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IMAGINARIES OF THE FUTURE 01: BODIES AND MEDIA

Delineating the Missing Film Genre: Eutopia

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This article begins by positing the absence of the eutopian genre within mainstream film and hypothesising that such an absence is worthy of artistic exploration. After discussing why film is considered crucial, the article examines *Utopian Studies* articles by Peter Fitting, Peter Ruppert and Robert Shelton, who discuss utopia in film with reference to Lyman Tower Sargent's definition of utopia. The article suggests that although these writers also detected an absence of eutopian film, their analysis was obscured by focussing on the 'utopian impulse', a more important tool for scholars than artists. The distinction between the 'utopian impulse' and the 'utopian art-form' is probed with reference to Fredric Jameson and Douglas Kellner, suggesting that the missing genre might be better described as the utopian art-form. Problems raised by the words 'utopia' and 'eutopia' are then discussed. 'Eutopia' is found to be more suitable for the article's aims. Following a short summary of utopia's historical reputation, where Adorno's argument against describing positive imaginaries is addressed, Tower Sargent's definition of 'eutopia' is explored with reference to the 'sociopolitical', 'place' and relation of eutopia to its readers. These terms are used to examine the relevance of three films (*Black Panther* (2018), *Tomorrowland* (2015) and *Blade Runner 2049* (2017)) to the eutopian art-form, showing how using these terms can help to understand what the eutopian art-form is and how to create new instances of it. A closing look at the existing field of mainstream film leads to a summary of this article's findings, namely that the eutopian art-form is absent and that this space presents a valid space for new artistic creation.

An Empty Space in Film

> 'I would define utopia as food, water, shelter, clothing, healthcare and education for everybody on the planet, by whatever means gets us that, or the work towards that state'.
>
> (Kim Stanley Robinson, quoted in Ford: 00:24)

Miguel Abensour described utopia as the education of desire (Playfair, 2015). As a viewer, a political subject and an artist, when I look at the body of mainstream popular film, I feel the desire to see something on the silver screen that I cannot find, to educate myself and others. Because sometimes seeing is believing.

In science fiction (sf) film I see only dystopia, which takes the present and extrapolates it towards something more hellish. In other filmic genres I see our current sociopolitical system repeated endlessly, mirroring and reflecting back on itself. What I do not see is what the lay person might call utopian film — spaces that are attempting to show how much better we could have it, given our mindboggling powers as a species, if only we could organise the world according to different principles.

The crudity of the above reasoning is likely to annoy utopian scholars. The utopian impulse is clearly present in dystopian narratives, as it is in most mainstream film. The aim of this crude logic is to attempt to prise open a neglected, narrow space, that of the utopian or eutopian art-form. I hope to elucidate this space, which in its smallness is also potentially rather large and vital. Darko Suvin wrote that sf 'can be written only between the utopian and the dystopian horizons' (2010: 43). If we are both correct, then consumers of film are missing half a genre. If all fiction shares the same horizon, they are missing even more.

I am concerned herein with defining what elements such a film ought to contain. As such, this is an article for makers, but also hopefully for scholars who are interested in opening up and supporting new fields of creative activity. My hypothesis asks: What if there were more such films — how might a broader public imaginary affect our collective hopes, dreams and goals?

Fredric Jameson wrote that for utopian 'representability to be achieved, the social or historical moment [...] must have reached a level of shaped complexity that seems to foreground some fundamental ill' (2007: 14). Global climate is a symptom of such an ill: the United Nations recently announced that we have 12 years to drastically alter the way our planet is organised to avoid widespread global catastrophe (Watts, 2018). The urgency of this situation makes it clear that new strategies need to be considered for reshaping our current systems — and fast. Climate change shows that existing systems are not working properly. Considered in this light, filmic representations of life as usual that support the status quo also take on a hellish, dystopian aspect. If we can therefore bundle almost all film into the dystopian category, it becomes clear there is a need for a eutopian Yang to the dystopian Yin.

The current sociopolitical complex that includes climate change also includes other worrying trends, from post truth to rising nationalism and increasing wealth inequality. Rather than climate change, it is the global elites, enabled by neoliberal policies, that are driving these trends (Monbiot, 2016; Balunovic, 2016). Whilst plenty of dystopian films can be found that might illustrate and therefore tacitly support these trends, what is absent from film are positive visions of a different sociopolitical norm that present positive counter positions to these problems: ideas that connect the reality that our world is breaking with a broader, more generous notion of commons.

This article explores this absence. We will analyse three recent films: *Black Panther* (2018) and Tomorrowland (2015), which were chosen for their seemingly utopian potential, and *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), which is dystopic and used to provide contrast. In order to interrogate these films we first need to do some work to define the tools of our analysis.

Why Film?

Mainstream film in particular is considered to be a more vital space within the arts than performance, sculpture or painting because, as Robert Shelton wrote, 'movies are arguably the commodities most central to defining this American century' (1993: 19). Of course, this comment is a simplification, but it contains an essential truth. Movies

are the myth making, dream shaping constructs of light and sound that, of all the art-forms, are most consumed by the general public. They transmit and shape desire, they travel well on the internet in *this* century and they influence masses of minds.

George Monbiot writes, 'Stories are the means by which we navigate the world [...] You cannot take away someone's story without giving them a new one' (2017: 1). If we want the world to change, employing mediums and methodologies that are accessible to everyone seems wise. Movies are such a medium. Everyone on the planet with access to a TV or computer is an expert in reading these stories which, often following the well-known myths presented in Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), contribute to our picture of how the world is and how it can be. In delineating a relatively unexplored part of the film spectrum, the thought is less that the introduction of more eutopian stories will change the world directly, rather that they might make a small difference to what is perceived as possible or desirable, which might in turn affect real change.

