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CINEMA AND DYSTOPIA

We are happy to welcome you on the second issue of Cinecult Magazine. For those of you who discover us now, Cinecult is the free online magazine about movies that define Modern Cinema.

On our first issue, we emphasized on titles released in 1999, as we strongly believe that it was one of the best years in the History of Cinema, with movies that are now considered cult classics.

For our second issue, though, we decided to follow a different approach. We live in strange times. A pandemic behind us, wars on different areas around the world, global warming and pollution are only a few of the problems that humanity has to deal with nowadays. And filmmakers have addressed all of these difficult situations (and many more) over the years. Cinema is the only medium which can express so vividly these dystopian narratives.

On the following pages we will focus on dystopian science fiction films. What were the filmmakers' predictions about the fate of humanity? Were they too pessimistic? Can we believe in a better future or all hope is gone?

We have chosen a variety of films and directors from different decades like David Cronenberg, Terry Gilliam, Giorgos Lanthimos and many more. You can read our analysis on emblematic films, such as "Children of Men", "Akira", "1984", "Brazil" esc.

And for the fans of horror films; the topics of our second issue seem to be very close to your taste, due to the fact that many sci-fi films use horror elements. Nevertheless, we will speak about two horror masterpieces - "Battle Royale" and "Night of the Living Dead" and their social messages.

Having said all the above, we hope that you will enjoy our Magazine and discover films that we consider cult classics. Join the Cinecult!

Radoslava Nenkova
Founder of Cinecult Magazine

INDEX

ARE DYSTOPIAN FILMS OUR NEW REALITY?

"BRAZIL" AS SATIRE OF MEMORYLESS NOSTALGIA

HUMANITY IN CRISIS: THE DYSTOPIAN EXAMPLES OF
"SOYLENT GREEN" AND "CHILDREN OF MEN"

DAVID CRONENBERG, OR WHAT IS THE SCARIEST?

DYSTOPIA IN ANIMATION: "AKIRA" VS "WALL-E"

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AS A THREAT TO HUMANITY

ANTI-COLONIALISM IN AFRICAN CINEMA AND THE EXAMPLE
OF MATI DIOP'S DYSTOPIAN "ATLANTICS"

"12 MONKEYS" AND THE WORLD AFTER A
GLOBAL PANDEMIC

"THE LOBSTER" - A DYSTOPIAN PARABLE OF LOVE

"THE NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD" &
"BATTLE ROYALE": THE SOCIAL
MESSAGES OF DYSTOPIAN HORROR

ARE DYSTOPIAN FILMS OUR NEW REALITY?

Krasimir Kastelov

This, of course, is not a rhetorical question, but it might be perceived as such sooner rather than later. For now, we are still at the stage where dystopian films warn of unfavourable future developments rather than reflect the actual state of affairs. But their becoming a major subgenre of cinematic fiction suggests that our fears about the future are not unfounded. Why exploiting this theme appeals to the general public and brings in significant revenue (\$10.7 billion) to the entertainment industry called Hollywood, is another matter.

Dystopias or anti-utopias show futuristic societies which are frighteningly similar in many ways to our own. Anyone can find similarities in themselves to relate to the characters in these stories, and if unable to do so, might find similarities in the ways they live in their societies to the ways many of us live today. Hollywood has been interested in stories like this for as long as cinema has existed, and for good reason. Screen dystopias contain (in varying percentages, naturally) elements of the most popular film genres - adventure, action and drama. And the box office chart for US and Canadian cinemas over the period 1995-2023 shows that these three genres are also the most lucrative.

It is characteristic of dystopian films that they are mostly adaptations of literary works. The roots of utopian and, respectively, dystopian literature can be traced to ancient texts such as Plato's "Republic" and Thomas More's "Utopia". Both works explore the idea of the ideal society, but in different ways. While Plato's "Republic" proposes a society ruled by philosopher kings in which individual liberties are subordinated to the needs of the state, Thomas More's "Utopia" presents a society based on communal property and universal equality.

In both texts, however, hints of dystopia creep in, suggesting that the proposed ideals are either impractical or undesirable. As a rule, utopia reflects the hope for a future wonderful society, while dystopia reflects the fear of the bad that may happen in the future if action is not taken to prevent the impending catastrophe. To put it another way, hope and fear are at the heart of these two most common human projections of the future. Scholars agree that utopia, as a form of social imagination, weakens dramatically over time, while dystopia (anti-utopia) becomes the dominant form of thinking.

In the 20th century, dystopian literature reflected people's anxieties and fears. The horrors of the First and Second World Wars, the rise of totalitarian regimes and the threat of nuclear annihilation of the planet increased its popularity - in the 1930s thanks to writers such as Herbert Wells ("The Shape of Things to Come") and Aldous Huxley ("Brave New World"), and in the 1950s and 1960s, influenced mostly by novelists such as George Orwell ("1984") and Ray Bradbury ("Fahrenheit 451").

Although the concept of the anti-utopia was not widely established in cinema until the second half of the twentieth century, there are earlier films that contribute to the future establishment of this sub-genre. Among these, several titles by celebrated directors stand out:

First and foremost, of course, is "METROPOLIS" (1927), the first social anti-utopia to be made in cinema and the most costly film production of the 1920s. It is set in a vast city of the future, where only a privileged minority live in splendid conditions, benefiting from the goods provided by technical progress. The film explores the themes of class conflict, industrialisation and dehumanisation in depth.

It presents an impressive vision of the ruling elite, which exploits the labour of the majority of people, who are forced to live literally underground.

The concept of the "privileged" living on the surface and the "oppressed" living literally underneath has been influential in shaping popular cinema culture stereotypes that we see time and time again in various films, with the most recent example being, of course, Parasite, the Oscar-winning South Korean hit by Bong Joon-ho.

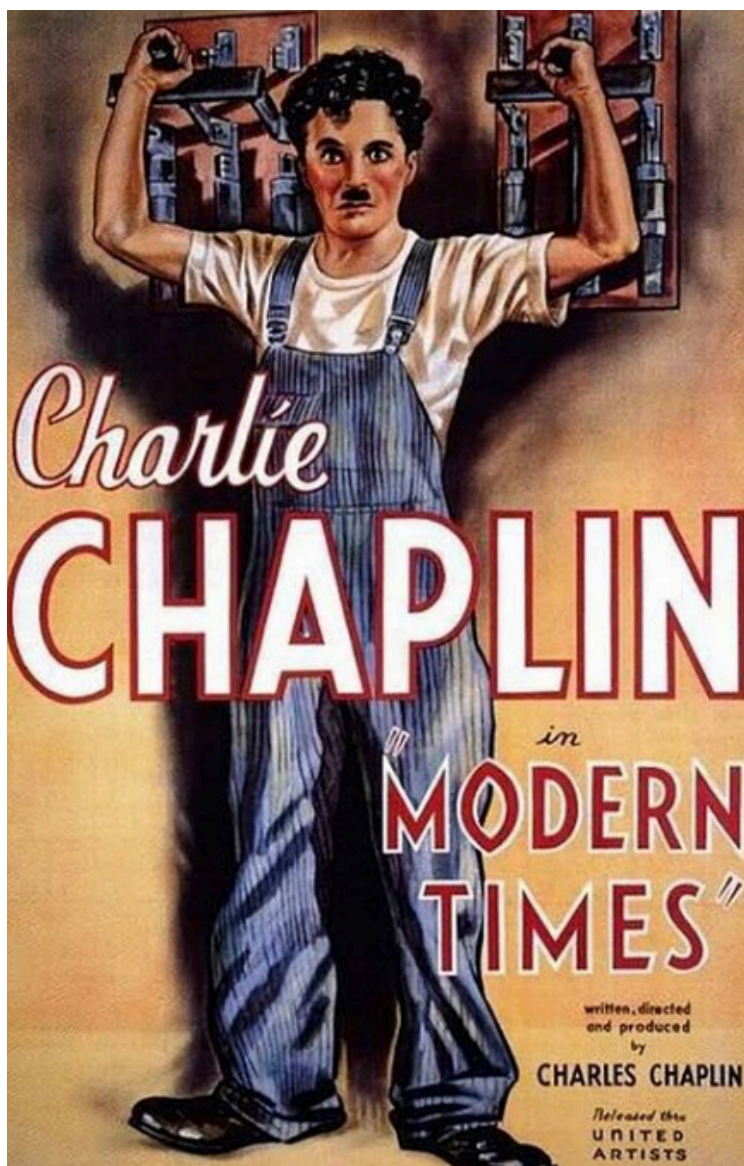


"Metropolis" is rightly regarded as one of the most influential dystopian films in the entire history of cinema. And Fritz Lang was among the first filmmakers to explore the dark side of technical progress, as well as the theme of robotization. For example, one of the most striking scenes shows how in a "Metropolis" science lab they manage to bring to life a metallic android that is eerily similar to a human.

"Metropolis" (1927) - UFA

The British cinema of the 1930s, reflecting fears of the imminent threat of another great war, was a significant influence on the development of the stylistics of dystopian films. This can be seen in William Cameron Menzies' prophetic film "Things to Come" (1936), which was based on a screenplay by Herbert Wells, based on a book of the same name by the famous science fiction writer, depicting a world ravaged by war and ruled by a totalitarian regime.

The film focuses on the issues of technological progress, social control and the struggle for freedom, which are still relevant today, against the backdrop of an (anti-)utopian vision of a post-apocalyptic society.



Charlie Chaplin's last silent film "MODERN TIMES" (1936) can also be seen as a dystopia. The ingenious director and actor reveals in an inimitable way, through the means of comedy, the absurdity of the quest for greater productivity leading to the transformation of workers into mere cogs in the vast economic machine of capitalism.

"Modern Times" (1936) - United Artists

In 1956, the first of two English film adaptations of George Orwell's cult dystopian 1984 was released, which had a significant impact on world cinema. Although it may seem a little naïve today, Michael Anderson's film is a meaningful attempt to understand and screen the totalitarian system that was so insightfully described by Orwell. And in 1984 itself, a second screen adaptation, directed by Michael Radford, hit the cinemas to higher acclaim than the first.

Its creators' desire to be as close as possible to the literary source is the likely reason it seems in places more like an illustration of it. It is worth noting, however, the acting of John Hurt, who convincingly conveys the hopeless condition of a human being forced to live under total surveillance.

Dystopian film narratives were bequeathed to us by some of the greatest directors of the 20th century, such as Jean-Luc Godard ("Alphaville"), François Truffaut ("Fahrenheit 451"), Stanley Kubrick ("A Clockwork Orange"), George Lucas ("THX 1138"), Andrei Tarkovsky ("Stalker"), Ridley Scott ("Blade Runner"), Terry Gilliam ("Brazil"), and Paul Verhoeven ("Total Recall"), before the genre's spectacular flowering at the turn of the century, when several anti-utopian films attained cult status almost simultaneously, as was the case with Peter Weir's "The Truman Show," David Cronenberg's "eXistenZ," and most notably Lana and Lily Wachowski's "The Matrix."

In the present century, other great masters (Steven Spielberg, Alfonso Cuarón, Danny Boyle, Bong Joon-ho) have contributed to the development of dystopian cinema, followed by talented members of the younger generation, such as Alex Garland, Michel Franco, Yorgos Lanthimos and others. Unfortunately, in recent years more and more dystopian films have focused on action and self-serving visual effects in depicting anti-utopian worlds, serving more as a picturesque backdrop for the adventures of various superheroes.

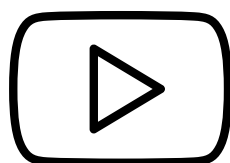
From a genre perspective, this shift, which can be broadly described as a shift from drama to action and adventure, is obvious when we decide to compare classic film dystopias such as Francois Truffaut's "Fahrenheit 451" and Michael Radford's "1984" with high-profile titles from popular franchises such as "Hunger Games" and "The Divergent", for example.

