

Between the Sleep and the Dream of Reason: Dystopian Science Fiction Cinema

In 1799, Francisco Goya published *Los Caprichos*, a collection of eighty aquatinted etchings satirising “the innumerable foibles and follies to be found in any civilized society, and . . . the common prejudices and deceitful practices which custom, ignorance, or self-interest have made usual.”¹ The most famous of them, “Capricho 43,” depicts a writer, slumped on his desk, while behind him strange creatures – a large cat, owls that shade into bats – emerge from the encompassing gloom. It is called “El sueño de la razón produce monstruos,” which is usually translated as “the sleep of reason produces monsters,” but could as easily be rendered “the dream of reason produces monsters.” In that ambiguous space – between reason’s slumber unleashing unreason and reason becoming all that there is – dystopia lies.

In 1868, John Stuart Mill coined the word “dystopia” in a parliamentary speech denouncing British government policy in Ireland. Combining the Greek *dys* (bad) and *topos* (place), it plays on Thomas More’s “utopia,” itself a Greek pun: “*ou*” plus “*topos*” means “nowhere,” but “*ou*” sounds like “*eu*,” which means “good,” so the name More gave to the island invented for his 1516 book, *Utopia*, suggests that it is also a “good place.” It remains unclear whether More actually intended readers to consider his imaginary society, set somewhere in the Americas, as better than 16th century England. But it is certainly organized upon radically different lines. Private property and unemployment (but not slavery) have been abolished. Communal dining, legalized euthanasia, simple divorces, religious tolerance and a kind of gender equality have been introduced. And gold is treated as worthless. While dystopia has no equivalent foundational text, *Utopia* shows the intimate connections between these apparently opposed ways of thinking about the world. In the first half of the book, More criticizes dystopian aspects of contemporary European and English society, including warmongering, wasteful monarchs and the enclosure of common land. It is only in the second half that he describes utopia—a society whose eutopian characteristics imply other dystopian aspects of the Old World, from its irrational social arrangements to the lust for gold unleashed by the discovery of the New World.

Nowadays, eutopia and dystopia are generally considered to be subsets of science fiction (sf), a genre which in part developed from, and then mostly subsumed, them. However, as Ernst Bloch’s work on the philosophy of hope argues, eutopian traces can be found in all manner of cultural texts and practices, from religions, fairy tales and dreams to sports, music, and love. The same is surely true of dystopia, so some of the examples discussed in this essay might challenge preconceptions of where exactly the boundaries of sf lie. What all these types of fiction have in common is a deliberate, systematic and radical simplification of the world’s complexity so that, by giving greater prominence to certain factors, a critical perspective on our own world can be elaborated.

In the case of eutopia, the new society is generated by selecting particular basic principles, rationally extrapolating social, political and economic structures from them and, in the best examples, fleshing out this blueprint with characters and narrative. With the exception of mythical realms—Golden Ages, Gardens of Eden, Lands of Cockayne, Big Rock Candy Mountains—eutopias are always the product of conscious design. Whether in fiction, experimental communities or social planning, it is generally accepted that eutopia cannot arise by chance (the key contemporary exception is found among neo-liberals, free-marketeers and their ilk, who like to pretend that capitalism is a naturally-occurring rather than man-made system, and that if unregulated it would inevitably produce a better world). Dystopias, on the other hand, can be deliberate, accidental, or both. There are four basic kinds.

First, there are societies intentionally constructed to be worse than our own, such as the totalitarian regimes depicted in the three classic novels that continue to dominate the

dystopian imagination: Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1924), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four* (1949). Dystopias of this kind are also often satires on our own world. Orwell's novel is simultaneously an attack on Stalinism and an exaggerated version of post-war austerity Britain; *SNOWPIERCER* (Bong Joon Ho, South Korea/Czech Republic/US/France, 2013) connects the privilege of the First World and the one percent to the immiseration of the Third World and the ninety-nine percent, as well as to anthropogenic climate change. Of course, such fictions—other recent examples include *GATTACA* (Andrew Niccol, US, 1997), *CODE 46* (Michael Winterbottom, UK, 2003), *IN TIME* (Andrew Niccol, US, 2011) and *ELYSIUM* (Neill Blomkamp, US, 2013)—also represent eutopia for the minority in whose favor they operate. Thus they pose an implicit critique of eutopian thinking. Who gets to decide the nature of the ideal society? For whose benefit is it to be built?

Second, there are depictions of worlds in which miserable conditions—poverty, pollution, war, ecological devastation, and so on—are obviously the product of human activity but as side-effects rather than directly intended consequences. Often such fictions refuse to think about systemic causes, instead blaming it all on some nebulous notion of a violent and barbarous “human nature.” In this kind of dystopian setting, the state and/or corporations typically intervene to produce a dystopia of the first sort, as seen in *A CLOCKWORK ORANGE* (Stanley Kubrick, UK/US, 1971), *ROBOCOP* (Paul Verhoeven, US, 1987) and *SOUTHLAND TALES* (Richard Kelly, France/Germany/US, 2006). (“Dystopia” has sadly almost entirely displaced “cacotopia,” Jeremy Bentham’s 1818 coinage; it comes from the Greek *kakós*, which means “bad” or “evil,” which is in turn derived from a proto-Indo-European word *kakke* meaning “shit,” which often seems more appropriate.)

Third, there are anti-utopias created as more or less direct responses to earlier utopian visions. For example, Huxley was as much concerned with satirizing HG Wells’s utopias as with his own dyspeptic inflations of contemporary social trends. Similarly, the politically complex interstellar future of *Babylon 5* (1993–98), partly shaped by the break up of Yugoslavia, was a critique of the *Star Trek* franchise’s rather bland setting; the increasing darkness of *Star Trek Deep Space Nine* (1993–99) was a response to this challenge.

