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Utopia, Dystopia, Film An Introduction

ABSTRACT

In the last three decades, numerous papers have been devoted to utopian and dystopian films, while some authors went as far as to suggest that a fairly diverse body of works, ranging from Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* and Frank Capra's *Lost Horizon* to Jean-Luc Godard's *Alphaville* and Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, may belong to the same cinematic genre. This introductory essay examines the arguments for defining the utopian film as a distinct genre and explores the connections between utopian films and the modern utopian literary tradition. Since most of the films that have appropriated narrative devices from utopian literary works are also science fiction films, the paper ultimately argues for a reconsideration of the relationship between these two genres.

KEYWORDS

Utopian Film; Film Genre; Science Fiction; Dystopia.

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Is There Such a Thing as a Utopian Film Genre?

One of the most famous texts written about Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, "Mr. Wells Reviews a Current Film," was published by *The New York Times* on April 17, 1927. Penned by the British writer H.G. Wells, then 60 years of age, the article was a devastating critique of the film, implying not only that *Metropolis* was unoriginal, sugar-coated and incoherent, but that it was also hopelessly antiquated. Wells was quick to notice that Thea von Harbou's script was heavily indebted to one of his own works, *The Sleeper Awakes* (published in novel form in 1910, but already serialized in *The Graphic* since 1898) and that it also drew its ideas from various other sources, such as Karel Čapek's *R.U.R.* or Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. What irritated Wells the most, though, was not the uninspired amalgam of ideas, but their outdated character, especially when it came to issues such as class conflict: "Now, far away in dear old 1897, it might have been excusable to symbolize social relations in this way, but that was thirty years ago, and a lot of thinking and some experience intervene."¹ Unlike other reviewers of the film who were praising its visuals while criticizing its ambiguous content (for instance, the German critic Herbert Ihering dubbed *Metropolis* "an ideological



film without an ideology”),² Wells claimed that the spectacular settings were meaningless, insofar as they reflected obsolete ideas about urban planning, work efficiency and technology: “Instead of plagiarizing from a book thirty years old and resuscitating the banal moralizing of the early Victorian period, it would have been almost as easy, no more costly and far more interesting to have taken some pains to gather opinions of a few bright young research students and ambitious modernizing architects and engineers about the trend of modern invention and develop these artistically.”³

It could be argued that Wells was ultimately proven wrong, at least in the short run, by the kind of movies about the future that were released in the late 1920s and early 1930s, both in Europe and in the United States. One needs to look no further than the opening shots of *High Treason* (a British film, directed by Maurice Elvey and released in 1929) or *Just Imagine* (an American musical set in a future New York, directed by David Butler and released in 1930) to realize how influential *Metropolis* was at that time. However, Wells’s arguments are important for a number of other reasons. First of all, they can be seen as a blueprint for his later contribution to the screen adaptation of his own book, *The Shape of Things to Come*. On the other hand, Wells pleaded for a more plausible, up-to-date kind of speculative fiction, founded on the latest scientific theories and written with an eye for everyday details of the future (for instance, in his review he remarked derisively that in *Metropolis* “[t]he motor cars are 1926 models or earlier”). In this respect, Wells was soon to be joined by others; by 1929, Hugo Gernsback, the American editor of the magazine *Science Wonder Stories*, was advocating for a type of literature that he himself

had labeled “science fiction” and that was supposed to be equally educative and scientifically-infused⁴. Unlike Gernsback, though, Wells wasn’t interested in labeling genres and, while pointing out some of the literary influences to be found in Thea von Harbou’s script, he obviously disliked *Metropolis* so much that he didn’t bother to discuss in any detail the formal similarities between Fritz Lang’s movie and a large number of novels, some of them his own, that were addressing the same themes and were being published throughout the last decades of the 19th and the first decades of the 20th century.

Would he have labeled Fritz Lang’s and Thea von Harbou’s vision “utopian”? While Wells did title one of his novels *A Modern Utopia*, it’s highly unlikely that he would have used the word “utopia” to describe *Metropolis*. By the time he was writing his review, there was no fixed label for speculative fiction or for what would be later called “science fiction.” Wells himself referred to his novels as “fantastic and imaginative romances”⁵ and, occasionally, as “scientific romances” or “scientific fantasies,” while a number of other terms, such as “impossible stories” or “scientific fiction,” were used in the United States.⁶ Of course, there was a distinctive body of works which could more aptly be called “utopias,” some of them bestsellers of their age, such as Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* or William Morris’s *News from Nowhere* (1892), alongside Wells’ *A Modern Utopia* (1905); furthermore, towards the end of the 19th century a number of scholarly books concerned with utopian literature were already being published, mostly in Germany and Great Britain, while the early 1920s saw the publication of two such volumes in the United States.⁷ Nonetheless, with a few notable exceptions, the kind of literary works that contain utopian themes and were being adapted for

the big screen in the first decades of the 20th century are more similar to the genre of British “scientific romances” (as defined, for instance, by Brian Stableford) or to Vernian extraordinary voyages and tended to be labeled as such. Unfortunately, as far as I know, there is no research concerned with the actual labeling of those films that are seen now as predecessors of modern science fiction cinema, but it seems that film critics and reviewers have used a whole range of terms to describe them—for instance, in a German article that was reporting on the shooting of *Metropolis*, Fritz Lang’s movie is called a “future-fantastic film” (*zukunftsphantastische Film*)⁸, a term similar to the one used at that time in Germany to label speculative fiction, *zukunftsroman* (novel of the future). On the other hand, when the reviewers did use the word “utopia,” it was not always meant in a flattering way; for instance, *Variety*’s review for William Cameron Menzies’ *Things to Come* (1936) harshly criticized the film for its depiction of a technocratic future society (“a world ruled by engineering dictators on a communistic plan”) and concluded sarcastically: “This is the kind of promised land which H.G. Wells has offered as Utopia in the film ‘Things to Come’.”⁹ In other cases, “utopia” was used interchangeably with similar terms in order to designate an ideal place; another review published in *Variety* described the isolated society in Frank Capra’s *Lost Horizon* as a “Paradise-on-earth,” commented on the “Arcadian idyll” and underlined “the Utopian philosophy of the community.”¹⁰ Rarely did such reviews suggest connections between films and utopian literature or speculative fiction, and it’s unclear if similarities between movies such as *Metropolis* and *High Treason* prompted the reviewers (or the public) to ascribe them to the same genre, although one isolated remark in the already quoted review for

Things to Come (“It reminds of ‘Metropolis,’ made in Germany, and ‘Just Fancy,’ [sic] made by Fox in Hollywood”¹¹) seems to suggest that, by the mid-30s, this might have been the case.