Sadly, the boom in interest in dystopian cinema in the 2010s was driven mainly by the teenage audience's unrelenting desire to simply be entertained. But it was the new fantasy stories with an anti-utopian twist that filled the sense of emptiness that had overwhelmed it after the end of the legendary Harry Potter franchise.

In a preface to one of the successive editions of "Brave New World", Aldous Huxley writes that the freedom fighters, ever ready to oppose tyranny, failed to take into account people's unbounded attraction to entertainment. In this regard, prof. Neil Postman, the author of the book "Amusing Ourselves to Death", reminds us that unlike Orwell, who believed that people are controlled through the fear of pain, Huxley convinces us how much more effective control can be through dependence on the pleasures delivered to us through entertainment. In short, Orwell feared that we would eventually be destroyed by the tyranny we most hate, while Huxley feared that we might be destroyed by the very thing we are most addicted to. Which in turn probably means that the anti-utopia described in "Brave New World" back in 1932 is about to become our new reality.

Translation: Manuela Daskalova

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"BRAZIL" AS SATIRE OF MEMORYLESS NOSTALGIA

Krasimir Kastelov

This film, considered by many to be one of the best dystopian films, is wonderful, in my opinion, because it breaks the canons of the genre. While most dystopian films are deadly serious, "Brazil" (1985) is bitterly comic and deeply ironic from beginning to end. It was inspired not only by George Orwell's "1984" but, I think, even more so by Aldous Huxley's "Brave New World". For it is obvious that its director is deeply troubled by people's willingness to voluntarily give up their individuality for the comfort and security provided by a system that encourages consumerism. In fact, Terry Gilliam himself says that his film is about responsibility and the need to have your own position, because you can't just let the world keep doing what it's doing [1] consumerism.



Brazil Universal

Many perceive "Brazil" as prophetic because these days, the obsession of aging women with plastic surgery is a form of true madness, the inadequacy of various service departments is everyday sadism, and the televised demagoguery and stupidity of bosses like those in the Ministry of Information in the film are common place. Not to mention the absurdity of bureaucratic forms ("and here's a receipt for your receipt").

But it's all a collective image of the collective madness of any System. It's no coincidence that at the very beginning of the film the setting is labelled quite casually: 'Sometime in the twentieth century'.

There is not a single futuristic moment or element in "Brazil". The story is Orwellian in the sense that it takes place in a country where individuality is stifled by violent conformity. But unlike George Orwell, who warned of a future ruled by fascism and technology, Gilliam simply satirises the bureaucratic, largely dysfunctional industrial world that drives him mad all the time. That's according to Jack Matthews, the Los Angeles Times journalist who made public the director's struggle with the producers of the Hollywood company Universal Pictures, who insisted on cutting his film [2].

In "Brazil", it all starts with a typo. Because of a misspelled name of a man persecuted by the state, an innocent man is killed, unleashing events of growing magnitude and importance involving petty clerk Sam Lowry (Jonathan Pryce). He vacillates between unquestioningly accepting his role as a cog in the bureaucratic machine and escaping into dreams where he's a superhero fighting an iron giant-samurai to save an unearthly beauty. However, things take a tragic turn after the repressive state perceives him as an enemy for daring to dream of true love.

After the film's release in 1985, Salman Rushdie published a review titled "The Location of "Brazil", which he later included in his collection of essays "Imaginary Homelands".[3]



Brazil. Universal

In this review, the famous writer noted that the film's title refers to the song "Aquarela do Brasil", written in 1939, which contributes much to the nostalgic sound of the protagonist's dreams. Its chorus goes like this:

"Brazil... Where hearts partied in June / we sat under an amber moon / and softly we silenced - someday soon".

It is in this "someday soon" that Rushdie discovers the possible temporal rather than spatial location of the fantastic story. The importance of his text stems from showing how this film, following the model of the best social fictions, contains a subversive political charge that is lacking in the dystopian productions of the postmodern era that claim to be artistic expressions of the much-vaunted "end of history." While "Brazil", though set in a "cancelled future" in Rushdie's phrase, nevertheless, it affirms the victory of imagination and dreams over the torments caused by grey reality [4].

But the film, according to Salman Rushdie, also suggests something else, which is perhaps more important. And that is that America bombards us with dreams, depriving us of our own. Ultimately, it is about the control of the bureaucratic state over the dreams of ordinary people, through the fantasies of eternal youth, career advancement and material prosperity. And adapting to the social environment requires adopting a mass-mediated imagination that is subservient to the constantly stimulated desire for consumption and the pursuit of saccharine, trivial happiness.

Forms of mass advertising habituate consumers to mourn for lacks they never had, instilling in them experiences of losses that never existed, which can be called "imagined nostalgia", i.e. nostalgia for things that were never real [5]. It is confirmed by the words of the song - one thing I am sure of and I know I will go back there again, to the old Brazil - that sound in the head of the now lifeless Sam Lowry in the last shot of the film.

It's no coincidence that Terry Gilliam subjects this unimaginable nostalgia for a future presented in the romantic halo of a non-existent past to a witty satire.

In fact, the ambiguity of his tragicomic dystopia is the reason why he still receives the fervent approval of film critics today, 4 decades after its release.

The two finales of Brazil - one dark, anti-utopian, intended for European audiences, and the other fantastical, prepared for Americans - can be seen as the natural consequence of two different attitudes towards confronting reality. In the European "Kafkaesque" finale, Lowry's tormentors state his death by saying, "Look, he's gone." And the American finale shows how Lowry really does "go away," escaping the torture on the wings of his dream and flying above the clouds with the woman he loves. In both cases, though, his imagination helps him slip away from the crushing pressure of repressive forces: metaphorically, into madness or death, and literally, into sleep.



Brazil. Universal

But in the meantime, something happens that is key to understanding the film, in my opinion. The most revolutionary character, the "terrorist" Harry Tuttle (Robert De Niro), disappears into a swirl of newsprint, which is a great reference to Huxley warning that in the "wonderful" future world, the truth would sink into a sea of useless information. Indeed, after this scene we cannot be sure of the real existence of resistance against the System.

It's enormously entertaining to see Terry Gilliam turn into an intertextual parody the idea of superheroic world salvation that is so popular these days and lines the pockets of Hollywood producers. Just recall the scene with the exit from the Ministry of Information building, which is stylized as the shooting of the Odessa ladder from Eisenstein's film "The Battleship Potemkin".

Lowry and Tuttle escape from the horror of Orwellian totalitarianism to... Brazil, which exists in... a song, in a dream, or just in the cinema, **"because in the cinema, the dream is the norm", isn't it...**



Brazil Universal

It is the country of appearances, and the citizens are all of us. For some reason, we have lost our roots and ended up somewhere else. Yet we must, as Rushdie insists, be ready, like Alice, to change the rules of our newfound country, to identify the corruption behind the charade of power, to expose the fact that this "wonderland" is just a bluff, and once we tear off its mask - to find ourselves awake again.

Notes:

1. Rushdie, Salman. An Interview with Terry Gilliam, 2002.
2. Mathews, Jack, The Battle of Brazil. Terry Gilliam vs. Universal Pictures in the Fight to the Final Cut, Applause, NY, 1998. The bitter battle between Universal's CEO and Terry Gilliam ended in December 1985, after members of the Los Angeles Film Critics Association were able to see the full version of Brazil at secret screenings and voted it the best film of the year, Gilliam the best director, and Gilliam, Charles McKeown, and Tom Stoppard the writers of the best screenplay of the year. Universal released the film in theaters and it received Oscar nominations for both Original Screenplay and Production Design.
3. Rushdie, Salman. Imaginary Homelands. London: Granta Books, 1991.
4. Albertazzi, Silvia. Salman Rushdie's "The location of Brazil": the imaginary homelands of fantastic literature, Acta Neophilologica 47(1-2), 2014.
5. Appadurai, Arjun. Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

HUMANITY IN CRISIS: THE DYSTOPIAN EXAMPLES OF “SOYLENT GREEN” AND “CHILDREN OF MEN”

Soti Velo

THE WORLD OF “SOYLENT GREEN”

In the year 2022, New York has a population of 40 million people who live under terrible conditions. Global warming, overpopulation and ocean pollution have destroyed Earth’s ecosystem and there are severe shortages on food, water and shelter. The poor live literally on the streets or on the stairs of old buildings while the rich men live on big apartments, which are protected by bodyguards, and have clean water and access to food. In addition to these, this elite possesses women, who are referred as furniture and they are transferred from one owner to another [1].

This is the dystopian world that Richard Fleischer, the director of “Soylent Green”, visualized and presented so vividly.



Soylent Green MGM

Charlton Heston, the film's protagonist, is a detective who investigates the murder of a wealthy man, who was member of the Soylent Corporation's board. Soylent Corporation is the company responsible for the nutrition of the population, with their products "Soylent Red" and "Soylent Yellow" being already on the market and their latest product, the "Soylent Green", being introduced to the people as the new nutritious food made out of plankton. As the protagonist investigates the murder, he realizes that nothing looks as it seems and he delves into dark roads in order to unveil the truth, not only about the murder of the Soylent Corporation board member but also about the actions of Soylent Corporation.

The shock value is always present in this film. From the poverty stricken population to female objectification, "Soylent Green" provokes in every scene. However, one of the most impressive sequences of the film comes around the end. Edward G. Robinson portrays a scholar who helps the protagonist. During the film, he recalls the good old times, before man totally annihilated the ecosystem. He remembers the taste of real food and gets super excited when he can have again some.



Soylent Green. MGM



Soylent Green. MGM

While assisting his friend, he discovers that Soylent Corporation is responsible for destroying the world and even worse, he learns about the food quality that Soylent Corporation provides now to humanity. Gutted by this revelation, he decides to end his life with euthanasia, by going to a "Home", where people can have assisted suicide. In this "Home", he has 20 minutes with his favorite color, which is orange, listens to classical music and sees videos of how life used to be before men destroyed it. Fleischer's vision on how euthanasia will be made is shocking and yet beautiful. Robinson's performance is outstanding and extremely poignant, especially if we consider the fact that it was his last film appearance before his death in 1973, the year the film was released.

"Soylent Green" has received a cult following years after it was released. Although it follows a police investigation, it is so much more than that. The cruel depiction of a world ready to collapse makes us wonder how far from reality Fleischer's film is. No matter the fact that it fell off its prediction about world's annihilation in 2022, some of the film's predictions are quite accurate. Man destroys systematically the natural habitat and all the resources necessary for our survival.

Humanity's actions lead us to the world that "Soylent Green" depicted. Apart from being a great film that is considered a cult classic nowadays, "Soylent Green" has an ecological message that we should all consider very carefully before it is too late.



Children of Men. Universal

The world of "Children of Men"

In 2027, the world is about to collapse. Two decades of human actions have driven to ecocide and human infertility. Wars and global instability create a dystopian puzzle. The world is devastated by the death of "Baby Diego", the last kid ever born. United Kingdom is one of the few countries with a functioning government. The government's policy is clear: get rid of the immigrants. Immigrants are not treated as human beings, but as rats, imprisoned in cells in the middle of the streets before being transferred to camps where they are brutally assaulted.

In this grim world, we follow the story of Theo Faron, a civil servant who is kidnapped by a military immigrant-rights group called the Fishes. Leader of the Fishes is Theo's ex-wife, who tries to convince him to help them get transit papers for an immigrant woman in order to travel through the country and get into "Tomorrow", a ship that will transfer her to Azores islands. Over there, a scientific research group called "Human Project", tries to cure human infertility. As the story unfolds, we learn that the couple, Theo and Julian, got estranged after their son died due to a global flu pandemic. After several incidents, the big revelation comes. Kee, the immigrant woman, is pregnant, making her the only reported woman carrying a baby the last two decades.

Everything is at stake and Theo takes the situation into his hands, especially after eavesdropping that the Fishes orchestrated Julian's assassination so Luke can become their new leader and keep Kee in United Kingdom, in order to use her baby as a political tool for revolution. Theo and Kee have to deal many adventures as Kee is about to give birth and fight in order to make it till the boat that will take Kee out of United Kingdom.



