"A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Dystopia": The Culture Industry’s Neutralization of Stephen King’s The Running Man

DOUGLAS W. TEXTER

The whole of literature of the past will have been destroyed. Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Byron—they’ll exist only in Newspeak versions, not merely changed into something different, but actually changed into something contradictory of what they used to be.

Introduction

In the above epigraph from George Orwell’s classic dystopia, Nineteen Eighty-Four, the editor of the Newspeak Dictionary, Syme, proclaims that the Inner Party will transform literary works and their political messages into their polar opposites. In this essay, I’ll argue that the American media—what Theodor W. Adorno has called the “culture industry”—have produced just such an inversion through their treatment of a very early novel by Stephen King, The Running Man. I’ll trace out a curious phenomenon: the way in which an early and edgy King work was transformed into the very thing it both predicted and criticized—a reality television program featuring a nation-wide manhunt and huge cash prizes.

In Part I, I’ll argue that King produced a work employing the tropes of dystopian literature and satire. Despite some scholarship by writers such as M. Keith Booker and Michael Collings hinting that The Running Man has dystopian qualities, no critic has yet fully articulated the kinds of dystopian maneuvers that King made. First, almost two decades before programs such as “America’s Most Wanted” and “COPS” appeared, King offered a predictive and trenchant critique of reality police television shows. Second, influenced by Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four and Aldous Huxley’s Brave New World, King both employed and modified the dystopian convention of using a dialogue between the protagonist and a member of the ruling elite to demystify and interrogate structures of power. Third, The Running Man ends with an incred-
ibly ghastly scene: an eviscerated protagonist flying an airliner into a high-rise office complex. In rendering this scene, King did not merely make his audience queasy and eerily foreshadow the events of September 11, 2001. He also rewrote one of the seminal episodes of American literature: the evisceration of the waist gunner Snowden in Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*.

In Part II, I'll examine the ways in which various iterations of *The Running Man* have thematically moved away from King's novel. First, King's celebrity prevented the work (originally published under a pseudonym) from being viewed fully as a dystopia. His status fixed *The Running Man* in a constellation of horror novels and movies. Second, the 1987 movie adaptation of *The Running Man* transformed a Vietnam-era protest novel into a Reagan-era star vehicle for Arnold Schwarzenegger and Jesse Ventura. Finally, Ben Affleck and Matt Damon attempted, in 2001, to turn the material of *The Running Man* into the very thing that it predicted: a reality television show called "The Runner," which featured a nationwide manhunt and huge cash prizes. Thus, within thirty years of its writing and less than twenty from the date of its publication, *The Running Man* became—in the words of Syme—not only different from what it once was but actually contradictory.

**Part I: The Text of The Running Man**

In *Nightmare on Main Street*, Mark Edmundson presents a quickie cultural history of the United States. Employing a kind of pop Freudianism, he argues that contemporary American culture is bifurcated. One strand of culture—"American Light"—begins with the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson and ends in the movie *Forrest Gump*. The other commences with Edgar Allan Poe and terminates in the Gothic worlds of Anne Rice and Stephen King. Of King, Edmundson writes, "His heart's in the right place. But he merely invites his readers to relive their childhoods with him, to take a self-righteous vacation away from the day-to-day immersion in the adult world. He's got nothing much to send them back to that world with, or nothing much that would be likely to help change it" (44). Although this view is slowly changing, it's fair to say that Edmundson delivers the standard critical line on King.

A more perceptive reader of King's work, Tony Magistrale, argues in *Hollywood's Stephen King* that "beneath the surface of King's genial public persona and the extraordinary popularity of his work is an expression of the major social, political anxieties of our time. The subtextual issues present in
his films and fictions explore the landscape of the national unconscious, exploiting the personal and political adversary myths that Americans consciously repress. As a critical sociologist of his culture, Stephen King is concerned with creating cautionary tales about a nation under siege from within” (149). I agree with Magistrale that King’s work in general is much more political than critics like Edmundson want to admit. One of the monkey wrenches in the political toolkit that King tosses readers of The Running Man is a very Marxist-oriented interrogation of the American superstructure.

Vietnam, reality police shows, and the ideological state apparatus

Written in 1971, The Running Man both predicts and critiques the reality police shows—especially “America’s Most Wanted” and “COPS”—that would capture both middle-class imaginations and working-class bodies. The plot of The Running Man is simple. Ben Richards, a twenty-eight-year-old unemployed “wiper” for General Atomics, needs to buy medicine for his infant daughter, Cathy, who is dying of the flu. Richards’ wife, Sheila, works as a prostitute in order to feed the family. Richards cannot find employment because GA has blacklisted him for insubordination. Desperate to save his daughter and not wanting his wife to continue to turn tricks, Richards auditions as a contestant/victim on one of the reality television shows produced by the Games Commission for broadcast on the Free-Vee Network.

In the Huxley-like “brave year of 2025,” the Richards family lives in a dank high-rise housing project in the Co-Op City section of the fictional Midwestern town of Harding. With this setting, King takes readers to the equivalent of the Prole enclave of London in Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four. “Below in the airshaft, clothes lines flapped with ragged wash. Rats and plump alley cats circulated through the garbage” (711). Redolent with the smell of cabbage, the broken-down apartment combines Victory Mansions in Nineteen Eighty-Four with the all-too-real horrors of Cabrini Greens in Chicago in the 1960s.

Waging a presumably Vietnam-like war in Ecuador, the United States at the end of the first quarter of the twenty-first century is sharply divided along a suburban-bourgeois/urban lumpen-proletariat fault line. The Free-Vee simultaneously fixes a skewed view of the urban underclass in suburban minds and narcotizes that underclass: “Free-Vee is the stuff of dreams, the bread of life. Scag is twelve oldbucks a bag, Frisco Push goes for twenty a tab,
but the Free-Vee will freak you for nothing” (715). One step behind the development of the telescreen in Oceania, Free-Vee sets are ubiquitous but still able to be turned off: “The Compulsory Benefit Bill of 2021 had failed to get the required two-thirds majority” (711). Although Richards is not normally a Free-Vee watcher, “ever since Cathy had gotten sick, he had been watching the big-money giveaways” (711). Both anticipating and magnifying such 1990s programs as “Survivor,” the game shows that Richards watches feature competitions or spectacles inflicting physical harm on their participants in return for huge cash prizes. For example, contestants on “Treadmill to Bucks” (only chronic heart, liver, and lung patients participate) run until they have heart attacks. The activity on “Swim the Crocodiles” needs no explanation; contestants blast each other on “Run for Your Guns.” Eventually, Richards lands a spot on “The Running Man.”

