Vertical Ethics in *The Platform*: An Ethical Literary Criticism of Food, Power, and Structural Injustice

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Abstract: This article examines the Spanish dystopian film *The Platform* as a narrative allegory of global food inequality and structural injustice. Grounded in Nie Zhenzhao's Ethical Literary Criticism, the analysis explores how the film constructs a moral system through its institutional design—one that removes private ownership, disconnects entitlement from labor, and subjects access to arbitrary mechanisms of control. Rather than portraying scarcity as a natural condition, the film frames hunger as a consequence of ethical failure embedded in systemic design. By juxtaposing the narrative's spatial and institutional architecture with real-world food systems, the study clarifies how dystopian storytelling can reflect and strategically invert global structures of inequality. Through this approach, this article demonstrates the capacity of ethical literary analysis to critically engage with cinematic texts and illuminate how fictional narratives can function as frameworks for examining the moral architecture of contemporary global systems.

Keywords: *The Platform*; dystopian narrative; global food system; ethical literary criticism; ethical structure

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标题：《饥饿站台》中的垂直伦理：对粮食、权力与结构性不公的文学伦理学批评

内容摘要：论文以西班牙反乌托邦电影《饥饿站台》为研究对象，将其视为全球食物不平等与结构性不正义的叙事性寓言进行分析。运用聂珍钊教授提出的文学伦理学批评理论，探讨影片如何通过制度设计构建伦理体系——取消私有制、切断劳动与获取的联结，并以非理性的控制机制分配资源，从而揭示系统性结构对道德基础的抽离。影片呈现的饥饿并非为自然状态，而是

制度所导致的伦理失败的产物。通过将空间和制度安排与现实食物体系相对照，论文旨在阐明反乌托邦叙事对当代全球不平等结构的反映与批判，以期展现文学伦理学批评在影视文本解读中的理论价值与批判性功能

关键词：粮食安全；文学伦理学批评；《饥饿站台》；粮食；分配伦理

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1. Introduction

Dystopian narratives often unfold in landscapes marked by ruin and moral collapse. As Gregory Claeys notes in *Dystopia: A Natural History* (2016), "the word 'dystopia' evokes disturbing images" (3), typically set in "landscapes defined by ruin, death, destruction," where "the perfumed scents of civility are but a distant memory" (3-4). While Claeys emphasizes the emotive and environmental contours of dystopian settings, M. Keith Booker draws attention to their narrative function: to expose and interrogate contradictions within seemingly stable social systems. Dystopian narratives commonly present radically deteriorated social environments to "more clearly reveal their flaws and contradictions" embedded in everyday life (Booker 3). By simplifying the structures of existence, these narratives foreground needs, desires, and conflicts that are often masked by the norms of functioning societies. They compel ethical reflection by dramatizing moral collapse and systemic injustice.

The Platform (*El Hoyo*, 2019), a Spanish dystopian film, exemplifies such narrative functions through its stark, vertically structured prison known as "the Pit."[1] The film stages brutal food distribution and interpersonal violence as symbolic critiques of systemic inequality. Its confined architecture and narrative economy sharpen the focus on survival, power, and moral responsibility, positioning the prison as a microcosm of global society. This paper offers a threefold analysis of *The Platform* as a critical allegory of the global food system. First, it situates the film within dystopian traditions that reflect and distort material inequalities, focusing on how food operates as both a material necessity and an ethical fault line. Second, it employs Nie Zhenzhao's theory of ethical literary criticism—particularly the concepts of ethical structure, knot, and line—to analyze how the narrative constructs and resolves moral dilemmas. Third, it interprets the film's conclusion as a

1 This analysis is based on the version of *The Platform* distributed by Netflix, which is the only officially released version of the film.

reflection on intergenerational responsibility, suggesting that absence of ownership, randomness of access, and institutionalized deprivation prompt reflection on moral agency in the face of structural injustice. In doing so, the study bridges dystopian allegory and ethical criticism, showing how cinematic narratives act as structured experiments in moral reasoning under systemic injustice.

