Political Utopias in Film

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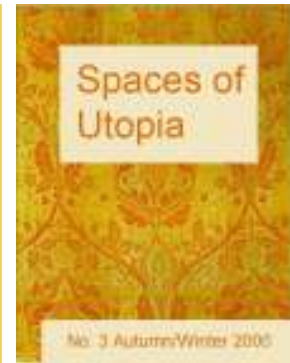
Loads of films deal with days lying far ahead of us and depict how life may evolve in the nearer or farther future. These films may be glamorous space operas, joyous games with scientific future possibilities, encounters with slimy creatures or wise civilizations from outer space or even dark forecasts of horrifying events and terrifying regimes in a faraway time that nobody wishes for. The world may be saved, reformed, unaltered, doomed, destroyed, reborn or – whatever.

All films that present us a lively vision of what the future may be like could be called utopian if a very broad sense of the term is applied. But to apply such a very broad concept of utopia does not seem to be a feasible option for the task of trying to find out something about "political utopias" in film. As always when dealing with the difficult subject of utopias there have to be at least some parameters as a guideline to limit the enormous amount of possible sources.

In the first part of this paper I will therefore develop the concept of "political utopias" which is further deployed for a more detailed analysis of some films that forms the second part of this essay. Eventually, in the last part of this paper, I will try to fit filmic utopias into the general line of development of political utopias as a whole with regard to their historical evolution and present state.

1.

Obviously, when you start thinking about looking for political utopias in films it is essential to develop a framework that offers some guidelines on what to look for in the bulk of films that present a prospect of the future. A rewarding approach for a thorough analysis of formally very different sources is the concept of "political utopias" originally developed by Richard Saage around fifteen years ago. Even though it has originally been designed for the analysis of written texts it can also be adapted to new sets of source material like moving pictures (Tietgen 2005: 29).

According to Saage, a political utopia is a fictitious outline of an ideal commonwealth characterized by its distinctive criticism of reality, its rational and comprehensible design, its claim of being universally applicable and its commitment to the future. Moreover, for a political utopia it is requisite that the political system as well as the social mechanisms and workings of the depicted alternative society be discernable in some detail. For a text or a film to be called a political utopia it must present a comprehensive draft of an alternative society to the recipient. The reader or the audience must be given detailed information on the political system, the economy, science, religion, art and education in utopia (Saage 1991: 3).

Clearly, such a definition dissociates itself from the philosophical tradition of concepts of utopia linked with the names of authors such as Gustav Landauer (Landauer 1974), Karl Mannheim (Mannheim 1965) and Ernst Bloch (Bloch 1993) that distinguish utopian texts and movements from others by putting the stress on the intentions an author or political activist pursues with his texts and actions.

As long as the above-mentioned criteria are recognizable, a political utopia can thus be incorporated into formally very different works. It can, for example, take the form of a theoretical treatise or a novel, it might be outlined within a fantastic voyage or a TV-series. With the stress on the existence of a comprehensive design of the whole of a society as a prerequisite for a political utopia, filmic versions of a better future can enter the analytical focus in just the same way as written texts do. Even other works usually not mentioned in discourses on utopian thinking and its implications for political theory like

computer games or radio plays may then be considered as well as new sources for further research. Furthermore, and very importantly, a political utopia can be the description of a supposedly perfect society, but just as well an account of the worst imaginable world, hence, a negative utopia or dystopia.

2.

As film is a medium that was invented only 110 years ago, the filmic utopias happen to be coming up at a time when utopian thinking has long left the phase of utopias of space behind and utopias of time are the predominant form of political utopias. Moreover, they enter the screen at a time where the absolute optimism shown by most utopian writers during the age of industrialization has already become questionable. Whereas utopian thinkers like Saint-Simon, Fourier, Cabet or Owen considered their ideas as being the analogy to scientific laws of nature in the socio-political sphere that only need to be globally accepted and implemented, the atmosphere for utopian thinking had changed significantly by the time film was invented. In the first decades of the cinematic age the continuing poverty of the lower classes, the First World War and totalitarian hopes and fears left their marks on utopian thinking as a whole as well as on the first filmic political utopias.

