REEL HOPE: LITERATURE AND THE UTOPIAN FUNCTION OF ADAPTATION

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by

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Introduction: The Utopian Function of Adaptation

There exists an intersection between utopian studies and adaptation studies that does not seem to have been explicitly stated in any of the scholarship in either field: the adaptation of texts into filmed productions affords adapters (filmmakers, etc.) the opportunity to emphasize what they see as the utopian dimensions of source texts for potentially critical purposes, which equals a utopian function of adaptation in and of itself. Critics, therefore, can use utopia as a hermeneutic in the analysis of adaptations. In doing so, it may be found that the utopian function of adaptation sometimes forgoes the dominant themes of the source text almost entirely, appropriating the text as a pulpit from which to engage in social critique. In fact, adaptations can stray from their source texts in scores of ways, thereby cultivating utopian potential, and these deviations will often bring about the usual assertions that “the book was better,” largely because the adaptation is not (for it cannot be) the source text. In adaptation studies scholarship, these assertions come from those aptly referred to as fidelity critics because they hold fidelity to the source text in the highest regard, but fidelity criticism has in recent years become to adaptation studies what formalism is to literary studies— passé. More recently, the idea of *intertextuality* between, for instance, a film adaptation and the novel it adapts, has been privileged in adaptation studies, specifically using a poststructural theoretical approach. Since adaptations cannot be judged by their fidelity to their source texts (which are multilayered and thus offer many different interpretations), we might instead judge them
by their particular readings of their sources, and how those readings might be valuable as works of art that operate in dialogue with or build upon their sources. Using utopia as an interpretive device—a theoretical model derived from the field of utopian studies—this study contends that the various “readings” of source texts—manifested as adaptations—are influenced by the utopian imaginations of their adapters, a concept drawn from the work of Ernst Bloch.¹ Aspects of the empirical world (social or political aspects, for instance) are critiqued via adaptations, and are thus the specific foci of the utopian function of adaptation. Herein, the Blochian utopian dreaming that occurs in art will be identified in several film and television adaptations, which will serve as case studies for the utopian function of adaptation. This utopian function of adaptation, it should be stated, may not even come from the source text per se, but from the very choice to adapt a particular text given the timeliness of its adaptation or the intent to adapt with socially or culturally critical ulterior motives. Before we can fully unravel the nature of the utopian function of adaptation, however, we must establish working understandings of both utopian studies and adaptation studies.

Beginning with utopian studies is appropriate, because the driving force behind utopian studies is ubiquitous—the utopian impulse. The utopian impulse is associated with Lyman Tower Sargent’s conception of “utopianism,” which he argues “is a universal human phenomenon” (“Three Faces” 3). This phenomenon is predicated on the idea that “the overwhelming majority of people—probably it is even possible to say all—are, at some time dissatisfied and consider how their lives might be improved” (Sargent, “Three Faces” 3). Sargent gives the following examples: “If we are hungry, we dream of a full
stomach. If we are sexually frustrated, we dream of sexual fulfillment. If we are frustrated by something in our society, we dream of a society in which it is corrected” (“Three Faces” 3-4). This idea of “dreaming” is associated with what Sargent calls “social dreaming,” which is his very definition of utopianism: “the dreams and nightmares that concern the ways in which groups of people arrange their lives and which usually envision a radically different society than the one in which the dreamers live” (“Three Faces” 3). Sargent’s concept of utopia, however, is informed at least in part by the work of Ernst Bloch, who, in The Principle of Hope, posits the idea of “the wishful element in the expectant emotions,” which “activates and galvanizes us towards the goal of a better life” (76). From this element, according to Bloch, “daydreams are formed. They always come from a feeling of something lacking and they want to stop it, they are all dreams of a better life” (76). Fredric Jameson, moreover, asserts that Bloch “sees [utopia’s] in-forming presence at work everywhere” (56), suggesting not only the need for individuals to engage in social dreaming, but also utopia’s “in-forming presence” in “all the objects of culture” (56). The “presence” to which Jameson refers is of hope, or “the permanent tension of human reality towards a radical transformation of itself and everything about it, towards a Utopian transfiguration of its own existence as well as of its social context” (58), and, for Jameson, “[t]o maintain that everything is a ‘figure of Hope’ is to offer an analytical tool for detecting the presence of some Utopian content even within the most degraded and degrading type of commercial product” (58). More than simply an interpretive device for locating utopian energy in cultural production, however, “utopian expression became a major element of the oppositional projects of the
[post-WWII] decades” (Moylan, Scraps 68). In fact, this reappearance of utopia fostered the revivals of utopian literature, intentional societies, and utopian social theory so that “utopian dreaming, now allied with concrete agency, looked through and beyond the structural logic and limits of hegemonic exploitation and interpellation” (Moylan, Scraps 68-69). These revivals would equal what Tom Moylan calls a “political renaissance” (Scraps 69), alongside of which the field of utopian studies could develop. Moylan points to sessions on utopian literature at the annual Modern Language Association conference as early as 1949, a wide range of publications appearing on utopia during the 1950s and beyond, and university courses on the subject offered in the 1950s and 1960s as having helped facilitate the founding of the Society for Utopian Studies in 1975, whose journal Utopian Studies was launched in 1990 and continues to be the central publication of the field. Utopian expression continues as a framework for opposition in cultural production; whether explicitly or as part of what Jameson would call the political unconscious of the artist, cultural products are rife with figures of hope either within the products themselves or implicit in their very production. In order to demonstrate that this is true, the chapters that follow will comprise a series of case studies. These case studies will look specifically at a series of literary adaptations.

Before we can move to an in-depth discussion of the utopian function of adaptation, however, we must examine the current state of the field of adaptation studies, which has been developing for more than fifty years. As above, the former paradigm of fidelity criticism has shifted to one of poststructural intertextuality. However, even within this new poststructural paradigm, critics must address the fidelity issue, largely because
adaptation studies has its roots in fidelity criticism, a natural theoretical lens through which to view adaptation considering that its study grew “out of English literature departments, inheriting the main assumptions of the dominant New Criticism,” which “hinged on a view of the literary work as unitary and self-contained, and of meaning as immanently inhering in the words on the page, an immutable essence to be apprehended by the (fundamentally passive) reader” (Aragay 11). In short, as Mireia Aragay puts it, “[t]he words on the page . . . were sacrosanct” (11), so any adaptation of those words would be doomed from the start. Critics such as Walter Benjamin and Virginia Woolf denounced film in the 1920s and 1930s, as Aragay points out, but by 1957 the most famous work on film adaptation up to that point would be published—George Bluestone’s Novels Into Film. Bluestone acknowledged film’s desire for legitimization, which was embodied in the industry’s attempts at using adaptations of canonical literature to draw in a better class of audience (or, at least, a larger audience). Critically, this maneuver backfired, and the result was “a binary, hierarchical view of the relationship between literature and film, where the literary work was conceived of as the valued original, while the film adaptation was merely a copy, and where fidelity emerged as the central category of adaptation studies” (Aragay 12). Bluestone, however, recognized one of the inherent problems with approaching film adaptation in this way—that of the inherent differences between film and literature: “between the percept of the visual image and the concept of the mental image lies the root difference between the two media” (2). The implication, of course, is that we cannot use the source text of an adaptation as the yardstick by which to measure the success of that adaptation, and it follows, for
Bluestone, that we must instead value adaptations as “different artistic [entities] from the novel[s] on which [they are] based” (64). Still, as Aragay shows, Bluestone’s “discussion is underpinned by a continued belief in the intrinsic superiority of literature” (13), which for Bluestone is because of its linguistic rather than visual nature—the same as the concept/percept problem above. This type of attitude against film adaptation would only be compounded by the highly artistic original films that would come, for instance, with the French *nouvelle vague* and beyond—originality, for some, was key for the respectability of filmmaking as a legitimate art.

Even with the rise of the academic field of film studies in the 1970s, Aragay mentions, adaptation studies would begin and end with the fidelity criterion, “to the exclusion of intertextual and contextual factors” (16). In 1975, for instance, Geoffrey Wagner would publish *The Novel and the Cinema*, which would become famous for its suggestion of three types of adaptation: transposition, commentary, and analogy. Transposition describes those adaptations that are “directly given on the screen, with the minimum of apparent interference” (Wagner 222), while commentary occurs when a source text is “either purposely or inadvertently altered in some respect” via its adaptation to film with “a different intention than . . . infidelity or outright violation” (224), and analogy is even further removed from its source since it “must represent a fairly considerable departure for the sake of making another work of art” (227). Wagner seems to want to delineate the degrees of fidelity/infidelity, but maintains the status quo of fidelity as the touchstone of adaptation studies in so doing. Aragay also points to other authors in the recent history of adaptation studies who have contributed to the
destabilization of fidelity criticism as the central focus of contemporary adaptation studies. One such author is Morris Beja, who, Aragay writes, “fascinatingly fluctuates between an apparent desire to challenge the primacy of literature and of the fidelity criterion . . . and an inability to ultimately break away from it” because of “[h]is formalist bias and implicit upholding of the superiority of (canonical) literature vis-à-vis film” (17). Beja may be biased in the way that Aragay suggests, but in the work to which she is referring, *Film & Literature: An Introduction*, Beja does allow for the challenging of the fidelity criterion, and thereby anticipates adaptation studies’s paradigm shift to intertextuality:

what a film takes from a book matters; but so does what it brings to a book. When it brings dedication and talent (or, if we are truly fortunate, genius), the result . . . [is] not a betrayal and not a copy, not an illustration and not a departure. It is a work of art that relates to the book from which it derives yet it is also independent, an artistic achievement that is in some mysterious way the “same” as the book but also something other: perhaps something less but perhaps something more as well. (88)

Still, there does seem to be an undertone even to this passage which suggests Beja sees the possibility of the film being “something less” as a given, but he also refers to André Bazin, who wrote in French between 1958-1962 about the intertextual value of adaptation in *What is Cinema?*—a work not completely published in an English translation until 1971. The paradigm shift, then, would seem to have been on the proverbial horizon throughout the 1960s and 1970s, and then, according to Aragay, the 1980s would be “a
decade over which the fields of literary studies, film studies and their interface, adaptation studies, were to be utterly transformed” (18) as well. The poststructuralists, for instance, made their mark on adaptation studies by rejecting Bluestone’s concept/percept problem of adaptation and instead suggesting, as Keith Cohen does, that between source text and adaptation—i.e., novel and film—there is an “observable phenomenon of mutation,” especially considering the “assumption” that “both words and images are sets of signs that belong to systems . . . that, at a certain level of abstraction, . . . bear resemblances to one another” (3). The French critic Christian Metz influenced this position, having investigated in 1971 the semiotics of the cinema,4 after which Cohen, in 1979 (five years after an English translation of Metz’s work appeared), would destabilize the idea that the media of film and fiction are mutually exclusive—an important development considering that such exclusivity would equal the impossibility of successful adaptation. For Aragay, “this in turn potentially liberates adaptation studies from the formalist, binary source/adaptation straitjacket” (18), and she points out that this was well understood in the field of adaptation studies in the early 1980s by critics like Dudley Andrew, for instance, who wrote in “The Well-Worn Muse: Adaptation in Film History and Theory” in 1980 that “[i]t is time for adaptation studies to take a sociological turn” (14), which Aragay interprets as meaning that adaptation “is a cultural practice; specific adaptations need to be approached as acts of discourse partaking of a particular era’s cultural and aesthetic needs and pressures” (19). Here, then, we begin to see how utopia could be useful as an interpretive device for critics, as “a particular era’s cultural and aesthetic needs and pressures” would certainly influence particular emphases in
adaptations of literature to motion pictures, which the critic could identify as influencing the film’s directed critique.

Intertextuality as an important word within film adaptation scholarship would also come along in the 1980s; writing specifically about the fidelity problem in film adaptation criticism, Christopher Orr wrote that “the discourse of fidelity is premised on the over-determination of a particular code at the expense of all others, i.e., this discourse or critical strategy thus reduces intertextual space to a single pre-text rather than attending to the richness of that space” (73). The fidelity criterion thus limits the adapter to the “single pre-text”—as Orr puts it, “it impoverishes the film’s intertextuality” (73). This intertextual approach to adaptation was informed by Roland Barthes, Aragay notes, and significantly contributed to a new understanding of adaptation wherein “the literary source need no longer be conceived as a work/original holding within itself a timeless essence which the adaptation/copy must faithfully reproduce, but as a text to be endlessly (re)read and appropriated in different contexts” (Aragay 22). While postructuralism had an important effect on adaptation studies, cultural studies and even reader-response theory entered the discourse, both contributing to the destabilization of the fidelity criterion, but Aragay cites Brian McFarlane’s Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation as having been “instrumental in unsettling the primacy of fidelity as a major criterion for judging film adaptations,” even if it is “narrowly formalistic in its marginalisation of the bearing of cultural and industrial conditions on the process of adaptation” (Aragay 23). Indeed, McFarlane asserts that “[f]idelity criticism depends on a notion of the text as having and rendering a single, correct ‘meaning’ which the
filmmaker has either adhered to or in some sense tampered with”—in other words, “the critic who quibbles at failures of fidelity is really saying no more than: ‘This reading of the original does not tally with mine in these and these ways’” (9). Although the poststructuralists had anticipated this view of fidelity criticism, none had ever so bluntly said it, so McFarlane’s contribution is quite important. Nevertheless, Aragay is not satisfied with McFarlane’s privileging of narrativity as a methodology because it privileges “both the source text and the film as text—because they can be formalised, to the detriment of other aspects—i.e. cultural and industrial conditions, intertextuality” (24). In any case, adaptation studies has from the point of relinquishing fidelity criticism as its benchmark been run in with several other theoretical methodologies in this new era of adaptation studies, and added to the growing list is what is here being called the utopian function of adaptation.

In his oft-quoted essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Benjamin derides film as the “most powerful agent” in “the technique of reproduction,” which he says “detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition” and “substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence” (1169). Further, he sees film as one of the “contemporary mass movements” (1170), and this characterization carries with it all the negative weight of a cultural critic looking down on the popular cultural form of film in the high modern era that was in full swing when Benjamin was writing his famous essay in 1936. Nevertheless, he does acknowledge that “technical reproduction can put the copy of the original into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself” (1169). There is a utopian dimension inherent in this line of
thought (and the action to which it refers) that has been posited elsewhere—in short, that critical mass can be achieved by utopian cultural products thanks to their dissemination via technology.\textsuperscript{5} One potential problem with this idea comes up, however, if we consider the typical student response to a film adaptation. Students viewing adaptations of Shakespeare texts along the lines of Tim Blake Nelson’s film adaptation of *Othello*, *O* (2001), or Gil Junger’s film adaptation of *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Ten Things I Hate About You* (1999), for instance, will often come to a naïve initial conclusion—that the film, by sacrificing Shakespearean language and period dress (among other things), makes the narrative accessible for a wider audience, which, though possibly true on some level, more likely betrays the student’s refusal to engage the text from which the adaptation is derived in the first place; the student, in such a case, may see the film more as a convenient *substitute* for its source text than an *adaptation* of that text. In this way, Benjamin may have been right about the demise of a “unique existence.” Nevertheless, since all “texts” (broadly defined) contain utopian potential—if we go along with Bloch—then adaptations might be found implicitly to transmit the utopian potential of their source texts to wider audiences, which is a utopian maneuver in and of itself, and one manifestation of the utopian function of adaptation—what we might call the *function of dissemination*. In other words, the dissemination of a source text’s utopian potential is merely a symptom of its adaptation, unless that content is harnessed specifically to make a point about the source’s cultural/historical context or if it is sacrificed to make another point entirely. For this reason, the function of dissemination can typically be recognized in those cases where an adaptation may go to great lengths to be as faithful to its source
as possible. While such adaptations may not offer very much in the way of intertextuality (besides their inherent intertextuality) or dialogue with their source, its utopian content is still disseminated.

More than simply transmitting or disseminating a source text’s utopian potential, however, we might go a bit further and say, following Benjamin, that adaptations reactivate a source text’s utopian potential. As Benjamin says, “permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder . . . in his own particular situation . . . reacts the object reproduced” (1169, emphasis added). Aragay sees Benjamin’s logic here as anticipating “some of the central claims of recent adaptation studies” (12), what with the interplay between adaptation and source suggested by the idea of reactivation, but we can go even further and suggest, as above, that here we encounter another manifestation of the utopian function of adaptation: if a source text in general is reactivated upon the appearance of an adaptation, it follows that there is a reactivation of that source’s utopian content as well; for instance, in light of the adaptation’s cultural context. In this sense, the utopian content of a source is harnessed to make some point about the cultural/historical context of the adaptation, and, at the same time, dialogue ensues between source and adaptation. This manifestation of the utopian function of adaptation might be best referred to as the function of reactivation. This reactivation of utopian content can be viewed as an intentional maneuver on the part of the adapter, influenced by his or her utopian imagination, which is a product of the utopian impulse. Furthermore, such reactivation can take a variety of forms, depending on what a given adapter sees as a source text’s utopian potential, but the utopian function of reactivation is brought to light
here in that the act of adaptation allows for an exhibition of the adapter’s utopian imagination.

One final manifestation of the utopian function of adaptation can be recognized in cases where adaptations use their sources more as narrative frames for introducing utopian content that is not present in the source in the first place—we might refer to it, therefore, as the function of framing. Fidelity critics of adaptation will no doubt find adaptations that employ the function of framing inferior to their sources since much of the source’s content or narrative may be missing from the adaptation. However, where utopia is the focal point of adaptation, the function of framing is of particular interest because such an adaptation adds depth to the source adapted by injecting it with new utopian content; in such a case, the adaptation promotes intertextuality. So we are again led back to Bloch—if we can find utopian potential in any cultural product, then we can certainly find it in adaptations that make little to no effort at fidelity to their sources. Thus, when we encounter such an adaptation, as utopian critics of adaptation, our goal should be to find utopian potential rather than approaching the adaptation as fidelity critics might—condemning the adaptation as a transgression against the infallible source. Beyond simply injecting the specific source text with new utopian potential, however, the function of framing may be found to be the most utopian of the manifestations of the utopian function of adaptation because it not only adds utopian energy to the source text, but to the cultural landscape at large. We can further argue that although to some extent we can value all adaptations, as Bluestone says, as “different artistic [entities] from” their sources, this is the most true of adaptations that use the function of framing because they
do, in fact, contribute, to what Orr calls the “richness” of the intertextual space of adaptation.

In setting up these theoretical bases for the case studies that are to follow, we should be aware of the relation of these concepts to those put forth by Geoffrey Wagner in *The Novel and the Cinema*. Indeed, Wagner’s concept of transposition may fit the same types of adaptations that are here identified as using the utopian function of dissemination since both are concerned with adaptations that remain very close to their sources. Similarly, Wagner’s concept of commentary can be linked to the concept of the utopian function of reactivation, and his concept of analogy is at least tangentially related the idea of the utopian function of framing. The difference, of course, lies in the fact that here we are specifically interested in the ways we can investigate adaptation in terms of its utopian potential, and these specific approaches to adaptation have been identified as carrying with them various degrees of said potential. Furthermore, where Aragay sees Wagner’s concepts as still privileging literature, the three manifestations of the utopian function of adaptation that have been outlined here do no such thing—in fact, quite the opposite. The utopian potential in which we are interested here has everything to do with the utopian end result of adaptation. How does the adaptation build upon or operate in dialogue with its source in terms of utopian content? If it does not do much of either, has it at least disseminated the utopian content of the source in some effectual way? In examining the various case studies within the categories of dissemination, reactivation, and framing, these will be some of the important questions that must be addressed.

It should also be clarified that the reason for which “film adaptation” has been
avoided as a general phrase up to this point—with mere “adaptation” in what might seem its place—is that this project’s intent is to look at adaptation in general, meaning that no adaptation is off limits in any media, even if film will indeed make up the brunt of the case studies herein. It would be irresponsible, for instance, to dismiss series television—a medium that is at the moment a fertile ground for adaptation, and one which may one day rival film as the most common medium for adaptation—in the context of adaptation studies, but we must also acknowledge that novels, films, and other cultural products can be and have been adapted into video games, theater productions, songs, and more. In some cases, we may even encounter metatextual adaptations such as Roger Corman’s *The Little Shop of Horrors* (1960), which, it has been suggested, was based on John Collier’s short story “Green Thoughts” (1932), and which was adapted into a stage musical by Alan Menken and Howard Ashman called simply *Little Shop of Horrors* in 1982 that was itself adapted into a musical film in 1986. Still, no matter the medium, adaptation has a utopian function that can be found consistent with one of the theoretical bases of that function listed above. Therefore, we cannot narrow our focus simply to film adaptation. Contrarily, it should be noted that this study will not deal with novelization, for while there is certainly a utopian function to this type of adaptation as well, it is simply beyond the present scope of analysis.

The sections that follow will consist of a few case studies of adaptations each, which employ the three specific varieties of the utopian function of adaptation outlined above. Part One, which will look specifically at film adaptations employing the utopian function of dissemination within adaptation, will begin with José Saramago’s *Blindness*
(1995) and Fernando Meirelles’s film adaptation of the same title, which appeared in 2008. Meirelles brings little new to Saramago’s novel, and thus employs the utopian function of dissemination in the adaptation. The director, it would seem, made this film specifically for Saramago, who, in DVD extras, appears moved to tears by the film upon viewing it at a Lisbon screening. Touching though this moment is, the film has little to say about its cultural context, and adds no new utopian content to the source text. In this way, it merely disseminates the utopian content already offered by Saramago in the novel.

Part One will continue with a look at Chandler Tuttle’s 2081, the more recent of two adaptations of Kurt Vonnegut’s short story “Harrison Bergeron” (1961) that will be analyzed in this study. Tuttle’s film employs the utopian function of dissemination in that it maintains the classically dystopian frame of the story, even though it does change a few things from that source. Part One will also deal with a decidedly more popular culture-oriented medium of adaptation—series television. Specifically, the Showtime series Dexter will be analyzed, the first season of which (2006-07) follows the novel upon which it is based—Jeff Lindsay’s Darkly Dreaming Dexter (2004)—very closely. In following the novel so closely we will see that Dexter employs the utopian function of dissemination by calling attention to childhood trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder, as well as encouraging discourse on the vigilante in culture, just as the novel does.

Part Two of this study will investigate how other adaptations employ the utopian function of reactivation. We will begin by delving into the world of Alfonso Cuarón’s 2006 adaptation of P.D. James’s The Children of Men (1992), simply titled Children of Men. Cuarón emphasizes the source’s commentary on immigration at a time when
immigration was a hugely controversial issue in American political (and, indeed, popular) discourse. As a Mexican director and a well-recognized name in the Era of the *Nuevo Cine Mexicano*, Cuarón is especially well-suited to reactivating such utopian content, here manifested in the cautionary structure of James’s novel, thereby making a point about the cultural context of the adaptation via the utopian content of the source. Returning to series television, then, Part Two, will also discuss the ways in which Alan Ball’s popular adaptation of Charlaine Harris’s *Dead Until Dark* (2001) calls attention to LGBT issues via the first season of HBO’s *True Blood* (2008-09). Using the vampire legend as a springboard, Ball is able to position the complications surrounding the revelation of the existence of vampires to the world as an analogue to LGBT social movements. Finally, Part Two will conclude by showing how the classic science fiction film *The Omega Man* reactivates Richard Matheson’s novel *I Am Legend* in light of the new Cold War fears that were at the forefront of the American imagination during 1971, when the film was released.

Part Three, for a first example of a film adaptation that uses the function of framing, will look at Leslie Libman’s and Larry Williams’s 1998 adaptation of the classical dystopian novel *Brave New World* (1932), by Aldous Huxley. This made-for-television adaptation is much different than the Huxley novel upon which it is based in terms of narrative, and these differences contribute to the film’s seeming appropriation of Huxley’s narrative as a frame for utopian content that is not present in the novel. Most explicitly, there is hope in the end of the film that is not present in the novel, whose ending, like other classical dystopias, produces despair over hope. In this way the
classical dystopian structure of the source is transformed into a critical dystopia—a type of dystopia that emerged in the 1980s, fifty years after Huxley’s novel was published. In addition to Brave New World, Part Three will also look at another adaptation of Vonnegut’s “Harrison Bergeron”—one made for the Showtime network in 1995 by director Bruce Pittman. Pittman’s film expands Vonnegut’s seven-page story to a film of ninety-nine minutes and clearly uses the utopian function of framing, since—like Libman’s and Williams’s Brave New World—it sacrifices the harrowing ending of the short story in favor of a more hopeful ending, thereby transforming Vonnegut’s classical dystopia into a critical dystopia via adaptation. While many of the works dealt with here are dystopian texts—simply because it is a genre that arguably occupies an important place in twentieth and twenty-first century culture—the utopian function of adaptation is a cross-genre phenomenon, and this study will demonstrate this by going outside dystopian fiction with the Harris novel and Ball’s True Blood, and, in part, by analyzing Roland Joffé’s 1995 film adaptation of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter as an adaptation that uses the utopian function of framing, even if this analysis does suggest the novel is a proto-classical dystopia. Hawthorne’s novel, in any case, is a canonical American novel, but, as we know, no cultural products are off limits to adaptation, and Joffé’s film is one adaptation that many people see as particularly bad. Nevertheless, the analysis will demonstrate how utopian potential is retained in the film, even if fidelity is sacrificed. The film not only allows Hester Prynne a hopeful ending, thereby contradicting the proto-classical dystopian frame of the novel, but it also has anti-utopian characteristics, criticizing utopianism itself, but thereby anticipating a renewal of the
utopian imagination. Thus, in spite of its infidelity to its source, Joffé’s film still contains utopian content and encourages intertextuality between source and adaptation.

It is hoped that these case studies will provide several examples of the various manifestations of the utopian function of adaptation, and, in so doing, show the ways in which adaptations contain utopian potential, regardless of their fidelity (or lack thereof) to their source texts. The utopian potential of adaptations is influenced more by the utopian impulse of the adapter, whether they are faithfully reproducing the utopian content that is present in the source, using that content in a new way, or appropriating the source in order to present new utopian content. This way of seeing adaptation lends new credence to the current paradigm of intertextuality within adaptation studies, but, more importantly, the influence of the utopian impulse on adaptation shows that there is, in fact, a utopian function of adaptation, which reveals the existence of some lingering hope in what is in many ways an otherwise hopeless world.
I. The Utopian Function of Dissemination

While films that do not depart in any significant way(s) from their source texts may not seem to adaptation studies scholars as particularly interesting, valuable, or critical, such films should at least be valued for their retransmission or dissemination of the utopian content inherent in their sources. Since utopian potential can be found in any work of culture, even the most rigidly faithful film adaptation will contain utopian content—specifically that of its source. Moreover, there is utopian potential inherent in the very dissemination of that utopian potential to a larger audience. Thus, fidelity criticism may not actually be worthy of the “old hat” reputation it has gained in film adaptation studies scholarship. The utopian function of dissemination is the method of adaptation that seeks merely to maintain the utopian content of a given source text in the adaptation of that source, introducing little or no new utopian content into the narrative. Fidelity critics might well be partial to adaptations employing the utopian function of dissemination because such adaptations usually stay fairly close to the narratives of their sources. Even so, utopian potential remains in these adaptations in the very dissemination of the utopian content that is contained in the source, which can be either an intentional maneuver or a bi-product of the filmmaker’s attempt to stay as true to the source as possible. Again, adaptations employing the utopian function of dissemination are not especially intertextual apart from the obvious relationship between source and adaptation, i.e., there is little dialogue between the two, but utopian content remains nonetheless. The
utopian content of the source that is inherent in its faithful adaptation, then, along with the retransmission of the content to a wider audience, equals a utopian maneuver that can be called the adaptational utopian function of dissemination. This chapter will look at José Saramago’s *Blindness* and Fernando Meirelles’s 2008 film adaptation of the novel, Kurt Vonnegut’s “Harrison Bergeron” and Chandler Tuttle’s short film adaptation *2081*, and Jeff Lindsay’s *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* alongside the first season of HBO’s adaptation, *Dexter*.

**José Saramago’s Blindness Gets the Meirelles Treatment**

Blind. The apprentice thought, ‘we are blind’, and he sat down and wrote *Blindness* to remind those who might read it that we pervert reason when we humiliate life, that human dignity is insulted everyday by the powerful of our world, that the universal lie has replaced the plural truths, that man stopped respecting himself when he lost the respect due to his fellow creatures.

—José Saramago

While adaptations cannot be judged by their fidelity to their source texts, thereby privileging intertextuality in contemporary adaptation studies, there are those adaptations that strive to remain as true to their sources as possible, thereby utilizing the utopian function of dissemination. It is this category into which Fernando Meirelles’s 2008 adaptation of José Saramago’s novel *Blindness* fits most comfortably. Saramago’s novel, which appeared in Portuguese in 1995 and in an English translation in 1997, is a critical dystopia whose narrative is catalyzed by “the appearance of an epidemic of blindness . . . known as the white sickness” due to its victims’ sight becoming completely clouded by what is “described as a milky sea” (Saramago, *Blindness* 39, 4). As a result of the
epidemic, the government of the novel’s ambiguous country, under the auspices of its “health authorities, the Ministry” (28), begins quarantining those infected or exposed to the infected in an abandoned mental hospital heavily guarded by the military. Conditions in the hospital become squalid as the internees deal with their condition in an unfamiliar environment and food rations run short. Saramago focuses on a few of the internees specifically, beginning with the character known as the first blind man, followed by those with whom he comes into contact before he is quarantined, and then those with whom he shares a ward of the abandoned mental hospital. None of these characters, in fact, are given proper names, instead being referred to by titles such as the boy with the squint, the doctor, the car-thief, the girl with dark glasses, and so on. The main character—the doctor’s wife—never actually goes blind, but she tells the health authorities that she has in order to accompany her husband into the abandoned mental hospital. As the sole sighted character, the doctor’s wife helps the blind around her as they deal with a series of conflicts with the military guarding the quarantine as well as with other wards before escaping to the outside world. The outside world, meanwhile, has taken on the characteristics of a post-apocalyptic world due to what has now become, save for the doctor’s wife, universal blindness. After navigating this world to find food and shelter, the novel comes to a close as the blind begin to regain their sight one by one.

