

Language, Race, and Body Rhetorics:

Relationships of Hegemony in Neill Blomkamp's *Elysium*



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INTRODUCTION

In “Arts of the Contact Zone,” Mary Louise Pratt introduces the concept of contact zones to refer to “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (33). In mainstream popular culture today, a number of directors are creating films that serve as contact zones for people of different cultural backgrounds; this is occurring frequently in the science fiction genre, which is increasingly producing films that provide socioeconomic commentary through a fictionalized reflection of real-world issues. One such film that uses rhetorical tools to serve as a textual contact zone and articulate its socioeconomic commentary is *Elysium*. Upon the film’s release in 2013, critics asserted that the director, Neill Blomkamp, generalized too much in characterizing both the places and characters within the film. Additionally, many negative reviews claimed that the heavy violence in the film overshadowed its potential for conveying adequate socioeconomic commentary. However, if one looks more closely, the rhetorical success of the film becomes increasingly clear.

In the following text, I argue that the sweeping generalizations that Blomkamp makes in his characterizations give heightened symbolic worth to the movie as a whole. Amid the heavy amount of violence throughout the film, Blomkamp uses our own preconceptions of socioeconomic issues, race, technology, culture, and language and turns them to his advantage as he delivers socioeconomic commentary. In particular, Blomkamp explores the multi-faceted idea of hegemony as it exists in contemporary society by using the film as an allegory for real-world issues. I would like to point out that there are many rhetorical strategies employed in Blomkamp’s film, and likewise there are many allegories and forms of commentary that Blomkamp constructs. I recognize that there is a plethora of themes and commentaries that

Blomkamp presents in his film; however, for the purposes of this analysis, I will limit my analysis to hegemonic constructions as manifested in real-world issues of class disparity, preconceptions about race and language, and body rhetorics.

In the sections that follow, I will begin by offering a plot summary of the film, followed by a discussion of the critical reviews that were published upon the film's release. I will then begin my analysis, arguing that Blomkamp utilizes a variety of relationships in order to explore constructions of hegemony that exist in the contemporary American psyche. My analysis will unfold across three subsections, each presenting a different hegemonic relationship that *Elysium* explores. The first of these subsections discusses real-world issues as presented in *Elysium*, including immigration and healthcare issues; the second includes an analysis of racial and linguistic stereotypes that perpetuate cultural hegemony; and the final subsection discusses the hegemony contained in manifestations of body rhetoric. Finally, after these analyses, I will present my conclusions.

Plot Summary: What It's All About

Released in August 2013, Neill Blomkamp's *Elysium* takes place in the year 2154, during which time humanity is split into two civilizations: one on Earth, and one on a space station called Elysium. The premise for the film is that Elysium is like a paradise, with beautiful landscapes, classy parties on the lawn, universal healthcare, large mansions, and a generally wealthy and privileged populace. By contrast, Earth is poverty-stricken, dirty, violent, overwrought with the sick and injured, and without sufficient healthcare. By dividing humanity between these two strikingly different communities, Blomkamp constructs a strong fictional hegemonic world that, in many ways, mirrors the real one in which we live. The general conflict within the film is that the people of Earth are desperate to get to Elysium in order to find the

healthcare and better living standards that they need; however, Elysium has strong defense measures in place that obliterate any immigrant ships that approach its borders. Each society consists of both drones and humans, but while Elysian drones are essentially public servants, Earthling drones are employed by the Elysian government to keep citizens of Earth harshly in check. The protagonist of the film, Max Da Costa (Matt Damon), works in a factory that manufactures these drones, and it is at work one morning that his story begins to unfold.

Max is a thief and a parolee, already on probation for previous crimes; at work one morning, we watch as he suffers a terrible accident, subsequently realizing that his only chance for survival is to go to Elysium to obtain the healthcare that will save his life. In order to achieve this, Max makes a deal with a man named Spider—who runs underground immigration operations for Earthlings desperate to reach Elysium—in order to obtain a ticket that will take him there. Max agrees to steal financial information for Spider; in return, Spider bolts Max to a cyborg exoskeleton that will help him to stay strong and alive until he can reach Elysium. As the plot unfolds, audiences follow Max's journey. In the end, he must choose between saving his own life and making the world better for everyone on Earth. He has the power to help them immigrate to Elysium, thereby providing them with the healthcare and improved living conditions that they desperately need—but if he does so, it will be at the risk of his own life.

Critical Reviews: Thoughts of Something Missing

Upon its release in August 2013, *Elysium* received an avalanche of negative reviews. Blomkamp was highly criticized as writers expressed their frustrations about the film as well as about Blomkamp's apparent incompetency as a director. Most of the negative reviews in question begin with the same idea: that *Elysium* did not live up to the hype. After the release of his independent sci-fi film *District 9* in 2009, Blomkamp gained significant popularity as a sci-fi

director. Audiences were largely pleased with *District 9* because, as Nick Recktenwald states in a review of *Elysium*, it “plunged into the intractable problems of racism and immigration, and [...] actually had something to say” (Recktenwald). As a result of the prestige Blomkamp gained after the release of *District 9*, the general expectation was that *Elysium* would be an undeniable crowd-pleaser in the same way, offering socioeconomic commentary wrapped up in the thrills of science fiction.

However, according to many, this expectation was not fulfilled. Many critics complained that *Elysium*, though beginning with themes of poverty, immigration, and class disparity, oversimplifies these issues and loses the commentary altogether in an onslaught of violent action scenes. Recktenwald was among the critics who outlined the insufficiencies of the film, titling his film review “‘Elysium’ Movie Review: Big on Action, Small On Brains.” He complains:

10 minutes is all it takes to realize that Blomkamp has no patience for the menace of class disparity, and instead prefers to deliver class warfare. The film’s [...] demographics are the first hint to *Elysium*’s cynical oversimplification of complicated social issues: the indifferent, wealthy residents of Elysium are almost all white and everyone on Earth is not, save for Matt Damon. I have no doubt that a similar imbalance truly exists in America and abroad, but *Elysium*’s stubborn, monochromatic lens treats any actual economic injustice with the sincerity of a Saturday morning cartoon. (Recktenwald)

This argument can be rather confusing, because while Recktenwald has “no doubt that a similar imbalance” exists in the real world, he seems to claim that this is no excuse for the way that *Elysium* reflects such an imbalance to set the stage for economic injustice throughout the film (Recktenwald). He goes on to discuss which other elements of the film are frustrating, and while the basis for his argument is not outrageous, the way that he manifests his argument is a bit overzealous.

Other critics express ideas similar to those of Recktenwald, though without the element of personal attack that Recktenwald admittedly employs. For example, in his review “Film

review: *Elysium* – Not quite the best of both worlds,” Laurence Phelan explains that the plot of *Elysium* “is at the same time too busy and too simple; there are too many characters but too little characterization [...] the action too quickly degenerates into one long breathless flurry of running and shooting and blowing things up” (Phelan). Phelan, then, presents the same frustrations as Recktenwald: that *Elysium* initially showed promise, but quickly smothered any potential of thematic depth by overwhelming action scenes. Critic Ben Kenigsberg, who published a review of the film on *RogerEbert.com*, expresses similar sentiments, admitting that “it’s a disappointment that the film ultimately doesn’t have much cogent to say” (Kenigsberg).