Of course, it wasn’t until the 80s and the early 90s that a specific genre of films (“utopian films” or “dystopian films”) came to be discussed. By that time, a number of American science fiction movies (from *THX 1138* to *Blade Runner*) and a couple of European art-house films (*Alphaville*, *Fahrenheit 451*, *A Clockwork Orange*) had already established a tradition of using a dystopian framework in order to address contemporary issues. Furthermore, science fiction as a genre, both in literature and cinema, was gaining credibility in academic circles, while seminal essays and books about the history and iconography of science fiction films, such as Vivian Sobchack’s *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film* (1987), were being published. Equally important was the fact that film studies tended to focus equally on the legacy of the militant or political cinema of the previous two decades and on the ideological aspects of the mainstream cinema. Thus, it wasn’t always clear what a utopian film was. For instance, an issue of the French journal *CinémaAction*, published in 1983 and titled “60s-80s: 20 Years of Utopias in Cinema” (“60-80: Vingt ans d’utopies au cinéma”), contained articles about a whole range of topics, from the history of the genre to the particular vision of certain radical filmmakers (Robert Kramer, Alain Tanner, Glauber Rocha) or the local and independent use of the television medium. Even the texts published in 1993 in a thematic issue of *Utopian Studies* devoted to utopian cinema didn’t always draw a clear distinction between those utopian (or dystopian) films that use the





conventions and devices of utopian literature and those whose ideology or approach could be called “utopian.” For instance, Peter Fitting in “What is Utopian Film? An Introductory Taxonomy,” extends the limit of the genre so as to include, apart from early utopian movies such as *Things to Come* and *Lost Horizon* and the canonical science fiction dystopias of the 70s, ethnographic documentaries portraying isolated or vanishing communities, historical films about utopian experiments, movies or television series that recycle in a nostalgic manner ideas about the nuclear family or, in the wake of the sixties, fictional accounts of communal living, films that depict the initial spontaneity and enthusiasm of a revolution, propaganda films and Third World radical filmmaking.¹² The inclusion of so many disparate categories of films into a predefined genre raises a number of problems (of which more below), but it’s necessary to underline at this point how pioneering many of these texts were¹³. They tried to establish a list of utopian films and discussed at length their iconography, while trying at times to outline the historical development of the genre. Furthermore, some of them convincingly argued, through the films they discussed, that a utopian film genre, if there is one, is not entirely limited to Hollywood fiction films.

However, the trouble with this particular film genre is that it doesn’t exist *per se*. Unlike film historians and academics that are familiar with the tradition of the utopian literature, audiences are probably more likely to associate utopian/ dystopian films with better known cinematic genres, such as the science fiction film or the action-adventure film. While some reviewers might point out the utopian themes of some films, as we’ve seen earlier, the films itself are rarely marketed as such—the renaming of the Laurel and Hardy comedy, *Atoll K* (1951), as

Utopia in the United States is probably the one known exception. Moreover, apart from one or two brief historical periods, such as the early 70s, there isn’t any consistent output of films that can be labeled “utopian” or “dystopian” and share recognizable common traits, such as plot or iconography. Such a label is, then, more of a theoretical construct than an empirical category. It could be argued, though, that most film genres are, after all, theoretical constructs—apart from the rare recognizable and traditional genres such as the western and the musical, the generic categories for films are as much a result of theoretical debates as they are rooted in the expectations of the audiences or the practices of the film industry. But in the instance of the utopian film genre it’s not its theoretical character that is problematic, but the ambiguous manner in which it is often defined.

In some cases, the definition of the genre seems to be implicit—a film is utopian because it promotes escapism or artificially reconciles divergent societal norms or ideologies. In other cases, the ambiguity seems to be inherent to the notion of “utopia”; as the term etymologically designates either a “nowhere land” (*ou-topos*) or a “happy land” (*eu-topos*), both inexistent, fictional societies and existent societies or communities depicted in a favorable light can be called utopias—it’s hardly surprising, then, that some films set, for instance, in American suburbia are often included in the genre. On the other hand, when an explicit definition of utopia is provided, it doesn’t seem to apply to many of films that are being discussed. For instance, such is the case in Peter Fitting’s article, “What is Utopian Film?” While Fitting approaches the genre in terms of its formal features, quoting Lyman Tower Sargent’s definition for utopia (a “non-existent society described in considerable



detail...¹⁴), many of his subsequent examples depart considerably from his original presuppositions. One can hardly agree that the semi-closed community captured on film in an ethnographic documentary or the society at large depicted in a propaganda film can be described as non-existent societies, especially since films belonging to these genres, i.e. the documentary film and the propaganda film, from their very beginnings claimed to be factual and accurate in their approach, no matter how embellished or plagued by omission and exaggeration they really were, and it was important that audiences reacted to them accordingly. Nor are the majority of the political films made during the 60s and the 70s utopian in the way suggested by Sargent's definition; indeed, they can be rather called utopian because, as Fitting puts it, they are "made as part of a larger project of utopian social transformation."¹⁵ In order to include these films in the utopian genre, Fitting's emphasis ultimately shifts from form and narrative to function. While this is probably in itself a fruitful area of research, it nevertheless blurs the lines between a number of similar genres, such as the political film (or the social problem film, as Steve Neale would call it), the propaganda film and, again, the documentary.

A similar emphasis on the function of the utopian film, rather than on its specific narrative strategies, can be found in Peter Ruppert's reply to Fitting, "Tracing Utopia: Film, Spectatorship and Desire," published in 1996. In his text, Ruppert closely follows the arguments of an often-quoted essay by Richard Dyer, "Entertainment and Utopia," first published in 1977. According to Dyer, films, and especially musicals (his main area of concern in the essay) are utopian not because they depict in any detail ideal societies, in the manner a utopian novel would do, but because they rely on emotional responses from their audiences, and these

emotions are often utopian in their nature ("Rather the utopianism is contained in the feelings it embodies. It presents, head-on as it were, what utopia would feel like rather than how it would be organized"¹⁶). Dyer goes on to argue that there are five distinct categories of utopian sensibility to be found in entertainment, and especially in musicals: energy, abundance, intensity, transparency and community. While Ruppert doesn't expand on these notions in order to produce a taxonomy of the utopian genre, he does argue for a method that will take into account utopia "as a mental process or activity"¹⁷ and further suggests that a large body of films, their genre notwithstanding, can be analyzed in this fashion. The problem with this approach is that, indeed, it can be used to point out similarities in content across genres, but not to circumscribe a coherent genre in itself. As Steve Neale has shown, Dyer's arguments are questionable when one considers the variety of the musical genre,¹⁸ while Ruppert's claim that movies are effective because they cater to the "utopian desire" ("the recurring human desire to project alternatives"¹⁹) of the audiences begs the question: what movies are *not* utopian in these sense?

Probably the major difficulty with defining a utopian film genre is that, as Ruppert and Fitting have pointed out, there seems to be very few films that have adopted the narrative strategies of the utopian literature. There are obvious reasons for this scarcity: the expository nature of most utopian novels makes them unsuitable for adaptation, and the few films that have translated this kind of material to the screen have often proven to be unsuccessful in financial terms. Nevertheless, I would like to make the case for a more narrowly defined genre, restricted to those films which closely resemble, formally and thematically, the utopian and dystopian literature



published since the late 19th century. As we would see, a large number of these films not only adapt themes from better-known literary works, as is the case with Godard's *Alphaville* or Lucas' *THX 1138*, but are themselves adaptations of lesser-known novels, plays or even comic books. On the other hand, as a result of the growing interest in this topic, there are now available a number of more or less complete filmographies of the genre,²⁰ and what these lists of utopian films suggest is that some aspects of the phenomenon might have been overlooked. This doesn't mean that some major, forgotten examples of utopian cinema have been discovered recently; on the contrary, some of these films are quite obscure, they belong to different cinematographic traditions and are more often studied by film historians, usually in the context of their own national film industries. However, there is some insight to be gained by looking at them chronologically. Rather than being isolated examples of an abstract utopian sensibility, they sometimes use similar generic patterns or rework in a similar fashion the same themes.