Manjana Milkoreit writes about the 'inclusion of positive-desirable (utopian), negative undesirable (dystopian) and mixed visions of the future' (2017: 3) as follows:

> All three types of future visions can have different cognitive emotional effects on political actors. The full spectrum of future thinking on political behavior needs to be explored to develop a good understanding of the psychology of utopian vs. dystopian thinking (2017: 3).

This is clear. A complex relation exists between what we see on screen, the world which we inhabit and our future desires for that world – and this relation is little understood. If the above hypothesis is correct that eutopian film is absent, then one part of the spectrum is not being explored in this very public medium. A desire to see examples of eutopian mainstream film is a desire for a fuller representation of the spectrum of imaginative possibility.

Previous Articles on Utopian Film

Having identified why film is being considered, we should first examine more carefully if the utopian or eutopian filmic space really is as empty as I claim. During the 1990s there were a number of articles written for the *Utopian Studies* journal about utopian

film. Peter Fitting (1993) opened proceedings in Issue IV, No. 2 by employing Lyman Tower Sargent's definition of utopian fiction as 'a non-existent society described in considerable detail' (1990: 4) to perform an introductory taxonomy of the field.

Fitting starts by observing that according to Tower Sargent's definition there are very few films that might be called utopian. He references *Things to Come* (1936) and *Lost Horizon* (1937) as two obvious but dated examples. Observing that both of these films 'devote relatively little space to the representation of the new society' (1993: 2), Peter Ruppert observes that Fitting excludes these films from being utopian on these grounds, before opening up his field of enquiry to encompass 'such diverse genres as dystopias, ethnographic films, political documentaries, pornotopias, TV sitcoms, and fascist films among others' (Ruppert, 1996: 139). Despite this broad range, according to the initial terms with which Fitting conducted his taxonomy, namely Tower Sargent's definition, Fitting's search came up blank.

In the subsequent article in that issue, Shelton discusses utopian film with regards to genre and encounters the same problem, namely that such films are scarce. On the one hand, Shelton is certain that, as Tom Moylan writes, 'Utopia cannot be reduced to its *content*' (1986: 38, italics original) — a claim that we will tackle shortly. On the other, Shelton is certain that *Things to Come* belongs to the utopian film genre, despite its pedagogical nature and its failure to provide a 'sensual, visual experience' (1993: 22). He closes in a way that testifies to the absence of contemporary utopias, writing of potential utopian film scholars that their 'immediate goal may be to play film historians and review and re-view the films of the sound era, especially before 1950' (Shelton, 1993: 23)

Impulse versus Art-Form

There is a section in Fitting's (1993: 8) article that takes up ideas presented in Richard Dyer's 'Entertainment and Utopia' (1992) where Dyer writes that 'Entertainment does not, however, present models of utopian worlds [...] Rather the utopia is contained in the feelings that it embodies' (1992: 20). Ruppert's article, 'Tracing Utopia' (1996), picks this point up and expands upon it. Ruppert agrees that Fitting's search implies a complete absence of utopian films (1996: 139). Disagreeing with Shelton, Ruppert claims a special property of utopian film is that it 'confounds easy classification

because it exceeds the normal bounds of genre description' (1996: 139). Ruppert employs the above quote from Dyer to show that utopia does exist in film, but not explicitly. He argues that 'Utopian film [...] cannot be defined by conventions of setting, plot, iconography, codes, or structural features.' (1996: 140) I disagree with this position. Using the word 'utopia' in this way obfuscates a whole avenue of possibility.

Jameson (2007) elucidates this point clearly by drawing a distinction between the 'utopian impulse' and the 'utopian art-form'. Identifying a paradox in the work of Ernst Bloch, Jameson writes, 'we would therefore do better to posit two distinct lines of descendency from More's inaugural text: the one intent on the realization of the utopian program', of which the utopian art-form can be considered a part, and the other, 'an obscure yet omnipresent utopian impulse finding its way to the surface in a variety of covert expressions and practices' (2007: 3). This is the utopian impulse. When considering the utopian art-form and film, Fitting, Shelton and Ruppert show that there is a dearth of films that share attributes with Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516/1965), which does fulfil the criteria of Tower Sargent's definition. They demonstrate an absence of the utopian art-form. For scholars who are involved in discussing existing artworks, this lack presents a problem that must necessarily be addressed by finding other ways to read existing films utopically: the utopian impulse.

To further clarify what the utopian impulse is, we can turn to Douglas Kellner, who explains in his article *Ernst Bloch, Utopia and Ideology Critique* (2010) a distinction that Bloch made between 'half' and 'genuine' enlightenment. He writes that whereas half enlightenment consists of a 'rationalistic dismissal of all mystification, superstition, legend' (Kellner, 2010: 41), full enlightenment 'criticizes any distortions in an ideological product, but then goes on to take it more seriously, to read it closely for any critical or emancipatory potential' (Kellner, 2010: 41). This emancipatory potential is the utopian impulse.

Crucially, Kellner is talking about critique. In dismissing films that are not utopian art-instances, it is not my intention to deny the importance of the utopian impulse. As we saw whilst discussing Shelton's reading of *Things to Come*, a film that fits the utopian genre can be short on the utopian impulse. For artists, however,

another avenue presents itself: the possibility to create new utopian art-instances. But what are they? To find out, going against what Moylan wrote (see Part III above), utopia must be reduced to its content.