The first political utopia in film is a real classic by now, namely, Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* that came to the movie theatres in 1927. Future society in *Metropolis* is characterized by its extreme class structure. The working masses are numbered and toil like slaves in the depths of the earth living in dark, standardized cave-like underground houses, whereas the upper classes live a life of luxury and leisure in the high-rise buildings of the upper city with their gardens and night-clubs.
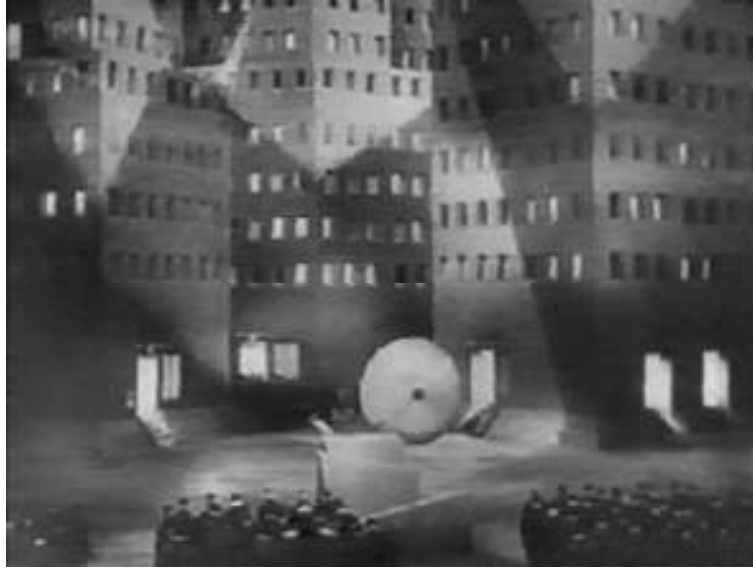
The workers stroll back to their houses like an "industrial army"
in a very low pace after a strenuous shift (*Metropolis*).

In *Metropolis* political power is performed by the industrial tycoon Joh
Fredersen, who resides in a fancy high-tech office on the top floor of a
skyscraper called "The New Babel". From a control room he rules over politics
and economy by means of secret services and technical control devices. He is,
for example, able to zoom into areas of his economic empire with a camera-
based surveillance system and can, thus, control his subordinates.

Joh Fredersen talking to the foreman of one of his factories
via a camera-based control system (*Metropolis*).

The workers have no real option to revolt as the consequences of a strike would unavoidably be disastrous: if they stopped working, the machines would generate havoc as the whole underworld would then be flooded and thereby their houses would be destroyed and people most probably get killed.

Lang's film depicts an antihumanistic and antidemocratic political system dominated by a few men that, although challenged by the workers, in the end remains nearly unaltered. Fredersen can keep his place and the envisioned marriage between hands and heart, between capitalism and workers' interests, between magic and rationalism does not change the basics of society. The political status quo remains the same as in the beginning. This is shown by the last sequence of the film where the leader of the workers meets Fredersen for a highly symbolic handshake in front of a gothic church. Despite being the supposed victors of the conflict, the workers are still shown as before, namely, as a faceless, strictly symmetrically ornamented mass. Eventually, *Metropolis* offers no real political alternative but votes for a pacified totalitarian state.

The workers, led by their foreman, walk up the steps leading to a gothic church in a strict, symmetric order. In a few seconds the supposed reconciliation between capitalism and the workers' interests is taking place (*Metropolis*).

The same could be said about the British film *Things to Come* from 1936, a film directed by William Cameron Menzies that is based on a script by H. G. Wells, who had a very significant influence on the political ideas presented in

the film. Besides its enthusiasm and optimism, *Things to Come* cannot be called much else than a totalitarian dystopia.

