

It rained fire : "The Running Man" from Bachman to Schwarzenegger

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Published version

MANN, Craig Ian (2017). It rained fire : "The Running Man" from Bachman to Schwarzenegger. *Science Fiction Film and Television*, 10 (2), 197-213.

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It rained fire: *The Running Man* from Bachman to Schwarzenegger

It all begins on a nice morning in May. Alienated from the world and recently expelled from his high school for a number of violent outbursts, a disenfranchised teenager takes a loaded gun to his algebra class.

Between the publication of that story in a short, angry novel appropriately titled *Rage* (1977) and the public outing of his pseudonym in 1985, Stephen King used the guise of ‘Richard Bachman’ – a name derived from a combination of Donald E. Westlake’s pen name Richard Stark and the Canadian rock band ‘Bachman-Turner Overdrive’ – to publish some of the most politically subversive works of his career. Before his ruse was discovered, King published five novels as his literary double: *Rage*, *The Long Walk* (1979), *Roadwork* (1981), *The Running Man* (1982) and *Thinner* (1984). Later, King famously fictionalised his dual identities in *The Dark Half* (1989) and has since published as Bachman only twice, reviving the pen name for *The Regulators* (1996), a thematic mirror for King’s *Desperation* (1996), and *Blaze* (2007), a previously unpublished novel originally written in 1970. In fact, with the exception of *Thinner* and *The Regulators*, all of King’s ‘Bachman books’ were written before or at around the same time as he finished his first two published novels: *Carrie* (1974) and *Salem’s Lot* (1975).

King has never been able to concretely articulate why he chose to publish those early manuscripts under a pseudonym. Before the author allowed *Rage* to go out of print due to its implication in the Heath High School shooting, the first four Bachman novels were reprinted together in *The Bachman Books* (1985). In King’s introduction to the first edition, titled ‘Why I Was Bachman’, he posits several potential reasons but concludes, ‘I don’t seem to have any very satisfactory answers’ (1). As Tony Magistrale suggests, one of King’s primary motivations was likely ‘curiosity to see if his fiction could fly without his brand-name help mixed with the disturbing appreciation that the name Stephen King was beginning to saturate the entertainment market’ (*America’s Storyteller* 12).

Of course, there was more to it than that. Many of the Bachman books significantly differ from work published under King’s own name in their genre, tone and themes. Firstly, King is primarily associated with horror; with the exception of *Thinner*, none of the books King published as Bachman before 1985 should be considered horror stories in any traditional generic sense. *Rage* and *Roadwork* are taut thrillers: tense tales about men who turn to violence in the face of overbearing authority and pointless bureaucracy. Meanwhile, *The Long Walk* and *The Running Man* are sf novels set in totalitarian Americas. *The Long Walk* takes place in an alternative present, where every year 100 teenage boys are forced to take part in a gruelling contest that demands they walk at four miles-an-hour across the east coast of America, day and night, until only one participant survives; those who fall behind are shot. Set in a dystopian future, *The Running Man*’s United States is one of economic turmoil, social injustice and class division, where the most popular form of entertainment is a television show that sees desperate contestants hunted on live television in return for a cash prize.

Importantly, all four novels also share protagonists who would rather die than surrender to forces of oppression. This is the most important way in which the first four Bachman novels differ from those King chose to publish as himself: their highly politicised, scathingly anti-establishment themes. These are desolate tales of men and boys pushed to the edge and willing to risk their lives and sanity to break away from

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3 conservative societies defined by corruption, inequality and brutal suppression. In
4 short, they are radically countercultural texts.