Historical Context: More's Rupture

Before exploring the details of the art-form, it is helpful to take a closer look at why utopia has acquired its negative reputation. Utopia's absence is not specific to film. Utopia has been historically challenged and sidelined by almost everyone, from Marx and Engels to Margaret Thatcher. More's *Utopia* (1516/1965), written at the dawn of the modern age, stands as an early depiction of a dream that was to become increasingly real over the intervening centuries. As Jameson observes, 'the force of More's original Utopian starting point and the grandest of all the ruptures effectuated by the Utopian Imagination [is and remains] the thought of abolishing money and private property' (2005: 229, capitalisation original). In other words, communism. Historically, it is now clear that beginning with 'the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions' (Marx & Engels, 1888: 258) is not to be advised.

Marx and Engels wanted to be taken seriously and presented their arguments as having a historical, scientific basis. An association with seemingly silly or impossible fantasy stories such as *Looking Backward* (1888) by Edward Bellamy or *News from Nowhere* (1892) by William Morris created a credibility problem. However, their argument against utopia was flawed. Suvin draws this out in *Defined by a Hollow*, concluding that 'in a future history, which is only postulated and contingent, science and utopia, necessity and possibility, the vertical and the horizontal, embrace' (2010: 64). He is saying that the seeding of cultural ambition that any political movement necessarily performs always involves the creation of utopias. Consider the competing Russian and American visions of the Cold War era: Due to the enormity of what was at stake, as sf author Kim Stanley Robinson observes, western utopian stories were obliged to consider their utopian dreams within the confines of capitalism (Robinson, in Lipschutz, 2013: 16:45).

Later, as the communist systems caved in, Thatcher, Reagan and other proponents of the neoliberalism described in *The Constitution of Liberty* (1960) by Friedrich

Hayek that these figures represented, encouraged anti-utopianism in the West. They presented communism as an impossible, undesirable dystopian alternative whilst maintaining that capitalism was the only viable utopia. As Thatcher famously declared, 'There is no alternative' (Monbiot, 2017: 36)

The neoliberals were aided in their critique of these failed systems by critical storytellers such as George Orwell and Aldous Huxley, who described the dystopian elements of alternative systems to great effect in the mid-twentieth century. Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945) critiques Marx and Engels' 'forcible overthrow by any means' in such a way that it can be taken as a critique of communism in general. Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), written in response to *A Modern Utopia* (1905) by H. G. Wells can similarly be seen as a critique of governments in control of the commons. As the cultural presence of these two writers during the 1980s (including as topics on the British school curriculum) suggests, their passions were used against them. In focusing on communism's failings, their critiques were not centred on the problematic elements of the developing neoliberalism. By the fall of the Berlin Wall, as the alternatives collapsed and the neoliberal ideology became global (Monbiot, 2017; Mason, 2015), dystopia was firmly, relevantly back on the agenda but the other tool for its critique — the utopian art-form — had been marginalised.

Michael Ott's article 'Something's Missing' (2015) excavates the motivations for avoiding utopia in the influential theories of the philosophers Theodor Adorno and Bloch, whose works were certainly familiar to the likes of Orwell and Huxley. Ott draws a line from monotheism through historical materialism to Adorno's inverse theology, wherein:

> the dialectical negation of the negative does not automatically create or naturally unfold the positive. Instead as history has shown, such hope filled negation of what is can produce even more horrifying conditions than what existed before (2015: 15)

This is the taboo. Adorno's solution was to focus on negating the existing system, also described as negative, which he argued was the only valid method of critique. This

denial of the value of a negative's reflexive positive is historically understandable, but ultimately stultifying, in that it plays too safe with the imaginary. Bloch criticised this position, arguing that 'against its own intentions, such [unrelenting] negativity allows the status quo to remain the same' (Ott, 2015: 20).

Bloch's solution was connected to longing and focused on drawing out the positive in what was already in existence – the utopian impulse. His optimism produced a reading of the world that would somehow, naturally or ontologically, lead to a more utopian state of affairs given time. Adorno criticised Bloch's 'more transcendent use of dialectics' (Ott, 2015: 19), accusing him of praising the communist states despite their obvious failings and of preventing utopia from emerging through this activity. He argued that when reified into a specific reality, the negative would always surface and railed against such administrated worlds (Ott, 2015: 16–20).

Both theorists' positions create difficult paradoxes for the makers of real or fictional worlds. With Adorno, no-one is permitted to actively even describe how wonderful the constructs of the future might be. In Bloch, one can long and read something wonderful into *what is*, but one cannot act towards that. From a practical standpoint, these positions are clearly absurd: imagine preparing to make a excellent table by making only the worst tables possible. Acknowledging this conundrum, whilst recognising the historical validity of Adorno and Bloch's arguments, allows us to grasp the importance of creating critical stories. Moylan's texts on the 'critical utopias' (1986) and dystopias (2000) provide helpful insights here, though perhaps due to utopia's decline this work does not extend to the present. Books examined by Moylan in *Demand the Impossible* (1986), such as Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974), simply do not go far enough for us today, embracing as they do a universe that contains capitalist and communist poles. Today requires critical visions of a shared, inclusive totality. As Žižek writes, 'Communism is today not the name of a solution, but the name of a problem, the problem of commons in all its dimensions' (2014: 214).

As we have briefly seen, the cumulative negative feedback of various historical processes has stripped our times of utopian art-forms, colouring our dreams of the

future between the globally dominant, anti-utopian capitalist visions and a plethora of dystopian nightmares. Taking into account the above, we can now move forward to define the missing utopian art-form.

