

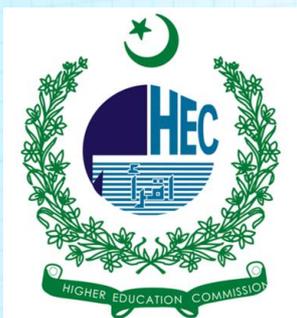
Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

<https://llrjournal.com/index.php/11>

**Eugenic Undercurrents in Contemporary American Dystopian
Films: Biopolitical Warning and Immunitary Exclusion in *The
Thinning***



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Abstract

This article examines *The Thinning* (2016) as a dystopian film that critically represents the transformation of educational evaluation into a mechanism of social classification and exclusion. Set in a future society confronting overpopulation and resource scarcity, the narrative centres on a national standardized examination through which low-scoring students are removed from society in the name of collective survival. Instead of presenting obvious dictatorship, the narrative presents a system in which official rules, everyday institutional routines, and accepted practices quietly decide who is allowed to remain part of the community. Through scenes, dialogue, and broader representational patterns, the narrative reveals how apparently neutral processes can acquire political meaning. A qualitative interpretive approach based on thematic close reading is employed to examine key scenes and recurring situations. The film is treated as a cultural text in which meaning emerges from narrative situations, characters' behaviour, and institutional settings. The theoretical framework combines selected concepts from three thinkers. From Michel Foucault, the discussion uses the idea of biopolitical governance to explain how authority regulates populations through monitoring, measurement, and normalization. From Francis Galton, it uses hierarchical differentiation to clarify how measurable ability becomes a standard of human value. From Roberto Esposito, it adopts the concept of immunitary logic, explaining how communities justify exclusion as protection. Together, these concepts form a process in which population management produces classification which justifies elimination. The narrative finally reveals that the students officially declared failed are not killed but transferred into concealed labour facilities, hence, they remain biologically alive yet are no longer recognized as members of society. By presenting elimination as an organized administrative process rather than visible violence, the narrative highlights the ethical risks within merit-based systems. The article concludes that the film functions as a cautionary cultural text that invites reflection on how modern institutions can normalize inequality while appearing efficient and necessary.

Keywords: *The Thinning*, biopolitics, eugenics, immunitary logic, meritocracy,

dystopian film

Introduction

Dystopian films do not simply imagine strange future worlds. They take ordinary social practices and portray what might happen if those practices continue without question. In contemporary societies, access to education, employment, and social mobility is increasingly shaped by procedures that claim to measure merit objectively. These systems promise fairness and efficiency, yet they also rank individuals by converting human potential into numbers. Recent dystopian films highlight this development by presenting institutional settings in which administrative decisions quietly determine who belongs and who does not.

In such narratives, power rarely appears as open violence. Instead, control operates through everyday practices such as surveillance, testing, and bureaucratic regulation. Authority works by organizing populations and shaping life chances. Michel Foucault explains that modern political power concerns life itself and “the disciplines of the body and the regulations of the population” structure its operation (Foucault, 1978, p. 139). Control therefore shifts from punishing individual bodies to managing collective existence. Measurement, record keeping, and institutional surveillance become the means through which societies regulate reproduction, health, and demographic balance.

This development connects to the earlier history of eugenic thought. Francis Galton studied hereditary ability and suggested replacing an inefficient human stock with more capable strains (Galton, 1892). Classical eugenics relied on biological arguments, but contemporary cultural narratives expose forms of selection carried out through institutional procedures rather than genetic intervention. Evaluation systems classify individuals according to performance, and the language of merit gradually replaces the language of heredity. Exclusion therefore appears logical and necessary instead of openly coercive.

Dystopian fiction has long served as a warning about these possibilities. Such narratives exaggerate existing social directions so their consequences become visible (Moylan, 2000). Modern dystopias often depict technocratic and bureaucratic systems in which administrative logic determines social belonging (Claeys, 2017). These stories do not celebrate authoritarian order. Instead, they reveal the human cost of

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Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

systems that value efficiency more than individuality.

Roberto Esposito's theory of immunitary logic helps explain why exclusion can appear protective. Political communities attempt to preserve themselves by separating what is considered safe from what is perceived as dangerous. Without such protection, "individual and common life would die away" (2008, p. 45). Protection therefore contains a contradiction because life is defended by removing certain lives. Modern power often decides who may live and who may be sacrificed. Dystopian narratives repeatedly highlight societies that eliminate individuals while claiming to protect collective stability (Mbembe, 2003)

The Thinning (2016) presents this logic within an educational setting. In a near-future society facing overpopulation and scarcity, the state administers a nationwide standardized examination. Students who fail are permanently removed in the name of collective stability. The exam appears neutral and merit-based, yet it functions as a mechanism of classification and exclusion. Education becomes a tool of governance, and numerical performance determines whether individuals remain part of the social body.

Accordingly, this article examines how *The Thinning* operates as a cautionary narrative exposing contemporary soft eugenics working through educational and administrative regulation. It explores how merit-based evaluation becomes a biopolitical mechanism that categorizes human value and defends elimination under the justification of survival. Drawing on Galton's concept of hereditary hierarchy, Foucault's account of population regulation, and Esposito's theory of immunity, it has been argued that film does not support removal but warns against modern systems in which collective protection is secured through selective sacrifice.