In situating *Blindness* as a critical dystopia, we must first undergo explanation of this particular narrative frame. Unlike the “classical” dystopia, which, according to Moylan, is “epic” or “open” and contains a “militant pessimism” that leaves “no meaningful possibility of movement or resistance, much less radical change, embedded in
any of the iconic elements of the text” (Scraps 157, 162), critical dystopias are “texts that maintain a utopian impulse” (Baccolini and Moylan 7). As Rafaella Baccolini and Moylan put it, classical dystopias “maintain utopian hope outside their pages, if at all; for it is only if we consider dystopia as a warning that we as readers can hope to escape its pessimistic future,” but “the new critical dystopias allow both readers and protagonists to hope by resisting closure: the ambiguous, open endings of these novels maintain the utopian impulse within the work” (7). By way of example, Baccolini and Moylan point to George Orwell’s characters Winston Smith and Julia from his 1949 novel Nineteen Eighty-Four, as well as John the Savage and Lenina from Aldous Huxley’s 1932 novel Brave New World; these are characters for whom escape is not an option, as they are either re-subjugated by the system they attempt to resist, or destroyed altogether. Both Nineteen Eighty-Four and Brave New World are regarded as classical dystopias, but the critical dystopia, “by rejecting the traditional subjugation of the individual at the end of the novel,” according to Baccolini and Moylan, “opens a space of contestation and opposition for those collective ex-centric subjects whose class, gender, race, sexuality, and other positions are not empowered by hegemonic rule” (7). Another important attribute of the critical dystopia comes from Lyman Tower Sargent’s definition of the genre; Sargent asserts that the critical dystopia “normally includes at least one eutopian enclave or holds out hope that the dystopia can be overcome and replaced with a eutopia” (“US Eutopias” 222).² Given these characteristics, it is safe to say that Saramago’s Blindness qualifies as a critical dystopia.

The Ministry of Health, with whom the doctor deals once he realizes that the
blindness seems to be infectious, at first appears oblivious, but comes to be much worse. Upon the doctor’s first attempt to reach someone with whom he could discuss his discovery over the phone, the doctor is simply belittled before the person on the other end of the line hangs up on him. This experience leads him to conclude that “[t]his is the stuff we’re made of, half indifference and half malice” (*Blindness* 29), which foreshadows the horrors to come at the hands of Ministry. In fact, more foreshadowing occurs when the doctor finally speaks to the actual Minister, who asks him to “please do us the favour of remaining indoors,” which, though the doctor feels is asked “with courteous formality, . . . left him in no doubt that he was being given an order” (31). Moreover, the Ministry chooses the mental hospital as the quarantine location instead of a better building—“the building for the trade fair”—because “[i]ndustry wouldn’t like it, millions have been invested in the project” (35). Once the site is agreed upon for the quarantine, the Minister easily gives “carte blanche” (36), and the internees are given a series of decrees described as “instructions” (39). Many of these “instructions” are quite mundane, such as the first—“the lights will be kept on at all times, any attempt to tamper with the switches will be useless, they don’t work,”—and the fourth—“the internees will be responsible for washing their own clothes by hand” (39). Mixed in with the mundane, however, are instructions that are quite serious, such as the second, that “leaving the building without authorisation will mean instant death,” and the tenth, that “in the event of a fire getting out of control, whether accidentally or on purpose, the firemen will not intervene” (39-40). This matter-of-fact way of telling the internees that they will be killed if they try to leave and that fires will be left to burn away even with people inside surely
demonstrates the ruthlessness of the authority overseeing the quarantine, and this
authority becomes in many ways to the microcosm of *Blindness* what The Party is to
*Nineteen Eighty-Four*, equaling a dystopian frame that is surely what we would call
“critical” in the way Moylan uses the word: “critical” is meant “in the Enlightenment
sense of *critique*—that is expressions of oppositional thought, unveiling, debunking, of
both the genre itself and the historical situation” (*Demand* 10).³

Also consistent with the critically dystopian narrative frame is the presence of a
resistant protagonist, in this case the doctor’s wife. Along the lines of the critical
dystopia, her gender is “not empowered by hegemonic rule,” and because she retains her
sight, she serves as the resistant protagonist of the novel, her sight setting her apart from
the blind characters like the Erasmian one-eyed king in the country of the blind.
However, the doctor’s wife tells the group that she escapes quarantine with—the doctor,
the first blind man, the wife of the first blind man, the boy with the squint, the old man
with the black eyepatch, and the girl with dark glasses—that she is “not a queen” and that
they “cannot know, what it means to have eyes in a world in which everyone else is
blind”; she is “simply the one who was born to see this horror” (Saramago, *Blindness*
247). More than simply “not a queen,” though, she realizes early on that “[s]he could not
even bear to think of the consequences that would ensue if it were to be discovered that
she was not blind, at the very least she would find herself at the beck and call of
everyone, at worst, she might become the slave of some of them” (80). Her position, then,
as the sole sighted character is no more empowered by hegemonic rule than her gender—
indeed, in spite of her sight, she is still forced to perform fellatio on the character known
as the leader of the blind hoodlums because she cannot bring herself at that time to kill him, even when she sees the opportunity to do so. Perhaps most importantly, though, the doctor’s wife never goes blind. In this way, Saramago resists the traditional subjugation of the individual at the end of the novel; as the characters with whom the doctor’s wife escapes quarantine begin to regain their sight, the good news is tempered by her own fear that she will now go blind herself. Looking out the window of her flat, she sees a “street full of refuse” and the “shouting, singing people,” but then, according to the narrator, “she lifted her head up to the sky and saw everything white” (293). This is the last of several moments throughout the novel where it is suggested that the doctor’s wife still stands a chance of going blind herself; at this moment, she thinks to herself, “[i]t is my turn” (293). Nevertheless, “[f]ear made her quickly lower her eyes. The city was still there” (293). This line alone opposes the classical dystopia in that the doctor’s wife’s retention of her sight symbolizes her resistance to subjugation. Still, the possibility of her going blind at any moment is suggested at different points in the novel, leaving the reader with the sense that her resistance to the dystopian conditions in which she has found herself may be fleeting. Her vision, though, which seems to be symbolic of her role as the critical dystopia’s resistant protagonist, is not the only way in which she takes on such a role.

Indeed, her vision aside, the doctor’s wife resists the hegemony of the system of which she becomes a subject in other ways. For one thing, we may be able to read her very decision to accompany her husband into the quarantine as an act of resistance. Knowing that he is to be taken away, the doctor’s wife packs clothes for her husband, but
the narrator tells us that “in addition to his own clothes, she had packed a number of blouses and skirts, a pair of slacks, a dress, some shoes that could only belong to a woman,” announcing afterward, “we’re ready for the ambulance now” (Saramago, *Blindness* 32, emphasis added). Though the doctor does not yet realize it, his wife has no intention of becoming separated from him during the crisis. In fact, when the doctor says “[w]ho knows how long we shall be separated,” his wife, knowing he will attempt to keep her from accompanying him, simply replies “[d]on’t let it worry you” (33). Finally, after helping her husband into the ambulance that will carry him to the abandoned mental hospital, “she climbed in and sat beside her husband. The driver of the ambulance turned round to protest,” saying “I can take only him, those are my orders, I must ask you to get down,” but she only responds “[y]ou’ll have to take me as well, I’ve just gone blind this very minute” (33). The reader does not know for sure at this point that the doctor’s wife has not actually gone blind, but shortly thereafter it is confirmed that she has not, as the doctor protests “you can see,” to which she responds “[f]or the moment, I shall almost certainly turn blind myself one of these days, or any minute now . . . I’m staying to help you and the others who may come here” (37). In this way, via her own agency, she resists the hegemony of the system under whose control she has placed herself and positions herself as the resistant protagonist of Saramago’s critical dystopia.

Of course, the aforementioned ways in which *Blindness* adheres to the generic attributes of the critical dystopia aside, there must also be some kind of critique inherent in the narrative in order for it to be considered a critical dystopia. Allowing for “expressions of oppositional thought” is one of the greatest strengths of the critical
dystopia since it originally came about as a reaction to the rise of the neoliberal politics that dominated the world political landscape beginning in the early-1980s. *Blindness* is certainly no exception to the genre’s impetus, but its critique is less specific than other critical dystopias such as Octavia Butler’s *The Parable of the Sower* and *The Parable of the Talents*, which carry some of the specific problems Butler identified in her world—religious fundamentalism, for example, and its infusion with political rule—to their logical conclusion in an imagined future. *Blindness*, however, seems to revel in what we might call its “critical ambiguity,” thereby avoiding specific critiques of the evils of its historical situation and instead presenting a much more broad critique of humanity in general. The blindness epidemic, we can reason, is an allegory for what might be called the widespread “selective moral blindness” that allows humans to perpetrate atrocities. Along these lines, the doctor’s wife says to her husband as the novel comes to a close, “I don’t think we did go blind, I think we are blind, . . . [b]lind people who can see, but do not see” (292). Saramago, in fact, touches upon this idea in his Nobel lecture, terming it “the blindness of reason” (“How Characters” 128).

The blindness of reason manifests in the novel’s pages in a variety of ways, but perhaps none so specifically as the interaction between the guards outside the quarantine and the blind within. When the doctor and his wife approach the guards asking for medicine to treat the car-thief, who has been injured by the girl with dark glasses in retaliation for fondling her and whose injuries have become infected, the guards order the doctor back inside without the medicine or any sense that they would make a requisition for it, which, according to the doctor’s wife, is because the guards are “terrified and . . .
obeying orders,” but the doctor finds this unacceptable, declaring “I can’t believe that this is happening, it’s against all the rules of humanity” (57). Fear, in fact, drives the guards to worse actions, one of which is the execution of the car-thief, who, after hearing that the guards have no intention of treating him, decides to plead his case to the guards himself, believing that “when they see [him] in this state they’ll recognize at once that [he is] in a bad way, put [him] in an ambulance and take [him] to a hospital” (65). Instead, upon seeing “[t]he face of a blind man” at the entrance to the quarantine, “[f]ear made [the guard’s] blood freeze, and fear drove him to aim his weapon and release a blast of gunfire at close range” (68). Worse yet, when the other guards come to see what has happened, the car-thief’s killer is “pleased with the obvious demonstration of the accuracy of his aim” instead of being appalled at what he has just done (69). Examples such as this abound in the novel, suggesting the prominence of the blindness of reason as its central critique as a critical dystopia. The soldiers in charge of delivering the food rations, for instance, after the shooting death of the car-thief, are said to be “suffering from the shock of the tragic episode” (75), but this shock turns out to have less to do with the tragedy of the car-thief’s death than fear of exposure to the victims of the white sickness, for its only effect is to lead the soldiers to “just dump [the food rations] in the hallway and retreat” (75). Given their hunger, however, the blind internees wait near the end of the hallway, and when the soldiers spot them, they are said to have “dropped the containers on the ground and fled like madmen” before “[t]he two soldiers forming the escort, who were waiting outside,” the narrator tells us facetiously, “reacted admirably in the face of danger. Mastering, God alone knows how and why, their legitimate fear, they advanced to
the threshold of the door and emptied their magazines” (75), killing several of the
internees. Ironically, the narrator suggests that the soldiers would defend their actions by
suggesting that they “acted in legitimate defence, as well as in defence of their unarmed
comrades who were on a humanitarian mission” (76, emphasis added). The blindness of
reason is demonstrated here in a particularly effective manner.

While the blindness of reason serves as the novel’s central critique, another
attribute of Blindness also helps to pigeonhole the novel into the category of the critical
dystopia. As Sargent maintains, the critical dystopia generally includes a eutopian enclave
or hope that the dystopian conditions can be overcome in favor of a utopia. Blindness’s
inclusion of hope comes in several forms, not the least of which is the fact that the
victims of the white sickness do overcome the disease, as is evident when the novel
comes to a close and the people are beginning to regain their sight. Even if the doctor’s
wife’s suggestion that they are all “[b]lind people who can see, but do not see” is true,
moreover, overcoming the literal blindness suggests a figurative manifestation of hope in
and of itself, just as the doctor’s wife’s never having gone blind in the first place
symbolically situates her as the the novel’s resistant protagonist. Specifically, the hope
included by way of the restoration of sight to the blind is hope that “the dystopia can be
overcome and replaced with a utopia.” Still, just before this restoration, the man with the
black eyepatch says “I cannot say whether there will be a future, what matters for the
moment is to see how we can live in the present,” to which the doctor’s wife replies
“[w]ithout a future, the present serves no purpose” (Saramago, Blindness 229). In their
present, we see a eutopian enclave—also consistent with Sargent’s definition of the
critical dystopia—in the form of the community that has been established amongst the characters with whom the doctor and his wife escape quarantine after it is burned to the ground and no guards remain. This community is established as they leave the now destroyed mental hospital and is set apart by its resolve to relinquish the “indignity” and “degradation” experienced while in quarantine (Saramago, *Blindness* 247). Once this eutopian enclave is established completely, the symbolic reward seems to be the very restoration of sight to the blind, and in this way, hope is included within the novel’s pages, making it a critical dystopia that is consistent with both Sargent’s definition of the genre and that of Baccolini and Moylan; the present, it would seem, does serve a purpose, giving way to a future that has the potential to be better than the past that brought it about. If the lesson of their literal blindness is heeded, then humanity will grant itself the symbolic sight that the doctor’s wife suggests they were lacking all along—they will become people who can see, and do see.

Fidelity critics would surely see Fernando Meirelles’s 2008 adaptation of *Blindness* as maintaining fidelity to its source text, as very little is changed in the adaptation from novel to screen. In this way, the only utopian potential inherent in the film is its retransmission of the utopian content that exists in the novel, and this is the very definition of what has here been labeled the utopian function of dissemination. There are, of course, some exceptions, chief amongst which is the emphasis on racial diversity in the film; the characters, whose races are never spelled out in the novel, are of a variety of races in the film. Even with racial diversity, though, the film does not effectively distance itself from the novel in any meaningful way because this diversity
merely signifies the microcosmic nature of the character ensemble, which seems to have been intended by the author in the first place. This diversity is also signified by the multiple languages spoken in the film by the various characters, whose cultures and nationalities seem to be as heterogeneous as we might expect in the contemporary world. Again, however, this approach to adapting the novel seems to be less about building upon the novel and more about remaining true to it because this heterogeneity merely supports the national ambiguity of the novel. The country, for instance, in which the narrative takes place is never named, something the film also maintains. The differences, then, between the novel and film, instead of allowing the film to build on or operate in dialogue with the novel, seem to merely bolster its fidelity to the source. In so doing, the film fails to offer any of its own utopian content, instead merely retransmitting that of its source, and it is thus exemplary of the utopian function of dissemination.

Saramago was famously against a film adaptation of *Blindness* in the first place. After all, a *film* about an outbreak of *blindness* might be publicly perceived as a bit oxymoronic. Still, Saramago was a bit more specific than this, telling the New York Times in 2007—three years before he died—that he “always resisted because it’s a violent book about social degradation, rape, and I didn’t want it to fall into the wrong hands” (qtd. in Eberstadt). The film’s producer, Niv Fichman, according to the film’s Cannes program/press release, surmised that “Saramago was afraid that a studio would turn [the novel] into a zombie film and lose the fundamental underlying politic of the story” (qtd. in Sanders 3). However, Fichman and screenwriter Don McKellar (who also plays the thief in the film) managed to convince Saramago, Fichman says, that “control
would remain in the hands of the filmmakers”; they “explained that [they] would have the freedom to cast who [they] want, to shoot how and where [they] want, and do whatever [they] felt was right for the film” (qtd. in Sanders 3-4). Having thus pacified the author’s hesitation to grant the screen rights to the novel, McKellar and Fichman began production, but even writing the screenplay proved challenging since, as McKellar says, “the tone of Saramago’s book would be very hard to achieve on film” considering that “[n]one of the characters even have names or a history, which is very untraditional for a Hollywood story. The film, like the novel, directly addresses sight and point of view and asks you to see things from a different perspective” (qtd. in Sanders 4). Nevertheless, the task was passionately undertaken by McKellar—so passionately, in fact, that the film is quite faithful to its source text, perhaps to its detriment. In spite of this, the Cannes program/press release suggests that “McKellar also understood that the film would have to diverge from the book in several key ways” (Sanders 4). Along these lines,

he had to consider the idea that in a movie theatre, the audience was going to develop an unusually voyeuristic relationship with these characters who can be seen but can’t see back. In the book, only the Doctor’s Wife can see all the harrowing events that take place, but in the film, the audience would join her in bearing witness. The burden of sight would be shared between them, and that was a delicate situation that McKellar had to carefully navigate. (Sanders 4)

This idea of the voyeuristic quality of watching the film clearly ignores the reader’s ability to also bear witness in his or her mind’s eye. Still, it does pose interesting
problems for a screenwriter in terms of how to actually shoot such a film so that this aspect of the source is kept intact, and in this way it is not a diversion at all, but a challenge in terms of fidelity to the source, one that McKellar overcomes with seeming ease. This proves exemplary, in fact, of how we should not necessarily see films that employ the utopian function of dissemination as bad films, even if in terms of experimenting with their sources they are decidedly unimaginative. Such a film may still be imaginative in the way it is able to remain faithful to its source, which affords it the ability to retransmit that source’s original utopian content.

In some ways, McKellar seems to have merely deciphered the novel for himself in his production of the film’s screenplay. He says, “[I]ike the Doctor’s Wife, the audience is watching people and that calls into question the humanity of observing and not acting, which becomes a major theme of the film” (qtd. in Sanders 4). Suggesting that this is only a theme of the film, however, betrays the screenwriter’s lack of understanding of the novel, which was made perfectly clear when McKellar apparently asked Saramago himself “why the Doctor’s Wife took so long to take action in the hospital? Why didn’t she act faster? Why, when she saw what was happening, didn’t she grab her scissors and kill?” (qtd. in Sanders 4). Saramago’s answer is that “she became aware of the responsibility that comes with seeing gradually, first to herself, then to her husband, then to her small family, then her ward, and finally to the world where she has to create a new civilization. It was a responsibility that she didn’t know was in her. She becomes aware of it through actions and circumstances” (qtd. in Sanders 4). The Doctor’s Wife’s gradual realization of her own agency as the novel progresses is something that is explicitly pointed out in the
novel itself, which again shows the film’s lack of creativity at least in terms of the narrative adaptation, for which the filmmakers rely heavily on the source.

Still, the utopian content of the source is maintained, and, if nothing else, this allows us to locate utopian potential within the very production of the film, since it disseminates the source’s utopian content to a broader audience. In fact, this brings us to the question of the language of the film. Meirelles, coincidentally, had attempted to secure the rights to the novel much earlier than McKellar and Fichman, and, at that time, according to the *Los Angeles Times*, he “had envisioned shooting the film in the novel’s Portuguese” (Turan), a vision likely inspired by the fact that Portuguese is Meirelles’s first language. However, by the time he found himself directing the film, he was convinced that “if you do it in English you can sell it to the whole world and have a bigger audience” (qtd. in Turan). This is consistent with the novel’s status as a critical dystopia, if we consider Moylan’s aforementioned use of the word “critical”; the choice to shoot the film in English is explicitly for the purposes of achieving critical mass. But this is not the only way in which the film maintains the novel’s genre.

One way in which Meirelles’s film adaptation of Saramago’s novel stays true to its source’s genre is by keeping the Ministry of Health as the pseudo-totalitarian entity that represses the subjects of the system it puts in place as a quarantine. In a clever twist on the novel, which presents the above-mentioned “instructions” as having come from a “loudspeaker fixed above the door” (*Blindness* 39), these instructions are shown in the film coming from a talking head on a television screen with the insignia of the “World Health Initiative” in the background, an initiative probably meant to be a generic version
of the real-life World Health Organization, changing the name of which maintains the
ambiguous setting. Still, when the doctor in the film realizes that the instructions are
coming from a television, he says that it “makes you question what kind of an idiot would
play a video in a quarantine for the blind,” concluding that it is “scary” (*Blindness*).
Nevertheless, however idiotic or scary the use of a video over a simple loudspeaker is,
the benefit to the film is that it maintains the tone of the novel by presenting a visual that
reinforces the critically dystopian frame—the video announcer can serve the same
purpose as the Party signs posted everywhere in Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. With
this being said, the resistant protagonist is maintained in the film as well.

The doctor’s wife is maintained as the narrative’s resistant protagonist, and her
intentions remain the same: just as she accompanies her husband to the quarantine in the
novel, in the film she is shown packing her own clothing as she prepares for the Ministry
to come and take him away, climbing into the transport vehicle at the last minute and
announcing resolutely that she has “just gone blind,” to which the knowing Ministry
worker responds “have it your way” (*Blindness*). Once inside the quarantine, like in the
novel, the doctor expresses his feeling that she should leave the quarantine because she
can, in fact, see, saying “I’ve got to get you out of here. I’m going to tell them that you
can see,” but she discourages the suggestion. Even though she does not at this point say
that she will help the others in the quarantine, that is exactly what she does, and her initial
resistance, which allows her to enter the quarantine with her husband in the first place,
provides the catalyst for her to begin to embody the same character we see in Saramago’s
novel—a character who recognizes her ability to help others via her resistance to the
dystopian conditions in which she has found herself, a character who in avoiding the outbreak of literal blindness also comes to avoid the blindness of reason.

The blindness of reason, what has here been argued is the center of the novel’s critique, thus making it a critical dystopia, is also kept in the film. When the car-thief is executed by a soldier guarding the quarantine, the soldier’s only reaction is to say “Sarge is going to fucking kill me” (*Blindness*) rather than express remorse at having taken a life, and another guard first begins to laugh at the sight before realizing the blood could be infectious and fleeing the scene. Another manifestation of the blindness of reason that is present in the film and derived from the novel is the sexual enslavement of the female internees by the blind hoodlums and their leader, who in the film is called the King of Ward Three. Just as they do in the novel, the blind hoodlums of ward three forcibly take control of the food rations, distributing them at first in exchange for any valuables that may have been brought in to the quarantine by the internees, and then in exchange for the sexual favors of the female internees. The novel presents this development quite simply, with the narrator reporting that “the blind hoodlums sent a message saying that they wanted women. Just like that, Bring us women,” a demand that, when protest ensues, is modified to “[u]nless you bring us women, you don’t eat” (*Blindness* 150). In the film, this tone is kept, as the King of Ward Three announces over a public address system “So, it’s been like a week or so, and you people have nothing left to offer, so at ward three, we came up with a new plan: bring us your women” (*Blindness*). The audacity of the blind hoodlums in both the novel and the film to enslave the women in the quarantine in this way is indicative of the blindness of reason.
In keeping with the critically dystopian narrative frame of the novel, the film must also include a figure of hope, and it does so by keeping in line with the novel and having the blind people begin to see again not only literally but also figuratively. Just as the novel has the doctor’s wife looking to the sky at the end, flooding her vision with white and suggesting that she has now gone blind before she looks back down and sees the city before her, the film dramatizes this scene practically verbatim. As in the novel, the doctor’s wife leaves the quarantine with a group of characters that resolves to work together in order to survive the ordeal that has unfolded with the white sickness. Reaching the doctor and his wife’s house, the group seems to have succeeded in forming a community, which resists the blindness of reason, and their reward seems to be the restoration of their sight. Having maintained this figure of hope from the novel, the film remains consistent with the attributes of the critical dystopia and is able to successfully disseminate the utopian potential inherent in its source.

José Saramago’s *Blindness*, as a critical dystopia, contains hope within its pages, even though as a dystopia it is meant to depict a worse situation than that in which its readers find themselves. The novel’s inclusion of hope manifests as a willingness of its world’s subjects to relinquish their blindness of reason and use their own agency to better themselves. Their ability to do so provides some hope for readers of the novel that people in their empirical world can do the same thing.

Fernando Meirelles’s film adaptation of Saramago’s novel takes care to maintain the dystopian characteristics of the novel, but also keeps the attributes of the story that make it a critical dystopia, including the resistant protagonist, the critique of the
blindness of reason, and the inclusion of hope within the narrative. In so doing, Meirelles fails to move away from the source in any significant way, but this does not mean that the film is a failure. In fact, the production of the film itself is a utopian maneuver because it allows the utopian content of Saramago’s novel to reach an even wider audience, which is itself also consistent with the critical dystopia. Furthermore, the film employs the utopian function of dissemination by remaining faithful to the novel and thereby disseminating its utopian content. In this way, we can locate utopian potential in the adaptation of Saramago’s novel, which serves as an excellent example of an adaptation that uses the utopian function of dissemination.

“Harrison Bergeron” Meets Chandler Tuttle in 2081

Kurt Vonnegut originally published his famous short story “Harrison Bergeron” in The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction in 1961, maintaining his position amongst the ranks of authors who had produced classical dystopias; Vonnegut had nine years earlier published his dystopian novel, Player Piano, which might also fall into the classical dystopian category, but it has not inspired any film adaptations to date. “Harrison Bergeron,” on the other hand, has been adapted twice—in 1995 and in 2005. The earlier film was made for the Showtime television network and expanded into a feature film-length narrative, while the latter runs a mere twenty minutes start to finish. The 1995 film is an example of an adaptation that uses the utopian function of framing because it converts the classical dystopia of the source text into a critical dystopia by including some hope within the narrative itself. We will look more closely at the 1995
film—directed by Bruce Pittman—in Part Three, but the 2005 film maintains the classically dystopian frame even as it updates the narrative overall for the sake of easing the suspension of disbelief, so we will now turn our attention there within the context of our discussion of the utopian function of dissemination. One interesting bit of irony about this pair of adaptations of “Harrison Bergeron” is that the 1995 adaptation of the short story, while it re-frames the Vonnegut text, maintains the title, *Harrison Bergeron*. The 2005 short film, however, directed by Chandler Tuttle, maintains the frame and stays true to the source, but Tuttle changes the title to *2081* after the year in which the story takes place. Nevertheless, both adaptions allow their adapters to take different (utopian) approaches to the short story.

Vonnegut’s “Harrison Bergeron” takes place over the course of a very short period of time one day in the year 2081 as George and Hazel Bergeron are watching television. Their son, Harrison, who had previously been taken away by agents of the Handicapper General, the leader of the United States and enforcer of the 211th, 212th, and 213th amendments to the Constitution, which created a system of forced equality—the strong wear weights, the smart a “mental handicap” (7), the beautiful masks that make them uglier, etc.—suddenly appears on television shortly after a warning is issued in a television news bulletin interrupting a live ballet performance that the fourteen-year-old Harrison had escaped from prison. As the bulletin explains, Harrison was being “held on suspicion of plotting to overthrow the government.” He is described as “a genius and an athlete, . . . under-handicapped, and . . . extremely dangerous” (10). Just as the bulletin comes to an end, Harrison breaks into the television studio and announces in front of the
studio audience and cameras (and, therefore, his mother and father watching at home), “I am the Emperor! Everybody must do what I say at once!” (12). He continues, “Even as I stand here . . . crippled, hobbled, sickened—I am a greater ruler than any man who has ever lived!” (12). As a demonstration of his ability, he removes his many handicaps and selects a ballerina with whom to dance, also removing her handicaps. The ensuing dance is fantastically impressive, but it is cut short when the Handicapper General herself shows up with a shotgun and kills both Harrison and the ballerina. The execution of the two should be enough to wrest the audience—including Harrison’s parents—from their complacency within the Handicapper General’s government; however, it is not. Using Harrison’s parents as symbols of the larger population, Vonnegut creates the kind of hopeless despair that characterizes the classical dystopia. After Harrison’s execution, Hazel begins crying, but her un-handicapped and therefore apparently naturally short attention span causes her to forget what she has just seen, and the television tube has burned out anyway, so there is no lingering image left as a reminder. George, meanwhile, whose attention span is regularly interrupted by the mental handicap, has gone to the kitchen, and upon returning he does not remember his son’s execution any more than Hazel. With that, the story comes to an end, and the reader is left feeling hopeless with regard to any possibility of this imagined future world escaping its plight, as the powerful impetus that is their having witnessed their own son’s death has been ineffective in wresting them from their complacency.

There is an obvious absurdity to Vonnegut’s narrative in “Harrison Bergeron”—the plausibility of enforced equality is ridiculous at best, and even Vonnegut himself
seems to call attention to this inherent absurdity by making the suspension of disbelief all the more difficult with fantastic passages like that which describes Harrison’s dance with his chosen ballerina Empress:

Harrison placed his big hands on the girl’s tiny waist, letting her sense the weightlessness that would soon be hers.

And then, in an explosion of joy and grace, into the air they sprang!

Not only were the laws of the land abandoned, but the law of gravity and laws of motion as well.

They reeled, whirled, swiveled, flounced, capered, gamboled and spun.

They leapt like deer on the moon.

The studio ceiling was thirty feet high, but each leap brought the dancers nearer to it.

It became their obvious intention to kiss the ceiling.

The kissed it.