Defining Topia, U or Eu?

In their projection of alternative no-places, dystopian art-instances can be described simply as being negative projections. We are attempting to define their opposite, positive utopian or eutopian projections. The words 'utopia' and 'eutopia' both create difficulties, connected to usage, meaning and public image.

The meanings More embedded in the word 'utopia' stem from ancient Greek. 'U' or 'ou' means 'not' and 'topos' means 'place', implying that utopia is 'no-place'. Conversely 'eu' means good, implying 'good-place'. Phonetically, the sound of 'eu' is present when one says 'utopia' out loud (Tower Sargent, 1994: 5). The word 'utopia' contains various meanings, including the idea that the place itself is a fiction (we should remember that More was writing in the sixteenth century, 89 years before the first novel in the Western Hemisphere, *Don Quixote*, was published) — and that such a place cannot exist at all: the good place is a no-place. As Oscar Wilde observed, subtler readings understand that progress is the realisation of successive utopias (1915: 28–29), but the idea of utopia as no-place is often used to claim utopias are impossible.

More plainly, a 'eutopia' is a good-place with echoes of a no-place when spoken aloud that loses its direct connection to being a no-place when it is written down. This problem can be further avoided if we make clear that we are referring to eutopian art-instances, which must necessarily be fictitious. An additional advantage the word 'eutopia' provides is that it provides a more balanced opposite to 'dystopia', as both terms are unambiguous in meaning.

The ultimate point here is that both of these words are problematic. The field of 'futuring' avoids this pitfall by simply avoiding the terminology of utopia altogether. This doesn't make sense in this case, where eutopia is selected as presenting less baggage.

Interrogating Eutopia's Definition

Tower Sargent provides a by-now familiar seeming definition of eutopia as:

> (i) a non-existent society described in considerable detail (ii) and normally located in time and space (iii) that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably better (iv) than the society in which that reader lived (1994: 9)

This definition can be interrogated in greater depth. Part i) below examines the society; part ii) the place; part iii) deals with 'better', including a subsection on 'perfection'; and iv) explores the relation of the imaginary society to the reader's own.

i) 'A non-existent society described in considerable detail'

This part of the definition alone excludes almost all existing films outside of science fiction. As Fitting observes, there are many literary dystopias that have been made into films, alongside a large number of original dystopian films that started life as screenplays (1993: 2).

We are looking for the workings of a society, different from our own, that shows positive alternatives to what we have. Tower Sargent writes, 'it must be a society — a condition in which there is human (or some equivalent) interaction in a number of different forms and in which human beings [...] express themselves in a variety of ways' (1994: 7). To help clarify this description we can turn to Suvin, who wrote that utopia 'is not a genre but the sociopolitical sub-genre of science fiction' (2010: 43). Putting this together, we can usefully use the term 'sociopolitical' to describe what we are seeking, namely sociopolitically different human interaction and infrastructure.

ii) 'normally located in time and space'

This part of Tower Sargent's definition comes from 'topos'. It is about giving the imaginary society a 'place' (1994: 5). This description does not necessitate, as 'normally' might suggest at first glance, that a eutopia cannot make use of certain sf tropes, such as being located in a parallel universe or the future. Indeed 'space' presents no problems for us, because in film the screen necessitates a certain amount of concrete

space. However 'place' is an essential element not to be overlooked, describing as it does specific instances of the infrastructure societies build in order to manage their interactions. As we will see, the 'places' of a film, simply put the film's locations, are a direct result of the sociopolitical superstructure.

iii) 'better'

Tower Sargent is careful to distinguish between 'better' and 'perfect' (1994: 9-10). Most standard dictionaries contain similar definitions of utopia to this one: 'An imagined place or state of things in which everything is perfect' (Oxford Living Dictionaries, 2018). Perfection creates a number of problems for eutopia.

The first is made in relation to totalitarianism and, echoing Adorno's fear of describing better places, raises ghastly spectres of the twentieth century's failed communisms, where blueprints for utopia were imposed to disastrous effect. Ruth Levitas writes that 'laying totalitarianism at the door of utopia is a political move that is intended to make any aspiration to social change impossible' (2013: 8). She suggests that the idea of utopia as a perfect blueprint that is devised and imposed should be avoided. Rather utopia should be employed as a dialogical method that is provisional, reflexive and contingent (2013: 18–19).

Another claim related to perfection is that there are no eutopian films because such places are too perfect to be interesting: eutopia is too boring for film. This critique can be broken down as follows:

a) Eutopia is not a place for humans. It is too perfect
b) As eutopia is perfect, it cannot contain imperfect love, which makes for a boring story
c) The eutopian art-form contains too much world building, which is boring

a) Ursula K. Le Guin wrote, 'As soon as we reach it, it ceases to be utopia' (1989). She makes this point strongly in *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas* (1973), positing an intractable darkness at the heart of human society. We can detect Adorno's influence here. To the contemporary artist attempting to write a eutopia, it ought to be clear that a place for humans will, and indeed must, contain flaws. It is these weaknesses, whether of the individual characters or the imaginary

infrastructure, that provide the creative friction out of which eutopian stories can develop.

