

The Tunnel at the End of the Light: The Possibilities of Utopian Narratives in SF

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It is easier for most people to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism – Frederic Jameson

You lot, you spend all your time thinking about dying, like you're gonna get killed by eggs, or beef, or global warming, or asteroids. But you never take time to imagine the impossible. Like maybe you survive. - The 9th Doctor

'A map of the world that did not show utopia,' said Oscar Wilde, 'would not be worth consulting.' I used to adore that phrase, but now reflect more upon the shipwrecks and prison islands to which the quest has led. - Christopher Hitchens

For my graduation project I adapted a short story by the popular science fiction author Ken MacLeod. Mr. MacLeod works primarily within a few subgenres of science fiction in which I am interested. Namely, social-science fiction, libertarian science fiction and what is generally called “hard” science fiction. Several of his novels, as well as those of others within the above subgenres, have always struck me as material worthy of cinematic treatment. However, in spite of the proliferation of science-fiction (hereafter SF) cinema since the industry-reorienting box-office success of *Star Wars*, typically these subgenres are ignored or passed over for adaptations into film.

My goal for this project was to 'cut my teeth' on a story within the subgenre and thus encounter some of the problems and complexities of adapting such works into films. Through this process I hoped to gain a better understanding of the challenges involved in bringing highly conceptual literary material to a visual medium, broaden my filmmaking skills and technique, and to learn more about the particular differences between literature and film. This process has raised a number of questions for me that I'd like to explore in this essay. Although the questions are numerous and each will likely take years of study to illuminate in significant depth, I'd like to use this space to make a preliminary effort to assay them and pinpoint areas for further enquiry.

The adapted short story by Ken MacLeod is titled *The Surface of Last Scattering* and the film adaptation is called *Scattered*. Both the story and the film center on a meeting between a father and son in the near future, the year 2030. The father, Keith, has just been released from prison after a 15 year sentence. Before his incarceration, Keith was a biogeneticist. He was working at a lab which created a genetically modified fungus to recycle paper. The fungus escaped the containment of the lab and spread over the entire globe destroying all of

the paper products on the planet. Keith was subsequently convicted for criminal negligence in allowing the fungus to escape. At their meeting, the son, Conal, believing in Keith's innocence and wrongful conviction, implores Keith to help with Conal's efforts to exonerate him and clear the public record. After some pressing, reluctantly Keith explains that he is in fact guilty of the crime. Keith intentionally released the fungus to destroy sacred text in hopes of destabilizing the tradition of scriptural authority which, in his view, was the foundation of a great deal of violence from nationalist and religious sectarian groups. Conal is shocked by this revelation. Upon his father's departure, Conal exposes his one remaining piece of memorabilia of his father, a laminated photo, to the fungus in the surrounding atmosphere. The photo disintegrates and disappears. His past now effectively erased, Conal is left alone to face an uncertain future.

I chose this story for several reasons both practical and artistic: The story was of a length that was appropriate for the short film format. The production elements (three actors, four locations) was within the range of the budget and time that we had available to complete the project. The core of the story is the conversation between the father and son essentially making it a performance-based piece. This was of interest to me as I wanted to build my filmmaking practice by gaining more experience directing actors and scripting dialogue. The core relationship between the father and son was one that I could relate to personally. I hoped that I could draw on my personal experiences to inform the drama with some emotional and psychological truth. Lastly, it dealt with the thematic issues of how we relate to our history and conceive of our future. These thematic issues are at the heart of the reason that I would like to work in the above-mentioned genres of science fiction cinema.

What is interesting about these genres? Why would someone want to tell these sorts of stories?