And then, neutralizing gravity with love and pure will, they remained suspended in the air inches below the ceiling, and they kissed each other for a long, long time. (Vonnegut 13)

This passage solidifies the absurdity inherent in the story by degrees, until Harrison and the ballerina are “suspended in the air.” The absurdity, then, of the passage, betrays the plausibility of the enforced equality premise. This may be precisely Vonnegut’s aim, though, for as Darryl Hattenhauer says, “the object of [Vonnegut’s] satire is not all
leveling . . . Rather, the object of his satire is the popular misunderstanding of what leveling and equality entail” (387). Hattenhauer, in fact, sees the story as more specifically aimed at satirizing “America’s Cold War misunderstanding of not just communism but also socialism” (387). While this is quite plausible, Tuttle’s film, at least, does not seem to delve into this territory specifically.

With the help of Lee Brooks’s score (performed by the Kronos Quartet and the Czech Philharmonic Chamber Orchestra), 2081 has an uplifting tone that belies the despair produced by the film’s ending, a despair that is consistent with that of the short story. The film begins as the story does, with a narrator (Patricia Clarkson) outlining Vonnegut’s future world. As the narrator relates the arrest of Harrison (Armie Hammer) by the “H-G men” (Vonnegut 7), this part of the story plays out in flashbacks intercut with George Bergeron (James Cosmo) watching television with his wife, Hazel (Julie Hagerty), mere steps away from where the film tells us Harrison was taken into the custody of the H-G men. This intercutting is almost diegetic, as George’s mental handicap repeatedly interrupts his ability to remember Harrison being taken at all. This is the first way the film demonstrates the power of the handicaps and stays true to the short story; while readers may find the suspension of their disbelief that a father could forget such a thing difficult, the film maintains the frame nonetheless. Hazel recognizes George’s frustration and says “you seem distracted, hon—what are you thinking about?” George, often glancing in the direction of where his son’s room had been before he was taken away, replies “I don’t know. Can’t get it straight in my head. Something” (2081). Soon after, a news bulletin comes on the air, but the announcer cannot hold his stuttering
at bay (a joke derived from the short story), and the screen goes blank with the message “Please Stand By.” Hazel takes this opportunity to go into the kitchen and “get started with the dishes” (2081), and this is where the film does part ways with the story in at least one way. In the story, it is George who goes to the kitchen and misses much of his son’s broadcast; in Tuttle’s film, however, these roles are reversed. As far as the suspension of disbelief is concerned, it is just possible that Tuttle did not see it as believable that Hazel—who is unhandicapped because she has “a perfectly average intelligence” (Vonnegut 7)—could, because she “couldn’t think about anything except in short bursts” (7), so easily (and quickly) forget the execution of her son after she witnesses it live on television. Nevertheless, Hazel is also somewhat villainized in both the story and the film when she responds to George’s question of whether she would like it if no one was handicapped anymore by saying “I’d hate it” (9). Thus, it may be easier for the audience to identify with George, who is handicapped, and who is still lamenting the loss of his son, even though he is having trouble even remembering it. Furthermore, it might be easier to suspend the disbelief of George forgetting his son’s execution because he has the mental handicap—the science fictional, dystopian frame, then, makes George’s ability to forget more believable. So, with George remaining in front of the television as Hazel moves to the kitchen, a crew stand-in for the stuttering news anchor appears on the screen and announces

suspected anarchist Harrison Bergeron has escaped from custody. Arrested six years ago for propagandist vandalism, broadcast piracy, refusal to report for his quarterly handicapping evaluations, and for the blatant
removal of his handicaps in a public place, Mr. Bergeron had been awaiting trial in a maximum security prison here in Washington D.C. when he miraculously disappeared from his cell earlier this evening. Please be advised that Bergeron is a genius and an athlete, is under-handicapped, and is considered to be extremely dangerous. If you see this man, please contact your local authorities immediately. (2081)

The ballet then returns, and everything seems perfectly normal. George starts to look for his wife, presumably to see if she has just seen the news bulletin, but he is interrupted by a banging coming from the television, a banging that scares the ballerinas; a banging that turns out to be Harrison breaking into the theater from which the the ballet is being broadcast. He makes his way to the stage and instructs the audience to remain quiet. He reports that he has placed a bomb underneath the theater, and that everyone should stay where they are. He then says:

My name is Harrison Bergeron. I am a fugitive and a public threat. I am an abomination of the able. I am an exception to the accepted. I am the greatest man you have never known. And for the last six years, I have been held prisoner by the state, sentenced without trial to torture without end. They had hoped to destroy in me any trace of the extraordinary. And in time I came to share that hope. But the extraordinary, it seems, was simply out of their reach. So now I stand before you today, beaten, hobbled, and sickened, but, sadly, not broken. And I say to you that if it is greatness we must destroy, then let us drag our enemy out of the darkness where it has
been hiding. Let us shine a light! So that, at last, all the world can see!

(2081)

At this point, Harrison removes his handicaps and casts them aside. In the theater lobby, meanwhile, a unit of H-G men, the Handicapper General, Diana Moon Glampers (Tammy Bruce), among them, wait to enter the theater and defuse the situation, but first a pair of explosives specialists underneath the theater must defuse Harrison’s bomb. Back inside the theater, Harrison solicits a volunteer to dance with him, a ballerina coming forward. Once the bomb is disarmed, the lead H-G man (James C. Burns) instructs the others via two-way radio to “kill the broadcast.” George is taken aback when the broadcast dies, but then, just before the dance begins, Harrison activates his “detonator,” which, instead of detonating the bomb, reactivates the broadcast feed so that people will be able to see what is about to happen. The dance begins as the H-G men enter the theater, and the Handicapper General walks to the stage and shoots. Just before, the lead H-G man seems to get word that the broadcast is live, and he tries to warn the Handicapper General, but is too late. Afterward, he informs her, and she looks into the camera, making a face that seems to show fear about the public having just seen her execute Harrison and the ballerina, but twisting it to one that shows her conviction not only that she stands behind what she has done, but that also acts as a kind of warning that this is what would happen if any of the viewers tried anything like Harrison had. Moments later, the broadcast feed again goes blank, and the action returns to the Bergerons’ living room. George trembles with emotion from what he has just seen, and before he has any chance to think about it, his mental handicap interrupts, leaving him
confused. When Hazel returns from the kitchen, she notices that George seems upset and asks why, to which he replies “I don’t know. Something sad on television” (2081). This affirms for the viewer that George has forgotten what he has just seen—the execution of Harrison. Hazel says “well, you should forget sad things anyway. I always do.” With that, George gets up to replace his empty beer, and his mental handicap sounds off. Hazel, mirroring the short story, hears the mental handicap sound and says, “Gee—I could tell that one was a doozy,” to which George replies “you can say that again,” prompting Hazel to literally say it again before the screen fades to black and the film comes to an end.

One major way that we can infer an intent on the part of Tuttle to remain true to the short story, or, at least, to disseminate its utopian content via the film adaptation, is, ironically, through some of the subtle differences from the short story. This is because those subtle differences often seem to have a singular purpose—helping with the plausibility of the story. In the first case, it is George Bergeron who watches the broadcast during which his son is executed by Diana Moon Glampers, which is arguably more acceptable for viewers because whichever of Harrison’s parents watch the broadcast, they are going to have forgotten seeing their son executed, which is far more difficult to accept from the un-handicapped Hazel—who is described not as unintelligent in the story, but merely as having “perfectly average intelligence” (7, emphasis added)7—than from George. In George’s case, he at least has the mental handicap artificially producing this effect on his memory. There is also an unspoken bond between George and Harrison presented in the film that helps to humanize the characters in a way that the
story falls short of, but this seeming departure from the source actually strengthens the cautionary goal of the source text in the film, thereby keeping the film in line with the source. George and Harrison both share a certain intellect that Hazel does not share, so alienating her character from the action by swapping her role as witness to Harrison’s execution for George enhances the plausibility of the outcome—an outcome that produces the despair that the classical dystopia hopes to produce for the sake of its cautionary intentions.

Another way the film strives to be more plausible than the short story has to do with the handicaps themselves. For one thing, the short story describes a few different types of handicaps: those that inhibit strength, intellect, and beauty. The latter variety are absent in the film. The story explains that the handicaps that inhibit beauty (masks) were brought about “so that no one, seeing a free and graceful gesture or a pretty face, would feel like something the cat drug in” (Vonnegut 8). Tuttle’s film, however, abandons these types of handicaps, using masks only as part of the ballet production, almost as a tribute to the masks of the story. In this way the film hearkens back to the short story, but, again, makes a sacrifice for the purpose of downplaying the absurd and boosting believability. The other handicaps do play an important role in the film, and, in the case of the weighted handicaps of the short story that ensure “[n]obody was stronger or quicker than anybody else” (Vonnegut 7), they are upgraded in the film from tacky “sash-weights and bags of birdshot” (8) to sophisticated metal weights that come complete with electronic readouts that help them look official and believable. These weights are at the center of the discussion during which Hazel expresses her true feeling that the handicaps are
essential to her feeling equal to everyone else, for the handicaps bring people with greater
strength or intelligence down to her level. Maintaining the weighted handicaps, then,
provides the film with an opportunity to explain the enforced equality premise of the
narrative, so that the film continues in this way to disseminate the utopian potential of the
source. Updating the look of the handicaps, moreover, enhances the believability of the
enforced equality premise, which, ultimately, leads to the cautionary ending that keeps
the film that much more in line with the source. The mental handicaps, meanwhile, are at
the center of George’s ability to forget having seen his son executed on television, so that
they are repurposed to help with the dissemination of the story’s utopian content in a
more plausible way themselves. If not for George’s mental handicap, he would not forget
what he has seen, which would undermine the event’s inability, within the narrative, to
encourage people to rebel against the oppressive system of enforced equality. This failure
is crucial to the classically dystopian frame of the narrative, so the mental handicap plays
a key role in helping to disseminate the story’s utopian content via the film adaptation.

Another way the film makes the narrative more plausible for the viewer than the
for readers of the short story is via the character of Harrison himself. The short story’s
Harrison is a very different character than that which Armie Hammer portrays in 2081.
Vonnegut’s Harrison, were he not to be executed, intends to install himself as “Emperor”
(12). Based on the few words he utters, it is easy to assume that he would not be a much
better leader than Diana Moon Glampers, the Handicapper General. This version of the
Harrison character seems to be doing little more than resisting the system that has
oppressed him, like a teenager rebelling against strict parents. Tuttle’s version of the
Harrison character, however, is a martyr. The addition of the bomb-in-the-theater premise (the bomb being a decoy for a device that reactivates the broadcast feed so that the viewing public can see his martyrdom) places special emphasis on the publicity of the execution, which should give the audience some hope, just as it might in the story. The reader knows, if nothing else, that Harrison’s execution has been broadcast on television, which ought to be enough to make people realize the iniquity of the story’s imagined system, but Hazel cannot even remember what she has just seen, and it was her own son that was executed, leaving little hope of any other public outcry over the heinous actions of the Handicapper General. The film emphasizes that the execution is being broadcast live by having it cut and then reactivated by Harrison so that he is sure the viewing public will bear witness. Nevertheless, the publicity merely intensifies the despair produced by the ending when Harrison’s father (instead of Hazel, as in the short story) cannot remember his son’s execution mere moments after he watches it live on television.

Emphasizing a particular aspect of the short story in the film may suggest the utopian function of reactivation rather than of dissemination, but in maintaining the most important aspect of the short story—its hopeless ending—the classically dystopian frame is maintained, which, in light of there being no significant reactivation of any aspect of the short story within the adaptation’s cultural or historical context, equals the mere dissemination of the source’s utopian content.

Ultimately, Chandler Tuttle’s 2081 is little more than a dissemination of the utopian content that exists in its source text, Kurt Vonnegut’s “Harrison Bergeron.” The film adapts the short story in such a way as to maintain the story’s classically dystopian
narrative frame, complete with the despair at the story’s end. Along the way, however, the film updates the story for the purposes making the premise more plausible for viewers. The increased plausibility of the narrative within the film only serves to intensify the dissemination of the utopian content in the short story. This utopian content actually exists within the dystopian frame, as the cautionary nature of the classical dystopia encourages an exhibition of the utopian imagination. In this way, 2081 does not display a weakness as an adaptation because it disseminates the utopian content of its source text, and in this way it can be classified as an adaptation that uses the utopian function of dissemination.

Lindsay’s Dexter Comes to the Small Screen

Jeff Lindsay’s 2004 novel Darkly Dreaming Dexter is no critical dystopia, but it has influenced an adaptation that employs the utopian function of dissemination—an adaptation that extends a bit further into popular culture than film because it is the inaugural season of a television series. The long form of the television series is quickly becoming the cultural form par excellence in contemporary culture, and season one of Showtime’s Dexter provides the space inside of which effective dissemination of the source text’s utopian content can occur. Still, Dexter—developed by James Manos, Jr.—is not an exercise in fidelity to its source. Several changes and expansions pervade the adaptation; however, none of these equal a reactivation or reframing of the source. Lindsay—a pen name for the author Jeffry P. Freundlich, husband, incidentally, to Ernest Hemingway’s niece Hilary—seems to be interested in two key themes, namely trauma
and the vigilante. The novel’s eponymous Dexter character, supposedly because he experienced trauma as a young child, has become a gruesome serial killer, but, thanks to a sort of conscientious “code” developed for him by his foster father, he kills only those who “deserve it” (Lindsay 41), making him a vigilante, even if his status as a vigilante is simply a by-product of his supposed trauma-induced psychological need to kill. Thus, the utopian content of the source is twofold: first, it calls attention to childhood trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder, and, second, it encourages discourse on vigilante culture.

Lindsay’s protagonist, Dexter Morgan, is a blood spatter analyst with the Miami-Metro Police, a convenient cover for a serial killer with the added bonus that he is familiar with forensic protocol and he is among the first to become aware of killers operating in the Miami area, killers who, according to the vigilante code that helps him justify his murders, might become his own victims. According to the novel, Dexter’s need to kill came about as a result of a trauma he experienced at three years of age—witnessing his mother’s gruesome murder at the hands of an assailant armed with a chainsaw. After witnessing the murder, the young Dexter had remained for two and a half days in the storage box where the murder had taken place, sitting in an inch of accumulated blood belonging to the victims that included his mother, but he does not remember any of it.

The adult Dexter that serves as the first-person narrator of the novel also does not remember that he had a sibling named Brian who was one year his senior, making them “Irish twins” (Lindsay 260), as Brian puts it. Brian had borne witness to his mother’s murder as well, and, as it turns out, has also been traumatized to the point of becoming a
serial killer, but he, unlike Dexter, does not choose his victims based on whether or not they supposedly “deserve” to die. Instead, he kills prostitutes, draining them of their blood and leaving them neatly arranged, apparently for police to find. Dexter, however, is often on the crime scenes where the bodies are processed into evidence (even though they have no blood), and, as it turns out, Brian is using his victims to try and force Dexter to remember his mother’s murder via the killings, as they are female victims that have been cut into pieces and drained of their blood, calling up associations with their mother’s murder. For a while, Dexter, seeing a video that shows an obscured image of the killer outside a hockey arena where he poses one of his victims, wonders whether he is actually the killer himself, since the obscured image of the man in the video footage resembles him and he is known to sleepwalk. Brian, however, soon begins an elaborate game with Dexter, at one point tossing a severed head out of the window of a truck at him, and later leaving a doll cut into pieces like his murder victims in Dexter’s apartment, causing Dexter to doubt his involvement, though he does not write it off entirely.

Ultimately, Brian kidnaps Dexter’s foster sister Deborah—a Miami-Metro vice cop trying to use the murders to graduate to the homicide division, since the killer targets prostitutes—so that he and Dexter might kill her together. Dexter, however, operates according to “The Code of Harry” (Lindsay 42), a code of ethics governing his serial killings that was conceived by his foster father, Harry Morgan (Deborah’s biological father), so he cannot bring himself to kill her because she “is the only person in the world who gives a rusty possum fart whether [he] live[s] or die[s]”; as he puts it, “if I could have feelings at all I would have them for Deb” (16). The inept detective Migdia
LaGuerta, though, finally proves herself an effective police detective by following Dexter to the shipping yard where Deborah was being held by Brian, in a storage box like the one in which Dexter’s mother had been murdered. Dexter insists he is there looking for his sister, and LaGuerta, wary because she suspects he is attached to the killings somehow, nonetheless agrees they should split up to try and find the missing Deborah. Soon, Dexter finds Deborah with Brian in the storage box, and the pair have a conversation that reveals nearly everything, with Deborah listening; she learns all about her brother’s serial killing, that the serial killer (dubbed the both “Tamiami Butcher” and the “Tamiami Slasher”) she and the Miami Metro homicide division had been chasing was Dexter’s biological brother, that together they had watched their biological mother get cut into pieces by a man with a chainsaw, and that they had waited two and a half days in the storage box where the murder had occurred before Dexter was rescued by her father and his brother was cast aside. She does not find out about the influence her father had had on Dexter by creating the code just then, but by novel’s end it is revealed that she had been made aware. In any case, while Brian attempts to convince Dexter to join him in killing Deborah, LaGuerta, just in the proverbial nick of time, interrupts the scene to try and save Deb’s life, but Brian subdues her with a knife to the midsection even as she is able to shoot him in defense. A few moments later, as Dexter struggles, holding a knife up to Deborah, to keep what he calls his “Dark Passenger” (271) from allowing him to kill her—thanks to the “Wisdom of Harry” (274)—LaGuerta moves to shoot him, and Brian pins the wrist of her shooting hand to the ground with his knife. Then, when Dexter successfully manages to not kill Deborah, Brian, disappointed, finishes LaGuerta off with
his knife and escapes, though wounded. The novel’s epilogue takes place at LaGuerta’s funeral, with Dexter considering his need to kill, Deborah’s acceptance of him as a vigilante (not to mention why he has a need to kill), the suggestion that an APB on Brian would turn him up eventually, and the expression of his wariness of another detective (named Doakes) who seems to be very suspicious of him.

The Showtime series *Dexter* that was developed by James Manos, Jr. seems to take an approach to adapting Lindsay’s novel that is in line with the utopian function of dissemination. Some of the events unfold differently than in the novel, but none of the series’s deviations from the source equal a reframing or reactivation of the source. The series is set in Miami, and thereby evokes the feeling of a sweat noir, à la Lawrence Kasdan’s *Body Heat* (1981). This neo-noir style is reinforced by Dexter’s first-person narration, an element which is itself taken from the novel. A theme song and opening sequence features Dexter (Michael C. Hall) performing the mundane tasks of getting ready for a day’s work, but these tasks are not so mundane as presented in the sequence—a tight shot of the sink over which Dexter shaves catches drops of blood from a cut, a knife seems to savagely cut a piece of ham that is placed in a frying pan, a French press is grasped too tightly, a blood orange is juiced rigidly. These stylistic decisions go a long way toward establishing the Dexter character’s brutality—even if that brutality is obscured by the fact that he is a likeable character the audience is encouraged to root for.

The series’s pilot episode opens much like Lindsay’s novel, with Dexter first killing a man he knows to have himself killed several children. Thus, the audience first sees Dexter for who he really is, just as in the novel. He has exhumed the bodies of the
children and posed them in the small house where they were murdered, and he brings their killer there to answer for what he has done. After killing him, he cuts the body into pieces, wraps them in plastic, and disposes of the remains in the ocean from his boat, cleverly called the *Slice of Life*. In narration, he talks about his need to kill, revealing that he cannot say specifically why he has such a need, but that his foster father, Harry Morgan (played in flashbacks by James Remar), had given him a code to keep him from getting caught and to ensure he would only take the lives of those who supposedly deserve to die. Flashbacks thereafter show Harry leading Dexter down a particular path to controlling his urge after he had discovered Dexter was secretly killing animals—including neighborhood pets. Returning to the present day, Dexter is summoned to a crime scene by his foster sister, Debra (Jennifer Carpenter), where he first sees the handiwork of the serial killer later dubbed the “Ice Truck Killer,” so named for his use of a refrigerated truck to transport his victims. Dexter, however, has nothing to do at a crime scene with no blood, so he takes his leave, and heads back to the police station where his office is located. He brings a box of donuts along with him to pass out to his co-workers, something he sees as making him seem more “normal.” He visits Camilla Figg (Margo Martindale) to get a file on a recently released murderer whom he later kills because, although the police had arrested him, he had been released in spite of his guilt on a technicality. Next, the viewer is introduced to Dexter’s girlfriend, Rita (Julie Benz), and on a date Dexter takes his leave of her because he spots a crime scene nearby—a crime scene that turns out to be the next victim of the Ice Truck Killer. Dexter’s preoccupation with the Ice Truck Killer leads him to inadvertently push Rita away later in the evening,
so he concentrates his energy on helping his sister get a leg up on the Ice Truck Killer investigation so that she can prove herself worthy of the homicide division, even though she is blocked by María LaGuerta (Lauren Vélez)—the series parallel to the novel’s Migdia LaGuerta—who is attracted to Dexter. LaGuerta, like in the novel, is preoccupied with the possibility of a witness because one of the victims had a cut that was unfinished, leaving her to believe that the killer was interrupted, but Dexter knows that the killer would not have had the opportunity to wrap the body in butcher paper were this the case. After killing the murderer he finds with the help of Camilla Figg (who in the novel is a member of the forensics team herself instead of the records supervisor at the Miami-Metro Police Station), Dexter starts to drive toward Rita’s house to make up with her, and spots a refrigerated truck. After a short pursuit, the driver tosses a head out at Dexter’s car, confirming that it is the killer the police have been searching for. Dexter continues to Rita’s house after the police secure the crime scene, and then returns home, finding a doll head on his refrigerator, which brings the series pilot to an end.

Other plot elements are added into the series to breathe life into other characters, including subplots that are only tangentially related to Dexter himself, and often unrelated to the overarching conflict that runs the season long—that of the hunt for the Ice Truck Killer. Most of these additions seem to serve little more purpose than expansion of the source to make it fit within the 12-part formula of the cable series and open up space for expansion of the series into future seasons. Some, however, do affect the Ice Truck Killer investigation both by the Miami-Metro police, as well as Dexter’s own personal investigation. As in the novel, Dexter helps keep Debra on the case by feeding
her information, for instance, about the killer’s likely use of a refrigerated truck. After
Dexter has a head thrown at him from the truck in question, it is Debra who finds the
truck. Inside the truck is a block of ice with the severed fingertips of a single female
hand, with the nails painted different colors—just the way the fingernails of the doll the
killer left in Dexter’s freezer in his apartment had appeared. Later he discovers the Ice
Truck Killer has broken into his apartment again, as the doll head has been reattached to
the front of his freezer, from which he had removed it, and the rest of the doll is missing
from inside the freezer.

Later, Dexter assists the police when they find another victim posed in a hockey
arena—on the ice, in the goal. The body turns out to belong to the severed fingertips
found earlier, and police focus on the arena’s nightwatchman, who turns out to be
missing. On a security tape that surfaces, the missing nightwatchman is seen posing the
body parts in the arena, but Dexter and Debra are unconvinced, as LaGuerta is, that he is
the killer. Debra even believes she has proof from the video that the nightwatchman was
being forced at gunpoint to pose the victim in the hockey goal. In the following episode,
the police find a male hand posed at a beach, a beach Dexter knows from his childhood.
He figures out that the Ice Truck Killer had posed the hand at the beach after looking at
pictures in his apartment from his childhood. The hand turns out to belong to the hockey
arena nightwatchman, making it impossible for him to be the Ice Truck Killer, and soon
they find a severed foot at another location that is familiar to Dexter. The foot too,
belongs to the nightwatchman, as well as a severed leg they find later. Still, it seems the
nightwatchman may be alive in spite of the amputations. Dexter, after looking at more
pictures, figures out where the killer is holding the nightwatchman and goes there to confirm before alerting the police. The nightwatchman is saved, minus a hand and a leg below the knee, but short of actually arresting the Ice Truck Killer, all seems well. However, this is hardly the end.

As the season continues, Dexter stumbles upon a *coyote* operation bringing Cubans illegally into the US, but killing those who cannot pay once they arrive in the country. Confirming the identity of the coyote and that he is indeed executing the non-paying Cubans himself, Dexter moves forward with his plan to kill him, and at the last minute discovers that the coyote’s wife is involved, deciding to kill her at the same time. Around then, the nightwatchman awakes from his unconsciousness, remembering little of any use to the police in their investigation. Here the doctor in charge of helping him with prosthetics for his hand and leg, Rudy Cooper (Christian Camargo) is introduced, and he takes a liking to Debra. Also, a new witness comes in to the police department, but cannot really help. Later, one of the coyote victims Dexter had dumped in the ocean reappears in the same location where she had been slain, and Dexter has to process the scene for the police; apparently the Ice Truck Killer had recovered the body and replaced it at the crime scene to scare him. Dexter plants evidence to close the case without any extra suspicion, and soon the police find a viable suspect in the Ice Truck Killer case, arrest him, and celebrate their success. Dexter, however, knows he is a fraud, and Debra, meanwhile, has begun to date Dr. Cooper, who is soon revealed to be the real Ice Truck Killer.

Debra, now dating the Ice Truck Killer/Dr. Cooper exclusively, is convinced by
him to join Dexter and Rita at a house Dexter has just inherited from his biological father, whom he had believed since childhood to be dead, but who has actually only just died. It turns out Harry Morgan had kept Dexter’s father’s existence a secret, but Dexter is more concerned with the fact that he suspects foul play in the death, though he is never able to prove it. However, he is able to prove that the man had indeed been his father via a DNA test, and, along with Dr. Cooper, scatters his ashes, and ties up his affairs. At the end of the episode, it is revealed that Brian—aka Dr. Cooper, aka the Ice Truck Killer—is likely to have been the one who killed the man. Soon after, the homicide division receives a jar of blood with a hotel room key floating inside, and in the room find what appears to be a gruesome murder scene with no bodies—only blood. Dexter, upon entering the room, collapses and calls up the childhood memory of sitting in blood. Afterward, he is too upset to enter the room, and the rest of the forensics team processes the scene, finding that the blood belongs to five victims—exactly the number of the Ice Truck Killer’s victims so far. In fact, it is the Ice Truck Killer (aka Dr. Cooper) who later convinces Dexter to confront his fear of the memory he has called up from his past, and so, entering the crime scene alone, he remembers having witnessed his mother’s gruesome death. Meanwhile, Angel Batista (David Zayas) finds a former prostitute with a prosthetic hand. The nails on the hand are painted just like the fingertips police had earlier found in the refrigerated truck. She points him toward a former john that had a fetish for amputees, and Angel goes to Dr. Cooper for information about potential acrotomophiliacs that could turn out to be the Ice Truck Killer. Dr. Cooper tells him little, and later attacks Batista while in disguise, but Angel survives. Still, he says nothing about the Ice Truck Killer-
acrotomophilic lead, and must be hospitalized from the attack. Soon after, police find the remains of another Ice Truck Killer victim, this time including a clue that links the scene to the other murders, as well as Dexter’s mother’s murder. As a result, Dexter discovers his mother’s identity and the details surrounding her murder, short of one detail—the existence of his brother, which seems to have been intentionally hidden from him. When Dexter examines Batista’s injury back at the hospital—from where he had hit his assailant with the back of his head—the injury is consistent with a defensive wound he had noticed on Dr. Cooper, and he immediately realizes that Dr. Cooper could be the Ice Truck Killer, soon confirming his suspicion, but too late, as the killer has already kidnapped Debra.

In the climactic finale, Dexter searches his apartment for clues he may have missed to discover where he might find the Ice Truck Killer, and thereby his now missing sister. He surmises that it is in the storage box where his mother was killed and he was “born”—meaning, where he experienced the trauma that made him what he has become, a “monster” (“Born Free”). Meanwhile, Detectives LaGuerta and Sargent James Doakes (Erik King) are also hot on the trail of the Ice Truck Killer, so if Dexter wants to beat them to him, he must act fast. In fact, Dexter is forced to tell them that he has confirmed Dr. Cooper is the Ice Truck Killer, but he does not tell them that he thinks he will find him in the storage box. Nevertheless, Doakes follows him there, but Dexter finds nothing in the storage box, and Doakes learns nothing of Dexter’s connection to the case, even though he suspects there is some connection. In the midst of an argument outside the storage box, the two are summoned to Dr. Cooper’s apartment, where they are able to
inspect the now-identified killer’s lair. Inside, Dexter finds a clue to where he might find Debra and the killer, which leads him to the address of the house where he had lived prior to his mother’s death; on the lawn, in a flashback, he remembers the existence of his brother. When Brian appears, they discuss their relation to one another, but then Dexter concerns himself with Debra’s safety, leading Brian to subdue him. Meanwhile, the police discover Dr. Cooper’s real name, narrowing their search for him. Back at his childhood house, Dexter awakens in the company of Brian, and they discuss how Dexter had been saved by Harry, but Brian had been cast away. Apparently, Brian wants Dexter to accept him as his brother and renounce his association with his foster family by killing Debra, who is posed unconscious in much the way Dexter poses his victims before he kills them. Dexter is hesitant, however, and he explains the Code of Harry, but Brian says that in joining forces with him, he need not restrict his victims in this way; he says “you could be yourself around me.” Indeed, Dexter describes Brian as “a killer without reason or regret—free” (Dexter), but he still respects the code, and refuses to kill her. When Brian, in response, tries to stab her, Dexter catches his arm, and at this moment, Debra regains consciousness while Dexter and Brian fight. Police arrive at the house, and Brian flees, escaping capture, but Debra is saved, and Dexter explains away his having been there by saying the killer had called him to come and “talk him down,” and that he had threatened to kill Debra if he did not come alone.