5 Of course, King has always been a political writer; *The Dead Zone* (1979) and
6 *Firestarter* (1980) are proof enough of this. Both are incendiary novels inspired by the
7 Watergate scandal, and either could easily have carried Bachman's name if not for the
8 slight glimmers of hope offered in their resolutions; a happy ending is nowhere to be
9 found in a novel authored by King's 'dark half'. The works King chose to publish
10 under the Bachman pseudonym are particularly pessimistic and impassioned political
11 satires permeated by a palpable sense of the author's distaste for modern America. As
12 Magistrale notes:
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15 The Bachman books thus represent a real distillation of the political
16 disenchantment noted throughout King's undergraduate years... more strident
17 in their tone, more pessimistic and dystopic than most of the work King was
18 publishing at the same time under his real name. It was as if the Richard
19 Bachman pseudonym gave King license to vent his darkest misgivings about
20 America and human nature in general.
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22 (‘*American Storyteller*’ 13).
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25 Considering the vast number of genre pictures connected to King, it might
26 seem puzzling that *The Running Man* (Glaser US 1987) and *Thinner* (Holland US
27 1996) are the only two films adapted from a book originally credited to Bachman.
28 However, given the tonally grim and politically radical nature of the Bachman books,
29 it is not a great surprise that of seven novels published under King's literary double,
30 five have never made it to the screen. *Thinner*'s adaptation is perhaps understandable;
31 of all the Bachman books, it most resembles the larger part of King's body of work.
32 John Sears notes that *Thinner*'s basic narrative is strikingly similar to *The Shrinking*
33 *Man* (1956) by sf stalwart Richard Matheson (85–6). But while it could reasonably be
34 considered a work of sf, *Thinner* is most easily categorised as a horror novel; it
35 concerns an obese lawyer who is cursed by gypsies to grow thinner and thinner until
36 he wastes away to nothing. *The Running Man*, however, is typical of Bachman's
37 angry dystopian fiction: a novel penned in 1971 under Richard Nixon's Republican
38 administration and published in 1982, shortly after the election of Ronald Reagan and
39 the rise of the New Right. Both at the time of its writing and its publication, then, *The*
40 *Running Man* – like *Rage*, *The Long Walk* and *Roadwork* – should be considered a
41 work of political protest.
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43 Paul Michael Glaser's adaptation would be released before Reagan left office,
44 but traditionally the cinematic version of *The Running Man* has not been remembered
45 as a radical satire. Instead, it has been lambasted as a vacuous, bombastic action
46 blockbuster, not least because it stars one of the decade's biggest action heroes:
47 Arnold Schwarzenegger. For example, M. Keith Booker describes the film as
48 'somewhat superficial' and suggests it is 'designed mostly as a pretext for
49 placing... Schwarzenegger in on-screen combat with as many outrageous bad guys as
50 possible' (353). Such views are not difficult to explain. Adapted from King's novel by
51 Steven E. de Souza, *The Running Man* entered into a market saturated by highly pro-
52 American, authoritarian action films for the Cold War era, including *Code of Silence*
53 (Davis US 1985), *Invasion U.S.A.* (Zito US 1985), *The Delta Force* (Golan US 1986)
54 and, of course, *Commando* (Lester US 1985), which shares both its writer and star
55 with *The Running Man*.
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3 This article will investigate the differing cultural, social and political contexts
4 in which *The Running Man* was written, published and adapted to screen in order
5 to investigate the thematic connections between a radically anti-capitalist sf novel and an
6 action blockbuster associated with staunchly right-wing ideologies and conservative
7 values. It will illustrate that despite many scholars' arguments to the contrary, and
8 several changes to King's original narrative, the socialist message and palpable anger
9 of the Bachman book survives in the film adaptation, rendering *The Running Man* one
10 of the few 1980s action films to question the genre's politics and criticise Reagan's
11 destructive economic policies.
12

14 **'You want to go downtown, maggot?': *The Running Man* and Richard Nixon**

16 *The Running Man* was originally written shortly after King finished the first draft of
17 *Carrie* (Collings 28). King finished the novel in a week or less ('*On Writing*' 69) and
18 it was, as the author states in his introduction to the second edition of *The Bachman*
19 *Books* (1996), 'a book written by a young man who was angry' (3). Opening in a
20 desolate suburb of the fictional city of Harding in the year 2025, it tells the story of
21 Ben Richards, an unemployed and thoroughly impoverished family man. At the
22 novel's beginning, his infant daughter, Cathy, is suffering from an unspecified
23 respiratory disease, while his wife, Sheila, tries desperately to care for her. They are
24 one family of many: in *The Running Man*'s future, American society is split into two
25 halves: the rich and prosperous, most of whom are employed by the Network – the
26 sole provider of television entertainment shown on the mandatory 'Free-Vee' in every
27 household – and everyone else: men, women and children confined to decaying,
28 crime-ridden slums awash with drugs and violence.
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31 The Network provides mind-numbing entertainment designed to distract
32 America's downtrodden citizens from the dreary nature of their everyday lives; it also
33 seemingly provides opportunities for escape from that existence by offering ordinary
34 people cash rewards for taking part in violent and exploitative game shows with titles
35 like 'Treadmill to Bucks' and 'Dig Your Grave'. Their most successful show, 'The
36 Running Man', promises \$100 for every hour a given contestant can survive on the
37 run from professional 'Hunters' and \$1 billion if they are still alive after 30 days,
38 while citizens are encouraged to report the whereabouts of Runners to the Network.
39 Not surprisingly, at the novel's beginning no one has lasted much longer than a week.
40 In a desperate attempt to forge a financially secure future for his family, Richards
41 auditions for the Network and is selected for 'The Running Man'. He proves to be one
42 of the show's most resourceful 'Runners', and is eventually offered a chance to
43 become a Hunter following his successful attempt to hijack a plane. But then Richards
44 is informed that his wife and child have been murdered and, in a final act of
45 revolutionary defiance, he flies his stolen aircraft into the Network Games Building:
46 'The explosion was tremendous, lighting up the night like the wrath of God, and it
47 rained fire twenty blocks away' ('*The Running Man*' 241).
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50 *The Running Man*, then, takes inspiration from multiple sources, both fiction
51 and non-fiction. Its most direct literary ancestors are clearly George Orwell's seminal
52 dystopian novel *Nineteen-Eighty Four* (1949) and Richard Connell's short story *The*
53 *Most Dangerous Game* (1924), in which a big-game hunter is himself hunted like an
54 animal by a bloodthirsty aristocrat on an isolated Caribbean island. Douglas W.
55 Texter suggests that there is also a link to be found between *The Running Man* and the
56 eventual development of what Kevin Glynn calls 'tabloid television' (2), typified by
57 such shows as *America's Most Wanted* (1988–) and *Cops* (1989–).
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3 In fact, despite King's manuscript having been written nearly 20 years before
4 *Cops* first aired, Texter somewhat puzzlingly suggests that one of the primary
5 qualities of the book can be found in its, 'predicting and unpacking police reality
6 shows of the 1990s' (53). He suggests that by having the Network manipulate footage
7 of Richards to create a bogeyman to be feared by the masses, King is essentially
8 predicting the kind of questionable profiling and creative editing that would later
9 come to define such shows (51–2). Texter does not consider, however, that there are
10 clear influences for these themes in the countercultural zeitgeist of the early 1970s.
11 King did not need to predict cultural developments 20 years in advance in order to see
12 violence, injustice and death on television.