If we accept that humans cannot be perfect, then b) also collapses. Kim Stanley Robinson asserts:

> Utopia does not mean immortality nor does it mean perfection. In utopia people are still going to get sick and die and in utopia you have the 'character A' falls in love with 'character B' who falls in love with 'character C' who falls in love with 'character A', and these are painful, so tragedy and pain still exist in utopia (Robinson, quoted in Ford, 2013: 2:50 – 3:05)

We would still be flawed in a world that was not on the brink of collapse and full of inequality. Our passions are not perfect. To give an extreme example: a psychopath can still struggle in a sociopolitically better world. Further, the removal of current inequalities will inevitably create new inequalities that suits 'better' much more than 'perfect'.

c) can be dealt with rather simply: Film is the ideal art-form to show other, 'better' worlds functioning in the background, without having to describe them at all. They can be shown without telling. As Moylan writes of utopias, 'the "setting" of the text is where the primary action is' (2000: 6). Its shape affects the things in the foreground — the characters. The story of the characters' interactions result from a combination of the operations of the background and their own personalities. Kellner wrote, 'certain versions of Marxist ideology critique and half-enlightenment error [...] by failing to see the importance of culture in everyday life' (2010: 43). Combining these thoughts, we can see that all stories employ the sociopolitical and its 'places' to create their characters. Typically, film uses the architecture of existing or historically known cultures to ground their characters. Eutopian stories imagine new spaces for their characters.

iv) The relation of the imaginary society to the reader's own

Perhaps the reason More's *Utopia* (1516) remains so useful is because it contains a critical description of his lived reality alongside his fictional attempt to reimagine it. Given both parts, we distant readers can grasp the relations he draws between these two worlds. Suvin's definition of sf is helpful for our understanding of this relational connection. For Suvin, sf is a story that uses a plot device called a 'novum' to set it

apart from the present reality, causing what he describes as 'cognitive estrangement' in the reader. The novum functions in a hegemonic manner over the story and can be presented as being logically or scientifically real, despite being different from how the real world actually is (2010: 75).

The novum serves to provide the reader with a connection between their lived reality and the fictional universe, allowing them to see their reality in a new light. As we will see when we look at the examples, we can use the notion of cognitive estrangement to analyse whether a film is logically consistent or critically effective.

Examples Examined: *Black Panther*, *Tomorrowland* and *Blade Runner 2049*

Black Panther (2018)

Superficially this film might resemble a eutopia. Wakanda is sealed off from the outside world with a force field, a little like the channel dug around More's island. The society within operates according to different sociopolitical rules and is visualised in considerable detail, showing human interaction in a number of different forms. The film features more advanced weapons technology than is currently available to us. The fictional element Vibranium explains this technology's existence, creating an estrangement of sorts to our own world. There is also a strong, almost exclusively black cast featuring many powerful female characters and the revolutionary Black Panther Party (BPP) is invoked in name.

Under the surface, *Black Panther* is far from being a eutopian art-instance. That Wakanda is a nation is immediately problematic. More's island in the sixteenth century prefigured the idea of the modern nation. What we need today are images that prefigure global unity. Sociopolitically, the Wakandans are essentially operating under feudalism, which is neither a new nor a different system. Rather, as Kim Stanley Robinson suggests, feudalism is 'the grandfather of capitalism' (Climate One, 2018). Its representation promotes top-down hierarchies and unequal wealth distribution.

The 'places' of the film range from small rural dwellings to the grand palace and its technological underbelly. Most of the film's dialogue take place in the places of power, the palace and science laboratory, while the outdoor landscape serves mainly as a battleground, reinforcing the sense of hierarchy. We do see some glimpses of an

impressively green cityscape, but when we see it in more detail, it appears to consist of standard spaces of exchange. The personal relations in the movie do show more equal relations between T'Challa and the female characters, but the formal power structures they are operating within negate this potential. The women in the film are not allowed to make decisions without his consent, whereas he can act as he chooses. Unfortunately, these sociopolitical problems are put to the service of the plot, a childish, uninspiring story that centres around the weakness of the Wakandan political structure, which allows hereditary claims to the throne. When we learn that Wakanda has been operating in this way for thousands of years, the problem of utopia as a rigid blueprint also appears: Wakanda is not a place of change.

The technology in the film presents a different problem. Vibranium presents as science but operates magically, creating an unconvincing bridge between our world and that of the movie. The main use Vibranium is put to in the film is weaponry. We do not see it being used to bring people, other life forms or resources together in positive ways. This tension between technological advancement and sociopolitical retardation is quintessential 1930s sf.

All of the above might seem acceptable on their own. One might claim that Wakanda was simply an idealised feudal state rather than an attempted eutopia. The problem coalesces around the references the film makes to the real world, namely to the sociopolitically inspiring Black Panther Party. The BPP are referenced only in name. The ill-informed can gain no access to their rich revolutionary heritage, which is muddied here beyond recognition. Considering that the BPP was opposed to imperialism (Bloom and Martin, 2013: 315), structuring Wakanda around feudalism becomes defamatory, as does the idea of a male lineage of kings. At its peak, the BPP was a large group of male and female activists working together to fight racial inequality and promote equal female male relations (Lumsden, 2009).

In conclusion, *Black Panther* has taken important cultural and social elements of the twentieth century and aestheticised them into a superficial construct that creates no new feelings of a better world, nor any understanding of what that might mean, falling rather into a rehashing of traditional power structures that show Wakandans to be technologically advanced yet politically backwards. Regarding

the utopian impulse the strong, largely female, mostly black cast is certainly worth celebrating, but in these times, it is too little too late. We are left with what Mark Fisher, invoking Jameson, calls 'nostalgia mode', when 'a coherent sense of historical time breaks down' (2014: 11).

What this movie shows is that creating filmic eutopia cannot be just about surface. In terms of describing a 'place' that deals more generously with the commons or that shows images of a more sustainable world, we can see that more attention must be given to the sociopolitical. Had the creators of this film done so, they might have created a place that was built differently from the bottom up and produced interesting, challenging stories. As it is *Black Panther* shows a lack of historical awareness that no art department or casting office could fix.