Later, in Dexter’s apartment, he seems to be bidding Debra goodnight, as though she were staying with him so as not to be alone after the trauma she has just endured. A little while later, after the lights are out, Brian arrives and stabs Debra as she sleeps in
bed, with Dexter asleep on his couch—or so he thinks. Instead, “Debra” is a prosthetics dummy, and Dexter subdues him. He brings Brian back to his lair and kills him in the same manner as Brian had killed his prostitute victims, draining the blood, but he makes it appear a suicide to the police that find him later. As in the novel, Doakes makes it clear he is even more suspicious of Dexter, but other than loose ends left for the next season of the series to take up, the season comes to an end here, and with it the adaptation of the novel. There is one final bit, however, that is important to note, and that is Dexter’s fantasy that people would appreciate what he has done to Brian, and what he does to other killers. As he puts it while fantasizing he is being celebrated by “fans” as he walks onto a crime scene, as though here were on a red carpet, “Everyone else would probably thank me if they knew I was the one who drained [the Ice Truck Killer] of his life. In fact, deep down I’m sure they’d appreciate a lot of my work” (Dexter). He then asserts, in a tip of the hat to the novel, “they see me. I’m one of them—in their darkest dreams” (Dexter), and with that the season ends.

Psychoanalytic critics have taken the Dexter series to task using a variety of approaches—in fact, an entire “completely unauthorized” work has been dedicated to doing so. In “Rethinking Dexter,” Lisa Firestone analyzed the series’s treatment of childhood trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These are themes that seem to be very apparent in the novel as well, and the series seeks to disseminate them to the extent that the novel is done justice—not to reactivate them, and certainly not to reframe them. Firestone argues that the series misdiagnoses Dexter as a psychopath, or at least that Dexter misdiagnoses himself as such. In short, Firestone shows that “Dexter’s other
diagnosable symptoms . . . diverge from the picture of the classic psychopath” (18). The series, as an adaptation of the novel, might have reactivated or reframed the source’s theme of psychopathy by correcting or altering this misdiagnosis, but it instead remains true to the novel’s presentation of Dexter’s psychopathic condition, however problematic. There is a utopian effect of this misdiagnosis as well—its exposure of what Firestone sees as the actual problem, that “Dexter is a victim of childhood post-traumatic stress” (21). In fact, the novel and film both provide an opportunity for Dexter and for readers to come to this conclusion themselves. In this way, the misdiagnosis is intentional, and the series seems to disseminate this aspect of the source flawlessly. Dexter continually refers to himself as a “monster” throughout the novel and season one of *Dexter*, but over the course of both, he is able to come to the conclusion that it was the trauma of having witnessed his mother’s murder that contributed to him becoming what he has become. The novel sees it as his having been “born” (253) upon the trauma, born, that is, as a psychopath, where the show says he was “born in blood” (“Born Free”). In both, the reader/viewer follows along with Dexter as he discovers his psychological urge to kill had been the result of the trauma, and not some inherent psychopathology. In this way, the misdiagnosis serves the utopian function of dissemination in the series, and that same misdiagnosis calls attention to the the harmful effects of childhood trauma, namely, PTSD. This reveals one of the utopian dimensions of the narrative itself, and, in fact, the discovery process that occurs over the course of both the novel and the series serves the argument that season one of the series seeks to disseminate this utopian content.

One of Firestone’s arguments about Dexter’s misdiagnosis has to do with the
influence of the Code of Harry. She points out that what “turned Dexter into a killer” was his need as a child having been traumatized to “dissociate from [himself] as the helpless victim and identify instead with the aggressor,” which is a common “survival strategy” (23) for such victims. However, as she points out, “Dexter’s loyalty to his destructive voices is not only a result of his identification with his mother’s murderer but also of Harry’s encouragement of Dexter’s violent tendencies” (27). In fact, Harry had viewed Dexter’s situation as helpless, and so he attempted to control Dexter’s behavior, and later to harness it for what he saw as good. As Firestone puts it, Harry “assumed that Dexter was on an inevitable course of destruction and encouraged him to commit . . . ‘small’ acts of murder”—i.e., of animals—“in the hope that it would keep him from harming people, when a more appropriate response would have been to get Dexter psychological help” (20). Firestone cites research that indicates Dexter could have been saved from his “Dark Passenger” (Lindsay 1) if the latter approach had been taken. Again, however, we can see the tragic outcome of this failing as a kind of cautionary tale, and thus both Darkly Dreaming Dexter and Dexter proffer this same utopian content, making Dexter an adaptation that employs the utopian function of dissemination in this regard.

Going a step further, it seems from what Harry has done to contribute to Dexter’s development that he is actually the proverbial “bad guy.” The discovery process Dexter goes through positions him almost as more of a victim—a victim of Harry’s shortcomings as a father of a traumatized child. Not that Dexter’s behavior is excusable—far from it—but his likability increases as the audience develops empathy for him because of his childhood trauma. Ironically, empathy is that which Dexter should lack as a victim of
childhood PTSD. As Firestone says, “[a]lthough Dexter is supposedly cut off from all human emotions, empathy is the emotion that he seems to most lack and long for. This lack of empathy, which is often cited as evidence of his psychopathy, can be a direct result of childhood PTSD” (22). Harry, then, in denying Dexter psychological treatment, is actually to blame for Dexter’s development of the Dark Passenger, though this does not seem to have been malicious. Harry had sheltered Dexter from his trauma to protect him from his Dark Passenger, and he had tried to help him control it as well. As Firestone points out, though, this approach “may well have perpetuated” Dexter’s violence (23). Here another aspect of the cautionary tale develops: if parents of traumatized children—particularly those who are aware of the trauma, as Harry is—get their children help, they might prevent the lack of empathy that could drive them to behave terribly, as Dexter does. Instead, Harry turns Dexter into a vigilante, which is another specific perpetuation of his violence, as it turns out.

Indeed, as a vigilante, Dexter perpetuates his violence. According to Firestone, “individuals suffering from PTSD . . . may be prone to aggression and dehumanization in the service of a cause that they find noble. The Code of Harry . . . provides Dexter with the moral justification and righteousness to see his acts of aggression and dehumanization as upholding a noble cause” (23). In this way, Firestone argues, “the code had an effect opposite to the one Harry intended” (23). Still, the vigilante narrative of Dexter’s story is a familiar one in American culture, and the inclusion of this trope in both the novel and the series encourages discourse on the vigilante, but, in turn, “on the weaknesses and corruption of society” (Cawelti 163). Not to be confused with “vigilantism,” which
Culberson argues is “a social group response” rather than an individual—though Culberson does note that “vigilante” is “often used to refer to a member of a vigilante committee” (10)—the vigilante “after it has become absolutely clear to him that the legally constituted processes of society cannot bring about justice,” decides to then “take the law into his own hands” (Cawelti 163). That is to say, “[w]hen it becomes evident that the police, the courts, and society in general cannot either protect the innocent or avenge acts of criminal violence, then the vigilante must himself become the law” (Cawelti 163).

Vigilante narratives encourage audiences to call into question their justice system, which forces a kind of re-evaluation of the strength of that system, equaling a utopian impulse within vigilante narratives. However, the eye for an eye approach to vigilante justice does not equal a utopian impulse, and, in the case of Dexter, the vigilante justification of his killings are little more than a convenient excuse.

The utopian function of the *Dexter* adaptation is recognizable as dissemination of the source’s utopian content, but there are, of course, many changes to the narrative, some more significant than others. The additions of particular sub-plots, such as the drug cartel’s feud with Sargent Doakes and the reappearance of Rita’s ex-husband, Paul Bennett (Mark Pellegrino), for instance, are in no way derived from the book. These changes, as noted, seem to have the sole purpose of filling out the twelve part, hour-long episode format of the series. Other additions to the narrative that appear in the adaptation seem to be added merely to set up continuing story lines that bleed over into subsequent seasons of the series, which departs from the novels almost entirely after its first season. Nevertheless, some changes are seemingly significant, and take place within the context
of the adaptation of the source. Debra, for instance, does not, as she does in the novel, witness the conversation Brian and Dexter have, thereby learning that they are brothers, and that Dexter is a serial killer. In fact, it is not until much later in the television series that she becomes aware of his serial killings—at the end of the sixth season. Still, this change does not take away from the dissemination of the source’s utopian content in any way. Speaking of Brian, in the novel he is not caught by the police or by Dexter (though it is suggested that he will be soon enough), but in the series he narrowly escapes the police and is instead captured by Dexter, who kills him. Once again, this does not interfere with the dissemination of the source’s utopian content, and, in fact, might emphasize the vigilante theme, but this emphasis does not equal a reactivation, so the function of dissemination remains intact. In fact, even with Dexter’s hero fantasy at the end of the series, viewers are only that much more prone to question their justice system and consider the vigilante theme, but again, this emphasis is not significant enough to equal a reactivation of the source. None of the series’s changes of the source’s plot elements really seem to result in anything other than an adaptation that employs the utopian function of dissemination. Even Rita’s kids, who seem in the series to be protected from their mother’s abusive past with their father while in the novel they are clearly not sheltered and may in fact be traumatized, do not constitute a significant enough change in the adaptation to equal anything more than a dissemination of the source’s utopian content.

With the lack of any special emphasis, then, on any of the source’s themes, the Dexter series’s first season falls into the category of an adaptation that uses the utopian
function of dissemination. The first season of the series certainly does not reframe the source either, even if it does change the title. Once again, though, the format of the television series may dictate this particular change, so that subsequent seasons will retain the same series title, thereby remaining consistent with the novel series, which features the word “Dexter” in the titles of each novel. What is clearly disseminated is the trauma theme along with the vigilante trope, arguably the most important aspects of the source. With trauma, although Dexter sees himself as a psychopath, he is actually a victim of childhood PTSD, which the adaptation clearly disseminates, and in the same manner as the novel—the misdiagnosis is undone via Dexter’s discovery of the trauma he had repressed. The utopian content inherent in this presentation of the theme includes the possibility of treatment and the cautionary energy contained in the picture of how not to raise a traumatized child. Connected to this is the vigilante trope, which, unfortunately, gives Dexter’s killing meaning, even as it encourages viewers to question their justice system, whose supposed failings seems to somehow justify the vigilante. Obviously, no killing should ever be sanctioned, but the vigilante narrative—one that is familiar in culture in general—produces a kind of utopian impulse in and of itself, by encouraging the reader/viewer to engage in social dreaming, which might help him or her come to some conclusion about their empirical world, and how it might be changed to negate this supposed need for vigilantes. In this way, the adaptation again disseminates utopian content sourced from the novel, thereby employing the utopian function of dissemination in dealing with that source.
Conclusion

Adaptations that employ the utopian function of dissemination are generally fidelity critic-friendly, and their utopian content is consistent with that of their sources. As to the latter, this is because the utopian content of such an adaptation is the utopian content of the source. In spite of the seeming lack of contribution to the discourse in which the source participates, one way in which it does contribute to that discourse is simply by disseminating the utopian content of the source to a different, perhaps larger audience. In the case of Blindness, Meirelles is able to disseminate the utopian content of a novel written in Portuguese to English speaking audiences by way of the cinema. He maintains the critically dystopian frame by allowing the characters to regain their sight, as the novel does, which stands as a figure of hope and by maintaining the community established amongst the ensemble of characters, which is itself derived from the novel. Tuttle, meanwhile, does not stay especially true to Vonnegut’s “Harrison Bergeron” in his film, 2081, but his deviations from the source, which largely serve as the proverbial sugar to help the medicine of the suspension of disbelief go down, do not reactivate or reframe the source. Finally, HBO’s Dexter, which adapts Jeff Lindsay’s Darkly Dreaming Dexter in its first season, allows for a full-scale dissemination of its source’s utopian content, in part because the long form of series television allows ample time to do so. While Dexter is not completely true to its source, like 2081, its utopian content is also consistent with that of its source. These adaptations serve as examples of the utopian function of dissemination within adaptation studies, and demonstrate how such adaptations themselves contain utopian potential.
II. The Utopian Function of Reactivation

Adaptations are very often made not to directly disseminate the utopian content of their sources, but in an attempt to harness that content and reactivate it within the cultural or historical context of the adaptation’s production. This type of adaptation uses is what here referred to as the utopian function of reactivation. In adapting source texts in this way, these adaptations enrich the the cultural space occupied by their sources in part by entering into a kind of dialogue with that source. Moreover, this type of adaptation reveals a manifestation of the utopian impulse by allowing the adapter to exhibit his or her utopian imagination, which fashions their critique. This critique is framed by the narrative of the source and its utopian content, and it builds upon that content in a culturally or historically significant way, usually by emphasizing a particular theme that is included in the source. In some cases, the theme that is emphasized has little more than a few mentions in the source, while in others it is as important as other themes. In either case, the themes emphasized in these adaptations are usually chosen due to some critically ulterior motive of the adapter, and the adapted source is thus reactivated. Sadly, adaptations that employ the utopian function of reactivation are dismissed by fidelity critics because they are not as true to the source as, say, those employing the utopian function of dissemination. Nevertheless, these adaptations are valuable from a critical perspective, and they demonstrate an exhibition of the utopian imagination, besides which, they contribute to the richness of the culture in which they are produced, in
tandem with their sources. For consideration here is Alfonso Cuarón’s *Children of Men* alongside its source text, P.D. James’s *The Children of Men*, as well as Alan Ball’s *True Blood* and its source, Charlaine Harris’s *Dead Until Dark*, and Boris Sagal’s film adaptation of Richard Matheson’s *I Am Legend*, entitled *The Omega Man*.

**Cuarón’s *Children of Men* Indicts Immigration Policy**

Harnessing the utopian content of its source text to provide commentary on an aspect of its cultural/historical context, Alfonso Cuarón’s *Children of Men* exhibits the characteristics of a film adaptation that employs the utopian function of reactivation. Cuarón’s film adapts P.D. James’s novel *The Children of Men* for the big screen, but takes significant liberties with this source in an attempt to call attention to immigration issues, which were at the height of controversy in the United States when the film appeared. As an immigrant to the United States himself, Cuarón would have had an important connection to the debate over immigration policy in the US, especially with regard to American attitudes toward Mexican immigration to the US specifically.¹ Adapting James’s novel afforded him the opportunity to produce for viewers the kind of cognitive estrangement that we so often see in science fiction, centered in this case on the immigration debate; that is, the film would encourage viewers to see the immigration controversy from a fresh perspective. This is achieved in part because, like *Blindness*, *The Children of Men* can be read as a critical dystopia, what with the inclusion of hope within its pages (embodied in the child), the ways in which the textual world are intended to be worse than the reader’s empirical world, and the roundabout way in which principle
characters are able to keep from becoming re-subjugated by the novel’s imagined system. One such character, Theo Faron, serves as the text’s resistant protagonist (however reluctantly), and his successful resistance of the narrative’s dystopian conditions is suggestive of the critically dystopian frame. Cuarón’s film is able to sustain this frame in spite of the notable liberties it takes with the source’s plot and characters. Perhaps more importantly, though, it reactivates the source text in light of a particular aspect of the cultural/historical context of its production, and it is in this way that it is exemplary of the utopian function of reactivation.

The cultural/historical context in which the film appeared was especially concerned with the immigration debate, as has been noted. By 2006—the same year the film was released—the number of immigrants in the United States rose to 37.5 million, over 11 million of which were from Mexico, the single highest number from any one country that year (Migration). The presidential election that officially began late in the same year when North Carolina Senator John Edwards formally announced his candidacy (an announcement that came, incidentally, a mere three days after the national release of Cuarón’s film) found immigration a politicized issue. The discourse surrounding this issue was generally geared toward the Mexican illegal immigrant population specifically. While this came as no surprise considering Mexico’s proximity to the United States and the widespread illegal immigration that came from there, some politicians—including both the democratic and republican nominees in the 2008 presidential election, Barack Obama and John McCain—supported a fence along the Mexican border with the United States in their campaign rhetoric, a fence which would emphasize the carceral nature of
the national border. McCain, for instance, said in a May 2007 republican debate that “we must secure our borders,” echoing Obama, who, in March of the same year said on *Larry King Live* “[w]e’re going to have to secure our borders” (qtd. in Carter). Still, Obama supported a path to legalization for illegal immigrants already living in the United States, while McCain, who himself wrote a bill in 2007 that also supported the path to legalization, revoked his support of that bill likely in a calculated move to the political right. Before the immigration debate worked its way into the electoral politics of the presidential election, however, legislators in the House of Representatives during the 109th Congress had considered H.R. 4437, also known as the Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005, passing the bill in the House in December of 2005. H.R. 4437 failed in the Senate, however, but it still sparked a series of protests that rejected the bill altogether and sought immigration reform that would provide amnesty for undocumented workers, which was the polar opposite of the bill’s original goal, i.e., to enact policy that would allow for the deportation of the millions of undocumented workers in the US. “¡Si se puede!” (“Yes we can!”) became the rally cry of the protests, which would seem to have succeeded in thwarting the conservative agenda that was poorly hidden behind the bill. Alfonso Cuarón carried the idea of the mass deportation of immigrants from the United States back to Mexico (and, indeed, other countries) to what he saw as a possible conclusion via his adaptation of James’s novel, equaling what is here being called a utopian reactivation of the novel.

*The Children of Men* appeared in 1992, and James set the novel about thirty years in the future, beginning with her protagonist, Oxford history professor Theo Faron’s diary
entry from New Year’s Day 2021, which also happens to be his fiftieth birthday and the
day that “the last human being to be born on earth was killed in a pub brawl in a suburb
of Buenos Aires” (James 3). The death of said human being, named Joseph Ricardo, is of
little consequence to the novel’s plot, but merely a device for installing its premise: no
child has been born on earth for twenty-five years. With the end of the human race in
sight, then, the people of England have allowed Xan Lyppiat—a who happens to be
Theo’s cousin—to become “the dictator and Warden of England” (4). Lyppiat’s regime
“combines perpetual surveillance with total indulgence” (11), using “national porn shops
to stimulate . . . flagging appetites” (7). Meanwhile, the elderly are encouraged to
participate in mass suicides, criminals are banished to a penal colony on the Isle of Man,
and the people born during the last year of human fertility, 1995 (“Year Omega”)—a
generation appropriately referred to as “Omega”—often terrorize the countryside in
gangs called “Painted Faces” (10). When Theo is approached by a former student
wanting him to speak to his powerful cousin about the atrocities of the regime, he
becomes involved in a rebellion fueled by hope that stems from the former student’s
secret pregnancy. Theo must then protect the unborn child and its mother from regime
control, and, after the child is born, kill his cousin to become the de facto leader of an
England with a renewed hope that is embodied in the newborn child.

Viewers of Cuarón’s adaptation of James’s novel are able to see their empirical
world anew in terms of the immigration debate because of the ways in which they are
cognitively estranged from their world after seeing the film. Americans watched, in 2006,
as debates and protests surrounding H.R. 4437 unfolded, while Cuarón imagined by way
of the film what the future might look like if the bill were to pass. Of course, Cuarón’s commentary on immigration in the film is not completely foreign to readers of James’s novel. Nevertheless, where the film and the novel really seem to part ways is actually with regard to the immigration issue. No doubt, the “sojourners” of James’s text piqued the interest of Cuarón, even though he apparently did not even read the novel himself, but did supposedly read an abridged version at some point and wrote the screenplay with Tim Sexton, who had read the unabridged novel. The sojourners, in any case, might have seemed recognizable to Cuarón as a version of the Latino immigrant labor force that was under attack from the political right via H.R. 4437 in 2005 and early 2006. Indeed, the novel’s version of the character Jasper—a mentor and former professor of Theo’s in the novel—dismisses the sojourners as those who are employed at “mending the roads, cleaning the sewers and collecting the rubbish” (47-8), while Theo’s former student Julian later protests that they “do our dirty work” (58). Cuarón would have been all too familiar with the line of reasoning that also says immigrant labor is a necessity in the United States. In fact, in 2004, filmmaker Sergio Arau had already dealt with this idea in *A Day Without a Mexican*, a film in which all Latinos inexplicably disappear from California one day, leaving Americans to do their own dirty work. Though Arau’s film is a comedy of sorts, its message is anything but satirical—the Latino immigrant work force in the United States is composed of the unsung heroes that do the work Americans are often either too lazy to do or even believe themselves above doing. The sojourners in James’s novel seem to have the same role. This role, however, is not one of glamour or prestige, even if we can consider the real-life immigrant labor force of the United States
heroic to some extent. Theo complains, for instance, that the sojourners are imported “as helots” and treated “as slaves” (96). The novel’s portrayal of the sojourners, then, is recognizable enough when compared to the Latino immigrant work force in the United States, but the similarities grow when we consider the rules governing the sojourners’ ability to stay in the country; as Julian points out, “They come to eat. Then, when they get old—sixty is the age limit, isn’t it?—they’re sent back whether they want to go or not” (58). Sending immigrants back to their home country was precisely the goal of H.R. 4437, so the novel would again have been timely subject matter for Cuarón to adapt in 2006.

Cuarón first applies a more intense stigma to the sojourners by calling them “fugees”—a term derived from the word “refugee.” Although “refugee” might seem like a term more likely to create a culture of compassion, in Cuarón’s version of the story, any such compassion has been washed away. As the film opens, news broadcasts inform viewers that “the Homeland Security bill” has been ratified so that “after eight years, British borders will remain closed” and “the deportation of illegal immigrants will continue” (Children). Also, posters encouraging citizens to turn illegal workers over to the authorities hang in the Ministry of Energy where Theo (Clive Owen) works, and a propaganda film warns that to “hire, feed, or shelter illegal immigrants is a crime” (Children). Intensifying the anti-immigration sentiment of the story in this way sets up the immigration theme as that upon which Cuarón is most interested in commenting. If the smaller cues do not give it away, surely the immigrants waiting at the train station in cages guarded by armed soldiers do, if not the bus that passes Jasper (Michael Caine) and
Theo on the road, which Jasper points out is full of illegal immigrants on their way to a refugee camp at Bexhill. This, in fact, is where we first hear the term “fugees”; Jasper says, “poor fugees; after escaping the worst atrocities and finally making it to England, our government hunts them down like cockroaches” (*Children*). From an old newspaper clipping shown shortly thereafter, viewers understand that at some point in the film’s recent history, because of the “atrocities” going on abroad, a “massive migration” to Britain had occurred, followed shortly thereafter by a proclamation that read in the newspapers as follows: “All foreigners now ILLEGAL” (*Children*). Fast-forward to the film’s present, and the holding cells filled with foreigners waiting to be transported to Bexhill merely become part of the film’s background, suggesting what widespread deportation would look like—the kind of deportation that might have resulted from the passing of H.R. 4437. In this way, although the premise of the film is the same—that children have ceased to be conceived—immigration already seems the most important theme, so this is how Cuarón has reactivated the source in his adaptation.

As if drawing parallels to the Mexican immigrant population via the adaptation were not enough to emphasize the adaptation’s preoccupation with the immigration theme, Cuarón goes a step further by bringing a fugee into the narrative’s central conflict—the exalted pregnant woman Theo must protect in the film is no white former student such as in the novel, but a black African refugee named Kee (Clare-Hope Ashitey). This complicates matters, of course, because of the status of the fugees in Britain juxtaposed with the longing for human conception. In a meeting with the “Fishes”—a terrorist group supposedly protecting Kee—Theo suggests the pregnancy should be made public, but the
corruption in the government and its position regarding refugees prompts one of the Fishes to quip sarcastically about the possibility of going public that “the government will say ‘we were wrong, fugees are humans too,’” while another suggests that they will simply “parade a posh black English lady as the mother” because they “would never acknowledge the first human birth in eighteen years from a fugee” (Children). Since the Fishes see themselves as being “at war with the British government until they recognize equal rights for every immigrant in Britain,” moreover, they imagine Kee’s baby might be “the flag that could unite us all” (Children) because its having been born to a fugee might prompt the recognition of equal rights for immigrants for which they are fighting. On the other hand, their leader, Julian (Julianne Moore)—who happens to be Theo’s ex-wife—now faced with an actual pregnancy, is more concerned with the safety of mother and child for the sake of the humanity in general than using the child as leverage against the government’s treatment of immigrants; after all, as Jasper puts it, Kee’s baby is “the miracle the whole world has been waiting for” (Children). Thus, Julian’s goal is to deliver Kee to an underground group called the Human Project that is working to find a “cure for infertility” (Children). The Human Project could potentially study Kee and her child to bring fertility back to humanity at large, but bringing Kee to the Human Project will mean the seclusion of child and mother in the Project’s “community on the Azores”—supposedly “a sanctuary” (Children)—robbing the Fishes of their leverage against the government. For this reason, some of the Fishes arrange for Julian’s murder so they might convince Kee to remain with them. When Theo discovers this, he convinces Kee to flee the Fishes, after which they seek refuge with Jasper, who arranges
for them to get to the refugee camp at Bexhill where they can meet the *Tomorrow*, a “hospital ship disguised as a fishing boat” (*Children*) that will bring them to the Human Project.

At this point it may seem as though the immigration angle of the film has fallen by the proverbial wayside; after all, the Fishes want to liberate the immigrants, but the film’s hero has taken their one chance to do so away to be hidden forever in a community of reproduction scientists. The immediate need to help the immigrant population, it would seem, has been superseded by the need to save humankind, and rightly so, though it will mean the continued persecution of the fugees. However, the film’s immigration discourse only intensifies, now through the awareness that comes about from seeing the inside of the refugee camp at Bexhill; the immigration theme now transfers from direct critique to cautionary tale.

Meeting Jasper’s immigration policeman contact at an abandoned children’s school, Theo and Kee, along with the midwife Miriam (Pam Ferris), are brought to a transportation station where they board a bus bound for Bexhill. Holding cells stand near where the bus arrives, and aboard the bus are many fugees, petrified of whatever is in store for them; two of the fugees on board beg Theo for food. Once in Bexhill, the bus stops and soldiers board with a dog and begin to harass Kee, whose water has broken—the baby is on its way. Running interference, Miriam is forced off the bus by her hair, and the camera follows her as she is put on her knees and has her head covered with a black cloth. In this case, a sub-critique emerges against the immigration issue—Miriam’s capture demonstrates the possibility of non-fugees getting mixed up in the struggle and
treated as prisoners by their own government, a situation we see in our empirical world when non-white American citizens are harassed as though they were immigrants themselves.³ As the bus pulls away, the camera shows lines of fugees posed on their knees with their hands on their heads, others who have been stripped of their clothing, and many dead on the ground. The soldiers all seem to agree with what the soldier aboard the bus says—“you fucking people disgust me” (Children)—which is evident from the way the fugees are being treated; they are beaten, starved, and they have their possessions stolen as they enter the camp. The fugees inside Bexhill, moreover, are left to their own devices; the camera shows garbage strewn about, feral dogs in packs, and bodies burning in the streets. Theo and Kee, however, have a contact inside Bexhill that provides them with a room where Kee is able to give birth to her child, but the viewer has by now been brought to the point of disgust at the way the fugees are being treated. Cuarón’s fundamental point might be to imagine what large-scale deportation of immigrants would look like, and he succeeds in painting a not-so-pretty picture using the sheer squalor of Bexhill as a backdrop.

The morning after Kee’s child is born, Jasper’s contact returns and sees the baby, revealing that the Fishes are trying to break into Bexhill. Theo and Kee know that the break-in is an attempt by the Fishes to find and take possession of the child, but as far as anyone else knows, an uprising is taking place amongst the fugees in Bexhill. As a result, the army has orders to attack the grounds. This proposed attack is one more way the film points to the immigration theme. The government, in this instance, is willing to attack Bexhill as though it were the enemy, and without regard for the human lives therein. This
kind of estrangement is not unlike that of the politicians who were apparently able to ignore the humanity of the people they would persecute were H.R. 4437 to have passed the senate and beyond. In this way, Cuarón injects the narrative with even more critique regarding immigration. In the end, Kee and Theo escape the war zone that Bexhill has become after the presence of the newborn baby shocks soldiers and fugees alike into letting them pass, but Theo has been wounded, and when the *Tomorrow* appears from out of the fog to rescue Kee and her baby, he has lost consciousness, and may even be dead.

Whether Theo is dead or not, hope remains in Cuarón’s adaptation, making it a critical dystopia. This hope is embodied in the child, but it also appears in the utopian enclave that is the Human Project. James’s novel is also a critical dystopia, and in this way the film maintains a significant aspect of its source—so significant, in fact, that we can see the film as one that employs the utopian function of *reactivation*, and not the utopian function of framing. That is to say that the liberties taken by Cuarón with the source—while important—are not so significant that they introduce utopian content that is not already present in the source. It is more than fair to say, however, that one specific dimension of the utopian content of the source is emphasized in a way that allows the film to interact with its source in a meaningful way, and that is the treatment of the theme of immigration, on which the director is in a particularly good position to comment, being a Mexican himself. Critical mass, moreover, seems to have been achieved, as the film was nominated for numerous prestigious film awards, including an Academy Award nomination in the category of Best Adapted Screenplay. This kind of critical mass is utopian in and of itself, what with the cautionary energy inherent in the narrative frame,
but it also provides utopian potential by bringing the critique of immigration policy before a vast audience and producing cognitive estrangement. Thus estranged, viewers can see immigration policies in their empirical world anew, and hopefully begin to approach any surrounding controversy in terms of human rights and social justice.