Research Objective

To examine how *The Thinning* operates as a cautionary narrative that exposes contemporary soft eugenics functioning through educational and administrative regulation.

Research Question

How does *The Thinning* portray merit-based educational regulation as a subtle biopolitical mechanism that classifies human worth and legitimizes exclusion in the name of social survival?

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Review of the Relevant Literature

Scholarly discussions of dystopian narrative increasingly emphasize that the genre reflects existing social realities rather than merely inventing imaginary futures. Baccolini and Moylan (2003) explain that contemporary dystopian works “negotiate the contradictions of the present historical moment” and transform them into narrative form (p. 2). In this sense, dystopia does not escape from reality. It intensifies present tendencies so that their consequences become visible. The genre therefore functions as a diagnostic tool that reveals hidden structures within modern society.

Modern dystopian fiction is also closely associated with systems of regulation. Vieira (2010) argues that dystopian societies are often defined by “the exacerbation of control and regulation in the name of order” (p. 16). Stability is maintained through structured monitoring rather than chaotic violence. Such narratives depict worlds in which individuals are constantly assessed and positioned within institutional hierarchies. Order becomes the organizing principle, and personal autonomy is subordinated to systemic efficiency.

Early literary critics noted that dystopian societies depend on rigid classification. Dystopian regimes frequently reduce individuals to functional categories that serve collective goals (Hillegas, 1975). Identity becomes predetermined by the system, and deviation is interpreted as a threat. This structural reduction anticipates contemporary concerns about institutional ranking and standardized evaluation, where complexity is replaced by measurable criteria.

Science fiction film criticism similarly highlights the importance of technological and bureaucratic systems. Telotte (2001) writes that speculative cinema often portrays societies “structured by technological mediation” in which everyday practices shape behavior and identity (p. 24). Control operates through routine mechanisms rather than visible brutality. The familiarity of these procedures makes dystopian narratives particularly unsettling because they resemble existing administrative practices.

Surveillance studies provide further insight into this dynamic. Lyon (2007) explains that contemporary societies depend on processes that “sort people into categories” which influence opportunity and treatment (p. 25). These systems operate quietly, yet they structure social inclusion and exclusion. Cultural narratives

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Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

frequently dramatize such sorting mechanisms by imagining worlds in which classification determines life outcomes.

Philosophical accounts of modern political power deepen this analysis. Agamben (1998) argues that modern politics creates a distinction between socially protected life and what he calls “bare life,” a condition in which individuals exist biologically but lack full political recognition (p. 8). This separation reveals how systems can include individuals physically while excluding them symbolically. Dystopian narratives often depict characters who inhabit precisely this ambiguous position.

Literary scholars have applied these philosophical insights to speculative fiction. Seed (2011) notes that science fiction repeatedly questions the assumption that human identity can be reduced to quantifiable attributes (p. 114). Such narratives expose the ethical risk involved in translating worth into measurable performance. When identity becomes numerical, humanity itself becomes negotiable.

Historical studies of eugenics further illuminate these representations. Kevles (1985) explains that early eugenic movements were grounded in the belief that social improvement required selective encouragement of the “fit” and discouragement of the “unfit.” He writes that eugenics was built on the conviction that society could be strengthened by “guiding human reproduction according to standards of desirability” (p. 3). Although overt policies were later discredited, the logic of improvement through selection continues to shape cultural imagination.

Cultural critics therefore argue that eugenic thinking persists in indirect forms. Contemporary narratives often displace biological language with institutional or technological frameworks (Squier, 2004). Selection is no longer described as genetic purification, yet social systems continue to differentiate according to perceived capacity. The mechanism changes, but the hierarchy remains. Such texts invite readers to confront the ethical implications of ranking human value.

Bioethical discussions of enhancement and productivity reinforce this concern. Buchanan et al. (2000) argue that debates about improvement often assume that societies should encourage desirable traits while discouraging undesirable ones. They caution that this reasoning can slide into a logic in which collective benefit justifies selective disadvantage (p. 28). When translated into fiction, this tension appears as

social systems that reward usefulness while marginalizing perceived weakness.

Educational theory adds another dimension to this debate. Contemporary educational systems increasingly operate through performativity, where success is measured through visible outcomes and standardized results (Ball, 2012). In such environments, students are valued according to measurable achievement rather than holistic development. Fictional narratives can extend this logic to extreme conclusions, transforming testing into a life-determining procedure.

Critical work on neoliberal governance also sheds light on dystopian representation. Neoliberal rationality treats individuals as entrepreneurs of themselves, responsible for maximizing their own value within competitive systems (Brown, 2015). Within this framework, failure is interpreted as personal inadequacy rather than structural inequality. Dystopian narratives often state this mentality by portraying societies in which worth must be constantly demonstrated and defended.

Finally, interdisciplinary scholarship connects these strands by examining how bureaucratic rationality can normalize exclusion. Modern institutions often fragment responsibility, allowing harmful decisions to appear routine and necessary (Bauman, 2000). Exclusion is presented not as cruelty but as administrative necessity. This normalization of exclusion provides a crucial context for understanding dystopian narratives that depict it as a policy rather than a punishment.

