





ROLLERBALL

CAST

JAMES CAAN as Jonathan E.
JOHN HOUSEMAN as Bartholomew
MAUD ADAMS as Ella
JOHN BECK as Moonpie
MOSES GUNN as Cletus
PAMELA HENSLEY as Mackie
BARBARA TRENTAM as Daphne
RALPH RICHARDSON as the Librarian

CREW

Directed and Produced by **NORMAN JEWISON**
Associate Producer **PATRICK PALMER**
Screenplay by **WILLIAM HARRISON**
Edited by **ANTONY GIBBS**
Production Design by **JOHN BOX**
Director of Photography **DOUGLAS SLOCOMBE**



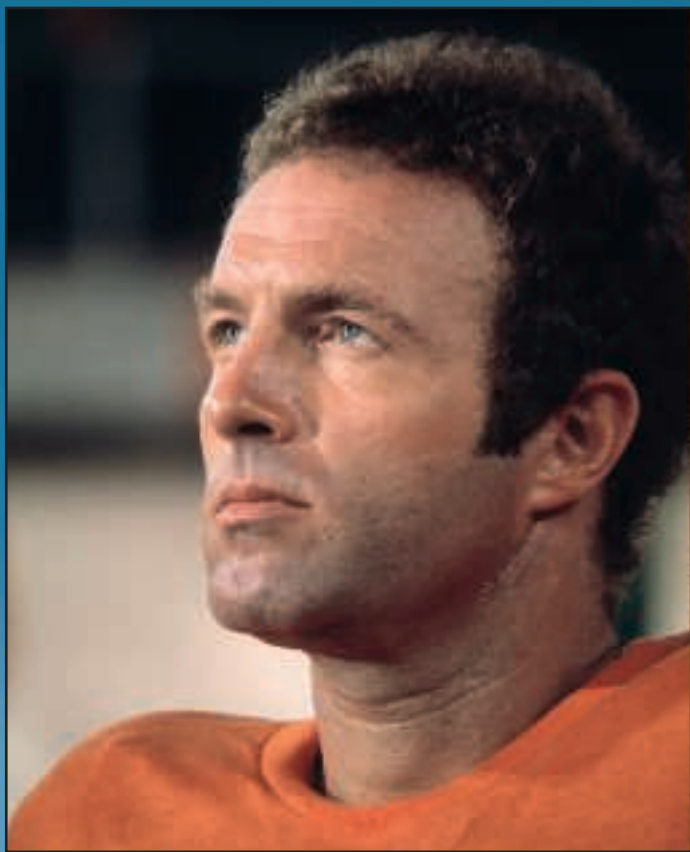
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ZERO SUM GAME

THE POLITICS, PARANOIA AND PRESCIENCE OF ROLLERBALL

by James Oliver

It was the 1st century satirist Juvenal who minted the term ‘bread and circuses’, bewailing the ease with which the common folk were pacified by the provision of cheap food and ready entertainment (in the form of gladiatorial combat and assorted wild beasts). Although he was talking about the pomp of ancient Rome, his words have found many applications since: most pertinently for our purposes is the small, but profound, influence they have had upon science fiction.

There are a number of science fiction films which could, if you are so minded, be seen as futuristic illustrations of the problem that Juvenal was describing. These are films set in the future and focussing on a competitive – and usually extremely violent – game which is used by the (usually malign) authorities as a sociological control mechanism. Elio Petri’s *The 10th Victim* (*La decima vittima*, 1965) might be the first example, followed thereafter by, amongst others, Peter Watkins’ *The Gladiators* (1969), *Death Race 2000* (1975), *Turkey Shoot* (1982), *The Running Man* (1987), *Battle Royale* (2000), *Series 7: The Contenders* (2001) and most recently, the wildly popular *Hunger Games* quartet (2012-15). Above all, though, there is *Rollerball*.

Produced during the brief flowering of intelligent large-scale science fiction movies that began with the success of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and concluded by the greater success of *Star Wars* (1977), *Rollerball* – written by William Harrison and directed by Norman

Jewison – is the very best of the “Future Sport” flicks; as with so many of the bread-and-circuses films, it explores the popularity of violent entertainment and the power of the media, but it also goes further, looking more profoundly at the society beyond the game.