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14 As Texter rightly notes, some of the most likely and immediate inspirations
15 for *The Running Man* were, on one hand, mind-numbing television game shows and,
16 on the other, visceral dispatches from the frontlines of the Vietnam War. During the
17 writing of *The Running Man* in 1971, American news networks were awash with
18 images of the conflict:
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21 Although the year in which King wrote *The Running Man* began with
22 President Nixon announcing that 'the end is in sight,' the war marched on in
23 both the rice paddies of South East Asia and the family rooms of South Jersey.
24 During that year, the US continued its illegal incursions into Laos and
25 Cambodia, and Lieutenant William Calley was found guilty of murder in the
26 My Lai massacre. While the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*
27 wrestled with the White House over the publication of the Pentagon Papers,
28 First Division troops engaged in open mutiny. The year ended with the
29 American body count at 45,000 and B-52s pounding North Vietnam.

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31 (Texter 48).
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33 Daniel C. Hallin asserts that Vietnam 'was in effect the first televised war',
34 during which, 'The media had extraordinary freedom to report... without direct
35 government control: it was the first war in which reporters were routinely accredited
36 to accompany military forces yet not subject to censorship' (6). As a result, graphic
37 combat footage and haunting images of men injured, maimed or dead were freely
38 available to view on television screens across the nation on daily news bulletins. It is
39 likely that King was not only inspired by the stark realities of war – beamed nightly
40 into American living rooms – but rightly disgusted by the fact that such horrifying
41 images had become increasingly stripped of their meaning and turned into a grotesque
42 form of family entertainment. To turn one man's slow death into a game show is
43 simply the next logical step.
44

45 Texter eventually concludes that *The Running Man* is 'not really about war'
46 (49), and he is correct: while news footage from Vietnam was clearly an influence on
47 the novel's dystopian imagery, the book is thematically more concerned with social
48 injustice and the brutal suppression of protest. Vietnam was not the sole provider of
49 the violent footage that saturated American television screens at the time of *The*
50 *Running Man*'s writing. Equally horrific images, of ordinary citizens suffering at the
51 hands of those sworn to protect them, could be found just as easily at home in
52 America under the administrations of Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard Nixon. In
53 February 1968, South Carolina Highway Patrol opened fire on protestors
54 demonstrating against racial segregation at a bowling alley in Orangeburg, South
55 Carolina; three men were shot dead and another 27 people were wounded in the
56 'Orangeburg massacre'. In August, thousands of anti-war demonstrators were
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3 assaulted by police armed with mace, tear gas and billy clubs during the ‘Chicago
4 police riot’, an event that was captured on live television and broadcast across the
5 nation. In May 1970, National Guardsmen fired on unarmed students protesting
6 against the Vietnam War at Kent State, killing four and injuring nine. Only 11 days
7 later, city and state police used lethal force against a group of black students at
8 Jackson State College. All of these events made national headlines. The events in
9 Kent and Jackson led Nixon to establish the President’s Commission on Campus
10 Unrest. The actions of National Guardsmen at Kent State were found to be unjustified
11 but no one was ever found guilty of a crime. These are just a few instances of police
12 brutality that contributed to the beginning of popular anti-authoritarian sentiments in
13 America (Rodriguez 510–11).
14

15 King’s 1971 manuscript, then, arises from one of the most turbulent times in
16 American history and is deeply ingrained in a troubling cultural moment: an era
17 defined by the counterculture’s struggle and saturated with televised images of
18 institutional violence. In this regard, *The Running Man* is strikingly similar to
19 *Punishment Park* (Watkins US 1971), a mockumentary set in an alternate America
20 where members of the counterculture are tried and convicted for their ‘crimes’ before
21 being hunted down and executed by law enforcement in an isolated desert compound.
22 It is unlikely that King saw *Punishment Park* before writing *The Running Man*;
23 following festival screenings, the film was widely lambasted as anti-American
24 propaganda and has never been formally distributed in the United States (MacDonald
25 360). However, the two texts arise from the same historical context and share obvious
26 narrative and thematic similarities, not least in their depiction of the police.
27