First of all, there's a distinction to be made between films which use allegory in order to depict social conflicts and utopian films. There are, as early as the 1910s, examples of films which address in an oblique way pressing contemporary issues and are set cautiously in a fictional country or community—for instance, Thomas Ince's anti-war big-budget movie *Civilization* (1916) has its plot laid in the kingdom of Wredpryd, while Hans Karl Breslauer's *The City without Jews* (*Die Stadt ohne Juden*, 1924), a satire of anti-Semitism, is set in a city called downright Utopia. Although both these films use formal devices which are sometimes associated with utopian literature, *The City without Jews*, with its depiction of a society from which all Jews are

banished by law, comes closer to most definitions of the utopian literary genre, since it presents an urban community in which the natural order of things has been altered. By contrast, *Civilization* is set in a fictional kingdom with recognizable institutions and societal norms. As is often the case with the utopian literature, films set in a utopian world rely on their audiences to notice and understand the differences between a familiar, natural order (synonymous with the "normal" expectations of the viewers) and the alternative political or social order which informs these imaginary worlds. When this alternative political or social order is lacking from a film, albeit set in a fictional world, it would be more appropriate to label it as an allegory or a satire.

Indeed, as Darko Suvin has already suggested, two of the main features of the utopian literature are its emphasis on a "formal *hierarchic system*" and its systematic use of fixed and conventional categories (government, economics, religion, warfare etc.) for describing an imaginary society.²¹ The former feature should raise no problems as far as films are concerned, but how about the latter? Are films able to depict the intricacies of an alternative social system without being overtly didactic? To answer this question, one would have to compare the narrative strategies employed in utopian literature to those used in utopian films. At the risk of simplifying matters, it can be said that some films duplicate to some extent the traditional plot of a typical utopian novel and overtly include in the story information about the institutions and social norms of an imaginary community, while others (arguably most of them) offer only hints in this regard and suggest the values and the institutions of the alternative community through images and well-chosen lines of dialogue. For instance, Frank Capra's *Lost Horizon*, adapted from James Hilton's novel of the



same name, contains a scene in which the protagonist, Robert Conway, inquires about the nature of the isolated community in which he and his companions were taken to as a result of a plane crash; in the ensuing conversation, Chang, one of the inhabitants of the idyllic society, informs Conway that Shangri-La, as the place is called, is a community without laws and without crime, founded on the principle of moderation and abiding to a single moral standard, encompassed in the formula “be kind.” Similarly, the protagonist in George Pal’s adaptation of H.G. Wells’ *The Time Machine*, released in 1960, asks the teenage-looking Eloi what kind of government and laws they live under, in a scene which departs from Wells’ novel, but is nevertheless consistent with the utopian literary tradition. By contrast, a film such as *Beyond the Time Barrier* (1960), released in order to capitalize on the success of Pal’s movie, has a plot similar to *The Time Machine*—due to an accident during his flight, a test pilot travels in time and lands in a post-atomic future, in which the surviving humans live in an underground city and have imprisoned all those affected by atomic radiation—, but it explores its utopian themes less overtly. As in many other science fiction films, the sense of the future is primarily conveyed through striking imagery—the city in which the pilot is being brought has its own geometric design and the future technology seems unfamiliar. As the plot unfolds, it becomes clear that the city has its own formal hierarchy (the leader, called the Supreme, runs it with the help of armed guards) and that the factions in the city have their own diverging interests when it comes to the survival of the human species. It could hardly be argued that such an oversimplified depiction of a future society matches the detailed description of any utopian text; issues such as work, religion or economy are conspicuous by their absence,

while the issue of hierarchy is secondary to the plot. However, claiming that a film like *Beyond the Time Barrier* is not utopian because it doesn’t depict an imaginary society “in considerable detail” would mean ignoring one of the major characteristics of the utopian literature—that is, in Frederic Jameson’s words, its “perpetual play of topical allusion.”²² Utopian films, like utopian novels, tend to draw on contemporary social anxieties and to reconcile them (in the case of utopias) or to amplify them (in the case of dystopias), but, unlike their literary counterparts, utopian films usually emphasize only one or two such themes, and in doing so they commonly depict partial versions of an alternative, imaginary society. *Beyond the Time Barrier*, for instance, incorporates into its plot anxieties over nuclear proliferation, a trait common to many science fiction films made during the 50s and the early 60s, but it also addresses concerns about political power (in the movie, the Supreme is an ambiguous figure, a benevolent, but totalitarian leader) and social segregation (both the “mutants” and the outsiders are being kept prisoners in the underground city). Although arguably unsophisticated and at times downright campy, the film follows a plot that is specific to the utopian literature, offers a glimpse into a rationally organized future society and, as such, it could be labeled as a utopian film.

It could be argued, then, that utopian films use many of the same narrative strategies as utopian novels, but in a specific manner. The imaginary society is rarely described in full; rather, utopian films tend to focus on a limited number of themes (or aspects of the fictional community) and they often emphasize these aspects through hyperbole, contrasting juxtapositions or other similar devices. For instance, the kingdom of Mars in Yakov Protazanov’s *Aelita*



(1924) is an obvious caricature of a generic capitalist country; visually, the Martian society looks unfamiliar, due to the use of avant-garde sets and costumes, but its hierarchical system is an oversimplified and recognizable version of a modern state—the film portrays both the workers and the ruling class and it focuses heavily on the subservience of the former to the latter. These relations of power are explicitly stated in the intertitles (the workers, we are being told, are “slaves” on Mars), conveyed through images (the workers are overseen by guards armed with whips) and further suggested by the plot (as decided by the ruling elite on Mars, the Elders, a third of the workforce is disposed of and “stored in refrigerators”). There’s a certain amount of utopian exaggeration in this depiction of class relations, but the film is utopian precisely because it represents these relations *literally*—as in later science fiction films, one particular aspect of the contemporary society is hyperbolized and depicted as if it were a coherent social norm in an imaginary world or in a future version of the current society. In some utopian films, one can also discern a hierarchy of issues that are being addressed: besides the main theme, which is often emphasized by the plot, other secondary aspects of the imaginary community are suggested by means of allusion. Such is the case, for instance, with Elio Petri’s *The Tenth Victim* (*La decima vittima*, 1965). The film, mainly a satire of media violence and celebrity culture, is set in a dystopian future in which the most popular television show involves a literal manhunt. However, particular scenes allude to other troubling aspects of the future (or, rather, to the perceived excesses of the sixties), such as the rise of the New Age religions, the sexual revolution and the dissolving of the nuclear family. Lastly, one would expect authority to be the one major issue in every utopian

film, but this hardly seems to be the case. In most utopian films, authority is indeed represented through images or suggested through dialogue, albeit at times in a very conventional manner—this is why in films utopian communities, with their small number of leaders overseeing a largely anonymous crowd, look very much like a small traditional (or even tribal) society—, but this doesn’t necessarily imply that these films *are* about authority. For all its visibility onscreen, authority is rarely challenged in early utopian films, while the more overtly critical films of the 60s and 70s often take refuge in escapist fantasies in order to deal with the perceived menace of authoritarianism.