This discussion engages with three intersecting strands of scholarship: 1) dystopian food allegories, 2) ethical literary criticism, and 3) global food-system studies. The first strand examines how food operates as both a material necessity and symbolic instrument in dystopian settings. Scholars have shown that dystopian narratives often use food to illustrate systems of political control and social stratification, as in analyses of *The Hunger Games*, *Soylent Green*, and *Snowpiercer*.[1] Other studies shift focus toward questions of individual complicity, cultural memory, and ecological trauma. Murray, for instance, highlights dilemmas of guilt and complicity in Atwood's biotech dystopias, while Xiao and Chen analyze how culinary acts in *Lord of the Flies* reflect the breakdown of civility. Höglund and Salmose adopt an ecocritical lens, interpreting food in *The Road* and *Snowpiercer* as a conduit of trauma, loss, and speculative futurity.[2]

The second strand centers on ethical literary criticism, with Nie Zhenzhao's *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism* serving as the primary theoretical source. As one of the most systematic expositions of the theory, it provides key concepts such as "ethical structure," "ethical line," and "ethical knot," along with a clear methodology for analyzing the ethical dimensions of texts. Unlike approaches that treat ethics as supplementary to form or context, Nie's theory places ethical inquiry at the heart of literary meaning. As he notes, once new forms of texts—such as digital, electronic, or performative texts—are conceptually recognized, "new ethics of literature emerge" (19-20). Although originally developed for written literature, the framework has been fruitfully applied to visual media, including Zhang Shengzhen's study of adolescent ethics in *His Dark Materials* and Sandro Jung's analysis of ethical identity in film adaptations of *Death on the Nile*. *The Platform*, with its layered vertical structure and moral conflict, aligns directly with the ethical

1 See Lori L. Parks and Jennifer P. Yamashiro, "Consumed: Food in The Hunger Games," *European Journal of American Culture* 2 (2015): 137-150; Stacy M. Jameson, "Dystopian Film on the Edge of a Food Coma," *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* 1 (2018): 43-56.

2 See Sean Murray, "Food for critical thought: Teaching the science fiction of Margaret Atwood," *Pedagogy* 3 (2014): 475-498; Xiao Mingwen and Chen Huafei, "Envisioning a 'Good' Utopia on a Dystopian Island: Culinary and Cultural Conflicts in *Lord of the Flies*," *Island Studies Journal* 2 (2022): 92-106; Johan Höglund and Niklas Salmose, "Climate Diaspora and Future Food Cultures in *Snowpiercer* (2013) and *The Road* (2009)," *Food, Culture & Society* 2 (2024): 310-325.

structure–knot–line model, making it a compelling case for transmedial ethical analysis.

The third strand addresses structural injustice in the global food system. Political economy scholars highlight how transnational agribusinesses consolidate power, distort markets, and deepen inequality. Clapp examines the effects of corporate concentration, while Friedmann identifies systemic crises in capitalist food regimes. Critiques of productionism, such as Lähde et al., show how yield-driven models marginalize smallholders in the global South.[1] Other studies frame food access as a matter of rights and environmental justice. D'Odorico et al. propose a quantitative threshold for inequality, and Gonzalez links global food disparities to colonial and ecological legacies. Collectively, these works call for a more democratic and ecologically grounded global food order.[2]

Despite rich scholarship in each domain, few studies examine how ethical literary frameworks can be used to interpret cinematic representations of food injustice. This paper addresses that gap by integrating narrative ethics with structural critique. Through *The Platform*, it demonstrates how dystopian cinema can illuminate the moral stakes of global food inequality and invite reflection on ethical agency under institutionalized deprivation.

2. Ethical Literary Criticism and the Structural Logic of Dystopian Narrative

Given *The Platform*'s emphasis on ethical dilemmas and moral disintegration, this paper approaches it as a dystopian narrative through the lens of Nie Zhenzhao's Ethical Literary Criticism. Central to Nie's methodology is the "ethical structure–knot–line" model, which analyzes how moral decisions, dilemmas, and their resolutions are embedded within a text's narrative structure. As Nie notes, "ethical knots are the main manifestations of contradictions and conflicts in the structure of literary works," serving to expose "the basic ethical issues" underlying the narrative (219-220). These knots are linked by ethical lines—"the whole process of the rise, development, and resolution of the ethical question" (220)—that comprise the narrative's overall ethical structure. Thus, a narrative's ethical structure is

1 See Jennifer Clapp, "The Problem with Growing Corporate Concentration and Power in the Global Food System," *Nature Food* 2 (2021): 404-408; Harriet Friedmann, "The Political Economy of Food: A Global Crisis," *New Left Review* 197 (1993): 29-57; Ville Lähde et al., "The Crises Inherent in the Success of the Global Food System," *Ecology and Society* 4 (2023): 16-28.