Growing up in the 80's I also was shaped by a steady diet of SF cinema. I did not know it then, but the genre was experiencing a resurgence of mainstream and critical acceptance. I thrilled to these adventures and was also inspired to think and question by their subtexts. I watched the rebels take on the Empire not two years after I was born and remember the event clearly. I saw a man question his own humanity within the context of an inhumane world in *Blade Runner*. A misfit teenager helped his bullied father with science in *Back to the Future*. I saw a child, who understood the common bond living beings share, rescue an alien from faceless instrumentalizing institutions in *E.T.* When I was old enough to handle the scares, I saw the working class crew of the *Nostramo* turned into prey for profit by their unseen corporate masters in *Alien*. Although mostly shocked and amazed by the savage violence, even the campy and outrageous social satire of *Robocop* wasn't lost on me at the time. There were plenty of other great SF gems of this period, in the cinemas and on television, high-quality and pulp, that I watched endlessly. I probably wasn't aware of it in the moment, but I was almost certainly deeply shaped by these stories and their subtextual commentary on society and politics. In short, it was demonstrated to me very early on of Science Fiction's unique potential to comment on the human condition, critique society and offer compelling visions of possible worlds.

Since this 80's-era resurgence, the genre has become a well-established part of the cultural mainstream. Having left its 50's B-movie origins behind, SF content is a mainstay of any release schedule. SF and Fantasy products continue to rake in billions of dollars annually. Although this phenomenon is much to the chagrin of some critics who lament the passing of

adult fare out of the multiplex, there are by now also numerous academic journals that give SF cultural output considered treatment, interpreting and debating various artifacts according to one theoretical framework or another.

The literary side of the genre is also flourishing in the early 20th Century, especially in the UK. Some commentators (Jeffries, 2005) have hailed UK SF as going through a Golden Age. Aficionados of literature have, sometimes grudgingly, acknowledged that the genre at its best is at the forefront of the arts, presenting us with some of the most innovative and imaginative literature being published. Even established and respected authors of literary fiction have made forays into the genre. (Atwood, 2011)

Taking a step out of SF and looking at the world at large: the era of my young adulthood was the era following the fall of the Berlin Wall and, in the West at least, the capitalist model of social relations emerging unchallenged and proclaiming itself triumphant. There was no end of self-congratulatory literature on the subject. Francis Fukuyama wrote an influential book proclaiming an end to history. Margaret Thatcher famously declared that “there is no alternative” to liberal democratic capitalism.

As literary theorist Frederic Jameson notes:

...late capitalism seems to have no natural enemies (the religious fundamentalisms which resist American or Western imperialisms having by no means endorsed anti-capitalist positions). Yet it is not only the invincible universality of capitalism which is at issue: tirelessly undoing all the social gains made since the inception of the socialist and communist movements, repealing all the welfare measures, the safety net, the right to unionization, industrial and ecological regulatory laws, offering to privatize pensions and indeed to dismantle whatever stands in the way of the free market all over the world. What is crippling is not the presence of an enemy but rather the universal belief, not only that this tendency is irreversible, but that the historic alternatives to capitalism have been proven unviable and impossible, and that no other socio-economic system is conceivable, let alone practically available. (Jameson, 2005)

Or as Ken MacLeod, author of the story upon which my film is based, put it:

Some people proclaimed that this collapse meant all sorts of new and exciting possibilities lay before us: the peace dividend, the end of history, the new economy. These were illusions, and are now known to be illusions. If modernism fell with the Berlin Wall, postmodernism fell with the Twin Towers. The future, as far as we can see it now, means new wars, new slumps and new terrors. (MacLeod, 2003)

Indeed, some of this pessimism, as it seemed to me a few years ago, was clearly evident in pop culture and in cinematic SF in particular. Although dating back as far as 1927 with Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* and John Blystone's *The Last Man on Earth*, dystopian and apocalyptic narratives in SF cinema seemed to proliferate at the turn of the 21st Century, especially apocalyptic ones. A search of IMDB using the keyword “dystopia” turns up 837 results in all media forms (films, tv, video games), of which only 282 were produced before the end of the Cold War, a 2:1 ratio. “Apocalypse” yields 1322 titles, only 82 made before 1989 for a ratio of 16:1. For “post-apocalypse” the ratio is 3:1 with 1816 titles, 496 of which were made before 1989. (IMDB, 2013)

To be sure, there was simply a lot more media being produced in the post-Cold War period.

