**Creative Research Essay Year 2**

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# Uniforms of Power: Costume, Spectacle, and the Aesthetics of Authority in Dystopian Cinema.

Costume design is so much more than the superficial aesthetics of clothing. It provides an insight into a character's life, revealing vital details about their psyche that the audience wouldn't be able to infer through other cinematic storytelling tools. It helps us position them within society while simultaneously explaining the way other characters interact with one another; it operates as a semiotic and political tool that reflects, reinforces, and critiques systems of power. In this essay, I want to explore how costume design within dystopian cinema can be used as a critical semiotic tool that reflects, enforces, and critiques systems of power. Drawing on the works of Michel Foucault (1977) and Georges Bataille, this essay investigates how political leaders cultivate their image to help enforce their authority and how these dynamics are highlighted or exaggerated within dystopian cinema. Films such as *The Hunger Games* (Makovsky, 2012), *Mickey 17* (March 2025) and *Blade Runner* (April 2017) provide examples of how clothing acts as an instrument of discipline, spectacle and symbiotic violence. These films reflect modern-day society but in an exaggerated form and resonate with the aesthetic of contemporary political figures such as Kim Jong-un, Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin, whose use of uniformity and theatricality displays them as a dogmatic political power and for their orders and regimens to be followed and respected. Additionally, I will be using behavioural psychology and perspectives to explain conformity to uniform and obedience to authority. Perspectives and evidence from experiments such as the Stanford prison experiment (Zimbardo,1973) and Milgram's study on obedience (Milgram, 1963). Furthermore, using theories of social conformity to ground dystopian cinema in real behavioural science. Through these interdisciplinary lenses, costume can be explained as not only a tool for world-building and aesthetics of genre, but as a critique of authority and contemporary politics, commenting on the human tendency to internalise and obey visual regimes. This essay is personal to me, it builds on my love of dystopian cinema, as well as linking to important current affairs that I believe we should all be knowledgeable about. It is crucial at this point in time to reflect and analyse the behaviour and actions of dogmatic world leaders as the political state of the world reverts towards fascism.

Costume functions as a semiotic system, a visual language composed of signs that communicate meaning about a character's social status, cultural background, psychological state, and personal history, as well as contextual information such as

time of day or location. Semiotic theory, as proposed by Charles Sanders Peirce, offers a useful framework for analysing how meaning is constructed through signs. Peirce identifies three essential components: the sign (the form itself, such as a word, image, or item of clothing), the object (what the sign refers to in reality), and the interpretant (the meaning produced in the mind of the observer). Expanding on this, Roland Barthes (1972), drawing from Ferdinand de Saussure, distinguishes between two levels of meaning: denotation, the literal, surface meaning, and connotation, the secondary, culturally informed meaning. Costume, therefore, is ideologically charged. It is not a neutral or purely aesthetic element but a system of signs that reflects and reinforces social norms, identities, and power structures. In dystopian cinema, clothing plays a critical role in visualising political ideologies. Costume designers use strategies such as colour symbolism, militarisation, uniformity, and the contrast between luxury and deprivation to convey the dynamics of control, resistance, and spectacle. For example, in The Hunger Games franchise, costume designer Judianna Makovsky (2012) constructs the Capitol's fashion as grotesque and hyper-capitalist, marked by exaggerated silhouettes, opulent materials, and excessive ornamentation, turning fashion into a tool of distraction and domination. In contrast, the districts' costumes signify dehumanisation and state control, reinforcing the narrative's critique of authoritarianism.

Power and the cultivation of image can be explained through Foucault, particularly in his work Discipline and Punish (1977), where he argues that modern power operates through visibility and surveillance rather than solely through direct acts of violence or law. In this framework, power is productive as well as repressive. This system of disciplinary power is deeply embedded in modern institutions such as schools, prisons, and the military. Uniforms are a key tool within this system; they create hierarchies and act as instruments of surveillance. In dystopian cinema, uniforms visually signify the imposition of discipline and state control over the body. The uniform becomes an extension of institutional power—a constant reminder of who is watching and who holds authority. In films such as *Mickey 17* and *1984*, uniforms are not just aesthetic choices but ideological markers. They symbolise control and the loss of personal freedom, which are key themes in dystopian narratives that align with Foucault's analysis of disciplinary societies.