While it is true that *Elysium* is overflowing with violent action scenes, it does not necessarily follow that this takes away from the thematic elements of the film. Critics argue that there is not enough time to see the world that is Elysium, and that each character is not satisfactorily developed; however, there is a reason for this: Blomkamp sketches his characters with broader strokes in order to prove a point about the way that the human subconscious forms stereotypes about elements such as language and race. Furthermore, the minor glimpse that Blomkamp offers audiences into Elysium is also a rhetorical strategy, presenting Elysium as something foreign and unattainable, while strengthening audiences’ views of Earth as something familiar. The better we know Earth and the conditions found there, and the more ideal (and therefore, more distant and foreign) that Elysium seems, the more quickly we understand that Earth must be escaped and Elysium must be reached. The film is not meant to be realistic; it offers a parable—tells a story. When we become frustrated at the lack of realism, we are missing the messages that Blomkamp is trying to send.

All in all, Recktenwald and other critics do make a good point: film, and science fiction in particular, should tell audiences something about the world in which they live. However, it is

not necessarily true that action-packed films chase away potential for thematic depth and socioeconomic commentary. *Elysium* is undeniably jam-packed with violence, from beginning to end. At times, the amount of violence that is included is surprising and seems somewhat unnecessary. We may ask, then, why Blomkamp decided to situate the film this way in the first place: would it not have been more rhetorically successful had he scaled back on the violence? Amid all of the clamor that many negative reviews have created, if audiences stop and identify the rhetorical strategies that Blomkamp uses—the ways in which he subtly develops his characters while simultaneously providing relevant commentary—it would become more clear that Blomkamp is quietly doing exactly what audiences wanted from him in the first place. However, we only complain about the ubiquity of the violence—instead of asking questions about why it is there and how it functions—then the depth that is present cannot be revealed.

Of course, at this point, we must identify the questions that should be asked. To begin, one can look at reviewers' ideas that *Elysium* does not fully develop its characters: if the characters are not fully developed, why? Which parts of the characters are developed: which parts do we see? One significant aspect of this film is the way that it uses both racial and linguistic features to identify and situate its characters. While language and race both seem like very surface-level methods of identification, it is important to examine the implications that accompany such classification strategies.

In addition to these ideas, we must consider *Elysium*'s oversimplification of themes: class disparity, poverty, and immigration are among the themes that critics lament were not well developed as *Elysium* progressed—and yet, each critic nonetheless recognizes that these themes are present. So why would the themes be oversimplified? I argue that Blomkamp used this oversimplification strategically in order to grab the attention of audiences: if the other facets of

his rhetorical technique were lost amid the chaos, the implication that socioeconomic themes are significant in the film was not—and perhaps this is because he sketched these themes with large, recognizable strokes. If he had made it more subtle, more detailed and complex, would audiences have picked up on that in the middle of the action-packed drama? Likely not.

It is likely that the “oversimplifications” and “underdevelopments” in *Elysium* that plague critics so effectively are actually rhetorical strategies that are intended to do the exact opposite of what the critics claim. In the following analysis, I will discuss the different ways that Blomkamp employs rhetorical strategy by using visual rhetorics and drawing on audiences’ preconceptions about real-world issues, technology, the body, race, and language. I argue that weaving these ideas throughout the film enables Blomkamp to quietly—though significantly—increase the symbolic worth of *Elysium* as a whole, despite the ubiquitous violence contained in the film. He does this largely by presenting a number of hegemonic relationships in the film, and the oversimplifications and generalizations serve to show audiences how, often, our preconceptions and stereotypes serve to perpetuate these manifestations of hegemony in the real world.

ANALYSIS

The “Violence Issue”

Before diving into an analysis of hegemony as presented in Blomkamp’s *Elysium*, I believe it is important to address the biggest factor about the film that caused such critical upset: the issue of violence. After watching *Elysium*, no one can deny that the film is filled to the brim with violent—arguably, sometimes unnecessarily violent—scenes. Critics argue that such an overabundance of violence takes away from the film’s potential to provide adequate socioeconomic commentary; while it is understandable that the violence may distract audiences

from more pertinent political or socioeconomic themes, the violence is not a causeless element of the film—it, too, has something to say.

Recktenwald and other reviewers are correct in that the violence is overpowering in the film; however, they misunderstand the function of that violence. While violence in film is a notable way of increasing ticket sales at the box office, this is not its only purpose in *Elysium*: violence fuels the discourse of class disparity through its manifestation in race, language, and body rhetorics. It is important to note that the violence contained in *Elysium* is important in fueling this discourse and these methods of providing commentary, because violence is the way that characters of different ethnolinguistic backgrounds interact and grapple with one another in the film: it is not simply a part of the relationship between Earthlings and Elysians; rather, it is the entire relationship. Elysians and Earthlings do not come into contact in this film unless it is under the pretense of violence. Therefore, the next question we must ask is why.

Why would Blomkamp create two societies that only interact through violent means? He does this because he is telling a story not only of hegemony—he is also telling a story of revolution, and these two ideas are tightly intertwined. The entire film is based around the idea that we must fight in order to break apart hegemonic frameworks, and it is only through revolution that we will see the beginnings of change. Without this revolution—manifested in the film as physical violence—the system of stereotypes and cultural hierarchies will never be challenged. In the real world, traditional frameworks are not always challenged by violence, but this is the method that Blomkamp chooses to employ. By deciding to include violence as a means to revolution, Blomkamp provides audiences with a tangible, visual mechanism for how change is created: it is a struggle; it is hard; people get hurt; it is ongoing; it is ubiquitous. We cannot give up and go home; we must fight until we no longer have the means. This is not to say

that I believe the only means to revolutionary change is violence—I do not. However, I do believe that Blomkamp highlights a very real aspect of history and humanity in conveying the idea that, often, revolution is needed to create change—and revolution is not a passive act.

In *Elysium*, the theme of revolution is prominent from the very beginning; even the protagonist is a representation of it, in both his character and his identity as a parolee. As the film progresses, the plot follows Max's journey to revolt against the system—at first, for his own personal gain; increasingly, however, for the entire community from which he comes. In the end, he succeeds in rebooting the Elysian citizenship system and breaking down the barrier that separates Elysian citizens from non-Elysian citizens. Thus, while Max's (and by extension, Earth's) is not a completely successful revolution—Max does not change the constructions or the disillusionment in place—it is a step in the right direction, because it breaks down the proverbial wall that separates one community from the other. It is the first step toward challenging traditional frameworks of hegemony, and violence is a thematic means by which to achieve that jumpstart of revolution: fighting back, whether physical or otherwise, is necessary to challenge deep-set hegemonic constructions.

Therefore, violence in the film does not hinder relevant and meaningful commentary. It is significant that the only interaction between the oppressors and the oppressed, between the white Elysians and the Latino Earthlings, between the rich and the impoverished is through violence. Violence in *Elysium* is emblematic of the constant real-world struggle between nations, between social classes, between races, between people of different linguistic backgrounds, and between groups who generalize and stereotype who they perceive to be their “other.” In this way, Blomkamp does not err; while the film is blanketed in violence, this does not cover up the socioeconomic commentary: the violence, in fact, *is* the socioeconomic commentary.

Real-World Issues in *Elysium*

Healthcare. Amid the violence of revolution contained in *Elysium* are presentations of real-world issues that have long been topics of debate—particularly in the United States. These real-world issues upon which Blomkamp chooses to focus provide a socioeconomic angle from which to look at hegemony. By considering prominent socioeconomic issues such as healthcare and immigration, Blomkamp creates a strong foundation for hegemony between the Elysians and the Earthlings, highlighting the superior position of the former with respect to the latter—in this case, regarding access to better resources and overall quality of life. These resources and higher life quality come easily to the citizens of Elysium, but those on Earth are denied such luxuries simply based on where they come from and their ability to break or escape the cycle of poverty in their own society. Blomkamp is targeting American audiences in particular, because the issues that he chooses to include—and the dynamics of those issues—are very close to the American psyche: healthcare, immigration, class disparity, and poverty.