François Truffaut’s *FAHRENHEIT 451* (UK, 1966) should also be understood in this way. Based on Ray Bradbury’s dystopian 1953 novel about a world in which books are banned and firemen no longer put out fires but burn books, *FAHRENHEIT 451* is not so much an adaptation as a critical riposte. Bradbury is often lauded as one of the giants of mid-twentieth-century American sf, but in the 1950s he was often criticized by sf writers, critics and fans for his essentially irrational worldview, which privileged simple, childish images and questionable nostalgia over reason, technology, science, and logic. Truffaut notes in his journals his growing awareness of Bradbury’s prepubescent imagination, and presents it as such in the finished film: the fire engines look like children’s toys, the cadet fireman come across as naughty schoolboys, and the novel’s queer unconscious is brought to the fore several times. The main recurring criticism of Truffaut concerns his representation of the book people, the tribe of vagrants who memorize entire books so as to preserve them for future generations. At the end of the film, he depicts them not as “a living library and arsenal for future revolutionaries” but as “zombies” circling “in the snow endlessly intoning the world’s literature.”ⁱⁱⁱ This supposed failure is the result of Truffaut’s different understanding of literature. While Bradbury’s bibliophiles treat books as if they are fixed works, products of solitary genius, possessed of a single meaning that can be stored, retransmitted and always mean the same thing to everyone, Truffaut approaches books as socially-constructed, complex, intertextual, polyphonic, unstable and ambiguous texts. This is evident in the way he textures his film with allusions to Alfred Hitchcock and others, and with quick cuts and

long takes, reversed footage, superimpositions, slow-motion, negative images, jump cuts, irises, split screens, and so on. These techniques break the illusion of the isolated text, disrupt the easy flow of continuity editing, and render the flat screen more lively.

More recently, Kurt Wimmer's *EQUILIBRIUM* (US, 2002) takes *Fahrenheit 451*'s core idea—that books are too dangerous to be tolerated—and, to Bradbury's likely chagrin, extends it to include not only other works of art but all entertainment forms. Indeed, all commodities—except for the drab overalls and minimalist Scandinavian furniture necessary to depict a fictional world—are deemed too dangerous to be tolerated because of their ability to provoke emotions. On the one hand, it mocks Bradbury's peculiar championing of literature (whose own taste is *dépassé*, anti-intellectual and, at best, middlebrow); on the other, it recognizes how profoundly we relate to and through cultural artifacts, however debased they might seem.

The fourth kind of dystopia is not unrelated. It consists of the horrified reaction you might feel to someone else's image of eutopia, of reading it against the grain. For example, when you side with *Star Trek*'s inhuman Borg collective—at least they are honest about what they do—against the smug, self-satisfied United Federation of Planets, blind to its own colonial ambitions and dedicated to the tedious, internalized micromanagement of the self. Another, perhaps more common, example can be found in the discomfiting eutopian conclusion of William Cameron Menzies' *THINGS TO COME* (UK, 1936). After a decades-long war and a devastating plague have thrown the entire world into barbarism, a new civilization emerges in Basra. An organization of scientists and engineers called Wings Over the World, using fleets of massive airplanes, a pacifying gas and other new technologies, bring law, order and trade to the scattered, isolated tribes and townships that remain, unifying them into a single world order. WOtW vows to stamp out all that nonsense about nations and flags, to maintain the peace, and to tear the resources out of the Earth and exploit them for the good of all; not an ounce of this natural wealth is to be squandered on war or in inefficient capitalist competition. Menzies uses cutting edge special effects in a stunning five-minute montage sequence, choreographed to a score by Arthur Bliss, to depict the construction of a eutopian Everytown—a towering subterranean city, airy, pristine and light—inside a newly hollowed out hill. It is magnificent. However, the ordered ranks of WOtW paratroops, the monumental architecture, the emphasis on rational design and the mastery of nature all reek of totalitarianism. Furthermore, to judge by Everytown's population 100 years in the future, there must have been a program of class and ethnic cleansing, so as to bequeath the city, the planet and the future to only the most priggish white bourgeois denizens of the English home counties. And to make matters even worse, it now all looks rather too much like a shopping mall.

Before *Metropolis*

Cinematic dystopias really begin with Fritz Lang's *METROPOLIS* (Germany, 1927), a film to which this essay will repeatedly return. However, there are, earlier films that point towards dystopia. From France, there is Jean Durand's trick film *ONÉSIME HORLOGER* (1912). The protagonist, unwilling to wait decades for his inheritance, interferes with Paris's central clock, making time pass more quickly. Undercranked footage produces a series of comic scenes: in a department store, customers try on garment after garment with great speed; builders throw up and decorate a wall in moments; a honeymooning couple race into the bedroom, and seconds later emerge with a baby that becomes a full-grown adult as it is dandled on its father's knee. An intertitle claims that this acceleration has made life "more beautiful." However, that is not the sense given by the speeded-up footage of Parisians propelled through the city streets at a breakneck pace. They are subject to a force over which they have no control, driven relentlessly without pause. In the 1880s, a single national time

was imposed on the UK in order to schedule the railways; in the 1890s, American factories began to introduce time cards, making workers clock in and out of shifts. Such measures rationalized and instrumentalized time for the purpose of capitalist accumulation. By emphasizing the domination of everyday life by a speeded up clock, Durand offers an estranged view of this world in which time has effectively become money. A decade later, René Clair's *PARIS QUI DORT* (1923) reverses this effect when a mad scientist puts the entire city to sleep, freezing everyone and everything in place. For the handful of people unaffected, this does not turn Paris into a ghastly mausoleum but a playground and a treasure trove; the worst thing they suffer is boredom. However, their ennui is so overwhelming as to suggest that Durand's intertitle was right, and that motion, acceleration, and circulation alone can provide fulfillment.