Of all the shows the Games Commission produces, “The Running Man,” hosted by emcee Bobby Thompson, is “the biggest thing on Free-Vee” (744). As one of Richards’ fellow contestants says, the show is one of the “big-money assignments. The ones where they do more than just land you in the hospital with a stroke or put out an eye or cut off an arm or two, the ones where they kill you. Prime time, baby” (740). “Filled with chances for viewer participation, both vicarious and actual,” “The Running Man” features a nationwide televised and armed manhunt for the contestant, who is staked to forty-eight hours’ worth of seed money and given a twelve-hour head start (744). Then government-paid hunters—led by Evan McConé, characterized as a “direct descendant of J. Edgar Hoover and Heinrich Himmler” (870)—track down the runner. If a runner happens to avoid his “Personal Waterloo” and survives for an entire month, he will receive one billion “New Dollars.” But, as the show’s producer, Dan Killian, tells Richards, “We’ve been on for six years. To date, we have had no survivors. To be brutally honest, we expect to have none” (744). Richards holds no illusions about his chances of receiving the grand prize, but he knows that his surviving family will be given one hundred dollars for every hour he stays alive and an additional hundred for every police officer he kills. Although he will surely die, Sheila will be able to buy medicine for Cathy.

King constructed his macabre game show by combining several types of programs on the air at the time that he wrote the novel. The network primetime schedule for ABC, NBC, and CBS during the 1970–1971 sea-
son had seventy-eight slots. Of those, about fifteen percent were occupied by police or spy shows such as "The Bold Ones," "Dan August," "Hawaii Five O," "Matt Lincoln," "Ironside," "Mannix," "Mission Impossible," and "Adam Twelve." In these shows, unlike in real life, the culprit is always detected, apprehended, and carted away. In addition, variety or comedy shows named for their hosts were ubiquitous: Ed Sullivan, Tim Conway, Glen Campbell, Red Skelton, and Flip Wilson all had their own shows. Although they were more commonly aired during the day than on primetime, game shows occupied two important slots: "Let's Make a Deal" and "The Newlywed Game" sat back-to-back in the 7:00–8:00 Saturday night slot on ABC, opposite "Mission: Impossible" and "The Andy Williams Show." The programs in this slot nicely represent the range of choices that a viewer of network primetime had, with selections from each of the big three categories. With its "personality" host Bobby Thompson introducing a constantly changing cast of guest stars/victims, "The Running Man" offers viewers a kind of variety show. It also provides the chase of a police drama and the randomness of the game show.

Chance and game shows have long fascinated King. Indeed, many of his most famous works, such as Cujo, feature people falling victim to fortune. Moreover, King wrote another early novel, The Long Walk (1966), in which 100 seventeen-year-old boys, chosen by lottery, walk until they drop on the New England section of Highway One. Taking place in a totalitarian America that saw a German invasion during the Second World War, the long walk brutally tests the endurance of its participants in front of crowds watching both along the route and at home on television. Ninety-nine of the boys are executed after they fall from fatigue or hunger. The survivor receives anything that he wants from the dark-sunglasses wearing "Major," the country’s military dictator. Written during and immediately after King’s student days during the Vietnam War, the novels display their author's fascination with game shows and probably also have their origins in the anxiety over the draft lottery of the 1960s and 1970s.

In Stephen King as Richard Bachman, Michael Collings, one of King’s earliest critics, discusses the author’s weekly column—"The Garbage Truck"—in the University of Maine student newspaper. King devoted one 1969 column to what Collings describes as an “openly, bitingly satirical” listing of game shows for viewers over thirty. Shows proposed included "The Brutality Game," "The Divorce Game," "The Wife Swapping Game"—and
even “The Burial Game” to be hosted by Vincent Price (92).

In *The Running Man*, King combines game shows, “personality” variety shows, and police procedurals with yet another type of program ubiquitous in the 1970s: network coverage of the Vietnam War. Although the year in which King wrote *The Running Man* opened with President Nixon announcing that “the end is in sight,” the war marched on in both the rice paddies of South East Asia and the family rooms of South Jersey. During that year, the US continued its illegal incursions into Laos and Cambodia, and Lieutenant William Calley was found guilty of murder in the My Lai Massacre. While the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* wrestled with the White House over the publication of the Pentagon Papers, First Division troops engaged in open mutiny. The year ended with the American body count at 45,000 and B-52s pounding North Vietnam.

The television networks had regaled the American public with six years of war violence that they choreographed as carefully as any booking officiated by Dano and McGarrett in “Hawaii Five O.” In *The Living Room War* (a compilation of *New Yorker* essays about television collected and published in book form in 1969), Michael Arlen describes the kind of coverage that the networks provided. The Vietnam War was very different from World War II in that the former was not a series of constantly forward-projecting battles culminating in the taking of a major city such as Paris or Berlin. Rather, it was a mélange of intense, brutal, and usually inconclusive engagements. The networks, catering to the expectations of the American viewing public and the posturing of the American government, tried to reenact the Allies’ race across Europe in 1944–1945. As Arlen says in “Television and the Press in Vietnam: or, Yes, I can hear you very well—Just what were you saying?”:

American journalism has practically surrendered itself to a consecutive, activist, piecemeal [kind of coverage]: “The next-day the First Army forged onward toward Aachen.” The journalists covering it know it to be a non-consecutive, non-activist war of silences and strange motions, where a bang on the table gets you nothing and an inadvertent blink causes things to happen in rooms you haven’t even looked into yet, where there is no Aachen, and “onward” is a word that doesn’t seem to
translate very well into the local language. The journalists reorder the actuality of Vietnam into these isolated hard-news incidents for the benefit of their editors. The editors say that that's what the public wants, and, to a great extent, the editors are right about that. The public does indeed want and need hard news, something concrete amid the chaos, something you can reach out to over the morning coffee and almost touch. (114)

The concreteness that Arlen refers to took the form of short film segments—of fire-fights, interviews with military talking heads, and footage of Phantoms and Skyraiders catapulting from, and caught in the nets on, the decks of the carriers Ticonderoga and Constellation. The public wanted the complexity of Vietnam and American involvement reduced and simplified. More important, it wanted action leading to closure.

King almost instinctively picks up on this need for simplicity, easily digestible coverage, and progressive action. Like a reporter in Vietnam, Richards is given a camera and forced to mail to the Network shots of himself every twenty-four hours. If he does not do so, his family will forfeit his pay. Heavily edited, these shots are broadcast nightly and sometimes during cutaways from regular programming.

Although incredibly violent and derivative of Vietnam War coverage, “The Running Man” is not really about war. Rather, it uses the techniques of war reporting and game shows in service of assuaging the nation’s fears about urban crime. The show allows middle-class viewers to forge an identity, one presuming and actually creating a working-class, dangerous Other. Simultaneously, the show destroys the symbols of poverty and crime in “this dark and broken time” (761). Thus, the show serves a dual function. In the terminology of Louis Althusser, it is both an Ideological State Apparatus and a Repressive State Apparatus. Examples of ISAs, which interpellate subjects by hailing them, are the school, the family, the church, and the communications industry. Examples of the RSA include the army and the police. “The Running Man,” with its studio audiences and hunters, is a hybrid incorporating elements of both the ISA and RSA. As Killian says, “The Running Man” is “one of the surest ways [the Network] has of getting rid of embryo troublemakers like yourself [Richards]” (744). Later in the novel, Killian says that two of the
functions of “The Running Man” are “pleasuring the masses and getting rid of
dangerous people” (905). Before his twelve-hour head start begins, Richards
is brought out before a studio audience. An overhead monitor displays a pho-
tograph of him: “It had been retouched, Richards thought, to make his eyes
deeper, his forehead a little lower, his cheeks more shadowed. His mouth had
been given a jeering, curled expression by some technic’s airbrush. All in all,
the Richards on the monitor was terrifying—the angel of death, brutal, not
very bright, but possessed of a certain primitive animal cunning. The uptown
apartment dweller’s boogeyman” (757). When Richards arrives on the stage,
emcee Bobby Thomson addresses both home and studio audiences: “Tonight
Skulking outside your home? Will you report him?” (759). The audience
screams its assent. Obviously Richards can’t be everywhere at once. But by
emphasizing “your,” Bobby Thompson makes ubiquitous and immediate the
threat that Richards seemingly poses. As Richards leaves the stage, the studio
audience boos him. In the wings, Killian says, “It wasn’t all show and audi-
ence packing out there, Richards. They hate your guts. Could you feel it?”
(761). Richards replies: “Yes, I felt it. I hate them, too” (761). In turn Killian
smiles and says, “That’s why they’re killing you” (761). Since its purpose is to
destroy Richards and the threat he represents, “The Running Man” functions
as an RSA, a fourth-estate hit squad. It also serves to hail both Richards as a
national enemy and viewers as potential crime victims and revenging allies of
the state. Thus, it functions as a hybrid RSA/ISA.