28 *The Running Man* reserves a large portion of its ire for the lawmen who are
29 gleeful to assist in finding, capturing and killing the Network’s Runners. Officers of
30 the law are routinely depicted as cold, uncaring and bloodthirsty; anyone who is not
31 of an appropriate social standing is labelled a ‘maggot’ and considered ripe for
32 beating with a ‘move-along’, a futuristic melee weapon presumably descended from
33 the old-fashioned billy club. For King, the police are nothing but well-trained thugs
34 and assassins acting on behalf of a corrupt establishment. Even those who are not able
35 to take part in the hunt take a vicarious thrill in watching it unfold. As one police
36 officer says to Richards the night before his ordeal begins:
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40 “It’s gonna be fun,” the cop said, “watching them go after you. I’m gonna be
41 glued to my Free-Vee with a beer in each hand.”

42 (‘*The Running Man*’ 43–4).
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44 Considering the cultural context of its writing, then, *The Running Man* is
45 inextricable from television reports of violence carried out by agents of the American
46 government against its own people. By extension, the novel also comments on the
47 civil rights movement and the racial tensions endemic in Nixon’s America. After
48 Richards’ 30 days have begun and shortly after he has killed five police officers by
49 setting fire to a YMCA hostel in Boston, he finds refuge with Bradley, the eldest son
50 of a black family living in the city’s slums. Despite the abject poverty his mother and
51 brother are forced to endure, Bradley eschews the chance to earn a thousand dollars
52 by turning Richards in to the Network because he identifies with the Runner’s plight;
53 he and his family are no strangers to police brutality. In a subtle reflection of violent
54 police responses to racial dissent, by the novel’s end it is heavily implied that Bradley
55 has been quietly murdered by the authorities for helping Richards – who is quickly
56 becoming a revolutionary figure by the narrative’s climax – to escape their clutches.
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The Running Man, then, depicts a dystopia inspired by the various instances of civil unrest and institutional violence that have come to define America under Nixon and Johnson. Its backdrop of economic turmoil was particularly inspired by Nixon's presidency. From 1970 onwards, the American economy was plagued by high levels of inflation and unemployment, or 'stagflation'; by August 1971, the situation had deteriorated to the point that Nixon's administration froze wages and introduced price controls in an attempt to reverse the damage. Considered in this context, King's novel does not only comment on the fiscal uncertainty of the early 1970s but articulates a fear of total financial collapse in the near future. In *The Running Man's* 2025, America is economically fractured: the rich live in luxury while the rest of society resides in poverty and squalor. There is nothing in between. Of course, by the time King came to publish *The Running Man* a decade after its writing, these themes would take on a horrifying new relevance.

'An American maze': *The Running Man* and Ronald Reagan

The Running Man was eventually published in May 1982, just over a year after Republican candidate Ronald Reagan became President of the United States following his election triumph over Jimmy Carter. As the paperback appeared on bookstore shelves all over America, readers would have been unlikely to guess it had been written as long ago as 1971. In the novel's opening pages, King describes the beginning of Richards' journey to the Network Games Building in Harding:

He walked fast, not looking around, not thinking. The air was sulphurous and thick. Four cycles robed past and someone threw a ragged hunk of asphalt paving. Richards ducked easily. Two pneumo buses passed him, buffeting him with air, but he did not flag them. The week's twenty-dollar unemployment allotment (oldbucks) had been spent. There was no money to buy a token. He supposed the roving packs could sense his poverty. He was not molested.

('The Running Man' 5).

Such images of abject poverty would have been quite familiar to many American citizens in 1982. The Carter years – largely due to events, such as the 1979 energy crisis, that were beyond the administration's control – had been dogged by the same stagflation that had troubled Nixon, and had partly contributed to Carter's failure to secure the White House for a second term: Reagan built his 1980 presidential election campaign on harsh criticisms of Carter's apparent failings and fought fiercely on a promise to reinvigorate the American economy. He announced his plans in February 1981: he would cut income and business taxes by 30% by 1984 and reduce gift, estate and capital gains tax; to cover shortfalls, he reduced government spending on programmes put in place to protect the vulnerable. As Schaller asserts, 'His spending plan would eliminate numerous welfare programmes, trim Social Security, and cut back on parts of the federal bureaucracy that regulated business, the environment, and public health' (42). Though Reagan enjoyed a great deal of working-class support, in reality his policies did little to help ordinary Americans. In the decade to 1990, the top one percent of American families enjoyed a 73.7% increase in total household income, while the bottom 90 percent saw an increase of only 5.9% (Mishel & Frankel 34). As Schaller suggests, in Reagan's America, 'the rich got richer and everyone else tread water' (76).