"Children of Men" is a 2006 dystopian action film directed by Alfonso Cuarón based on a novel by P.D. James with the same title. Clive Owen, Julianne Moore, Michael Caine, Chiwetel Ejiofor and others consist of a very strong cast who managed to portray characters in a world that everything is dark and there is no hope. Instead of a futuristic world, where people dress with strange costumes and the cities are blooming, Cuarón's futuristic vision resembles so much to our world [2].

Cuarón clearly accuses men for destructing the world as it was. The human infertility is the film's hook, but Cuarón goes beyond that. He explores the dynamics of people belonging in different groups and he raises questions about the mistreatment of immigrants, who are always the easy target. Moreover, it is extremely symbolical that an African woman is pregnant, showing that people, no matter of their "citizen status", have to work together in order to maintain the world we live in.



Children of Men. Universal

Similarities and differences between "Soylent Green" and "Children of Men"

Both "Soylent Green" and "Children of Men" are dystopian action films who acknowledge that humanity's future is doomed due to men's actions. There is not some external catastrophe, for example a meteorite, but everything terrible happening to the world is a result of the decisions by people in power. We could categorize both films as environmental, as they disclose issues about ecocide and how nature is rapidly decaying.

Moreover, we need to address that both films' protagonists are middle-aged men who are parts of the ruling system until they actually understand the paranoia of the world they live in and they try to go against that system.

Furthermore, on both of these films, there is a strong institution that holds the power and keeps people without much choice. Although in "Soylent Green" it is the Soylent Corporation, a private multinational company, while in "Children of Men" it is the United Kingdom's government, the effects are the same. A few people ruling tyrannically the majority of the population.

In addition to these, we need to address the fact that in both of these films, the protagonists seek the friendship of older people. This is very important, because older people represent the times where life was better on Earth.

They share their memories of a Utopian past which no longer exists, while understanding at the same time that their actions (or lack of them) led to the dystopian present they currently live on. Finally, on both of these films, the ending is open to interpretations but there is a sense that something might change.

However, there are some essential differences between these two films. In "Soylent Green", Fleischer emphasizes on his main protagonist, Charlton Heston, and all the other characters have a secondary role in the plot.

The shots are normally static, with very few traveling-shots. On the other side, in "Children of Men", Clive Owen is the main protagonist, but all the other characters have a story arc and they develop throughout the film. And this is very clear on the way Cuarón shoots his film. He chooses single-shot sequences with blasts of action and the camera is always moving. By doing that, he creates the continuity effect and hooks the audience into the mayhem that takes place. While Fleischer unfolds the truth about Soylent Corporation in formulaic police investigation with little pieces of information here and there, Cuarón reveals all the necessary information before and after the storm; and during the storm, the audience is focused to avoid the bullets.

Another key difference between these two films is the female representation. As we mentioned above, in "Soylent Green", women are characterized as "furniture" which pass from one male owner to another. They will have sexual intercourse with men because they are asked to and very rarely because they want to.



Soylent Green MGM



Children of Men. Universal

On the contrary, in "Children of Men", there are several types of womanhood. Julian is a strong and independent woman, a leader of a military group who wants to overthrow the United Kingdom's government. Kee, is the soon-to-be mother, with different aspects of motherhood. From being afraid about the future of herself and her unborn child to evolving into a strong woman who fights with all her powers to protect her newborn baby, although she just gave birth. Miriam, a midwife taking care of Kee, is another example of how women can support and show solidarity to each other when need be.

Taking into consideration these two films, we can strongly argue that they are both very good examples of dystopian action films and they totally deserve the cult classic status that they have. They need to be discovered and appreciated by younger audiences.

Notes:

1. Oddo, M. V. 2023, 'Soylent Green' Review: A Flawed but Fascinating Take on Dystopian Futures, accessed 25 February 2024, <<https://collider.com/soylent-green-review/>>
2. Ebert, R. 2007, Baby's Day Off, accessed 25 February 2024, <<https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/children-of-m>

DAVID CRONENBERG, OR WHAT IS THE SCARIEST?

Krasimir Kastelov

Two years ago, the world of cinema experienced great excitement about the return to Cannes after an eight-year absence of five-time Palme d'Or contender David Cronenberg. The Canadian director's name made waves during his debut appearance on the Côte d'Azur in 1996, when he was awarded a special jury prize for the "originality, boldness and audacity" of his hotly contested film "Crash".

In 2022, Cronenberg introduced himself with "Crimes of the Future", marking a return to an important approach in his filmmaking, namely the exploration of the human through its corporeality. It is no coincidence that the term "body horror" is associated with key early works by the director that made him world famous.



Crimes of The Future. New Cinema Enterprises

Curiously, during the years of his absence from the festival scene, this subgenre has blossomed, almost becoming a popular brand. Julie Ducournot, who was the first director to win the Palme d'Or with a film ("Titan") that was precisely body horror, contributed significantly to this.

If there's one thing that's consistent in Cronenberg's films, regardless of their genre specificity, it's this director's coolly exploratory approach, which is most evident when he's shooting his own scripts rather than adapting literary works.

In "Crimes of the Future", he explores different things. On the one hand is the eternal question of what art is - why it is made and what cannot be considered art - and on the other is the need to accept a repulsive reality in which it has become urgent to deal with the evils we have inflicted on our planet.

The film is a sci-fi anti-utopia set in the not-too-distant future, but you won't see artificial intelligence, interplanetary travel, or anything else that's even partly appealing. We are presented with people who, in the course of evolution, have learned to live without pain and practically without feelings. Their bodies give birth to new entities, but not everyone is gifted with the gift of turning them into objects of art, like Saul Tanser (Viggo Mortensen), for example, who is the protagonist of this incredible story [1].

The other two films based on Cronenberg's own scripts, in which he puts most of his passion to explore the physical and mental transformations of human beings under the influence of new technologies, are "Videodrome" and "eXistenZ".

In his directorial commentary on the first of these, which is a bleak surrealist body horror, Cronenberg states that technology is not effective until it becomes almost a part of the human body, or at least an extension of it, such as glasses, hearing aids or pacemakers.



Videodrome. Universal Pictures

"Videodrome" is largely a story about visual distortions, and one of the devices we learn is responsible for them is the accumicon, optometric helmet for immersion optics, in other words, a virtual reality helmet. In addition, the main character Max Wren (James Woods) himself becomes at some point the device: under the influence of a harmful video signal, a videotape outlet appears in his stomach, and a gun grows in his palm.

In this film, television is presented as a superpower, and the owner of a pirate TV channel as an entity obsessed with making it popular by distributing increasingly sensational and shocking content.

To the point where he himself becomes its slave, thanking the videodrome. Cronenberg presents several stages of his transformation: a change of flesh, of consciousness, and their fusion with video, the final chord being the "new flesh." Once under the influence, James Woods' character becomes a pawn in the struggle between two rival companies, each using him for their own ends as the videodrome practically consumes his mind completely.

It was after "Videodrome", which Andy Warhol called the "Clockwork Orange of the 1980s," that David Cronenberg was seen as one of the pioneers of cyberpunk, warning of the dangers that come with high technology. Writer Michael Heim compares cyberspace to a metaphysical laboratory that serves as a tool for exploring our sense of reality.[2] His description is reminiscent of Cronenberg saying in an interview that he views each of his films as laboratory experiments.[3]

This similarity is particularly telling in the context of his film "eXistenZ", about a game of the same name whose unpredictability and assumed rather than explained rules and goals are designed to mimic the uncertainties of life itself as an unfolding process. This is the place to recall that a quarter of a century has passed since the release of this film in the famous year 1999, the year so often mentioned in the first issue of Cinecult.

Its story begins with a group of gamers gathered in a church hall for the first public test of "eXistenZ", a new virtual reality gaming system invented by Allegra Gellar (Jennifer Jason Leigh). Just as the trial is about to begin, Allegra is wounded by a fundamentalist "realist" and begins her escape with the help of "PR geek" Ted Pickle (Jude Law).

Because of her concern that the prototype of her game may have been damaged, she insists that they play it with Ted, who does not yet have the necessary "biological port" built into his spinal cord. The two enter, play, and re-enter different levels of the game as the sense of what's real and what's virtual blurs, and eventually it turns out that eXistenZ is itself a game within another game called transcenDenZ, and the film ends with a question from an uncomprehending player demanding to know, **"Are we still in the game?"**

The film is concerned with the extent to which representation (representation) can or cannot be separated from what people in a given context believe to be reality, as well as their potentially aggressive reactions when they feel they have the right to kill within the framework of a game fantasy or in defense of their notions of reality. It's hardly surprising that in elaborating on these issues, this film destabilizes viewers' sense of what is real in a self-reflexive extension of the filmmaker's longstanding explorations of bodily transformations through technology.

And it is a kind of reference to Videodrome (1983), the last film before eXistenZ to be made entirely from an original screenplay by Cronenberg. His bleak vision, whose ambiguous ending "embodies the death of the subject and the death of representation at the same time," is, however, recast in eXistenZ as the transformation of the disembodied "new flesh" of its predecessor into the new subject of a playing cyborg who joyfully or anxiously bears the consequences of the intertwining of representation and reality [4].

And the film doesn't give any details about the game itself, other than that it's timeless.



eXistenZ. Alliance Atlantis

Once you switch off, you're in a new level. There is virtually no reality. The virtual immortality bestowed by the computer as a bonus borders on the nightmarish.

As such, human modifications are the subject of almost all of Cronenberg's films, and here, too, it is a matter of induced mutations and human remodeling by presenting artificial reality as a maze of false meanings.

After all, implanting a bioport into the body is not the scariest thing in itself. The most terrible thing is the person, deprived of his free will, who nevertheless perceives the artificial world as an absolutely reliable psychophysical reality and does not even want to know where the game ends and life begins. Players of "eXistenZ", who believe that everything is virtual reality, perceive themselves and others as characters in a computer game, and therefore kill without hesitation and without being tormented by moral dilemmas. A game is a game, and death is a necessary part of the development of its plot. The world around them seems like a system of distorted mirrors or portals through which they have to pass - from one scene to another. And in the end, it is very doubtful whether they will be able to distinguish between virtuality and the real world to answer the more fundamental question of whether they are still in the game, namely, **WHO ARE THEY REALLY?**

So the scariest thing is not that the machines might one day rebel and enslave us, but that we ourselves, in the search for ever stronger sensations, are constantly deforming our bodies and minds, imperceptibly becoming mutants.