This hailing function of “The Running Man” becomes incredibly aggres-
sive after the hunt actually gets underway. On one occasion, when Rich-
ards torches the Boston YMCA on Huntington Avenue and roasts several
hunters in the process, Bobby Thompson presents coverage. With the screen
displaying Richards’ face, Thompson engages in a call-and-response with the
studio audience: “What will you do if you see him on your street?” The audi-
ence responds: “TURN HIM IN!” Thompson asks, “And what are we going
to do when we find him?” The audience replies: “KILL HIM!” (802). The
point of view shifts from the first question to the second. This shift invites
audience members to think of themselves (both conceptually and legally) as
deputized agents of the state.

If Thompson’s first question sounds familiar to television viewers of
the 1990s and the early twenty-first century, it should. It’s approximately the
same one posed weekly by John Walsh on “America’s Most Wanted.” And the Vietnam-style, three-minute, action-packed-clips—with police violence taken out of socio-political context—are very similar to the video segments used on “COPS.” In “The Court of Last Resort: Making Race, Crime and Nation on America’s Most Wanted,” Margaret Deroisa argues that the “conflation of law enforcement and entertainment is troubling for many reasons” (238). Chief among these are the “show’s implication that blacks and Hispanics are de facto criminals” and the construction of a “national climate of unwarranted fear and paranoia” (238). Ironically, this climate rose at precisely the time when real crime rates were falling.

In The Perpetual Prisoner Machine: How America Profits from Crime, Joel Dyer notes that in the 1980s, “when the media corporations decided to dramatically increase their use of violent, crime-oriented content as a means of increasing ratings or pickup rates and thereby enhancing profits, it created a by-product—an exaggerated apprehension of crime throughout the general population” (3). Writing in 2000, Dyer explains that since most people perceive their vulnerability to crime not through the viewing of actual criminal acts but by watching images presented by the media, “nearly 80 percent of the public now believes crime to be one of the biggest problems confronting America, despite the fact that most of us are safer now than we were in the 1970s” (3). Although crime rates have gone down, poverty rates, which dropped precipitously after the implementation of the Great Society Programs introduced by President Lyndon Johnson in 1964, climbed in the 1970s and 1980s and have remained fairly steady at between 9.3 and 11 percent for the last decade or so.

This focus on crime and lack of attention to poverty lead to what Dyer calls the “Mean World Syndrome” (109). As Arlen said in the 1960s, “What television mostly gives us is some other world we dream we live in. It tells us almost nothing about how life is and how we are (connected, as most of it is, inextricably and pragmatically to the sacred mainstream)” (178). The Running Man very accurately predicts that the dream world to be created by the media in the (as it turned out) not-at-all distant future would be one in which ever-present urban-bred criminals from the ghettos of the South Side, North Philadelphia, Watts, and Harlem lurk at every turn and need to be hunted down by the police with the willing help of the general public. As Deroisa says, shows like “America’s Most Wanted” make Americans think
that their nation is “under siege and infiltrated by dangerous criminals who are simultaneously both like and unlike us, the supposedly law abiding citizens watching at home” (244). This siege mentality is produced partly by the vigilantism of “America's Most Wanted,” “especially given the show’s extensive reliance on the second person and direct address. Rarely employed on contemporary television as consistently and forcefully as on ‘America's Most Wanted,’ Walsh frequently points his finger at the camera with a dead serious glance” (Deroisa 242). Reminiscent of Bobby Thompson’s call-and-response interaction with the audience of “The Running Man,” Walsh’s finger wagging usually involves a request to “you the viewer to call in and provide information that will bring this criminal/punk/scumbag/animal... to justice” (Deroisa 243). Thus, The Running Man foreshadows and critiques the conflation of entertainment with policing and eerily predicts the vigilante mentality of “America's Most Wanted.”

If Bobby Thompson is a televisual ancestor of John Walsh, then the short, heavily edited clips sent by Richards from the field and the “battle clips” filmed by the ‘newsies’ and turned into the segments for “The Running Man” predict the kind of footage shown on “COPS.” As Jessica M. Fishman, in “The Populace and the Police: Models of Social Control in Reality-Based Crime Television,” says: “COPS’ presents an action-packed world of adrenaline focusing on the intense moment of confrontation between the police and the suspects. ‘COPS’ relies on displays of bravado and violent force to create [its] drama” (282). One of the striking features of “COPS” is that just as “The Running Man” never has any survivors, “COPS” never shows scenes in which “the bad boys” ultimately evade their pursuers. Thus, the show presents a seemingly omnipotent police always getting its man or woman. As Fishman argues, “Positioned as an urban savior, the cop-hero emphasizes the subordination of the public’s power to authority figures, who, invested with the power of the state, are deemed responsible for maintaining law and order” (274). Thus, “COPS” provides a treatment of police officers very similar to King’s rendering of Chief Hunter Evan Mccone. King characterizes him as “the personification of the steel inside the Network’s cathode glove. A boogeyman. A name to frighten bad children with. If you don't stop playing with matches, Johnny, I'll let Evan Mccone out of your closet” (870). King's rendering of Mccone as a terrifyingly omnipotent agent of the state foreshadows the state omnipotence offered on “COPS.”
Ben Richards as the Prole Winston Smith: reshaping dystopian dialogue

If predicting and unpacking police reality shows of the 1990s were the only work performed by *The Running Man*, the novel would be important. But it does far more than these. A third task that King undertakes in *The Running Man* is the interrogation of the American middle class that participates, sometimes unwittingly, in creating urban slums where the proletariat dwells, the very condition occasioning the production of the show. This interrogation is performed by the use of the dystopian convention of presenting a dialogue between the rebellious protagonist and a member of the ruling elite. In this section, I’ll argue that the use of this convention (and the modifications of it that King makes) puts *The Running Man* in the company of dystopian novels. Viewing the novel as a dystopia restores to the work what Walter Benjamin in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” would call its “aura,” which has been neutralized by the culture industry. Such a restoration in turn de-emphasizes the work’s exchange value, distances it from readers, and allows it to perform its political work. In other words, viewing the work as a dystopia restores its use value.

