Imperfect Worlds and Dystopian Narratives in Contemporary Cinema

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Introductory Remarks. The Uses of Dystopian Worlds

Contrary to the meagre body of what can be called "utopian films," filmic dystopias have become so prominent in the cinematic production of the last two decades that it would be reasonable to expect this potentially interesting field of study to have produced a substantial bibliography of book-length studies on the subject and the theoretical issues involved. And yet, with the exception of Peter Fitting's pioneering works or chapters in books on SF cinema focusing on dystopian motifs, the dystopian cinema has been largely neglected by film critics, and only marginally treated in utopian studies. It attracted far less critical attention than, for example, Hollywood disaster movies. Apocalyptic anxieties instigated by the turn of the millennium seem to have channelled interests of cinema specialists in the direction of global catastrophes. Apparently imperfect worlds, plagued by such afflictions as social unrest, anarchy, *coups d'état*, totalitarian regimes, lethal systems of coercion, sensual, emotional and intellectual deprivation of citizens, that is, by less spectacular misfortunes transpiring on a smaller scale, could hardly compete with visions of mass destruction and annihilation of humankind. The number of publications on dystopian motifs in contemporary cinema—negligible, if compared to that on dystopias in literature—by no means reflects the variety of filmic "unhappy worlds," which in itself constitutes reason enough to explore them further.

Any discussion of dystopian film, or dystopian motifs in cinematic productions, must unavoidably touch upon the elusive question of the definition of dystopia versus anti-utopia, satirical utopia, and other possible genre labels. The adoption of any given definition would determine the selection of films to be subsumed under this category, which could be appropriately restricted or expanded by the adopted position. The most comprehensive, and at the same time the most convenient for our purposes, definition of dystopia—albeit literary, not cinematic—is provided

by Lyman Tower Sargent, who characterizes it in terms of a contrastive comparison with the author's world (Sargent 1994). What is interesting in Sargent's definition is that he does not set out to define the characteristics of a genre, or mode of discourse, but conceptualizes dystopia as a certain way of constructing the represented world. In other words, all other elements, often distinguished in formulating a normative poetics of the genre, such as the mode of narration, plot pattern, standard motifs, or typical characters and events, are not taken into consideration. Going beyond Sargent's typology which comprises six types of utopian discourse: utopia, eutopia/positive utopia, dystopia/negative utopia, utopian satire, anti-utopia, critical utopia, it could be argued that both satirical dystopias and anti-utopias are not so much different genres or modes of discourse as certain functions, or uses, of the dystopian construction of the fictional reality which they both introduce (Blaim 2011 [forthcoming]). The range of possible functions, or uses, of dystopias in literature and cinema goes beyond satire (of whatever degree of generality) or critique of the existential (or postulated) reality. In fact, dystopias can also be used in the utopianizing function, which often accompanies the anti-utopian one, when the represented world makes the reality of the reader, or viewer, truly (e)utopian by comparison with the one depicted in a particular novel or film.

The authors of the studies included in the present book, who apply Sargent's definition of the literary dystopia to cinematic representations of imperfect worlds, focus on both popular as well as less widely discussed films from different cultural, linguistic and political contexts, in which dystopian elements play a major role. In all cases, a special emphasis is put on the functions of the selected dystopias and techniques of constructing and construing visions of fictional realities. The oldest filmic dystopias presented in the volume: *Goto, the Island of Love* (1968), dir. Walerian Borowczyk, and *Even Dwarfs Started Small* (1970), dir. Werner Herzog, were released in Western Europe (France and West Germany respectively); the newest dystopia *The Aerial* (2007), dir. Esteban Sapir, comes from South America (Argentina). Considering the traditionally strong tendency towards political topicality in the East-European cinema, it is hardly surprising that the Polish dystopias discussed here: *Sexmission* (1984), dir. Juliusz Machulski; *Ga-ga: Glory to the Heroes* (1986), dir. Piotr Szulkin; *Kingsajz* (1987), dir. Juliusz Machulski, were all made in the turbulent 1980s—the decade which witnessed the gradual collapse of what many used to regard as the communist utopia come true. Among the films, there are also three major Hollywood productions: *Equilibrium* (2002), *V for Vendetta* (2005), and *Children of Men* (2006) that exemplify the post-9/11 decade of the proliferation of dystopian themes and motifs in American cinema. To avoid sweeping generalizations, how-

ever, the 1980s are additionally represented by a Canadian production, *Videodrome* (1983), dir. David Cronenberg—the sole example of the more or less unadulterated North American cinematography. With the exception of Cronenberg's film, in all other American dystopias, the European connection is unmistakeable. *Equilibrium* abounds in themes and motifs from two classic British dystopias, *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*; the plots of *V for Vendetta* and *Children of Men*, set in the London of the near future, are based on works by British authors; and *The Aerial* explicitly references the times and concepts of Russian Formalists. The group of East-European films includes the Russian/Soviet film from the late 1970s, Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979) based on a popular SF novel by the Strugatsky brothers.

The proposed selection of dystopias does not constitute any recognized canon of the dystopian cinema, and the eleven films analysed in the three parts of the book do not necessarily define the major tendencies in the future development of the genre. At the same time, they seem to deny the allegedly formulaic nature of filmic dystopia, demonstrating the variety, narratological inventiveness, compositional complexity, generic hybridity, and heightened intertextuality of Eastern and Western cinematic productions. As all the case studies show, the dystopian cinema easily adapts the techniques and motifs from the literary dystopian narrative, simultaneously modifying and refining them in accordance with the specificity of its medium.

The book is divided into three sections. Each section foregrounds the complex interrelations that dystopian films enter into with regard to the artistic, cultural and socio-political contexts in which they originally appeared.

1. In Part One entitled "Dystopia and Conventions," the authors discuss the use of various artistic conventions which organize and estrange the dystopian narrative and fictional world. The studies demonstrate the effects of applying the carnivalesque (*Even Dwarfs Started Small*); the fairy-tale and formalist cinema conventions (*The Aerial*); the conventions of the pastoral idyll, organ concerto, the *fête galante* painting style (*Goto, the Island of Love*); and the campy art of bricolage (*Equilibrium*).
2. In Part Two entitled "Dystopia and Culture," the cinematic dystopias are viewed as artistic representations of some important cultural phenomena regulating, or disorganizing, our contemporary reality. The authors concentrate on various aspects and mechanisms of TV-semiosphere (*Videodrome*); terrorism and its theatrical dimension (*V for Vendetta*); (anti-)feminism (*Sexmission*).

3. In Part Three entitled "Dystopia and Reality," the studies foreground the real that lurks behind the estranged dystopian worlds: Soviet punitive psychiatry (*Stalker*); everyday life under communism (*Kingsajz*); the Cold War, political propaganda and the power of the media (*Ga-ga: Glory to the Heroes*); ethnic and cultural minorities, demographic crisis (*Children of Men*).

Whilst this division, like most, may seem to some extent arbitrary, it has the advantage of indicating the three major domains in which the dystopian cinema operates and which exert an important influence on the thematic and compositional dominants of particular dystopian constructs.

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