It would seem, then, that utopian films are to some extent less sophisticated than utopian literary works. Few would argue that this is true, but in my opinion such a conclusion is inevitable if utopian films are to be defined only in relation to the conventions of utopian literature. However, for all their use of traditional narrative devices associated with the utopian literary genre, such as the travel in space or time, these films often employ tropes and narrative strategies from various other genres. This hybridization of genres may partially explain why filmic utopias seem “incomplete.” In this regard, a film like Protazanov’s *Aelita* is not only a satire of capitalism, but also a melodrama set in the turbulent times of the N.E.P. (Lenin’s New Economic Policy) and, due to its emphasis on the technological aspects of interplanetary travel, a predecessor of the science fiction genre. Alexei Tolstoy’s novel *Aelita*, on which the film was based, was in itself a mixture of romance and science fiction, but, as Ian Christie has shown in a contextual analysis of Protazanov’s film, appropriating devices and themes from several genres at once was a strategy used by film studios such as Mezhrabpom-Rus in order to draw



Russian audiences back into cinemas in the early years of the Soviet regime.²³ At a time when the Russian film industry was being rebuilt, films were expected to be equally entertaining and “progressive,”²⁴ and in retrospect *Aelita* seems to be a well-balanced example for this approach. It could be argued, then, that those early films which depicted utopian communities popularized a highly stylized version of the utopian genre, while often emphasizing the very aspects of the fictional society that were convenient for the plot or for the overall message of the film—in the case of *Aelita*, the worker’s subservience and the Martian hierarchy. The most striking aspect of early filmic utopias, their look, was the sole exception in this regard, since it was meant to convey a sense of detachment from the “present,” while also stressing the generic or aesthetic affinities between these films and their earlier counterparts—as Christie suggests, the futuristic sets in *Aelita* may have been modeled with the visuals of the internationally successful *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (*Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*, 1919) in mind.²⁵ It’s important to note that similar claims can be made about more recent utopian films in respect to their form and content. It would probably be more appropriate, then, to shift our attention from the generic similarities between utopian cinema and utopian fiction in general to the interplay of genres to be found in most utopian films.

This approach has the advantage of taking into account the overall evolution of film genres. As many film historians have pointed out, genres are not fixed categories, but fluid ones, and they often develop by recombining and redefining their own conventions. Early utopian films were surely indebted to certain literary sources, but they were also appropriating narrative devices from other well-established film genres. Take, for instance, the device of space

travel. By the time Protazanov had used it in *Aelita*, there were already a number of films made on this topic—most notably, Georges Méliès’ *A Trip to the Moon* (*Le Voyage dans la Lune*, 1902) and *The Impossible Voyage* (*Voyage à travers l’impossible*, 1904) or Holger-Madsen’s *A Trip to Mars* (*Himmelskibet*, 1918), but one can also mention Gaston Velle’s *A Voyage Around a Star* (*Voyage autour d’une étoile*, 1906), Segundo de Chomón’s *A Trip to Jupiter* (*Le voyage sur Jupiter*, 1909) or Enrico Novelli’s *A Marriage in the Moon* (*Un matrimonio interplanetario*, 1910)—and, despite their diversity, they shared to some extent a common iconography. All these films depicted human-like inhabitants of other planets and had scientists or amateur scientists as main characters (there’s a telescope prominently displayed in every one of them). Since most of them were short-length films, their plots were sketchy and the imaginary communities they portrayed were shown in very little detail. *Aelita*, on the other hand, not only expanded on the plot and themes of earlier films about space travel, but also added elements of melodrama to the conventional plot of such films and emphasized the futuristic look of the Martian society. The same can be said of other early films that are nowadays labeled as utopian—they often used narrative conventions borrowed from other popular genres, such as the adventure film or the science fiction film, and they integrated utopian elements into a narrative that was typical of the utopian literary genre only to a certain extent.

Ultimately, films such as *Aelita*, *Metropolis* or, as we would see, *Himmelskibet*, are best-known examples of a broader phenomenon. Since the early years of cinema, filmmakers were translating onto the screen stories belonging to a number of popular genres, later grouped together under the



label “science fiction.” The broad categories suggested by Edward James for the speculative fiction of the late 19th and early 20th centuries (the extraordinary voyage, the tale of the future and the tale of science²⁶) find their equivalent in the output of the silent era—films were being made about future wars (*The Airship Destroyer*, 1909; *If England Were Invaded*, 1916), the end of the world (*The End of the World/ Verdens Undergang*, 1916), lethal scientific contraptions (*The Mechanical Man/ L'uomo meccanico*, 1921; *The Crazy Ray/ Paris qui dort*, 1925) or, as pointed out earlier, extraordinary voyages. Given their number and variety and taking into account the small number of films actually depicting utopian societies, it would probably be more accurate to treat early utopian films as a subgenre of science fiction cinema. To some extent, this claim seems to hold true for the majority of later utopian films, although one would also have to take into account an increasing number of films released since the 30s and traditionally ascribed to other genres, such as the comedy or the social problem film,²⁷ which have in their turn employed utopian and dystopian themes and motifs. Even if this assumption turns out to be incorrect, the current emphasis on the function of utopian films (their political stance, their ideology) has the disadvantage of ignoring a number of developments in genres traditionally associated with utopian fiction, such as the science fiction film, while also neglecting the transfer of utopian themes and narrative devices from one genre to another. In what follows, I would like to argue that there are, indeed, a consistent number of utopian science fiction films, aside from those made by Hollywood studios in the 70s and the 80s; on the other hand, the following historical overview, covering the evolution of utopian films from the silent era to the mid 70s, will try to

determine what genres were more likely to appropriate utopian conventions, using a wide range of examples taken from both American and European cinema.

Utopian Films: A Brief Historical Overview

Early Utopian Films

If we define a utopian film, following Darko Suvin’s discussion of the narrative conventions of utopian literature, as a film depicting a “rounded, *isolated locus* (valley, island, planet—later, temporal epoch),” inhabited by a community based on a “formal *hierarchical system*” and governed by different laws or social norms, “*articulated* in a panoramic sweep” and conflicting with the “normal” expectations of the reader/viewer by means of an “implicit or explicit *dramatic strategy*,”²⁸ then the first such film seems to be Holger-Madsen’s *A Trip to Mars (Himmelskibet)*, 1918.²⁹ Produced by the Danish Nordisk Company in 1916, while World War I was raging, but released only two years later, this is mainly an allegorical anti-war film. Consequently, the plot involves an international crew flying to Mars and discovering a more advanced and peaceful civilization—the inhabitants of Mars are vegetarians, abhor firearms and have a disdain for war. As is revealed in one of the scenes, the Martian society has had its own conflicts and wars before a simpler and more peaceful way of life prevailed. To some extent, then, this imaginary society is presented as a future version of mankind. However, if this is a future society, it is by no means a modern one: the Martians wear ancient, obscure symbols on their clothes, such as the cross of Osiris, are organized as an ancient tribe and seem to condemn not only the bellicose nature of the Earthlings, but also, as a suggestive montage sequence



of exuberant city life makes it clear, their inclination to vice. As in Shangri-la, the idyllic community depicted in Capra's *Lost Horizon*, the emphasis is put on the moral improvement of mankind under the benevolent supervision of quasi-invisible elites.