In the film the world is reborn after it was nearly destroyed in a big war and most people got killed by an epidemic. Wells'/Menzies' solution is the creation of a technocratic World State in the year 2036. Man has become a purely rational species that learned all the right lessons from history. Everybody has become a morally flawless creature that has internalized the new superior utopian order. There exists no more poverty and no illnesses. Everything is clean, ordered and pacified. Nature has been conquered by humanity and is dominated completely. Society is led by an elite of wise men whereas the rest of the population walks around the streets in uniform togas looking a bit bored and is presented as a floating mass that can easily be manipulated by their leaders. But, interestingly enough, the perfection is not without its critics. A famous artist tries to persuade the masses to revolt and to put an end to the prevailing ideology of progress.

The artists' speech is brought to the inhabitants as a live transmission (*Things to Come*).

The conflict centres around the question whether a first journey to the stars shall be undertaken or not, whether humanity should journey into space in the name of science and technology or be content with what it achieved on earth. In the end the existing political order – what a surprise – wins in this conflict. The opinions of the critics are taken into account but are rejected as being rationally not convincing, unscientific and unreasonable.

"Which shall it be?" – Looking at the sparkling stars in the sky the political leader of the society pictured in *Things to Come* asks a rhetorical question concerning the further path of mankind (*Things to Come*).

However, even if the positive aspects just mentioned are taken into account, a static political order is depicted and further developments are only to be wished for in the sphere of science and technological inventions. Political and social developments are supposed to have reached their final form and are therefore supposed to come to a halt. Moreover, an air of repression remains the predominant political feature of the film. Not only do the masses seem to be easily manipulated but also controllable by the elites. Architecture and technological means help the leaders to keep their people on the one and only, unquestionable utopian track.

Both *Metropolis* and *Things to Come* are examples of political utopias that present ideal commonwealths that have to be understood as the final point of human evolution concerning social and political matters. But, although they are intended as positive visions by their creators, they have a very dark edge to them as well. In the end an atmosphere of sterile perfection, fear, subjugation and definitely very little fun for the inhabitants of the ideal cities is created.

The same could be said not only for most of the filmic political utopias from the time of the so-called "Cold War". Only now nearly always filmmakers clearly opt for the creation of horrifying negative utopias.

Typical films of this time include François Truffaut's *Fahrenheit 451* (1965), the science fiction classics *Soylent Green* (Fleischer 1973) and *Logan's Run* (Anderson 1976), or Jean-Luc Godard's *Alphaville* and George Lucas' *THX 1138*, two aesthetically very interesting films to which I'd like to turn now in some more detail.

Alphaville, from the year 1965, is a film that does not fit clearly into any genre. It is a highly original mixture of science fiction, spy movie, melodrama, film noir and comic strip. The film is an accumulation of references to other films and literary works, and is both a trivial story and a serious political essay.

In the film, secret agent Lemmy Caution is sent to Alphaville, the capital of a totalitarian state, in order to find out something about his predecessors as spies there. He encounters a dystopian world run by an omnipotent electronic brain called Alpha 60 and his inventor, the scientist Vonbraun. Everybody living in Alphaville is constantly under surveillance by means of cameras, radio-based apparatuses and an army of secret service agents. The central computer always knows where a person is and what he or she does. Every citizen has an individual number tattooed on the skin which instantly reminds the viewer of concentration camp inmates.

A tattooed registration number (*Alphaville*).

The basic political guideline in *Alphaville* is the idea of the existence of a mathematically calculable one and only human rationality, that can be established by electronic operations if it is not hampered by irrational human behaviour. For this reason, emotions are banned, people are sedated with pills

and politically incorrect words that might pose a threat to the stability of the social order are erased from the dictionary called the "Bible" that is published daily. Every sort of deviant behaviour or thoughts is brutally fought against. Persons who do not apply to the rules or who show signs of emotion are persecuted, re-educated and, if this does not help, driven into suicide or executed.