Despite extensive scholarship on dystopia, surveillance, biopolitics, and eugenics, limited attention has been paid to how educational assessment itself functions as a mechanism of population control in contemporary dystopian cinema. Much criticism focuses on authoritarian states or technological domination, yet fewer studies examine standardized testing as a life-determining structure. The film *The Thinning* (2016) directly centers on this issue by presenting a society in which academic evaluation determines social membership. By analysing this film through theories of classification, regulation, and protective exclusion, this article addresses a gap in existing scholarship and demonstrates how contemporary dystopian films uncover soft eugenics embedded within ordinary institutional practice.

Theoretical Framework

Key ideas in the present analysis come from the primary writings of Francis Galton, Michel Foucault, and Roberto Esposito. The main eugenic text consulted is Galton's

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Inquiries into Human Faculty and Its Development (1883/1907), which presents a systematic explanation of hereditary reasoning and social improvement. His earlier and later works, *Hereditary Genius* (1869/1892) and *Essays in Eugenics* (1909/2010), provide further clarification of his arguments about inherited ability and selective advancement. For biopolitical theory, the analysis and discussion depend primarily on Foucault's *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction* (1976/1978) and *Security, Territory, Population* (1977–1978/2007), which examine normalization, regulation, and the management of populations. *Society Must Be Defended* (1976/2003) has been used as a supporting text to clarify how social protection can involve segregation. Roberto Esposito's *Bíos: Biopolitics and Philosophy* (2004/2008) provides the central account of immunity and the idea that communities sometimes preserve themselves by removing perceived threats.

Galton (1892), introduces the idea that human beings can be evaluated and ranked according to perceived capacity. His study of hereditary ability asks whether society might improve itself by encouraging certain traits while discouraging others. He argues that a man's natural abilities are derived by inheritance and further maintains that it would be quite practicable to produce a highly-gifted race of men by judicious marriages during several consecutive generations (p. 1). The implication of this claim is not only biological but social. Human worth becomes measurable, and difference becomes a basis for organization. Although, contemporary narratives no longer employ the language of breeding, a similar logic appears through performance, intelligence, and productivity. Institutional assessment therefore functions as a classificatory mechanism. Individuals are judged through calculable achievement rather than ancestry; hence, the hierarchical ordering remains.

Foucault's concept of biopolitics explains how such ranking becomes part of governance. Modern authority, he claims, does not rely mainly on punishment or visible force. Instead, it organizes life within populations. He notes that modern power operates through the disciplines of the body and the regulations of the population (1978, p. 139). The state now tries to manage how people live, grow, reproduce, and stay healthy, not only whether they obey the law. Through statistics, observation, and record keeping, institutions compare individuals and establish norms. Testing, monitoring, and evaluation become techniques for organizing society.

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Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

Activities that appear educational or administrative may therefore function as methods of governing collective existence.

Esposito's theory of immunity clarifies why exclusion can appear necessary in such systems. Communities attempt to preserve themselves by separating what they consider safe from what they view as dangerous. Without such protection, he writes, individual and common life would die away (2008, p. 45). Preservation therefore depends upon removal. Exclusion is presented as prevention rather than aggression. Individuals defined as risks to stability are eliminated in order to protect the whole community. The idea of immunity shows how harm can be justified as protection.

Collectively, these concepts establish a sequential analytical process. Galton explains classification, Foucault explains regulation, and Esposito explains protective exclusion. Through this combined framework, this article interprets the narrative as unveiling a social order maintained by ranking individuals, managing populations, and legitimizing exclusion in the name of collective welfare.

This perspective helps explain how the film operates. The narrative does not merely represent an oppressive government, it frames how ordinary institutions come to operate as political mechanisms. Educational evaluation becomes a means of classification, administrative policy becomes regulation, and elimination appears as protection. The analysis therefore focuses on procedures that seem neutral but have serious consequences. Through this combined interpretation, the film can be read as exposing a social order maintained by ranking individuals, managing populations, and legitimizing exclusion for the sake of collective welfare.

The order of analysis and discussion follows the narrative logic of the film rather than the historical chronology of the theorists. The analysis begins with Foucault because the film first represents a system of population management. It then turns to Galton to explain the criteria of human ranking within that system, and finally to Esposito to interpret the exclusion that results from such classification.

Methodological Approach

This article follows a qualitative interpretive research design based on textual analysis of film. The selected film is treated as a cultural text in which meaning emerges through narrative situations, institutional procedures, character interaction, and dialogue. Textual analysis does not attempt to measure audience reception or

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Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

psychological response. Instead, it examines how representation produces social meaning. McKee (2003) states that textual analysis examines how cultural texts “make sense of the world” and how particular ideas come to appear natural within representation (p. 1). This article therefore examines how ideological meanings are constructed within the film’s narrative structure.

The primary analytical procedure is close reading. Originating in literary criticism, close reading requires careful attention to the internal organization of a work. Brooks (1947) states that interpretation must attend to the internal organization of the work itself (p. 192). When applied to film, close reading involves detailed examination of specific scenes, behaviour of the characters, environment, recurring patterns and spoken dialogue in order to understand how meaning is constructed. The analysis therefore concentrates on moments in which characters discuss testing, ranking, obedience, and elimination, because these narrative situations reveal the governing logic of the fictional society.

Alongside close reading, the study employs thematic interpretation. Rather than statistical coding, themes are identified as recurring narrative patterns across the film. Ryan and Kellner (1990) argue that film narratives communicate ideology through repeated story situations and conflicts that express social values (p. 12). In this study, recurring elements such as standardized examinations, administrative authority, surveillance, and the removal of students are interpreted as thematic patterns that construct a system of social classification and exclusion.

