



Gene Healy: 'Hunger Games' doesn't fit TSA's dystopian vision

Gene Healy
April 9, 2012

At the top of the box office for the third week in a row, "The Hunger Games," based on Suzanne Collins' bestselling post-apocalyptic novel, is the biggest hit Hollywood's had in some time. That's no accident: In troubled times, Americans go for dystopian diversions.

"Dystopian fiction is more popular than it has been in more than 50 years," explains a recent article on Goodreads.com, a popular book-discussion Web site. From WWII through the Cold War, "Fear of the State" was the dominant theme in books like "1984" and "A Clockwork Orange."

That fear is still present, but now it comes with a chick-lit twist: "The new breed of dystopian novels combines classic dystopian themes of cruel governments and violent, restrictive worlds with a few new twists -- badass heroines and romance."

If you like that sort of thing, then that's the sort of thing you'll like. I gave up on "The Hunger Games" 50 pages in. Good narrative drive, but I prefer dystopian visions that are more absurd and that have some connection to present-day trends. Which is why I look to the Transportation Security Administration as the leading indicator of the future of government stupidity.

The coming American dystopia will probably look a lot less like "The Hunger Games" than it does like "Idiocracy," Mike Judge's hilarious, dumbed-down dystopia (2006). It's set 500 years in the future, when America is one giant, dilapidated mall populated by imbeciles, and the mall cops are in charge.

With the TSA, though, 500 years seems overly optimistic.

Last week on his blog, security expert Bruce Schneier recounted his recent Economist.com debate with a former TSA administrator: "He wants us to trust that a 400-ml bottle of liquid is dangerous, but transferring it to four 100-ml bottles magically makes it safe ..."; that "butter

knives given to first-class passengers are nevertheless too dangerous to be taken through a security checkpoint"; and that "there's a reason to confiscate a cupcake (Las Vegas), a 3-inch plastic toy gun (London Gatwick) ... and a plastic lightsaber that's really a flashlight with a long cone on top (Dallas/Fort Worth)."

Still, they're sometimes chipper and cheerful about it. Some months ago, at the Milwaukee airport, I stumbled shoeless from the TSA line into a big sign: "Recombobulation Area." It's as if to say, "I've just had my hand in your crotch for no good reason, but have a nice day!"

In Gary Shteyngart's near-future comic dystopia "Super Sad True Love Story" (2010), America's ruling Bipartisan Party runs the "American Restoration Authority" (slogan: "Together We'll Surprise the World!"). As one character explains, "the ARA runs the infrastructure and the National Guard, and the National Guard runs you."

That hits a little close to home. As Schneier notes, "Airports are effectively rights-free zones. ... You have limited rights to refuse a search. Your possessions can be confiscated. You cannot make jokes, or wear clothing that airport security does not approve of." And still, after a decade of operation, the TSA cannot point to a single terrorist plot it has foiled.

What's worse, the TSA is increasingly taking this show on the road with roving VIPR, or Visible Intermodal Prevention and Response, teams that conducted over 9,300 random searches in 2011 -- on cruise ships, at NASCAR races, on buses and at train stations.

In an era of friendly authoritarianism, with a caring fedgov bent on protecting the populace from salt, trans-fats and secondhand smoke, government-sponsored deathmatches smack more of fantasy than science fiction. It's not Panem-style brutality we need to worry about.

Rather, it's an endless series of pointless indignities in the name of "homeland security."

Examiner Columnist Gene Healy is a vice president at the Cato Institute and the author of "The Cult of the Presidency."