Healthcare is currently one of the biggest issues of debate in the United States, particularly with President Obama's introduction of the Affordable Care Act. Even long before this legislation, American citizens have asked questions about what universal healthcare should look like and how it should be implemented. Despite all the talk of reform, however, healthcare undeniably remains a significant issue for many Americans, because there is still a large number of people who simply cannot afford it. Indeed, that is where the line is drawn: between people who can afford and have access to healthcare and people who cannot and do not. Blomkamp addresses this issue throughout the entirety of *Elysium*; the most telling way that he does this is through the struggles of the protagonist, Max, who will die if he does not reach Elysium and obtain the healthcare that he needs to save his own life. The premise for healthcare in the film is

that the people on Earth have little access to it: the resources they have available to them are limited, and many who have terminal illnesses and other diseases or injuries are out of luck due to the fact that they cannot get the healthcare they need.



Figure 1: Elysians have easy access to medical pods, which quickly heal any ailment. Still shot from *Elysium*; Dir. Neill Blomkamp; TriStar Pictures, 2013; *ScreenRant*; Web; 15 April 2014.

As is to be expected, by contrast, the citizens of Elysium enjoy universal healthcare that is seemingly inexpensive and ridiculously accessible. Everywhere on Elysium—even in homes—one will find medical pods: all an Elysian citizen must do is get into a pod, scan their arm (in which is encoded their Elysian citizenship), and the pod scans their body for what needs to be mended (see fig. 1). This can be anything, it seems, from broken bones to cancer. Blomkamp contrasts this ease of medical treatment with the healthcare system on Earth, which is depicted when Max goes to the hospital to fix a broken wrist. The hospital is terribly overcrowded, and it is clear that the medical personnel are doing their best with what is available to them—though it is also clear that what is available is not very much to begin with.

Many of the Earthlings try to immigrate to Elysium illegally in order to get the healthcare that they need, but even if they do make it to Elysium, such healthcare is not even accessible to them because they lack the identification embedded in Elysians' forearms that indicates their citizenship to medical pod scanners. As such, even after they immigrate in the name of improved healthcare conditions, they are denied healthcare based on their lack of citizenship: the pods will not work for them, because they have no Elysian identification to scan. Thus, even if the metaphorical borders of hegemony can be crossed, the system can never be overcome: the community with which one identifies will always be readily evident, regardless of whether political borders can be overcome through revolutionary means.

Immigration. In addition to healthcare, the real-world issue with arguably the most weight as presented by Blomkamp is immigration. Like the healthcare issue, discourse surrounding immigration hits home strongly for many American audiences, and the way that it is represented in the film proves very similar to the current circumstances and attitudes surrounding immigration in the United States. The way that Blomkamp presents immigration is by using Elysium as a representation of present-day United States and by using the film's Earth as present-day Mexico. To begin with, he creates an overwhelming sense of class disparity between the two communities and flaunts various facets of Elysium that give the community there a higher quality of life (for example, as previously stated, accessibility to top-notch healthcare). Elysium acts as a loose representation of the American dream—the green lawns, the garden parties, the nice houses. Meanwhile, many of the people on Earth are willing to do anything it takes to get to Elysium and realize that dream—even in its simplest form, as adequate healthcare.

In his presentation of the immigration issue, Blomkamp is not only providing an abstract demonstration of hegemony; he is also providing a very physical representation of it. Elysium is

located up in space, where the citizens can literally look down on Earth and the people who live there. Meanwhile, the people of Earth look up at Elysium, as if it were a planet or a distant star—and it may as well be, for how difficult it is to immigrate there. Blomkamp could have presented two communities or societies who are literally on level ground, but he did not; instead, he chose to elevate the hegemonically dominant community to a physical position that would allow its members to look down upon those who are depicted as being inferior.

The most telling scene in the movie that relates to the immigration issue in contemporary America shows crowds pressing in from all sides, money in hand to buy tickets that guarantee them a seat on a ship that is bound for Elysium. However, all of these people are immigrating illegally—they are buying their one-way ticket from Spider, the underground smuggler. Elysium does not allow immigrants to cross its borders; therefore, purchasing a ticket does guarantee Earthlings a seat, but it does not necessarily guarantee them a better life in Elysium: they might not even make it there. Indeed, viewers watch as Earthlings board a ship that will be launched toward Elysium. In particular, the scene focuses on a mother and her daughter—who is injured—clamoring aboard the ship and holding each other close as they hold their breath for better circumstances. Everything culminates in a tragic scene wherein the figurehead of Elysium, played by Jodie Foster, orders the Earthling ships to be shot down before they reach Elysian borders. Many on the ships die, as with the push of a button they are blasted to smithereens before they even reach the Elysian atmosphere.

With the exception of blowing up anyone who tries to cross American borders, it is easy to draw parallels between Blomkamp's portrayal of illegal immigration and the attitudes towards illegal immigration and immigrants in the United States today. Border control is strict and sometimes ruthless, and even if immigrants do make it across American borders, they do not

have the access to healthcare and education that citizens do. Furthermore, the stigma against immigrants—even immigrants who are legal—is often negative, as many Americans view immigrants simply as people who unfairly infiltrate the job market and soak up resources that they should not be allowed to access, based on their “illegal” or even “foreign” status. Of course, this is not to say that all Americans hold this view of immigrants in the United States; however, it is important to note that the stigma against immigrants and immigration in contemporary American society is significant and loud, and Blomkamp is amplifying this in his portrayal of immigration in *Elysium*.

The rhetorical effect that Blomkamp achieves, however, is a crucial one: by developing the story from an Earthling point of view, Blomkamp aligns his audiences with the immigrants who are trying to reach Elysium. Therefore, he is aligning American audiences in the film with the representation of their real-world “other”: the illegal immigrant. Blomkamp’s rhetorical strategy, therefore, serves to offer a new viewpoint of immigration for American audiences by enabling them to sympathize with a group that, ordinarily, they might not align themselves with based on real-world stigmas and stereotypes. In turn, this allows them to enter into the idea of revolution from a new angle that is different from the one they might have experienced in their own lives.

Establishing Socioeconomic Hegemony. Clearly, the issues of healthcare and immigration are at play in this film; furthermore, there are also those of poverty, class disparity, government corruption, and political hegemony. As explained by Peter Ives in *Language & Hegemony in Gramsci*, “hegemony traditionally signifies some combination of authority, leadership and domination [...] two features, military predominance and cultural prestige, are evident in much of the term’s history” (63). Indeed, this is largely characteristic of the cultural

and political dichotomy established in *Elysium*, as Elysium is portrayed as the dominant society over Earth—both in regards to defense systems and military capabilities as well as cultural prestige, as is reflected in the use of French as a language of Elysian society. The dichotomy that is established between Earth and Elysium within the film is an extreme one (see fig. 2). On the one hand, Earth is a multitude of unfortunate circumstances. Visually, the poverty level is evident; there are children begging in the streets, and the atmosphere is reminiscent of a present-day third world society. In terms of healthcare, Earth is sorely lacking; while basic services are available, the hospital is overcrowded, and many are not receiving the treatment they require. The government and authority figures, in turn, are in the form of automated drones: this serves to dehumanize the community on Earth as one that can only be controlled by automatons instead of human beings, and further characterizes the government on Earth as one that is corrupt, doing nothing to intervene in the suffering of Earth's citizens.

