Rollerball is a story of violence – the story of Jonathan E, a violent and destructive man whose actions are condoned and permitted by the society he lives in because they are expressed as sport – and it is a sport that is enjoyed by millions of spectators. The film is about controlled violence, between trained, prepared men, all Rollerball players, all of whom choose to participate in the game’s circus of carnage. And the men’s brutal Rollerball games are broadcast across the world in an attempt to satisfy its viewers’ own violent urges, and to prevent them from engaging in interpersonal aggression themselves.

Rollerball is a game played in a science fictional year 2018. It combines elements of present-day games such as ice hockey, motorcycle racing, American football and roller derby to create a new sport. The field of play is a bowl-shaped circular track (like those used in modern day cycle racing); the object of the game: to put the ball into the other team’s goal; the challenge: the ball shoots into play at the top edge of the track at a speed of 200 miles an hour... As a Rollerball player, the stakes are high; there is the other team: like you, they comprise ten men on roller skates and motorcycles; like you, their “kit” is lethal spiked gloves, heavy body armouring, black leather and gladiator-style protective helmets. And like you, they’ll go to any lengths of violence to get possession of the ball – including murder.

Rollerball is a game supervised by government. State government is no longer the norm, now a global authority rules. Six world-spanning corporations use Rollerball’s vicarious violence to reinforce their world domination, a device to channel the populace’s instincts into team support. The six corporations, each purporting to serve a human need, are named Food, Housing, Energy, Luxury, Communications and Transport. Rollerball is the story of one man’s fight against this corporate system that decides the fate and destiny of a world. Rollerball, and the world existing around it, is the creation of William Harrison. A Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Arkansas, and a regularly published fiction writer, Harrison originally expressed the idea of this dangerous game in a 6000 word short story published in the September 1973 issue of the U.S. magazine Esquire. Its original title (and the name of the game) was Roller Ball Murder. Harrison had the idea for the story after a college basketball game which erupted into a fist fight. After the game, he debated with friends just how far violence in sport could develop. His story presents one extreme possibility. Brimming with ideas and a well-realised scenario for such a short narrative, the original story is vivid and inventive. Written in the first person, it is one player’s record of survival in the competitive ordeal that is Rollerball. Jonathan E is one of the very best players, and his story is a chronicle of changing times as Rollerball gradually becomes less and less acceptable as sport (but more and more popular) when there is a series of...
breakdowns in the rules. Each time the rules are changed, the game becomes more violent, concern for the players’ welfare deteriorates to almost nothing, and Rollerball becomes close to anarchy.

The story ends with Jonathan E preparing to play in his worst match yet, sure to be a bloodbath—there are to be no time limits, four dangerously bouncing oval balls in play simultaneously, and penalties that will leave players without their helmets, defenseless.

Enter producer-director Norman Jewison. Jewison, born in Canada in 1926, saw Roller Ball Murder in Esquire and was attracted by the twin themes of violence in sport and the struggle of the individual against the corporate system. He contacted the writer. Harrison consented to a film, and agreed to write the screenplay.

Rollerball was to be Jewison’s twelfth film, and before it he had an impressive list of achievements, both artistically and financially. The Cincinatti Kid(1965) and The Russians are Coming, the Russians are Coming(1966) were two of Jewison’s early successful films. Then, in 1967, he made in the Heat of the Night, the famous thriller with the story that is heavy with inter-racial tension. Starring Rod Steiger (in his most memorable role as a bigoted white cop) and Sidney Poitier (as an ambiguous young black detective), the film won four Academy Awards, including Best Picture, Best Actor (Steiger) and Best Screenplay (adapted by Stirling Silliphant from the novel by John Ball). Jewison was also nominated for an Oscar for his direction, but Mike Nichols won for The Graduate.