A dissident is executed in a swimming pool. On the left a row of convicted people, who will be the next victims, can be seen. From a gallery (top right), the leaders of Alphaville watch the scene that is staged like an entertaining show (*Alphaville*).

But in the end there is hope for Alphaville and the world as a whole. Our hero, Lemmy, re-introduces emotionality and moral categories to Alphaville. While being interrogated by Alpha 60, he manages to puzzle the computer with paradoxes to such an extent that in the end it collapses and destroys itself because it is unable to find a correct answer. Only those inhabitants of Alphaville who retained a residue of human feelings and behaviour survive, whilst everybody else who already got inhuman dies.

Interestingly, Godard does not opt for any political side of the opponents in the Cold War with his film. He is more concerned with tendencies that are inherent in both forms of political systems and his political statement is a critique of modernization and technical progress in general. Unfortunately, the film ends with the destruction of Alpha 60 and leaves the audience alone with the question what a positive alternative could be like in detail and what new commonwealth will be created in Alphaville in the future.

Very much the same applies to George Lucas' *THX 1138* from 1971. Again, the audience encounters a society where every human being has lost his or her individuality and has become a small part of the purely rational machine-like state that is electronically calculated and planned on the basis of efficient economic cost-benefit relations. Uniform clothes and haircuts, numbers instead of names (THX 1138 being our hero) and the denial of all human emotions characterize this subterranean urban society. Cameras control life and there exists absolutely no privacy. Sex has become a criminal act, family structures are abolished, problems are dealt with by swallowing pills and religion purely aims at stabilizing the system which leaves absolutely no possibilities for political participation. The state itself remains faceless but is hierarchically organized, even though we do not see the actual leaders, who must be a kind of purely administrative elite (Lucas / Murch n.d.).

Again, like Godard in *Alphaville*, Lucas' criticism aims at both systems – capitalism and communism. He shows a totalitarian planned state based on a rigid market economy. And, again, the recurrence of emotions, especially love, is the key to overcome the dystopian state. Our hero revolts, gets caught, tortured and put into a prison that is a truly Orwellian "place without darkness". It is a horrifying means of reducing individuality to a minimum: in a constantly lit white room the inmates wear white clothes and become nearly invisible, leaving their shaved heads, naked hands and feet to an abstract, dislocated form of life on their own.

Inmates of the constantly lit white prison (*THX 1138*).

All communication runs into dead-ends there as well. Nevertheless, THX 1138, with his willpower and the help of a hologram, succeeds in escaping, but, in the end, only because his hunt has reached the limit of the financial budget that has been allocated to this purpose by the authorities and so his hunters are ordered to stop chasing him shortly before they catch him!

Like in the case of *Alphaville*, the end is rather disappointing as the positive vision remains too vague. THX 1138 reaches the top of the earth and sees nothing more than a burning, setting sun. If there is anything else out there, any utopia, other dystopias or sheer nothingness, remains unclear. The fact that the sun is not only setting but is characterized by its immense heat and that the music accompanying the scene is a sequence from the *St. Matthew Passion* by Johann Sebastian Bach, moreover, does not suggest that there is much hope for mankind.

But, fortunately, there are also at least some films that portray a positive political utopia. Two examples for this category are Roger Corman's *Gas-s-s-s! Or: It Became Necessary to Destroy the World in Order to Save It*, from 1970, and Alain Tanner's *Jonas Qui Aura 25 Ans en L'An 2000* [Jonas who will be 25 in the year 2000)], from 1976.[1]