The unit of analysis consists of individual scenes and narrative episodes within the film. Particular attention is given to examination sequences, the announcement of results, institutional decision-making processes, public political speeches, detention procedures, and the underground labour facility. Within these scenes, dialogue, character reactions, and behavioural responses are analysed as evidence of ideological meaning. The study does not undertake formal cinematic analysis such as camera technique, shot composition, or editing patterns. Instead, it focuses on representational meaning produced through narrative action and speech. Selected scenes are examined closely, especially those depicting examination procedures, institutional decision making, and elimination policy. Dialogue is analysed to understand how authority justifies exclusion and presents it as necessary for social stability. The emphasis

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Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

therefore remains on narrative representation rather than technical film form.

The theoretical framework guides interpretation without predetermining conclusions. Galton clarifies how measurable ability becomes a standard of human value, Foucault simplifies how institutions regulate populations, and Esposito explains how exclusion can be framed as protection. These perspectives function as interpretive lenses rather than fixed explanatory claims.

Analysis and Discussion

The Thinning (2016) is set in a near-future society facing severe overpopulation and resource scarcity. In response to a global directive requiring annual population reduction, the United States establishes a policy known as the “10-241 Examination,” commonly called the Thinning. Every student must take a standardized aptitude test each year, and those who receive the lowest scores are taken into state custody under the justification of protecting national survival and preserving resources. Rather than presenting open brutality, the narrative frames removal as administrative procedure. Through its scenes, dialogue, institutional practices, and visual environments, the it represents a system in which evaluation quietly becomes selection.

The story follows Laina Michaels, a highly intelligent student who supports her younger siblings after their mother’s illness and death. As the annual examination approaches, anxiety dominates students’ lives because the test determines not only academic success but continued existence. At the same time, Blake Redding, the son of Governor Dean Redding, the political architect of the Thinning policy, begins to question the morality of the system, especially after his girlfriend Ellie Harper fails the examination and is taken away by authorities.

During the following year’s examination cycle, Blake deliberately answers questions incorrectly in an attempt to expose the injustice of the system. However, the test administrator Mason King secretly manipulates the results to ensure Blake passes, transferring failure to Laina instead. Shocked by her unexpected result, Laina is detained with other failed students. With the help of teacher Kendra Birch and classmate Kellan Woods, she escapes confinement and discovers evidence that examination results are deliberately altered to serve political and social interests.

Meanwhile, Blake infiltrates the school’s control system and joins Laina in uncovering the truth. Together they reveal that the examination is not a fair

assessment of ability but a mechanism of selective removal. Public exposure forces the authorities to release the students officially recorded as passing. However, the film ultimately reveals that failed students are not executed as officially claimed. Instead, they are secretly transported to an underground industrial facility where they are used as unpaid labour. The Thinning therefore functions as a concealed system of population management and economic exploitation disguised as educational meritocracy.

I. Biopolitical Governance and Population Management

The political order structured in *The Thinning* (2016) does not initially appear as open tyranny. Instead, it presents itself as administrative necessity shaped by environmental crisis. The world of the film is framed as a struggle for survival in which overpopulation has exhausted resources. Population reduction is therefore described as a rational policy rather than a moral decision. The opening narration explains that nations must reduce population annually and that the United States implements this directive through a standardized academic examination. Students who fail are taken by authorities as part of the policy. Removal is presented as procedure rather than punishment, “Students in the United States take a test every year, and those who fail are executed” (*The Thinning*, 00:00:01–00:00:10). The wording is important because the narrative initially adopts administrative rather than emotional language. The action is framed as regulation. Michel Foucault (1978) explains this transformation as classical sovereign power operated through the right to kill, but modern power functions differently. He writes that “the ancient right to take life or let live was replaced by a power to foster life or disallow it to the point of death” (p. 138).

The *Thinning* examination embodies this shift. The state does not publicly punish criminals. Instead, it manages survival probabilities within a population. Students are not treated as offenders but as biological variables within a system of regulation.

The School as a Biopolitical Space

The choice of a school as the primary setting is significant. A school normally represents development and socialization, yet here it becomes a mechanism of selection. Before the examination, the campus is surrounded by barbed wire, armed guards, scanners, and surveillance cameras (00:03:36–00:03:42). The environment

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Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

resembles a secured compound more than an educational institution. Parents wait outside the gates and say goodbye to their children. They are emotional but do not protest. Their acceptance indicates internalized authority. Biopolitical power succeeds not primarily through violence but through normalization. Foucault (2003) describes this distributed functioning of authority: “Power circulates. It is never localized here or there, never in anybody’s hands” (p. 29). Parents, teachers, and students participate in maintaining the system. Guards enforce it, but society sustains it.

Surveillance and Observation

The examination is conducted on digital tablets under constant monitoring, “Keep your eyes on your own tablet. No talking” (00:12:51–00:12:56). The classroom becomes a surveillance chamber. Students are not learning, rather they are being observed. Locked doors, cameras, and guards transform educational assessment into biological inspection. Students sit rigidly, avoid eye contact, and whisper nervously before the test. Fear is quiet rather than chaotic, which indicates normalization. A revealing moment occurs when a child asks for help, “I don’t know this one... can you help me?” (00:07:24–00:07:26), “I’m sorry. I can’t help you. It’s against the rules” (00:07:26–00:07:29). The teacher’s tone is kind, yet institutional rules override compassion. Personal morality is subordinated to procedure.