2 See Paolo D'Odorico et al., "Food Inequality, Injustice, and Rights," *BioScience* 3 (2019): 180-190; Carmen G. Gonzalez, "Food Justice: An Environmental Justice Critique of the Global Food System," *Routledge Handbook of Environmental Justice*, edited by Ryan Holifield et al. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018, 401-417.

"interwoven by ethical lines and ethical knots," manifesting "characters' thoughts and actions regulated by moral norms" (218-219). The complexity of this structure depends on both the number of knots and the intricacy of their formation and resolution.[1]

Ethical knots necessitate ethical choices, which, as Nie contends, signify deeper ontological inquiry: "ethical choices can be seen as a self-inquiry into why humans are such beings, or to put it in another way, what constitutes the self" (28).[2] In this sense, moral dilemmas within narratives serve not only as turning points for character development but also as sites for existential reflection.

To conduct such an ethical and ontological reading of *The Platform*, one must first articulate the structural logic of dystopian narratives. This paper posits that their ethical structure hinges on three interconnected elements: condition (survival environment), subject (members of the world), and event. While these elements are present in all narratives, dystopian narratives distinctively amplify their interaction. Most notably, dystopian worlds present exceptional survival environments to foreground social, political, or ethical concerns. These environments are often marked by systemic scarcity—of food, shelter, or autonomy—where access and control over limited resources become central to the narrative's structure and power dynamics.

As Parks and Yamashiro argue in their analysis of *The Hunger Games* (2013), "Food as symbol in *The Hunger Games* is most representative of the power structure within Panem. It reveals the way in which order is constructed and maintained through systems of reward and punishment" (140). Dystopian texts thus dramatize real-world inequalities via what Darko Suvin terms "cognitive estrangement," constructing logically coherent but unfamiliar worlds to critically reflect on existing social orders (3-9, 61-62). This estrangement reframes familiar ethical issues in extreme conditions, intensifying moral scrutiny.

Subjects in dystopian narratives are often grouped by distinct principles, most commonly by differential access to survival resources. Class-based hierarchies—where resource access dictates existential conditions—appear in *Snowpiercer* (2013), where a train stratified from head to tail car enacts rigid socioeconomic divides.[3] Likewise, *High-Rise* (2015) portrays vertical class conflict within a residential

1 See Nie Zhenzhao, *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism*, London: Routledge, 2024, 14-15.

2 According to Nie, ethical choices within a narrative act as "tests of moral cognition," where characters reflect not only on right and wrong but on "what it means to be human." See Nie Zhenzhao, "Ethical Literary Criticism: A Basic Theory," *Forum for World Literature Studies* 2 (2021): 200.

3 See Johan Höglund and Niklas Salmose, "Climate Diaspora and Future Food Cultures in *Snowpiercer* (2013) and *The Road* (2009)," *Food, Culture & Society* 2 (2024): 315.

tower, and *The 8 Show* (2024) depicts a competition within a tiered structure dividing participants into the "uppers" and "lowers."

Beyond structural groupings, ethical orientation and decision-making further divide subjects. In *The 8 Show*, material inequality exacerbates mistrust and incentivizes moral compromise. As the narrative unfolds, these characters encounter branching ethical dilemmas—"ethical knots"—that test the viability of their value systems. These knots serve as experiments for probing individual and collective ethics, and the decisions made therein alter subjects' trajectories and status within the narrative.

Accumulated ethical choices allow for subject typologies. In *The Platform*, four types can be discerned: (1) self-destruction, (2) co-destruction, (3) self-survival, and (4) mutual survival. Types 1 and 2 tend to exit the narrative early, encountering fewer ethical knots. In contrast, types 3 and 4 engage with the ethical structure more extensively, continually reassessing their moral frameworks in the face of survival imperatives.

Thus, dystopian narratives critically test the viability and resilience of ethical values under extreme conditions. In sum, dystopian narratives operate as boundary-testing arenas for existing value systems. Through stylized survival conditions, grouped subjects, and consequential events, they interrogate the coherence and resilience of ethical principles under duress. The ethical structure of such texts functions not merely as narrative architecture but as a critical framework for examining the ontological foundations of human behavior.