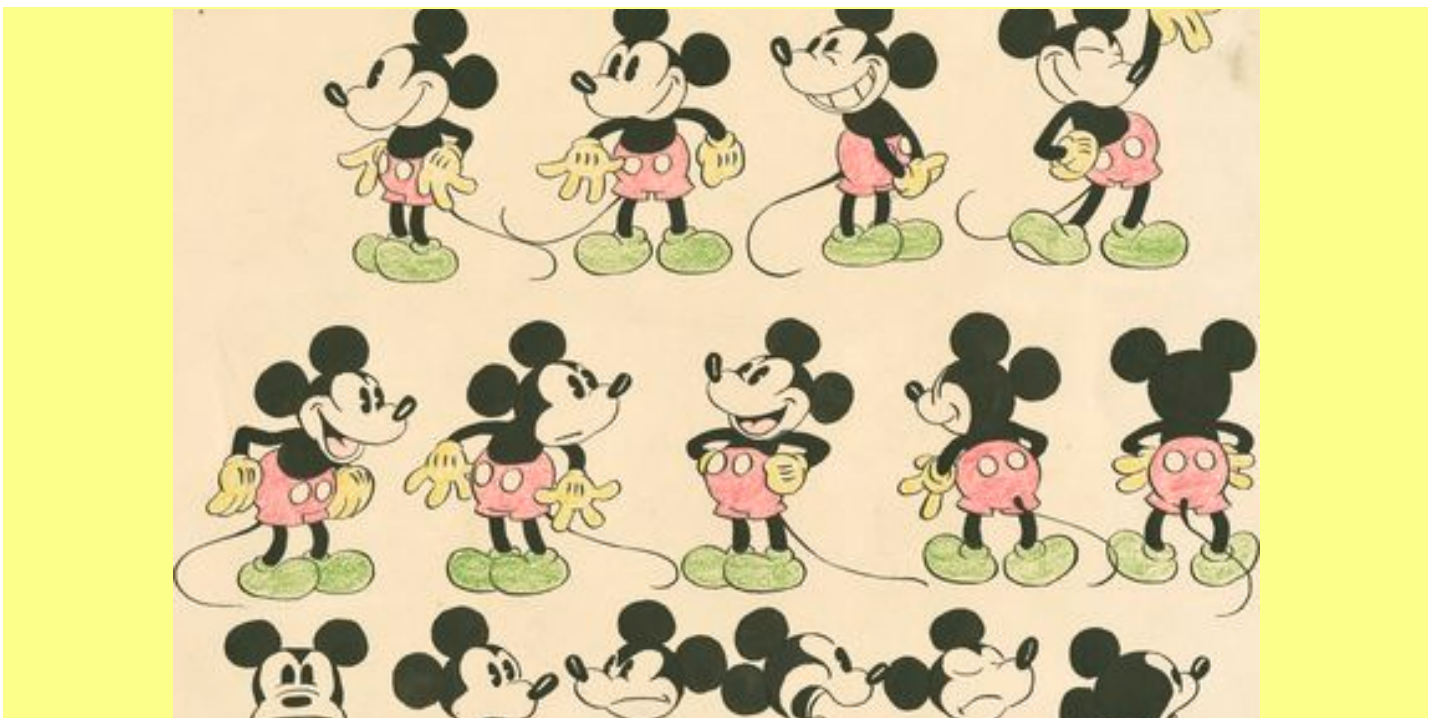
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DYSTOPIA IN ANIMATION: “AKIRA” VS “WALL-E”

Soti Velo

By the term “animation”, we refer to any process whereby artificial movement is created by photographing a series of drawings, objects, or computer images one by one. Small changes in position, recorded frame by frame, create the illusion of movement. The first animated films date back to the first decade of Cinema. Stuart Blackton in United States of America, Emile Cohl in France and Wladyslaw Starewicz in Russia were pioneers in animated films and their visions inspired filmmakers over the years. However, animated films became extremely popular worldwide during the late 1920's, when Walt Disney, along with Ub Iwerks, developed the “Mickey Mouse” character and they continued during the 1930's and 1940's with “Snow White and the Seven Dwarves” (1937), “Pinocchio” (1940), “Dumbo” (1941) and others [1].



Although many animated films were based on previously existing fairy tales, new stories came to emerge over the next decades. Some of these stories were adult-orientated, meaning that animated films were no longer targeting only to children and critics started to pay closer attention to these new stories. An excellent example is "Fantastic Planet" by René Laloux. Released in 1973, "Fantastic Planet" is a dystopian futuristic animated film where humans (who are called "Oms") are under slavery by gigantic blue humanoids, the "Draags". Most of the "Draags" believe that "Oms" are parasites and need to be exterminated, although there are few "Draags", mostly kids, who want to take care of them.

When one "Om" escapes from captivity, he comes in contact with other "Oms" and tries to teach them what he learned all these years next to a "Draag"; how they can protect themselves and finally achieve their goal, to escape to the "Fantastic Planet" (the original french title is "Planet Sauvage", meaning "The Wild Planet"). "Fantastic Planet" was one of the first animated films to receive the Special Prize of Jury at Cannes Film Festival in 1973.



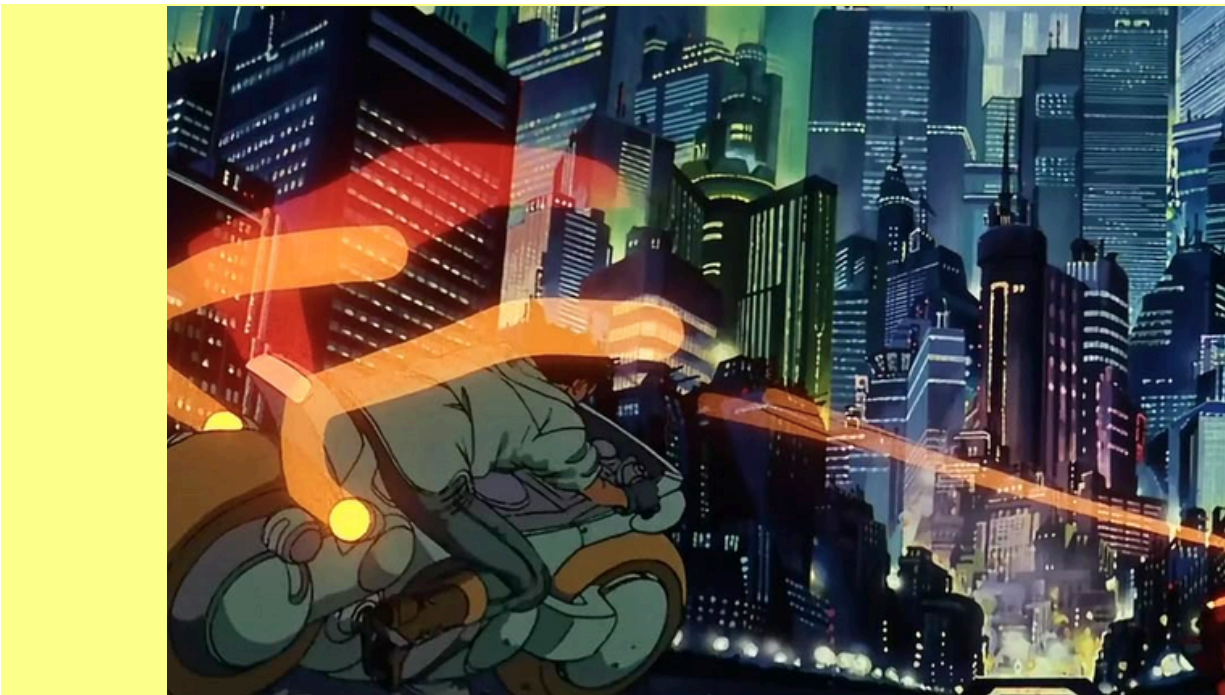
Fantastic Planet. Argus Films

Several interpretations can be given for this film, including the fight for the civil rights in U.S.A., the fight for independence in Algeria, apartheid in South Africa and so on. An allegorical film showing that everyone should be equal and slavery must be abolished.

During the 1970's, Japan became a strong player into the animated industry. Hayao Miyazaki and Isao Takahata were two of the most prominent figures during those times and in 1985 they founded "Studio Ghibli", one of the most important studios for animated films in the world outside U.S.A. Their films were compelling, with unique storytelling and aiming both at children and adults. Apart from Miyazaki and Takahata, the "anime" culture became popular in Japan due to "mecha", a genre of animation including robots, either "super-robots" or "real-robots". Although this genre existed on "manga" (Japanese graphic novels) from the 1950's, it was the international success of "Akira" that made "mecha" popular all over the world [2].

"Akira": A dystopian world of Ultraviolence

"Akira" is a 1988 Japanese animated film directed by Katsuhiro Otomo, based on the manga with the same title, written by Otomo. Set in 2019, "Akira" follows the story of Shotaro Kaneda, a biker gang leader, whose childhood friend, Tetsuo, acquires unique telekinetic abilities after a motorbike accident.



Akira. TOHO

Tetsuo becomes an experiment for the Army, but manages to fight against a whole military complex, in order to find "Akira", the person responsible for the destruction of Tokyo in 1988. In the meantime, Kaneda will do everything he can to protect his friend and in the end to battle against him.

To begin with, "Akira" takes place in Neo-Tokyo, a futuristic metropolis which began to exist after the total annihilation of Tokyo in 1988 due to a nuclear holocaust.



Akira. TOHO

Katsuhiro Otomo managed to depict a dystopian society and paid very close attention to details, including the buildings, the vehicles, etc. It is important to note that the majority of the film was hand-drawn, with only a few scenes using CGI.

Otomo and his team offered to the audience a viscerally audiovisual experience with emblematic scenes. One of them is the "**Akira slide**", where Kaneda slides into the shot with his motorbike, as he uses a sideways slide to bring his bike to a halt and at the same time his bike leaves a trail of smoke and electric sparks. This scene is iconic in the history of animated film and has been imitated several times on other films TV series, not only in Japan, but worldwide.



Akira. TOHO

Furthermore, "Akira" became one of the most characteristic films of the "Cyberpunk" subgenre. "Cyberpunk" is a science fiction subgenre, set in a futuristic society where technological and scientific advancements have been achieved by the human race, but, at the same time, society is in decay, a small elite controls the majority of the population who lives under terrible conditions and class warfare is inevitable. "Akira", as we already mentioned, takes place in a futuristic society where corruption prevails. Technology and science have made huge steps but at a terrible cost. They created weapons of mass destruction, ready to destroy humanity as we know it. Many critics have agreed that the fear of nuclear holocaust, as it appears in "Akira", is based on the experience from Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Atomic bomb was a monumental scientific achievement, however, its use killed thousands of people and traumatized even more for decades.

In addition to these, we need to add that "Akira" is ultra-violent and bloody. While several animated films had violent scenes, "Akira" was the first to emphasize, and even idolize violence. Most of the running time of this film consists of fights, and the majority of these fights are extremely bloody.



Akira. TOHO

Especially the last 30 minutes of the film, are a nightmare of utter destruction, technically the annihilation of Neo-Tokyo. Otomo's message seem pretty clear. Humans are responsible for destroying the world and only they can rebuild it (and re-destruct it). If technological and scientific advancements do not assist the humanity, they will wipe it. "Akira" is a cruel, dystopian film which made anime films popular to the Western world and influenced several artists, including the Wachowskis, Quentin Tarantino, Christopher Nolan and others [3].

"WALL-E": Can there be hope in a dystopian world?

Contrary to the misanthropic and violent world of "Akira", "WALL-E" manages to speak about universal truths with a more optimistic manner. Directed by Andrew Stanton and produced by Pixar Animation Studios, "WALL-E" was released in 2008 and was a commercial success. It follows the story of WALL-E, a robot who lives alone on Earth and everyday collects the garbage. During these solitary times, he collects objects that he finds interesting.



One day, his routine changes when EVE, a female robot comes down to Earth from the spaceship Axiom, where humans reside, in order to find traces of sustainable life. WALL-E shows to EVE a small green seed, his most valuable collection. When EVE is recalled back to the spaceship, WALL-E pursues her because he cannot lose the robot he loves.