It's hard to tell if Yakov Protazanov, the exiled director that returned to Russia in the early 20s in order to make *Aelita*, was aware of the existence of *Himmelskibet* or if he was inspired by its visuals. However, it's important to point out that *Aelita* was similar to *Himmelskibet* and to other later utopian films, such as *Metropolis*, *Just Imagine*, *Lost Horizon* or *Things to Come* in another crucial aspect: they were all prestige productions, made on lavish budgets and often advertised as such (for instance, *Metropolis* was frequently identified in German reviews as a *Großfilm*, the German equivalent of a prestige picture). In fact, those film industries that ended up making a utopian film (i.e. a big budget science fiction film) in the silent era or during the 30s were either at the peak of their power (the Danish film industry in the late 1910s or the German one in the mid to late 1920s) or they were trying to imitate the successful formulas of other major film industries (as we've seen, such is the case with the Russian film industry in the early 1920s). This fact is important because it explains the mixture of genres and styles that informed the first utopian films. *Himmelskibet*, for instance, is a "message" film, but its narrative is up to a certain point similar to that of other adventure films of the era—the travel to Mars is explicitly modeled upon Christopher Columbus' first voyage, down to such recognizable details as the mutiny on board and the near-execution of the captain. *Metropolis*, on the other hand, as Wells, Ihering and others reviewers of the era have noted, was part social allegory, part sentimental romance, part drama. The lesser-known *Just Imagine* (1930) is probably

the perfect example for the broader phenomenon. Made by director David Butler in order to capitalize on the success of his earlier musical, *Sunnyside Up* (1929), *Just Imagine* drew inspiration from *Metropolis* as far as its visuals were concerned, but was in effect, in terms of plot, a combination of comedy and musical. The film was one of the many musicals to employ synchronized sound in the early years of the transition to sound, and it relied heavily on musical numbers written by a then-famous trio of songwriters, George Gard De Sylva, Lew Brown and Ray Henderson, which had also penned the songs for *Sunnyside Up*.³⁰ As for its content, one could easily dismiss the utopian elements of the film as a mere pretext for the musical numbers (and, indeed, the part of the movie involving space travel appears to be a crude satire on the popular genre itself), if it weren't for the film's equally comic and anxiety-ridden take on the future. In the New York of the 1980s depicted in *Just Imagine*, marriages are controlled by the state, actual food is replaced by pills, people have numbers instead of names and technology is represented as both empowering and threatening—in short, a kind of thematic blueprint for many later filmic dystopias. If the future in Butler's film is not as bleak as it was depicted, for instance, in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, this is mainly due to the ambiguity of the film—the future state is intrusive, but benevolent, while scientific progress is equally emphasized and ridiculed.

With the notable exception of *Things to Come*, all early utopian films were similarly ambiguous in their portrayal of technology. The crew of space explorers in *Himmelskibet*, for instance, uses the latest model of airship in order to reach a civilization from which technology is largely absent. Anxieties about technology and technological progress are prominent in



Metropolis (the menacing robot) or in *Aelita* (the stylized background, made out of huge cogwheels, used to emphasize the workers' dependency on machinery). Many of these films are also overt anti-war allegories; *Things to Come* portrays the reshaping of human institutions after a devastating planetary war, while Shangri-La, the isolated community from *Lost Horizon*, is a kind of Noah's Ark, meant to shelter a few chosen humans (and civilization in general) from the perils of war. In a sense, nearly all the utopias depicted on film until the late 30s are moral utopias. They question modernity, they offer moral solutions to the social dilemmas of the day—such as the famous message of mediation between the hand (the workers) and the brain (the elites) in *Metropolis*—, and they project into the future a prevalent nostalgia for a simpler, pre-industrial past.

It's important to note that not all early utopian films were necessarily appropriating narrative devices from the nascent science fiction film genre. *Lost Horizon* is the obvious counter-example, but there are also lesser-known ones. One such movie is Aleksandr Ptushko's *The New Gulliver* (*Novyy Gullivyer*, 1935), mainly a children's film, which adapted Swift's satire to the sensibilities of Soviet juvenile audiences, portraying the kingdom of Lilliput, as one would probably expect, as a highly autocratic and class-stratified society. However, Ptushko's film is an adaptation of a classic work of utopian literature and, as far as I know, is a quite singular work in the early Soviet cinema. By contrast, there is a kind of sub-genre of American comedy films that deserves closer attention as far as its utopian themes are concerned. This sub-genre, known as "Ruritanian comedy" (a term used by film historians nowadays, but coined in the early years of cinema), may be seen as a filmic equivalent of utopian satire.

The plot of such films is set in a generic Central European or South American country (Anthony Hope's fictional Ruritania was itself modeled on the stereotypical image of 19th century Central European monarchies) and it usually centers on the exploits of a male protagonist and on his attempts to adapt to the local milieu—it's no wonder that this particular sub-genre has served as a vehicle for many male stars of the silent era and of the 30s, such as Douglas Fairbanks, Harold Lloyd or Will Rogers.³¹ Of course, these were often thinly-disguised satires of recognizable contemporary events and personalities, a fact obvious to anyone who ever saw Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (1940), a film set in the fictional country of Tomainia, but actually intended as a satire on the rise of the Nazi Party in Germany. However, some of these films used the conventions of Ruritanian comedy to highlight other issues, such as political authority, or to criticize indirectly current political institutions, and in this respect utopian films and Ruritanian comedies overlap thematically—one could quote, for instance, the opening song in *Duck Soup* (1933), with its hints at authoritarianism, the portrayal of corrupt institutions in the same film and the humorous comments on political power in *Million Dollar Legs* (1932).

On the other hand, the turbulent climate of the Depression era found its expression in a number of American social problem films that advocated for utopian solutions in order to overcome the social conflicts of the day. One such film is Gregory La Cava's *Gabriel over the White House* (1933). Financed by the media magnate William Randolph Hearst and released a short time after Franklin Delano Roosevelt (of whom Hearst was a supporter) had been inaugurated president, the movie follows the personal trajectory of a fictional American president which, due to a supernatural "intervention," decides to ignore the demands

of his party, to speak up for the common good and to act on it too. An obvious authoritarian fantasy, the film portrayed its main character as a moral hero and presented in a favorable light his decisions to dissolve the Congress, end prohibition and make good use of an angry “army of the unemployed.” Although this is an extreme example, denounced as such even in 1933 by those who reviewed the film, La Cava’s film evoked a yearning for a different kind of authority, and the same leaning towards an alternative society, one ruled by better leaders, is obvious in an altogether different film, King Vidor’s *Our Daily Bread* (1934). A sequel to Vidor’s silent movie *The Crowd*, *Our Daily Bread* depicts an agrarian and quasi-egalitarian community and features in one of its scenes a debate concerning the best form of government for the commune. While the film strongly emphasizes the values of democracy and solidarity, the community ultimately relies on the benevolent leadership of the main (male) character. Furthermore, like in other utopian films of that era, civilization seems to be a threat for the community (the commune is disrupted by the intervention of state officials and by the arrival of a city-bred *femme fatale*). Ultimately, *Our Daily Bread* offers the same solution as the more politically-minded comedies of the 30s, such as Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times* and René Clair’s *Freedom for Us* (*À nous la liberté*): escape from modern society.