Georges Bataille (1973) explored how power often functions irrationally, through excessive displays, spectacle, and ritual. He argued that human societies are structured not only by production but also by extravagant expenditure, which he called 'la dépense'. Power expresses itself through lavishness, destruction, and spectacle, as seen in royal courts, religious ceremonies, and public executions. For Bataille, power is seductive. Leaders often present themselves in ornate, sensual, and theatrical ways, using luxury, beauty, and performance to awe and dominate. These acts are designed to inspire fascination, pleasure, and submission. In *The Hunger Games*, Bataille's ideas are embodied in the character of President Snow,

who represents controlled, sinister luxury—his white roses, tailored suits, and meticulous grooming all function as performances of power. Similarly, Caesar Flickerman, the flamboyant host of the Games, is excessively styled and constantly performing. His glamour distracts from the brutality, turning suffering into spectacle. This directly aligns with Bataille's theory of how power maintains itself through excess and theatricality. The theatrical function of costume, as seen in dystopian cinema, extends into real-world politics. Political leaders carefully construct their visual appearances as performative symbols of authority. For example, Donald Trump's consistent use of dark, oversized suits and a red tie is a performance of corporate strength and nationalist symbolism. The red tie acts as a symbolic marker of aggression and patriotism, visually positioning him as a populist businessman-turned-leader. During White House press conferences, his uniformed appearance contrasted with the more relaxed attire of other world leaders, reinforcing his singular, combative brand. Similarly, Kim Jong-un's use of the Mao-style suit and military parades invokes revolutionary iconography, aligning his image with that of his grandfather, Kim Il-sung, and evoking ideological purity. The costume represents discipline, control, and anti-Western resistance. It rejects Western luxury in favour of austere, collectivist power. During state parades, Kim's appearance, framed by ballistic missiles and synchronised military formations, becomes a Bataillean spectacle: a controlled excess in which costume and militarism merge into visual propaganda. Dystopian cinema often reflects the sociopolitical conditions of its time and critiques power systems, revealing the theatricality and constructed nature of authority to its audience.



Figure 1

Conformity and obedience to authoritarian figures can be explained through behavioural psychology, particularly in how clothing and uniforms influence obedience and conformity, and how this can be applied in costume design to enrich and support narrative. Philip Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Experiment (1971) reveals how costume can function as a psychological weapon. In the experiment, participants were randomly assigned the roles of either guard or prisoner in a simulated prison environment. The guards, dressed in military-style uniforms and reflective sunglasses (which obscured their eyes), quickly adopted authoritarian behaviours, despite knowing the scenario was fictional. The experiment was cut short due to the participants' deteriorating psychological state and the guards' increasingly abusive behaviour. The study demonstrated how costume enforces roles and accelerates psychological transformation. The uniforms served as a medium of authority, detachment, and power. The autonomy and legitimacy conferred by the costume enabled ordinary individuals to adopt extreme behaviours, suggesting that visual markers of authority can override personal ethics. Similarly, Stanley Milgram's Obedience to Authority experiment (1963) demonstrated that people are more likely to follow orders, even when those orders cause harm, when the person is perceived as a legitimate authority figure. Visual cues such as lab coats and formal attire convey expertise and institutional power, reinforcing their perceived legitimacy in the eyes of participants. These findings demonstrate that costume is not neutral; it plays an active role in shaping how authority is internalised and obeyed.

These psychological principles are reflected in dystopian cinema. For example, in *The Handmaid's Tale* (Crabtree, 2017), the characters wear red robes and white bonnets; uniforms specifically constructed to erase personal identity and reinforce submission. In this context, the costume becomes a psychological control mechanism, enforcing the hierarchy where obedience is expected, and deviation is dangerous. The leaders wear black suits, which denote power and authority. Their tailored cuts and lack of personal style emphasise their power, making them a

legitimate authority figure and therefore to be obeyed by the Handmaids.



Figure 2

In addition, within the series *Snowpiercer*, (George, 2021) costume is used to maintain class division within the train's closed society. The bourgeoisie at the front of the train wear tailored, clean, and luxurious clothing, symbolising privilege, while those at the back wear tattered and damaged garments. This stark contrast visually establishes the societal structure and helps maintain a sense of order, discouraging rebellion by constantly reminding individuals of their place. In dystopian narratives, costume does more than signify status; it makes roles unavoidable, using clothing as a form of soft control. As an actor, you are not just wearing clothes but wearing your role. Uniforms and costumes embed obedience into the narrative and the character's identity.