By contrast, Elysium is everything that Earth is not. It is a civilization of the privileged, a community for the wealthy. There, no poverty level can even be perceived; visually, Elysium has

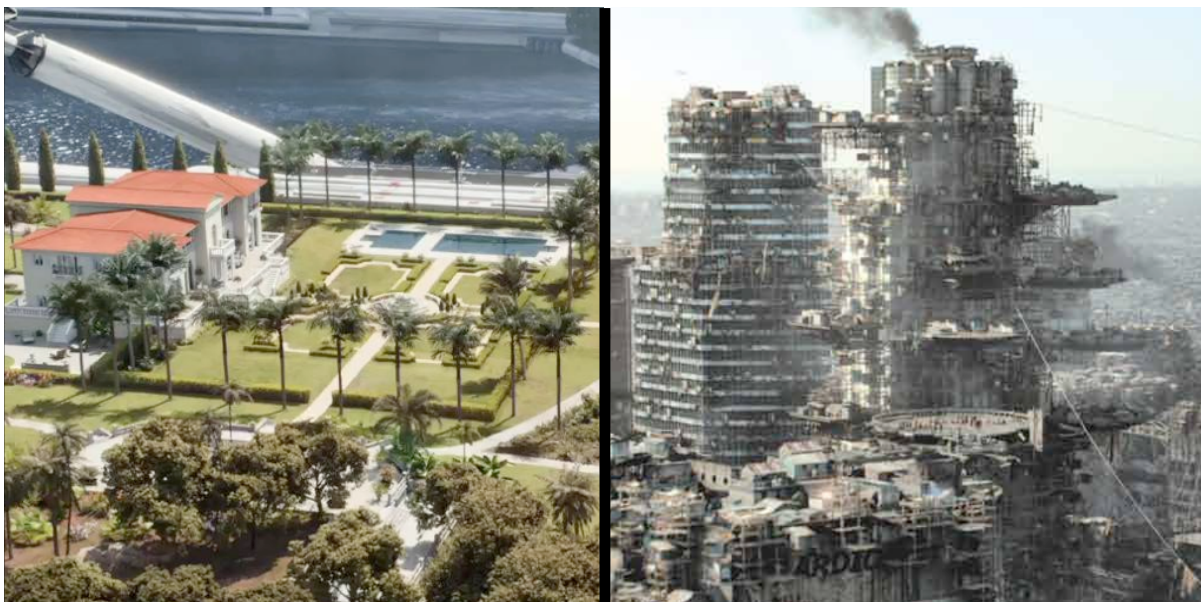


Figure 2: Elysium, left, is a society for the privileged; Earth, right, is a site of poverty. Left: Still shot from *Elysium*; Dir. Neill Blomkamp; TriStar Pictures, 2013; *Blip*; Web; 15 April 2014. Right: Still shot from *Elysium*; Dir. Neill Blomkamp; TriStar Pictures, 2013; *Filmoria*; Web; 15 April 2014.

quite the country club effect: it is adorned with vast, green lawns, aesthetically pleasing gardens, and nice, large houses. On Elysium, healthcare is easily accessible for all, and it is also extremely effective, with more advanced treatments than are available on Earth. Elysians are in want of nothing, it seems. In comparison to those on Earth, they are living the dream. The hegemony established between the two communities is further strengthened by the extreme difficulty of immigrating to Elysium. Citizenship is quite literally branded into Elysians, as a chip is inserted into their forearm, its display acting as the film's futuristic equivalent of legitimate citizenry. This, combined with Elysium's ruthless border control tactics, makes it almost impossible for the people of Earth to seek a better life there.

Taking these constructions at face value, from an American perspective, Elysium represents a futuristic America, while Earth is depicted as a future-form of Mexico. The socioeconomic constructs and the immigration regulation via strict—and, indeed, violent—border control methods help to characterize these representations as well as the hegemonic relationship between them. In this way, the film acts as a contact zone wherein American audiences can perceive and experience the issue of immigration in a new way, from the opposite perspective. With this in mind, we are better equipped to analyze how Blomkamp uses constructions of race/ethnicity and language to lead Americans to identify and sympathize with the fictional counterpart (those from the film's Earth) of their real-world “other”—namely, illegal immigrants.

In sum, Blomkamp depicts real-world issues in *Elysium*, including healthcare and immigration. These issues resonate particularly with American audiences, because healthcare and immigration have both long been topics for debate in the United States. Blomkamp not only provides commentary on real-world issues; he also uses the manifestation of these issues in

Elysium to create and demonstrate the striking socioeconomic disparity between the communities of Earth and Elysium in the movie. Thus, he uses relevant socioeconomic issues to establish a strong sense of hegemony in the film. Having discussed the ways that Blomkamp sets the socioeconomic stage in *Elysium*, we can now analyze the ways that he builds upon that relationship of hegemony by playing upon audiences' preconceptions of race and language.

Racial and Linguistic Stereotypes

The most obvious way that Blomkamp creates a visual divide between the people of Earth and the people of Elysium is through racial distinctions—and these distinctions, too, fall across a spectrum of hegemony. The citizens of Elysium are white with fair complexions; indeed, the ruthless antagonist of Elysium has blond hair and blue eyes (see fig. 3). Meanwhile, the people on earth are depicted as Latinos, with a darker skin tone and dark hair (see fig. 4).

This dichotomy contributes to the visual context and characterization of the film's Earth as real-world Mexico and Elysium as the real-world United States. What is significant is the fact that the protagonist, Max, is one of few citizens on Earth that are phenotypically white. This racial difference provides one means by which American audiences can align themselves with the protagonist who, though phenotypically white, is truly a representation of the community on Earth and not a member of the homogeneously white Elysium.



Figure 3: Jodie Foster plays an important Elysian authority figure in the film; as her character demonstrates, Blomkamp primarily depicts Elysians as white. Still shot from *Elysium*; Dir. Neill Blomkamp; Perf. Jodie Foster; TriStar Pictures, 2013; IMDb; Web; 15 April 2014.



Figure 4: While Elysians are fair-skinned, Earthlings are depicted largely as Latino. Still shot from *Elysium*; Dir. Neill Blomkamp; Perf. Diego Luna, Matt Damon, Wagner Moura; TriStar Pictures, 2013; IMDb; Web; 15 April 2014.

With visual constructions of identity in place, Blomkamp layers these identities with linguistic characterizations. In *Elysium*, Blomkamp makes use of three languages: Spanish, English, and French. Each of these languages serves a certain purpose in the film; Spanish is spoken on Earth, English is used as a lingua franca, and French is spoken on Elysium. Racial appearance accompanies these linguistic assignments rather predictably: the Spanish speakers are

predominantly Latino, the French speakers are white with fair complexions, and the English speakers are found among both of the aforementioned groups. Perhaps the only character who breaks the linguistic-racial paradigm is Max. While Max is a Spanish-speaking citizen of Earth, his whiteness manipulates the traditional paradigm. However, in order to understand just how Max breaks the mold of traditional ethnolinguistic stereotypes, one must first realize the dynamics of language attitude in contemporary American society and the ways in which these attitudes about language intersect and interact with attitudes about race, thereby reinforcing constructions of cultural hegemony in the American psyche.

English. Because a large number of American audiences speak English, and because—as such—this is the linguistic feature of the film with which they will most strongly identify, I will first discuss the implications of English and English speakers that are manifested throughout the film as a reflection of language attitudes in contemporary society. In *What Is Sociolinguistics?*, Gerard Van Herk discusses the idea that different communities decide which ethnic markers they think are most important, explaining that “speakers may be more familiar with one language or language variety, but the choices they make about how to use language let them position themselves with respect to other people, and let them build their (ethnic) identity. A single linguistic choice can mark you as a member of (or let you affiliate with) a particular community” (Herk 76). Indeed, Blomkamp uses Max’s language in the film to affiliate him with the population of the movie’s Earth and the Latino community of the real world. If one looks closely, one will even recall that his name, “Da Costa,” is Spanish. This is important, because audiences typically align themselves with the protagonist of a given text, and by affiliating Max with the Latino community, Blomkamp is offering audiences a way to experience the story

through the eyes of the Latino community—an “otherized” group in the real world with whom American audiences might not otherwise align themselves.