Transition: the 50s

At first sight, there seems to be almost no utopian film in the period between the late 30s and the mid 60s. Film historians or film buffs would probably be able to point the occasional exception—the already mentioned *Atoll K* (not a very good movie, but a lighthearted fantasy about an isolated community proclaiming its own laws nevertheless), two George Orwell adaptations, *Animal Farm* (1954) and *1984* (1956) and a rather obscure allegorical film about the future fate of Britain as a socialist state, adapted from a J.B. Priestley play, *They Came to a City* (1944)—, but articles written on the subject of utopian films usually pay little attention to this transition period. This is probably due to the fact that the utopian film genre is rarely defined and analyzed in relation to the wider institutional context of the film industry. Therefore, by reading some of these articles one may get the impression that the rising number of dystopian films made since the early 70s was linked to some specific shift in the American (or European) culture of the 60s. While this is undoubtedly true for some of these films, paying close attention to the preceding decade might reveal the extent to which the films of the 70s formalized conventions already in place since the late 50s and early 60s. It’s rather obvious that many of the dystopian films made since the 70s are also science fiction films. It would be useful, then, to take into account the post-war evolution of the science fiction film (consolidated as a genre in the United States in the 50s) and to search for earlier instances of utopian films in this diversified genre.

There are two important things to note in this respect. On the one hand, American



science fiction films of the 50s usually employed (and endlessly recycled) narrative devices and themes—the alien invasion, the creature invasion, the atomic conflict—that are not specific to the utopian literature. Among them, only a handful featured a plot that was vaguely utopian, and these were usually B-movies, made on small budgets. Thematically, they equally resembled earlier science fiction films and their contemporary counterparts—for instance, the plot of *Flight to Mars* (1951) involves a team of American astronauts discovering on Mars a superior civilization (one with a fairly conventional hierarchy, but far more advanced technologically) and ultimately stopping an Earth invasion. On the other hand, while these films recycled similar narratives, they also proved to be a perfect vehicle for various ideas and anxieties of that era. The recurring fear of nuclear disaster was one such major concern; for instance, George Pal's *The Time Machine* (1960) had its protagonist witness the atomic destruction of London and the subsequent evolution of the human race into two distinct subspecies, while other films, made before and after *The Time Machine* (*World Without End*, 1956; *Beyond the Time Barrier*, 1960), used Wells' recognizable plot in order to depict similar post-atomic futures. However, if we take into account a phenomenon so far overlooked, the appearance of popular science fiction television series starting with the late 50s, the diversity of utopian themes that found their way into mass culture becomes apparent. A perfect example in this respect is *The Twilight Zone*. Two of the episodes written by the creator of the series, Rod Serling, "The Obsolete Man" (aired in 1961) and "The Old Man in the Cave" (aired in 1963), depicted future societies in which personal freedom and faith were threatened or downright abolished by authoritarian

governments. Similarly, "Valley of the Shadow," written by Charles Beaumont and aired in 1963, revisited to some extent the plot of *Lost Horizon* and emphasized the dystopian aspects of such an isolated community, while "Number 12 Looks Just Like You," adapted from a Beaumont story, "The Beautiful People," was a bleak depiction of a future society affected by conformity and consumerism, and a likely influence for Scott Westerfeld's later novel, *Uglies*.

Authoritarian Dystopias, Ironic Utopias: the 60s and the 70s

To some extent, the relatively large number of dystopian science fiction films made in the early 70s in the United States—*THX 1138*, *Soylent Green*, *Zardoz*, *Rollerball*, *Death Race 2000*, *Logan's Run*—can be explained by two factors: the rise of the "New Hollywood" and the willingness of American studios to get involved in producing science fiction films (a genre that was no longer profitable by the early 60s) after the unexpected success of *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *Planet of the Apes* (both these films were released in 1968 and both were financially successful). The fact that young American directors of the early 70s were interested in genre filmmaking, with some of them favoring science fiction (George Lucas is the obvious example), is often mentioned too by film historians when writing about this particular decade. Equally important, though, are two less-studied aspects. Firstly, by the time Hollywood studios turned their attention to science fiction films again, a number of dystopian science fiction films had already been made in Europe. Most of them were art-house films, and they were either independently financed projects—Jean-Luc Godard's *Alphaville* (1965), for instance, was produced by the French industrialist André Michelin, while Peter Watkins' *The*



Gladiators/ Gladiatorena (1969) was made for the Swedish television—, or movies financed by American studios eager to enter the art-house market (such is the case with François Truffaut’s *Fahrenheit 451*, made by Universal Pictures in London), or even international co-productions featuring well-known stars (the already mentioned *The Tenth Victim*, produced by Carlo Ponti, had in its cast Marcello Mastroianni and Ursula Andress). Secondly, during the 60s science fiction was being institutionalized as a genre in Europe, a fact apparent from its increased appeal for television audiences, especially in Great Britain, and from the establishment of two important thematic festivals—the Trieste International Science Fiction Film Festival (initially, FIFF/ Festival Internazionale del Film di Fantascienza), which debuted in 1963, and the Sitges Film Festival (Festival Internacional de Cinema Fantàstic de Catalunya), which launched its first edition in 1968. Therefore, by the late 60s and early 70s there were already science fiction television series which may be viewed as variations on earlier dystopian films—most notably, *The Prisoner* (1967-1968) and *The Guardians* (1971), both made by the British television network ITV—, while many feature films or movies made for television that would be labeled nowadays as dystopian films were being shown at the two thematic festivals already mentioned.³² While *Alphaville* and *Fahrenheit 451* are habitually cited as direct influences on later dystopian films made in the United States, the broader phenomenon has been largely ignored by those who have tried to outline the development of the genre. However, if there is a utopian film genre, it would have to include all the dystopian films made for different mediums and in different countries, on both sides of the Atlantic, in this particular period. What this seems to imply is that most utopian films produced in these two decades belong to an

“international” genre, one that is closely associated with science fiction cinema.

As for other international film genres, it’s difficult to point out an identifiable set of traits to match all the utopian films discussed here. However, there are certain generic similarities that may be invoked to support the thesis of a common (sub)genre. These films depict a future authoritarian society and, since this future society differs from the “normal” society in one or two major aspects, these movies are usually topical—consequently, there are dystopian films concerned with overpopulation (*Soylent Green*, *Z.P.G. / Zero Population Growth*, *Logan’s Run*), media violence (*The Tenth Victim*, *The Gladiators*, *Rollerball*, *Death Race 2000*), consumerism (*THX 1138*), and so on. The most common way of depicting the overpowering authority of the future state is through an emphasis on uniformity (the inhabitants of future dystopian societies are all dressed in the same manner and use standardized everyday objects) and coercion (filmic dystopian societies, much like their literary counterparts, are police states, and they rely in different degrees on surveillance and public punishments to reinforce their authority). The plot of such films usually involves the protagonist’s gradual awakening to the “true” nature of his society and his subsequent rebellion, at times followed by his escape; romantic subplots are also common in this kind of story. Lastly, since these are all science fiction films, they commonly predict future developments in technology, but, in part due to the rise of environmental concerns in the 60s and 70s, they tend to oppose technology to nature—therefore, the protagonists escape their hypertechnologized societies and take refuge in pristine and/ or deserted natural settings.