3. *The Platform*: A Microcosm of the Global Food System and Ethical Dynamics

A dystopian narrative's world-building often reflects and incorporates specific aspects and characteristics of the real world. The scope and extent of this reflection shape the survival environment, subjects, and events around which the narrative structure unfolds. Generally, in dystopian worlds, various essential resources—such as air, time, equipment, vaccines, food, weapons, and information—are scarce. Access to these critical resources typically depends on shared norms, rules, personal effort, or ability. Essential survival resources are sometimes explicitly prioritized, while in other cases, exchanges or trade between resources are allowed. Consequently, discussions surrounding the ownership and usage rights of survival resources tend to vary widely, depending on the type of resources in question. However, in the world of *The Platform*, "food" is presented as the sole essential resource for survival. By establishing such drastically simplified survival conditions, *The Platform* narrows the focus of power dynamics and ethical discussions to the

subject of food.

3.1 *The Platform*'s Reflection on the Global Food System

The treatment of food resources in *The Platform* mirrors several structural features of the global food system, setting it apart from other dystopian narratives. By illustrating the mechanisms and hierarchies of food distribution, the film reveals how access to food becomes entangled with power relations and ethical judgments. In doing so, it foregrounds patterns of inequality and conflict that invite engagement with food justice theories concerned not only with availability, but also with access, fairness, and institutional accountability.

3.1.1 "Sufficient" Food Supply

One of the most striking features of *The Platform*'s depiction of food resources is the concept of "sufficient" provision. Here, "sufficiency" does not imply unlimited food, but rather that enough food exists to feed everyone—if distributed fairly. This is evident in the system's design: menu preferences are collected before admission, and the resulting feast reflects individual choices. The food descends floor by floor, offering equal opportunity. As Imoguiri in *The Platform* affirms that the food would reach the lowest levels if everyone ate only what they needed—emphasizing that the problem lies not in scarcity but in unequal distribution.

This fundamental characteristic of *The Platform's* food supply structure parallels the features of the actual global food system. As of 2023, approximately 733 million people worldwide—about 9.1% of the population—suffer from chronic hunger, a situation periodically worsened by global food crises.[1] These crises are often attributed to food production shortages or overpopulation, with reductionist views framing the issue solely as a problem of insufficient supply. Modern food crises, however, are not exclusively the result of supply shortages.[2] It is estimated that the food produced globally today could theoretically feed approximately 10 billion people—about 1.5 times the current global population.[3] According to the FAO Statistics Division, the world currently produces enough vegetal products

1 See FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO, *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2024—Financing to End Hunger, Food Insecurity and Malnutrition in All its Forms*, Rome, 2024, 8.

2 Several studies point to this same conclusion. See Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*, Oxford: Claredone Press, 1981, 1-8; Derek Headey and Shenggen Fan, *Reflections on the Global Food Crisis: How Did It Happen? How Has It Hurt? And How Can We Prevent the Next One?* vol. 165, Washington, D.C.: International Food Policy Research Institute, 2010, 4-53; Nora McKeon, "Global Food Governance," *Development* 1 (2021): 48-55; Sandro Mezzadra, "Global Food Insecurity as a Crisis of Social Reproduction for the Capitalist World-Ecology," *Globalizations* 5 (2023): 789-803.

3 See UN Committee on World Food Security, 19 October 2022. Available at: https://www.fao.org/cfs/resources/detail/en/c/1609703. Accessed 4 July 2024.

alone to provide nearly 3,500 calories per person per day—well above the average minimum requirement of 1,900 calories. As Frances Moore Lappé aptly states, "Abundance, not scarcity, best describes the supply of food in the world today" (8).

Hunger persists due to structural inequality—ranging from domestic issues like poor infrastructure and political instability to global factors such as inequitable trade rules and food financialization.[1] *The Platform* allegorizes these dynamics: unlike many dystopias premised on collapse, it depicts a system with stable, externally supplied food. The narrative eliminates scarcity, compelling characters to confront ethical failures embedded in unjust distribution systems.

3.1.2 Power Dynamics and the Leverage of Food Access

In *The Platform*, food is not merely a resource for survival—it is the system's primary symbol of power. Delivered sequentially from top to bottom, food grants those on upper floors priority access and the capacity to control what remains for those below. Since survival depends entirely on food, this priority translates into power over life and death. The vertical structure that governs this distribution is not neutral; it is a deliberate institutional design that enforces material inequality and entrenches hierarchy of control—an arrangement that aligns with Thomas Pogge's theory of *institutional harm*, where systemic arrangements create foreseeable and morally significant deprivation.[2] In this context, hunger is not a natural condition but a predictable outcome of structural asymmetry. This embedded hierarchy directly shapes behavior and social interactions within the system. Upper-floor occupants wield control, while lower-floor prisoners are left in a state of dependency and desperation. The result is a rigid social order rooted in unequal access, where food becomes a determinant of status, authority, and domination. The system's design does not merely regulate resource allocation—it manufactures and reinforces power dynamics through the very act of distribution.