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3 Richards' motivations for taking part in 'The Running Man', then, take on a
4 powerful resonance at the time of the novel's publication, when welfare programmes
5 were either woefully underfunded or being systematically dismantled. Richards lives
6 in a high-rise, one of many that litter the landscape of his desolate suburb 'like the
7 grey turrets of a penitentiary' (*The Running Man* 1), with no access to healthcare for
8 his dying daughter and only a cripplingly low unemployment allowance paid in nearly
9 worthless 'Old Bucks'. Of course, only the rich have access to 'New Bucks', a
10 currency presumably introduced to kickstart a failed economy. Opportunities to make
11 money are scarce; Richards' wife routinely prostitutes herself in order to afford the
12 life-prolonging drugs their dying child needs. In this context, the twisted game shows
13 broadcast across the nation also take on a sick relevance: the very first show described
14 in the novel, 'Treadmill to Bucks', sees desperate men with life-threatening heart,
15 lung and liver defects attempt to live long enough to spend their meagre winnings,
16 while 'The Running Man' promises an enormous prize that represents one of the few
17 opportunities for social mobility available in the novel's harrowing future.

18
19 The Network Games Building is another grotesque satire of the ever-widening
20 gap between rich and poor. From the moment he arrives to audition, Richards is
21 gradually transported upwards from the squalid street level. He is taken via elevators
22 from one floor to the next, increasing his physical and figurative distance from the
23 poverty outside. On the first seven floors, he is subjected to rigorous testing; at every
24 stage in the process, several of his fellow aspirants are rejected and forcefully taken
25 back to the street and their desperate lives. On the eighth floor, Richards begins to
26 note the gradually improving conditions: 'The waiting room on the eighth floor was
27 very small, very plush, very intimate, very private' (*The Running Man* 34). It is here
28 that Richards learns that he has been selected to appear on the show with the biggest
29 potential prize. From there, he is taken to the ninth floor, which houses a lavish hotel
30 suite where he will spend his final nights before the hunt begins. Finally, he arrives on
31 the tenth, where King remarks, 'The fiction of upward mobility which started on the
32 grimy street-level ended here' (*The Running Man* 47). The 'fiction of upward
33 mobility' was, of course, exactly what Reagan offered: a promise that hard work
34 would pay off. But in the Network Games Building – an analogue for Reagan's
35 America – capital flows upwards. As King remarks as Richards arrives on the fourth
36 floor, 'they were like rats in a huge, upward-tending maze: an American maze' (*The
37 Running Man* 20).

38
39 While its headquarters are a grotesque satire of social mobility, the enormous
40 power and influence of the Network itself also takes on a new metaphorical meaning
41 under Reagan. In addition to benefiting the wealthy by introducing generous cuts to
42 income and business taxes, Reagan also granted unprecedented freedoms to big
43 business in the form of dramatic financial deregulation. As Schaller notes, Reagan had
44 long been a proponent of financial reform: 'Government oversight and hostility
45 toward the private sector, he believed, had stifled the creativity of American business'
46 (99). Once in office, Reagan began to relinquish the government's control over
47 enterprise; he privatised a number of formerly public services and accelerated the
48 regulatory relief that had initially begun under Carter's presidency.

49
50 King was clearly sceptical of corporate culture even in the early 1970s. His
51 Network is a cutthroat organisation utterly devoid of ethics; Damon Killian, a
52 dedicated executive, sees no moral dilemma in executing desperate people on live
53 television in order to keep viewers glued to the company's programming.
54 Furthermore, the Network is the sole representative of the state in the novel's world; it
55 seemingly controls the media, the police and the workforce. Written a decade before
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3 Reagan took office, *The Running Man* is a grave vision of an America in which an
4 incestuous relationship between business and government has progressed so far that
5 the two institutions have become indistinguishable. King could not have known that
6 such a development could be possible within a decade. *The Running Man* was written
7 as a countercultural novel under Nixon, but ultimately its themes proved more
8 relevant to the Reagan era. As Magistrale asserts, in the context of its publication,
9 King's novel is 'a highly politicized narrative of helplessness born of poverty and
10 social anomie' (*Hollywood's Stephen King* 158).

11 **'I'm not into politics': *The Running Man* and Arnold Schwarzenegger**

12
13 The cinematic adaptation of *The Running Man* has generally not been well-received
14 by scholars and is negatively compared to the novel as a matter of routine. While
15 Booker criticises the film's cartoon violence (354–5), Texter limits his discussion of
16 the adaptation to a diatribe on what he perceives to be a lack of skill exhibited by its
17 director Paul Michael Glaser and screenwriter Steven E. de Suza, concluding that the
18 film's 'plot and politics... don't take readers anywhere very interesting' (67).
19 Magistrale is kinder, though he suggests that the novel's subtext is eroded in the
20 film's ending, in which Richards (Arnold Schwarzenegger) brings down ICS, the
21 film's version of the Network: '*The Running Man* is thus a paean to the power of the
22 individual' (*Hollywood's Stephen King* 160). Mark Browning echoes Magistrale's
23 sentiments, suggesting that the film is guilty of 'shifting Ben Richards from everyman
24 to Superman' (168).