In *The Running Man*, King employs the standard techniques and strategies of the dystopia—creating cognitive estrangement through the deployment of a novum, refusing to allow readers to experience a sense of closure and catharsis, and rendering dialogue that demystifies political/economic domination. *The Running Man* also represents a stepping away from the classic (and often anti-utopian) dystopia and a move toward what Tom Moylan in *Scraps of the Untainted Sky* calls a critical dystopia, “a textual mutation that self-reflexively takes on the present system and offers not only astute critiques of the order of things but also explorations of the oppositional spaces and possibilities from which the next round of political activism can derive imaginative sustenance and inspiration” (xv). *The Running Man* is a kind of “missing link” between the classic dystopias of Orwell, Huxley, and Zamyatin (that attack state-produced oppression) and the postmodern works of Octavia Butler and Kim Stanley Robinson (that direct their fire toward transnational capital).

Arising from the Socratic dialogues and “The Grand Inquisitor” scene in the *Brothers Karamozov*, the dystopian dialogue has been employed most famously in the twentieth century by Jack London (*The Iron Heel* [1907]), Yevgeny Zamyatin (*We* [1924]), Aldous Huxley (*Brave New World* [1932]),
George Orwell (Nineteen Eighty-Four [1948]), and Margaret Atwood (The Handmaid’s Tale [1987]). Of all of these novels, only London’s Iron Heel features a dialogue between a working-class protagonist (the autodidact labor leader Ernest Everhard) and a member of the ruling elite (the oligarch Wickham). Indeed, with the exceptions of Everhard, Alex in Clockwork Orange, and George Orr in Ursula Le Guin’s Lathe of Heaven, most dystopian protagonists are solidly middle class. One thinks of Orwell’s Winston Smith (an editor for the Times of London), Huxley’s Helmholtz Watson (an emotional engineer), Zamyatin’s D-503 (an aeronautical engineer), and Margaret Atwood’s Offred (a former librarian).

Ben Richards, though, is most certainly a Prole. I would argue that if—as has often been claimed—Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale is a feminist reworking of Nineteen Eighty-Four, The Running Man is a working-class rewriting of that text. In Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism (the book within the book in Nineteen Eighty-Four), Emmanuel Goldstein says that “proletarians, in practice, are not allowed to graduate into the party. The most gifted among them, who might possibly become nuclei of discontent are marked down by the Thought Police and eliminated” (186). When Killian tells Richards that part of the raison d’être for “The Running Man” is disposing of troublemakers, he essentially echoes Goldstein. The perhaps non-existent author of Theory and Practice also says that this policy could be overturned in case of necessity. And—as will be discussed below—by offering Richards a deal, Killian enacts the policy changes toward gifted proles allowed by Goldstein.

Although King does indeed have the de rigueur dialogue between Richards and Killian, it is through the use of a second dialogue that King truly inspects and interrogates the middle class. It is this dialogue—along with the concept of working-class solidarity—that is (to invert the words of Edmundson) the “something” that King’s readers can take back with them into the real world.

After Richards torches the Y, he makes contact with a variety of working-class characters (including children), who help to protect him. In doing so, he is following the advice of Killian, who tells him: “Stay close to your own people. . . . Not those good middle class folks out there; they hate your guts” (761). After one of his working-class allies dies in a high-speed chase in New England, a wounded Richards literally enters the realm of the bour-
geoisie by carjacking Amelia Williams, a representative of the class wanting to destroy him: “She was dressed for town, and wore blue wrap around sunglasses. Good looking from what he could see” (845). According to Richards’ description, she is one of “these beautiful chosen ones. They existed up where the air was rare” (849). Amelia is, of course, both terrified and incensed: “You’ve got some nerve, don’t you, you cowardly little murderer! Scaring me half out of my life, probably planning to kill me the way you killed those poor boys in Boston” (848). The poor boys to whom Amelia refers are Evan McConе’s Hunters, who exist only because the urban poor have no prospects for work and because the middle class needs to be entertained and assured that it is not in danger.

At the beginning of her dialogue with Richards, Amelia does not understand the structural social/economic conditions occasioning their meeting. Thoroughly conditioned by the media, she says: “You’re an enemy of the Network. . . . It says so on the Free-Vee. I saw some of those disgusting things you did” (848). She asks Richards, “Why don’t you find decent work? Because you’re too lazy! Your kind spit on the face of anything decent” (848). Richards responds by taking control of the dialogue and turning the tables on Amelia. He asks: “Are you decent?” (848). Answering in the affirmative, Amelia says, “Isn’t that why you picked on me? Because I was defenseless and decent? So you could use me, drag me down to your level and then laugh about it?” (848). Richards continues his interrogation: “If you’re so decent how come you have six thousand New Dollars to buy this fancy car while my little girl dies of the flu?” (848). Startled by his question and perhaps realizing that her view of him is erroneous, she opens her mouth only to close it again without saying anything. Then she simply cries out: “You lie” (849). Richards continues his indictment of Amelia’s class: “When this is over,” Richards says, “you can go back to your nice split-level duplex and light up a Doke and get stoned and love the way your new silverware sparkles in the highboy. No one fighting rats with broom handles in your neighborhood or shitting by the back stoop because the toilet doesn’t work. I met a little girl five years old with lung cancer. How’s that for disgusting? What do . . . .” (849). Totally unable to process Richards’ words, which implicate her in his plight, she can think of them only as obscenities. Thus, she screams at him: “Stop! You talk dirty!” (849). Later in this section, two police officers, aware that Amelia is in the car, open fire. She is stunned that she is now considered as expendable as
Richards: “I told them and they tried to kill us,’ she said wonderingly. “They tried to kill us” (852). After Richards shoots the police officers, he says, “They tried to kill me. You too. Drive fast” (853). Amelia, though, still can’t believe that she would be treated in the same way as Richards is: “She screamed at him: ‘THEY DID NOT TRY TO KILL ME!’” (853). King writes that “the mask of the well-to-do young hausfrau on her way back from the market now hung in tatters and shreds. Beneath it was something from the cave, something with twitching lips and rolling eyes” (853). Later, Amelia eventually becomes a willing ally of Richards. King uses this scene and its dialogue to question the innocence of the viewers who watch “The Running Man.” They are complicit in its creation and help to turn Richards and others like him into the very thing they dread.

In addition to employing and modifying the dystopian dialogue, King makes another dystopian innovation. The classic dystopias—Zamyatin’s, Huxley’s, Orwell’s, and even Atwood’s—locate the site of oppression in the state. It is the One State, the World State, Oceania, or Gilead that is the problem, the force against which resistance must be directed. Even in Atwood’s work—written right before the fall of the Berlin Wall—the dystopia is high modernist in nature. Apart from some SF works, such as Vonnegut’s Player Piano and Kornbluth’s The Space Merchants, it generally isn’t until the cyberpunks of the mid 1980s and, especially, the postmodernist SF writers of the 1990s such as Kim Stanley Robinson and Octavia Butler that corporations become the focus of dystopian writing. King, though, anticipates both the cyberpunks and the Pomo Clarionites through one of The Running Man’s subplots. During his run, Richards discovers that General Atomics has been polluting the air for over a generation. Such pollution is responsible for the lung cancer in the little girl about whom Richards tells Amelia. Nose filters are available for people in Amelia’s class but are cost-prohibitive for most residents of Harding and, presumably, the rest of the United States.