From Denmark, August Blom's *VERDENS UNDERGANG* (1916) uses an apocalyptic threat—an approaching comet will destroy all life on Earth—to foreground existing social conflicts. Workers, utterly disgusted with the excesses of a decadent, reveling bourgeoisie, finally rise up against a class who manipulated news of the inevitable impact to make (rather pointless) financial killings. Holger Madsen's pacifist *HIMMELSKIBET*—made in 1917 but unreleased until the end of the First World War—depicts a classically inspired telepathic, fruitarian eutopia on Mars. The intention is to imply that Earth is, in contrast, dystopian, but the rather joyless Martian civilization now seems merely camp.

From the Soviet Union, Jakov Protazonov's *AELITA* (USSR, 1924) dismisses the exciting romance of aiding workers overthrow bloody Martian feudalism in favor of the mundane and grinding labor of building a Bolshevik eutopia on Earth. But somehow the film's heart is just not in it. The red planet's revolution is not a flowering of interplanetary socialism—as promised in the same year's animated short *MEZHPLANETNAYA REVOLYUTSIA*, directed by Nikolai Khodataev, Zenon Komissarenko, and Youry Merkulov—but a trick played on the workers by the eponymous queen, who is scheming to usurp the throne. However, *AELITA*'s constructivist sets and costumes, signifying the exotic, alien modernity of Mars, are far too fabulous. Consequently, deploring the Martian aristocracy is just that little bit too hard and, despite the brutality of their regime, the planet never really comes into focus as a dystopia (and at the end it turns out to have all been a dream anyway). Meanwhile, the terrestrial struggle to build a new world is just a little too grim, and the film's conscious deferral of eutopia cannot help but gesture towards the dystopian elements of the fledgling Soviet Union, themselves a complex product of the oppressive society fashioned under Czarism and of the troubled Bolshevik efforts to build something different.

From Germany, Lang's own two-part film *DR. MABUSE, DER SPIELER* (1922) depicts a more-or-less contemporary Berlin as the product of deranged social forces, embodied by his eponymous power-crazed villain. Law and order has collapsed, stock market manipulation brings ruin on the country, and Mabuse's henchmen and hit men institute a reign of terror. It is sometimes claimed that the film originally started with a montage depicting a socialist revolution violently suppressed by right-wing thugs in cahoots with the state, recalling the 1918 Spartacist uprising, murderously crushed by the Freikorps. If it existed, this prologue, implying that social conditions would lead to future repetitions of such events, was promptly eliminated from all prints and subsequently lost. Consequently, the film presents a nightmarish distortion of the Weimar period rather than an unambiguously extrapolated dystopian future of the sort we find in *METROPOLIS*.

The Green Space, the City and the Insufferable Bourgeoisie

METROPOLIS stands out from these earlier efforts because of Lang's construction of an entire future city that fills every frame of the film and seems to have no exterior. Typically,

dystopian texts imagine a green space of some sort, usually beyond the bounds of the city and free of its apparatuses of surveillance and enforcement, into which a couple, who have become romantically or sexually involved during the course of the story, can flee. The force of this convention, seen in films as various as *LOGAN'S RUN* (Michael Anderson, US, 1976), *28 DAYS LATER...* (Danny Boyle, UK, 2002), *CYPHER* (Vincenzo Natali, US/Canada, 2002) and *I AM LEGEND* (Francis Lawrence, US, 2007), is sufficiently powerful to explain the much-derided ending of the original *BLADE RUNNER* (Ridley Scott, US/UK/HK, 1982). It makes complete sense, generically, for the film to close with Deckard and the replicant Rachel flying out of the grimy, noirish future Los Angeles into a pristine, green mountainous landscape; tonally, however, it is quite wrong.

This convention also shapes the unsettling “eutopian” conclusions of some films. In *DARK CITY* (Alex Proyas, Australia/US, 1998), Murdoch, finally outside of the city walls and heading towards the semi-mythical Shell Beach, knowingly starts up a relationship with the woman he loves even though her memory has been wiped and her “original” personality, which may itself have been artificial, completely rewritten. At the end of *OBLIVION* (Joseph Kosinski, US, 2013), the rebel forces present Victoria and her daughter with a physically identical clone of Jack and they welcome him as if he is the same person. While such unthought-through complications can create a disturbing dissonance, some films consciously work against this convention. In *THX 1138* (George Lucas, US, 1971), the eponymous protagonist escapes alone and, after an arduous journey, emerges from the subterranean dystopia—but into a sun-blasted desert. *BRAZIL* (Terry Gilliam, UK, 1985) ends with Sam and Jill fleeing into the countryside, only for this apparent dénouement to be reframed as a delusion, the product of a psychotic break experienced by Sam while he is being tortured. *BLADE RUNNER: THE DIRECTOR'S CUT* (Ridley Scott, US/UK/HK, 1991) ends ominously with a lift door closing, entombing Deckard and Rachel in an uncertain future.