The Thomas Crown Affair(1968) was Jewison’s next picture, the story of a bored millionaire, played by Steve McQueen, whose escapades into bank robbery lead him deeper into trouble when he comes face to face with insurance investigator Faye Dunaway. Jewison’s last two films before Rollerball were both adaptations of stage musicals. Fiddler on the Roof (1971), a big financial success, won John William, his first Oscar, for Best Score, an Oscar for Oswald Morris’s photography, and another nomination for Jewison. Jesus Christ Superstar (1973), based on Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber’s famous work, had a somewhat mixed and less positive response.

With a $5 million budget from United Artists (a great deal of money for an SF picture at the time), Jewison went to work on Rollerball using some of the finest talent available. Living and working in England at that time, Jewison was quoted as saying that he believed British film technicians to be amongst the best in the world, and his choice of production personnel reflects this. For
Director of Photography, he chose Douglas Slocombe, who had worked on many Ealing classics, and who had just won Best Cinematographer Award from the British Society of Cinematographers for his work on Jesus Christ Superstar. The film’s Costume Designer was Julie Harris, who began more than 30 years of work in the film industry at Gainsborough Studios, and later worked on such films as Help!, A Hard Day’s Night and Live and Let Die. The musical director was Andre Previn, blending works by renowned classical composers such as Shostakovich, J.S. Bach and Johann Strauss into the score and conducting the London Symphony Orchestra for the soundtrack recording.

The Production Designer for Rollerball was John Box. Box is an experienced Hollywood professional whose work outside production design includes producing one feature (John Le Carré’s The Looking Glass War), and second unit directing on several others. But his major accomplishments have been in the design of whole films (often massive productions), for which he has won four Oscars – for Doctor Zhivago, Lawrence of Arabia, Oliver! and Nicholas and Alexandra. Box was quoted about his involvement in the making of Rollerball: “When Director Norman Jewison first called me on Rollerball (which was about four months before filming started), we both agreed that we should avoid using any props or gadgets that would make our film look like a James Bond movie. And because the time period is just forty years into the future, we didn’t want to completely ignore the present, which will obviously still be with us in many forms.” In fact, while in London the movie-makers consulted with the BBC programme Tomorrow’s World for some realistic insight into future technology. Box continues: “One of my most immediate and complicated challenges was to create the physical setting for the completely new game, Rollerball. In William Harrison’s original magazine short story, and even in his subsequent screenplay, the Rollerball arena was described in only the most general terms. We started with the idea that it had to be a circular bevelled hardwood track on which skaters and motorbikes could perform at high speeds.” Eventually, with the assistance of Herbert Schuman, the world’s foremost architect of cycle tracks, the Rollerball stadium was designed and built in Munich.

Appropriate talents were similarly chosen in casting for the film. The lead role of Jonathan E. was taken by James Caan, a professional actor who had appeared in nearly 20 films. Born in 1939, Caan worked in theatre and television before he began his film career in 1963. His big break came in 1971, when he starred as Sonny Corleone, the quick-tempered son who takes over the family in Francis Ford Coppola’s The Godfather. Just prior to Rollerball, Caan starred in several pictures that consolidated his status as a major star, including Freebie and the Bean, The Gambler, The Godfather Part II and Funny Lady.

Another major casting success was for the role of Bartholomew, Jonathan E’s boss and head of Energy Corporation. John Houseman was an excellent choice to play the character of the aging, eccentric man of power. Originally a Hollywood film producer in the 1940s, working first with Orson Welles on Citizen Kane and then with David Selznick Productions, Houseman turned to acting late in life. He did well at it, winning a Best Supporting Actor Oscar when nearly 70 for his performance in The Paper Chase in 1973.

Shooting on Rollerball took place in 1974 in Munich and London. Eight weeks were spent shooting the Rollerball sequences on an often dangerous set in Munich. Several stunt men were injured, some seriously, and there were times when former footballer James Caan had to be restrained from doing some of his character’s more dangerous stunts. Then six weeks were spent at Pinewood Studios near London shooting the remainder of the picture.