The symbolic and practical power of food in *The Platform* mirrors how food functions in international politics as a source of leverage and control. Historically, sufficient agricultural productivity and self-sufficiency in staple foods have been

1 Various studies highlight different aspects as the root causes of the global food crisis. See Jennifer Clapp, *Food*, Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2020, 57-157; Anuradha Mittal, "The Blame Game Understanding Structural Causes of the Food Crisis," *The Global Food Crisis: Governance Challenges and Opportunities*, edited by Jennifer Clapp and Marc J. Cohen, London: Routledge, 2009, 13-28; Derek Headey and Shenggen Fan, *Reflections on the Global Food Crisis: How Did It Happen? How Has It Hurt? And How Can We Prevent the Next One?* vol. 165, Washington, D.C.: International Food Policy Research Institute, 2010, 14-53.

2 See Thomas Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights: Cosmopolitan Responsibilities and Reform*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002.

considered essential indicators of a nation's comprehensive national power.[1] Nations with weak agricultural structures or an inability to achieve food self-sufficiency inevitably depend on international trade to secure essential food supplies, creating a dependency on other nations. In the anarchic realm of international politics, the failure to achieve self-reliance often translates into a weaker or even negligible power position, ultimately rendering the nation vulnerable to the influence and control of others.

From this perspective, food resources in the global political structure function not only as a source of power but also as leverage in relations between nations. Since the establishment of the Westphalian system, which formalized the concept of sovereign states, nations have utilized economic resources as tools of diplomacy and politics. Particularly, food resources have emerged as vital strategic assets in international politics. Nations with surplus food resources employed exports, aid, and regulations to influence the political and diplomatic actions of other countries and to reshape their economic and industrial structures. During the Cold War, leveraging food resources to constrain the behavior of other nations was considered a privilege of agricultural powerhouses, which readily used this advantage to serve their own interests.

The U.S. provides a clear example of a country that strategically leveraged food resources during the Cold War. Through programs such as PL-480 (Food for Peace), it exported surplus agricultural products under the guise of aid, thereby increasing recipient nations' dependence.[2] This use of food diplomacy extended to coercive measures—such as soybean export restrictions against Japan and grain embargoes targeting the USSR and Poland.[3] Together, these cases demonstrate how surplus food functioned not merely as humanitarian aid, but as a calculated tool of economic influence, deepening global hierarchies and reinforcing the power of food-exporting nations.

The politicization and leverage of food resources are similarly evident in the world of *The Platform*. Prisoners on the upper floors, who gain power by virtue of their position, exercise this power over those on the lower floors for various purposes. Most upper-floor occupants compel lower-floor inmates to comply with

1 See J. S. Bajwa, "Defining Elements of Comprehensive National Power," *CLAWS Journal* 151 (2008): 155.

2 See Harriet Friedmann and Philip McMichael, "Agriculture and the State System: The Rise and Decline of National Agricultures, 1870 to the Present," *Sociologia ruralis* 2 (1989): 103-110.

3 See J. R. Tarrant, "Food as a Weapon? The Embargo on Grain Trade between USA and USSR," *Applied Geography* 4 (1981): 273-286; Vernon L. Sorenson, "International Policy Conflict: The Japanese Response to US Agricultural Export Embargoes," *Agribusiness* 5 (1988): 409-424.

their demands, often to assert dominance or simply for entertainment. Through these actions, they achieve a range of objectives, including threatening, suppressing, coercing, pressuring, negotiating, and even retaliating against those below. For example, even Goreng and Imoguiri, who aim to reform the system to ensure the fair distribution of food to all, resort to leveraging their "priority access" to food as a means to achieve their goal. They warn the lower-floor inmates that, unless food is properly rationed, it will be deliberately spoiled before it reaches the lower levels. This structural attribute of *The Platform* serves as an effective allegory, aptly reflecting the dynamics of international politics surrounding real-world food resources.