METROPOLIS implies an urban future so extended in space as to be metrocosm: the city is all there is; there is no outside or alternative; it is in effect the entire universe. Its monumental architecture, reputedly inspired by the Manhattan skyline, overwhelms. Individuals are lost in the masses populating its vast built spaces, and those masses are rendered insignificant by its sheer scale. Not all space in the metrocosm is equal, though. Lang demonstrates the ways in which cities spatialize social and economic class, and in which class continues to shape our urban environments. In Lang's city, the ruling elite live above ground. Their sons practice athletics with fruity vibrancy in immense stadia. They enjoy the sexual ministrations of elaborately, exotically and only partially dressed women (their fanciful costumes imply that the entire global history of fashion is available for plunder, for reworking with the revealing touches one might expect of Weimar nightclub sauciness). In contrast, the workers live far underground, in featureless tenement blocks built in artificially illuminated caverns. Bearing in mind the way that the physical structure of this vertical city embodies class hierarchy, it is worth noting that, at the end of each ten-hour shift the elevators take the workers back *down* to their homes—that is, they live beneath even the machines.

The erotic possibilities enjoyed by *METROPOLIS*'s elite are denied the oddly sexless inhabitants of the utopias and dystopias in *JUST IMAGINE* (David Butler, US, 1930), *THINGS TO COME*, *ZARDOZ* (John Boorman, Ireland/US, 1974) and *A BOY AND HIS DOG* (LQ Jones, US, 1975). More recently, in *ELYSIUM*, the ruling class live in palatial but dull suburbs on a giant orbiting space station. Sadly, the film lacks the necessary bite to turn their blithe, mostly-white nuclear families into an effective satire on contemporary gated communities, the privilege and cultural homogeneity they reproduce, or the self-righteous indifference they breed. A clearer sense of rigorously enforced oppressive sameness is found in Don Siegel's *INVASION OF THE BODYSNATCHERS* (US, 1956). Set in a suburban small-town that is being systematically taken over by alien seed pods which replace the

inhabitants with emotionless facsimiles, it is often seen as being about the threat of communist infiltration. The film itself, however, seems more concerned with the development of post-war commodity culture (the live band has been replaced by a juke box, a small independent store closes down), and with reproduction and the policing of sexual morality. The divorced protagonist, Dr. Miles Bennell, comes back from a conference to discover that his college sweetheart, Becky, has returned to her hometown after the failure of her own marriage. These sexually active but unmarried adults immediately fall into each other's company: in the middle of the night, wearing just pajamas and a robe, Miles bursts into Becky's bedroom and carries her off to his house; she looks very at home in the morning, wearing a borrowed shirt and cooking his breakfast. When these (mild) sexual dissidents, the only townfolk capable of emotion, discover what is going on, they must flee a mob of their eerily conformist neighbors. Briefly separated from each other on the outskirts of town, Miles does not realize that Becky has been replaced. But when he kisses her, he pulls back in revulsion at the passionless thing she has become: "I didn't know the real meaning of fear until I kissed Becky."

Psychosexual material that cannot be expressed openly lends Siegel's film a dream logic. Made under a different censorship regime, David Cronenberg's *SHIVERS* (Canada, 1975) shows little of this restraint. In *Starliner Towers*, a luxury apartment development outside of Montreal, far from declining urban centers, bourgeois eutopia is disrupted by a man-made parasite. Part aphrodisiac, it unleashes the libido of the infected; part venereal disease, it is transmitted by sexual contact. As the building descends into orgiastic chaos, shifting the balance between id, ego and superego, so Cronenberg abandons the classical shot compositions that established the rational ordering of this built space. The film ends with the radically transformed post-human tenants dispersing into the city, and beyond, taking the parasite with them. *INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS* leaves little doubt that, despite their promise of a more rational world, the pod people must be stopped. More ambiguous, *SHIVERS* challenges us to consider a world without sexual inhibitions, a world in which the infant's polymorphous perversity survives into adulthood, free from all those tedious repressions that tend to produce normative, monogamous heterosexuality.

In Ben Wheatley's *HIGH-RISE* (UK/Belgium, 2015), the privilege, isolation and anonymity of a fashionable brutalist tower block free its uniformly bourgeois inhabitants from psychic repressions, liberating them into debauchery and violence. Even the architect's manicured roof garden—an absurd mini-Versailles forty stories in the sky—gives way to the baser impulses it is supposed to refute. JG Ballard's novel, on which the film is based, trolls the 1970s moral panic about declining inner cities by depicting a wealthy middle class possessed of the worst attributes tabloid journalism ascribed to the urban poor. The film, set in a 1970s dreamworld, ends with the protagonist barbecuing a dog while waiting for violent tribalism to break out in the neighboring block, and with a child listening to a speech by Margaret Thatcher in which she insists that only free-market capitalism can produce real freedom. Neoliberal global dystopia looms.

Movement and Stasis

Personal planes and aerial roadways crisscross Lang's metropolis, an elite mobility starkly contrasted with lock-step shuffling of the exhausted workers. Such constraints on movement are a common feature of dystopia (and the world they criticize), as the exhilarating *BANLIEUE 13* (Pierre Morel, France, 2004) shows. By 2010, poverty, unemployment and crime reach the point where the state abandons the eponymous Parisian neighborhood. They build a massive wall around it to prevent any "contagion" by its inhabitants. Even the militarized police will not venture beyond the border checkpoints they maintain. But within this urban hellhole, controlled by rival criminal gangs, one tower block stays relatively clear

of drugs and safe from harassment. It is the home of Leïto, played by David Belle, one of the founders of *le parkour*, who spends much of the film performing breathtaking stunts. Free-running the urban landscape, he embodies the desire for a mobility denied by the city's physical and social structures.