Kellner writes that Bloch was convinced:

> that only when we project our future in the light of what is, what has been, and what could be can we engage in the creative practice that will produce a world in which we are at home and realize humanities deepest dreams (2010: 40).

The absence of eutopian art-instances from the twentieth century might serve to excuse this film from trying – the writers had no precedents from which to ground alternative approaches. Another argument would be to deny any association with utopian thinking. However, the ease with which strong critique can be levelled at *Black Panther* suggests a clear need for such films, where a logical sense of something 'better' than our current systems might become available to contemporary audiences, rather than uncritical, historically muddied fantasy.

Tomorrowland (2015)

Tomorrowland provides a different focus for our study because this film has a clear idea of the problem it wishes to address. The film contains a critique of capitalism and dystopian media and a technologically advanced parallel 'eutopia' built by scientists where things are technologically 'better'.

The plot of *Tomorrowland* centres around a parallel dimension created at the end of the nineteenth century by scientists including Thomas Edison and Nikolai Tesla as a place where scientists could work more freely. When we join the story, they have developed a machine that is somehow filling creatives from our world with dystopian dreams that manifest through popular media, which is somehow leading earth towards annihilation – the precise mechanism is given scientific jargon but remains unclear. Regardless, the heroes have to avert this destruction.

Accepting that the idea of an external 'dystopia machine' is causally redundant, the film can still be criticised for how it follows this plotline through. Early on, the heroine learns from her father to 'feed the right wolf', hope or despair, a metaphor that she uses to destroy the machine in the final act by choosing to hope. However, during this act, no direct effects manifest back in the 'real world' of the film. After the machine is destroyed, nothing is shown to immediately change, which it presumably would if the machine had been driving the world to destruction. Showing such effects would have driven the underlying message of the film home, that we can affect the way we approach the future through the images and stories we tell ourselves. Showing such behaviour in the real world of the film might have created cognitive estrangement with similar creatives of our own world. Without such a step, the film does not function logically or critically.

A deeper problem for the film is that it does not convincingly describe a more eutopian space within the parallel dimension. Here many of the problems of *Black Panther* are present, chief among these being that the film conflates technological wonders produced via science with the sociopolitical potential of the scientific method. Tomorrowland the city is packed with 1950s technological 'utopian' ideals, from jetpacks, monorails and skyscrapers to convincing, morally good humanoid robots capable of love. Yet the infrastructure is not centred around a different sociopolitical logic. Not only is there no sign of the group of scientists referred to earlier in the story, which somehow makes sense if a military junta has taken over, but neither are there any of the 'places' they would have been built to support a democratic, scientific approach to social organisation. Their science is focused only

on gadgetry. No attempt is made to describe the conditions for living and working together that scientific thinkers working unbounded would almost certainly have experimented with. Mirroring the architecture of theme parks, there is almost no seating to be seen in the in-between, sterile spaces of the city. We do see one large amphitheatre of empty seats, but the gesture is token, not thorough. We are mostly shown vast concourses, suggesting shopping, which are void of spaces for social exchange.

Such 'places' do not create space for genuine characters to form. As with *Black Panther*, we can surmise that the plot has driven the setting. The story needed a dictator so they built him a hollow frame. To suggest that this would be the natural outcome of scientific minds at the close of the nineteenth century set loose on a new 'new world', able to observe Earth's own dramatic history at arm's length, does not do justice to the democratic, egalitarian nature of the scientific method and whitewashes any hints of the commons.

Without these 'places', the film fails to produce the believable ruins of a eutopia. These problems might perhaps be laid at Disney's door. The film serves as a tie-in to *Epcot*, Disney's real-life blueprint for perfect living from the mid-twentieth century – Tomorrowland needed to resemble the theme park. Regardless, like in *Black Panther*, such an ahistorical approach to imagining better worlds is lazy and damaging, and speaks volumes about the significant absence of utopian thinking in recent times. One does not need flying cars to describe a eutopian space; one needs more equal relations between the characters, which ought to manifest in the 'places' of the film. It is conceivable to describe a eutopia in a mud-puddle, if only one pays enough attention to the sociopolitical.

Blade Runner 2049 (2017)

We will now look at a dystopian counter example to explore other important aspects that should be considered if the sociopolitical basis *is* sound:

Bladerunner 2049 is the story of an android bladerunner – a police officer assigned to retire androids who have gone rogue. In the course of his investigations the lead, K, discovers ideas that lead him to question his existence and reject his

role. The story is set in a futuristic rendering of Los Angeles that has been shaped by a global failure to address climate change and the unchecked rise of wealthy corporations. In the movie, Dr. Tyrell, a maniacal billionaire and designer of new androids, represents this class.

Like the original, *Blade Runner 2049* is a critique of our current world and a warning about our future. We are presented with a comparison between K's pokey apartment building and Tyrell's pyramid style megalith, which highlights the extremes of wealth and poverty. The technology in the film is also used to exaggerate current trends. Holograms and artificial intelligence are presented within a corporate package resembling that of Apple or Android. Supporting this are giant adverts for real products such as Coke and Sony, which emphasise the power of the corporations and the insignificance of average individuals trapped within the system.