Corman, a master in shooting cheap horror and sci-fi B-movies, is much less known for his social criticism in some of his films from the late 1960s and early 70s. His film *Gas-s-s-s! Or: It Became Necessary to Destroy the World in Order to Save It*, as he characterized it himself, is the story of a "band of roaming hippies looking for utopia" (Corman / Jerome 1998: 155). The plot of the movie is pretty simple: due to a military accident a gas is set free in the United States that kills everybody over 25 years of age. This strange incident leaves the young generation with the chance and burden to create one or many new societies. A young couple, disappointed by the new reactionary structures that begin to take shape in their hometown, sets out on a trip looking for a "groovy old pueblo in Mexico" of which they have heard that a new utopian way of living is trying to be established there. On their way they pass through several places and thereby encounter different new forms of socio-political orders that have spread up in the aftermath of the disastrous events. In one town the local football team established a violent fascist terror-regime. In another place a

parody of the old order formed itself, dominated by a bunch of pacified Hell's Angels driving golf-carts and talking like politicians. In the end the couple reaches the pueblo. Here we find a sort of rural anarchist society with a grassroots democracy, no violence, no police and an eco-friendly barter economy. Technology and science are, nevertheless, not condemned, but seen as helpful means if used for a humane end. Also no divisions between the sexes, different ethnic groups or classes exist any longer.

But soon after its establishment this young society is challenged by the threat of the violent football gang we encountered earlier in the film that wants to rob them of their supplies. Even though they are seriously in danger, the hippies do not fall back into violent behaviour in order to protect themselves. In a meeting of all members of their community in which even children are allowed to raise their voices they discuss their situation and decide not to revert to military options. They start a peaceful dialogue and eventually convince the footballers to join their non-violent society. By this the young utopian blossom steps into a first phase of enlargement and stabilization. Other people join the experiment and the film ends with a big party of all film characters. The new order is definitely not perfect yet but it is a promising first step on the road to utopia. A road that might be infinitely long and winding but still represents the best imaginable way for politics today.

The "Oracle" to which the protagonists try to resort in their search for truth during their journey to the pueblo underlines the unfinished and fragile status of the envisioned utopian experiment. They are hoping for definite answers, but the oracle offers them the opposite and just responds:
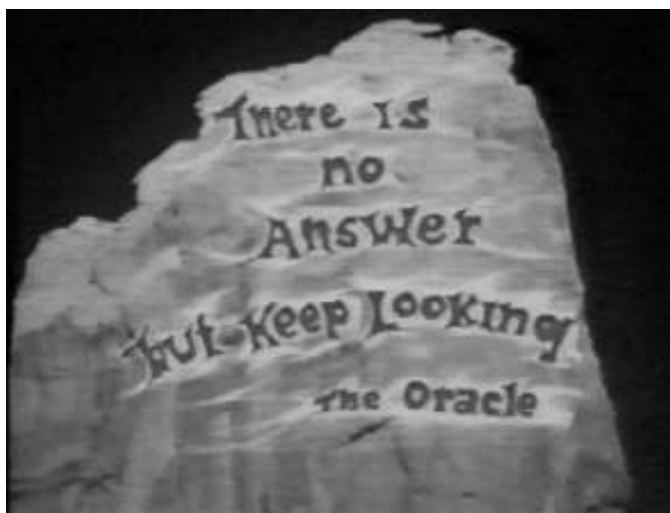
The oracle's message in Corman's utopia (*Gas-s-s-s!*).

The same unfinished utopian perspective is offered by Tanner's film *Jonas Qui Aura 25 Ans en L'An 2000*, the most successful Swiss movie ever made. The film tells the story of eight characters looking for a new way of living beyond capitalism. Whereas *Gas-s-s-s!* is a satire, *Jonas* is a serious political essay without being an abstract avant-garde film. It is an entertaining film but all the same a call to act now and to start trying alternatives today despite the massive obstacles of the surrounding political circumstances in the real world.

Each of the protagonists has had bad experiences with the prevailing capitalist order. They meet by coincidence and during the film develop into a small community experimenting with an alternative political model and lifestyle on a farm outside Geneva. It is based on a holistic overall approach including the principles of self-determined work, solidarity, grassroots democracy, organic production and equality between the sexes. The end of the film is bitter-sweet: the utopian experiment is only partly stable and compromises with the imperfect political order of mid-seventies Switzerland have to be made in order to keep the experiment at least partly alive. The important point is that the experiment is not given up completely. Eventually, hope remains that better times for utopia are in store if more courageous people realise that they are able to change history by their own political actions.[2]

3.