While utopian potential exists in the film’s having achieved critical mass, hope lies elsewhere as well. The inclusion of hope in the film that is embodied in the child, for instance, is straightforward enough—after years of no child having been conceived, suddenly humanity seems poised to resurrect itself, which could undo all the bad done in the face of fear that the end was finally near. There is also a more abstract brand of hope here that lies in the very possibility of transcending the narrative’s conflict. That this can be overcome in the narrative suggests that the issues we are faced with in our empirical world can also be overcome, and it follows that the immigration theme is part and parcel of this logic. In short, the child as the embodiment of hope also lends hope to the situation regarding immigration in the narrative and in the viewer’s empirical world.

Immigrants, in the film, have been ruled illegal because they are seen as having overrun England in migrating there to escape the atrocities going on abroad. These atrocities are occurring due to the panic that has come about in response to the impending apocalypse. With the birth of a child, however, the atrocities might be rendered pointless, and refuge could cease to be a necessity, thereby eliminating the root cause of all the problems that are shown in the film. These problems, moreover, comprise another way in which the adaptation maintains the source’s status as a critical dystopia—that the film world is intended to be seen as worse than the viewer’s empirical world.
It is not very difficult, of course, to see how the world of the film is meant to be seen as worse than the viewer’s empirical world. First of all, no child has been conceived for eighteen years. In James’s novel, it has been twenty-five years since the last child was born, meaning that said child was born in 1996 because the novel begins in the year 2021. With the novel having been published in 1992, a sense of immediacy is produced alongside the cognitive estrangement it produces—whatever conditions have led to this child-free world, there are only four years left to correct the problems that have brought about this conclusion, whatever they may be. The film too produces this sense of immediacy; the narrative is set in the year 2027, and it has been eighteen years since a child has been born, so the film came out only three years before the imagined year of the last child’s birth. The problems that may lead to this conclusion, moreover, are pontificated upon by Jasper when he mentions “genetic experiments, gamma rays, [and] pollution” (Children) as some of the popular explanations. Whatever the cause, the inability to conceive children catalyzes the variety of other aspects of the filmic world that make it much worse than the viewer’s empirical world. Of particular interest here are the aspects of that world that deal with the immigration theme—when children could no longer be conceived, many countries experienced atrocities that drove citizens to seek refuge in Britain, but these “fugees” are now being forcefully exiled to Bexhill. Since immigration was already a politicized issue in 2006, the picture of what could be the fate of immigrants under the circumstances presented in the film might lead viewers to imagine the fate of those who might be affected by H.R. 4437. That fate would be worse than the reality of the life of the immigrant (undocumented or otherwise) in the viewer’s
empirical world, and is a specific way in which the film adheres to the characteristics of the critical dystopia.

Another way the film maintains the critically dystopian frame of its source (thereby utilizing the utopian function of reactivation) is by keeping the principle characters from being re-subjugated by the system they resist throughout the narrative. Baccolini and Moylan identify the resistance of “the traditional subjugation of the individual at the end of the novel” (7) as one of the key attributes of the critical dystopia, and Cuarón’s adaptation maintains this aspect of the frame in his adaptation. The novel’s ending is much more explicit in terms of this resistance—Theo kills his cousin Xan Lypiatt, the Warden of England, to maintain watch over the child born to Julian, his former student, but in so doing becomes the new ruler of the country in fact. Because Theo is a benevolent character, the reader can assume that this is a positive outcome that means England and the world can recover from the problems brought on by the absence of children in the world. The film, however, ends quite differently, but one aspect of the narrative that remains intact is that Theo is not re-subjugated by the system he is resisting; in the scuffle between Bexhill fugee rebels and British troops called in to quash the uprising, Theo is shot, and by the time the boat he has secured to take Kee and her baby to the Human Project boat the Tomorrow starts toward the rendezvous, Theo appears dead. In spite of his death, Theo never gives up the mission to get Kee to the Human Project, and the Tomorrow does show up in the end to bring Kee and her child to the Human Project, allowing the viewer to assume that hope remains for humanity to overcome this dark time. Similarly, Kee is herself a principle character that is not re-
subjugated by the system she resists—in fact, Kee resists not only the overarching system of the British government, but also the Fishes. In this way she qualifies as a resistant protagonist that is also one of the “collective ex-centric subjects whose class, gender, race, sexuality, and other positions are not empowered by hegemonic rule” (7) that Baccolini and Moylan have identified as common characters in the critical dystopia. As an African fugee and a woman, Kee’s race, class, and gender—at the very least—qualify her as such a subject, and her status as a fugee specifically points to the immigration theme that Cuarón emphasizes in the adaptation, which supports the assertion that the film employs the utopian function of reactivation.

Cuarón’s adaptation of James’s novel is a particularly valuable piece of cultural production because of its critique of the immigration issue that was at the forefront of political discourse upon the film’s release. When looked at in terms of its adaptation of the novel, however, the film’s value as a cultural product grows. Using the theoretical base of the utopian function of adaptation posited above, we can read Cuarón’s adaptation as one that employs the utopian function of reactivation because it harnesses critical potential that is already present in the novel to make a statement about the cultural/historical context in which it appears. Specifically, the film emphasizes themes related to immigration, which was an important issue in the political rhetoric of the 2008 presidential election campaign that began as early as 2006. Cuarón picked up on an issue whose rise in the cultural imagination really came to a head following the debate that surrounded H.R. 4437 in 2005. The outcry against this legislation brought immigration to the forefront of political debate in the United States, calling attention to the many
undocumented Mexican workers in the US. As a Mexican immigrant himself, Cuarón would have been intimately familiar with the plight of the undocumented Mexican worker in the United States, given that transmigrancy is so common between Mexico and the US. *Children of Men*, then, provided Cuarón with a platform from which to critique conservative attitudes and ideas surrounding illegal immigration wherein cognitive estrangement might encourage viewers to see the immigration issue from a new perspective. The cognitive estrangement produced, moreover, comes from the narrative frame that is employed—that of the critical dystopia. The critically dystopian frame utilized in the film is derived from the novel, and the filmmaker’s having kept in line with this frame is one more way we can see the film as one that uses the utopian function of reactivation in its adaptation of the novel. The critically dystopian frame is identifiable through the ways in which the filmic world is designed to seem worse than the viewer’s empirical world and the fact that the characters are not re-subjugated by the system they are up against like so many or Orwell’s Winston Smiths. The critical mass achieved by the film also contributes to its status as critical dystopia, as does the autonomy of a character—Kee—whose race, class, and gender should traditionally inhibit their potential for resistance in the first place. This aspect of the film is an addition to the narrative that actually intensifies the critically dystopian frame initially presented by James’s novel.

Immigration in the years since *Children of Men*’s release has not ceased to be an important political issue. Indeed, we have seen the passage in the state of Arizona of Arizona SB 1070, the Support Our Law Enforcement and Safe Neighborhoods Act. This legislative act was signed into law in Arizona in 2010, and it allows law enforcement
officials to check the immigration status of individuals during routine stops. The law has caused much controversy in the United States at large, with many people concerned about the possibility of racial profiling and civil rights violations that may occur as a result of the law’s provisions. While Arizona SB 1070 represents the extremities of the anti-immigration sentiment in the United States, anti-immigration policies are in place all over the country at the local and federal level, meaning that Cuarón’s treatment of the issue may have been somewhat prescient, even if the catalyst—human inability to reproduce—has not come to pass. Nevertheless, Cuarón seems to have reactivated James’s novel indeed via his film adaptation, and though anti-immigration still runs rampant in the US, a look at Children of Men might make people stop and consider the implications of the anti-immigration sentiment in general. This possibility embodies the utopian function of adaptation—that through adaptation we might discover things about the conditions under which we live and be encouraged to make changes that will improve those conditions.

**Alan Ball Reactivates Dead Until Dark Through LGBT Lens**

Just over seven years after the publication of Charlaine Harris’s Dead Until Dark, Academy Award-winning screenwriter Alan Ball created the HBO series True Blood, so named for the synthetic blood that, according to the mythology of Harris’s novel (which spawned the Southern Vampire Mysteries series), negates vampires’ need to drink human blood, and thereby the need to conceal their existence from the world. After the blood had been invented (two years before Harris’s narrative begins), vampires “came out of
the coffin (as they laughingly put it)” (1). There is an obvious parallel here to the expression used in American culture when a homosexual reveals him or herself as such publicly, that they “came out of the closet.” Harris seems to have intended this parallel, but she fails to make effective use of the metaphor throughout the narrative. Alan Ball, on the other hand, foregrounds this aspect of his adaptation of the novel—*True Blood*’s first season—so effectively that it can be characterized as an adaptation that employs the utopian function of reactivation, with the theme of homosexuality as that which is emphasized to this end. Indeed, *True Blood* shows just how superficial Harris’s treatment of this theme is, as her “coming out of the coffin” analogy is rarely used, and her most outwardly gay character, Lafayette, is a background character at best in the novel. Ball, however, makes effective critical use of the homosexuality theme, and upgrades Lafayette to a central character who sometimes serves as the voice of reason, even though he is supposedly so morally backwards from the rest of the (mostly white, heterosexual) characters. In this way, the series forces viewers to evaluate their own perceptions of the LGBT community, both because of the presentation of Lafayette’s character and the analogy of the vampire as the Other. The way the series forces this evaluation is a manifestation of the adaptation’s utopian function of reactivation.

Harris’s novel takes place in the small, fictional Louisiana town of Bon Temps, and the narrator/protagonist is Sookie Stackhouse, a waitress in a local bar who it so happens is able to hear people’s thoughts, which she characterizes as a “disability” (Harris 2). Her difficulty blocking out these thoughts makes her appear a bit strange to the townspeople, who simply believe her to be “crazy” (Harris 2). When it turns out that
Sookie cannot hear the thoughts of her first vampire customer at work, Bill Compton, she is smitten with him. The whole reason she discovers this, though, is because she rescues him from would-be blood drainers. The vampire-human relationship that develops as a result is plagued by the forbidden love quality of their romance, and, worse yet, women in Bon Temps who have slept with vampires (dubbed “fang-bangers”) start getting killed off by a murderer yet to be captured. When the would-be drainers retaliate against Sookie, meanwhile, Bill gets to save her, and, as she finds out, he even goes so far as to kill the assailants, making it look like an accident. In spite of his brutality, however, he begins to court Sookie as he might have done in his own time; that is, the time of his human life, the mid-19th century, during which he had fought against the North in the Civil War. This fact interests Sookie’s Grandmother, with whom she lives, and Bill comes to the visit them at their house to discuss speaking to a community club interested in the Civil War history and court Sookie. Before his speech, however, Sookie is taken aback by some other vampires she meets who come to visit Bill, and she becomes upset with him. Furthermore, Sookie is the one to discover another of the mysterious murderer’s victims—one of her co-workers—so she is quite upset anyway. She is more upset, however, that the murders are continuing, and that it is assumed Bill had something to do with them, even though the victims had been strangled and had not drained of their blood.

Deciding to use her “disability” to see if she can find any clues to help solve the murders, Sookie convinces Bill to take her on a “date” to a nearby vampire-themed bar called “Fangtasia,” where she might read the minds of the patrons. Instead, she meets a much older vampire—the owner of the bar—and is able to use her disability to warn him
of an impending police raid on the bar. On the way back to Bon Temps with Bill, the
couple are harassed by a policeman who asks to see her neck, to ensure she has not been
bitten by a vampire and is thus not coming from the bar that has been raided. Bill is upset
by what he perceives as the policeman’s racism, and his quiet frustration is perceived by
Sookie as indifference to her, so she agrees to attend his speech before the Civil War
history group with her boss from the bar, Sam Merlotte. Afterward, unsure of her feelings
for Sam, she rejects his advances as they stand in front of her house. Inside they find her
Grandmother, who has been stabbed to death. Days later, after the funeral, Sookie
rekindles her relationship with Bill, shocking her friends when they learn afterward that
she has had sex with him and let him feed on her blood. Once again, though, Bill angers
Sookie by killing an uncle she tells him about that had molested her when she was young.
Thus angered, Sookie breaks off the relationship a second time, but when a house he is
supposed to have been visiting is burned by angry locals, killing the vampires inside, she
realizes how much she really does care for him. As a result, when he reappears later, she
is relieved he had not been killed, and they become lovers again.

Still, Sookie continues her internal conflict over the relationship because of the
restrictions of Bill being a vampire, but when she returns home with him one evening to
find her cat strangled, she gets angry about the fact that she is being victimized because
of her association with a vampire and brushes aside her reservations. Later, when Bill has
to leave town suddenly, he leaves another vampire behind to protect her. When Sookie
leaves one night to go to the bar and meet her brother, she instead befriends what seems
to be a stray dog that she then brings home with her. The next morning, she learns that
the dog had been Sam, her boss, in dog form. He is a shapeshifter. More importantly, though, Sookie’s brother is soon arrested in connection with the rash of murders in the town, and it makes sense he would be because he had been close to all the victims, but Sookie is convinced he has been framed. Meanwhile, her vampire protector at home chases off a would-be assailant from her property, likely the real killer. Later, the killer returns and attacks her after subduing the vampire outside. It turns out that the killer is Rene Lenier, husband to Sookie’s co-worker, Arlene. Rene apparently hated vampires so much that he had killed his sister when she had begun associating with them, a practice he had continued with like-minded women in Bon Temps. Although he does a fair amount of damage to her, she takes a knife from him and stabs him, buying her enough time to get to the phone in Bill’s house, which is nearby her own, and call the police. When she wakes up afterward, she is in the hospital, Rene is in intensive care, and Bill returns to comfort her. The mystery solved, the novel comes to and end.

Alan Ball fares a little better with his adaptation of *Dead Until Dark*, which is carried out in the first season of *True Blood*. The reason the adaptation is more successful is because of its emphasis on the utopian content of the novel—that is, its reactivation of that content. With regard to the novel, the vampire acts as a stand-in for the homosexual in the reader’s empirical world, producing a kind of cognitive estrangement that might encourage reader’s to see the controversy over issues like gay marriage and religion’s condemnation of homosexuality for what it is: ridiculous. The novel, however, simply does not go far enough to encourage this conclusion, but the first season of *True Blood* does. *True Blood*, of course, does include some changes from and additions to Harris’s
novel, notably the characters of Tara, who does not figure nearly as prominent a role in the first novel as she does in the first season of *True Blood*, and Lafayette, a cook at Merlotte’s bar who in *True Blood* is also a road crew worker and drug dealer, as well as a prostitute. In the novel, Lafayette is killed, but in the series his supposed murder is presented as a season-ending cliffhanger in which the victim turns out not to be Lafayette at all when season two begins later. Nevertheless, Lafayette seems to serve to keep the relationship between the theme of homosexuality at the forefront of the viewer’s imagination alongside the overt parallels between the vampire struggle for equal rights and the same for the LGBT community. Even with such additions and other changes, though, the plot of *True Blood*’s first season is largely the same as that of *Dead Until Dark*.

The first sequence of the series foregrounds the coffin/closet analogy early in the series. A spokesperson for the American Vampire League (AVN) is shown speaking on behalf of her race on HBO’s *Real Time with Bill Maher*. The interview plays diegetically on a television screen inside a convenience store where a young couple who had noticed a sign outside that the store carried the synthetic blood product True Blood arrives to inquire about the presence of vampires in Louisiana. The store’s clerk poses as a vampire himself, teasing the young couple, but they do not realize that a vampire is inside the store buying True Blood himself. The vampire defies the traditional image of the vampire; he wears hunter’s camouflage, speaks with a thick country accent, and is disgusted at the suggestion of people drinking vampire blood for its drug-like effects. He is still menacing, though, when he warns the clerk to never pose as a vampire—even as a
joke, as he had for the young couple—or he would kill him. The title sequence then begins, and afterward the viewer meets Sookie Stackhouse (Anna Paquin), who herself soon meets Bill Compton (Stephen Moyer), the vampire whose mind she cannot read. Unlike the novel, the series assumes she cannot read the minds of vampires at all, but she does not know this to be true until she meets Bill.\(^6\) As in the novel, she saves him from drainers. The next day, the first murder is discovered, Jason Stackhouse (Ryan Kwanten) is brought in for questioning, and Sookie sees Bill again when he returns to the bar. After her shift, she is attacked by the drainers in retaliation for having saved Bill from them, but she is rescued by Bill, and he lets her drink his blood so she can heal. Later, he comes to her house to meet her grandmother (Lois Smith) and discuss the possibility of speaking to her Civil War history group, after which he takes an evening stroll with Sookie. During the walk, she discovers Bill had killed the drainers after he rescued her from them and that he had made their deaths look like an accident. The walk brings them to Bill’s house, just across a graveyard from where Sookie lives, but Bill has difficulty controlling his urge to bite her, so he walks her back home. When Sookie returns the next night, she meets some other vampires who have come to visit Bill, and she is put off by their behavior. However, she is able to use her mind-reading power to save the vampires from becoming infected with a disease, of which little is known, that vampires can contract from the humans whose blood they feed upon, so she is saved from danger. Bill also protects her very fiercely, but she is frightened nonetheless, and she leaves abruptly.

Later, Sookie discovers the next murder victim, and, when her brother is again
suspected of having been involved, she is inspired to go to the vampire bar Fangtasia in nearby Shreveport, Louisiana with Bill in an attempt to ask questions about the murdered girls and clear Jason’s name. At the vampire bar she meets Eric Northman (Alexander Skarsgård), and makes quite an impression on him—especially when she warns him of an impending raid on the bar. After they flee the bar ahead of the raid, Sookie and Bill drive back to Bon Temps together, and are stopped by a policeman who asks to see Sookie’s neck in order to ensure she has not been attacked by a vampire or a patron of the bar they have just raided. Bill hypnotizes the officer and scares him, in the process scaring Sookie, who is so fed up with the violence and drama of the vampire world that she rebuffs his advances, leaving him to conclude that he should no longer attempt to court her.

Bill continues to attempt to win over the town by maintaining his commitment to speak to Sookie’s grandmother’s Civil War club, but Sookie, in her attempt to move on from dating Bill, agrees to attend with her boss, Sam Merlotte (Sam Trammell)—as a date. Though he is visibly hurt by their attending together, Bill succeeds in winning over the townspeople with his speech. After the speech, Sam and Sookie go out for coffee and Sam kisses her, but she shies away, angering him when he realizes she is hesitant because of the recent relationship with Bill. As a result, she takes a taxi home, and, upon arriving, discovers her grandmother murdered. Bill suddenly arrives, presumably because he can sense her fear ever since she drank his blood, and he ensures she is safe just as Sam arrives to make sure she has arrived home from their date safely. Both try to comfort her, partially in competition with one another, and Sookie becomes determined to clean up the bloody mess. The next day, people begin coming to the house to pay their respects, and
Sookie gets overwhelmed, all the more so when Jason, because a vampire blood-induced bender has kept him from learning of his grandmother’s murder, bursts in and attacks her, blaming the murder on her and suggesting that her association with vampires is the cause. Later, Bill comes back to be with her during the night.

At the funeral, Sookie becomes overwhelmed by the inner voices of those in attendance, eventually being escorted home by Sam, as Bill cannot attend in the light of day. That night, she goes to Bill, and they have sex, complete with Bill feeding on Sookie’s blood. Afterward, Sookie tells him about her abusive uncle. When Bill goes to sleep just before sunrise, Sookie prepares for her upcoming nightshift at Merlotte’s, and her mood conveys to her co-workers what has happened. Sam ruins the moment when he removes a scarf from Sookie’s neck, exposing the marks from where Bill fed on her. Sookie stands her ground, however, while elsewhere Bill kills the now elderly abusive uncle she had told him about. Back at the bar, Bill’s one-time vampire visitors terrorize the clientele, but Bill arrives just in time to lead them away, by pretending to be evil like they are. Afterward, some of the locals plot to burn the vampires’ house down with them inside, worrying Sookie because she fears Bill will be killed with them. The locals are successful in their endeavor, and Sookie is afraid that Bill has been killed, but he later resurfaces, having spent the night buried in the graveyard after hearing Sookie’s phone messages warning him. Afterward they settle into a routine, but that routine is interrupted when Eric Northman summons them to Fangtasia so that Sookie might read the minds of some of his employees to see who has been embezzling money from the business. When she is attacked by the vampire employee that she discovers is the guilty party, Bill steps
in, killing the attacker. This is the catalyst for why he must leave later in the narrative, something that is never explained in the source text.

When Sookie and Bill arrive back at her house, they find that her cat has been killed, probably as a warning that the killer is after her. Later Bill is taken away, as he must answer for having killed one of his own kind. First he stops at Merlotte’s to explain to Sookie that he must leave and convince Sam to watch over her while he is away. Sam does so, but in dog form, as he follows Sookie to Bill’s house, where she will stay while he is away. Later, Sam inadvertently reveals that he is a shifter when he wakes in human form at the foot of the bed in which Sookie is sleeping. This revelation is followed by more revelations about the mystical world, such as the existence of werewolves, though none are shown in the series’s first season. Later, at a party held at Merlotte’s for a co-worker, Sookie is attacked by the killer, but escapes. Sam accompanies her home to protect her, and the next day they travel to a place Sookie had seen in the thoughts of her attacker to try and figure out his identity. They get the name of a man who had been the brother of a murder victim in another parish—possibly the murderer currently operating in Bon Temps—and go to the police for information, which is given reluctantly. Once again, Sam and Sookie grow close, but Bill bursts into Sookie’s house, interrupting a kiss between the two. Bill and Sam begin to fight, but Sookie, in a fit of anger, rescinds Bill’s invitation into the home, barring him from the house. Meanwhile, at the police station, Sam’s and Sookie’s attempt to find the identity of the killer reveals him as the fiancé of one of Sookie’s co-workers and Sam’s employees, Rene Lenier (Michael Raymond James). The information comes through as a fax, which is promptly buried under other
papers in the police station, besides which Jason has been taken into custody for being the murderer, which he believes himself to be after another woman he is involved with ends up murdered. As a result, Rene is not exposed as the killer in time to prevent him from going after Sookie again.

When Sookie is overwhelmed by the thoughts of the clientele at Merlotte’s, she decides to leave by herself, even against her better judgement, since she is in danger of becoming one of Rene’s victims. In fact, it is Rene who offers her a ride home when her car will not start, but the viewer knows that it is because he has sabotaged the car. He offers to wait with her until Sam can come and be with her for protection, and she accepts, not knowing he is the killer. When Sam recognizes Rene’s scent on an article of clothing he has left at the bar from one of the other crime scenes, he rushes to Sookie’s aid, who is by now trying to escape Rene by running through the graveyard beside her house. She sees in his mind his history of murdering girls who associate with vampires beginning with his sister in the parish Sookie had visited looking for him. When Rene catches up to her, he knocks her out, but Sam comes along in dog form, biting him. Rene knocks him out, and is so shocked to see him revert to his human form that he begins beating him. Meanwhile, Bill has come out of his house, even in the sunlight, to try and save Sookie, and collapses as he burns before he can get to her. Sookie suddenly wakes up and grabs a shovel from nearby with which to hit Rene, killing him. Afterward, Bill has to be buried to save himself from the effects of the sun, and, later, when the sun goes down, he and Sookie reconcile. This is not the end of the season, necessarily, but it is the end of the parts of the series that are adapted from the novel. With Rene dead, Sookie’s
friends come to check up on her, and then the narrative jumps two weeks forward in time, with Sookie at work, and the season ends with Lafayette’s body being discovered in a car, possibly dead from an earlier attack, but the beginning of the series’s second season reveals him as not having been killed.

Lafayette, in fact, is an important part of the way the series emphasizes the theme of homosexuality. He interacts with the waitresses at Merlotte’s since he is the restaurant’s head cook, and he even suggests that they should be jealous that because of his homosexuality they cannot sleep with him, because they are missing out. This establishes the character as gay up front—proudly and openly—which is consistent with what seems to be Ball’s intended utopian function of the adaptation, that of reactivating the source via the adaptation with emphasis on the homosexuality theme. These kinds of moments involving Lafayette abound in the series, quickly foregrounding the homosexual theme in tandem with the coffin/closet analogy that also does so. Lafayette flirts with everyone from a Bon Temps yokel at Merlotte’s to “the straightest guy” (“The First Taste”) at a party he goes to with Tara. His overt homosexuality seems almost to soften the stigma against homosexuality for the viewer, allowing the controversy over vampires in the series to take precedence in their minds. This is one of the central projects of the adaptation, because the cognitive estrangement produced by this destigmatization of homosexuality in the series allows viewers to see the homosexuality of their empirical world from a fresh perspective, hopefully resulting in greater tolerance and acceptance. Still, there is some stigma attached to homosexuality that is retained in the series. For instance, the supposed moral inferiority of Lafayette as a gay man makes it
easier for him to also serve as the town drug dealer, which includes the sale of vampire blood.

When Jason comes to Lafayette for Viagra because he has had trouble maintaining an erection, he is ultimately convinced vampire blood can help. In fact, Jason’s erectile dysfunction is psychological; after seeing a video of one of his lovers with a vampire, he is traumatized and even hallucinates that a woman he is having sex with later is actually the male vampire, causing him to lose his erection. Ironically, though his masculinity is threatened by vampires, it is vampire blood that helps him get it back. Moreover, he must obtain the blood from a gay man, Lafayette, and, since he has no money, he must dance in his underwear for Lafayette’s video camera as payment. In this way, Jason sacrifices his masculinity to obtain that which he thinks will help him regain it, a product of what had threatened his masculinity in the first place (that is, vampires). This goes a long way toward emphasizing the homosexual theme that is highlighted in the series, and in effect demonstrates the complete lack of superiority—moral or otherwise—of the heterosexual, white characters in the series, possibly debunking that same myth of superiority in the viewer’s empirical world.

Even though the above passage might suggest that Lafayette is not masculine himself because he is gay, this is not the case. Lafayette may be effeminate, but he is also quite tough. In one scene, he becomes incredibly upset when some Bon Temps “rednecks” decide to pick on him by suggesting that their food had “AIDS” because he—a homosexual—had prepared it (“Sparks Fly Out”). As a result, he goes to their table and beats them up, ejecting them from the bar. Then, in the next episode, Lafayette is there to
comfort Sookie when her grandmother dies, proving an effective juxtaposition of his macho versus nurturing character traits, a depiction which challenges the homophobic view of the homosexual in the viewer’s empirical world. Nevertheless, Lafayette is not entirely open-minded himself, as is demonstrated when he calls Sookie a “skank” (“Burning House of Love”) behind her back because she had let Bill suck her blood. Another juxtaposition occurs here because it is only a little earlier in the same episode that Tara’s mother calls Lafayette a “sexual deviant” (“Burning House of Love”). In this way, the vampire as an analogy for the LGBT community is emphasized because even the “sexual deviant” has a negative opinion of vampires and those who become intimately involved with them. Of course, it is a fine line, as Lafayette sleeps with vampires, but he will not let them suck his blood.

The depiction of Lafayette as the gay character representing the larger LGBT community in the show attempts to destigmatize gay people in American culture, and its doing so is a bi-product of the show’s emphasis on the homosexual theme derived from the source. One way this happens in particular is via Lafayette’s status as the wise man of the show. When Tara expresses her frustration that a $445, backwoods exorcism she purchases to cure her mother of alcoholism might be a scam, Lafayette provides some perspective by saying “$445 is better than a lifetime of Zoloft” (“The Fourth Man in the Fire”). Lafayette is also a kind of spiritual guide to Jason when he learns to properly use vampire blood for enlightenment (rather than simply as a sexual aid), and he also helps stabilize his assistant cook at Merlotte’s, Terry Bellefleur, who suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder. He even shows political conviction when a state senator who is
also one of his prostitution clients and vampire blood customers goes on television denouncing vampires. Lafayette goes to see him during one of his campaign meetings, and he threatens to expose him as a hypocrite. Lafayette even serves as the guide to the series in Blu-ray disc extras, periodically talking over the show to explain characters and plot elements. In one of these extras, Lafayette explains the Vampire Rights Amendment (VRA), which is the legal attempt at obtaining equal rights for vampires in the US. Of the VRA, Lafayette says, “once again the government gotta put it in writing that everybody’s equal ’cause small-ass minded society is too stupid to figure that shit out” (“Enhanced Viewing”). Positioning Lafayette as the voice of reason in this way bestows a respectability on this gay character, which could have the the effect of viewers reassessing their perceptions of the LGBT community. Lafayette, however, does not serve as the only aspect of the narrative that encourages viewers to rethink their assumptions about homosexual people.

In general, the vampire frame of the narrative produces an emphasis on the homosexual theme. When Bill first comes into Merlotte’s and Sookie is excited to meet a vampire, she is disappointed by the prejudice displayed by her co-workers, calling Tara, in particular, “small-minded” (“Strange Love”). In another instance, Sookie hears the thoughts of a man in the vampire bar Fangtasia, who asks himself “it’s not gay if it’s with a vampire, right?” (“Mine”). On a grander level, the mystery that runs throughout the entire first season of the series—that of the murders of women who associate with vampires—is at its root dealing with hate crimes. The women are killed because they associate with vampires. In fact, at one point in the series, several vampires are killed just
for being vampires, though the vampires killed are villainized earlier. Nevertheless, the homosexual analogy of the source is emphasized via the hate crime of the vampire killings and the murders of the women who associate with them.

There is one aspect of the vampires that almost justifies the fear against them, and that is their preferred diet of human blood. In this way the vampire is somewhat ill-suited to be an analogy for homosexuals in the empirical world, as homosexuals are not feared for the violence they do to heterosexuals. Still, vampires are mythological, so the straw man fallacy is in this sense moot. Additionally, there is evidence in the series that people do not only fear vampires because of their violence. In one instance, a woman calls Jason a “person of low moral character” (“Burning House of Love”) for wanting to go to Fangtasia. The series even deals with human-vampire marriage—at one point there is an awkward moment when it is suggested Bill and Sookie get married, leaving Sookie’s co-worker, Arlene (Carrie Preston) to say “when it becomes legal” (“The Fourth Man in the Fire”). Later it does become legal in Vermont, and a news report about it airs on the television in the bar.