3.2 Ethical Dimensions of the Global Food Problem

3.2.1 Shifting the Focus from Ownership to Access and Usage Rights

The Platform restricts food-related rights to focus characters' decisions on ethical dimensions. One of the most distinctive features of *The Platform* compared to other dystopian worlds is the absence of "ownership." In *The Platform*, characters are strictly forbidden from "owning" food resources. If an individual attempts to hide or hoard food from the platform, the system retaliates by drastically adjusting the temperature, creating an environment where survival becomes impossible. This mechanism underscores that the food allocated to each floor is not an individual's absolute possession, but a conditional resource intended for sharing and consumption. Through this system, *The Platform* shifts the discussion of food resources from issues of "ownership" to those of "access" and "usage" rights.[1]

Thus, characters are not concerned with protecting or maintaining resources they own but must instead focus on how to exercise their temporarily granted "access" or "usage" rights. This structure intensifies the ethical conflicts caused by the unequal distribution of resources, compelling individuals on each floor to consider the impact of their actions on the survival of others. Ultimately, *The Platform* confronts its characters with moral dilemmas in an environment devoid of ownership rights, challenging them to decide how "ethically" to use limited resources. This setting highlights not merely the issue of resource scarcity but fundamentally examines human ethical and social attitudes toward resources.

1 Sen identifies four types of entitlement in a private ownership market economy: (1) trade-based entitlement, (2) production-based entitlement, (3) own-labour entitlement, and (4) inheritance and transfer entitlement. These entitlement relations frame individuals' legitimate access to food and other resources. In *The Platform*, however, the prohibition of food ownership and the system's violent enforcement mechanisms negate all such entitlements, making access to food a contingent, not institutionalized, right. See Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981, 2.

3.2.2 The Absence of "Legitimate Rights"

In *The Platform*, access and usage rights to food—the sole resource and source of power within the system—are distributed in a unique manner, representing one of the film's defining characteristics. Rather than relying on innate abilities, competition among characters, or evaluation of specific actions, *The Platform* employs a mechanism of "random allocation." In most dystopian narratives, access rights to food are typically granted to those who "first claim" or "earn" resources through competition. Securing access often requires actions such as "violence and plundering" or "negotiation and compromise." In such worlds, food access is portrayed as a product of meritocracy—a reward for individual effort or ability. This dynamic allows power structures to shift based on actions and character, enabling both fair distribution and monopolization, depending on circumstances.

In contrast, food access rights in *The Platform* are entirely unrelated to individual effort, achievement, or ability. Prisoners who enjoy priority access to intact food by residing on upper floors receive these rights arbitrarily, granted temporarily through the system's random allocation process. These rights are neither strengthened nor diminished over time; instead, they are reassigned when the system relocates prisoners to different floors after a fixed period. This configuration subverts the Lockean premise that underlies much of real-world property theory—including that of the global food system—namely, that ownership and its moral legitimacy are earned through individual labor.[1] In *The Platform*, food access is entirely decoupled from labor or merit, rendering such traditional justifications for property rights inapplicable. As a result, prisoners cannot generate or acquire these rights through their own actions; they can only exercise the rights temporarily granted to them.

This also means that once a right is granted, it cannot be forcibly taken by others through violence or trickery until the system reallocates floors. In this way, *The Platform* simplifies the ethical framework of dystopian narratives. While many dystopian stories explore a range of conflicts involving ownership, usage rights, and moral imperatives—gradually deepening these layers of conflict—*The Platform* completely eliminates the rationale for ownership. The "randomness" of access rights highlights that food resources are merely "given" rather than "earned" and underscores the fact that no one within "the Pit" possesses a "legitimate" right to the food resources, including ownership. This sharp focus shifts the ethical debate to the "attitudes" and "agreements" surrounding how subjects treat and use the resources

1 See John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government (New edition)*, London: Printed for Thomas Tegg, 1823, 116, 123.

provided to them.

4. Ethical Structure of *The Platform*: Boundary Test of Value Systems

Within the structure of *The Platform*, Goreng and others confront ethical dilemmas rooted in resource scarcity. Each individual's survival depends on their access to food, yet their actions inevitably affect others. From this tension emerges the central ethical knot of the narrative: "How should resources (food) be used?" This overarching question branches into more specific ethical concerns:1. Whose survival should be prioritized? 2. What constitutes fair distribution? 3. Should one attempt to pursue systemic change? 4. To what extent, and by what means, should one enforce their will? In this vertical testing ground for value systems, Goreng descends and ascends through various levels of "the Pit," encountering different ethical environments and evolving through relationships with three successive roommates. These encounters shape the ethical structure of the narrative through a sequence of ethical knots, where human values such as solidarity, survival, idealism, and sacrifice are tested under extreme conditions.