The world portrayed in the movie as it finally appears is close to that of the short story – the game, the characters, the corporations are the same; only the scenes have changed.

Off the track, the film follows the clash between Jonathan E and the corporations. Jonathan plays for Houston, a team run by
the Energy Corporation, one of the most successful teams in the interconglomerate sport. The corporations are frightened of Jonathan E's power as the best Rollerball player ever, and want him to quit the game. But Jonathan wants to maintain his position and status as a player, and at the same time he is trying to find some answers - what is the origin of the game? What was life like before the Corporation Wars? And why do the corporations want him out of the game?

But it is the excitement of three Rollerball matches that dominate the film, building up game by game to a conclusive final. The matches are colourful with violence, in true cinematic style: the silver glint off metal weapons; the black leather and bright orange of the players' kits; the soft yellow of the wooden track; and the glaring redness of the blood. The Rollerball track becomes akin to a gladiatorial arena.

The movie was released in the United States in June 1975, and though critical response was negative, the movie was fairly popular, containing the vital ingredients of colourful action and a professional and well-crafted production. In its initial release period in the U.S. and Canada, the film earned back $9 million, an acceptable return before re-releases, television and foreign sales.

Critical comment centred on the script, felt by many to be too abstract, with the lead character not appearing to take enough direction in his life. Also criticised was the film's presentation of women, all of whom appear dependent and uncaringly manipulated by men.

When the film was released in the U.K. later in 1975, it had much more of a rave reaction. Perhaps it was the violence (even though more than four minutes were cut for the censor) that surprised British audiences, not conditioned by the night-after-night "true life" and fictionalised violence that is part of the staple diet of the American television networks.

The film was released on video in the U.K. in 1980 by Intervision Video; William Harrison's 1975 collection of short stories, Rollerball, included, along with twelve others, his original story from Esquire; and a soundtrack album was also released.

After Rollerball, Norman Jewison continued directing and producing (though he has made no more s.f. films). He made F.I.S.T., starring Sylvester Stallone, and... and Justice for All, with Al Pacino. He also acted as Executive Producer on The Dogs of War, based of Frederick Forsyth's bestselling novel. His latest film is Best Friends, starring Burt Reynolds and Goldie Hawn.

I enjoyed Rollerball. It's an exciting, violent action film that makes good sf cinema. James Caan acts well as the physical competitor who survives everything that's thrown at him - a winner. And he performs equally well off-track as the sensitive individual searching for meaning. John Houseman is very good as the monotonic old corporation boss. But it is Ralph Richardson who steals part of the movie in his delightful cameo as the caretaker of the computer which contains the knowledge culled from all the books ever written. At one stage, when it seems the computer has lost the entire 13th Century, Richardson kicks the machine. "Not much in that century," he says, "Just Dante and a few corrupt Popes. Still ..."

Rollerball is filled with destruction, and it's attractive destruction, if you like that sort of thing. But the message is clear: How far will we encourage legitimised violence in order that we can get our own second-hand enjoyment out of it?

Rollerball (1975)
James Caan (as Jonathan E), John Houseman (Bartholomew), Maud Adams (Ella), John Beck (Moonpie), Moses Gunn (Cletus), Pamela Hensley (Mackie), Barbara Trentham (Daphne), Ralph Richardson (Librarian), Shane Rimmer (Team Executive).

Produced and directed by Norman Jewison, Screenplay by William Harrison, Production design by John Box, Art director Robert Laing, Track architect Herbert Schurman, Music director Andre Previn, Costumes by Julie Harris, Stunt coordinator Max Kleven, Skating coordinator Peter Hicks, Photographed by Douglas Slocombe, Edited by Anthony Gibbs, Special effects by Sass, Bedig, John Richardson and Joe Fitt, Makeup by Wally Schneiderman, Associate producer Patrick Palmer.

Time: 129 minutes