All of these instances of emphasis on the homosexual theme in the series contribute to its reactivation of the source text’s same theme. Ball is himself a homosexual, so it stands to reason that he would have a vested interest in reactivating this aspect of the source in his adaptation. The utopian project, then, of the adaptation is to challenge the homophobia that runs rampant in American society both by using the vampire as an analogy for the homosexual as the source does (but doing so more effectively and overtly) and by depicting the homosexual character Lafayette in such a
way as to encourage the viewer to reevaluate their notions of homosexual people. Bill
and vampires like him who wish to “mainstream” rather than continuing the traditional
secretive existence of the vampire deal with oppression the likes of which are all too
familiar to homosexuals. Encouraging compassion for vampires in the series, but with the
overt references to LGBT issues, helps produce a cognitive estrangement from the
empirical world that allows viewers to see controversy surrounding those issues anew,
hopefully resulting in tolerance and acceptance. Furthermore, Lafayette can be seen as a
representative of the LGBT community who might change the attitude of some viewers
toward homosexuals for the better. In these ways, True Blood serves as an adaptation that
employs the utopian function of reactivation.

**Sagal Exposes Cold War Fears Via The Omega Man**

Boris Sagal’s 1971 film The Omega Man, adapted from Richard Matheson’s 1954
novel *I Am Legend*, is another film adaptation that serves as an example of the utopian
function of reactivation. In it, Sagal reactivates the Matheson novel in light of the Cold
War, providing a premise of Sino-Soviet biological warfare gone awry. As a result,
contemporary viewers of the film were presented with a cautionary tale that suggested
what could happen if Chinese and the Soviet relations were to deteriorate dramatically, as
they had begun to prior to the film’s release, when, in 1969, a seven-month conflict
occurred along the border separating the two countries. Matheson might have himself
been influenced by the Cold War, specifically the role the Korean War played in it. The
novel appeared in 1954, the year after the Korean War officially ended—a war which was
at risk of nuclear warfare throughout. The idea that the pandemic that leaves Matheson’s protagonist as the only one unaffected was brought about by “dust storms” resulting from “bombings” that were part of “the war” (Matheson 44) suggests a certain fear of what might come from the Korean War if nuclear warfare were used. The Cold War, of course, went on for many years, but with many different significant events that might produce fear in American culture. While Matheson may have been influenced by the Korean War and fears surrounding the possibility of nuclear war in that conflict, Sagal was specifically influenced by the Sino-Soviet border conflict and its effect on the population if it were to escalate significantly, equaling a reactivation of the novel in light of the historical context of the film’s production. As a post-apocalyptic narrative, the novel plays upon the fears of what might happen if the historical situation of its production were brought to a possible logical conclusion. In this way, the utopian content of the novel lies outside its pages—as a critique of the forces that allow such conflicts to escalate to the point of nuclear warfare and a call to action to prevent such conflicts in the first place. Sagal’s film, then, reactivates this content—even with many changes to the narrative—itself presenting a possible logical conclusion of Cold War conflict and encouraging a manifestation of the utopian impulse amongst viewers to avoid further conflict and its “fallout.”

Matheson’s novel tells the story of Robert Neville, a survivor of a pandemic that has turned all the other humans into vampires. Of course, Neville does not know that all humans have turned to vampires, but he has not come across anyone but those who have turned into the monsters. In fact, one of the vampires is his former neighbor, Ben
Cortman, who heads up the effort to gain entry to his house and feed on him. Female vampires play on Neville’s sexual desire by “striking vile postures in order to entice him out of the house” (Matheson 7). In spite of their efforts, the vampires cannot get into the house or get Neville out, as he has boarded the home against them, replacing the loosened boards during the day, when the vampires must remain out of the sunlight. During the day, Neville performs the mundane tasks of reinforcing and maintaining his house, and at night he drinks liquor and listens to music while the vampires outside yell at him and throws things at his house. Also during the day, he runs errands, which include staking the vampires he finds in homes and in other places.

One day, Neville decides to go and visit his wife’s gravesite, she having died from the pandemic herself, then, as the reader learns later, coming back to find Neville and he having to kill her again and rebury her. It is on this visit that he discovers the vampires die from exposure to sunlight. He spends so much time confirming this suspicion (by dragging other vampires out into the sun) that he arrives home near dark and has to battle the vampires around his house to get back inside. Later, Neville begins to study the chemical compounds of garlic in an attempt to understand what about it is irritating to the vampires. He experiments with a refined garlic oil, and tests it on vampires, then moves to crosses, trying to understand what hurts the vampires and why. Eventually he becomes a kind of amateur blood pathologist, discovering the bacillus that causes the vampirism and determining that it had been spread by the dust storms that had blown across the earth after the ambiguous “bombings” mentioned earlier. In the midst of all this, he discovers a live dog in his neighborhood, and tries, with varying degrees of success,
befriend it before it finally dies.

Soon after, Neville finds a woman named Ruth who appears, like himself, to have survived the pandemic, though he is wary of her. He brings her—against her will—back to his house and decides he needs to make certain she has not been infected by giving her a blood test, in spite of her insistence that she is uninfected. Still, she seems to be irritated by garlic, and so Neville remains unconvinced. When he finally is able to test her blood, she knocks him out with a wooden mallet just as he discovers the bacillus in her blood under a microscope. When he awakens, he finds a note that indicates she was sent to him as a spy, that it was he who had killed her vampire husband, and that the vampires had found a way to “stay alive” (Matheson 143). She goes on to plead with him to leave town before others like her come and take him prisoner, largely because she thinks they will eventually kill him. She does not want that to happen because she has fallen in love with Neville while spying on him. She also leaves a pill for him to examine, a pill which is supposedly responsible for the vampires’ ability to go out into sunlight and “live with the germ” (Matheson 144). Nevertheless, Neville realizes that the pill may have little to do with their changed state, that the bacteria has simply mutated. In spite of this knowledge, and the warning he had been given by Ruth, Neville does not leave his house, and soon the vampires come and take him prisoner.

Soon after, Neville wakes in a prison cell after he had been rendered unconscious by the vampires, and he is soon visited by Ruth, who tells him that he is the last of his kind—a human unaffected by the bacillus—and that he is to be executed. She gives him some pills that will allow him to commit suicide, and, as he takes them, he looks out a
window and sees the horror on the faces of those who see him, realizing that “he did not belong to them . . . he was anathema and black terror to be destroyed,” declaring just before his death “I am legend” (Matheson 159). With these words, the novel comes to a close, but by 1971 it would be adapted for a second time, this time as *The Omega Man*, directed by Boris Sagal.

Sagal’s film opens with Robert Neville (Charlton Heston) driving through downtown Los Angeles, the city now empty except for Neville himself and the corpses of those who died from a pandemic, as well as “the family”—an organized group of anti-technology, albino mutants (analogues to the novel’s vampires) who want to kill Neville, and for whom he must consequently remain on the lookout. He shoots them on sight when he does see them, except to try and get information about their leader’s whereabouts—a mutant who goes by the name Matthias (Anthony Zerbe).

In the opening sequence of the film, Neville, driving through the city, gets a flat tire and so finds a car dealership where he can get a new car, driving it to a movie theatre he has rigged up with generators so he can watch Michael Wadleigh’s *Woodstock*. He remarks that the film is now playing “for a third straight year,” showing that *The Omega Man*’s narrative takes place in 1973. When Neville exits the theatre, the sun is already going down, giving him little time to make it back to his house before the mutants will emerge from the darkness. As he arrives home, the mutants try to keep him from getting into his garage, and he shoots three of them in order to make it in safely. Next, he switches on his generator, which activates bright lights that deter the mutants outside the apartment building where he lives in a penthouse. As he takes the elevator up, he has a
flashback to some of the events leading up to the pandemic that has left him the titular omega man. Pushing the button for his floor calls up memories of bombs exploding, and a newscaster named Matthias—the same whose “family” now terrorizes Neville—reports that “as the Sino-Russian war continues to rapidly escalate, US authorities are beginning to question to what degree we will become involved in what could swiftly grow into global conflict.” An image of a bomb being detonated comes with the audio of a transmitted message from military personnel: “abort firings. Abort firings. Interception will fragment bacilli-carrying missiles.” Neville now arrives at the entrance to his penthouse and the flashback ceases as the viewer sees his home, which is equipped with surveillance. He drinks wine and plays chess with a Julius Ceasar statue he has positioned in a chair, all while talking to himself. The mutants outside call to him, irritating him greatly.

Elsewhere, a mutant named Zachary (Lincoln Kilpatrick) informs Matthias of the day’s casualties at the hands of Neville, leaving Matthias to condemn Neville and his use of technology, which the mutants have renounced because of what it has done to them. This renunciation frustrates Zachary because he wants to use some more advanced weaponry to kill off Neville, but Matthias refuses this plan. Here another flashback begins, with Matthias the newscaster reporting that hospitals are having trouble keeping up with the many sick—the result of the biological weaponry-induced plague. Because the plague is straining the entire country, martial law has been declared. People are shown choking as the disease overtakes them, and Matthias notes that after choking comes unconsciousness, and that “death occurs within minutes.” He continues, “whether
a state of war between China and Russia still exists is not important any longer; our fellow countryman are dying, the very foundations of civilization are beginning to crumble under the dread assault of that horror, long feared, germ warfare.” Soon an all out emergency is declared and anyone found on the streets without military orders is subject to “summary execution.” Matthias’s news broadcast now airs diegetically on a television screen in “Colonel” Robert Neville’s office, Neville watching: “Now the question is survival. Is this the end of technological man? Is this the conclusion of all our yesterdays? The boasts of our fabled science? The superhuman conquests of space and time? The age of the wheel? We were warned of judgement. Well, here it is. Here. Now. In the form of billions of microscopic bacilli. This is the end.” At this point in the flashback, a phone rings in Neville’s office, and the Colonel is summoned to administer a test vaccine. On the helicopter ride to his destination, however, the pilot comes down with the disease and dies mid-flight. Neville walks away from the crash and gives himself the vaccine, having begun to display the plague symptoms himself. With that, the flashback ends, and back in the penthouse Neville cooks and begins to eat dinner, while the mutants outside use a primitive catapult to launch fireballs at him. Neville uses an infrared-scoped assault rifle to run them off.

The next morning, after a run, Neville considers where the mutant nest might be and scouts the area, finding himself in a department store where he shops for new clothing to replace the sweaty garments he is wearing. While there, he sees a non-mutant woman, who flees, though he gives chase unsuccessfully. He decides to “find a drink” afterward, and is captured by the mutants who bring him before Matthias. Matthias and
the family condemn him as “evil” for having committed murder (of their kind) as well as “use of forbidden tools, practice of prescribed rites” and the use of “science, medicine, weapons, machinery, electricity,” but without ending up like them—mutants. Since they see him as “the last living reminder of hell,” they plan to execute him, and they bring him to an arena (possibly Los Angeles Memorial Sports Arena) to burn him at the stake. Bright lights suddenly interrupt the burning, and a man frees Neville from the stake. The man, later identified as Dutch (Paul Koslo), and the woman Neville had earlier seen in the department store, later identified as Lisa (Rosalind Cash), help him escape on motorcycles.

They arrive at a compound overseen by Lisa and Dutch where there are several children, including Lisa’s younger brother, Richie (Eric Laneuville), who is beginning to present symptoms of the plague. Here Neville is called a scientist, and the people of the compound know of him and his work, which apparently dealt with the possible effects of biological warfare. Dutch, as it turns out, had nearly finished medical school himself before the outbreak of the plague, and he explains that the disease killed older people immediately or turned them into mutants like Matthias and the family, but that younger people have a near-resistance that can keep the illness at bay, but not forever; they can develop full-on symptoms and end up mutants. Because of his resistance following his having injected himself with the vaccine, Neville and Dutch figure out that they may be able to synthesize a cure for the disease from Neville’s blood and save Richie and the others—perhaps even those already infected. They bring Richie to Neville’s penthouse and Lisa remains there too. Before long, Neville and Lisa enter into a romance together,
but not before Zachary makes it inside Neville’s penthouse when he forgets to refill the fuel in his generator and is shot to death.

Soon enough, Neville is able to successfully synthesize a cure for the plague, and they plan to gather Dutch and the children at the compound and get away from the city for good. First, Lisa goes to gather necessities while Neville finishes refining the serum with Richie. Richie has by now recovered, but he wants to give the serum to the family, so they can be cured, which Neville refuses. While Lisa is still out, Neville drives to the compound to inform Dutch that they have the cure, and that they will start curing the children and everyone else soon. While he is gone, Richie takes it upon himself to go to the family and try to convince them to take the serum and cure themselves, but they refuse and plan to use Richie as bait to bring him to them, ultimately killing him.

Meanwhile, on her way back to the penthouse, Lisa turns into one of the mutants. When Neville arrives at the family’s nest, finding Richie dead, he hurries back to the penthouse, nearly getting captured by the family. Once there, he finds Lisa in her mutant state, and the family is also there, taking him prisoner and destroying his penthouse—including the serum, minus one bottle. Neville is able to fight his way out of the penthouse with Lisa in tow, but Matthias calls to her, and takes the opportunity to throw a spear into Neville’s chest. Believing him dead, the family leaves him, but he manages to survive overnight so that when Dutch arrives with the children, he can collect the one bottle of serum along with Lisa and move forward with the plan. Neville dies before Dutch leaves (ending up conspicuously in the crucifixion pose), but the hope of humanity’s survival lives on.

In spite of its many changes from Matheson’s novel, The Omega Man should not
be disregarded as an adaptation. The utopian function of this particular adaptation lies in its reactivation of the source text in light of its own historical context. The Cold War was a multi-faceted, ongoing conflict that spanned more than four decades. For Matheson, the immediate manifestation of Cold War fear was embodied in the Korean War, which itself spanned three years and was fraught with the threat of nuclear warfare. In 1950, even before the official start of the war, in fact, nuclear bombs were ordered into the region and earmarked for retaliation if the Chinese or North Korean armies attacked South Korea. Furthermore, when Dwight D. Eisenhower succeeded Harry Truman as president, his administration, though cautious of using nuclear warfare in Korea, still had plans at the ready to use it if necessary. The fear generated in the American consciousness of communism and the possibility of further nuclear warfare after its effects had been seen in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 would understandably have influenced Matheson’s narrative. Indeed, the “war” and “bombings” mentioned in passing in a flashback toward the beginning of *I Am Legend* seem to suggest a nuclear fallout premise of the novel. In a conversation with his wife that takes place via flashback, Neville is reminded of the possibility of mutation within the animal kingdom—that insects, in particular, are “changing. Suddenly. Jumping over dozens of small evolutionary steps, maybe developing along lines they might not have followed at all if it weren’t for,” his wife finishes, “the bombings,” which, she says, are “causing the dust storms. They’re probably causing a lot of things” (Matheson 44). After this exchange, it is said that Neville’s wife “sighed wearily and shook her head” before saying “and they say we won the war,” to which Neville replies “[n]obody won it” (44). Later, Neville comes to the conclusion that
the dust storms had spread the disease that had turned everyone but him into vampires. Of course, deployment of nuclear weapons in Korea would not necessarily cause disease-spreading dust storms in the United States; however, said deployment might cause retaliation in the form of attacks on the United States, perhaps nuclear attacks. Again, the fear of this outcome could very well have influenced Matheson’s narrative, not least because “the war” mentioned in the flashback could very well have been a reference specifically to the Korean War, not to mention the expansion of that war were nuclear warfare to come into play.

In much the same way as *I Am Legend* does, *The Omega Man* carries a conflict of its historical situation to a logical conclusion, thereby reactivating the source text, which is the utopian function of this particular adaptation. As relations between the Chinese and Soviets began to unravel beginning in the late-1950s because of ideological differences, border disputes soon followed. These disputes continued throughout the 1960s, culminating in 1969 in a months-long military conflict between the two powers. The border disputes were largely a manifestation of the more broad breakdown in Sino-Soviet relations, which were crumbling around this time. This breakdown in relations between the two countries produced concern worldwide that nuclear or biological weapons could be used, and that the use of said weapons would affect the rest of the world in the form of fallout, or, if another country were to become involved in the conflict, the triggering of a global, nuclear or biological war. In *The Omega Man*, which appeared nearly two years later, it is the latter situation that is presented as the catalyst for the film’s post-apocalyptic setting. In fact, Sagal may have had a particularly close tie to Cold War fears,
as he had been born into the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1923, and had emigrated to the United States some years later. Thus, the director would have had a vested interest, perhaps, in presenting to the world a cautionary tale about what could happen if Sino-Soviet relations were to crumble completely and thereby devolve into war, especially war involving weapons of mass destruction. The spread of a bacillus as that which is responsible for the disease that leaves the Robert Neville of the novel the last man makes a biological-weapons-gone-awry premise plausible, but the immediacy of the Sino-Soviet conflict as specifically that which causes the post-apocalyptic world of *The Omega Man* equals an effective reactivation of that novel for the film’s contemporary audience. This effectiveness is inherent in the warning the film issues against both crumbling Sino-Soviet relations and biological warfare. In this way, the film has a utopian function that denounces biological warfare, warns against crumbling Sino-Soviet relations, and encourages an exhibition of the utopian imagination on the part of the audience at the same time as it exhibits Sagal’s own utopian imagination.

*The Omega Man*, via its reactivation of Matheson’s *I Am Legend* issued a powerful warning against Cold War conflict, including the exacerbation of that conflict to the point of using weapons of mass destruction. *I Am Legend* did essentially the same thing, but the Cold War was a long and varied conflict that lasted decades, so that *The Omega Man* did actually reactivate the novel within its own historical context—where Matheson’s immediate Cold War influence was the Korean War, Sagal’s was the crumbling relationship between the Soviets and the Chinese, or, more specifically, the Sino-Soviet border conflict. The utopian function of reactivation, then, is the result of the
adaptation, but the intent is for Sagal to exhibit his own utopian impulse, which is to consider what he considers bad about his empirical world and, via a utopian longing, intensify that negativity as a cautionary tale. Of course, Sino-Soviet relations were producing a certain fear in the American consciousness in general. This fear was so pronounced that it even caused the great journalist Harrison E. Salisbury to write an entire book on the very real possibility of *War Between Russia and China*. Salisbury’s book is but one other manifestation of the widespread fear of nuclear and/or biological warfare that pervaded the Cold War era, and it takes its position in its historical context alongside Sagal’s *The Omega Man*, which is an example of a film that employs the utopian function of reactivation in its adaptation of its source.

**Conclusion**

The utopian function of reactivation within adaptation affords adapters the opportunity to harness the utopian content of their source texts to make some critical point that is relevant to the cultural or historical context of the adaptation’s production. In doing so, the adaptation can enter into a kind of dialogue with its source and thereby elevate its cultural space and contribute to the culture overall. Moreover, reactivating a source text via adaptation allows the adapter to exhibit their utopian imagination, a demonstration of which far supersedes the complaints of fidelity critics. In *Children of Men*, for instance, Alfonso Cuarón is able to zero in on a particular manifestation of utopian content in the novel, reactivating it in light of the immigration debate happening within the historical context of its production. As a Mexican himself, surely his utopian
imagination was piqued by the iniquities of Mexican immigration into the United States
with which he was likely all too familiar. His presentation of this theme, furthermore,
helps to produce cognitive estrangement, encouraging the viewer to see the debate anew.
This is achieved in part because Cuarón maintains the critically dystopian frame of the
source in the film, which is itself a testament to the adaptation’s status as an adaptation
that employs the utopian function of reactivation and not the utopian function framing.
Alan Ball’s television series season-long adaptation of Charlaine Harris’s *Dead Until
Dark*—the first season of HBO’s *True Blood*—meanwhile, reactivates utopian content
found in its source as well. In the case of *True Blood*, the theme of homosexuality is
presented from the start and carried through the season in a way the novel simply does
not. One way this is achieved is by raising the profile of the gay character Lafayette, who
in the novel is a background character at best, but in *True Blood* is a very likeable
character who is also very often the voice of reason in a very unreasonable narrative
world. Presenting Lafayette in this way might help viewers reevaluate their prejudices
against homosexuals, which would be in Ball’s interest in particular as a homosexual
himself. In this way, another exhibition of the utopian imagination is exhibited. In the
case of Sagal’s *The Omega Man*, the film reactivates Matheson’s *I Am Legend* in light of
its historical context’s own Cold War fears, fears which had influenced the novel’s
production as well, but under different circumstances. Sagal’s adaptation encourages
viewers to reject policies that might lead to the kind of horrors it depicts, just as the novel
does for readers, but the catalysts for the warning that ensues in both works are consistent
with the historical context of their respective production. The utopian function of
reactivation within adaptation, then, reactivates the utopian content of the source in light of the cultural or historical context of the adaptation, boosting the cultural value of the source, contributing to culture overall, and allowing the adapter to exhibit his or her utopian imagination.
III. The Utopian Function of Framing

Adaptations which seek neither to disseminate the utopian content of their sources nor reactivate that content within their own cultural/historical contexts are here referred to as adaptations that employ the utopian function of framing. In using their source texts as frames around which new utopian content can be proffered, these adaptations are on the one hand the most utopian of adaptations, because they demonstrate the utopian potential inherent in cultural production, but on the other hand the critical black sheep of fidelity critics because they deviate significantly from their sources. Nevertheless, adaptations using the utopian function of framing provide a space for new utopian content, which adds to the depth of the cultural product adapted. Furthermore, this promotes intertextuality between the source and the adaptation, which is one more manifestation of the utopianism inherent in the adaptation. Since utopian potential can be found in any cultural product, moreover, it follows that it can found even in adaptations that do not follow their sources closely. In locating the utopian potential in these cultural products, the critique should not be overshadowed by concerns about fidelity to the source, especially since the utopian content of that source is expanded by its use as a frame, which is somewhat of a utopian gesture in and of itself. This gesture, expressed in a more general sense, is a contribution to the culture overall, beyond its own proffering of utopian content, thanks to the promotion of intertextuality and interest in the source text, as well as the consideration of that text within the historical context of the adaptation,
This chapter will investigate adaptations of Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, Kurt Vonnegut’s “Harrison Bergeron,” and Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* as some examples of adaptations that employ the utopian function of framing.

**Libman and Williams Build a *Brave New World***

Although it was published in 1932, Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* has yet to inspire any major Hollywood adaptations. Nevertheless, two adaptations have been produced—one in 1980 and the other 1998—but both of these were mere made-for-television productions. The 1980 adaptation, directed by Burt Brinckerhoff, stays very close to its source, and is, therefore, another example of a film adaptation that employs the utopian function of dissemination. The 1998 adaptation directed by Leslie Libman and Larry Williams, however, takes a lot of liberties with Huxley’s novel, equaling an adaptation that employs the utopian function of framing. We have said above that a film that uses the utopian function of framing in adapting its source is one that essentially uses the source text as a frame within which to proffer some utopian content that is not present in the source in the first place. The differences between the endings of the novel and Libman’s and Williams’s film reveal the ways in which the latter employs the utopian function of framing. Huxley’s novel ends with John Savage hanging himself, while Bernard Marx and Helmholtz Watson are exiled from the World State altogether. Thus, in the traditional dystopian style, the resistant characters are re-subjugated by the system in power, or they are killed. The utopian content that is present in Libman’s and Williams’s
adaptation, meanwhile, comes from several key changes in the conversion from novel to film, including the fact that Bernard and Lenina actually conceive their own child and escape the World State presumably to live happily ever after. This aspect of the film, among others, produces a kind of hope within the work itself that converts Huxley’s *classical* dystopia into a *critical* dystopia. A change as significant as that of the fate of Bernard and Lenina, moreover, in addition to a variety of other changes, situates this adaptation securely as one that can be said to use the utopian function of framing in adapting the source.

Huxley’s *Brave New World* imagines a world in which humans are no longer born in the “viviparous” (7) way, but rather are “decanted” (9) out of bottles. The embryos, additionally, are conditioned to be Alphas, Betas, Deltas, Gammas, or Epsilons, with the sub-classifications plus, minus, and semi-moron, each reflecting the kind of job and social status a person will have. This conditioning continues after birth, in effect both instilling the tenets of the stratified society in the children and ensuring their contentment with their place within it. This society—the World State—worships Henry Ford as a kind of messiah, replacing the sign of the cross with that of a capital “T,” after Ford’s Model T car. This is because Ford’s assembly line model for the production of automobiles has been applied to the production of human beings in the World State. To keep its subjects pacified, moreover, the World State rations them a drug called soma, which the Resident Controller for Western Europe, Mustapha Mond, tells children on a tour of the Central London Hatchery and Conditioning Centre has “all the advantages of Christianity and alcohol; none of their defects” (54). Soma keeps Fordian society numb to their
repression, and is a popular enhancement to the society’s encouraged sexual promiscuity, among other things. When Bernard Marx, an Alpha-Plus, takes Lenina Crowne along on a trip to the non-Fordian savage reservation—a fenced off reservation in Malpais, New Mexico where “uncivilized” people live—he finds John. Born to an ex-society member who had been left on the reservation after being mistakenly impregnated by the Director of Hatcheries and Conditioning (Bernard’s overbearing boss), John, along with his mother, Linda, accompanies Marx and Lenina back to London, a center of Fordian society. When Linda recognizes the D.H.C. as John’s father, then, he steps down from his position. As a result, Bernard becomes something of a celebrity in Fordian society, as does John, who has been brought up knowing only the savage reservation, and whose morals have been informed by reservation life and a chance copy of several of the works of William Shakespeare. Because of this, he quickly begins to recognize the flaws of Fordian society, and, after attempting to escape the society and live alone, he is overwhelmingly bothered by curious Fordian people, and eventually driven to suicide.

Huxley’s novel is one of the quintessential examples of the classical dystopia, which, as mentioned above, is an “epic” or “open” genre, containing a “militant pessimism” that leaves “no meaningful possibility of movement or resistance, much less radical change, embedded in any of the iconic elements of the text” (Moylan, Scraps 157, 162). What is even more important to remember about classical dystopias is that they “maintain utopian hope outside their pages, if at all; for it is only if we consider dystopia as a warning that we as readers can hope to escape its pessimistic future” (Baccolini and Moylan 7). Naomi Jacobs says of the classical dystopia, moreover, that its “repulsive
force . . . comes from its portrayal of a world drained of agency—of an individual’s capacity to choose and to act, or a group’s capacity to influence and intervene in social formations” (92). The endings of novels like Yevgeny Zamyatin’s We, Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-four, and Huxley’s Brave New World, then, situate them as classical dystopias because no hope for the resistant protagonists of their plots exists within the pages of the narratives, in part because of the lack of agency that Jacobs mentions, as well as the influence and/or intervention of the systems portrayed in the works. In Brave New World, we see a world that has been socially engineered via eugenics (and dysgenics), as well as conditioning, so that society will run according to the way the system wants it to. Bernard Marx is exiled after he is found to have resisted the social order, and it is said that this “punishment is really a reward” because “he’ll meet the most interesting set of men and women to be found anywhere in the world. All the people who, for one reason or another, have got too self-consciously individual to fit into community-life. All the people who aren’t satisfied with orthodoxy, who’ve got independent ideas of their own. Every one, in a word, who’s any one” (Huxley 227). For some readers, the enclave of which Marx is being sent to become a part represents some hope within the pages of the novel, undermining its status as a classical dystopia, but this enclave remains under the control of the novel’s imagined system, so there will be little room for agency or resistance, even if pleasures will abound—which, incidentally, is the distraction of choice for the system in control in the World State. In this way, Bernard is re-subjugated by the system (as is his friend Helmholtz, another resistant character). John Savage, on the other hand, continues to resist the system, only to be frustrated to the point of suicide by the novel’s
end after beating Lenina to death in a rage—Lenina being yet another character who resists the system, in her case by falling in love with John Savage. With all of these resistant characters either being re-subjugated by the system or killed, it is clear the novel is an example of the classical dystopia.

Libman’s and Williams’s adaptation of Huxley’s novel is a decidedly modernized production that portrays the World State as a society organized around a kind of fashionable decadence. Lenina Crowne (Rya Kihlstedt) is a schoolteacher in the World State who is romantically involved with Bernard Marx (Peter Gallagher), an emotional engineer who specializes in conditioning. The relationship between Lenina and Bernard is somewhat controversial given that promiscuity is encouraged by the World State, so they remain just promiscuous enough to keep the reproach of others at bay. Meanwhile, emotional engineering has been failing, as workers in the lower strata of the World State are resisting their conditioning and acting out. Maintaining the frame of the source, Lenina and Bernard head to the savage reservation, and, when their helicopter crashes, they are rescued from hostile locals by John Cooper (Tim Guinee), who takes them to his mother’s house, a mobile home on the reservation. After learning that John is the son of a man from the World State, and that he has been raised on the savage reservation by a woman—his natural mother—from the World State, he decides to bring John and his mother, Linda (Sally Kirkland), back with him because of “the research possibilities” (Brave New World). John’s presence in the World State is met with some resistance, but the World Controller, Mustapha Mond (Leonard Nimoy), approves the experiment nonetheless. When the Director of Hatcheries and Conditioning (Miguel Ferrer) realizes
that he is the father of John, however, he destroys the evidence and reconditions a disgruntled Delta (through a reconditioning process reminiscent of what we see in Kubrick’s *A Clockwork Orange*) to “Kill Bernard Marx” (*Brave New World*). The plan fails when the Delta cannot bring himself to carry out the task. Nevertheless, the Director is revealed as John’s father when Bernard is able to recover the evidence that was thought to have been destroyed. All the while, since the arrival of John in the World State, he has become a celebrity, along with Bernard, for having been responsible for bringing him back from the reservation. During this time, John and Lenina develop feelings for one another, but John has reservations about acting on them because his morals cause him to question the promiscuity of the World State. As in the novel, he is driven to incite a riot amongst workers receiving a soma ration outside the hospital where his mother has just died from a soma overdose, and is brought before Mustapha Mond to explain himself. Unsatisfied with the exchange between Mond and himself, John ventures off on his own to be alone, but is soon discovered by the media, who unintentionally force him off a cliff where he falls to his death. Bernard, who has taken over as Director of Hatcheries and Conditioning, is then presented with the information that he has gotten Lenina pregnant, and he is faced with the choice of either reporting the pregnancy or escaping the World State, choosing the latter. The film ends with the couple and their child together on a beach, just as Mond, laughing, realizes what has happened.