It’s a lot more difficult to explain why this particular genre (or sub-genre) has



flourished from the mid 60s onward. Were these films symptomatic of a more general decline in the legitimacy of government and authority? Were they the expression of a new and more radical way of filmmaking? There are no easy or definitive answers to these questions, since dystopian films were equally being made by established film studios and smaller production companies and they were targeting different kinds of audiences (art-house moviegoers, younger audiences, and so on). However, one important clue in this respect is provided by the kind of material that was adapted for the big screen. Even if the generic plot of many dystopian films is reminiscent of the so-called “classic” literary dystopias (i.e. Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *We*, Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* and George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*), these works were actually adapted only in the early 80s—while Orwell’s book was in fact translated to the screen in 1956 as *1984*, the first years of the 80s saw the coincidental release of three such adaptations: Burt Brinckerhoff’s *Brave New World* (1980), made in the United States and aired on NBC, Vojtěch Jasný’s *We* (*Wir*, 1981), made for the German television, and Michael Radford’s feature film *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1984). In the 60s and the 70s, producers and directors were more likely to adapt lesser-known and more or less contemporary science fiction novels or short stories that addressed in a metaphorical manner current social issues. For instance, two similar movies, Michael Campus’s *Z.P.G.* (1972) and Michael Anderson’s *Logan’s Run* (1976), were based on books published around the same time—Paul R. Ehrlich’s nonfiction bestseller *The Population Bomb* (1967) and William F. Nolan’s and George Clayton Johnson’s novel, *Logan’s Run* (1968), respectively—that warned about the dangers of future overpopulation. In general, it was not

uncommon for filmmakers to rework the same themes, while adapting similar literary sources—in this regard, *The Tenth Victim* (1965), *Rollerball* (1975) and *Death Race 2000* (1975) were all based on science fiction short stories, penned by Robert Sheckley, William Harrison and Ib Melchior, respectively.

However, not all utopian films made in these two decades are as easy to categorize. A film such as Roger Corman’s *Gas! or It Became Necessary to Destroy the World in Order to Save It* (1970) initially seems to be a pastiche of earlier science fiction films, and one adapted for the counterculture generation—the movie depicts the obligatory nationwide cataclysm, but this event somehow affects only the people over 25 years—, but eventually unfolds as a series of vignettes, tied together by a common theme, the search for an ideal community. There are endless allusions in the dialogue to the major issues of the day, as seen through the eyes of the counterculture (free love, music, political horizontalism), and the utopian community reached at the end of the film is depicted alternatively in affectionate and ironical terms. It would be easy to dismiss such a film as a product of its age and a cinematic curiosity, were it not for other film projects made independently in the early years of the same decade that shared some of its thematic interests and its ironic distance. One of them is *The Year 01* (*L’an 01*, 1973), a collaborative effort between French directors Jacques Doillon, Alain Resnais and Jean Rouch and cartoonist and author Gébé. Adapted from Gébé’s comic book of the same name, the film depicted in a number of loosely structured vignettes a future France that halted its production facilities and embraced a new way of life, characterized by freedom, the pursuit of one’s inclinations and the symbolic abolition of private property. Another similar film, directed by the exiled



Chilean director Raúl Ruiz in West Germany, *The Scattered Body and the World Upside Down/ Utopia (Mensch verstreut und Welt verkehrt, 1975)*, was a satirical take on utopian socialism and its practices (communal living, the new division of labor, unrestricted sexuality). All these films portray imaginary utopian communities that are, to some extent, the practical embodiment of some of the influential political and social ideas disseminated throughout the 60s. Furthermore, since these films are formally closer to the art-house political films of that era, they tend to be critical of consumerism, colonialism and industrial progress (as, in fact, many dystopian films of the era were), but they also adopt an ironic stance towards their own subject matter. Integrating social commentary into their plots, these films seem to question openly the possibility of a utopian transformation of society or even dismiss such a possibility, as a rather obscure allegorical film about the excesses of individualism in a remote contemporary community, *Dream City (Traumstadt, 1973)*, seems to do.³³

This overview bears no pretense of being an exhaustive one. Some genres need to be explored further—for instance, the social problem film seem to be an almost ideal vehicle for utopian ideas, and there almost certainly are other political films made in the 60s and 70s that have appropriated, in one way or another, narrative devices from utopian literature. On the other hand, science fiction cinema as a phenomenon was in no way restricted to the United States and a few European countries, as these pages might seem to suggest. There might be other science fiction films that have employed utopian themes and motifs in lesser-known national cinemas. However, it seems that, in general, science fiction films were more likely to adapt utopian tropes, and in fact a large number of films

that are usually labeled nowadays as “utopian” are adaptations of literary works with strong utopian or dystopian undertones. If this is indeed so, the evolution of the utopian film should be merely a chapter in the larger history of science fiction cinema. There are, of course, isolated examples of utopian films, some of them discussed here, that clearly don’t belong to the science fiction genre; however, their infrequency and their variety in terms of style and form tend to make them the exception rather than the rule.

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Notes

¹ H.G. Wells, “Mr. Wells Reviews a Current Film,” reprinted in Michael Minden, Holger Bachmann (eds.), *Fritz Lang’s Metropolis: Cinematic Visions of Technology and Fear*, Rochester, Camden House, 2000, p. 95.

² Herbert Ihering, “The *Metropolis*-Film,” in *ibidem*, p. 87.

³ H.G. Wells, *op. cit.*, in *ibidem*, p. 99.

⁴ Edward James, *Science Fiction in the 20th Century*, Oxford & New York, Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 12, 41-42.

⁵ Brian Stableford, *Science Fact and Science Fiction: An Encyclopedia*, London, Routledge, 2006, p. 468.

⁶ Edward James, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

⁷ Richard Toby Widdicombe, “Early Histories of Utopian Thought (to 1950),” *Utopian Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 1992, pp. 1-38.

⁸ “Der zukunftsphantastische Film *Metropolis*,” reprinted in Michael Minden, Holger Bachmann (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 75.

⁹ “Things to Come,” *Variety*, Vol. 121, No. 12, March 4, 1936, p. 26.



¹⁰ “Lost Horizon,” *ibidem*, Vol. 125, No. 13, March 10, 1937, p. 14.

¹¹ “Things to Come,” *ibidem*, Vol. 121, No. 12, March 4, 1936, p. 26.

¹² Peter Fitting, “What is Utopian Film? An Introductory Taxonomy,” *Utopian Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (1993), pp. 1-17.