This raises a new question, however: What does “American” mean in this context? Does it mean “white”? Does it mean “English-speaking”? One could argue that if “American” means “white,” the individuals on Elysium could be aligned with Americans. On the other hand, one could also argue that if “American” means “English-speaking,” every character in the film should be called American. Ultimately, perhaps it is best to assert that it is the combination of Max’s racial and linguistic features that align him as “American.” This is not to say that every American is white and speaks English; however, this is where the dangerous territory of stereotypes comes into play: an English-speaking white male, Max embodies the stereotypes that may come to mind when one thinks of the traditional American man. However, while it is true that citizens of Elysium are white and English-speaking, their seemingly easy and flawless lives may make it difficult for real-world Americans to align themselves with such characters. Hard work and equality are two mentalities that Americans hold dear. Because these values are incongruous with the Elysian way of life—as demonstrated by the way that the Elysian government refuses to reach out to poverty-stricken Earth in the film—it is difficult for American audiences to align themselves with the Elysians (who represent the wealthy 1% of real-world American society).

If it is the combination of Max’s ethnicity and his linguistic positioning that makes him an easily relatable American character, it is important to analyze the relationship between English and “whiteness.” While in this particular context, Max’s ethnicity and language choice may identify him as “more American,” many real-world scholars assert that the globalization of English as a lingua franca has caused it to become detached from any sort of national or ethnic

identity. Working in tandem with this is the idea that “whiteness,” rather than being an identity in itself, is instead the lack of a specific ethnic identity. As Herk discusses in *What Is*

Sociolinguistics?:

Some recent work [...] has looked at how Whiteness is constructed as the absence of an ethnic identity, and how speakers of White varieties of English benefit from their unmarked nature—they are seen as “invisibly normal” (Hill 1998:539). Other varieties thus can be cast as marked, divergent, or even deliberately deviant. White varieties are associated with the standard and with education and power, as if such an association were natural, rather than the result of social, economic, and political forces that have often deliberately excluded speakers of ethnic varieties from access to that education and power. (79)

Therefore, English constructs not so much of an “American” identity as an identity with which many Americans more closely identify—what they most tend to align themselves with. In this sense, English and whiteness in *Elysium* are not necessarily American so much as these features are markers of the “norm”—as the opposite of the Spanish-speaking Latino community. Because of this, Max’s identity could be characterized less as “American” and more as “normal” based on the preconceptions of American audiences. He is not so much American as he is the “norm” that forms his identity against the Latino, Spanish-speaking “other.” The fact that American audiences easily identify with him exposes Americans’ tendencies to identify themselves not as “white” or “English-speaking,” but rather as people who are not Latino and not Spanish-speaking, when compared to their Spanish-speaking and Latino counterparts. Blomkamp uses Max’s phenotypic “whiteness” as a mechanism that enables many American audiences to easily identify with him. Subsequently, once this shared identity is established, Blomkamp uses Max’s Spanish-speaking as a segue for American audiences to connect through Max to the Latino community within the film (via the aforementioned construction of shared identity).

Operating off of this approach, it is important to note that the use of English by the Elysians cannot be ignored: Elysium in the film is depicted as a place of education and power,

and this sense of superiority is further heightened by the Elysians' use of French. Its characterization in the film positions Elysium as the political force that has “deliberately excluded speakers of ethnic varieties” (in this case, the people from Earth—those who speak Spanish) “from access to [...] education and power” (79). By denying Earthlings access to Elysium, where they would receive improved healthcare, education, and overall quality of life, the English-speaking Elysians are the embodiment of that hegemonic political and cultural force that is dominating and often excluding other ethnic and linguistic groups.

One can conclude, therefore, that the use of English throughout *Elysium* is multi-faceted. First, it is used as a tool to help audiences to align with the protagonist: if Max spoke only Spanish throughout the film, American audiences would likely identify less with him as a character and, by extension, with the problems of the people on Earth. In addition to its use as a rhetorical tool of audience alignment, English is also used as a double-edged method of communication between people of Earth and people of Elysium in the film. On one hand, it is employed as a neutral lingua franca that facilitates communication between the Spanish-speaking earthlings and the French-speaking Elysians. On the other hand, however, it is anything but neutral as it reminds us of the powerful hegemonic political and cultural position that English occupies in contemporary society. These dynamics present another question: is English a neutral communicative tool, or is it a means of cultural and linguistic imperialism (and, therefore hegemony)?

Spanish. While the dynamics of English in *Elysium* are clearly multi-faceted, it is this multi-faceted nature that makes the film so unique in its use of linguistic constructions. To add more depth to the way that English operates in the film, Blomkamp employs Spanish and French alongside it. In real-world contemporary American society, Spanish is viewed by many—

whether consciously or subconsciously—as a linguistic marker of the “other”: illegal immigrants who are coming into the United States, finding work, and bringing unwanted or feared cultural and linguistic variety with them. This is not to say that all Americans view Spanish speakers in this way, nor that all Americans have negative feelings towards Spanish-speaking or Latino immigrants to the United States. However, it is important to recognize the real-world hegemonic language attitudes that are at play in order to understand how the use of these languages in the film affects audiences.

If Spanish can be identified as an American marker of the “other,” it follows that the natural inclination of many American audiences when watching this film would be to negatively stereotype the Spanish-speaking characters. Indeed, through a number of visuals, Blomkamp plays upon a number of negative stereotypes that exist against Spanish-speaking/Latino communities: in the film, he paints earth as a poverty-stricken place, dirty, and controlled by outside forces—drones put in place by the leaders of Elysium. These negative stereotypes are challenged, however, by the identity of the protagonist. By aligning Max with the Spanish-speaking community, Blomkamp provides the “in” that American audiences need in order to align themselves with the stereotyped group of people that, in real-world circumstances, would be an identified “other” that would evoke, by contrast, a wary response.

This analysis in itself gives rise to an important question: why is Max’s Spanish-speaking seemingly more strange or noticeable than the English-speaking of the stereotypically Latino characters in the film? As Herk points out, “Notice that there isn’t really a [...] term for when speakers of marked ethnic varieties [...] adopt White-identified features. This demonstrates how unmarked that behavior is (in other words, people who speak non-Standard non-White varieties are *expected* to pick up the language of power, and so nobody comments on it, or names it)”

(Herk 80). If English is the identified linguistic “standard” in *Elysium*—indeed, it is utilized as a lingua franca between the two communities—it follows that it is also the language of hegemony and power. Because English is presented as the “norm,” it does not seem strange, nor is it highly noticeable, when Spanish-speaking individuals code-switch into English. By contrast, it is much more noticeable when Max code-switches into Spanish. Such reactions against and attitudes toward not only languages themselves, but the dynamics of code-switching between particular varieties, further lends evidence to the idea of linguistic hegemony and the ways in which it contributes to cultural hegemony in our subconscious.