Thus, King works squarely in the dystopian tradition. In addition to borrowing language and settings from Orwell and Huxley, he employs the technique of offering a dialogue with a member of the ruling elite. By making his protagonist working-class, he performs a maneuver not seen in an American dystopia since Jack London’s The Iron Heel. And unlike the dialogue between Ernest Everhard and the oligarch Wickham in London’s work, the exchange between Richards and Amelia ends with the representative of
the elite converted to the proletarian cause. Finally, through interrogating corporate as well as state oppression, King anticipates structural and thematic innovations not made until at least a decade after *The Running Man* was originally written.

**Blood and guts in the sky: from Snowden to Richards**

In *The Running Man*, King also examines the concept of co-optation of working-class dissent. To perform this examination, King borrows heavily from Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22*.

In “The Life and Death of Richard Bachman: Stephen King’s Doppelganger,” Stephen P. Brown notes that *The Running Man* “builds without pause to a final chapter that must be among the most appalling scenes ever written” (127). In this scene, a fatally wounded Richards rejects an offer made by Killian to have him (Richards) replace Evan McConne as Chief Hunter as a reward for his cunning during the chase. After shooting McConne, the wounded Richards, his intestines trailing behind him, flies an airliner into the Games Commission Building, thereby permanently canceling both “The Running Man” and its producer.

Besides conceivably—and certainly inadvertently—serving to inspire Fundamentalist terrorists in 2001, this scene performs two very important pieces of work for the novel: it emphasizes Richards’ ultimate solidarity with the working class and his rejection of co-optation by the ruling elite. In addition, it emphasizes and concretizes the ghastly costs of such a rejection. Both the high-altitude deal making and the evisceration featuring so prominently in this section come from a source very different from Stephen King’s admittedly dark imagination alone. Rather, they are allusions to one of the most important pieces of anti-war satire of the twentieth century—Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22*. By unpacking these allusions, I’ll show that King was attempting to do more than simply sicken his audience (although he does manage to do that quite nicely).

In a 1986 interview with Maine high-school student Elaine Landa, “I am a Hick, and This Is where I Feel at Home,” King was asked what novels by other writers he wished he himself had written. He named these books: *Lord of the Flies*, *A Separate Peace*, *Catch-22*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and *Light in August* (252–253). The palimpsest of the works of Golding, Knowles, Steinbeck, and Faulkner is pretty clearly visible throughout King’s corpus: child
bullies, school scenes, dissolving families, and endangered women. *Catch-22* seems the joker in the hand that King dealt to Landa. King doesn’t do Heller. Or does he? In fact, the final fifth or so of *The Running Man* draws its themes of co-optation and bargain striking as much from *Catch-22* as from “The Gong Show” and “Let’s Make a Deal.” Heller’s haunting imagery of the primal scene of the gunner Snowden’s evisceration in *Catch-22* is incorporated practically wholesale into the novel.

In “Catching a Market: The Publishing History of *Catch-22*,” Jonathan Eller notes that by the time King was in college at the University of Maine (1966–1970), “Heller had become a chapbook writer for a new generation of college students in the tradition of Salinger and Golding” (515). Originally published by Simon and Schuster in 1961, *Catch-22* had sold over six million (Dell) paperback copies by the fall of Saigon in 1975 and had become a “campus classic” (Eller 516).

At the conclusion of *Catch-22*, the bombardier Yossarian, who has vowed to “stay alive forever or die trying,” is offered a way out of his combat duty. Having proven to be a thorn in everyone’s side and having tried in every possible way to avoid flying more missions (the number of which incessantly increases), Yossarian is offered a deal by his commanding officers: Colonels Korn and Cathcart. Korn says, “It took a bit of thinking, but we finally worked out this horrible little plan for sending you home without causing too much dissatisfaction among the friends you’ll leave behind.” Yossarian replies: “What kind of plan? I’m not sure I’m going to like it.” The plan is both simple and, as Korn says, “odious.” Yossarian must accept the deal “because it will send [him] home safe and sound in two weeks, and because [he does] not have a choice. It’s that or a court-martial” (Heller 414). When pressed by Yossarian about what he must do in return for being promoted, sent on War Bond Tours, and presented with “a whole new world of luxury,” Colonel Korn gives a terse answer: “Like us” (Heller 414). Yossarian is appalled. Although his part of the bargain seems simple, keeping it will force Yossarian to betray his core beliefs and values and thereby destroy the solidarity with his fellow airmen that his rebellion has earned him. He at first tells the colonels that “it’s a deal.” He later breaks his word and absconds to Sweden, where his friend, the pilot Orr, has gone after crash landing his B-25 in the Mediterranean and rowing his life raft through the Straits of Gibraltar, the English Channel, and the North Sea.
In *The Running Man*, Richards—with the willing help of Amelia—bluffs his way onto a jumbo jet at an Air Force base in Maine. He claims to have with him a kilo of “Black Irish.” And because he made sure that the media covered the final leg of his journey with Amelia, he was assured that the Hunters wouldn’t take the chance of accidentally detonating the explosive and killing the middle-class folks gathered to watch him.

Once Richards is aboard, with McConé and other Federal agents, Killian broadcasts a message: “You’ve been the greatest contestant we’ve ever had, Richards. Through a combination of luck and skill, you’ve been positively the greatest. Great enough for us to offer you a deal,” one as odious in terms of its solidarity-destroying impact as that which Korn offers Yossarian (899). The offer consists of asking Richards to replace McConé as chief hunter: “Here’s the deal, Richards. Fly your plane to Harding. There will be a Games limo waiting at the airport. An execution will be performed—a fake. Then you join our team” (900). When Richards professes his disbelief, Killian reassures him: “No, you’re the best runner we’ve ever had. And the best runner knows the best places to look. Open your eyes a little and you’ll see that ‘The Running Man’ is designed for something besides pleasuring the masses and getting rid of dangerous people. Richards, the Network is always in the market for fresh talent. We have to be” (905). Thus, Killian offers Richards the same type of deal that Korn offers Yossarian. And Richards’ two-fold response is identical. First he accepts, then with the knowledge that Cathy and Shelia have been murdered, explosively rejects the offer. Richards’ rejection of Killian’s deal is quite different from Yossarian’s rejection of Korn’s. Yossarian rejects the offer because he has seen a better way: running away. But Richards, who has been running for days, is simply tired. The death of his wife and child have closed the door to any meaningful future to him. He seeks only revenge against the system itself.