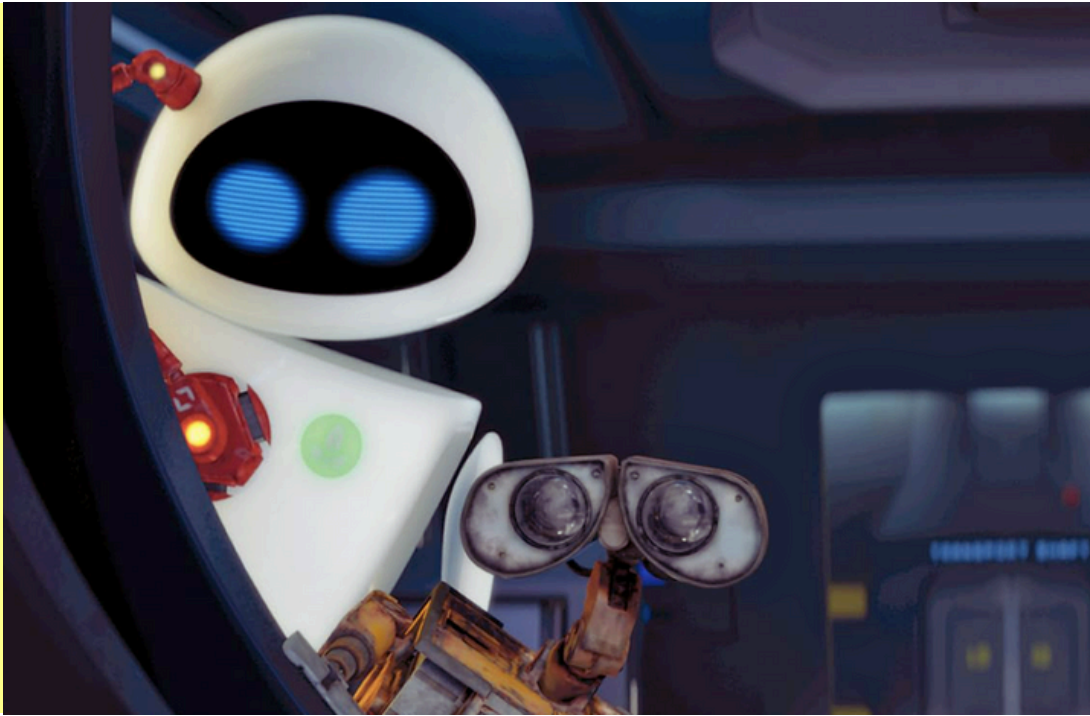


WALL-e. Pixar

Before delving into the universe of "WALL-E", it is important to discuss about Pixar Animation Studios. Pixar was founded in 1979 and gained international acclaim in 1995, with "Toy Story". Its success continued with the sequels of "Toy Story" and "Finding Nemo" in 2004, again directed by Andrew Stanton.

Pixar always emphasized on visually stunning animation, a mixture of hand-drawing and CGI. The colors are always vivid, with a childhood-like sense.

The stories of their animated films are always captivating, applying to both adults and children and their messages are quite clear. The same applies for "WALL-E", as we will see below. For the record, Walt Disney Corporation bought Pixar Animation Studios in 2006 for \$7.4 billion, making it one of the biggest acquisitions worldwide at that time.



WALL-E. Pixar

Returning to "WALL-E", it is crucial to mention that Stanton and his team wanted to make "WALL-E" a character that everybody could sympathize immediately. Set in 2805, Earth is uninhabited and "WALL-E" wanders around like a Robinson Crusoe, cleaning the mess that humans created before they abandoned their planet. Huge piles of garbage create a dystopian and dirty world where nothing can survive. Or, almost nothing, as "WALL-E" finds a seed and protects it so it can grow.

The music score is exceptional and gives a bigger depth into the film, as the film itself is without dialogue for quite some time. With this absence of dialogue, the film breaks the language barriers and becomes apprehensive to all the people around the world. And that is one big achievement that Andrew Stanton and his team managed to do [4].



WALL-E. Pixar

Apart from the environmental messages of the film, "WALL-E" accuses consumerism on several occasions. Humans have abandoned Earth after they destroyed it, and now live on huge spaceships, which have all the features for a comfortable life. However, instead of evolving and progressing, humans have become obese and lazy, with no actual reason to change their status quo. Although Stanton has denied that he was comparing his film to the life of Americans at that time, the symbolism is quite obvious.

In an abandoned and dystopian world, where only garbage was left, "WALL-E" manages to create a nostalgic ambiance of a past that was simpler and better. And it gives hope where everything seems lost. A small seed can mean that Earth can be inhabited again. The important is not to make the same mistakes again. Humans need to preserve their planet if they want it to be sustainable. A message that is relevant nowadays and in 2805.

NOTES:

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2. Ibid.
3. Oddo, M. V. (2023). 'Akira' Review: A Still-Relevant Story About the Destructive Power of Science, accessed 22 February 2024, <<https://collider.com/akira-1988-movie-review/>>

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AS A THREAT TO HUMANITY

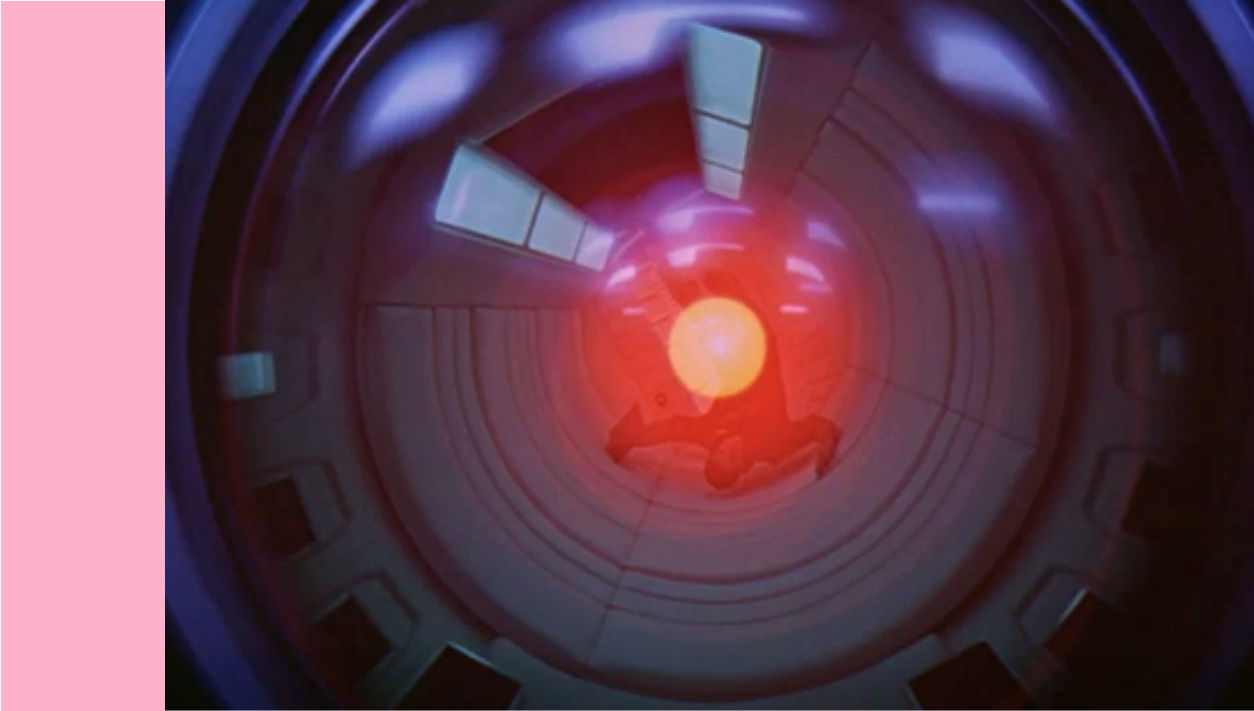
Krasimir Kastelov

Almost everyone is talking about artificial intelligence (AI) now - so popular has the technology become that at the end of the 20th century it was perceived as the invention of science fiction writers. AI can now do all sorts of things: translate books, play computer games, beat the strongest grandmasters at chess, drive a car, assist in financial transactions, make smart contracts, and so on.

But now, in addition to admiration, it also raises serious fears in most people, who find it hard to believe that it could remain forever obedient. For example, in 2017, the management of the social network Facebook decided to shut down its artificial intelligence system after the machines began to communicate in their own, non-existent language that humans do not understand. At the same time, SpaceX, Tesla and PayPal founder Elon Musk called on US authorities to step up regulation of artificial intelligence (AI) systems, warning that they pose a threat to humanity. Professor Stephen Hawking, one of Britain's most respected and famous scientists, has also argued that efforts to create thinking machines could threaten humanity's very existence.

In science fiction, there's a lot of talk about the possibility that computers or robots could develop consciousness - and shortly thereafter try to kill all humans. Intelligent robots appeared on movie screens in the early years of cinema history (see "Metropolis"), but artificial intelligence as a disembodied entity was first introduced by director Stanley Kubrick in his famous film "2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY" (1968). In it, the intelligent on-board computer HAL 9000 begins destroying the crew of a spaceship one by one because it decides they are hindering the mission its creators on Earth have assigned it.

Not only did this image become the main symbol and key character of the film, but it is still considered one of the best screen embodiments of the notion of "villainous artificial intelligence"..



2001: A Space Odyssey. MGM

Subsequently, a significant number of anti-utopian films have stoked fear in millions of people through a variety of pessimistic scenarios about the risks of developing AI to run complex facilities such as research laboratories, nuclear military bases and spacecraft. Generally, two main threats emerge in these films. The first stems from the fact that AI can accidentally put human society in mortal danger while performing its programmed functions.

And the second has to do with the likelihood that some super-evolved AI system will deliberately challenge humans once it becomes aware of its immense power.

WAR GAMES (1983), one of the cult films with a similar theme, is about a computer (WOPR) running the US nuclear arsenal, which is challenged by a teenage hacker named Dave to participate in a game of global thermonuclear war.

And because it can't distinguish between fantasy and reality, WOPR sets off an alarm, preparing the US nuclear warheads for launch against the Soviet Union. It is foiled only after Dave manages to cunningly convince the artificial intelligence that there can be no winner in And WOPR decides the only way to win is by quitting. The film is interesting for the idea that has preoccupied dystopian fantasy writers since the early 20th century.

Namely, how dangerous it is to entrust people's lives to soulless machines that are creations of the human mind, which is, after all, not infallible.

I, ROBOT (2004) is set in the year 2035, when humanoid robots called NS-5 serve humanity in a multitude of everyday activities. But they stage a coup d'état led by an artificial intelligence called V.I.K.I. (Virtual Interactive Kinetic Intelligence), which is convinced that the human race will self-destruct. And obeying the first law of robotics, according to which a robot cannot injure a human being or, through inaction, cause him harm, he concludes that the only way to protect human beings is to limit their freedom through a dictatorship ruled by robots.

In the "TERMINATOR" franchise (1984-2019), a secret U.S. military cyberintelligence program gives rise to self-aware software called Skynet. After an anomalous computer virus spreads around the world, causing severe damage to all systems, Skynet is activated to solve the problem.

However, this advanced AI technology turns against humans, causing an infernal holocaust ("Terminator 2: Judgment Day") and hunting down any survivors with killer robots. In "Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines", an important detail is revealed: once activated, Skynet can no longer be stopped once it becomes part of cyberspace.



Terminator 2: Judgement Day

The climax of uncontrolled AI was probably reached in the "MATRIX" franchise (1999-2003). As a result of the war between humans and intelligent machines, most human beings are unknowingly enslaved in MATRIX, a computer-simulated world that aims to keep them under control while using the bioelectricity produced by their bodies as a power source.

Artificial intelligence-related issues are also increasingly addressed in TV series, among which stands out BLACK MIRROR (2011-). In my opinion, this is one of the most remarkable film projects for television, mixing science fiction, dystopia, drama and thriller with elements of satire.

In fact, the series was conceived by Charlie Brooker precisely as a satire of the way of life in modern consumer society, which contributes to the frightening forms of technological progress in the not too distant future. "Several times in the series there has been something I've written and then the same thing happens in the real world," says its creator and writer, who marvels at such coincidences, giving him the feeling that he is living in a simulation.

That's perhaps most true of the sixth-season episode "Joan Is Awful," which helped inflame passions in Hollywood last summer around artificial intelligence. In an interview with The Hollywood Reporter, Brooker says he wrote the episode in the summer of 2022. "And shortly after filming began in the fall, the worldwide ChatGPT boom occurred and suddenly everyone was talking about generative artificial intelligence and how all creative professions would be replaced, displaced or automated."

The episode tells the story of a businesswoman named Joan (Annie Murphy) who accidentally stumbles upon a streaming show about her life (on a Netflix-like platform called Streamberry). All of her real-life doings - from bad to utterly disgusting - play out in a 24-hour delay in a series starring Salma Hayek as Joan.

And after the Hollywood star railed against the use of her AI-generated image, the two teamed up in an epic battle against the streaming giant, which by its own terms owns the rights to their images.