GATTACA's eugenic future emphasizes the social construction of physical spaces and the differential access people have to them. Biometrics and genotypic profiling, accepted features of everyday life, keep the genetically engineered, beautiful, exquisitely coiffed and regularly monitored "valids" separate from the unengineered "in-valids," with their predispositions to genetic disorders, shorter life-spans, disabilities and bad complexions. Only valids get to live in fancy houses, dine at expensive restaurants and travel into space. In CODE 46, international travel—and even access to cities—is regulated through a system that combines genetic surveillance with health insurance. The majority of the population, denied coverage, struggle to survive in the depleted world outside the cities. IN TIME argues that such systems are ultimately about social and economic class. In 2169, everyone is genetically engineered to be physically perfect, and to stop aging when they reach 25. At that point, a clock embedded in the forearm begins to count down how much time they have left to live. They are granted a year in which to earn more time, which is also currency. And if the clock ever reaches zero, they die. The city is divided into "time zones." In impoverished Dayton, people live from day to day, rarely managing to keep more than 24 hours on their clocks; in wealthy New Greenwich, the elite accumulate time, hoarding hundreds, even thousands, of years, becoming potentially immortal. The poor, unable to afford the price of crossing from one zone to the next, are kept in their place, while the rich can buy as much freedom of movement as they want.

SLEEP DEALER (Alex Rivera, US/Mexico, 2008) shows how building and sustaining borders between classes, nations and ethnicities concentrates wealth and maintains western economic hegemony and white privilege. It is set almost entirely south of the US–Mexico border wall, in a world in which information and capital are free to circulate globally but people are not. In Oaxaca, Del Rio Water sequester the local water supply and pipe it to the US, making local people dependent on *milpa* agriculture even more precarious. Memo, who tinkers with electronics, accidentally monitors a frequency used by Del Rio's security forces. In retaliation against this "terrorist" threat, a drone strike destroys his home, killing his father. To support his family, Memo relocates to Tijuana and is fitted with a cybernetic interface that enables him to work in a "sleep dealer," a *maquiladora* from which he remote-operates a construction robot in the US. As his boss says, "This is the American Dream. We give the United States what they've always wanted ... all the work—without the workers."

Control Systems and Unreasonable Rationality

Rising above Lang's city is the office of Joh Fredersen, the administrator who oversees it all. Like some inhuman spider-bureaucrat, he sits at the centre of an immense network of surveillance, monitoring, information, and control systems. Like the Alpha 60 computer in Jean-Luc Godard's ALPHAVILLE (France/Italy, 1965), he is the panopticon, completely identified with maintaining and perpetuating the city. Nothing escapes him, and other people are mere cogs in his machine. Furthermore, Lang's set designers and cinematographers create a visual field in which deep focus and perspective combine to create ominous differences of scale that also map power relations. This is perhaps most obvious in Fredersen's immense office, the height of which reiterates the verticality of the city and its class structure. In the foreground Fredersen looms over an assistant, Josaphat, who is ill-suited to the dehumanization required of his role in city governance, and who in the distant background seems not merely small and powerless but visibly diminished by his boss's scorn. He departs,

further infantilized by a door so imposing that he must reach up to chest height to turn its handle.

The construction of space so as to give physical form to power recurs throughout dystopian cinema. In *CONQUEST OF THE PLANET OF THE APES* (J. Lee Thompson, US, 1972), Caesar—the child of intelligent chimpanzees who travelled back in time from a post-apocalyptic Earth where humanity has been superseded as the dominant species—grows up in a world in which apes are bred as slave labor. He eventually leads a simian revolution (a key scene was recut just before release to avoid seeming like advocating black and/or worker militancy). The film was shot in Irvine, California, a planned community built in the 1960s and 1970s, with the university as its economic driver. Eerily, the concrete battleground on which the apes take their stand was actually part of a campus specifically designed so as to thwart the possibility of student uprisings. A rather more abstract model of social relations is presented in *CUBE* (Vincenzo Natali, Canada, 1997). Seven strangers, each of them named after a prison, wake up in the giant eponymous object, itself containing 17,576 fourteen-foot cubes which move around within the larger Cube. To escape this shifting, booby-trapped three-dimensional maze, cooperation is essential but constantly undermined by fear, suspicion, and violence. The survivors ultimately come back full circle to the cube in which they awoke just as it moves to the position that allows them to exit the Cube. They have repeatedly escaped from one confinement to another, but achieved nothing that affects their overall confinement, and end up killing each other. Only the autistic character survives, and he can communicate nothing of their fate.

When *METROPOLIS*'s protagonist Freder, a recent sentimental convert to social justice, bursts in to his father's office to plead for his intervention in the plight of the workers, Fredersen is unmoved. Thoroughly instrumentalist, he perceives all that he does, however unreasonable it might be, as rational: these are the things that *must* be done; there can be no questioning of basic premises; there is no alternative. Such monstrously totalized "rationality" is deep in the core of dystopian fiction. Zamyatin, Huxley and Orwell railed against it, and its shortcomings are neatly satirized in *THX 1138* and *BRAZIL*. In the former, the protagonist only succeeds in escaping the brightly lit underworld of constant surveillance and tranquilising medication because, just as the robot police are about to catch up with him, the operation goes over its assigned budget and they are ordered to abandon pursuit. In the latter, the whole absurd story starts when a fly gets caught in a printer, smudging a name, which is then misread, leading to the arrest not of suspected terrorist Archibald Tuttle but of the completely innocent Archibald Buttle, who then dies in police custody. Sam, a low-level bureaucrat, is charged with rectifying the error, but when Buttle's neighbor, Jill, tries to lodge a complaint, she is labeled a terrorist. From this comic confusion, and the state's blind drive to preserve itself, matters can only escalate.