There are ways in which Libman’s and Williams’s adaptation could have been considered an example of the utopian function of reactivation were it not for the significance of the ending having been changed from that of its source. In Huxley’s
novel, the savage becomes something of a celebrity in the World State: “All uppercaste
London was wild to see this delicious creature” (153). In Libman’s and Williams’s film,
the savage becomes not only a celebrity, but a media sensation, demonstrating a direct
critique of contemporary society’s obsession with fame. A newscast early in the film,
shortly after John arrives in the World State, reports that “there’s something new in town,
and he’s savagely attractive” (Brave New World). In fact, the newscasts continue
throughout the film, establishing the impact John has on the World State as the narrative
develops. John’s level of celebrity, however, begins to weigh on him, and this is
compounded by his struggle to adjust to the World State and what he sees as its
immorality, as well as his mother’s death. After he is pardoned for inciting the riot at the
soma distribution outside the hospital where his mother has died, he is reported by the
news as saying “I want to be alone” before wandering to the countryside and camping out
atop an “abandoned microwave tower” (Brave New World). After he is discovered by the
media—who appear as paparazzi might in the viewer’s empirical world—and
overwhelmed by the numbers that assemble, he attempts to escape the tower and the
media. They are upon him as soon as he reaches the ground, and his attempt to run away
from them is foiled when he comes to the edge of a cliff and is left with no escape, falling
to his death. The role the media plays in John’s death is not unlike the real-life story of
the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, which took place seven months before the film’s
appearance on television in April 1998. Although the official reports regarding Diana’s
death were that her driver, Henri Paul, had been driving drunk, the car was being pursued
by paparazzi, which may have been partly responsible for Paul’s loss of control of the car
as he attempted to lose the pursuers. In this way, Diana’s fame may have contributed to her death, just as John Cooper’s fame contributes to his death in Libman’s and Williams’s *Brave New World*. Given this quasi-parallel, the film seems to reanimate the novel’s indictment of media sensationalism within the historical context of its production, and thus the film does have some of the utopian function of reactivation embedded in its adaptation of the source.

In the novel, as in Libman’s and Williams’s film, Bernard Marx also becomes a celebrity. In bringing John back to the World State from the Savage Reservation, Huxley’s Marx suddenly finds himself no longer an outcast, instead becoming just the kind of social butterfly he abhors as the narrative begins. Because “it was only through Bernard, his accredited guardian, that John could be seen, Bernard now found himself, for the first time in his life, treated not normally, but as a person of outstanding importance” (Huxley 156). This importance earns him the favor of much of the upper-caste people of the World State, as well as the affection of women who prior to his guardianship of the savage would have thought him “ugly,” “small,” and even “stunted” (Huxley 46). After returning to the World State with John, however, it is said that “[a]s for the women, Bernard had only to hint at the possibility of an invitation, and he could have whichever of them he liked” (Huxley 156). Nevertheless, Bernard’s newfound popularity earns him the disapproval of the one person who had been his friend prior, Helmholtz Watson, but it is no matter because he is so happy that he tells himself “never would he speak to Helmholtz again” (157). In this way Bernard relinquishes his resistant protagonist status, being re-subjugated by the system and replaced as a resistant
protagonist entirely at this point by John and, to a lesser extent, Helmholtz. We might see this as further evidence of the novel’s classification as a classical dystopia since Bernard is the initial resistor as the narrative gets underway.

Peter Gallagher’s Bernard Marx in Libman’s and Williams’s *Brave New World* comes off as an innocent, scholarly-type character, and he brings John back from the reservation solely because he wants to study him as a genetic World State subject untainted by conditioning, and not because he figures out early on that the D.H.C. is John’s biological father. Furthermore, Bernard does not himself become that much of a celebrity. Instead, only his career seems to be affected positively; as the D.H.C. says, “You’re moving up in the world, Marx. Congratulations” (*Brave New World*). Bernard becomes friendly with Mustapha Mond as a result of his research and his having brought John back to the World State, and he seeks out John’s father, revealing that it is the D.H.C. only after an attempt on his life orchestrated by the D.H.C. As a result of all this, Bernard is positioned to take over as the new D.H.C., suggesting his possible complicity in the World State system. When Lenina comes to Bernard to tell him that she is pregnant with his child, however, he is faced with the decision of whether to attempt to explain the pregnancy away publicly, risking death or worse, or banishing Lenina from the World State, choosing the latter. Initially this decision positions Bernard as an insensitive character that chooses status and career over family, in effect becoming re-subjugated by the system, albeit in a different way than in the novel. However, in the end Bernard is revealed as having come to his senses and joined Lenina in exile with his child.

Speaking of Lenina, the changes made to her specific narrative in Libman’s and
Williams’s film also exemplify the utopian function of framing due to the ways in which the classical dystopia is converted to a critical dystopia. Huxley’s Lenina starts out as a fairly typical World State subject, except that she has a mild scandal surrounding her near-monogamy with Henry Foster. She intends to subvert the scandal by becoming involved with Bernard Marx. The couple travel to the savage reservation together, and Lenina is appalled by the sights and sounds she encounters there, until she lays eyes on John. Lenina’s monogamy with Foster, then, seems to signify her own resistance to the system, which comes in the form of her ability to, for all intents and purposes, fall in love, which is forbidden in the World State. Her capacity for love then centers itself on John, who rebukes her because of his morals, to the extent that she begins to represent for him his own moral weakness because he is sexually attracted to her, but the World State’s conditioning has made her too willing for his romantic (or, perhaps, renaissance, thanks to Shakespeare) ideas about love. Once alone at the lighthouse, John attempts to find solace but can only think of his own desire—specifically for Lenina—so he punishes himself for these thoughts via self-flagellation. Lenina then arrives at the lighthouse herself; she cannot keep away, so intense is her love. This further demonstrates her resistance to the system. John, however, sees her and flies into a rage, beating her with the whip he had used to whip himself, killing her. In this way, no hope exists for Lenina in Huxley’s text.

As an “ex-centric” subject, Libman’s and Williams’s Lenina comes to a different end, one that includes not only the hope of escape from the World State, but actual escape. Instead of Henry Foster, the film presents Lenina’s near-monogamous
relationship as being with Bernard. As a result, John assumes they are married, even though marriage does not exist in the World State. Lenina does become interested in John, but it reads more like infatuation than love at first, and her one attempt to become intimate with him is rejected when he thinks better of it. This prompts Lenina to reach for her soma and forget this unhappiness, but she stops short, and allows herself to feel the negative emotion. This shows some resistance for the character, but next she sits with John at the hospital as his mother dies. Afterward, John prompts some intimacy himself, and the viewer is led to believe that she reciprocates. At this point, she comes to accept that she may be in love with him, and that it is harming her relationship with Bernard, which may well have been love itself. At this point she again turns to soma to dull the pain she is experiencing, and during this “soma holiday” John escapes to the abandoned microwave tower. When Lenina sees John on television later, she goes to try and see him, and, after he dies, she sees Bernard there, and they leave together and have sex that night, professing their love for one another. Bernard next becomes the new D.H.C., appointed by Mustapha Mond himself, and Lenina is shown teaching her class, but she goes off script, inspired by her internal struggle with the system of which she is a subject. Next she visits Bernard to report her pregnancy, is sent into exile, and eventually joined by the father of her child, as mentioned above. Lenina, then, resists the system herself in the film, but to a much greater extent than she does in the novel. More importantly, though, she survives, and, much more than that, lives the proverbial happily ever after, or so at least the film’s ending would have its viewers believe.

Another manifestation of hope in Libman’s and Williams’s film that contributes to
its relinquishment of the narrative frame of the source is the character Gabriel (Jacob Chase), who appears to question the ideology of the World State on a couple of different occasions throughout the film. Gabriel is one of Lenina’s students, and he is established early in the film as a kind of resistant subject himself. The character’s likely analogue in Huxley’s text is the little boy in the garden who “seems rather reluctant to join in the ordinary erotic play” (32). The child’s reluctance to participate in the “sexual game” (31) may exemplify his resistance to the World State system, but he is merely taken “in to see the Assistant Superintendent of Psychology. Just to see if anything is at all abnormal” (32). With that the child disappears, never to be seen in the novel again, and the reader can assume that he will be reconditioned until he has what the World State would see as a healthy appetite for the sexual games. The reader, meanwhile, might well respond with abhorrence at the suggestion that children be encouraged to participate in such games, and any hope that the little boy’s resistance will make an impact falls by the proverbial wayside when he is taken away.

From this aspect of the novel likely comes Libman’s and Williams’s character Gabriel, who the viewer first encounters early in the film, as Lenina explains how the World State society came into existence (the film’s version of the D.H.C.’s tour at the beginning of Huxley’s novel). Gabriel, stone-faced, explains, as taught via conditioning, “today we have no crime, no disease, no war, no aging, no suffering. Each of us is genetically designed to fit perfectly into our place in society. So everyone is happy” (Brave New World). In the next scene, Gabriel is shown in bed, seemingly uncomfortable as he sleeps and the “hypnopædia” (Huxley 25) voice drones on.¹ It is as if he is resistant,
in this moment, to hypnopædia itself, and Lenina responds by drugging him with soma. When the viewer next sees Gabriel, it is when John comes to Lenina’s class to recite Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* for the students. Most of the class thinks the play is irrelevant and outdated, but Gabriel seems intrigued, looking ashamed of his classmates for their inability to appreciate not only the play, but also John’s explanations about why it demonstrates how great a writer Shakespeare was. Although Gabriel’s resistance is mostly only manifested up to now by facial expressions, it is clear he is a resistant character himself—he seems to want to reject the system of which he is a subject in spite of his indoctrination into that system. When Gabriel is next shown, it is in Lenina’s class, watching intently as she abandons *The World Concensus Textbook*, saying, “heroes change things. We’re not supposed to want anything to change. Heroes mean that one person can make a difference” (*Brave New World*). While another student chides Lenina for going outside the textbook, Gabriel watches, seemingly hopeful that she will stand behind what she has said, but when she backs down he shows disappointment and despair—as though a ray of hope has gone dark. In spite of his seeming loss of hope Gabriel remains a manifestation of hope within the narrative that leaves the viewer with hope, even more evidence that Huxley’s novel has been transformed into a critical dystopia from its original classically dystopian frame. As the film comes to a close, Gabriel is once again shown in bed, but this time he does not let the hypnopædia voices disturb him; instead, he reaches beneath his pillow, retrieving cotton swabs, which he places in his ears to block out the voices, and thereby resist the conditioning. This moment is so important to the film’s reinvigoration as a critical dystopia that it is the last scene before
the credits roll, and the importance that is placed on this moment solidifies the use of the utopian function of framing insofar as it leaves hope within the narrative itself. This in turn provides the viewer with the hope that even if such a future did come to pass, we would still be able to overcome it. That is, we would be able to “escape [such a] pessimistic future.”

And so it bears repeating: Libman and Williams, in their adaptation of Huxley’s *Brave New World*, convert the classical dystopia of the novel into a critical dystopia, as hope is present within the proverbial “pages” of the narrative. Because of this change, the adaptation is an example of the utopian function of framing. This hope comes in several forms throughout the film, but not without still critiquing some aspects of its historical context in much the same way a film adaptation using the utopian function of reactivation would. Celebrity, for one, is a theme upon which the film seems to comment, showing the ills of becoming a celebrity by having John die in the film at the hands of a paparazzi-style media, rather than having him hang himself as in Huxley’s novel. The overwhelming media that kills John unintentionally could be a play on the real-life death of Diana, Princess of Wales, whose death was thought to have been brought about in part because of the paparazzi pursuing them. In this way the film reactivates the source text within the historical context of its own production.

The adaptation’s reactivation of the source aside, it remains an example of the utopian function of framing because, as we have seen, hope is included within the narrative. This hope comes in many forms, one of which is Bernard Marx’s rejection of the World State system. Of course, the novel includes this rejection also, but Huxley’s
Bernard is re-subjugated by the World State system by novel’s end, whereas in the film the character abandons the World State and his newfound position as D.H.C. in order to join his child and its mother in exile. In this way, the character equals one manifestation of hope in the adaptation, reframing the narrative as a critical dystopia. A second manifestation of hope in the narrative is the character Lenina, who in the novel is subtly resistant, but comes to a bad end, devoid of hope. In the film, however, Lenina is more explicitly resistant in a couple different ways, including her preference for unhappiness versus the numbing effects of soma, allowing herself to fall in love, becoming pregnant, and choosing exile over the World State so that she can keep her baby. Because she does not die, as in the novel, furthermore, hope remains in the text, and again we can recognize a reframing of the source into a critical dystopia. A third hopeful element of the film is the character Gabriel, who may be inspired by a character who appears only briefly in the novel, but whose resistance to “erotic play” may have been enough to create a child character that is resistant to the entire system for the film, which is exactly what Libman and Williams did. Gabriel recites the facts about the World state in drone-like fashion and tosses and turns in bed while the hypnopædia voices whisper in his ears so that only soma will calm him. Gabriel shows up in other scenes as well, reinforcing his resistance to the system, but the film closes as he shown in bed once again, refusing to toss and turn this time because he has cotton swabs ready to put in his ears and block out the hypnopædia. This again provides utopian content in the film that is not present in the source text, reframing the source into a critical dystopia.

The utopian function of framing is significant as an approach to adaptation in that
it demonstrates a general need for utopian potential in cultural production in general. In adaptations of this type, utopian content is actually added in where there may have been none. In the case of Huxley’s *Brave New World*, Libman and Williams introduce utopian content into a narrative that had none, and this is a manifestation not only of the utopian function of framing, but also of the utopian impulse in general. This shows how cultural production can be an outlet for filmmakers to exercise the utopian imagination. *Brave New World* provided Libman and Williams with such an outlet, and they introduced utopian content by reframing the narrative. There is, as we have seen, some reactivation included in the adaptation, and this is a specific utopian maneuver, but the conversion of a classical dystopia into a critical dystopia might more generally demonstrate the need for hope under late capitalism, and this is yet another utopian manifestation of the adaptation. In our own brave new world, Libman and Williams seem to say, what we really need is hope, not caution.

**Bruce Pittman Brings “Harrison Bergeron” to Showtime**

Over thirty years after the original publication of “Harrison Bergeron,” and ten years before Chandler Tuttle’s *2081*, director Bruce Pittman adapted the short story for the small screen courtesy of the Showtime network, employing the utopian function of framing and—like Libman and Williams had done with *Brave New World*—converting Vonnegut’s classical dystopia into a critical dystopia. That Pittman includes a figure of hope in *Harrison Bergeron* (1995) is significant enough to situate the film as a critical dystopia, thereby classifying it as an adaptation that employs the utopian function of
framing, but there is a more specific addition of utopian content that is not derived from the source which drives the reframing of the source in the adaptation home that much more effectively. In a nutshell, Pittman uses the frame of the source to comment on the capacity of cultural production to affect political systems and possibly subvert oppressive ones. This addition of utopian content—content that is not derived from the source text—is consistent with the aim of an adaptation that employs the utopian function of framing. Coupled with the conversion of the source text’s classically dystopian frame to a critically dystopian frame in Pittman’s adaptation, the critical angle dealing with the power of cultural production to effect change makes *Harrison Bergeron* a powerful example of an adaptation that uses the utopian function of framing.

*Harrison Bergeron* opens in a retro-style 1950s setting, which is explained by the character Phillipa (Miranda de Pencier) as follows: “America was happiest in the 1950s. At least, that’s how people who were alive then remembered it, and after the revolution, the administrators just redesigned the country on that model—sort of a nostalgia by proxy” (*Harrison Bergeron*). The film continually alludes to a second revolutionary war, since the end of which, according to Chief Officer of the National Administration, John Klaxon (Christopher Plummer), “America has been striving to create a truly egalitarian society—a society of average people” (*Harrison Bergeron*). Just as the creation of such a society is impossible in the short story—Diana Moon Glampers must have an advantage, after all, if no one else—so it is in Pittman’s film as well. As Klaxon puts it, “to run such a society requires certain high administrative functions that the average person is simply incapable of performing” (*Harrison Bergeron*). Harrison (Sean Astin), no matter how
hard he tries, cannot get average grades; he is even disappointed at the film’s beginning for having gotten an A+ on a test. He tries to have his “band” (an analogue of the mental handicaps of Vonnegut’s story, worn on the head) adjusted, but to no avail. His last resort is to have an operation to make his brain average, but the doctor (Nigel Bennett) invites him to a “head house” the night before the operation, a house that has the aura of a brothel, but where intellectual stimulation is the illegal activity instead of sex; Harrison’s particular stimulation is a game of chess. It is here that he meets Phillipa, and, when police raid the house, he is brought to the National Administration Center (NAC) and invited to become one of the above average people who work there—“the people who supervise the economy, who run the railroads, the airlines, communications, manufacturing” (Harrison Bergeron).

After being indoctrinated into the culture of the NAC, Harrison gravitates toward television programming as his profession, and he falls in love with Phillipa along the way, consummating the romance fairly soon after she reciprocates the feeling. All the while, Harrison catches up on the cultural production he had until recently been forbidden to view, developing a genuine appreciation for film and music especially. This appreciation moves Harrison to question the society, but John Klaxon provisionally succeeds in convincing him that the social arrangement is just until Harrison sees even more that depresses him. Soon, Phillipa tries to convince him to escape the United States, but Harrison refuses because he wants to try and make a difference. Soon it is revealed that Phillipa is pregnant, and she tries to escape alone, but she fails and is returned to the NAC, where she undergoes the operation to make her intelligence average. Afterward,
Klaxon arranges for her to be taken away from the NAC to have her child—Harrison’s child—elsewhere. Harrison, distraught, breaks into the television programming room and feeds the cultural production to which Americans have been forbidden exposure into their homes for around 24 hours in an attempt to wake them from their blind, yet enforced obedience. Soon, however, soldiers cut through the steel door and remove Harrison from the room, restoring the regular, government-approved television programming. Harrison is sedated, and, upon waking, visited by Klaxon, who asks him to go on television and tell viewers that his presentation had been a hoax, in exchange for which he will be kept updated about Phillipa in her new life. Harrison reluctantly agrees, and goes on television, but he shoots himself to death after telling the people that his presentation had not been real. As the movie ends, a young child and his friend are shown secretly watching a recording of part of Harrison’s presentation, removing their bands while they do so. The child turns out to be Phillipa’s and Harrison’s, and Phillipa is shown with a smile, hearing jazz music coming from her son’s room upstairs as the film fades.

Pittman’s film, as should be clear, takes many liberties with its source, the most important of which is the ending, which suggests that there is hope for the narrative’s imagined dystopian world to escape its dystopian conditions—hope that is exemplified by Harrison’s and Phillipa’s son and his friend watching a recording of Harrison’s broadcast, and removing his band during. Harrison’s son even mentions that he has friends who have recordings of other portions of the broadcast that they may be able to get their hands on. Their very desire to watch recordings of the broadcast shows some hope that it has had some effect in waking people from their complacency, not to mention
the availability of those recordings, which suggests a more widespread resistance to the system. This inclusion of hope situates the film as an adaptation that employs the utopian function of framing because its very inclusion betrays the lack of hope in Vonnegut’s story, a calculated maneuver to make the story a cautionary tale in the classically dystopian mode. In this way, the classical dystopia that is Vonnegut’s short story is converted into a critical dystopia, by suggesting hope that humanity would be able to overcome the confines of a world the likes of that which is depicted in the film adaptation, rather than using the despair of Vonnegut’s original ending to generate cautionary energy against the institution of such a system to begin with. In some ways, we might be able to read this new approach to the story as some indication of the contemporary world’s dissatisfaction with its lot, as though we have already found ourselves living in a dystopia, so that what we need now is not a cautionary tale to keep us from reaching the dystopia, but a tale of hope that we have the capacity to escape the dystopia. Nevertheless, we do not live in as extreme a dystopia as that which is described in either the film or the short story, and this interpretation of the story’s relationship with the reader’s empirical world, in spite of its seeming suggestion of a use of the utopian function of reactivation, still fundamentally suggests a reframing of the short story.

Still, *Harrison Bergeron* does maintain some of the cautionary energy of the short story by giving the viewer a glimpse of a plausible future and cognitively estranging him or her from their empirical world such that they may be able to view it anew after viewing the film. This estrangement might influence the reader to reject policies that could help to usher in a world like the one we see in Pittman’s film. Maintaining this
aspect of the story helps to maintain the dystopian frame of the story in general, but, as we have seen, hope that is included within the proverbial pages of a dystopian work
revokes its status as a classical dystopia and repositions it as a critical dystopia. Although Harrison himself is re-subjugated, he martyrs himself for what he sees as the good of the people, and we can identify a utopian enclave in the film’s end that is composed of those who would trade recordings of Harrison’s broadcast on the black market and watch them without their bands. Kevin Alexander Boon and David Pringle actually make reference to this aspect of the film:

Harrison learns . . . that nothing of any consequence was gained by his rebellious actions against the National Administration Center.

Unfortunately, this point is undermined at the end of the film where we learn that compact discs of the broadcast are being traded secretly among the country’s young people, suggesting that this intellectual will eventually provoke awareness in the next generation, and that Harrison has managed to infect the hegemony of the intellectual ruling class at a grass-roots level.

(187-88)

What Boon and Pringle see as having “undermined” what they describe as “a Vonnegutesque message about the value of human expression in a world that has become dehumanized by the machinery of institutionalized thinking” (187) is precisely what converts Pittman’s film from the classical dystopia of the story into a critically dystopian film. Where this study parts company with Boon and Pringle is where they see the undermining of Vonnegut’s original message as being unfortunate. Instead, this gives the
adaptation of the story a utopian function, rather than damning the film to failure because of its fidelity to the source. In reframing the short story in the way Pittman does, he suggests humanity’s capability of escape from dystopia, a capability that is not suggested in the short story, probably because it was thought that the despair of the ending would produce hope outside the pages of the story, so that we can again echo Baccolini and Moylan when they say that classical dystopias “maintain utopian hope outside their pages, if at all; for it is only if we consider dystopia as a warning that we as readers can hope to escape its pessimistic future” (7). Pittman’s film adaptation of “Harrison Bergeron,” however, is a critical dystopia in that it “allow[s] both readers and protagonists to hope by resisting closure” via its “open [ending],” which “maintain[s] the utopian impulse within the work” (Baccolini and Moylan 7).

While it may seem difficult to pinpoint Pittman’s agenda with Harrison Bergeron as an adaptation, the film does introduce its own utopian content within the frame of the adaptation. Nevertheless, Darryl Hattenhauer has suggested that the short story is specifically aimed at satirizing “America’s Cold War misunderstanding of not just communism but also socialism” (387), and Pittman seems to miss or ignore this aspect of his source. Given that the Cold War was considered over only four years before the film appeared—upon the dissolution of USSR in 1991—the Cold War remained in the cultural imagination of Americans. Because of this, it may seem as though Pittman had a naïve interpretation of the story that hinged on the idea that the story was meant to be anti-socialism instead of a satire of the American misunderstanding of socialism, which is summed up by Vonnegut years later when he says in “Do You Know What a Twerp Is?”
an essay in his memoir, *A Man Without a Country*, that “‘Socialism’ is no more an evil word than ‘Christianity.’ Socialism no more prescribed Joseph Stalin and his secret police and shuttered churches than Christianity prescribed the Spanish Inquisition” (11). In fact, Vonnegut was a self-proclaimed socialist, who, in “Harrison Bergeron,” it seems, was merely bringing the literal interpretation of socialism as a system of equality to its logical conclusion—absurdity. Hattenhauer, for instance, points out that “the theme of this satire is that attempts to achieve equality are absurd,” at least “[a]ccording to all commentary” on the story by others (387). Pittman, however, presents a new story: that the system in control of the film’s imagined world was put in place because people cannot not “covet” (*Harrison Bergeron*). The absurdity, then, is simply a bi-product of the premise, and not the point.

The justification for the system’s institution is explained by John Klaxon when he says, after showing a film reel of gruesome pictures of war and violence, that “the Bible tells us not to covet. But we covet nonetheless. It’s in our damn genes. We covet not only our neighbor’s ass, his lands, his possessions, we also covet his appearance, his talent, his intelligence. And once we covet, we hate. And when we hate, this is what happens” (*Harrison Bergeron*). If the short story, then, is meant as a satire of the American misunderstanding of socialism, the film certainly has reframed the source to introduce its own utopian content. Klaxon, in fact, reveals that system in place in Pittman’s adaptation came about because of the evils cultural production—as though film and music were ultimately responsible for the hatred that leads to war. The only way to stymie more war from occurring, then, according to Klaxon and, by extension, the NAC, is to remove the
availability of the cultural production that might move its consumers to this extreme jealousy that supposedly leads to war in the first place. Harrison, however, disagrees with this approach, and he sets out to use the same cultural production that is blamed for hatred and for being the seeds of war to attempt to wake the inhabitants of the film’s imagined world from their complacency. In this sense, though Pittman may miss or avoid the satire of the American misunderstanding of socialism, he uses the adaptation to frame his own utopian content—the power of cultural production to affect political systems.

Regarding cultural production, Klaxon sees its banishment as a necessary evil. Harrison confides to him that he is frustrated by the fact that society in the film has been inhibited to the extent that it will never produce “great music or a great film” (Harrison Bergeron). He continues, “I know the constitution says that it’s the function of government to render all people equal,” and Klaxon asks “it saddens you? It saddens me too, Harrison.” Then, admitting his love of Beethoven, Klaxon laments the fact that that he is “striving to create a world in which no Beethoven will ever be born,” but explains the justification for doing so by saying “it has to be. Not just because of some words in a constitution—it has to be.” After showing the aforementioned war and violence footage to Harrison, he says, “if I have to choose between this”—indicating Beethoven as a symbol of cultural production—“and this”—indicating the war and violence footage—“I’ll put the gun to Beethoven’s head myself” (Harrison Bergeron). Despite this discouragement, Harrison is unconvinced that the system that the system to whose inner workings he is now privy is justifiable. Taking initiative, Harrison breaks into the television broadcast room, barricaded behind thick steel doors to which no one has access
but from the inside. He proceeds to interrupt all broadcasts with a message of his own, exposing the NAC’s existence, and explaining,

I’ve illegally taken charge of this control room because I want to get you to overthrow your government, and the whole system of forced equalization. Now, the people who came up with this system had really good intentions; they wanted to get rid of envy, which can lead to a lot of terrible things, and they did it, which is great. But what have you had to give up in return? You don’t even know, do you? Well, as long as I can stay on the air, I’m going to try and show you some of the things people are capable of. What you might be capable of too. (Harrison Bergeron)

Harrison then instructs his audience to remove their handicap bands so they can understand what he is going to show them, and he begins the broadcast of great cultural achievement. This broadcast demonstrates that Harrison, and, it follows, Pittman, see cultural production as so powerful that it has the potential to inspire people to fight against or at least undermine an oppressive system. The broadcast continues for nearly twenty-four hours, during which Harrison reads poetry, shows films, and plays music, while people at home watch, some of whom do, in fact, remove their bands at his instruction. Nevertheless, after soldiers break into the control room and put an end to Harrison’s broadcast, the people are said to have simply put their bands back on. No uprising seems to have taken place, and only 1.3% of the population is even “touched and delighted” by the broadcast, according to Klaxon. Still, the 1.3% “still represent over three million people who could conceivably foment civil unrest” (Harrison Bergeron), so
Harrison is instructed to go on television and say that the entire broadcast had been a hoax, in order to quell the potential for an uprising. Harrison tells the host of *Chat with Charlie* (played by a young Howie Mandel) that the broadcast “was only meant to entertain” before he says “that’s right, Charlie, nothing you saw on TV that night was real, anymore than what you’re about to see right now is real,” and with that he removes a revolver from his jacket, inserts the barrel into his mouth, and pulls the trigger, martyrning himself on national television in hopes it will have some impact on the viewing audience’s complacency.