French. One must not forget, however, that another language—French—is also at play in *Elysium*. In this film, the Spanish-French dichotomy uses the audience’s subconscious stereotypes of each language in order to culturally characterize—by means of linguistic constructions—each society. Stereotypes of French, along with its culture and its history, point to the language as one of intelligence and high culture. This is due in part to the history of its speakers—French philosophers, French artists, French political thinkers. For example, in his article entitled “On the Rhetoric and Precedents of Racism,” Victor Villanueva discusses racism in American academia and demonstrates how our preconceptions about racial background can limit multiculturalism in contemporary society. He challenges, “[I]magine the phrase ‘there is a Mexican philosopher’ and compare it to ‘there is a French philosopher.’ Which carries the greater weight?” (Villanueva 658). As Villanueva indicates, we hold certain preconceptions of the French culture that characterize it as one that is superior in intellect, art, and class. By contrast, stereotypes of Spanish, along with its culture and history, point to the language as one of lower society, of lesser intelligence.

In fact, in *Beneath the United States: A History of U.S. Policy Toward Latin America*, Lars Schoultz offers a comparison between attitudes towards France and attitudes towards Latin America—specifically, in this case, Peru. He states:

What exactly is the difference? To begin, Peru is in Latin America, the “other” America; France is in northwestern Europe, the cradle of the dominant North American culture. Peru is poor; France is rich. Peru is weak; France has nuclear weapons. Peru has Incan ruins...; France has ancient ruins too, but it also has the Louvre. Peru makes pisco; France makes claret. Peru is not so firmly democratic; France is. [...] In most of our history, Peru has not mattered much in international relations; France has mattered a lot...U.S. policy toward Peru is *fundamentally* unlike U.S. policy toward France. (xvi)

Of course, Schoultz is discussing the dichotomy between Peru and France, while we seek to analyze the dichotomy between Mexico and France. However, the two dichotomies are not significantly different. Now, replace the word “policy” in Schoultz’s discussion with the word “attitude.” Particularly due to negative constructions of illegal immigrants—and, by extension, of Latinos in general—in the United States, Americans may stereotype Spanish as a language tied to concepts such as criminalization, poverty, dirtiness, lesser intelligence, or “otherness”—very unlike the way that Americans will view the French or other European “elitist” societies.

As Ofelia Garcia and Leah Mason explain in *Language and Poverty*, “In the USA, Spanish is often characterized as the language of the conquered, the colonized and the immigrants; that is, as a *language of poverty*” (78). This is largely reflected in *Elysium*, where French is used to characterize the Elysians as more sophisticated and intelligent upper-class, and Spanish is used to mark the citizens of Earth as poverty-stricken and inferior to those on Elysium. The fact that Spanish and French are not used extensively throughout the film—as previously stated, Blomkamp utilizes English primarily—is part of what makes their subtlety so powerful. Blomkamp uses linguistic differences to mark each group of people as either higher or lower in the cultural hierarchy, drawing on audiences’ subconscious of what constitutes a more

intelligent, more sophisticated culture versus what makes a less intelligent, less sophisticated one. After using linguistic features to characterize each society, the constant use of such features becomes less significant; what is most important is that they are simply introduced and established for characterization purposes. From that point on, English not only provides a middle ground within which the two nations attempt to interact; it also ensures that the audience sympathizes with the citizens of Earth by not alienating them with an overuse of subtitles.

Linguistic Shifting. In addition to these dynamics of language throughout *Elysium*, there is further significance to be found in the decrease of Spanish-speaking as the film progresses. In the beginning of the film, Spanish is spoken much more widely in the context of the society on Earth; however, with the film's progression, Spanish is spoken less and less until, when the protagonist finds himself on Elysium at last, English seems to have completely replaced it. The significance of this shift can be explained by an analysis of language found in *Language and Poverty*, which points out the common idea that Spanish must “remain in the shackles of poverty—economic, social, moral and intellectual” (79). This idea is supported by an opinion expressed by Samuel P. Huntington, a professor of government at Harvard University, who is quoted in *Language and Poverty* as stating:

The persistent inflow of Hispanic immigrants threatens to divide the United States into two people, two cultures, and two languages. Unlike past immigrant groups, Mexicans and other Latinos have not assimilated into mainstream US culture, forming instead their own political and linguistic enclaves—from Los Angeles to Miami—and rejecting the Anglo-Protestant values that built the American dream. ...There is no *Americano* dream. There is only the American dream created by an Anglo-Protestant society. Mexican Americans will share in that dream and in that society only if they dream in English. (79)

These ideas present an interesting new facet to the Spanish-English relations demonstrated in *Elysium*. If popular thought characterizes Spanish as a marker of inferiority, a marker of those in the “shackles of poverty,” then one could argue that the shift to English in the film demonstrates

a symbolic breaking of those shackles. By the time the protagonist reaches Elysium, thereby breaking the chains that tied him to a poverty-stricken Earth, he is no longer code-switching between Spanish and English. His transition into using English homogeneously marks his transition from a place of poverty and oppression in attempts to claim improved circumstances and freedom.

However, taking Mr. Hunting's statement at its full value, one must also acknowledge the loaded nature of these assertions. If, in fact, "Mexican Americans will share in [the American] dream and in that society only if they dream in English," then it holds true that the switch into English is a necessary change in order for the hegemonic dichotomy to be even somewhat consolidated (79). In other words, for Max to make it into Elysium at all, the switch from Spanish into English is a necessary symbolic step in achieving that "dream." This is one limitation of Blomkamp's sketch, however—it does not quite fit with the rest of his commentary on revolution and overcoming cultural hegemony (as opposed to succumbing to it—i.e., Spanish speakers switching to English). Here, Blomkamp is not arguing that Spanish should be left behind, but he is acknowledging the sociolinguistic trend of code-switching as a means to integrate into a different society and the paradox of what that code-switching can mean. In the case of *Elysium*, linguistic code-switching is a mechanism for crossing a gap forged by hegemony; simultaneously, however, it perpetuates that same hegemonic construction by succumbing to a more dominant language.

Clearly, the linguistic rhetorical tools that Blomkamp employs are most effective for an audience that has an understanding of the dynamics surrounding immigration in the United States today. What makes *Elysium* unique is its attempt to "flip the script" on traditional frameworks that outline the immigration issue in the American psyche. While there are many

Americans that are quick to identify immigrants—and in an unfortunate amount of cases, Latinos in general—as the “other” of United States society and economy, *Elysium* rhetorically frames the people of Earth to look and speak like Latinos while simultaneously characterizing them in a way that will create a sympathetic audience rather than an alienated one. This is what makes the use of English as a lingua franca throughout the film so significant: too much Spanish spoken by the people of the movie’s Earth would result in a disconnected audience. Blomkamp, therefore, uses Spanish in order to characterize the people of Earth as the fictional equivalents of real-world immigrants to the U.S., while utilizing English to render the audience sympathetic to those fictional equivalents of the real-world “other.” Additionally, however, one cannot ignore the irony: while Americans are aligned with the Spanish-speaking community in the film, the use of English as the segue away from the “shackles of poverty” nevertheless perpetuates the idea that English, as an American identifier, is a necessary component to achieving the dream and being accepted by the hierarchically “superior” community.

New Alignment. Ultimately, by using a protagonist that breaks the traditional paradigmatic framework established in the film—particularly the racial dichotomy—Blomkamp gives his audience an accessible means by which they can enter into symbolic community with the citizens of Earth in *Elysium*. This is where the text finds its contact zone, because if the fictionally-constructed Earth is representative of Mexico, and Elysium is representative of the United States, then Blomkamp’s use of rhetorical tools that enable American audiences to identify with Max (and, by extension, with the society on Earth that is barred from Elysium) are ultimately placing American audiences within a discourse that aligns them with their real-world “other.” Cultural divides become muddled as American audiences are not aligned with the fictional representation of themselves (namely, Elysium); rather, they sympathize and identify

with the very fictional community that represents the real world construction against which many of them stand. Again, we are brought to themes of revolution in the film—try finding a scene heavy with violence without our protagonist present. Max represents these seeds of revolution, and he is literally the embodiment of challenges to traditional hegemonic frameworks as a result of his ethnolinguistic situating. Because of this, the violence truly does follow him wherever he goes: he leaves revolution in his wake as he journeys to Elysium and ultimately breaks down the walls that separate it from the Earthling community.