In the Machine

While cavorting in the pleasure gardens, Freder catches a glimpse of a Maria, a beautiful, saintly worker who has sneaked some workers' children up to see the wealthy at play, to see what a life of good health, leisure, and ease looks like, but also to teach them about a human fraternity that reaches across class distinctions. Inspired by her, Freder descends into the underworld beneath the city, where the machines upon which it depends are located. In the machine hall, he watches the dreadful, inhuman ballet of workers locked into the demands of the M-machine they operate. Their rhythmic movements, repetitive and limited in range, echo the Taylorist "scientific" management of production line labor, in which complex processes are broken down into discrete tasks or units of motion, each of which is assigned to an individual worker to perform over and over again so as to optimize labor efficiency and drive productivity (regardless of its effects on the physical and mental health of the worker).

Such production lines are pointedly shown in two rather different locations in René Clair's ultimately eutopian *À NOUS LA LIBERTÉ* (France, 1931). It opens with close ups of men's hands making toy wooden horses, then slowly reveals that this is convict labor in a tough prison. Louis escapes from prison, and rises from selling gramophone records on the streets to owning and running an ultra-modern factory producing record players. His workers perform their labor in exactly the same alienating manner, albeit in lighter, cleaner spaces, and move around the facility with the inhuman precision of soldiers being drilled. Émile, a former cellmate who sacrificed his own liberty to aid his friend's escape, takes a job at the factory, unaware that it belongs to Louis, because he is smitten with a young woman who works there. But desire, or any other human feeling, has no place on the production line, and comedic chaos ensues when Émile is distracted by her presence. Soon, the cellmates are reunited, and their homosocial bond, born out of adversity, overturns the bourgeois and domestic conventions robbing Louis's life of joy. He turns ownership of his now-fully-automated factory over to the workers, enabling them to abandon labor for leisure, and he and Émile leave it all behind for life on the road as tramps.

Clair includes the schoolroom as a site of alienating labor, where rote and tedious tasks discipline all energy and joy out of children so that can become dutiful citizens, fit to enjoy the "freedom" enshrined in the motto of the Republic. They are instructed that work will make them free, an expression that was soon to become even more ominous as the slogan—"Arbeits macht frei"—over the gates at Auschwitz and other concentration camps. *ROLLERBALL* (Norman Jewison, UK/US, 1975) depicts a future after the demise of nations, when corporations have finally consolidated into half-a-dozen monopolies that, in exchange for a carefully managed, peaceful world, require nothing of the people other than unquestioning obedience to executive diktats. Jonathan E argues that there must have been a moment when people were offered the choice of comfort or freedom, and they chose comfort; Ella, the love of his life, replies that "comfort is freedom."

Charlie Chaplin's *MODERN TIMES* (US, 1936) pursues Clair's dystopian critique of the contemporary world, drawing together factories, prisons and department stores as locations of domination and instruments of social control. On its production line, it is not desire, emotion or distraction that disrupts the machine but its own efficiency. Chaplin's little tramp, having surrendered control of his body to the demands of the production line's repetitive tasks, cannot keep up; he loses control of his body, which succumbs to involuntary twitching and juddering; he is driven into a kind of delirium, a self-destructive madness that unleashes suppressed erotic impulses. He, too, ultimately walks away from the city, setting out on the long road into the country with a gamin he has befriended—another couple fleeing dystopia for that elusive green space, where things might be better.

After Fredersen refuses Freder's intercession on behalf of the workers, the febrile young man returns to the level of the machines. There, he trades places with an exhausted man, who is only part way through his shift at the paternoster machine. It is a huge vertical dial with 50 lights on its rim that light up in seemingly random order. When a light comes on, the worker must move one of a pair of "clock-hands" to point at it, while holding the other hand over the previous light. Here, Lang's fascination with graphic representations of data—his films are full of counters, gauges, thermometers, and so on—reaches its consciously absurd apotheosis. Neither the machine nor its operator's actions serve any obvious—or even remotely plausible—purpose beyond the brutal dehumanization of the person forced to labor at its behest. It is pure disciplinarity: it exists merely to discipline. While automation liberates humanity from toil in *À NOUS LA LIBERTÉ*, Lang's machines subject and enslave workers to the will of the class that the city and its systems are designed to serve.

Race and Dystopia

As Freder watches the M-machine, the worker-components lose control of it. It scalds them with steam before blowing up—one of two times in the film in which Lang, using a camera on a swing, shows an explosion from the viewpoint of the explosion. As dazed workers carry the dead and injured from the carnage, Freder has a vision of the machine as the ancient Canaanite deity Moloch, an orientalist image of cruelty and human sacrifice. Chained slaves are driven up the stairs at the centre of the machine and into the idol's mouth, where they are cast into its flaming belly; as Freder's vision fades, they are replaced with row after row of enervated workers, trudging in orderly fashion to their fiery consummation in the god-machine's gaping maw. Such imagery is reiterated in a sequence that retells the legend of the Tower of Babel. The hired hands employed in its construction are depicted as pyramid-building slaves, darker-skinned than their employers. This racial coding of the underclass does not extend to the city's own workers—indeed, as *THINGS TO COME* shows, sf cinema frequently whitewashes the future. For example, the only person of color in the cast of *LOGAN'S RUN* is Roscoe Lee Browne, and he remains unseen, merely voicing the robot Box, and while there was predictable internet outrage over the casting in *THE HUNGER GAMES* (Gary Ross, US, 2012) of African-American Amandla Stenberg as Rue, who was white in the novel, few of its readers seemed even to notice that the protagonist, Katniss, is not white, and even fewer protested the casting of Jennifer Lawrence in the role.