As might be expected from a science fiction film made in the 1970s, it offers us a particularly grim vision of the future. It’s an obvious point, but science fiction films are (almost invariably) far more about the era in which they were made than they are about the future. Much more than its literary counterpart, cinematic sci-fi is a projection of the hopes and/or anxieties of the age – note, for instance, how the genre has become more popular as technology has become ever more central to our lives and to our society.

The 1970s were a particularly bleak time – a time of disillusionment, of political weakness and economic stagnation. No wonder, then, that so much of the science fiction produced in that decade painted such a pessimistic view of what the future might hold – be it post-apocalyptic (*A Boy and His Dog* [1975]), lawless (*A Clockwork Orange* [1971]) or fascist (*THX 1138* [1971]).

The world of *Rollerball*, though, is possibly the most interesting: avoiding the obvious horrors of most dystopias, it offers a world that must have seemed most attractive to cinema goers sheltering from the realities of 1975: a world of plenty, of stability, of material comfort.

It is only as the film progresses that we see how superficial this society is: a world built on bland conformity and submission, where empty hedonism is prioritised above human connection – Ella, the beloved wife of our hero, superstar rollerballer Jonathan E., is awarded to

someone else, supplanted by a string of concubines that he is loaned for only six months at a time, so he doesn’t get too attached to them. This alienation is emphasised by the way that Jewison and director of photography Douglas Sloccombe shoot the film: while the action scenes are kinetic and vital, those portions of the story which take place away from the track are subdued and clinical.

Jewison was evidently inspired by the elegant but chilly style that Stanley Kubrick used for *2001* and *A Clockwork Orange* (Jewison was also evidently influenced by how Kubrick’s films use classical music rather than a more traditional score). The film also draws on Italian filmmakers – the party scene and the destructive morning after recall Federico Fellini (specifically *La dolce vita* [1960], an indictment of the same spiritual sterility that the party/hangover scenes in *Rollerball* illustrate) while the use of modern architecture to illustrate the soullessness of the modern (or indeed future) world tip the hat to Michaelangelo Antonioni.

(Incidentally, let us pause for a moment and reflect, wide-eyed with wonder, that there was once a time when large-budgeted, Hollywood-produced action films were not simply aware of European art house auteurs but actually drew influence from them. It is safe to say that John McTiernan’s ill-advised 2002 remake of *Rollerball* did not draw influence from European art house auteurs.)

It is a vision of tomorrow informed by Aldous Huxley’s pioneering literary dystopia *Brave New World* (1932), which is similarly located in an anti-humanistic World State of unreflective self-gratification: the pills which are so readily gobbled in *Rollerball* might be a chemical analogue of Soma, the drug of choice for Huxley’s sybarites. And, as



in *Brave New World*, the social order is not disrupted by intellectual disobedience but by a more instinctive rebellion. Our hero Jonathan E. is not a cerebral type; like most rebels he wants his freedom but the freedom he seeks isn't any sort of philosophical abstraction – he just wants to continue playing the game he loves. After all, since Ella has been removed from him, he doesn't have much emotional investment in anything else.

He doesn't even have much of an identity, his name stripped down to the almost-anonymous 'Jonathan E.'. Is it a coincidence that when Jonathan plays *Rollerball*, he wears the number six shirt? Or is it a deliberate homage to *The Prisoner* (1967-8), another great science fiction battle between liberty and repression, in which Patrick McGoohan's Number Six struggles to establish himself as more than just a number?