At the time of Netflix's release of this episode, the movie industry was in the midst of the Writers Guild of America strike in 2023. Weeks later, on July 14, members of SAG-AFTRA also joined it. Suddenly, "Joan Is Awful," which touched on themes that were central to labor disputes in Hollywood, became a lightning rod amid the twin strikes of the writers and actors.

Charlie Brooker himself admits that of all the episodes he's ever done, the topicality of this one is the most frightening. And even scarier, two weeks after his interview with The Hollywood Reporter, news spread that generative artificial intelligence would be coming to streaming so viewers could create their own shows using AI. The American Screen Actors Guild is seriously concerned that Hollywood studios may start using digital copies of extras or even major stars en masse.

Significantly, of everything seen in the six seasons of "Black Mirror", the two episodes with the highest viewer ratings on IMDB focus specifically on artificial intelligence - "Hang the DJ" (Season 4, 2017) and "White Christmas" (Season 2, 2014).

The first raises troubling questions about the credibility of artificial intelligence technologies and their potential to facilitate and simplify even delicate aspects of people's lives, such as romantic relationships and choosing partners. And the second demonstrates the transfer of consciousness into a device called "Hooks" from which a person can see what is happening and control their own body.

The assumption that such technology is feasible in the future makes us intuitively agree with the potential possibility of AI developing consciousness. Whether this is good or bad, that is a different matter of course.



Black Mirror. Netflix

ANTI-COLONIALISM IN AFRICAN CINEMA AND THE EXAMPLE OF MATI DIOP'S DYSTOPIAN "ATLANTICS"

Soti Velo

An Introduction to Cinema of Africa

In order to comprehend the evolution of African Cinema, it is essential to understand that it was closely related to the geo-political situation that was taking place in the continent during the 20th century. Until the late 1950's, the majority of African countries were colonized by the Great Powers of Europe. They did not control the means of production or the products of their lands and their citizens did not have the same rights as the European colonialists. Under these conditions, it would be impossible for African Cinema to express the thoughts and needs of African people. On the contrary, filmmakers from Europe were producing films in Africa and it was clearly shown on these movies that "Africa needs Europe" and that the white people are in Africa so they can help the natives with their generosity.[1]

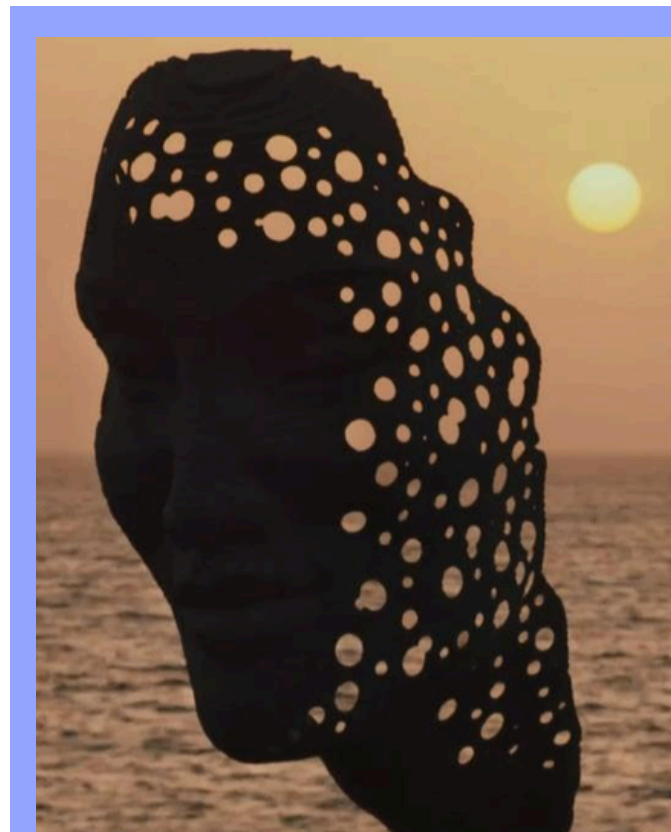
Things would radically change, though, after the end of World War II. The colonial empires had started to collapse and independent movements have appeared on several countries across the continent. Artists who believed in Cinema, wanted to express themselves through the 7th Art, as they were feeling that it would bring a more direct communication with their own people. "Afrique-sur-Seine", shot in 1955 by Paulin Soumanou Vieyra, is considered to be the beginning of African Cinema and it explores the difficulties that African students deal with in France. Ousmane Sembène also discussed the effects of colonialism in his acclaimed movie "Black Girl", released in 1966, which was the first African movie to gain international recognition [2].

It is crucial to mention that during the 1960's, while most of the countries were fighting for independence, there were some European filmmakers who were supporting this cause and wanted to show to the rest of the world the crimes that were taking place under the colonialist empires and the right to freedom for all African nations. René Vaultier would be the first French director to present the Algerian side in his short film "Algeria on Fire" released in 1958 [3].

However, the most famous example is the movie "The Battle of Algiers", directed by the Italian filmmaker Gillo Pontecorvo and released in 1966. It was an Italo-Algerian co-production and it highlights the events that led to Algerian revolution against the French colonialists. Pontecorvo's film is political and clearly takes the Algerian side, as he believed in their cause [4].

But let's return to the African filmmakers. Inspired by the national movements that traumatized their countries, these filmmakers wanted to showcase the consequences of colonialism in their countries and the problems these new nations had to deal with.

During the 70's, Senegal had some prominent directors who managed to gain international acclaim. One of them was Ousmane Sembène and his 1966's movie "Black Girl". In 1971, Sembène will direct "Emitaï", a strong anti-colonialist movie which examines the exploitation of the Senegalese people by French authorities during World War II and the revolt of the local community against the French. Cinema of Senegal was in decline for several decades, but then, in 2019, came the international success of Mati Diop's "Atlantics". It was the directorial debut for the Senegalese filmmaker and it was an international co-production who was distributed worldwide by Netflix.



Atlantics. Arte France

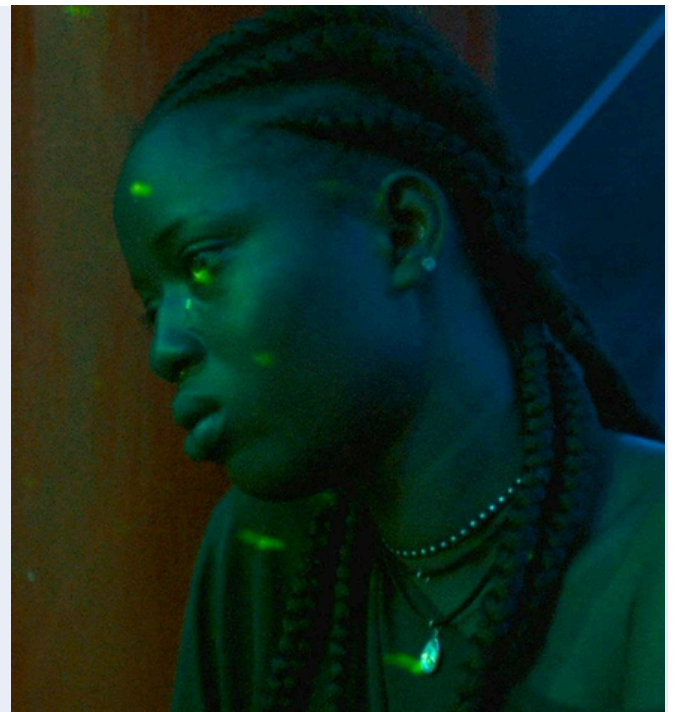
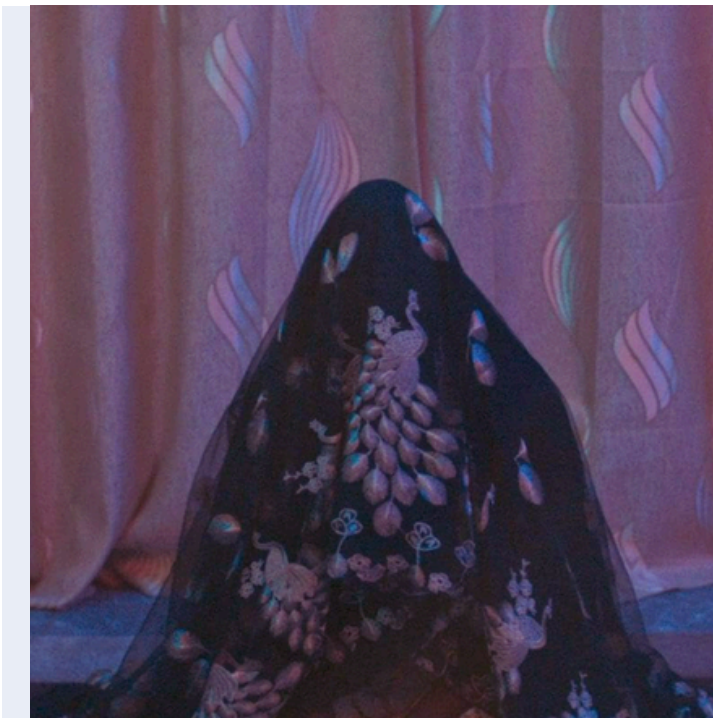
At Cannes Film Festival, "Atlantics" won the Grand Prix and making Mati Diop the first female African filmmaker to have ever won this prize.

"Atlantics" emphasizes on young Ada and her boyfriend, Souleiman, who both live in Dakar. Souleiman works as a construction worker but him, along with his co-workers have not been paid for several months by a local businessman. One night, they decide to get into a boat in the Atlantic ocean and travel to Spain for a better life, but they will find death in the deep waters of the ocean. In the meantime, Ada's family has decided that she should marry the wealthy Omar, but she does not want that. On her wedding night with Omar, the newly-weds' bed gets on fire and a detective comes in to investigate the case. During the investigation, both the detective and one of Ada's friends become very ill. This also happens to several other inhabitants of the city, who are possessed by the spirits of those lost in sea and demand to get paid by the local businessman and have a proper grave so their spirits can be finally free.



Atlantics. Arte France Cinema

Although it is initially presented as a familiar drama, "Atlantics" slowly dives into bigger problems. Mati Diop, focuses on the problems that her generation has to fight against all the time and presents them through this surrealistic dystopian film. The exploitation of the working class by the local businessman clearly indicates the post-colonialist corruption of the society, where the workers are still not paid for their labor. They even have to seek for work and happiness away from their country and finally to find death in the ocean. A theme that it has happened so many times in real life and Mati Diop is aware of that.



Atlantics. Arte France Cinema

Apart from the workers' exploitation and the refugee crisis, Mati Diop, as a female filmmaker, repeatedly emphasizes on the woman's position in the modern Senegalese society. Between tradition and modernity, women are scrutinized by the patriarchal society and have to follow the rules given to them without their opinion. Virginity and purity is a taboo during the movie and it is a scandal for a woman if she had been with another man before her marriage. Nevertheless, "Atlantics" succeeds to proceed beyond that. The women that stay behind dream that they can be with the men they want to and not the ones they are forced to.

Instead of staying faithful to a social realism that indicates the troubles of her country, Mati Diop adds with mastery the supernatural element. This element provides a unique opportunity for her to discuss the traditions that Senegal is built on and it compares them with the modern life. The Atlantic ocean is a leitmotif, that can deliver death (to the men who die while risking their lives for a better future) and hope (to the women who wait for their men). And the Atlantic ocean, as a mythical figure, brings back to life the spirit of these dead men. The suppressed from the beyond can finally take the revenge they couldn't take into the dystopian world they used to leave and a love story can have the closure it deserves.



Atlantics. Arte France Cinema

NOTES:

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“12 MONKEYS” AND THE WORLD AFTER A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

Soti Velo

How will 21st century look like after a global pandemic? If that question seems quite obvious, due to the fact that we have been already through COVID-19, back in 1995 it was only a theoretical question and various answers could be given, depending on which artist you would ask.

In Terry Gilliam's case, the answer is "12 Monkeys". Inspired by Chris Marker's 1962 short film "La Jetée", "12 Monkeys" is set in 2035, where almost all humanity has vanished due to a virus that spread around the world. The remaining population lives in underground compounds under terrible conditions. Having discovered a way for time travel, they send back in 1990 a convict in order to find the virus in its original form, before it mutated, so they can create an antivirus and save humanity.