4.1 The Justification of Violence for Survival

Goreng's first roommate, Trimagasi, introduces him to the system of "the Pit" on the 48th floor. This initial phase sets up the basic parameters of the narrative's ethical inquiry: Is there enough food? How should it be managed? Can fairness be extended across levels? Can the structure be changed? These fundamental questions frame the baseline from which the narrative's ethical structure begins to unfold.

Trimagasi embodies a cynical, utilitarian worldview rooted in survivalist pragmatism. His tool of choice, a knife, symbolizes preemptive violence and instrumental reason—a material extension of his belief that ethical responsibility is nullified under conditions of scarcity. As a narrative device, the knife operates not just as a weapon but as a metaphor for the logic of reductive survival, where others are rendered expendable. This perspective is later enacted on floor 171, where Trimagasi attempts to harvest Goreng's body to survive.

Goreng, initially idealistic, is compelled to commit violent self-defense and cannibalism. This reluctant act marks his first rupture with ethical innocence and initiates the erosion of his preexisting moral framework. The moment constitutes the narrative's first major ethical knot: is it ethically permissible to kill for survival? As Nie explains, ethical knots are "the main manifestations of contradictions and conflicts" that surface ethical choices embedded in the narrative (220). Goreng's reluctant violence transforms him from passive observer to ethically implicated subject who must now reconstitute his selfhood under compromised moral

conditions.

4.2 The Fragility of Idealistic Solidarity without Structural Reform

On the 33rd floor, Goreng meets Imoguiri, whose belief in rational cooperation marks a shift toward idealistic solidarity. She promotes a moral economy wherein each person takes only what they need. This introduces the second major ethical knot: can cooperative ethics persist in a system designed to undermine them?

While Imoguiri's persuasion fails to generate reciprocity, her actions raise a secondary ethical knot: can non-human life hold equivalent ethical worth to human life under conditions of extreme scarcity? Her decision to share food with her dog, Ramses II—her permitted item—reflects an attempt at interspecies solidarity. However, this gesture, as Donna Haraway might argue, remains trapped in anthropocentric "bounded ethics" that fail to foster genuine multispecies kinship, lacking the structural disruption necessary to enact true "making kin" (102-103). Ramses II's eventual death—due to violating the no-hoarding rule—exposes the limits of this liberal humanist gesture. Without systemic backing, symbolic actions cannot alter embedded injustice.

Imoguiri's failure culminates on the 202nd floor, where extreme scarcity leads her to suicide. Her death constitutes another ethical turning point, demonstrating that good intentions alone are insufficient within violent, structural inequality. As Haraway emphasizes, "sympoiesis"—collective becoming—requires more than isolated moral will[1]; it must be sustained by a shared structural ethic of collaborative survival. Imoguiri's tragic end forces Goreng to revise his approach, now understanding that ethical persuasion must be coupled with coercive intervention. Her legacy lies in revealing the inadequacy of symbolic gestures in the face of structural oppression.

4.3 Collective Resistance and the Ethics of Coercion

Baharat, introduced on the 6th floor, represents another ethical turning point. Initially intent on escaping the system, his failed attempt to ascend is thwarted by those above, reaffirming the futility of personal salvation in a vertically oppressive order. This becomes a new ethical knot[2] that reframes the existing dilemma: should one escape injustice or resist it from within?

Goreng persuades Baharat to descend instead, reframing their purpose toward systemic intervention. This decision marks a shift from individual survival to

1 See Donna J. Haraway, "Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene," *Staying with the Trouble*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2016, 58-61.

2 Ethical knots can be produced during the forming process of the text. See Nie Zhenzhao, "Ethical Literary Criticism: A Basic Theory," *Forum for World Literature Studies* 2 (2021): 192.

collective resistance, redefining ethical agency as embedded in solidarity rather than self-preservation. Their descent becomes a symbolic journey through successive minor ethical knots—discrete yet cumulative tests of moral reasoning and value prioritization. Each floor becomes a site of moral deliberation: how much food should be shared? When is coercion justified? Can justice be enforced without reproducing systemic violence?

Their armed resistance to hoarding is not an action out of survival instinct or mere vengeance but an ethical strategy oriented toward redistributive justice.[1] Baharat's abandonment of his escape goal in favor of a higher collective purpose signifies the narrative's structural transition from survivalism to sacrificial ethics. As Nie observes, the ethical line "links all the ethical knots in the formation of ethical structure" (220), and this descent—their moral trajectory—culminates in the film's climactic ethical confrontation.