The despair produced by the film is until this point consistent with the short story, but it is soon revealed that Phillipa is pregnant, and we later see the young son of Harrison viewing recordings of Harrison’s not-fake broadcast without his band. This hopeful ending undermines the film’s status as a classical dystopia, converting it into a critical dystopia, but the treatise on cultural production that is inherent in Harrison’s broadcast—suggesting the power of cultural production to encourage an exhibition of the utopian imagination—is an additional inclusion of hope within the narrative that makes the film a critical dystopia. As a critical dystopia, the film significantly disassociates itself with its source text, and it also does so by suggesting the utopian potential of cultural production. In these ways the film is exemplary of an adaptation that employs the utopian function of framing, by introducing utopian content into the narrative that is not taken from the source, and by reframing the classically dystopian frame as a critical dystopia.
Joffé’s Infamous Adaptation of *The Scarlet Letter*

Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) is one of the most highly regarded works of American literature. It is a work that paints Hester Prynne as a proto-feminist, indicts the religious fundamentalism of the Puritans, and investigates the utopian potential (or lack thereof) of the colonization of the New World, among other things. The novel sets Hester Prynne as the resistant protagonist à la the classical dystopia, a protagonist whose adultery is not penalized to the greatest extent (which is death) because “youthful and fair,” she was “doubtless . . . strongly tempted to her fall,—and that, moreover, as is most likely, her husband may be at the bottom of the sea” (Hawthorne 121). Also like the classical dystopia, Hester is unable to fully escape her subjugator—she does not leave the Massachusetts Bay Colony with her fellow adulterer, the Revered Dimmesdale, as planned because Dimmesdale suddenly falls dead after confessing to what he has done. Admittedly, Roger Chillingworth—the believed-dead husband of Hester Prynne who returns under this alias and exacts revenge—himself dies, but not before Dimmesdale. Chillingworth, however, is not the sole subjugator, for it is the leadership of the Colony who had initially punished Hester’s adultery with the shame of the scarlet letter. Chillingworth, moreover, leaves a large amount of property to Pearl—the child product of Hester’s adultery—in his will, but not to Hester, who comes back to the Massachusetts Bay Colony at the novel’s end after having lived abroad with her daughter (presumably on Chillingworth’s property) to live out her last days alone. There is a defeat of the character—indeed, a re-subjugation—that is consistent with the common re-subjugation of the resistant protagonist of the classical dystopia inherent in
her return to the Massachusetts Bay Colony as “penitence” (Hawthorne 239). Her having worn the titular scarlet letter on her breast as a symbol of her transgression might have been punishment enough, not to mention the death of Dimmesdale that prevented her from leaving the Colony with he and Pearl in the first place. However, she does leave the country, and she does it with her daughter alone, but she returns years later by herself. Thanks, then, to the Puritan indoctrination Hester had no doubt received during her time there and before, she relinquishes the strength she demonstrates in wearing the letter all those years and nearly leaving the Colony forever by returning specifically as “penitence.” In this way, the novel can be seen to contain elements of the modern classical dystopia, and therefore might be characterized as a “proto-classical dystopia.” While the novel warns against unchecked fundamentalism, moreover, it does not warn against utopianism itself, at least not outrightly. An infamous adaptation of the novel, however, does.

One hundred forty-five years after its publication, in 1995, Roland Joffé “freely adapted” (Scarlet) Hawthorne’s novel into a film also called The Scarlet Letter, starring Demi Moore as Hester Prynne and Gary Oldman in the role of the Reverend Dimmesdale. The film begins not with Hester’s public humiliation on the scaffold as the novel does, but with her arrival in the Massachusetts Bay Colony long before. It goes on to dramatize her affair with Dimmesdale, her pregnancy, her imprisonment, and Pearl’s birth, before getting around to her punishment—the wearing of the scarlet letter. The premises for the way the events unfold, moreover, are different from the novel in significant ways. For instance, in the film, Hester only gives in to her desire for
Dimmesdale when she is informed that her husband is dead, violating only an arbitrary
Puritan law regarding the prescribed length of mourning time. Another example involves
hostile Indians living nearby the Colony, who decide to attack just as Hester is about to
be hanged for her crime, allowing her to escape, and, in the end, allowing herself, Pearl,
and Dimmesdale to ride out of the town together in pursuit a better life outside the
Colony, damning its attempt at establishing a “new Jerusalem” (_Scarlet_). In this way, the
film seems to contain an indictment of utopianism itself, characterizing it as anti-
utopian.² Ironically, utopian potential can be found in the film, despite its anti-utopian
elements, because, as Lyman Tower Sargent puts it, the “cycle of hope, failure, despair,
and the rejection of hope altogether, followed by the renewal of hope seems to be the
basic pattern of attitudes to social change” (28). In short, the film is a cultural product
manifestation of one part of the cycle Sargent outlines, so the film’s rejection of hope is a
stepping stone to the renewal of hope. The turn, then, from what can be read as the
novel’s proto-classical dystopian frame to a critical dystopia with anti-utopian
characteristics situates Joffé’s film as an adaptation that employs the the utopian function
of framing. For this reason, Joffé’s film—which has been widely panned by critics for
more reasons than its seemingly complete disregard for fidelity to the text—stands as yet
another example of the utopian function of framing within film adaptation.

Hawthorne’s novel begins with Hester Prynne’s public humiliation atop the
scaffold of the pillory of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. She holds in her arms the three-
month-old Pearl, the product of her adulterous affair with an as yet unnamed co-
conspirator, and she wears the scarlet letter. Her husband, who had apparently sent her
ahead of him to the Colony while he remained behind in Europe, now appears, but does not make himself known to anyone as her husband, and, when she spots him, warns Hester not to reveal him to the crowd as her husband, preferring instead to take on a new identity. When the clergymen—Dimmesdale in particular—ask Hester to reveal the identity of Pearl’s father, she refuses. In the prison to which she is taken with the child afterward, she is visited by her former husband, who is now using the name Roger Chillingworth, and who warns her not to tell anyone who he really is. Later, Hester is freed from the prison, and she stays in the Colony in spite of her shame, choosing to remain there for her “earthly punishment” (131) and making a living as a seamstress.

Because she is a controversial figure in the Colony, Hester gets companionship from Pearl, who is growing up before her. One day, when Hester is delivering a commissioned pair of gloves to the Governor, she brings Pearl along, and learns that the Governor and others are considering taking the child—now a toddler—away from her, which upsets her greatly, but Dimmesdale comes to her rescue and keeps the removal from coming to pass. Nevertheless, Dimmesdale’s guilt seems to be having an effect on his physical health, and he comes under the treatment of the doctor, Roger Chillingworth, who eventually moves in with him. Dimmesdale, meanwhile, does not know that Chillingworth is Hester’s husband, but the townspeople and even the novel’s narrator, seem to see the “evil in his face” (159).

Soon, Chillingworth gets a look at Dimmesdale’s chest, which itself bears a mark of his guilt, a mark no one else sees until the end of the novel, and which is never described in detail. The narrator further relates that the Reverend Dimmesdale has begun
scourging himself and nearly admitting his guilt in his sermons, and he later decides to go
and place himself on the scaffold of the pillory to duplicate for himself the public shame
Hester had experienced at the beginning of the novel, though it is in the middle of the
night. Even so late, however, he is spotted on the scaffold by a few people, including
Hester Prynne and Pearl who join him there. Pearl seems to breathe new life into
Dimmesdale’s demeanor, and a meteor even passes overhead. Chillingworth sees the trio
on the scaffold and leads Dimmesdale away. The next day, a sexton delivers a glove to
Dimmesdale that he had found on the scaffold. He also says that many who saw the
meteor believed it to be the letter “A” in the sky for “Angel,” in honor of the recently
deceased Governor, but with Dimmesdale having been on the scaffold with Hester and
Pearl, the “A” of the meteor may stand for “adultery,” just as the “A” on Hester’s chest
does.

Chillingworth having seen the three on the scaffold together confirms for him that
Dimmesdale is Pearl’s father, and he confronts Hester afterward, telling her that
Dimmesdale deserves to be punished, and that he will not end his pursuit of that
punishment. Afterward, Hester and Pearl come upon Dimmesdale in the woods, and
Hester tells the Reverend that Chillingworth is the man who had been her husband. As a
result, Hester and Dimmesdale plan to run away together with Pearl to England. In the
meantime, Dimmesdale comes face to face with Chillingworth, and both put on a charade
that the other does not know the truth about who they are. With a holiday coming in the
Colony, Dimmesdale prepares to give what will be his last sermon before he leaves with
Hester, while she makes travel arrangements. While doing so, however, she is observed
by Chillingworth, and the mariner tells her he made arrangements to come along as well. Later, she is told that Chillingworth intends to bring Dimmesdale along with him, while the latter delivers his last sermon inside the nearby church. When he comes out of the church, he is visibly shaken, weak, and he beckons Hester and Pearl to join him near the scaffold of the pillory, onto which they climb together. Dimmesdale then confesses to the gathered crowd that he is Pearl’s father and sheds his ministerial garb to reveal his own mark, though it is not described in any detail, Hawthorne preferring ambiguity. Afterward, the minister dies, damning any hope of Hester and he running away together with Pearl to England.

In the conclusion, it is said that the minister had revealed a scarlet letter cut into his chest, though there is some question about if that is actually what it is or if it was there at the moment of the revelation or appeared later, whether put there by Chillingworth or having appeared as a magical warning against sin. Furthermore, there are some that maintain there had been nothing on Dimmesdale’s chest at all. In any case, after his revenge has been fulfilled, Chillingworth is left without purpose, seemingly, and dies soon after, leaving his property to the child Pearl. Hester and Pearl, then, disappear from the Massachusetts Bay Colony and Hester becomes a legend there until years later, when she returns alone, Pearl apparently having been married in England and later having a child of her own. Back in Massachusetts, Hester becomes a kind of counselor, but she never takes off the scarlet letter, instead the scarlet letter loses its stigma, and Hester eventually dies, her gravestone simply reading “On a field, sable, the letter A, gules.”
Joffé’s 1995 film version of Hawthorne’s novel begins with a meeting between the Reverend Dimmesdale and another clergyman of the Colony and Metacomet, the historical chief of the Wampanoag Native American tribe. The Wampanoag actually did eventually participate in a war against New England settlers known as King Philip’s War from 1675-1678. This meeting is apparently meant to prevent that or any other war from coming to pass, but Metacomet is distraught and unconvinced that the settlers will respect his people and territory. The meeting turns out to be a funeral for Metacomet’s father, Massasoit, and as the torch touches the funeral pyre, the scene changes to a ship on the watery horizon carrying Hester Prynne from England. Pearl introduces herself in voiceover, reporting that it was 1666 when her mother arrived in the Colony. She had been in search of the same religious freedom as the rest of the Puritans when they left England, and she had been sent ahead of her husband to prepare for him to arrive. She quickly begins to do just that, taking a house in the Colony, with the help of a young man who advises against the house she chooses because of its having been abandoned after an Indian attack. She takes the house nonetheless, as well as indentured and slave laborers, and begins setting up her home, all the while scandalizing the Colony with her independence in the absence of her husband.

One day, in the woods near her home, she sees the Reverend Dimmesdale swimming nude, becoming entranced by the sight before she is visited by a clergyman and his wife, who mean to bring her to church because it is the sabbath. She decides to refuse the offer and go alone, but her carriage gets stuck on the path. The man who comes along and helps her turns out to be Dimmesdale, but she does not know who he is until
she arrives at church and sees him step forward to deliver the sermon. The sermon deals with the New Jerusalem that is the Massachusetts Bay Colony, and its successes and failures. Afterward, Dimmesdale is disappointed to learn that Hester is married, and he rebuffs her. Nevertheless, it is clear that Dimmesdale is interested in Hester, and when she discovers his library, they meet again and the proverbial sparks fly. Still, they avoid each other, knowing their love is a sin, but word soon comes that an English ship has been attacked by indians, and among the remains is an item belonging to Hester’s husband, so he is believed dead. When Dimmesdale comes to deliver the news to Hester, the pair cannot contain their excitement at her freedom from her husband, and so consummate the romance. Hester’s husband, it is later revealed, has actually been taken prisoner by the indians who attacked his ship, and given over to another tribe for his value as a medicine man.

Around the same time, Hester’s pregnancy is discovered, but she will not reveal the father to the clergymen who accuse her. As a result, she is imprisoned as a heretic, in spite of Dimmesdale’s pleas against it. While imprisoned, Dimmesdale comes to visit her, suggesting they tell the truth about their affair, but Hester refuses for fear they will hang Dimmesdale. She remains in the prison for five months and more, eventually giving birth to the child inside her prison cell, with Dimmesdale coming afterward to baptize the baby himself. Hester’s imprisonment then comes to an end, but not before the wife of one of the clergy devises the plan for the scarlet letter, which is implemented upon her public shaming after she still refuses to reveal the father of her child. During the shaming, her husband (Robert Duvall) rides into the colony, having been allowed to leave his Indian
captors, and witnesses it, visiting Hester in her home afterward. While there, he chides her for her transgressions, and it is suggested that he forces her into sex, punishing her for her adultery afterward. Soon after, Hester warns Dimmesdale of her husband’s presence in the Colony, who decides he would rather take on a new identity and attempt to find out Pearl’s father himself, since Hester will not reveal him. He also warns Hester not to reveal his identity or try and run away or she and her co-conspirator will be hanged.

The doctor then takes on the identity of Chillingworth and becomes a presence in the town and amongst its leadership. Now liberated from her prison cell, meanwhile, Hester is shamed everywhere she goes, complete with the scarlet letter and a drummer playing as she walks anywhere in the Colony. Dimmesdale busies himself keeping the Colony in the good graces of the indians, though there is significant worry that this “great experiment” (Scarlet) is failing, and Chillingworth suggests an attack has been forewarned by certain “signs”—failing crops, the presence of foreigners, and witchcraft. The Colony leadership immediately latches onto this idea and suggests Hester’s situation involves witchcraft. As a result, Chillingworth examines Pearl for the “mark” of the witch, and finds a birthmark, but does not reveal it. Later, Chillingworth attempts to intercept correspondence between Dimmesdale and Hester, but failing that convinces her slave to bear witness to witchcraft in Hester’s home. A witch hunt then begins in the Colony, in the midst of which Chillingworth reveals the mark on Pearl. When Dimmesdale comes afterward to plead with Hester to run away before she is captured, Chillingworth overhears, and he prepares himself to kill Dimmesdale, but when he carries out the deed, he finds he has mistakenly killed another man who has come to rape
Hester but whom she has chased away. Having killed his victim in such a way as to make the murder appear as an indian attack, the Colony begins to punish the indians living amongst them, and Chillingworth is ashamed at what he has done. Dimmesdale, however, finds Chillingworth’s pipe with the body—proof that the indians are not responsible for the murder, but it is of no consequence, for the town continues its ruthless punishment of the indians. As a result, Dimmesdale bids one of the town’s indians go and get the Wampanoag to come and see the atrocity so they might save their people in the Colony. Meanwhile, Hester is arrested along with other suspected witches, and the town prepares to hang them.

At this point in the film, Dimmesdale enters the boarding house to confront Chillingworth as the murderer, but he finds the doctor has hanged himself. Next he comes to the gallows where Hester and the other witches are about to be hanged to give an impassioned speech in hopes of preventing the hanging, which includes confessing his love for Hester and the fact that he is Pearl’s father. He even offers himself up to the gallows to save Hester, and is nearly hanged, but the Wampanoag storm the Colony just in time for him to escape the execution. As the indians raid the town, Hester rescues Pearl, and Dimmesdale joins them, assuring Hester that she will be able to remove the scarlet letter and receive a “public apology” (Scarlet). With that, Hester removes the scarlet letter, but announces that she would prefer to leave the Colony than be allowed to live shamelessly among them. Dimmesdale decides to join her in leaving the town, and as they ride away in the sunset, Pearl relates in voiceover that Dimmesdale had died in the Carolinas, where they had resettled, before she had become a teenager, and that Hester
had never remarried. Thus, the film comes to an end.

The utopian function of the film’s anti-utopianism is that it cautions against utopianism, which is the last step in Sargent’s cycle before the renewal of hope, but it may also be found in the reframing of the novel’s proto-classical dystopia as a critical dystopia. As with Libman’s and Williams’s *Brave New World* and Pittman’s *Harrison Bergeron*, Joffé’s *The Scarlet Letter* gives the viewer a “happy” ending that the novel does not. Hester’s indoctrination by the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the novel leads her back there after having lived abroad with her daughter, and upon returning she still wears the scarlet letter on her chest. Hawthorne writes, “there was a more real life for Hester Prynne here, in New England, than in that unknown region where Pearl had found a home. Here had been her sin; here, her sorrow; and here was yet to be her penitence” (Hawthorne 239). In some ways, this passage reads like the closing passage of Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, wherein the protagonist, Winston Smith, comes to love the oppressive regime he has been rallying against throughout the novel, after having been brainwashed. Hester Prynne might herself have been brainwashed by the fundamentalism of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, returning there to pay penitence after having escaped following her own oppression. In Joffé’s adaptation, however, Hester rides away from the Colony with Dimmesdale, who has not, as in the novel, fallen dead after admitting that he is Pearl’s father. Hester also refuses to be “tamed,” and she is able to leave the Colony with Dimmesdale in spite of the fact that the Colony leadership is prepared to forgive her completely. In this way, hope remains for Hester that is not granted in the novel per se, embodied in her *ability* to leave the Colony, and her *desire* to do so. Reading the novel,
then, as a proto-classical dystopia, it would follow that the film is a critical dystopia because Hester is not resubjugated by the system she resists.

Still another way of analyzing Joffé’s adaptation is by seeing it as having anti-utopian characteristics. Seeing the film as a critical dystopia is justifiable, but to see it also as an anti-utopia is difficult to reconcile. Nevertheless, it does contain anti-utopian attributes. Utopianism itself, for instance, seems to be a target of the film’s critique, but utopian potential can be rescued from the adaptation by reading it as a manifestation of the last event in the cycle of utopianism, which, according to Sargent, gives way to the renewal of hope. To do so requires a recognition of the despair that the viewer may feel after considering the film’s attitude concerning utopianism—that attempts to improve society by correcting its failures might result in making “our imperfect world even more imperfect” (Sargent 27). That despair, however, because of the universality of utopianism, or, “social dreaming” (Sargent 3), would necessarily lead to an exhibition of the utopian imagination for the purpose of rejecting said despair, and thus the renewal of hope may bloom.

The anti-utopian nature of the film, moreover, manifests itself specifically at certain points in the film. One scene in which it does so in particular is during Dimmesdale’s sermon early on. The Reverend calls his parishioners “fellow voyagers in the greatest of all dreams,” and asserts that they have been “singled out like Israel of old to serve as a model” (Scarlet). He further characterizes the “dream” as their “new Jerusalem—our city on a hill” and “the measure of perfection” (Scarlet). However, as the film is coming to a close, Dimmesdale and Hester discuss the utopian project of the
Colony in a negative light when Dimmesdale reminds Hester “there’s no perfect world,” with Hester replying “no, not perfect. But we came here to make a new one” (*Scarlet*). Because they have failed in doing so, it is implied, Hester wishes to leave and start over yet again. In this way, the film criticizes utopianism itself, here represented by the Puritan establishment of a new society. Nevertheless, the failure of any utopianism gives way to the exhibition of the utopian imagination to find hope anew, and the failure of this utopia gives way to Hester seeking a better life for herself and her child, completing the cycle.

Joffé’s widely panned adaptation of Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, then, does have a utopian function, reframing the source to that end. Joffé may have intended to indict utopianism itself, using the familiar arguments against perfection, but the effect of this is to give way to the very hope that is criticized as unrealistic in the first place. This hope is sought out by and granted to Hester at the film’s end, which both converts the source from a proto-classical dystopia to a critical dystopia and reframes the source as anti-utopian, which is a sort of utopian content not contained in the source. Although anti-utopianism would seem from its name to be devoid of utopianism, it actually begets the very hope that is indicative of an exhibition of the utopian imagination, so the adaptation, even with its anti-utopian nature, does end up with a utopian function, even though the filmmaker may not intend it. His own intended utopian function might simply have been the criticism of utopianism itself, but this critical project is superficial at best. In the end, the viewer will be encouraged to exhibit their utopian imagination, whether from the conversion of the source to a critical dystopia, or from the despair produced by the anti-utopian nature of the adaptation. In this way, hope reigns supreme, and the film
demonstrates its own utopian function as an adaptation via its reframing of the source.

**Conclusion**

The utopian function of framing within adaptation is not a method that seeks to disseminate or reactivate the utopian content of the source. Instead, it introduces new utopian content into the source, but it often does so by fundamentally altering that source. For this reason, adaptations that employ the utopian function of framing are often denounced by fidelity critics; however, these may yet be the most utopian of adaptations. This is because, like adaptations using the utopian function of reactivation, those using the utopian function of framing add to the depth of the cultural product adapted, and they do so not by emphasizing utopian content already present in the source, but by adding new utopian content. In doing so, the adaptation possibly brings new attention to the source, but it also engages in intertextuality with that source. If we agree with Bloch, then, that utopian potential can be found in any source, then even in spite of their infidelity, adaptations using the utopian function of framing contain utopian potential. In the case of Libman’s and Williams’s film adaptation of Huxley’s *Brave New World*, the source is reframed from a classical dystopia to a critical dystopia, which allows for utopian potential within the narrative that is not granted in the source. The same goes for Pittman’s *Harrison Bergeron*, but this adaptation of Vonnegut’s short story of the same title contains additional utopian potential in the form of its suggestion that media or popular culture might be able to motivate people to resist or even subvert oppressive political systems. The final case study in this chapter surrounded Roland Joffé’s film
adaptation of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, which proves an interesting example of the use of the utopian function of framing. The source text, as it turns out, can be read as a proto-classical dystopia, but the film converts this narrative frame into a critical dystopia by way of the hope provided at the end of the film, among other things. More than this, however, the film specifically criticizes utopianism, and thereby might be characterized as anti-utopian, but hope remains because a lack of faith in hope leads to the kind of despair that might actually (and, perhaps, ironically) renew hope after all. These examples show how utopian potential remains in adaptations that do not adhere to the narratives of their sources, which are those that employ the utopian function of framing.
CONCLUSION

Even though adaptations of literature are often judged by their fidelity to their source texts, and thus often panned for a lack thereof, fidelity alone is not an appropriate measuring stick by which to judge them. For one thing, adaptations are generally undertaken in a different media than that of their sources—novels are adapted into films, films into video games, etc. For this reason, the adaptation can never fully live up to the source on the grounds of fidelity. The media aside, though, adaptations are the products of usually only one of many possible interpretations of their sources. In other words, one person’s opinion of what actually happens in a source text (especially where ambiguity is involved) will never match the interpretations of all other readers. This fact dooms any adaptation to be rejected by some fraction of the source’s readers to begin with. Instead, the existence of a multitude of possible ways of interpreting a source opens a space for intertextuality between that source and the adaptations. These adaptations, moreover, allow the adapters to exhibit their utopian imaginations, using the work to proffer utopian content, thereby revealing utopian potential via cultural production.

For Ernst Bloch and many who have come after him, all cultural productions contain utopian potential or utopian content, and it follows that this is true of adaptations as well—even those adaptations that do not contain fidelity to their sources. Still, many adaptations do attempt to remain close to their sources, and these sources, of course, contain utopian potential/content as well; the adaptations that do exercise fidelity to their
sources employ what is here referred to as the utopian function of dissemination. Disseminating the utopian content of a source within its adaptation is still proffering utopian content, in this case merely the content that is already contained in the source. The opposite of fidelity criticism might be criticism suggesting adaptations do not stray far enough from their sources in some attempt to build upon the utopian content of the source, but such adaptations still contain the utopian content of their sources, and thus have a utopian function as adaptations. Other adaptations, meanwhile, emphasize a particular manifestation of the utopian content of their sources, content which is of particular interest to the cultural or historical context of the adaptation.

The utopian function of reactivation within adaptation a method of adaptation that seeks to reactivate some utopian dimension of a source text that is of particular interest or importance within the cultural or historical context of the adaptation’s production. If a source text dealing with World War II, for instance, was adapted within the context of an ongoing military conflict in the present day, the adaptation may intentionally point to the tragedies of civilian casualties to call attention to that issue in the context of the ongoing conflict. As above, Cuarón’s *Children of Men* reactivated the immigration issue that was included as part of the P.D. James’s novel it adapted to call attention to a political issue that was at the forefront of the American political discourse when the movie was being made and when it was released. Reactivating the source in this way equaled a utopian maneuver that demonstrates the utopian function of adaptation, and in particular the utopian function of reactivation within adaptation. When adaptations contain utopian content that is not part of the source text, then, they move away from reactivating their
sources and instead *reframe* their sources.

The utopian function of framing is the final category of the utopian function of adaptation. Adaptations taking this approach largely use their source texts to proffer utopian content that is not present in their sources at all. While these adaptations might be rejected by fidelity critics for not staying true to their sources, they have at least the potential to engage in dialogue with their sources, and they promote intertextuality. More specifically, they proffer new utopian content to the culture at large, and in this way can be the most utopian adaptations of all, whether intentionally (as in *Harrison Bergeron*) or unintentionally (as in Joffé’s *The Scarlet Letter*). Adaptations such as these, moreover, because they are the most degraded by fidelity critics, offer a fertile ground for critical interpretation, as well for finding utopian potential in cultural products that might otherwise fall by the proverbial wayside.

In any case, cries of “the book was better” are by now understood to be the fallacies they are for the reasons listed above, but added to the media and intertextuality arguments is now the utopian function of adaptation. Because critique of the hegemonic system can occur openly from within cultural production, it stands to reason that utopian potential can be found there, but adaptation is especially well-equipped to perform such critique, and the result usually reveals the utopian function of the adaptation. That function comes in the form of the critical project of the adapter, who either wants to reinvigorate the source’s existing utopian content in general, emphasize an aspect of that content for the cultural or historical context of the source’s adaptation, or introduce new utopian content into the source by way of the adaptation. In any of these cases, the
adaptation helps keep alive the utopian dream of the improvement of our lives by suggesting what might be done. As a result, hope itself remains.
Introduction: The Utopian Function of Adaptation

1. Bloch posits the idea of “the wishful element in the expectant emotions,” which “activates and galvanizes us towards the goal of a better life” (76). From this element, “daydreams are formed. They always come from a feeling of something lacking and they want to stop it, they are all dreams of a better life” (76). See Bloch, Ernst. The Principle of Hope. Trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1986. Print.


3. Aragay’s introduction to Books in Motion: Adaptation, Intertextuality, Authorship, entitled “Reflection to Refraction: Adaptation Studies Then and Now,” is a comprehensive history of the development of the field of adaptation studies, if not the comprehensive history. Rewriting that history might be redundant at present since the field is in an intertextual holding pattern, so Aragay’s version has been used as a roadmap here.


5. See Hall, Alexander Charles Oliver. “‘A Way of Revealing’: Technology and Utopianism in Contemporary Culture.” Journal of Technology Studies 35.1
I. The Utopian Function of Dissemination


2. The term “eutopia” means simply “good place”—a combination of the Greek words “eu” (“good”) and “topos” (“place”). The title of Thomas More’s Utopia—the work after which the utopian genre is named—is a pun built on the ambiguity achieved by combining “eu” and “ou” (“no” or “not”) with “topos.”

3. In the same place, Moylan expands his meaning of the word critical to also include “the nuclear sense of the critical mass required to make the necessary explosive reaction” (Demand 10), of which Saramago’s having been awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1998—a mere three years after Blindness’s original publication—is likely evident. The production of a film adaptation of the novel, for which the rights were secured as early as 1999, also suggests the novel’s critical mass.

4. At the same time that the doctor’s wife is forced into a sex act by the leader of the blind hoodlums, however, so are others from her ward in the quarantine, and one of these women falls dead afterward. Later, when the hoodlums come to gloat about their sexual exploits, the doctor’s wife can take it no more, and she goes
directly to the leader of the blind hoodlums and stabs him to death with a pair of scissors (160-170). This action serves as yet another way in which readers can see the doctor’s wife as the critical dystopia’s resistant protagonist.

5. Meirelles’s adaptation of *Blindness* was In Competition as part of The Official Selection at the 61st Cannes Film Festival in 2008, at which it served as the opening screening.

6. Meirelles was born in São Paulo, Brazil.

7. According to the short story, the result of Hazel’s “perfectly average intelligence” is that she “couldn’t think about anything except in short bursts” (7). Still, it is hard to believe that this level of intelligence would be so a deficiency that Hazel could forget seeing her son executed live on television only a few moments after it happened.

8. Future seasons of the *Dexter* series deviate significantly from Lindsay’s subsequent books after the first season.

**II. The Utopian Function of Reactivation**

1. Cuarón was born in Mexico, but lived in New York during the 2000s before moving to England.

2. The very term “Homeland Security” is surely a reference to the US department of the same name that was instituted in 2003 and is responsible for the invasive airport pat-downs and other practices that have recently led to a popular sentiment that the US has become a police state.
3. See the racial profiling that has been occurring in Arizona since that state’s passing of Arizona SB 1070.

4. The novel only addresses the question of the infertility’s cause to say that it had not been discovered. As Theo writes in his journal, “[w]e are outraged and demoralized less by the impending end of our species, less even by our inability to prevent it, than by our failure to discover the cause” (5).

5. According to the novel, “[s]ince vampire blood was supposed to temporarily relieve symptoms of illness and increase sexual potency, kind of like prednisone and Viagra rolled into one, there was a huge black market for genuine, undiluted vampire blood” (6).

6. In the novel, it is clear that Sookie can read the minds of vampires—at least that of Eric Northman, as is clear when she says “And suddenly, I was in his thoughts” (216).

7. Wadleigh’s Woodstock was originally released in 1970, so it follows that the Neville of *The Omega Man* is living in the post-apocalyptic year of 1973.

### III. The Utopian Function of Framing

1. Although it is not specifically explained in the film, per se, Huxley explains hypnopædia as “sleep-teaching” (25), which is how the World State educates its subjects (in part) while they are still children—they literally play recorded voices to them repeatedly while they sleep, which instills the tenets of the system in them.