25
26 Such criticisms are somewhat understandable. *The Running Man* is a
27 dystopian sf film, but it is also an action picture penned by the screenwriter of
28 *Commando* and featuring one of the most famous action stars of all time. A prolific
29 school of thought asserts that action cinema of the 1980s is inextricably tied to
30 individualist rhetoric and Cold War propaganda. Susan Jeffords suggests that such
31 films support Reagan's foreign and domestic ideologies through 'muscular physiques,
32 violent actions, and individual determination' (21). She goes on to argue that while
33 Reagan was doing everything in his power to support free enterprise and encourage
34 social mobility, themes of individualism 'plagued the entire decade' (40). Certainly, it
35 would not be difficult to find support for Reagan's individualist rhetoric in
36 *Commando*, in which Schwarzenegger single-handedly takes on a South American
37 dictator. And, of course, such readings of *The Running Man* are also likely to be
38 informed by the knowledge that Schwarzenegger himself has always been an
39 outspoken Republican.

40
41 It is also true that *The Running Man* departs from its source text in a number
42 of ways. Set in a dilapidated Los Angeles between the years 2017 and 2019, the film
43 maintains the novel's dystopian setting for the most part. Rather than a televised
44 manhunt across the United States, though, 'The Running Man' is a game show based
45 on a lavish set. The hunt itself takes place in a desolate maze left behind by an
46 earthquake, where Runners are hunted by 'Stalkers': trained killers with catchy
47 names, gimmicky costumes and impractical weapons. Richards' family is entirely
48 excised; rather than taking part in a game of death by choice in the pursuit of financial
49 security, he is a police helicopter pilot who refuses to collude in the state-sanctioned
50 slaughter of rioters protesting food shortages. Richards' colleagues carry out the
51 attack and he is framed for the crime. Doctored footage appears to evidence Richards'
52 involvement, and his appearance on 'The Running Man' is intended to be an
53 execution. Eventually, the film comes to offer the kind of neat resolution that King's
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3 novel purposefully withholds: having slaughtered all of the network's champions,
4 Richards and an underground resistance movement defeat the establishment. Despite
5 Schwarzenegger's heroics, though, *The Running Man* – both through the power of its
6 source material and through several changes to the novel's narrative – maintains and
7 expands the countercultural themes of King's work.

8
9 The film begins with a scene that encapsulates exactly the kind of police
10 brutality that concurred with the writing of King's original manuscript, in which
11 police officers are ordered, in only a slight exaggeration of several high-profile
12 examples of historic institutional violence, to open fire on protestors from their
13 helicopter. Of course, this scene also had a more recent precedent; such instances of
14 lawmen grossly abusing their power had not been safely buried with the 1970s. In
15 May 1980, race riots broke out in Miami when four white officers were acquitted by
16 an all-white jury for the manslaughter of Arthur McDuffie, a black military veteran
17 who was beaten to death after he jumped a red light. 18 people died in the riots; over
18 300 were injured and 600 arrested. It is Richards' steadfast refusal to take part in this
19 kind of state-sanctioned violence that leads directly to his appearance on 'The
20 Running Man'. In refusing to open fire on innocent civilians, he is rejecting
21 America's history of brutally suppressing its most impoverished and vulnerable
22 citizens. His punishment is to become one of them.

23
24 It is following Richards' failure to carry out his orders that the film reveals the
25 social injustice and fiscal inequality prevalent in its world. After a year and half in a
26 labour camp, Richards escapes – aided by several members of a resistance movement
27 representative of a social underclass – and is taken to a Los Angeles slum, rife with
28 homelessness and destitution. Magistrale argues that 'King's novel, although set in a
29 futuristic America, actively approximates current living conditions for many inner-
30 city Americans' (*Hollywood's Stephen King* 158), and its cinematic adaptation
31 quickly establishes the same verisimilitude; the dark and dirty streets occupied by the
32 film's underclass are filled with ramshackle temporary housing and abandoned
33 vehicles. A giant television screen towers above the broken-down neighbourhood,
34 cruelly reminding America's unfortunates of a luxurious life that will forever remain
35 out of reach. Meanwhile, the ICS network is based in an opulent skyscraper equipped
36 with fountains and gardens. Within its first few minutes, then, *The Running Man* has
37 established its dystopia as a polarised world of extreme social division: a powerful
38 satire of Reagan's America. This subtext is later underlined by a clip from 'Climbing
39 for Dollars', a grotesque show in which a desperate man attempts to climb a rope,
40 cash clenched between his teeth, while Rottweilers wait below. Just as he might reach
41 the top, a blast of carbon dioxide casts him back to the baying dogs, the illusion of
42 social mobility shattered.