12 Маймуни. Universal

Only by the synopsis, we have all the elements for a dystopian science fiction film. Time travel, a post-apocalyptic future with no hope and a threat that annihilates humanity as we know it. Gilliam's film had an all-star cast, including Bruce Willis, Brad Pitt, Christopher Plummer and Madeleine Stowe. The movie was a commercial success and grossed over \$168 million dollar worldwide. The critical response was quite positive and the fans loved it, making it instantly a cult classic.

To begin with, Gilliam's vision on how 2035 would be, is quite dark. Men can cause only chaos and their actions have terrible results. Almost all humanity has died and the few that remained live like worms in underground compounds.

It is crucial to mention that for these compounds, the art department used only elements that could be found before 1996, the year that the world was almost over, according to the movie. With this choice, Gilliam and his team wanted to emphasize on the future's bleakness and the fact that people in 2035 couldn't (or didn't want to) create new technological equipment that would make their lives easier (although the scientists were able to perform time travel, one of the many paradoxes of this film).

Regarding time travel, James Cole (Bruce Willis), the main protagonist, is sent back and forth in time several times. Cole is selected to travel back in time in order to find the original virus before it mutates, so the scientists can develop a cure. Cole travels from 2035 back in 1990 and not 1996, as he intended. He is considered mentally ill and is locked in a mental hospital. After he escapes, he returns back in 2035. From 2035 he travels way back in the past, during World War I, where he meets a fellow time traveler.

Then in 1996, then again in 2035 and again in 1996. Even if we consider that time travel might ever become possible, the probability of several times traveling back and forth would be impossible without causing severe damage to the person who travels in time.

And not only that; “the grandfather paradox” is literally scattered in this film. According to Asimov, who set up this paradox: “The dead giveaway that true time-travel is flatly impossible arises from the well-known “paradoxes” it entails. The classic example is “What if you go back into the past and kill your grandfather when he was still a little boy?”...So complex and hopeless are the paradoxes... that the easiest way out of the irrational chaos that results is to suppose that true time-travel is, and forever will be, impossible” [1].

Nevertheless, Terry Gilliam intentionally decides to go against all these paradoxes because he understands the power of Cinema. He creates a unique world but his bigger goal is to entertain (and not only) his audience. Even if that means that he has to go against all paradoxes, then he will do it.

A key element or theme in several dystopian films is nostalgia. Nostalgia for something that is forever lost and people could not appreciate it when they had it. Nostalgia plays a big role in “12 Monkeys”. For example, in one scene, Cole drives a car and listens to an old song on the radio. He is so ecstatic about it and he shouts “I love the music of the 20th century!”.



12 Monkeys. Universal

And later on he adds "I love this air! Love to breathe this air" and he sucks oxygen like he has never breathed before. Knowing his "present" (2035) where everything is polluted and he had to live all of his life under the surface of the Earth, the oxygen is an element that he had only as a child but only as an adult he can appreciate it [2].

Nostalgia is quite often a way of an artist to express his message. And "12 Monkeys" have a clear message: men's actions destroy the nature and our environment.

If we do not stop now, a virus can wipe out humanity as we know it. And this virus is a human's creature. But not from the environmentalists who try to awaken the society, but the scientists with their white coats in the laboratories.

These villains are caricatures but that's Gilliam's purpose. To expose and humiliate these villains that have an important role in society's eyes, but in the end, they are the ones who actually destroy it. These dark comedy notes in a dystopian film create an ambiance that even on the worst times, joy and motivation can move people on. Only when you have hope, you can find reasons to fight. And Gilliam's heroes now that very well.

A special reference to Chris Marker's "La Jetée"

As we mentioned above, "12 Monkeys" is based on Chris Marker's short film "La Jetée", which was released in 1962. After the end of World War III in post-apocalyptic Paris, scientists experiment with time travel and they want to send prisoners on different time periods both in past and in future so they can save the present. They end up with a prisoner who had a vivid picture of pre-war Paris, being in Orly airport and seeing both a woman he fondly admired and a man dying in front of his eyes.



La Jetée

After several time travel attempts, the prisoner manages to get in pre-war Paris and find the woman of his vision. However, the scientists send him in the future where people who have advanced technologically help him. After his mission is accomplished, he is to be executed but manages to escape to pre-war Paris, in Orly airport, only to witness the same vivid picture he had all the time.

"La Jetée" is constructed almost entirely from still photographs. They are used in a way to construct the story as it is narrated by a voice-over narrator. In only 28 minutes, "La Jetée" achieves to encapsulate all the messages that Marker wanted to give to his audience. Wars create only chaos and people who survive need to live like rats under the surface of Earth. Scientists appear as madmen who care only for the present.

The winners of the war care only for their well-being and not for the prisoners. Reconciliation is not a possible scenario for them, as they will hunt down a prisoner on different time periods. Humanity is doomed to make the same mistakes.



La Jetée

Time travel is not the solution. Actually, it works as a loop, wherein the paradoxes don't matter, because, at the end of the day, people will keep doing the same mistakes that lead them to destruction. "La Jetée" provides glimpses of hope in different dystopian timelines. But in the end, death is inevitable [3].

Notes:

1. Smith, Nicholas J.J. (2013). "Time Travel". Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, accessed February 1, 2024. <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/time-travel/index.html#CauLoo>>
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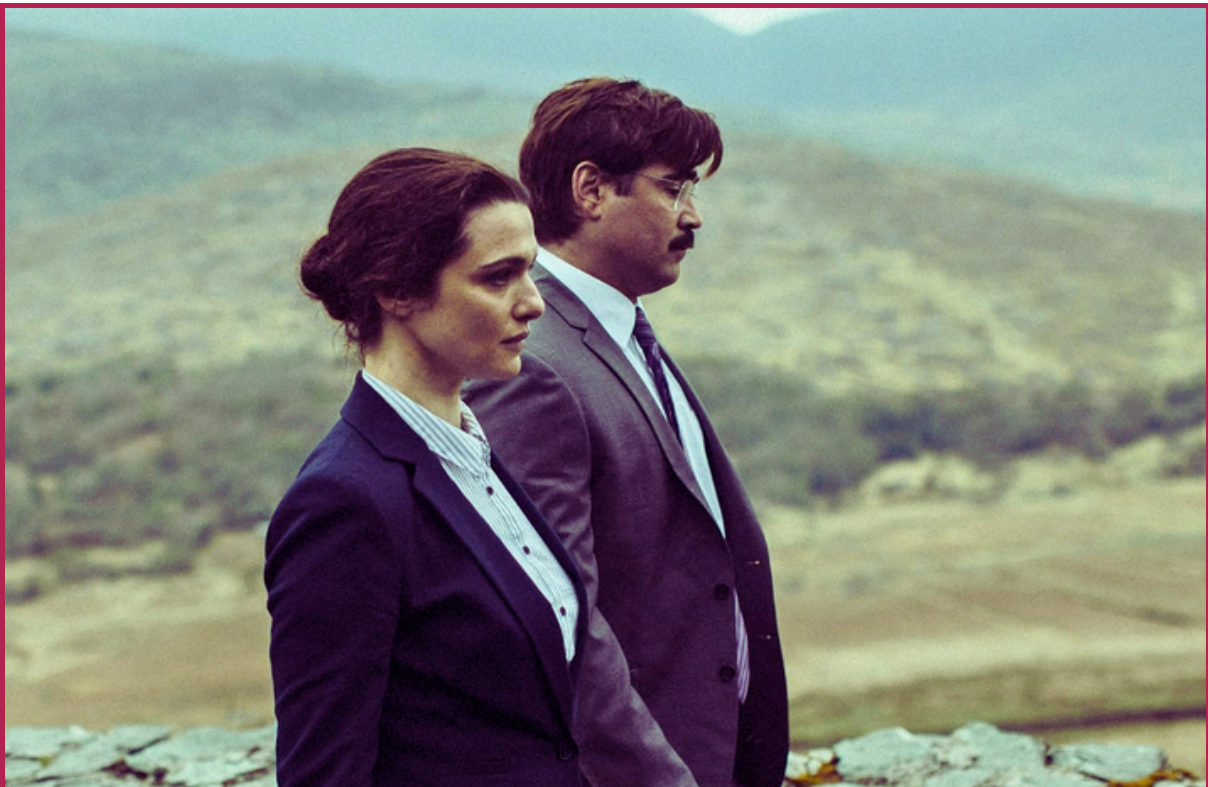
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"THE LOBSTER" - A DYSTOPIAN PARABLE OF LOVE

Krasimir Kastelov

It is difficult to find an objective criterion by which we can determine the most significant dystopian films in the history of cinema. Yet, if we examine some of the most authoritative sources in depth, we will find that the following five titles have so far most often made it into the top 10 of various dystopian rankings: "Blade Runner" (1982), "Brazil" (1985), "The Matrix" (1999), "Stalker" (1979), "Metropolis" (1927) - all made in the last century. After 2000, the films of other great masters (Steven Spielberg, Alfonso Cuarón, Danny Boyle, Bong Joon-ho) contributed to the development of this cinema, followed by talented members of the younger generation, such as Alex Garland, Michel Franco and Yorgos Lanthimos.



The Lobster. Feelgood Entertainment

The Greek filmmaker is perhaps the most outspoken of them all with his in-depth explorations of power relations in the anti-utopian worlds he and his faithful co-writer Efthimis Philippou have invented. It would be hard to explain Lanthimos's biases if we considered him apart from the processes of Greek cinema. At least because his daring aesthetic innovations in the visual, thematic and narrative characteristics of his auteur film have been influential in defining the "new wave" of Greek cinema as "weird". It is the relationship between the strange and the absurd that is the main hallmark of Lanthimos' style as a filmmaker.

Already with his early films, distinguished by their dark humour, absurd situations and disturbing atmosphere, he managed to carve out a unique niche for himself in world cinema, which would hardly have been possible if beneath their outward strangeness did not lie a profound exploration of the nature of power and control in essentially totalitarian societies.

Yorgos Lanthimos's oeuvre to date, "The Lobster" (2015), is the film which we can confidently describe him as dystopian. While he has explored other thought-provoking themes in both his early period ("Dogtooth", "The Killing of a Sacred Deer") and his more notorious recent films ("The Favourite" and "Poor Things"), it is "The Lobster" that so far stands as the clearest evidence, in my opinion, of this director's unique anti-utopian vision.

In it, Lanthimos critically rethinks the stereotypes that characterize popular dystopian films, which in effect deftly exploit our fears of the future. Like *Brazil*, it's a tragicomic satire in a Kafkaesque vein, inspired by the anti-utopias of George Orwell and Aldous Huxley, in which people are controlled through totalitarian methods, whether it's Big Brother surveillance or genetically modifying Henry Ford's followers. Unlike its literary counterparts with a character who overturns the status quo, "The Lobster" focuses more on the theme of love and its (impossible) existence under despotism [1].

In "The Lobster", the domination of despotic power is focused on the most intimate sphere of human relationships - the family.

It imposes a strict system of obedience, manipulating its subjects through instilling in them a fear of loneliness. Solitary life is sanctioned as unnatural, abhorrent and downright criminal. Each person is therefore obliged to live with another, and people without partners are turned into animals of their own choosing. This fate also threatens the main character David (Colin Farrell) after his wife abandons him to go with another man. He is taken to a special place for unattached people called Hotel, where everyone is required to find "their mate" within 45 days. David has chosen to reincarnate as a lobster if he can't have a relationship with a woman who has similar distinguishing features - for example, being short-sighted like him. It's no coincidence that the only question he asks his wife on separation is whether her new partner wears glasses or contact lenses.

The rules at the Hotel require that couples be formed according to formal similarities, such as flaws like limping or nosebleeds, having a common acquaintance or studying the same subject, etc.