Statistical Life

In *Security, Territory, Population*, Foucault (2007) explains modern governance: “The population is a set of living beings whose biological processes can be measured and regulated” (p. 70). *The Thinning* converts human beings into numbers. A score determines fate. When results are announced, the teacher offers no explanation, only instruction, “If I call your name, stand and follow the guards” (00:02:26–00:02:32). Students plead, “Please... I passed... please check again!” (00:02:35–00:02:43), but the procedure continues without giving any justification, hence, numerical evaluation becomes biological judgment.

The Propaganda of Care

An instructional animation shown to children explains population control policies: “America keeps only the brightest so the nation can survive” (00:06:54–00:07:10). The language frames removal as protection. Violence is presented as responsibility. Governor Dean reinforces this logic: “Is it barbaric to be the best educated nation in

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Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

the world?” (00:37:45–00:38:05). Death is reframed as improvement.

The Manipulated Examination

The system’s real nature appears when Laina discovers the altered results: “I got a ninety-eight... I passed. You changed the results” (00:12:03–00:12:10). She scored 98 percent yet failed, while Blake passed with 15 percent. The test does not measure ability. It legitimizes predetermined decisions. Biopolitics does not simply measure life. It produces categories of normal and abnormal. The examination becomes a selection technology rather than an educational tool. Students memorize formulas to survive rather than to learn. Laina sells cheating lenses to pay for medical treatment. Teachers comfort students but still follow rules. Guards treat students as detainees. Institutional logic reshapes behavior across the entire environment. When Blake pleads with his father, “Just make a call. Say it was a mistake.” (00:16:40–00:16:46), he replies “We all have to obey the law” (00:16:46–00:16:51). Political order overrides family bond.

Lockdown and Spatial Control

After the results, the school enters lockdown. Movement itself becomes regulated. Even passed students cannot leave. Students who resist are beaten (00:54:04–00:54:23). Violence appears procedural rather than emotional. Through these scenes, *The Thinning* visualizes Foucault’s concept of biopolitics. Authority operates through measurement, surveillance, classification, and normalization rather than overt terror. The examination determines which individuals remain within the social body. The school becomes a site where population is calculated and regulated. Life is governed through administrative procedure, illustrating the modern political management of existence described by Foucault.

II. Eugenic Selection and Hierarchy

Before the narrative develops its political implications, it first establishes a system of classification. The world of *The Thinning* is not organized around morality or law. It is systematized around ranking. Every classroom, hallway, and security checkpoint functions as a sorting mechanism. The examination is not simply an educational assessment. It is a technology for deciding who deserves to continue existing.

Francis Galton provides the intellectual foundation for this logic. In *Hereditary Genius* (1892) he argues that intellectual superiority is neither random nor equally

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Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

distributed. He writes, “a man's natural abilities are derived by inheritance, under exactly the same limitations as are the form and physical features of the whole organic world” (Galton, p. 1). This statement is crucial because Galton is not merely saying people are different. He is arguing that differences are natural, measurable, and inheritable. Intelligence becomes a biological property. Once intelligence becomes biological, survival can be justified biologically.

The film portrays a regime that circulates this assumption through propaganda rather than scientific reasoning. In the animated instructional video shown to children, the teacher explains, “In America, what if only the smartest boys and girls got to live here?” (*The Thinning*, 00:26:59–00:27:05). This line is the ideological core of the film. The state does not openly say it kills children rather claims to preserve the most intelligent. Killing is reframed as selection and violence becomes improvement. Galton develops a similar reasoning while arguing that social policy may deliberately guide improvement. What nature does blindly, slowly, and ruthlessly, man may do providently, quickly, and kindly (Galton, 1907). Placed beside the film, the wording becomes striking. The ruling authorities present the policy as a humane necessity. The governor states that “Our world is crowded. We had to look the facts in the eye and make hard decisions” (00:36:44–00:36:58). The state therefore interprets its actions not as murder but as rational correction of nature.

The School as a Eugenic Laboratory

The environment of the school visually supports Galton’s hierarchy. The campus resembles a controlled testing facility rather than a place of learning. Three features stand out:

Militarization

Before the exam begins, fences, armed guards, scanners, and surveillance cameras surround the school (00:01:36–00:02:00). Parents say goodbye to children as if sending them into a war zone. The atmosphere is quiet but tense. Conversation centers on survival rather than education.

Isolation

Students sit separately and cannot assist one another. The teacher instructs, “No talking. Keep your eyes on your own tablet. All grades are final” (00:12:44–00:13:08). Learning becomes secondary and only measurable performance matters. The

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Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

classroom functions as a measurement chamber.

Surveillance

Cameras continuously monitor the students (00:04:05–00:04:09). If intelligence determines worth, it must be constantly measured. The environment resembles a scientific experiment in which children are treated as data.