As James Clifford states in *The Predicament of Culture*, “‘Cultural’ difference is no longer a stable, exotic otherness; self-other relations are matters of power and rhetoric rather than of essence” (14). Indeed, this is exactly the sort of “cultural difference” obtained by Neill Blomkamp in *Elysium*. The cultural difference that Blomkamp presents is anything but stable; instead, it presents a paradox in which the self-other relations are muddled: the real-world “other”—namely, Latino immigrants to the United States—become the fiction-world “self” as audiences are aligned with the society on Earth instead of with the Elysians in Blomkamp’s film. By entering into this text, audiences can no longer remain at a comfortable distance from the carefully constructed “other” of the American psyche; rather, audiences become this “other” as matters of “power and rhetoric” overpower matters of essence (14). At their very essence within the context of immigration issues, Americans consider themselves to be just that: native-born Americans—that is what defines “self”. However, this film fragments that construction by entering into hegemonic discourse from the other side. The rhetoric used in the film strips the “American” essence of American viewers and puts those viewers in a position whereby they sympathize with and actually become the stigmatized real-world “other” that stands in contrast to their “essential” real-world identity.

In sum, Blomkamp uses constructions of both race and language to his advantage in *Elysium*. First, he sets the socioeconomic stage by mirroring real-world issues, such as healthcare and immigration, throughout the film; in doing this, he portrays the significant disparity between the Earthling and Elysian community, thereby establishing a strong sense of hegemony for his audience. As I have analyzed, he builds upon this by playing upon the racial and linguistic stereotypes of his audiences in order to “flip the script” specifically on American viewers. However, while we can use racial constructions as a jumping off point for Blomkamp’s employment of body rhetorics in *Elysium*, such constructions are not the only way that body rhetorics are used throughout the film. Blomkamp does use race as a form of body rhetoric in order to both reinforce and challenge ethnolinguistic stereotypes as well as to strengthen the allegory of U.S. – Mexico real-world relations; however, he uses this in tandem with other facets of body rhetoric—namely, tattoos and cyborg technology—that also strongly add to the symbolic worth of the film as a whole as well as the hegemonic discourse that it provides.

***Elysium* and Body Rhetorics**

Tattoos. Tattoos are a seemingly minor inclusion in Blomkamp’s characterization within *Elysium*; however, their rhetoric goes a long way based on audiences’ preconceptions of tattoos and what they signify. While tattoos are becoming more widely accepted in contemporary American culture, they also have cultural undertones of belonging to marginalized individuals of society. Additionally, in film as well as other media, tattoos also have a reputation for signifying the “bad guy” of a given story or situation. This is turned on its head somewhat in *Elysium* as Blomkamp characterizes the Earthlings—including the protagonist, Max—with tattoos, underscoring their “bad guy” status as the real-world “other” even though they are the heroes of the film.

Blomkamp also uses tattoos to reinforce the “rougher” culture and circumstances from which these characters come in comparison to the Elysians, and also to set them apart not only as members of a community separate from that of Elysium, but as marginalized members of their own society. As Mindy Fenske states in *Tattoos in American Visual Culture*, “Tattooed bodies [...] hyperbolize discourses of class and status” (39). Fenske goes on to explain that “bodies violating social norms [...] are interpreted as external manifestations of internal social deficiencies [and] more than simply demonstrating economic status, therefore, class norms signify one’s physical condition, psychological well-being, and intelligence” (39). What Fenske describes is precisely how tattoos function in *Elysium*: they are a visual and physical manifestation of “social deficiencies” and lower economic and social status (39). Blomkamp, therefore, perpetuates the relationship of hegemony in the film by separating Max and other Earthlings from their superior Elysian counterparts with this additional visual marker (see fig. 5).



Figure 5: As shown above, many of the major Earthling characters in *Elysium* sport tattoos. Still shots from *Elysium*; Dir. Neill Blomkamp; Perf. Jose Pablo Cantillo, Matt Damon; TriStar Pictures, 2013; IMDb; Web; 15 April 2014.

Additionally, Blomkamp emphasizes the marginalization of Max and other minor characters by marking them with tattoos: Max is a parolee who was recently released from

prison, and the men that he teams up with, also sporting tattoos, work for the underground smuggling business that sells one-way tickets to Elysium. One can see, then, that the tattoos as a part of Blomkamp's rhetorical strategy serve a number of purposes in characterization of the protagonist and the culture from whence he comes. Max and his cohorts are not only separated from Elysians, but they are visually separated even from other members of their own society; this provides a more multi-faceted view of hegemony, as it contrasts the Elysian culture with the Earthling one, and further distinguishes another subculture within Earthling society. Therefore, in their makeup and placement upon the body, tattoos do have the ability to signify belonging not only to communities or groups, but also to social class.

What is most interesting about the rhetorical effect of tattoos in *Elysium* is that they do not work alone: as with every other hegemonic relationship within the film, the tattoos do have a counterpart to which they can be compared in Elysian society. Where Max and his comrades sport tattoos, those on Elysium sport their citizenship—literally, as it is embedded into their forearm. Blomkamp does not stop at simply using tattoo stereotyping to help characterize the main actors from Earth; instead, he takes it one step further by creating a visual means by which the Elysians are also marked: their citizenship. Each community has its own mark of culture and of social standing, and where Max's is one of marginalization and stereotypically lower socioeconomic situating, the mark of the Elysians is one that expresses superiority, representing all the things that Earthlings will never have without the same branding.

Furthermore, the fact that each society has its own "marking" that identifies its members also shows the limitations of revolution: while frameworks and injustices may be broken down and overcome, stereotyping and community membership are constructions that are nearly impossible to erase. Even if the two societies were to integrate and everyone had access to the

same resources, individuals would still bear the markings that identify their origins and community affiliations. Political and economic hegemony may be conquered, but cultural hegemony will forever run wild.

Cyborg Technology. In addition to tattoos, cyborg technology is another major theme relating to body rhetorics that Blomkamp employs in *Elysium*. The use of cyborgs in the film is multi-faceted, because there are pure drones and there is also cyborg outfitting that is combined with an actual human: for the majority of the film, Max is bolted to a cyborg system that makes him stronger—somewhat superhuman. Therefore, the role of cyborg technology and robots in the film is complex.

Starting at the beginning, audiences see that drones in the film are used both on Earth as well as in Elysium; however, their purpose in each place varies. On Elysium, it seems that the drones are there to serve the humans—as guards, servants, public officials, etc. Meanwhile, on Earth, the drones fulfill similar roles, but with a very different tone. Where the purpose on Elysium is service, the purpose on Earth is control. It becomes clear that the drones on Earth that serve as police, guards, and public officials were placed there by the Elysian government to control the Earthlings and keep everything in check. For example, in the early scenes of the movie, we watch as a drone officer assaults Max on his way to work—a needless encounter in which the drone breaks Max's arm. Therefore, as we can see, the hegemonic positioning of the humans in the film is further accentuated by who they are in relation to the drones around them: do the drones exist to serve them (Elysians) or control them (Earthlings)?