It has become common for the resistance to oppressive social structures to be led by people of color, including Ice-T in *JOHNNY MNEMONIC* (Robert Longo, Canada/US, 1995) and *TANK GIRL* (Rachel Talalay, US, 1995), Laurence Fishburne in *THE MATRIX* (Wachowski siblings, US, 1999), Ving Rhames in *SURROGATES* (Jonathan Mostow, US, 2009), Morgan Freeman in *OBLIVION*, and Diego Luna and Alice Braga in *ELYSIUM*. However, such characters typically serve the narrative of a white protagonist. The major exception is Lizzie Borden's *BORN IN FLAMES* (US, 1983), which works through many of the frustrations felt by women in the New Left and by working class women of color in second-wave feminism. Set in a near-future in which America has turned socialist, its government is challenged over its deeply rooted patriarchal assumptions when, with the economy wobbling, it chooses to lay off women workers first. At the same time, white feminist supporters of the socialist state struggle to recognize their blindness to the racial (and middle-class) privilege they enjoy. By the end, third-wave feminists, who have learned from the struggles of third world feminists, have no option but to take up arms against a revolutionary government that is simply not revolutionary enough—beginning with a bomb attack on the World Trade Center. More recently, Janelle Monáe's Cindy Mayweather is unquestionably the protagonist of the short films that accompany her *Metropolis: Suite 1 (The Chase)* (2007) and *The ArchAndroid* (2010) albums.

Dystopia, of course, is also a useful way to think of many realistic depictions of the everyday lives of people of color (and other Others). For example, *SWEET SWEETBACK'S BADAASSSSSS SONG* (Melvin Van Peebles, US, 1971), *KILLER OF SHEEP* (Charles Burnett, US, 1978) or *BOYZ N THE HOOD* (John Singleton, US, 1991) to see a foregrounding of economic, social and political structures that shape African American experience—structures that persist after the apocalypse has destroyed almost all human life in *FIVE* (Arch Oboler, US, 1951) and *THE WORLD, THE FLESH, AND THE DEVIL* (Ranald MacDougall, US, 1959). Japanese-American Desmond Nakano's *WHITE MAN'S BURDEN* (France/US, 1995) is set in a role-reversed US dominated by African Americans. It follows a white working class man who is unjustly accused of a crime, beaten by police, fired from his job, evicted from his home and, in his desperate quest for justice, takes a wealthy black man hostage. Sadly, though, this wannabe anti-racist parable still requires the audience to root for the white guy. More successful is African-American Kevin Willmott's mockumentary *C.S.A.: THE CONFEDERATE STATES OF AMERICA* (US, 2004). It outlines an alternative history

in which the South won the Civil War, expanded the CSA into the Caribbean and Latin America and maintained slavery into the present day. Throughout the film, the audience is presented with examples of racist advertising, cartoons and other cultural texts from this alternate timeline, all of which are revealed at the end to be real artifacts from our own world.

Unreason, the War on Women and After the End of the World

For all its obsession with rational control, METROPOLIS abounds with images of unreason: violence, orgiastic excess, medieval Catholic iconography and Christian apocalypticism, as well as a gothic repertoire of pentagrams, catacombs, statues that come to life, sorcery, magical doorways, memento mori, immurement and immolation. The interrelation of reason and irrationality is embodied in the figure of Rotwang, who lives and works in an archaic house that has somehow survived the scorching of the earth that must have preceded the construction of the city. A scientific genius, he also surrounds himself with the occult accoutrements of alchemy. His crazy hair and manic behavior imply madness, while his black-gloved hand is, it is implied, mechanical, a product of his robotics research. To assist Fredersen in rooting out the incipient revolution, he transforms his stunning art deco robot into the likeness of Maria, who he has taken captive. She has been holding worker discontent in check by urging them to wait for a messiah to emerge, but the false Maria provokes them into violent revolt. This is intended to justify Fredersen's brutal suppression of resistance, which will terrorize the workers into complete submission. In scenes anticipating Eisenstein's depiction of Bolsheviks storming the Czar's Winter Palace in OCTOBER (USSR, 1928), the workers abandon their posts and erupt into the city. Chaos follows as machines malfunction, holding tanks overflow, and floodwaters threaten to overwhelm the children they have left behind.

While false-Maria spends her days whipping up anarchic fervor among the workers, she spends her nights driving the sons of the bourgeoisie into violent sexual frenzy with her exotic nightclub act. Extending the film's orientalist and millenarian imagery, she emerges from a large vessel held aloft by Nubian slaves to perform her erotic dance, at one point even appearing as the Whore of Babylon. It is unclear how much of this is the product of Freder's fevered imagination, or what part, if any, it plays in Fredersen's plans. Nevertheless, it emphasizes a recurring element of dystopia. In addition to reducing workers to cogs in the machine, dystopia often also genders robots as female, eroticizes female robots, replaces women with robots, and reduces women to their sexual or reproductive functions. (Arguably, any sf film that does any of these things should be described as dystopian.)

The figure of the robot often reveals, intentionally or not, the patriarchal structures of society foregrounded in many realist feminist films. For example, in BLADE RUNNER, Zhora, formerly a member of an "off-world kick murder squad," now works as an exotic dancer, complete with snake, while Pris is a "basic pleasure model," and Deckard effectively rapes Rachel. In EX MACHINA (Alex Garland, UK, 2015), an oddly homosocial retelling of Bluebeard, Nathan is ostensibly concerned with whether the humanoid robots he has created possess genuine artificial intelligence. However, he abandons the Turing Test in order to see whether Caleb can be manipulated into falling for Ava, a machine crafted to look like a woman even with its inorganic parts exposed; and later, Caleb realizes that the mute servant Kyoko is an earlier model, one that Nathan sexually abuses. The isolated house in which this all takes place functions as a maze and a trap, foregrounding the social construction of gender to the benefit of men. Although some consider the film's conclusion, in which Kyoko kills Nathan and Ava escapes into the world, to be a feminist one, you have to wade through an awful lot of misogyny to get there.