The Oscar-winning lighting and cinematography might conceal *Bladerunner 2049*'s methodological construction from the ground up which, unlike in our other examples, also manifests in the film's 'places'. Despite only eleven locations in this almost three-hour movie, the architecture and set dressing grant every 'place' such character that each could support multiple dystopian stories. This is because the film's creators understood its sociopolitical position. Every location is concrete in its hyper-capitalist, über-liberal execution and makes logical sense as a negative extension of our own time. The overcrowded cityscape seems inevitable, the seawalls are almost already built in our minds. This is what the creators of *Black Panther* and *Tomorrowland* missed. The logic of their world was not complete, because they failed to push through their eutopian yearnings sociopolitically. Neither of these worlds is convincingly better than ours because their sociopolitical logic contained significant blanks. This produced uninspiring 'places', without which convincing stories fail to materialise.

To *Blade Runner 2049*'s critical detriment, it does not worry about creating internal cognitive estrangement. It lets the year in the title and the Los Angeles setting create a pull between our 'now' and its own, where our sociopolitical reality is accelerated to its worst possible ends. It is so well made that it is almost as if it has

happened already, we just have to lie down on our sofas and wait for it. As Susan Squier wrote, 'Unable any longer to inoculate us against our fears, science fiction sutures us to a destructive present that is all too real' (2004: 213). The problem with this approach is that *Bladerunner 2049* can be one thing to one group of people, namely a critique, and another to a different group – namely an advert for a potentially desirable (dystopian) future. Following this thought encourages one to imagine what one eutopia as good as *Blade Runner 2049* might do to the popular imaginary.

How To Create a Eutopian Art Instance

> 'The real goal for future utopian film scholars is to expand our focus [...] into that for best original screenplay' (Shelton, 1993: 23).

What we have learned above can now be used to describe a method for creating actual eutopian art-instances:

In order to create a eutopian art-instance a storyteller must begin by re-imagining the sociopolitical. In a dystopia, the system is stacked against humanity. A eutopia must reverse such infrastructure. The overarching problem of our times is the global commons. How can we better share this world of ours? There are plenty of ideas to be explored in non-fiction. Considering applying an element of More's rupture (see Part V of this article) might also be a good place to start the creative process of exploring alternate sociopolitical realities: Is it a top down hierarchical system with better checks and balances? Is it a horizontal system with solid democratic systems for inclusion and truthful information dissemination? (Jameson in Balunovic, 2016) Is it a world run by machines of loving grace (Brautigan, 1967) or a 'doughnut economy' (Raworth, 2018) of semi-organised anarchy? Is it a system of interconnected self-sustaining ecologies (see EFFEKT Architects, Lynge, 2019), an international system of 'hives' (Palmer, 2017) or 'pradashas' (Harvey, 2000)? Is it More's *Utopia* (which is asking for the Terry Gilliam treatment)? What is it?

Once the sociopolitical angle is selected, one can allow the imagination to build the 'places' that reflect and explore its infrastructural consequences. These spaces

should be considered as the psychological framework for the characters, creating a platform for them to explore the effects of the sociopolitical logic on their behaviour. The 'places' of the film are the film-maker's tools for creating cognitive estrangement in the viewer, wherein the specifics of the imaginary space is contrasted with our lived reality. The storyteller must also decide where to situate these places in time, choosing a temporal location relative to our own world – from a parallel world to the near future or distant past. Again, the type of cognitive estrangement this might effect in the viewer should be considered.

In combining the sociopolitical model with the 'places' of the film, criticality becomes essential for creating effective stories with believable characters. What problems might these places create for the characters? How would their hopes, struggles and dreams work within such a framework? How might these systems combine with our inherent natures and learned behaviours? In a near-future scenario almost all of us would have to readjust our current values to function effectively, creating the hero's struggle. In a far future the entire paradigm of human behaviour might be drastically different. How would a time traveller from our age behave in such a world? How might these systems go dreadfully wrong (at the low point of the Freytag Pyramid) and how might these mistakes be adjusted to create 'better' conditions for human flourishing (at the end). Does the lead character end up flourishing or suffering? Individual comedy and tragedy can both still occur against a better sociopolitical backdrop, just as they can in a dystopian setting. Inspiring stories can be found in contemporary fiction, from Alastair Reynolds' Conjoiners – a convincing attempt at describing a compassionate, collective consciousness that stands in stark contrast to Star Trek's anti-collective representation of The Borg – to Le Guin, to Iain Banks' 'Culture' series and on. The old masters such as Morris, Wells and More are all accessible and relevant. Other essential fields currently under-explored in sf film such as gender, race and disability may also find new outlets under a broader sociopolitical umbrella. The seeds are all there, pointing to all parts of the future.

Eutopia's Absence and Mainstream Film

Of course, mainstream film is a somewhat impenetrable industry, requiring great skill, wealth and talent to succeed within. Selecting such an unpopular position as eutopia might seem unwise. However, what Levitas captures so well with the title of her book *Utopia as Method* (2013) is that utopian thinking is a methodology of thought and action without end. The collective project has to be to chip away at the existing edifices to carve out new spaces of hope. Now is a time of rupture. Governments, corporations and individuals are all being required to affect drastic change to react to the climate deadline (Spriggs, 2019). In such times, new spaces open up, inside and outside of existing systems.

The question of why eutopian films are absent from the mainstream had a clear answer for Shelton and Ruppert. Shelton writes, 'we can safely call Hollywood a nexus of capitalist co-optation' (1993: 21). This claim is clearly true regarding our examples. Having been made at Marvel, Disney and Sony, each one is tied in with product ranges and brand names. Ruppert pushed his critique of Hollywood further, writing that 'movies cannot be expected to be overtly critical of the industrial and ideological apparatus on which their existence depends. Nor can they be expected to promote the overthrow of existing social relations' (1996: 139). This claim should be disputed. Movies can be expected to promote the overthrow of existing social relations. That they do not is a scandal that we have simply accepted. Such acceptance, that movies can only serve as a part of the apparatus of confirming existing ideology, is not a good position from which to operate, politically or artistically and is inherently undemocratic. Strategies can be developed for opening up spaces such as film through imagining, enunciating and creating from multiple vantage points.