Through the exacting of this revenge, King re-enacts and transforms one of the most powerful episodes in twentieth-century literature. In *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell echoes Alfred Kazin in calling the wounding of Snowden one of the primal scenes of *Catch-22* (Fussell 34). This scene occurs very late in the novel, although its horror has been hinted at throughout. During a flak-infested bombing run over Avignon, Yossarian climbs out of the plane’s nosecone and administers first aid to Snowden, a young waist gunner. At first, Yossarian believes that he has Snowden’s wounds
under control, but:

Snowden kept shaking his head and pointed at last with just the barest movement of his chin down toward his armpit. Yossarian bent forward and saw a strangely colored stain seeping though the coveralls just above the armhole of Snowden’s flak suit. Yossarian felt his heart stop then pound so violently he found it difficult to breathe. Snowden was wounded inside his flak suit. Yossarian ripped open the snaps of Snowden’s flak suit and heard himself scream wildly as Snowden’s insides slithered down to the floor in a soggy pile and just kept dripping out. A chunk of flak more than three inches big had shot into his other side just underneath the arm and blasted all the way through drawing whole mottled quarts of Snowden along with it through the gigantic hole in his ribs it made as it blasted out. Yossarian screamed a second time and squeezed both hands over his eyes. His teeth were chattering in horror. He forced himself to look again. Here was God’s plenty all right, he thought bitterly as he stared—liver, lungs, kidney, ribs, stomach and bits of the stewed tomatoes Snowden had eaten that day for lunch. Yossarian hated stewed tomatoes and turned away dizzily and began to vomit, clutching his burning throat. The tail gunner woke up while Yossarian was vomiting, saw him, and fainted again. Yossarian was limp with exhaustion, pain and despair when he finished. He turned back weakly to Snowden, whose breath had grown softer and more rapid, and whose face had grown paler. He wondered how in the world to begin to save him. (429)

This scene is so powerful because it depicts the ultimate violation of the human body—the inversion of inside and outside. That which is supremely internal and private—one’s own insides, one’s own partially digested lunch—becomes all too external and public. The scene also suggests the ultimate futility of rational action in the face of overwhelming violence employed by a state func-
tioning as a killing machine. In the midst of a very dark, absurdist comedy, Heller gives what Bakhtin, in his discussion of the grotesque in *Rabelais and His World*, calls a “monstrous” image (306). Bakhtin argues that “the exaggeration of the inappropriate to incredible and monstrous dimensions is... the basic nature of the grotesque. Therefore, the grotesque is always satire” (306). The image of Snowden’s guts and his undigested lunch literally falling out of his body is so profound that it haunts Yossarian throughout the novel.

Although I take issue with Fussell’s assertion that the humor in *Catch-22* is “distracting vaudeville” (34), Fussell is right that this absolutely horrific scene lies at the heart of the novel. This horror ultimately fuels the rest of the satiric representation of the totalized bureaucracy. The wordplay, repetition, obfuscation, circularity, and redundancy of the novel are not exactly vaudeville. Rather, they form the curtain with which bureaucracy shields itself against the reality of Snowden and his stewed tomatoes. Readers are asked to consider implicitly just what kind of political system would allow its youngest and most vulnerable citizens to be made into such grotesqueries.

Thus, the scene in *The Running Man* that Brown finds horrific truly is so, but part of the reason for its horror is what it suggests about a system that destroys Ben Richards and his family. After ostensibly accepting the deal that Killian offers, he thinks better of it and kills the plane’s crew, including Mc Cone. Unfortunately for Richards, Mc Cone fires at the same time he does: “Richards sat down hard. He felt very tired. There was a large hole in his belly. He could see his intestines” (916). Up to this point, Richards has been cast as a kind of Yossarian, cynical and trying to survive against, first, an economic system that has reduced him to a menial worker, and then against an RSA/ISA that both enlarges and reduces him. He is star and criminal. But at this point, his status changes. He becomes not simply a Yossarian, a survivor, but also—and simultaneously—a Snowden, a victim.

Amelia plays the role of horrified witness. Like the bombardier in Heller’s work, Amelia “scream[s] endlessly, her hands pulling her cheeks down into a plastic witch-face” (916). While Amelia screams, “Richards [gets] up very slowly, holding his intestines in. It felt as if someone was lighting matches in his stomach. He went slowly up the aisle, bent over, one hand to his midriff, as if bowing. He picked up the parachute with one hand and dragged it behind him. A loop of gray sausage escaped his fingers, and he pushed it back in. It hurt to push it in. It vaguely felt as if he might be shitting himself”
(917). As with Yossarian, Amelia’s power of speech is reduced: “Guh, guh, guh, God. Oh dear God” (917). The grotesquerie continues: “He paused at the entrance to the galley and tried to gather his intestines. He knew that they didn’t like it on the Outside. They were getting all dirty. He wanted to weep for his poor, fragile intestines, who had asked for none of this. He couldn’t pack them back inside” (918). King magnifies Heller’s imagery by anthropomorphizing internal organs and emphasizing their innocence.

After putting the parachute on Amelia, Richards fires the explosive bolts on one of the plane’s hatches. Amelia is sucked out and presumably saves herself. Richards, though, pilots the plane into the Games Commission tower. The last scene of the book actually shows Killian working at his desk as Richards, giving the producer the finger, delivers his coup de grâce. For the young King and his working-class protagonist, co-optation was simply not an option.

Thus, King is doing something far more important than horrifying his audience in The Running Man. He offers a remarkable prediction and still trenchant critique of reality police shows. Retelling Nineteen Eighty-Four from the Prole perspective, he employs and modifies a convention of dystopian literature in the twentieth century. Through this modification, he interrogates the American class system in a fashion not seen since London’s The Iron Heel or possibly since one of King’s favorite books, Steinbeck’s The Grapes of Wrath. Finally, King plays successfully with one of the seminal scenes of American literature in order to offer a biting satire and to demonstrate quite vividly the high costs of class resistance. The book’s ending—while perhaps representing a failure of imagination in not offering a position between total destruction and complete assimilation—draws attention to the plight of the American urban underclass and the bourgeoisie’s anxiety about this class’s very existence.

Part II: The Neutralization of The Running Man by the Culture Industry

In this section of the essay, I’ll describe the way in which the culture industry has neutralized this novel, stripping away its edginess and economics and, ultimately, transforming it into the very thing it predicted and criticized. This neutralization took place in three stages over the course of about eighteen years. First, once the work (originally published under the pseudonym of
Richard Bachman in 1982), was discovered in 1985 actually to be a Stephen King book, it was transported to and fixed in a King constellation inhabited by possessed cars, evil hotels, and little girls who could set things on fire. Second, once it was locked into this best-seller orbit, the novel became a prime candidate for film adaptation. This adaptation, rather than responsibly or even reasonably looking to capture the essence of the novel, was a self-reflexive, self-indulgent, and ultimately conservative examination of violence and television, one which ripped away the relentless interrogation of material conditions offered by the novel and, unfortunately, shone the spotlight on two bodybuilders who ultimately became governors: Arnold “The Terminator” Schwarzenegger and Jesse “The Body” Ventura. Finally, in stage three, two very successful Gen-Xers, Matt Damon and Ben Affleck—who, like millions (including this writer) came of age surrounded by King movies—began, in 2001, to produce “The Runner”—a reality-television show that, in the fashion of Oceania’s completely bowdlerized classics, transformed The Running Man into something that contradicted what it used to be.