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44 The film does, admittedly, remove Richards' financial motivations for taking
45 part in 'The Running Man', but the nature of the film's version of the show is equally
46 as sinister and just as scathingly satirical. While *The Running Man*'s opening
47 prologue declares that an unseen state supposedly 'controls' television, the film itself
48 suggests that the network's relationship with the government extends to its function as
49 a form of privatised justice system. As Tim Shorrock suggests, 'American
50 corporations have rarely acquiesced to political dictates, either from the right or the
51 left. Instead, they grasp opportunities represented by government policy, and then
52 move as quickly as possible to maximise profits and minimise risk' (73). Here, the
53 government supplies 'criminals' (i.e. political opponents) to take part in 'The Running
54 Man' so that ICS, essentially a private contractor, can both carry out a death sentence
55 on the state's behalf and attract millions of viewers hungry for violence. As the film's
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3 version of Killian (Richard Dawson) declares, 'we give 'em what they want'. In an
4 anti-capitalist satire of the often incestuous relationship between government and
5 private business, then, ICS turns grotesque public executions into ratings and profit.

6 The network's motivations are therefore financial, but what of Richards'
7 motivations? There is no denying that *The Running Man* initially establishes
8 Schwarzenegger's character as an individualist hero. A man thrust into a situation in
9 which he must kill or be killed, he openly declares, 'I'm not into politics, I'm into
10 survival'. However, despite his apparently apolitical stance, Richards comes to act on
11 behalf of a socialist force by the film's climax. Richards knows his fellow Runners,
12 Laughlin (Yaphet Kotto) and Weiss (Marvin J. McIntyre), from his time in the labour
13 camp; they are members of the underground resistance, which has its headquarters
14 hidden in the labyrinth used for the filming of 'The Running Man'. As the game
15 continues, the revolutionaries hatch a plan to broadcast the unedited footage of the
16 government's attack on rioters. Their goal, of course, is not just to prove Richards'
17 innocence (though by this time he has become quite popular with the viewing public),
18 but to inspire a proletarian uprising. In an obvious evocation of the Watergate scandal,
19 they intend to reveal the corruption of America's ruling elite. So when Richards
20 spearheads an assault on the network – after both Laughlin and Weiss have laid down
21 their lives – it is important to note that he does not do so alone as many of the film's
22 critics suggest. It is Amber Mendez (Maria Conchita Alonso), a former ICS employee
23 turned rebel, who discovers the raw footage that exonerates Richards, and both she
24 and Weiss are responsible for hijacking the network's uplink facilities so that the
25 video can be shared with the nation. Furthermore, Richards orchestrates the final
26 attack on ICS in collaboration with the movement's leader, Mic (Mick Fleetwood).
27 Clearly, despite his claim that he is 'not into politics', Richards acts as one part of a
28 collective: a socialist resistance determined to topple the establishment and put an end
29 to inequality.

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33 Of course, it could be suggested that such a reading is undermined by the
34 casting of Schwarzenegger, who has come to be so inherently linked with the action
35 genre, individualism and political conservatism. Perhaps this can begin to explain
36 why *The Running Man* has been so consistently misread or dismissed. For example, in
37 an article principally concerned with Schwarzenegger's career, J. Hoberman
38 erroneously describes *The Running Man* as a film in which 'our Arnold mocks futile
39 dreamers of social reform and demands immediate action' (32), despite the fact that
40 Richards' actions ultimately result in social reform. It is equally telling that Browning
41 summarises his discussion by suggesting the film's heroic role is one 'for which only
42 former Mr Universes need apply' (168).