Sci-fi novelist J.G. Ballard stated in 1971, "What the writers of modern science fiction invent today, you and I will do tomorrow." This idea connects directly to accelerationism, a political and social theory that argues for the intensification of capitalist growth and technological development to hasten the collapse of the current system. Over the past few decades, much of the world has undeniably accelerated, working patterns, political cycles, technological innovation, communication habits, and urban development have all intensified. Accelerationism has evolved from a fictional device employed by sci-fi writers into an actual intellectual movement. In dystopian cinema, costume offers a visual projection of these extreme futures, using exaggerated aesthetics to reflect and critique the political tendencies of the present, thereby opening the audience's eyes to contemporary realities. Films such as *Blade*

*Runner 2049* feature techno-corporate uniforms and sterile, minimalist clothing that echo themes of surveillance, dehumanisation, and systemic control. These costumes are not products of imagined futures alone, but are extrapolations of current trajectories, creating speculative worlds that feel disturbingly close to our own. For instance, *Black Mirror* incorporates fashion and branding aesthetics that mirror today's celebrity-driven politics. These costume choices reflect a world where politics functions as entertainment, and power is maintained through controlled image and spectacle. In this way, dystopian costumes function as a speculative tool, offering both a critique of existing structures and a cautionary forecast of what the future may hold. It allows audiences to recognise the absurdity and horror of these imagined realities and reflect on how closely they resemble the world we already live in.

Dystopian cinema can act as an allegory for contemporary authoritarianism, drawing clear parallels between fictional authoritarian regimes, real-world political systems, and modern-day politics. Through strategic costuming and spectacle, these films critique the aesthetic strategies employed by modern authoritarian figures. They reveal how visual political leaders and people in authority adopt identity, performance, and power, and how these elements are intricately linked. In real-world politics, figures often adopt branding as a form of ideological signalling.

For example, Donald Trump's MAGA cap functions as more than merchandise; it serves as a symbolic uniform that unifies supporters who share his ideology. It reduces complex political issues to a short, catchy slogan, which can limit deeper understanding and critical engagement. In this way, it becomes a tool of propagandistic control. This mirrors the role of costume in dystopian cinema, where visual markers signify social alignment within a system of power. Trump's bold, performative media persona also shares striking similarities with the character Caesar Flickerman in The Hunger Games, who transforms state violence into entertainment through charm, theatrics, and style.

Similarly, Vladimir Putin's staged shirtless photo-ops use aestheticised masculinity as a political message, projecting strength, control, and dominance. This strategy parallels dystopian narratives where leaders convey hyper-masculine authority and power through visual presence alone. Leaders in these films are often portrayed as commanding physical power and symbolic control, reinforced through costuming. Lastly, Kim Jong-un's use of uniformity, particularly the Mao-style suit, reinforces a sense of collectivism, nostalgia, and militarised discipline. His carefully curated image during mass parades and state ceremonies reflects a broader strategy of total visual control. This is echoed in *The Hunger Games*, where the Capitol's costumes represent a blend of luxury, excess, and regimentation that coexist with brutal oppression. Much like the North Korean elite, Capitol figures use spectacle and uniformity to separate themselves from the masses while asserting dominance through appearance. Dystopian costume design critiques these political realities by

visualising them in exaggerated, speculative forms. Costume becomes a key mechanism through which power is performed, internalised, and sustained. Dystopian films highlight how aesthetic performance is central to political strategy, ultimately blurring the line between fiction and reality.

In conclusion, costume in dystopian cinema is not merely a tool for world-building or visual aesthetics but also functions as a critique of the systems within the narrative, systems that often reflect real-world authoritarian regimes. To maintain control, these regimes use visual symbols such as uniforms, branding, colour choices, and styling. Films like *The Hunger Games* and *Blade Runner 2049*, along with series such as *Snowpiercer*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and *Black Mirror*, use costume design to explore themes of political control, social division, and propaganda, revealing the impact of authoritarian aesthetics. Costume, therefore, becomes a lens through which audiences can examine and question the political realities of their own world. Through the lenses of semiotics, philosophy, and psychology, costume emerges as a tool of both resistance and control. It reflects a character's psyche and their position within society, particularly in relation to conformity and obedience. Semiotics helps us understand costume as a system of signs, which carries both denotative and connotative meanings and reveals how characters want to be perceived. Philosophy, particularly through the work of Foucault and Bataille, offers insights into how costume expresses power, surveillance, spectacle, discipline, and desire. Behavioural psychology, through studies like Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Experiment and Milgram's obedience research, shows how uniforms can influence behaviour and encourage either conformity or resistance. Ultimately, costume shapes identity and enforces, or challenges, ideology, demonstrating how dystopian cinema reflects real-world behaviour and blurs the boundary between fiction and reality. In a world where political power is increasingly tied to image and media performance, important ethical questions arise: What responsibilities do costume designers hold? Should costumes expose manipulation and spectacle? Should designers avoid reinforcing stereotypes or glamorising authoritarian figures? Or can costume design serve as resistance and activism, opening conversations about contemporary politics and helping audiences see the truth in front of them?

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