THE STEPFORD WIVES (Bryan Forbes, US, 1975) and THE HANDMAID'S TALE (Volker Schlöndorff, US/Germany, 1990) have more obviously feminist credentials. In the

former, Joanna and her family relocate to a bourgeois Connecticut community, thus escaping the noise, dirt and danger of dystopian New York. However, with a couple of exceptions, Joanna finds the women there oddly bland. Always perfectly turned out, these dutiful wives and mothers are obsessed with their homes, husbands and children. Her mildly rebellious feminist friends transform overnight, becoming indistinguishable from the other suburban wives. Joanna discovers that they have been killed and replaced with more biddable robot copies—and even her husband has joined the conspiracy, ordering a bigger-breasted duplicate of herself. The latter film, based on Margaret Atwood’s 1985 novel, is set in a future in which pollution has made 99 percent of the population sterile. In the Republic of Gilead, a North American fundamentalist Christian dystopia, the fertile Kate is forced into servitude as a Handmaid, that is, a concubine for one of the ruling elite. Given to a military commander called Fred, she is renamed Offred—“of Fred”—and reduced to her potential for impregnation. With the continued growth and expanding influence of the Christian right and the alt-right, Gilead continues never to seem as implausible as one would hope.

After the end of the world, whether by nuclear war, incurable epidemic or climate change, there is rarely enough of a functioning society left for it to be deemed truly dystopian. And as films from *DAWN OF THE DEAD* (George Romero, US, 1978) and *MAD MAX 2* (George Miller, Australia, 1982) to *CHILDREN OF MEN* (Alfonso Cuarón, US/UK/Japan, 2006) and *THE ROAD* (John Hillcoat, US, 2009) show us, when the zombies are breaking down the shopping mall doors, when the barbarians, fresh from raiding the last remaining bondage-gear warehouse, are circling on their salvaged/pimped rides, when life has stopped reproducing and people are, with scant regard for logic, keeping other people alive as cannibal fodder . . . when it has all burned down and the scattered remnants are barely hanging on, when it is all stripped back to a barren arena in which sundry agents, mistaking their paranoia and violence for reason, play out zero sum games, we are positioned to identify with the brave few who circle the wagons, who fortify the walls, who open fire on the Others outside and – oh so reluctantly – do all the killing that ‘reason’ demands. This is the brutal logic of the market, of the de facto segregation of our cities by race and class, of nations and borders, of Gilead’s misogyny, of so much of our contemporary political discourse.

In futures where there can be no future, there can at least be figures of hope. In *MAD MAX FURY ROAD* (George Miller Australia/US 2015), Imperator Furiosa, whose mechanical hand is a retort to Rotwang, Dr Strangelove and all those other symbolically castrated mad geniuses, chooses to abandon her flight into the mythical green space beyond. Instead, she returns – with her platoon of feminists, liberated sex slaves, and men who have learned better, with the seeds of new life preserved through the generations by feminist warriors – to challenge, to overthrow the obscene, resource-hoarding, one-percent patriarchy of Immortan Joe. Dystopia cannot be escaped; it must be fought.

METROPOLIS is often mocked for an ending that Lang himself derided.ⁱⁱⁱ With the false-Maria burned at the stake and Rotwang dead, the revolution stalls on the steps of the Cathedral. There, the real Maria identifies Freder as the messiah she promised. Because of their love for each other, his sympathy for the workers and his relationship to the master of the city, he can be the “heart” that steers the relationship between the “head” (Fredersen) and the “hands” (the workers). This sentimental solution is obviously absurd. The overall system might be made more palatable, but it remains in place, essentially unchanged. And yet this is the solution, more or less, for which the real world has settled: proxies negotiate with the exploiter on behalf of the exploited so as to maintain an exploitative economic system.

Arguably, this is also how the dystopian imagination functions socially. Eutopian fiction often bogs down in explanation of how everything, from the economic system to the toilets, works but dystopia is structured by conflict, by the operations of power and resistance to it. Dystopia lends itself to narrative and appeals to our sympathy. It condenses systemic injustice into provocative and affective images and narratives that highlight the oppression and immiseration caused by the economic and social structures we live in and often unthinkingly prop up. However, this self-same ability also enables denial. For example, Ridley Scott's advertisement for the first Apple Macintosh draws on the dystopian imagery of METROPOLIS, THX 1138 and *Nineteen Eighty-four* so as to insinuate that these new personal computers will liberate us from the old-style, centralized and thus inevitably totalitarian mainframe, and simultaneously from the centralized state into the glorious freedoms of the neoliberal market: "On January 24th, Apple Computer will introduce Macintosh. And you'll see why 1984 won't be like '1984.'" And because the year, and the subsequent decades, did not look exactly like Orwell's nightmare, it does not matter that the world has become one of unprecedented surveillance, dishonest news media, historical amnesia and phoney wars. Similarly, just because the fascists do not turn up in the Nazi inspired regalia of Paul Verhoeven's STARSHIP TROOPERS (US, 1997) or James McTeigue's V FOR VENDETTA (US/UK/Germany, 2005), it does not mean that they are not already here, happily encouraging racism, sexism and homophobia as they organize and govern not on the behalf of the people but of the economic system. They are the monsters that the sleep, and the dream, of reason unleash, and monstrous is the world they are building.

ⁱ Advertisement, quoted in Robert Hughes, *Goya* (London, 2003), 181.

ⁱⁱ Phil Hardy, ed. *The Aurum Film Encyclopedia: Science Fiction* (London, 1995), 251.

ⁱⁱⁱ Patrick McGilligan, *Fritz Lang: The Nature of the Beast* (London, 1997), 127.