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44 One of the few scholars to entertain the idea that *The Running Man* could be
45 read as a countercultural film is Dave Saunders, who examines it in relation to Fred
46 Glass' notion of the 'New Bad Future' or 'NBF' (2), a capitalist dystopian setting that
47 Glass largely finds in another Schwarzenegger vehicle: *Total Recall* (Verhoeven US
48 1990). Saunders observes that 'The Reagan era's out-and-out exultation of greed had
49 plainly lost some of its allure' by the time of *The Running Man*'s release, and argues
50 that the film is 'a semi-articulate response to deregulation and the glorification of
51 monetary excess' (108). However, Schwarzenegger's presence clearly tempers
52 Saunders' reading. He suggests that *The Running Man* is principally concerned with
53 'exposing potential rather than long-conspicuous flaws' (102) in the capitalist system,
54 and aligns the NBF with individualist rhetoric by arguing that it constitutes a warning
55 that if 'corporate-centred Reaganite ethos were to extend too far beyond the limits of a
56 broadly liberal consensus and become the basis of a police state, an ironically anti-
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3 libertarian America...might be the eventual result' (101). Ultimately, Saunders argues
4 that *The Running Man* is just one of many NBF narratives in which 'hard-body, white
5 male figures such as Arnold assume mantles of symbolic, patriarchal power because
6 they are men...of deeds, of *action*, who are capable of pushing physically for a
7 difficult, but, they suggest, achievable balance of free-market economics and pan-
8 societal empathy' (107).
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10 So, it is clear that Schwarzenegger's star persona and political associations
11 have both influenced scholarly responses to *The Running Man* and stifled any earnest
12 discussion of its subversive themes. After all, in *Commando*, *Raw Deal* (Irvin US
13 1986) and *Predator* (McTiernan US 1987), Schwarzenegger acts as a one-man army
14 in his respective battles against foreign aggression, organised crime and a determined
15 extraterrestrial threat. Furthermore, Tri-Star Pictures worked hard to capture the star's
16 individualist persona in *The Running Man*'s marketing material. The film's US
17 theatrical poster carries a tagline that alludes to a rigged game of death before
18 declaring: 'But... Schwarzenegger has yet to play.' However, the film's narrative
19 communicates something very different. While *The Running Man* periodically finds
20 space for Schwarzenegger's masculine posturing and trademark one-liners during his
21 battles with luridly named opponents such as 'Buzzsaw' and 'Fireball', it ultimately
22 comes to deconstruct his persona with aplomb. The film illustrates that Richards is
23 able to defeat the network's Stalkers in one-on-one combat only to reveal that he is
24 incapable of bringing down ICS itself. Eventually, he finds that only by joining forces
25 with the revolutionaries will he be able to survive 'The Running Man' and help to
26 install a better future. In short, he discovers that politics and survival are inextricably
27 intertwined.
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29 In fact, the film actively satirises the individualist rhetoric often associated
30 with both Reagan and Schwarzenegger. It achieves this through the ICS network's
31 veteran Stalker, the ultra-patriotic 'Captain Freedom' (Jesse Ventura). In King's
32 novel, the Network's most trusted Hunter, Evan McCone, is introduced as having the
33 appearance of 'A direct descendent of J. Edgar Hoover and Heinrich Himmler' (*The
34 Running Man*' 181). Freedom, on the other hand, is a muscle-bound powerhouse.
35 Retired from 'The Running Man' but now the star of the lurid fitness show 'Captain
36 Freedom's Workout', he promises a perfect body in exchange for 'pain' and
37 'suffering'. As such, Freedom actually becomes a satire of the muscular action heroes
38 often considered to endorse Reagan's politics: the 'indefatigable, muscular and
39 invincible masculine body' that Jeffords argues 'became the linchpin of the Reagan
40 imagery' (25). It is no surprise that when Freedom is brought out of retirement to kill
41 Richards, he wants to do so draped in the American flag and with nothing but his bare
42 hands. In fact, when ICS decides to fabricate footage designed to make viewers
43 believe Freedom has slain Richards and his comrades, the Stalker reveals his true
44 nature when he murders the actors playing his victims for his own enjoyment. Thus
45 Freedom becomes a metaphor for the dark side of both Reagan's individualism and
46 Schwarzenegger's persona: while he seemingly stands for the ideals of patriotism,
47 strength and honour, corruption and violence lie beneath.
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49 In truth, *The Running Man* actually has less in common with the
50 Schwarzenegger movies that preceded it than it does with its immediate contemporary
51 *RoboCop* (Verhoeven US 1987), another film that mixes dystopian sf with action
52 tropes. *RoboCop* is set in a crumbling future Detroit, where law enforcement is
53 privately managed by a sinister corporation named Omni Consumer Products. OCP
54 attempts to combat the blight of crime by turning a deceased officer, Alex Murphy
55 (Peter Weller), into a cyborg lawman. By the film's end, the corporation itself is
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revealed to be a hive of criminal corruption, its executives more interested in profit than the social good. Like *The Running Man*, then, *RoboCop* laments social inequality, greed and the marriage of state and capital. As observed by Jack Boozer, the film's central message 'is that over-friendly business and government alliances are constantly ripe for abuse' (172). Perhaps *RoboCop* has been recognised for its subversive content where *The Running Man* has not simply because it does not have to contend with its star; not only is Peter Weller not a muscular action hero, but his face and body are hidden for much of the film. So, to appreciate *The Running Man*'s anti-capitalist themes it is first necessary to look beyond Schwarzenegger's persona before considering how the film works to deconstruct it.

Despite its poor academic reputation and the connotations brought to the film by its star, the cinematic adaptation of *The Running Man* steadfastly maintains the themes of its source novel. However, several narrative changes to the Bachman text mean that they are expressed somewhat differently. The book's theme of brutal authoritative suppression can be found in the film's opening sequence, in which desperate and impoverished citizens are murdered in cold blood by their own government; its socially-conscious depiction of a world fractured by class conflict is captured in a vision of a Los Angeles divided between luxurious skyscrapers and squalid slums; and King's clear distaste for corporate America is communicated by the picture's poisonously symbiotic relationship between the state and private enterprise. The accusations of individualism often levelled at the film are clearly unfounded. Despite Richards' initial reluctance, he comes to play a decisive – but, importantly, collaborative – role in inciting a revolution, while the film actively satirises Reagan's individualist agenda. Inspired by the radical politics of Stephen King's work as Richard Bachman, *The Running Man* is ultimately a rare action film that attacks the underpinning ideologies of capitalist America.

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