The Moment of Classification

The most revealing moment in the film is not the execution chamber but the reading of the results list. When names are called, guards physically remove the failing students. A boy protests, “Don’t touch me!” (00:15:18–00:15:27), another student screams, “No! No! No!” (00:31:51–00:31:58). What matters here is classification and the moment a name is read, the individual’s social identity changes. A student becomes a biological burden. Galton later formalizes this logic in *Essays in Eugenics* (2010) that Eugenics is the study of agencies under social control that may improve or impair the racial qualities of future generations, either physically or mentally (p. 35). The phrase “under social control” precisely describes the result announcement. The guards represent the agencies of control, and the exam score represents measurement. Together they assign value.

Behaviour Under Eugenic Pressure

The system alters behaviour long before punishment occurs. Simon purchases contact lenses which reveal answers because he fears failure (00:01:21–00:01:35). The system does not promote learning rather produces survival strategies. Laina sells those lenses to pay for her mother’s medical treatment. She explains, “We sold everything. I just didn’t know what else to do” (00:46:57–00:47:16). When existence depends on ranking, morality becomes negotiable. Blake intentionally answers incorrectly, “Today I will be filling in enough incorrect answers to definitively fail my exam” (00:28:02–00:28:08). He attempts resistance through self-sacrifice, but he still passes because his father intervenes through power.

Collapse of Meritocracy

The central revelation occurs in the server room, where Laina uncovers the altered scores and states “I got a 98. I passed. Ellie got 88 and failed. Blake got 15 and passed” (00:12:03–00:12:15). The examination is not measuring intelligence, it is selecting victims. Galton believed eugenics would identify natural superiority. The film

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Print ISSN: 3006-5887

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discloses how easily such selection can be manipulated by political authority. The hierarchy exists first, measurement legitimizes it afterwards. Governor publicly claims that “None of us are above the law.” (00:22:44–00:22:52), privately he orders the scores to be altered. This contradiction exposes the real function of eugenic ideology. The concern is not intelligence but the justification of authority. The language of merit conceals political choice.

The Hidden Purpose

The final revelation deepens the critique. The failing students are not executed. They are transported to an underground industrial facility where previous failed students already work (01:19:50 onward). The injections are sedatives. The system never intended biological purification. It intended labour extraction. The “unfit” population becomes a workforce. Galton imagined improving society by encouraging superior reproduction. The film presents a darker transformation. Society keeps the superior visible and the inferior useful but invisible. The rhetoric of intelligence functions as moral cover for economic exploitation.

The Thinning presents a modernized eugenic order. Heredity is replaced by standardized testing, race by aptitude, and sterilization by examination, yet the structure remains the same. Human beings are divided into valuable and disposable categories. Galton’s writings explain the origin of this logic, and the film uncovers its consequences. The classroom functions as a sorting mechanism, the examination enforces selection, and the score determines inclusion or exclusion.

III. Immunitary Logic and Protective Exclusion

The political order depicted in *The Thinning* does not justify itself through open brutality. Instead, it explains its actions as necessary protection. The state never describes the procedure as killing. It presents it as preservation of society. This shift corresponds to what Roberto Esposito identifies as the immunitary paradigm of modern politics. In *Bíos: Biopolitics and Philosophy* (2008), he explains that modern communities preserve themselves by activating mechanisms of immunity which “is a form of protection that preserves life, but does so by placing it in a condition that simultaneously negates or reduces it” (p. 45). Protection therefore does not simply defend life rather restricts certain lives in order to secure the collective body. The community survives by isolating what it interprets as an internal threat.

Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review

Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

This logic appears early in the film during the instructional animation shown to kindergarten children before their first thinning examination. The classroom is bright and friendly. The teacher smiles reassuringly and plays a cheerful educational video. The animation calmly explains global overpopulation and tells children that “Some countries say goodbye to their oldest. Others allow only one child. In America, what if only the smartest boys and girls got to live here so there would be enough to go around” (00:26:53–00:27:05). The tone is gentle and comforting, yet the content introduces elimination. Violence is hidden inside the language of care. Children respond positively and even clap. The scene shows that the system is sustained not only through force but through early moral education. Citizens are taught to interpret removal as responsibility. Esposito (2008) similarly argues that immunity operates because “the safeguarding of the collective body requires the neutralization of what is perceived as a threat within it” (p. 52). Governor Dean Redding’s political rhetoric makes this biological logic explicit. Speaking before a cheering audience, he declares that “If you do not work and do not support our great society, then you are living off the system. That is a parasite. And we wash parasites out” (00:38:18–00:38:26).

The language shifts from citizenship to biology. Citizens become parts of a social organism and failing students become parasites. Once disease metaphors enter political discourse, removal appears hygienic rather than violent. As Esposito (2008) explains, immunitary thinking imagines the community as a body in which “exclusion becomes the condition of preservation” (p. 54). The applause of the crowd shows that society accepts the argument as necessity rather than cruelty. The film contrasts this public narrative of protection with concealed administrative violence. After the results are announced, failing students, including Laina Michaels, are escorted into sterile processing rooms, instructed to remove their clothing for decontamination, and restrained in chairs (00:37:28–00:42:00). The lighting becomes clinical and cold. Guards behave calmly and procedurally. No one expresses visible hatred. Violence becomes bureaucratic. The contrast between the celebratory rally and the silent execution chamber demonstrates how immunitary systems depend on concealment. Social acceptance becomes possible when elimination is visually distant.