Cancer of the pseudonym: the life and death of Richard Bachman

Stephen King wrote The Running Man in 1971. The novel wasn’t published, however, until 1982. Along with Rage (1977), The Long Walk (1979), Roadwork (1981), and Thinner (1984), The Running Man was published by NAL under the pseudonym of Richard Bachman. According to King, in “Why I Was Bachman,” the Bachman identity was based on:

[a] fairly unpleasant fellow who was born in New York and spent about ten years in the merchant marine after four years in the Coast Guard. He ultimately settled in rural Central New Hampshire, where he wrote at night and tended to his medium-sized dairy farm during the day. The Bachmans had one child, a boy who died in an unfortunate accident at the age of six (he fell through a well cover and drowned). Three years ago a brain tumor was discovered near the base of Bachman’s brain; tricky surgery removed it. And he died suddenly in February of 1985 when the Bangor Daily News, my hometown paper, published
the story that I was Bachman. (vii)

King is quite candid about his use of the pseudonym: "I've been asked several times if I did it because I thought I was over-publishing the market as Stephen King. The answer is no. I didn't think I was over-publishing the market . . . but my publishers did" (ix). As Stephen P. Brown, the person who revealed Bachman's identity to the world, says, "There are very few writers in King's rarefied, ultra-bestseller category who write more than one a year . . . There are huge economic pressures at work. Publishers of ultra-bestseller writers live in fear that titles will be published too close together and interfere with each others' sales" (110-111). King wanted to bring out his early works, but such publication would have cannibalized the sales of his already published novels and, thus, not increase the sum total of King's income contribution to his publisher's list. Therefore, Elaine Koster, King'sNAL publisher, brought out the works under the name of Richard Bachman.

The Bachman cover was blown in 1985 when Brown, a bookstore worker in Washington, DC, read Thinner and thought he recognized Stephen King's voice. Brown went to the Library of Congress and discovered King's name on the novel's copyright form. Realizing the importance of his discovery, Brown immediately wrote an article for The Washington Post. The moment that, as, King says, Bachman died of "cancer of the pseudonym," all of the Bachman books became Stephen King novels. Sales skyrocketed. For example, Thinner, which had sold 28,000 copies as a Richard Bachman work, subsequently sold a quarter of a million under King's own name (King, "Why I Was Bachman" xi). Thus, the Bachman books became part of the King constellation, which includes Salem's Lot, The Dead Zone, Carrie, Cujo, and Firestarter.

Once the King brand was affixed to The Running Man, the chances of the book being dealt with in terms of its own merits dropped practically to nil. About the most sensitive reading offered of The Running Man comes from Tony Magistrale, who describes it as "techno-horror" (157). But the second term in Magistrale's hyphenated compound still connects the work with the horror genre. If The Running Man is indeed horror, it is so in the same way that Nineteen Eighty-Four, The Handmaid's Tale, and Brave New World are. But because of the King name attached to the novel, it became a prime candidate for adaptation into a film.
The Translation of The Running Man into film

In the 1970s and 1980s, King’s books had done, for the most part, quite well financially as movie adaptations. For example, Carrie (1976) grossed about $33 million, The Shining (1980) $44 million, Creepshow (1982) $19 million, The Dead Zone (1983) $20 million, and Cujo (1985) $21 million (although it barely made back its initial investment).

Directed by Paul Michael Glaser, the film adaptation of The Running Man differs greatly from the novel. In fact, about the only things that remain consistent between the movie and its adaptation or translation into film are the title, the name of the leading character, and a game-show theme. As Magistrale notes, King didn’t have anything to do with the adaptation (159). Gone are Richards’ family, the Midwestern and New England urban settings, the working-class dissent, and the disaster ending.

Some reasons why the book and film are so different revolve around the professional identities and careers of both the director and the screenwriter. Many of the best King-novel-based films were directed by major talents, who seemed to have the proper habitus to capture the flavor of the particular novels. For example, Stanley Kubrick directed The Shining, Brian De Palma made Carrie, and David Cronenberg directed The Dead Zone.

Unfortunately, The Running Man adaptation was not blessed with such directing and writing talent. Glaser is perhaps best known for playing Detective David Starsky on the 1970s police show “Starsky and Hutch.” Most of Glaser’s directing work before The Running Man was in television. Although he directed an unimportant drug-crime feature film called Band of the Hand, he seemed in the 1970s and 1980s more comfortable with the small screen. He directed several episodes of “Starsky and Hutch” in the 1970s and a few episodes of “Miami Vice” in the 1980s. In addition, he directed a made-for-television movie called Amazons, which depicted a band of Amazon warriors plotting the overthrow of the United States government. He can also claim the rather dubious fame of directing “The Village of the Motorpigs” episode of a very short-lived science-fiction show called Otherworld, which chronicled the misadventures of a family emerging from a tour of the Pyramids into an alternate universe.

The Running Man’s screen writer, Steven De Souza, had written episodes of—among other television shows—“Knight Rider,” “The Bionic Woman,” and “The Six Million Dollar Man.” One of his few feature film
credits before *The Running Man* was the wildly careening Eddie Murphy and Nick Nolte vehicle, *48 Hours*. After *The Running Man*, he went on to script the big explosions of Bruce Willis's enjoyable but politically innocuous *Die Hard* films of the 1990s.

Glaser and De Souza were both wrong and right for the movie adaptation of *The Running Man*. Inasmuch as both the film and the novel critique television and feature violence, Glaser and De Souza didn't face much of a challenge. They were at home with cops and strange worlds. The ghosts of Sonny Crockett and Steve Austin seemed to haunt their conception of the film. Glaser and De Souza simply gutted the book and filled the empty shell with what they knew: misunderstood but heroic cops and larger-than-life action heroes.

In the film, Ben Richards has been beamed from Harding and Boston to California. Played by Arnold Schwarzenegger, Richards is now a police officer without a family who is wrongfully accused of being the "Butcher of Bakersfield" and gunning down civilians during food riots. After escaping from prison and kidnapping Amber Mendez, he is sentenced to be executed on "The Running Man." The roles of Bobby Thompson and Dan Killian have been collapsed. In a bit of self-reflexivity, the composite character, Damon Killian, is played by Richard Dawson, the real-life host of the 1980s game show *Family Feud*. Although the core plots of the novel and the film are similar—a malcontent being hunted down on television—the entire nature of the movie hunt is different. To paraphrase King, Evan McConne and the Hunters were a combination of the SS and the FBI—ruthless, to be sure, but serious and frightening in the way that only plainclothes police officers or dark-sunglasses-wearing secret service agents can be. In the film, the Hunters have fled the stage and have been replaced by Stalkers, who are a combination of WWF wrestlers, hockey players, and executioners. Dressed in brightly colored spandex lycra and with names like Captain Freedom (played by Jesse Ventura), Dynamo, Fireball, and Subzero, the Stalkers are about as frightening as the Penguin's sidekicks on the 1960s ultra-campy Batman show. The location of the fight also changes. In the novel, which captures the flavor of Vietnam-era protests, discontent literally and figuratively runs through the streets and the slums. Contained, the televised conflict between the muscle-bound version of Richards and the Stalkers takes place in an enclosed area away from the general public. Glaser and De Souza give viewers a taste of the
late Cold War: proxy wars being fought in remote locations, the Caribbean and Central America, for example.