¹³ Besides the articles published in the two thematic issues already mentioned, insights into the subject can be found in some other papers published throughout the 80s and the 90s—see H. Bruce Franklin, “Don’t Look Where We’re Going: Visions of the Future in Science-Fiction Films, 1970-82,” *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (1983), pp. 70-80; Peter Ruppert, “*Blade Runner*: The Utopian Dialectics of Science Fiction Films,” *Cineaste*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (1989), pp. 8-13; Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner’s chapters on “Technophobia” and “Dystopia” in *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film*, Indiana, Indiana University Press, 1988, pp. 245-254, 254-258; Constance Penley, “Time Travel, Primal Scene and the Critical Dystopia,” in Constance Penley, Elisabeth Lyon, Lynn Spigel, and Janet Bergstrom (eds.), *Close Encounters: Film, Feminism and Science Fiction*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, pp. 63-80 (the last two reprinted in Sean Redmond (ed.), *Liquid Metal: The Science Fiction Film Reader*, London, Wallflower Press, 2004, pp. 48-56 and pp. 126-135); Peter Ruppert, “Tracing Utopia: Film, Spectatorship and Desire,” *Utopian Studies*, vol. 7, No. 2 (1996), pp. 139-152. For more recent contributions on the matter, see Peter Fitting, “Unmasking the Real? Critique and Utopia in Recent SF Films,” in Raffaella Baccolini, Tom Moylan (eds.), *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, New York & London, Routledge, 2003, pp. 155-166; Kathrin Fahlenbrach, “Utopia and Dystopia

in Science Fiction Films around 1968,” in Timothy Scott Brown, Andrew Lison (eds.), *The Global Sixties in Sound and Vision: Media, Counterculture, Revolt*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, pp. 83-100. *CinémAction* has also released in 2005 a new thematic issue, titled “Utopia and Cinema” (“Utopie et cinéma”), under the supervision of Yona Dureau.

¹⁴ Peter Fitting, “What is Utopian Film? An Introductory Taxonomy,” p. 1.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 5.

¹⁶ Richard Dyer, “Entertainment and Utopia,” in Richard Dyer, *Only Entertainment*, London & New York, Routledge, 2002, 2nd edition, p. 20.

¹⁷ Peter Ruppert, “Tracing Utopia: Film, Spectatorship and Desire,” p. 143.

¹⁸ Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, London & New York, Routledge, 2000, pp. 103-104.

¹⁹ Peter Ruppert, “Tracing Utopia: Film, Spectatorship and Desire,” p. 147.

²⁰ The most complete, as far as I know, is the one compiled under the supervision of Michel Antony and published, of all places, on the site of the French National Confederation of Labour (Confédération nationale du travail, CNT), see <http://www.cnt-f.org/video/images/stories/pdf/cinema-et-utopies-22sept2011.pdf> (in French), last visited on October 24, 2015; while the choices on the list are not always defensible, mostly because it seems that every major cinematic document concerned with the syndicalist or anarchist movement was included on it, along with a number of science fiction movies that are not strictly speaking utopian, it is nevertheless the best place to start in reviewing the subject.

²¹ Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*, New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 1979, p. 50, author’s emphasis.



²² Frederic Jameson, “Of Islands and Trenches: Neutralization and the Production of Utopian Discourse,” in Frederic Jameson, *The Ideologies of Theory*, London & New York, 2008, p. 393.

²³ Ian Christie, “Down to Earth: *Aelita* Relocated,” in Richard Taylor, Ian Christie (eds.), *Inside the Film Factory: New Approaches to Russian and Soviet Cinema*, London & New York, Routledge, 1991, pp. 81-102.

²⁴ As Christie points out, Mezhrabpom-Rus had a very clear idea of how to make such films, as a script competition launched in September 1923 suggests. The proposed themes were the following: “1. the Russian folk epic; 2. historical and epic tales with a heroic flavor; 3. the everyday life of the workers and peasants past and present; 4. contemporary everyday life (other than workers’ and peasants’); 5. modernized daily life; 6. the everyday life of Nepmen; 7. adventure films and films of everyday life ‘on a USSR-wide scale’; 8. wholesome revolutionary detective films; 9. utopian films, such as a look into a happier future,” quoted in *ibidem*, p. 86.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 82-83.

²⁶ “There was the extraordinary voyage (within which we might place the lost-race story); the tale of the future (including utopias, tales of future war and what Stableford calls ‘eschatological fantasies’, like *The Time Machine* itself); and the tale of science (notably concerned with marvelous inventions),” Edward James, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

²⁷ I use here the term “social problem film” as defined by Peter Roffman and Jim Purdy in their 1981 book *The Hollywood Social Problem Film: Madness, Despair and Politics from the Depression to the Fifties* and further discussed by Steve Neale in *Genre and Hollywood* because, unlike other labels such as “political film,” it stresses the

generic plot structure of such movies—in Roffman’s and Purdy’s words, “the central dramatic conflict revolves around the interaction of the individual with social institutions (such as government, business, political movements, etc.)”—, and not their function, see Steve Neale, *op. cit.*, pp. 105-110.

²⁸ Darko Suvin, *op. cit.*, pp. 50-51, author’s emphases.

²⁹ There are a number of short-length films made prior to *Himmelskibet* that could be labeled utopian, insofar as they depict “topsy-turvy worlds” in which women assume the traditional attributes of men, including their clothing, in a future matriarchal society, the best-known example being Alice Guy’s *The Consequences of Feminism* (*Les Résultats du féminisme*, 1906), later remade by Guy for the American audiences under the title *In the Year 2000* (1912). A brief overview of this sub-genre can be found in Keith M. Johnston, *Science Fiction Film: A Critical Introduction*, Oxford & New York, Berg, 2011, p. 68, while a contextual analysis of *The Consequences of Feminism* appears in Alison McMahan’s biography, *Alice Guy Blaché: Lost Visionary of the Cinema*, New York & London, Bloomsbury, 2003, pp. 233-241. However, some of these films have been lost, while others, including the obscure comedy *The Last Man on Earth* (1924), are relatively hard to come by, and therefore it was difficult to evaluate them.

³⁰ For an in-depth analysis of the film and of its generic influences, see Katherine Spring, “Just Imagine: The Musical Effacement of Dystopia in an Early Sound Film,” in Mathew J. Bartkowiak (ed.), *Sounds of the Future: Essays on Music in Science Fiction Film*, Jefferson & London, McFarland, 2010, pp. 67-85.

³¹ For an overview of Ruritanian comedy, see Charles Morrow, “It’s Good to be the



King: Hollywood's Mythical Monarchies, Troubled Republics, and Crazy Kingdoms," in Andrew Horton, Joanna E. Rapf (eds.), *A Companion to Film Comedy*, Chichester, West Sussex, Wiley-Blackwell, 2013, pp. 251-272.

³² According to the site of the festival, FIFF had on its programme Godard's *Alphaville* (in 1965), an adaptation of E.M. Forster's "The Machine Stops," made as an episode of the British science fiction series *Out of the Unknown* (in 1967), Watkins' *The Gladiators* (in 1970), Roger Corman's *Gas!, or It Became Necessary to Destroy the World in Order to Save It* and "L.A. 2017,"

a dystopian episode of the American series *The Name of the Game*, made by a young Steven Spielberg (in 1971); for the full archive, see <http://www.sciencefictionfestival.org/archivio-edizioni/festival-internazionale-del-film-di-fantascienza/?lang=en>. Similarly, the Sitges Film Festival included in its program films such as *Alphaville* (in 1968) or Michael Campus' *Z.P.G./ Zero Population Growth* (in 1972); for the full archive, see <http://sitgesfilmfestival.com/-eng/arxiu>.

³³ The film, directed by Johannes Schaaf, is loosely based on Alfred Kubin's 1909 novel, *The Other Side* (*Die andere Seite*).