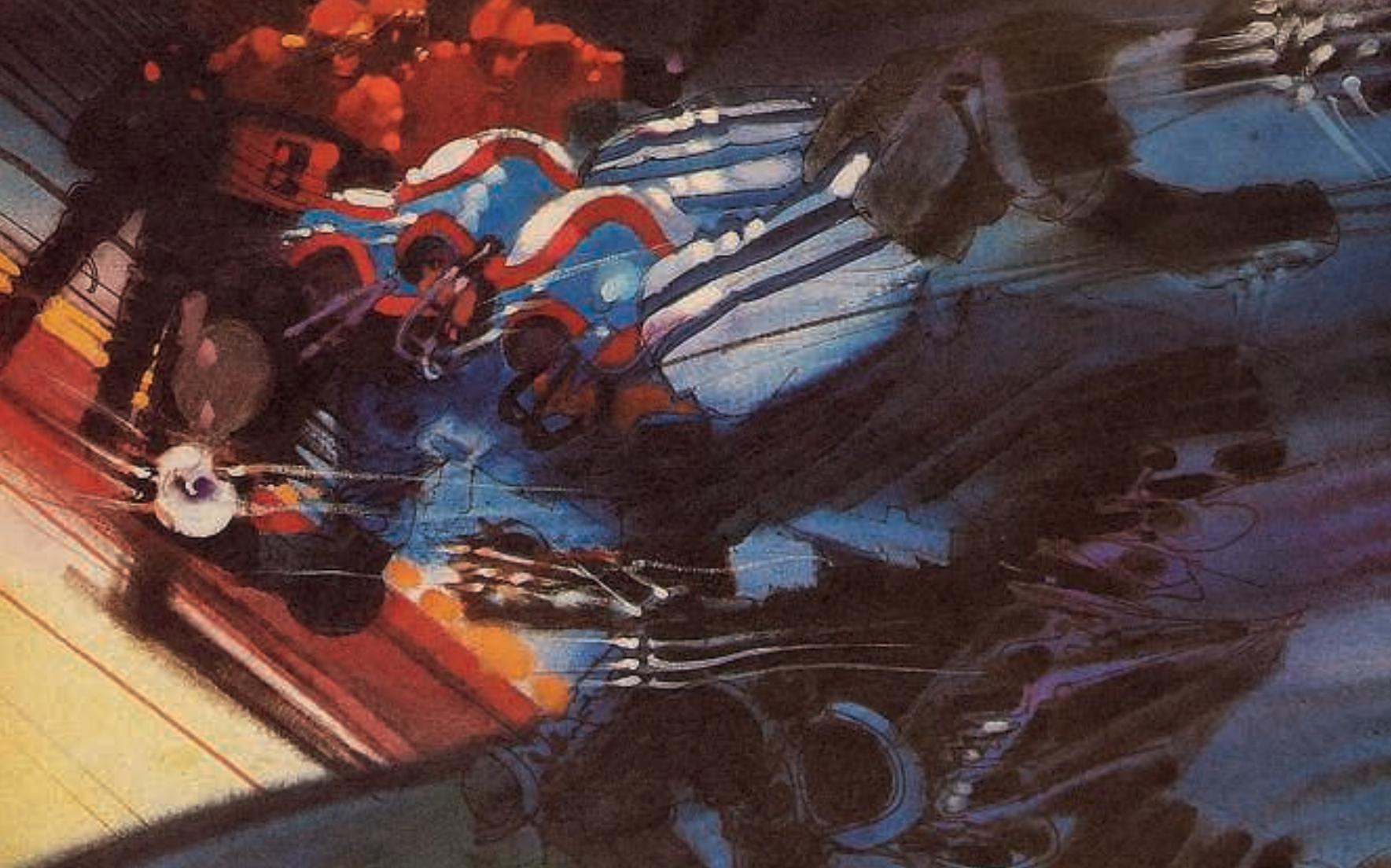
Rollerball's defiant clarion call for individual recognition fits neatly into the wider mood of the 1970s, sometimes known as 'The "Me" Decade'. Elsewhere, the film taps into other themes popular in the period when it was made. Like so many films of the 1970s, there are hints, suggestions and whispers of conspiracies: the plot is driven by Jonathan's efforts to establish precisely why he is being ordered to retire, leading him to a (partial) discovery of how the world is managed.

And where there are conspiracies, there must also be that most ubiquitous of 1970s themes: paranoia. As the net tightens, Jonathan realises that he is no longer a superstar but a target. Throughout the film, there is a steady erosion of trust in authority, of the sort so prevalent in post-Watergate cinema.

For all that the film is a classic example of '70s cinema, *Rollerball* has aged very much better than many of its contemporaries. It looks especially sharp when placed next to other science fiction films: it's usually easy to look at how the filmmakers of yesteryear thought that the future would look and note just how far off-beam they were, with their often ill-advised fashions and impractical technology. Such thoughts, however, rarely occur while watching *Rollerball*.

It's never established when the story is set (the poster refers to 'the near future', promotional material says '2018', but the film itself never reveals its dates) and Jewison and production designer John Box sensibly ground the film in a contemporary reality, using extant, if architecturally innovative, buildings like the magnificent BMW tower in Munich (a building close to the hearts of all cult movie fans: it also makes an appearance in *Suspiria* [1977]). Likewise the costume designs: the clothes, for the most part, look not so very different from regular fashions, such as the classically-tailored suits that the executives wear. The only significant element of the production design that really dates the film is the big screen TVs: they're square, rather than the now-more-familiar rectangles.