4.4 Intergenerational Responsibility and the Ethics of Sacrifice

Upon reaching the 333rd floor—the very bottom of the vertical system—Goreng and Baharat discover a child, previously thought nonexistent. The child, silent and vulnerable, represents not only the weakest participant in the current resource distribution system but also a symbolic embodiment of future generations. Her position at the lowest level of the structure reflects the ethical hierarchy imposed by the present, in which future lives have the least access to survival and are entirely dependent on the ethical decisions made by those above. Her existence challenges the final ethical knot which transcends immediate survival dilemmas and raises a deeper intergenerational question: can the present generation act ethically to safeguard the future?

Sending the child upward becomes a symbolic act, not a pragmatic solution. Her ascent conveys an ethical message. Goreng's decision to remain behind while Baharat dies in the descent marks the final ethical transformation: relinquishing self-preservation in favor of moral transmission. Nie notes that literature teaches by presenting "illustrations of ethical choices," which are not reducible to moral rules but rather serve as instructive examples of how to live responsibly (166). Goreng's departure from "the Pit"—and from the narrative—marks the fulfillment of this ethical instruction: it is not survival that completes his journey, but the transmission of ethical value through symbolic action.

The child becomes both the messenger and the message. Her upward journey

1 These natural will, free will, and rational will compose what Nie calls "Sphinx Factor," revealing the process of ethical evolution of the two characters. See Nie Zhenzhao, "Ethical Literary Criticism: Sphinx Factor and Ethical Selection," *Forum for World Literature Studies* 3 (2021): 383.

functions as a test of the viewer's conscience: will humanity act on behalf of those who cannot act for themselves? This act, though ambiguous in outcome, concludes the film's ethical structure with a final question—not who survives, but who chooses to act ethically across time and power.

Conclusion

This article has examined *The Platform* as an ethical allegory of global food distribution, arguing that its vertical narrative structure and symbolic economy foreground moral dilemmas of scarcity, access, and intergenerational responsibility. Drawing on Nie's ethical literary criticism, the analysis demonstrated how the film's spatial design, institutional rules, and symbolic logic together construct an "ethical structure" that reflects and distorts real-world food injustice.

Each analytical section has demonstrated how the film distills structural inequalities into an enclosed vertical system that amplifies the moral consequences of unequal access. *The platform*'s design subverts key principles found in liberal political philosophy, particularly the Lockean notion that ownership arises from labor. In *The Platform*, there is no continuity of labor, production, or private ownership—only consumption regulated by institutional fiat. The removal of ownership and redistribution based on random allocation destabilizes any merit-based logic, forcing viewers to confront a world where moral action cannot be justified through entitlement, desert, or productivity.

This world thus operates as both a reflection and an exaggeration of contemporary global asymmetries: it mirrors the arbitrariness of birth and nationality in determining food access, while eliminating mechanisms—such as governance, law, or markets—that might otherwise provide accountability or redress. The film thus serves not only as a dystopian commentary on food injustice, but also as a narrative model for investigating the moral architecture of systems shaped by inequality and impunity. By placing ethical decision-making at the center of a highly structured yet absurd system, *The Platform* invites viewers and scholars alike to confront how ethical agency operates when all structural incentives discourage moral action.

This study contributes to ethical literary criticism in two principal ways. First, it shifts the critical focus from individual moral choice to the structural conditions that shape or constrain ethical agency. By constructing a fictional world that reflects global inequality while subverting liberal assumptions—such as property through labor and meritocratic distribution—*The Platform* raises questions not only about who chooses, but under what conditions choice is possible. Second, this study

demonstrates the framework's relevance beyond written texts, extending it to a visual, commercial dystopia. In doing so, it expands ethical literary criticism into contemporary cultural production, showing that moral philosophy can be explored through cinematic world-building.

Nevertheless, several areas warrant further research. First, while the analysis has focused specifically on food as the key contested resource, other dystopian narratives foreground vital goods such as water, energy, or information—each with its own moral implications. Future research might examine how such variations in resource regimes generate different ethical conflicts. Second, while this article has addressed the ethical architecture encoded within narrative structures, future work might explore the role of affective reception and audience response. Further research should consider how fictional worlds that suspend or invert real-world moral assumptions operate ethically not only within the diegesis but also in their emotional and ethical impact on viewers. Addressing such gaps through future research could offer deeper insight into how dystopian narratives that allegorically mirror systemic injustice foster more critical reflection on the ethical structures underpinning contemporary global systems.

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