Activists within Hollywood might consider anew the affect the content of their work can have. There is a telling line towards the end of Leonardo DiCaprio's documentary *Before the Flood* (2016) where he says, 'Now if this was a movie [...] we could write the end of the script and we could figure a way out of this mess'. Despite its longing for a now impossible, indigenous relation to the natural world, James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009) created a huge depth of feeling (Blake, 2010) and is full of

the utopian impulse. Perhaps DiCaprio, Cameron and other like-minded individuals might take a deeper look at the worlds they are creating and acting in.

Living as we do now in the age of the internet, with its advantages such as crowd funding and user-led media coverage, movies are regularly made outside of Hollywood that make it through the film festival circuit to appear in the cinema and online. *Primer* (2004), *Monsters* (2010) and *Prospect* (2018) are three relatively low budget sf examples that have entered popular culture through this route. The internet also creates new possibilities for collaboration. There are ethical brands who might consider product placement, such as those connected with the ethical consumer movement (Kirchhoff, 2013). The field of utopian film festivals is also unsaturated. Avalanches start from the rolling of small stones.

The field of utopian scholarship might also consider extending its scope to further connections with the arts. Scholars such as Manjana Milkoreit from Purdue University and Denise Baden from Southampton Business School are actively using their positions to create calls for stories that relate to more ecological futures. The engagement of utopian positions would enrich this type of cultural mixing.

The arts themselves, particularly contemporary fine art, are a relatively open space. Despite its function as a buffer zone for political dissatisfaction (Steyerl, 2012: 6) and its focus on critique, there is room and a certain amount of openness within this field for attempts to visualise more positive sociopolitical places. Through creating networks, events and most importantly, new art instances, makers outside of mainstream film can generate new impulses inwards to the cultural centre. An important implication for contemporary fine artists considering touching mainstream film is that the myths described by Joseph Campbell (1949) and the story arcs of the Freytag Pyramid are not to be dismissed out of hand as being too mainstream. The full palette of the contemporary filmmaker is open to the eutopian scriptwriter. The medium is in one sense the message (McLuhan, 1967) but so is the content of the message. In seeking to address broader audiences, this point should not be overlooked.

Conclusion

Artists must always be brave. Levitas writes, of sociology, that utopia 'needs to be released from a damaging self-censorship' (2013: 217). If we are too careful, we diminish the spectrum of ideas filtering through to the mainstream. As Kellner writes:

> the Left tended to focus simply on criticism, on negative denunciations of capitalism and the bourgeoisie, whereas fascism provided a positive vision and attractive alternatives to masses desperately searching for something better (2010: 41).

By imagining a radical alternative that presents sociopolitically different places to those on offer in mainstream and dystopian film, More's rupture and the communist ideal of a world without private property or wealth remain relevant yet in need of refreshing. Due to various historical processes, it is precisely this sociopolitical space that has been under-explored in film. Clear attention should be paid to this blank spot to avoid the creation of ahistorical, unconvincing stories. It is clear that applying More's rupture to a film script to explore alternative, functioning commons would have serious effects on the sociopolitical organisation of the imaginary societies created. As shown, when done properly, a clearly defined sociopolitical stance produces fresh imaginary 'places' that can support original characters with new stories to tell. These stories might well create an alternative sense of 'better' for some viewers, if the functioning alternative world is allowed to remain in the mind's eye after the credits roll – even when the main character has failed in his or her task.

Although accepting this position might appear to be political, it doesn't have to be. Allowing that the full spectrum of sociopolitical imaginative possibility is necessary might even be a moral imperative. Alternatively, eutopia's absence from film is, simply put, intellectually and artistically intriguing. As is eutopia's relation to the current need for an expanded imaginary of the global commons.

Eutopia and dystopia are the perfect tools for exploring this need and eutopia its under-represented better half. Of course, 'utopia is potentially dangerous' (Tower Sargent, 2010: 9), but as a maker of fiction, one is truly free. This hypothesis is focused on a safe space — films are only stories after all. Therefore film presents a good space to try such ideas out publicly. Precedent is strong in the film world. It might only require one successful instance to open the floodgates of the field. This would be an ideal case scenario. The best way to explore eutopian ideas would be within a large, diverse network of critical, constructive minds.

As the current plethora of comic book adaptations and space opera suggests (D'Alessandro, 2019), film is ready for a new, historically aware dialectic and as climate change shows, the world needs a large, open discussion about its future. Eutopia is a serious space because it is talking about *our* future. But if it is to be considered deeply, it must also be a space of play, humour and freedom. There is as much validity today in seeing a completely static society played out eutopically on the big screen as there is in seeing a flexible, dialogic, open and flawed space happen — if it provokes questions. Connections between multiple films in this new genre would spark dialogue and might inspire change.

It must be acceptable to imagine better places. If your tent is blowing in a strong side wind you don't peg it on the sheltered side, you over-peg it to windward. You certainly don't prohibit even talking about how to stop it flapping. A healthier balance of eutopia and dystopia would at the very least produce a more constructive cultural domain than the one we currently draw from, which might ultimately affect the real, where so many continue to suffer and the planet appears doomed. That is why eutopia should be in the cinema.

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