In the film, each Stalker employs his own particular and outlandish method of fighting. For example, Dynamo electrocutes people while Buzzsaw and Richards literally chainsaw it out together for the home audience. Although the violence in the movie is gruesome, it’s not very frightening. And it doesn’t have the book’s tinge of poverty-inspired desperation behind it. While there is a political element to this version of *The Running Man*, it’s actually pretty conservative. Just as the Reagan administration argued, big government—symbolized by Killian and the Network—is out of control. Television violence is a bad thing, too. Although some of Richards’ fellow runners are working to overthrow the Network, this Richards really isn’t into politics. Emerging alive and triumphant at the end of the movie, Richards simply kills the Stalkers.

Thus, we now have a very different “Running Man,” the plot and politics of which don’t take readers anywhere very interesting. Probably wanting to hang their hats on the hook created by King’s name, Glaser and De Sousa ignored dystopian conventions and intentions and created what Kamilla Elliott in *Rethinking the Film/Novel Debate* calls a “ventriloquist” adaptation (144). This kind of adaptation guts the content of the book and offers a “Running Man” that adheres to filmic conventions.

**Not merely different but actually contradictory: “The Runner”**

So far, we’ve seen three versions of *The Running Man*. First there was the edgy and decidedly dystopian work by an unknown author, Richard Bachman. Then it turned out that the novel was actually a Stephen King book. Although the book’s content didn’t change after Bachman’s “death,” the work’s genre most certainly did. *The Running Man* is clearly a work from dystopia. In *The Stephen King Story*, George Beahm relates that when *The Running Man* was first rejected by ACE, the no-doubt beleaguered editor told King that “anti-utopias” weren’t selling very well (57). King’s cheeky response was that “George Orwell and Jonathan Swift had done quite well with negative utopias” (qtd. in Beahm 57). One doesn’t have to understand every nuance of the writer’s thoughts to realize that King was writing something more akin to *Nineteen Eighty-Four* than to, say, *Dracula*. But the work became associated with the world’s bestselling horror author. As such, it became ripe for adapta-
tion into film. Paul Michael Glaser’s *The Running Man* was a glitzy vehicle in which a non-political Arnold Schwarzenegger drove to victory against Big Government. With the premiere of the 1987 film, *The Running Man* was now something quite different from what it used to be, but it wasn’t quite something contradictory.

Fourteen years later, in the summer of 2001, with primetime lineups (of the six major networks) featuring shows like “Survivor,” “America’s Most Wanted,” and “COPS,” ABC Television completed the neutralization of *The Running Man* by announcing auditions for a new reality television show, “The Runner.” To be produced by Matt Damon and Ben Affleck with help from Michael Davies, one of the creators of “Who Wants to be a Millionaire?,” “The Runner” was to feature a nationwide and televised manhunt of a contestant by Agents. Primetime ABC shows would have been interrupted for current developments of the hunt.

Had the runner evaded capture for an entire month, he or she would have received the grand prize, one million dollars. People chosen to participate on the show as runners would have been trained for their jobs—at the Runner Operations Center—by a former CIA agent, Brian Jenkins. Those playing the role of agents would have received mentoring, at the Agency, by an early twenty-first-century version of Evan McConé, the former NYPD officer Bo Dietel.

A “Reality Planet” advertisement related to Internet surfers the following message about the show: “Alone and on the run, one citizen—the Runner—must carry out a series of secret missions while trying to evade capture. Pursuing the Runner across the country are Agents, who have at their disposal not only the latest technology to track the Runner’s every move, but also the greatest resource on the planet—the American public.” Members of the home-viewing audience were to be encouraged to register on the Internet as online bounty-hunters and participate in bringing the Runner to what Dan Kilian called his or her “Personal Waterloo.” Had they been successful in treeing their quarry, these hometown agents would have shared the bounty to be received by the official operatives. The events of September 11, 2001 cancelled the premiere of the show, which was scheduled for January of 2002.

In a column for the online magazine *Boundless* in 2000, Ethan Campbell noted the strange similarity between *The Running Man* and the
then-soon-to-be-produced “The Runner” and argued, somewhat sardonically, that “the only substantial difference between King’s show and ABC’s is that the contestant will not be killed. Yet” (2). Campbell went on to wonder “how, for instance, can the network prevent fans from harming the fugitive physically, or the contestant from harming fans in his desperation to escape” (3). Although the show, which had announced casting calls in August 2001, never aired, if it had it would have changed the face of reality television as profoundly as “COPS,” “Survivor,” and “America’s Most Wanted.”

Although no information is available (probably for copyright reasons) about whether inspiration for “The Runner” was drawn directly from the The Running Man, the ABC show had so many similarities to King’s work (including, of course, the names) that I think that it’s safe to assume the former derives from the latter. The irony, of course, is that The Running Man is satire. “The Runner” was to be played straight.

**Conclusion: The Neutralization of The Running Man**

The journey of neutralization has been long and strange. Let’s summarize where we’ve been. With deep nods to Orwell, Huxley, and Joseph Heller, The Running Man was an edgy working-class dystopia produced by a struggling writer during the Vietnam Era. Eerily predicting and offering a critique of the kind of police reality-television shows that would mesmerize American audiences in the 1980s and 1990s, it was published in 1982 under a pseudonym. Then, in 1985, it became embedded in a constellation of works by the number-one-selling author of the twentieth century. The novel’s position in this constellation blinded general readers and many academic critics to the nature of the work itself. In “The Literary Equivalent of a Big Mac and Fries? Academics, Moralists, and the Stephen King Phenomenon,” Greg Smith examines why King’s work has been either ignored or lambasted by academic critics. He cites three reasons for such treatment: the commercial success of King’s work; the fact that he writes in the gothic-horror genre; and the atrociousness of the films that have been made from his novels and short stories. Citing a few sympathetic critics writing in the 1990s, Smith argues, “[A]s any close reader of King’s fiction will discover, Magistrale and Collings are correct in their assessments of his predominant social/political symbolic and thematic concerns, but by this point the stereotype of King as junk peddler had been fairly well cast” (335). Thus, it’s difficult to spot the dystopia amid
the detritus. Stephen King write something akin to *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or even *Catch-22*: Not a chance, most critics would say. King only writes horror that sells terrifyingly well.

Embedded in this new horror constellation, one dripping with gore and cash, the novel became ripe for adaptation into a major motion picture. In 1987, Glaser renovated the novel by gutting the novel’s working-class interior and filling it with two future governors, wrestle-mania kitsch, and a Reagan-era political subtext. Finally, in 2001, the Hollywood duo of Ben Affleck and Matt Damon began to turn *The Running Man* into the very thing that the novel predicted and criticized. In a final eerie twist, the action canceling “The Runner” before first hunt flew straight out of the novel: desperate terrorists crashing a jetliner into the World Trade Center.

In the “Society” section of *Aesthetic Theory*, Theodor W. Adorno argues that “works are usually critical in the era in which they appear; later they are neutralized, not least because of changed social relations. Neutralization is the social price of aesthetic autonomy. However, once artworks are entombed in the pantheon of cultural commodities, they themselves—their truth content—are also damaged. In an administered world, neutralization is universal” (229). The media’s treatment of *The Running Man* provides a perfect example of such neutralization, one so complete that within a generation of its creation the work became something not merely different but something which actually contradicted what it used to be.
Works Cited