As the film progresses, audiences discover that the purpose of the very factory in which Max works is to put together such drones. This is a circumstance rich with irony, because the same automatons that control the Earthling society are the ones that many Earthlings are paid to

assemble in factories for meager wages. Therefore, Earthlings are, in a sense, perpetuating their own oppression by helping to put together these robots that ultimately become their police force and their public officials that do nothing to actually help Earthling society. This is a clever rhetorical strategy that Blomkamp employs, because it provides commentary on the ways in which we, as humans, allow our own circumstances and our own attitudes towards constructions such as politics, the economy, race, and language to perpetuate the hegemonic relationships in which we are currently so cemented.

Moving forward, the cyborg theme of *Elysium* is rendered more complex when Max, in order to keep himself alive, is essentially fused to a piece of cyborg technology that is bolted into his head and down his spine, making him stronger so that he can both survive and fight until he can reach Elysium and obtain the healthcare he needs to save his life (see fig. 6). It is significant that Max's survival is dependent on the same technology that perpetuates oppression in his daily life. We can tie this back to the ideas of the American dream previously discussed, as it relates to the English language: ironically, one must take on the language of hegemony (i.e., English), in order to achieve the American dream—circumstances that bring one up out of poverty and less-than-ideal living conditions. In the same way, Max must don the very exoskeleton of his oppression—that of a cyborg—in order to reach the place that simultaneously holds the key to a better life as well as causes him to be inferior on the hegemonic scale.

The fact that Max must resort to this technology further perpetuates the idea of revolution throughout the film: he takes a mechanism that traditionally operates to oppress him and uses it to his advantage in order to overthrow that very same force of oppression (namely, Elysium and its hegemonic dominance). There is irony to be found in this, however: it is risky that Max fuses himself with this symbol of oppression in order to complete his mission. Blomkamp has created

a situation in which Max can only use a means of Elysian society in order to overthrow that society: in the end, Max uses their own technology against them. In true form, however—being fused to an object that traditionally perpetuates his own oppression—Max does not live to see the fruits of his efforts. That which has oppressed him his entire life does succeed in serving Max with the ultimate oppression: death. While he does become the means to the climax of revolution within the film, “rebooting” the current world order and challenging an unjust society, the hegemonic dominance of that society—represented in the cyborg technology that offers itself as a last resort to his revolutionary efforts—ultimately leads to his own destruction.



Figure 6: As the movie poster depicts, Max is fused to a cyborg exoskeleton in order to survive and reach Elysium. *Elysium* movie poster; Dir. Neill Blomkamp; Perf. Matt Damon; TriStar Pictures, 2013; *IMDb*; Web; 15 April 2014.

These ideas are significant because they provide one final bit of commentary on what it means to achieve revolution and create change within a given society. While Max did succeed in “rebooting” the system in Elysium, he did not live to ensure that the system was recreated as a completely new one, clean of injustice. Therefore, Blomkamp shows us that revolution is only the beginning of creating true change; after the seeds are planted and discourse is built, it is not enough to reboot an old system; we must actively also build a new one that seeks to overcome traditional frameworks and injustices.

As Ira Wells states in *American Icons: An Encyclopedia of the People, Places, and Things That Have Shaped Our Culture*, “Robots are our assembly-line workers, space and ocean explorers, household vacuum cleaners, and toy companion pets; they reflect us, and serve our needs and desires. It can also be said that we resemble them, for in our ever-increasing hours connected to electronic systems, whether of robots, computers, cellphones, or Internet, we are under cybernetic controls and leading ‘cyborg lives’; the cyborg is ‘an icon of contemporary labor’” (Wells 592). Indeed, Wells’ description of modern-day technology and the roles that it has in our daily lives is spot-on, and all of this is reflected in the use of cyborg technology in *Elysium*. While technology in the film does supply characters with everyday appliances, it also is heightened with the portrayal of cyborg technology both in the way of “pure” drones and in the way of Max’s hybrid human-cyborg state. He is the embodiment of what Wells describes, because Max does end up resembling the robots in the film as he goes on to live a “cyborg life.”

This discussion of embodied rhetorics exemplifies my argument that Blomkamp uses a number of techniques to perpetuate his commentary of hegemony and revolution throughout the entirety of *Elysium*. After he sets the socioeconomic stage with real-world issues (e.g., healthcare, immigration), and having shaped the identity of his characters (and the two societies

from which they come) using racial and linguistic constructions, he furthers this characterization by utilizing elements of body rhetoric—namely, tattoos and cyborg technology. The inclusion of tattoos may seem inconsequential, and cyborg technology may appear only to perpetuate the themes of violence within the film; however, it is important to note that even the most minor details such as these play a significant role in how audiences construct ideas about the text presented to them.

CONCLUSIONS

In his recent review of *Elysium*, Nick Recktenwald defines “good” science fiction as “a process of inquiry, of probing the social, political or cultural present to speculate how the future might look and feel” (1). He then goes on to explain in frustrated detail the reasons why *Elysium* does not meet these criteria. As noted above, Recktenwald is not alone in these assertions: indeed, after its release in August 2013, *Elysium* faced an avalanche of negative reviews. Many of these commentaries provide the same critiques of Blomkamp’s film, arguing that the action swallowed up the socioeconomic themes, the themes of class disparity and immigration were oversimplified, and that the predictable roles of the main characters—along with the generic overuse of warfare—rendered *Elysium* a general disappointment.

Amid these critical reviews, however, it is clear to see that relationships of culture, race, language, and even nations are intricately interwoven into the text in order to produce a commentary that is anything but oversimplified. While it is true that Blomkamp paints his characters and his communities with broad strokes, there is a reason for these generalizations: they provide a purposeful over-exaggeration of real-world issues and real-world constructions of hegemony that are perpetuated daily in American society. This is seen not only between America

and Mexico based on immigration issues; it is also seen within America regarding issues such as healthcare, as well as stereotyping of language, race, and elements of body rhetoric.

Blomkamp's use of a white protagonist in a predominantly Latino context is crucial in the alignment of "white" American audiences with the cause of the film's citizens of Earth as opposed to the homogeneously white citizens of Elysium. Furthermore, the stereotypes of and relationships between Spanish, English, and French within society's contemporary subconscious do not only play a major role in characterizing the characters in the film: they also characterize the hegemonic relationships between these characters in regards to power, poverty, and freedom, as well as who does or does not deserve access to or experience of these things. In response to many of the aforementioned film reviews, then, I assert that the socioeconomic and cultural commentary contained in *Elysium* does not decline halfway through the film; one must simply ask the right questions in order to recognize the rhetorical strategies at play.

I have discussed the ways in which Blomkamp utilizes various rhetorical tools to facilitate relevant commentary and symbolic worth in *Elysium*; further, I have analyzed his constructions of hegemonic relationships as they appear in political/economic, ethnolinguistic, and embodied rhetorics. Overarching and working in tandem with each of these relationships of hegemony is the theme of violence, which represents the power that revolution has in the real world to challenge these constructions of hegemony and create a way of breaking down these paradigmatic frameworks that are fueled by stereotypes and traditions of power.

It is important to note that Blomkamp points out a number of contradictions and complexities in the commentary that he provides, reminding us that there is no clean-cut or easy answer for the problems that we face both as Americans and as humans in today's world. However, Blomkamp does facilitate discourse that brings these problems center-stage,

challenging audiences to consider these themes and how they relate to significant issues in daily life. Perhaps the true source of frustration on the part of *Elysium*'s critics, then, is not Blomkamp's oversimplification of themes; perhaps it is instead his failure to provide an unsatisfactory solution to the fictional problems—mirroring real-world issues—that will justify cultural hegemony and racial hierarchies, thereby easing the collective conscience of American audiences.

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