I would now like to sum up the results and try to integrate them into the history of the development of political utopias as a whole during, roughly, the last century.

The first political utopias in film date from the time between the two world wars. They show many resemblances to written utopias like the famous ones of that time by Zamyatin, Huxley or, later on, Orwell. Thus they fit well into the dystopian tradition established since the 1920s without offering important new elements. The filmic dystopias from the 1960s and 70s in turn show similarities with written utopias but are also examples of a transitional phase in utopian thinking. As they date from a time when the fictional dystopia was already well established, they are formally not very original but they add some new topics that became prevalent in the contemporary positive utopias, namely, criticism concerning the relationship between man and nature, with special regard to nuclear power, genetic engineering, computerization and ecological problems. Furthermore, they quite often succeed in not taking sides with either communism or capitalism but raise their voices against the dangers that might lead to a degenerated and perverted political system in general. In doing so they not only have a warning function but are also a call for political action.

On the other hand, their positive outlooks offer some, if only very vague, hints that show analogies with predominant contemporary, positively utopian patterns. Especially a tendency towards decentralised, anarchist, peaceful and free socio-political arrangements can be stated.

In films and books of the last decades positive political utopias have become self-reflexive and open to different outcomes in the future. This "self-reflexive turn" has made them dynamic and open towards a history in the future. The utopian societies depicted are not the end of history like they were in most older utopias and, therefore, they do not have to be perfect yet. By this the older need to stabilize the perfect orders, to create a sort of *perpetuum mobile* that is *de facto* a socio-political *perpetuum immobile* has become unnecessary. Since they do not tend to employ terrible methods to ensure the further existence of the utopian society, they could be called "post-totalitarian".

The nation state is always condemned as being an outdated, wrong and ineffective construction. As an alternative authors and filmmakers opt for rather anarchistic political systems. This can be said of the filmic examples mentioned above but it is also true of important written political utopias like Huxley's *Island* (1962), Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (2000) or Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1996). As a whole these anarchist utopias stand in the much older tradition of anarchist political utopias related with the works of de Foigny, Diderot and Morris.

Moreover, political utopias of the last decades, both written and filmic, are less concerned with time and return to the form of utopias of space. By doing this they offer a perspective to start working on utopia now, to struggle for the most perfect society within the existing structures in order to overcome them – here, and everywhere else. For in all cases some sort of federal, but decentralised global political arrangement is envisioned or remains the only logical consequence of the utopian provisions.

All contemporary political utopias are a sort of appeal to the reader or viewer to think about utopian alternatives now, to get up and fight for utopia in order to overcome our everyday dystopias. They aim at mobilizing the recipients for political action. As the hologram in *THX 1138* answers the question about where the exit from the white-out hell of prison is, pointing his finger at the audience: "That's the way out!"

"That's the way out!" (*THX 1138*).

Notes

[1] Both films do not clearly fit into the category of "science fiction" but are good examples for the fact that political utopias need not be incorporated into a science fiction-film or -text. Moreover, a couple of differences between "political utopias" and science fiction can be established:

1. technical solutions to varying problems are not an end in themselves in political utopias but are only devised in order to fulfil a social purpose;
2. political utopias are not concerned with extrapolations, prognoses or even calculations of their probability to be realised but offer a solely theoretical approach by means of a conceivable alternative;
3. political utopias are always anthropocentric;
4. they always offer an alternative for society as a whole, whereas science fiction need not provide this;
5. a political utopia doesn't have to be presented within a fictional text (Saage 1997: 48; Tietgen 2005: 35).

[2] In much the same way the two big science fiction TV-series *Star Trek* and *Babylon 5* offer a quite similar political perspective. For a discussion of these two, see Tietgen 2005: 271.

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