Esposito (2008) further argues that immunity does not always destroy biological life. Instead, it can preserve life while removing political belonging. He observes that

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modern biopolitics can “separate biological existence from political existence” (p. 56). The final revelation of the film illustrates this principle directly. After the injections, Blake Redding regains consciousness in an underground industrial complex (01:19:40–01:20:30). Workers in identical uniforms operate machinery under artificial light. Blake sees Ellie Harper alive among them. The executed students have not been killed. They have been relocated into forced labour. The system therefore, does not eliminate life entirely. It removes individuals from visibility while preserving their bodies as economic resources. Their civic identity disappears, but their biological existence continues. The injection marks a transition from citizenship to instrumentality. Esposito’s formulation becomes literal. The students live, yet they no longer belong. Governor Dean’s televised statement reinforces this ideological framing, “All of our fallen students have made the ultimate sacrifice in ensuring a better tomorrow” (01:17:06–01:17:19). The vocabulary of sacrifice transforms victims into contributors. Parents mourn presumed deaths, which stabilizes social order, while the state benefits from hidden labour. Immunity therefore functions simultaneously at biological, psychological, and economic levels.

Behavior of the characters throughout the film supports this interpretation. Miss Birch hesitates but still reads the list. Mason King calmly administers procedures. Teachers enforce rules they privately doubt. Citizens fear failing more than they question the policy. Authority operates not only through coercion but through internalized necessity. The visual environments reinforce the pattern. Bright classrooms and patriotic ceremonies represent the protective narrative. Dark basements and industrial machinery represent concealed exclusion. Cheerful cartoons coexist with underground labour camps. The state does not simply kill, it reorganizes life into valued and devalued forms.

The Thinning therefore dramatizes Esposito’s immunitary logic with clarity. The government claims to protect the future of society. To achieve that protection, it isolates part of its own population, removes them from recognition, and converts them into controlled labour. The community survives through exclusion, and protection becomes the moral language that makes elimination appear essential and normal.

IV. Integrated Interpretation

When the film is considered as a whole, *The Thinning* depicts a society in which

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moral judgment has been replaced by procedural decision making. Individuals do not directly choose who should live or die. Instead, an administrative system produces that decision. The examination appears to be an educational assessment, yet it actually functions as a mechanism that classifies and removes individuals from the social body. This structure echoes Francis Galton's (2010) claim that society can be organized by distinguishing levels of human ability. He argues that social policy should distinguish individuals according to hereditary capacity, encouraging the reproduction of the more capable and discouraging that of the less capable. The Thinning examination performs precisely this function. It does not merely evaluate learning but also determines social existence.

One of the most revealing aspects of the film is the behaviour of ordinary citizens. Outside the school, parents wait anxiously behind barriers and cry for their children (01:15:00). Yet none attempt to break the gates or confront the authorities. Fear is visible, but resistance is absent. The population obeys because the system appears orderly and official. Institutional order itself generates validity. Hannah Arendt's (1963/2006) analysis of bureaucratic violence helps explain this reaction. She argues that harmful outcomes occur when responsibility is dispersed across administrative structures, so that individuals perceive themselves as performing duties rather than committing harm (p. 136). This dynamic appears when guards escort failing students after the results are announced (00:15:08–00:16:18). The guards remain calm and unemotional. Their conduct makes the event appear procedural rather than violent.

Foucault (1978) similarly explains that modern power operates by managing life rather than threatening death. He observes that power now takes charge of life. The school examination therefore functions as a biopolitical instrument. It regulates existence without overt brutality. The school environment reinforces this transformation. The examination hall is clean, quiet, and orderly (00:12:20). Students sit in rows and complete questions on tablets. Nothing visually signals danger. Death is embedded within a familiar institutional routine. Because the procedure resembles ordinary schooling, hence it appears legitimate. Educational theory clarifies this process further. Paulo Freire (1970/2000) argues that when education is reduced to measurement, students are treated as objects rather than thinking participants (p. 72).

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This is visible when teachers immediately read the names of failing students as soon as scores appear (00:14:53–00:16:20). Numerical evaluation replaces personal identity.

The animated lesson shown to younger children illustrates the normalization of ideology within the fictional society (00:25:25–00:27:23). The presentation frames population control as environmental responsibility and national duty. It avoids the language of killing and instead emphasizes improvement and protection. Institutions such as schools function as ideological apparatuses that present social norms as natural truths (Althusser, 1971, p. 143). The children's acceptance of the message illustrates this process of normalization.

Foucault (2003) describes a transformation of power directed “not at man-as-body but at man-as-species” (p. 243). Modern governance operates at the level of populations rather than individual offences, focusing on processes such as birth rates, mortality, and health within the human species. The government in the film therefore does not punish crimes but regulates demographic existence. The discovery of altered scores reveals the real nature of the system. Laina Michaels scores ninety-eight percent yet fails, while Blake Redding passes with fifteen percent (01:10:47–01:11:01). The test therefore does not measure intelligence. It assigns value. Meritocratic systems justify inequality by presenting outcomes as ability rather than authority (Young, 1958/1994). The film dramatizes this critique. Galton's own writing anticipates such logic. He suggests that society should encourage the continuation of more suitable human qualities (1892, p. 17). In the film, the suitable remain visible citizens, while others disappear from public life. Students' reactions confirm internalized authority. Ellie Harper does not resist removal (00:16:08–00:16:20). Simon cries but obeys the guards (00:14:59–00:15:18). Even Laina initially doubts herself rather than the system. Individuals blame personal failure before questioning institutional power.