What's most interesting about *Rollerball* when viewed today, though, isn't the skill with which Jewison and his production team future-proofed the visuals. Seen from the perspective of the second decade of the 21st century, *Rollerball* can be described as one of the most prescient of science fiction films: it trades in themes which surely resonate more loudly in our time than they would have done when the film was made.





While there had been earlier films which had explored anxieties over corporate power (it was a popular subject in crime flicks – most notably *The Big Combo* [1955], *Underworld U.S.A.* [1961] and *Point Blank* [1967] – and was often addressed in the 1960s work of Jean-Luc Godard), *Rollerball* represents the first cinematic vision of what we now know as globalisation.

The future it envisages is one in which the model of the nation state has been subsumed by what seem to be independent city states – New York, Tokyo, Houston – each apparently administered by monolithic corporations (like 'Energy', which sponsors/controls the Houston team). It is, in other words, an explicitly globalised world where corporations operate trans-nationally, with limited-or-no restraint from directly elected authorities.

This was not, it's fair to say, much of an issue in 1975, a year when the cold war was still very much on the boil – indeed, it wasn't much of an issue in 2002 when the aforementioned ill-advised remake hobbled into (and swiftly out of) cinemas. These days, however, there is ever more concern about the power of the corporations about their ability to circumvent or even override domestic national power (on issues of tax and governance and more).

The film's crystal ball seems to function equally well elsewhere – the supercomputer Zero, primed with the accumulated knowledge of the ages (well, all of it apart from the 13th century at any rate) has more than a little resemblance to our own world wide web, and raises the potential unreliability of digital information storage compared to that which can be found in hard copies: the ease with which the computer loses information (whether the history of the corporate wars or Dante)



highlights an issue that is increasingly urgent as so much material is abandoned in the frantic race to digitise and move online – the importance of preserving physical media.

We don't, of course, have the game of rollerball itself, although we do have some pastimes that rival it for sensation and the possibility of serious injury (at least) for their participants. Moreover, sport has become progressively more central to our culture since *Rollerball* was made, and sportsmen-and-women increasingly venerated as idols. And just as in *Rollerball*, games and their players are used as locomotives to drive and develop business interests, in pay TV, endorsements and sundry promotions.

However, while the enduring relevance of Juvenal's comments about bread and circuses reminds us that human nature is unchanging, history and circumstances are more fluid. As times change and the current economic order is replaced by another, future generations might find *Rollerball* less relevant than it seems today. And yet there is still much to admire, even if that were to happen.

If nothing else, the film deserves recognition for the rollerball games themselves, some of the most sustained and well-realised action sequences of the decade and a model of stunt work, staging and editing (we shall glide gracefully over the film's central irony: that in spite of its thrilling – and thrillingly violent – set-pieces, it was actually intended by both writer and director to be a condemnation of brutality as entertainment).

But credit too must go to Norman Jewison's controlled direction out of the arena, most especially his handling of the actors. Jonathan E.

might be the most restrained character that the often-combustible James Caan ever played but it is one of his very best performances, perfectly capturing the simple sportsman's bewilderment and anger at corporate machinations he doesn't understand.

It's not enough to call it the best of the Future Sports movies, although it is: *Rollerball* deserves recognition as one of the smartest of science fiction films, one that is perhaps more relevant to our globalised age than it was upon its initial release. That it's also got all those kick-ass action scenes as well means it's damn near essential.

James Oliver is a writer and filmmaker whose thoughts on films can most often be found at Movieemail.com.



ABOUT THE TRANSFER

Rollerball is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.85:1 with stereo 2.0 audio and 5.1 surround sound. The High Definition Master was produced by MGM and made available for this release through Hollywood Classics.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and Booklet Produced by Ewan Cant

Executive Producer: Francesco Simeoni

Production Assistants: Louise Buckler, Liane Cunje

Technical Producer: James White

QC and Proofing: Ewan Cant, Anthony Nield

Subtitling: IBF Digital

Blu-ray Mastering: David Mackenzie

Artist: Paul Shipper

Design: Jack Pemberton

SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, Craig R. Baxley, James Caan, Michael Felsher, Robert Fischer, Scott Grossman, Alistair Leach, Dieter Meyer, Jennifer Rome and Melanie Tebb.





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