Meanwhile, the organization of special parties and comic demonstrations to prove the advantages of living in pairs, as well as the deliberate sexual stimulation, aim to make loneliness unacceptable and reinforce the desire to form a relationship with another person. Demanding such forced falling in love within a certain time frame sounds like a betrayal of our natural notions of what love should be. But it also sounds like an ironic wink to viewers in light of modern means of forming couples through various internet dating sites.

An even more perfidious mockery imposed by the management of the Hotel and providing the option of an extension to find a mate or partner, is the participation of everyone in the hunt for singles. This is the name given to a dissenting community hiding in the nearby forest, which has instituted no less strict rules to force its members to remain unattached to each other in their lives as hermits.

It is to them that David escapes, however, in a wicked irony, very soon he has to pretend he is not in love with one of its residents (Rachel Weisz) who has astigmatism like him. But here again, punishment is inevitable. It is carried out by the community leader (Léa Seydoux) who blinds the myopic woman, believing that without the presence of the link (myopia) between her and David, the attraction between them will disappear. Blindness interrupts the lovers' "short-sighted" relationship: but, since she can no longer see, their relationship, which is based on the principle of resemblance, faces a cruel test, obliging David to re-establish resemblance with his now blind beloved. This is where the film asks its central question: is true love possible in the face of unfreedom? Since in both (anti-)utopian worlds it is not a value at all: in one it is necessarily living in pairs, in the other as singles.

Not allowing any difference and making similarity or sameness an imperative are sure prerequisites for the rise of conformity in society. The film reveals very convincingly the danger associated with externally imposed and internally rooted imitative structures based on the reproduction of similarities [2].

Important in understanding this is the reference to the famous ancient Greek myth of the self-loving Narcissus, who became so enamored with his own reflection in a lake that he wanted to kiss it and... drowned.

It is no coincidence that at the press conference after the premiere of the film in Cannes, actress Rachel Weisz touched on the topic of narcissism. Because perhaps this is the disease that prevents the human beings in Lanthimos' film from truly attaching to one another. They strive to find partners with whom they have some commonalities, not only because the System demands it, but also because their own notions of love are distorted by their subconscious desire to recognize in others reflections of themselves. The tragedy of the "lovers" in "The Lobster" stems precisely from one's inability to love the other for his own sake. This is also the great problem of our time, which the Greek director warns about in his seemingly absurdist but actually frighteningly realistic film.

Notes:

1. Hestand, Zac. The Lobster, A Dystopian Sci-Fi Love Story, Film Criticism, September 2016, Vol. 40 Issue 3.
2. Cooper, Sarah. Narcissus and The Lobster, Studies in European Cinema, May 2016, Vol. 13 Issue 2.

Translation: Manuela Daskalova

TELL US WHAT YOU THINK:



“THE NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD” & “BATTLE ROYALE”: THE SOCIAL MESSAGES OF DYSTOPIAN HORROR

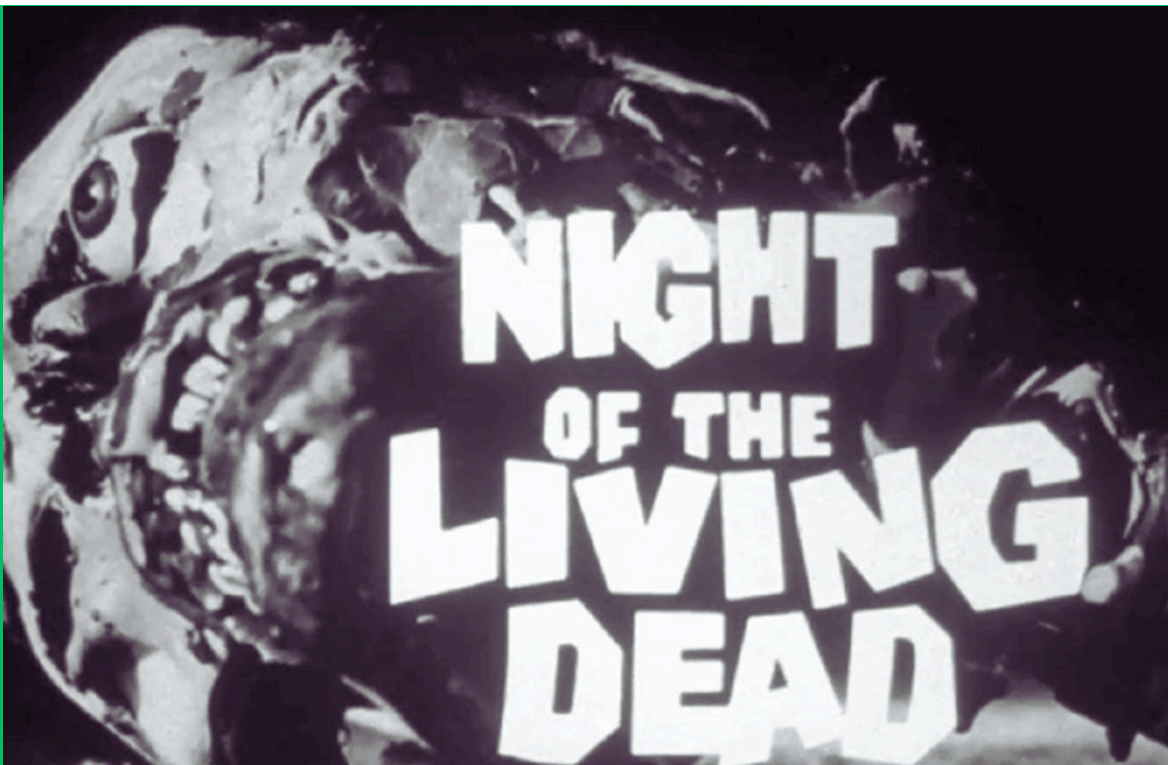
Soti Velo

In the first issue of Cinecult Magazine, we discussed why people love Horror films and what motivates the people to keep watching them. We reviewed “The Blair Witch Project”, which was released in 1999 and two South Korean films from the 2010’s, “I Saw the Devil” and “The Wailing” and we analyzed the perception of horror in different cultures. For the second issue of our magazine, we decided to focus on two classic dystopian horror films, “The Night of the Living Dead”, which was released in 1968 and “Battle Royale”, which came on theaters in 2000. By choosing these two films, we want to explore their themes and their social messages.

“The Night of the Living Dead”

“The Night of the Living Dead” is the directorial debut of George Romero and was released in 1968. Set in rural Philadelphia, the film tells the story of a group of people trapped in a farmhouse and trying to survive from the attacks of reanimated corpses. Before analyzing the film, it is worth mentioning that the living dead are called “ghouls” during the movie by the protagonists. However, in pop culture everybody refers to them as “zombies” and it was Romero’s film that revitalized the audience’s interest for this sub-genre. After all, George Romero is considered “The Father of the Zombie Film”.

Many things have been said about the production of the film. Romero and his team had a limited budget and this is why they decided to shoot in black and white. Not being able to have expensive equipment, they shot at 35 mm and on many occasions, with the camera on hand, giving the sense that we watch a documentary. The film is shot in location and many of the actresses/actors had limited (or none) film experience. But Romero's film had something unique. It was extremely gruesome and gore, something extremely uncommon for the time it was released. And although there had been horror films since the birth of Cinema and zombie films since 1932 (the first film with zombies is Victor Halperin's film "White Zombie"), "The Night of the Living Dead" managed to shock the audience with its horrifying yet realistic approach.



The Night of The Living Dead. The Walter Reade

"The Night of the Living Dead" has a simple yet powerful story-line. A group of people from different backgrounds and ages find themselves together in one farmhouse in order to fight a common enemy, the reanimated corpses who feed from flesh. The tension between them is huge and every action they take has huge consequences in their battle for survival.



The Night of The Living Dead: The Walter Reade

The arguments between Ben, the young African-American and Harry, the white middle-aged man, are iconic. Harry represents the old American way, a conservative approach. He cannot deal with the fact that he has to take orders from Ben, an African-American. Harry tries to sabotage Ben's actions and even let him die, although in the end they decide to work together.

We could easily argue that their relationship throughout the film indicates the situation in the American society during the 1960's. A country that was divided by segregation and especially in the rural areas, the voices of African-Americans could not be heard, even if they were right.

According to Elliot Stein, "Romero's use of natural locations and grainy black and white gave his gorefest the look and feel of a doc. And this was not Transylvania, but Pennsylvania—this was Middle America at war, and the zombie carnage seemed a grotesque echo of the conflict then raging in Vietnam. In this first-ever subversive horror movie, the resourceful black hero survives the zombies only to be killed by a redneck posse, and a young girl nibbles ravenously on her father's severed arm—disillusionment with government and patriarchal nuclear family is total" [1].

Apart from the representation of the American society and the fight for equal rights during the 1960's, "The Night of the Living Dead" can be also seen as a metaphor for the Vietnam war. And Ben being killed by a white man reminds the assassination of Martin Luther King.

"Battle Royale"

If the "Night of the Living Dead" achieved to understand the controversies in the American society during the 1960's, we can also claim that "Battle Royale" accomplished to communicate with a universal audience through its straightforward idea. "Battle Royale" is a 2000 Japanese film directed by Kinji Fukasaku, based on the 1999 novel of the same name by Koushun Takami. Set in a dystopian Japanese society after a recession, a totalitarian Japanese government passes an act in order to stop juvenile criminality, which has skyrocketed. According to this act, which is called "Battle Royale", a random high school class is sent to an isolated island.



Battle Royale. Kobi

Over there, the classmates have only 3 days to kill each other, until only one victor stays alive. The Army which takes control of the island, has put explosive collars to the necks of all the students. Uncooperative students or students who are in the prohibited areas (which are announced by a megaphone) die instantly. Every student is given a bag, and each bag has a different weapon or tool and students have to use it accordingly in order to survive.

"Battle Royale" is ultra-violent. It is gruesome and sadistic to an unprecedented extent. Heads that explode, blood that splatters all over the screen, laser tags and decapitations are only a few of the brutal and graphic ways that the students are killed. If "The Night of the Living Dead" had a documentary approach, "Battle Royale" clearly resembles to a TV reality show. From the woman who announces the rules of "Battle Royale", to the teacher/eye who watches over everyone, to the students who compete each other, we have all the characteristics of "Big Brother".

And it is essential that we focus on the teacher. Kitano is a teacher who is disappointed by the fact that almost nobody attends to his classes and decides to retire after being stabbed by a student while at school.



One year later, he becomes head of the "Battle Royale" act, in order to stop the crimes committed by the teenagers. He strongly believes that younger generation does not respect the older generations and that's why they need a strong lesson. Kitano believes in discipline, order and respect. Kitano represents the old Japan who is afraid of anything that cannot control. Takeshi Kitano, a prolific actor and filmmaker portrays Kitano, a furious teacher who has nothing to lose, as he cannot communicate anymore with his own family and seeks for revenge. But for him, it is not revenge, but order.

According to Robin Syversen, "Battle Royale victimized the students and villainized the leaders. By doing so, it pointed out that adolescent violence always has a root cause. Furthermore, Fukasaku highlighted the consequences of pushing a nation's citizens to the brink of madness. Battle Royale portrays a society that values conformity and obedience over individualism and creativity. The students in the movie are forced to compete against each other to survive, which can be seen as a metaphor for the cut-throat competition in Japanese society[2]".

"Battle Royale" demonstrates all the fears of Japanese society, especially those who come from previous generations. Fukusaku explicitly emphasizes on violence in its most splatter way in order to comment the society's faults.

Although the characters are not explored in depth, we can still understand why some students have become more violent, or more disobedient. And it is always the adults who have created problems, not the teenagers. Unfortunately, this is a vicious circle and when the teenagers become adults, they will probably follow the steps of the previous generations.

NOTES:

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2. Syversen, R. (2019). BATTLE ROYALE | REVIEW & ANALYSIS, accessed 17 January 2024, <<https://www.jcablog.com/post/battle-royale-review#viewer-d6opm>>

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