The injection chamber intensifies the symbolism. The room resembles a hospital with bright lighting and medical equipment (01:08:31–01:09:01). Violence appears as treatment. Esposito explains that political communities often preserve themselves through a negative protection of life in which some lives are restricted to secure the collective (2008, p. 52). Removal is presented as care. Michel Agier (2011) similarly notes that modern societies manage unwanted populations through

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controlled spaces that appear protective while actually excluding them. The chamber functions as such a space. The factory sequence provides the final clarification. The failed students are alive and working underground (01:19:42–01:20:10). They are not eliminated biologically but erased socially. Their labour sustains the same system that judged them unworthy. David Harvey (2005) observes that modern economies often depend on invisible labour while publicly promoting fairness (p. 167). The film visualizes this contradiction. Esposito's concept becomes explicit here. Modern politics preserves life while producing zones where life is reduced to mere survival (2008, p. 110). The underground factory represents such a zone. The students remain biologically alive yet politically invisible. Governor Dean Redding's speech further illustrates how language stabilizes the system (00:37:45–00:38:12). He speaks of progress, education, and national success rather than death. Political authority endures by presenting exclusion as protection. The central danger presented by the film is therefore not overt cruelty but rationalization. No character believes they are evil. Teachers administer exams. Guards enforce rules. Politicians claim to safeguard the future. Each action appears reasonable in isolation, and for that reason the overall violence becomes invisible.

The film ultimately unveils a procedural evolution of power. Foucault explains the creation of a governing structure that manages life through surveillance and regulation. Galton provides the internal criterion that ranks individuals according to perceived capacity. Esposito clarifies the final stage in which exclusion is justified as protection. The narrative therefore presents a continuous chain. Population management produces classification. Classification produces exclusion. Exclusion becomes collective safety. The society does not suddenly become violent. It becomes dangerous through a gradual administrative progression in which regulation transforms into normalized elimination.

Conclusion

This article argued that *The Thinning* presents more than a fictional story about a dangerous examination system. The narrative portrays a society in which human value is determined through institutional procedures rather than moral judgment. Life and removal are not decided through visible cruelty but through organized processes that appear rational and necessary. By placing elimination within a school environment,

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Print ISSN: 3006-5887

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the narrative reveals how systems of evaluation can gradually transform into systems of selection.

Within the film, the examination functions as a political instrument. Academic performance becomes a measure of worth, and numerical ranking is presented as objective truth. Students internalize the belief that survival depends on measurable ability. Teachers supervise the procedure as though it were an ordinary academic event. Parents accept the policy because it is framed as national protection. The system therefore relies less on terror and more on normalization. Violence is embedded within routine.

The combined theoretical framework clarifies this structure. Foucault explains how modern authority regulates life at the level of populations through surveillance, calculation, and administrative management. Galton reveals how ability can be converted into a hierarchical standard that divides individuals into superior and inferior categories. Esposito shows how communities justify exclusion as a protective act necessary for collective survival. Together, these perspectives outline a procedural development of power. Governance produces classification. Classification produces exclusion. Exclusion is then legitimized as safety. The film extracts that removal does not emerge suddenly, it develops gradually through systems that claim to improve society.

The final revelation, in which failed students are not killed but forced into hidden labour, deepens the critique. Biological life continues, yet social belonging disappears. The students remain alive but are detached from visibility, dignity, and recognition. The narrative therefore shifts the focus from death to abandonment. The most disturbing element is not execution but erasure.

The broader significance of the film lies in its familiarity. It does not rely on futuristic genetic engineering or extreme technological fantasy. Instead, it centers on testing, ranking, surveillance, and data-based evaluation. These practices resemble contemporary institutional systems. The film identifies that when performance becomes the primary measure of value, exclusion can appear reasonable rather than violent. Administrative logic can replace ethical reflection.

Future Recommendations

The analysis opens several avenues for further research. First, future studies can

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compare *The Thinning* with other contemporary dystopian films that depict evaluation systems, such as narratives centered on genetic testing, social credit scoring, or algorithmic ranking. Such comparison will clarify whether educational assessment represents a broader cultural anxiety about data-driven governance.

Second, interdisciplinary research can explore how cinematic representations of testing intersect with real-world educational policy, performance measurement, and meritocratic ideology. Examining these connections will deepen understanding of how cultural narratives reflect and critique institutional practices.

Third, further theoretical work can expand the framework beyond biopolitics and eugenics to include algorithmic governance, digital surveillance, and predictive analytics. As technological systems increasingly influence social opportunity, dystopian cinema may offer important insight into how numerical evaluation reshapes concepts of fairness and belonging.

Finally, future research can examine audience reception to determine how viewers interpret the film's portrayal of merit, responsibility, and exclusion. Understanding public response would reveal whether such narratives function primarily as warning, entertainment, or social commentary.

The Thinning portrays a society that does not collapse into chaos but stabilizes itself through logically efficient exclusion. Its warning is not about sudden tyranny. It is about the quiet transformation of evaluation into elimination. When institutional systems define human value, moral judgment may slowly be replaced by procedural decision. The film therefore invites reflection on how easily organized efficiency can become organized abandonment.

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