Before 1989 there were 665,406 titles released, whereas after that date there were 1.6 million, two and a half times as many! Thus in the years before 1989 'apocalypse' narratives were 0.0001% of what we were watching. After that date, they were 0.0008%, an 800% increase. Clearly this is still a miniscule fraction of all televisual media produced. Nevertheless we've seen 2.5 times more films produced in the post-Cold War period, but 8 times more 'apocalyptic' films. To the extent that we looked to the future, we were clearly spending a lot more time imagining the end of the world. Although it turns out we don't look into the future terribly much. Searching every title in IMDB for the keywords 'future' and 'futuristic' only yields 4433 and 1856 titles respectively. 'Utopia' has a negligible 80 titles in all film history, and some of them are dystopian stories. 'Vision-of-utopia' has one title. A mere 0.02% of all content listed on the site falls into the genre category of Science Fiction.

IMDB is admittedly a very imperfect measure. Films can be mistagged, tags can overlap, keyword designation is subjective, single TV episodes count as a single title, and the database is mostly made up of North American and European content thus overlooking huge sections of the globe. Even so, I think it is safe to say that since the end of the Cold War, we've seen an increase in dystopian and apocalyptic narratives. Even up to this year, Empire Magazine groups the current crop of "must-see" 2013 SF films under the banner of apocalypse films, and lists 11 large studio projects to be released including *Pacific Rim*, *Star Trek*, *World War Z*, and *After Earth*. (Empire, 2013)

There were other indications within the narrative arts of a turn toward seeing the triumph of the liberal capitalist project, not reason for hope and progress, but despair and resignation. *The Sopranos* (1999) changed the form of narrative television drastically and has been universally praised by critics and audiences. It isn't hard to read a strong critique of the utopian ideal of suburban American life (i.e. the American Dream) within the text of the show. To be sure, critiques of middle-class life and its associated institutions are a recurring theme in American storytelling, from *Long Days Journey Into Night* and *Death of a Salesman*, to *The Godfather* and countless others. However it seems significant that *The Sopranos* struck such a chord with audiences at the time.

Following *The Sopranos* audiences and critics had high praise for shows that explored a sense of malaise in American life and little hope for an exit. *Dexter* showed us a cop, typically a savior and protector figure, who also had a double-life as a serial killer. *Mad Men* features a protagonist who needs to assume a false identity to achieve The American Dream only to find his victory over social immobility utterly pyrrhic. *Boardwalk Empire* continues in the gangsterous vein of *The Sopranos* and is not subtle about its view of endemic institutional corruption. *Breaking Bad* features a "Mr. Chips", figure who has played by the rules his entire life and found that the only way he can maintain his hold on middle class respectability and basic material security is to turn to crime. Lastly, the monumental show *The Wire* is probably the best dramatization in television history of the radical insight that the problems that plague contemporary life are systemic and structural and not simply a result of individual moral failings or personal choice. The show's creators have openly noted that Greek Tragedy was a major influence on their work, and indeed doom is the order of the day on *The Wire*. All of the characters, whatever their personal morality or moral character, are caught up in the institutional web that creates bad incentives and worse choices. Echoing this thematic thread is MacLeod again:

What makes [contemplation of the future] worse is that hardly anybody has confidence in

human potential, in our capacity to take charge of events; hardly anybody believes that while we may not be able to choose our past, we can still choose our future. We're all victims of unmasterable forces, whether they are our genes, or our childhood experiences, or our addictions and compulsions, or the world market.

Frederic Jameson, writing as early as 1982, puts the problem slightly differently:

...I think it would be better to characterize all this in terms of History, a History that we cannot imagine except as ending, and whose future seems to be nothing but a monotonous repetition of what is already here. The problem is then how to locate radical difference; how to jumpstart the sense of history so that it begins again to transmit feeble signals of time, of otherness, of change, of Utopia. The problem to be solved is that of breaking out of the windless present of the postmodern back into real historical time, and a history made by human beings.

So what is to be done? How can one break out of 'the windless present' and begin to think about a human future? How can we create a discussion of the kind of world we'd like to have instead of merely accepting the world we have as 'the least worst' possible world? And can this be done by use of the narrative arts?

In recent years, some artists and intellectuals have also concurred that such a problem exists and have thought that the answer may lie in a revival of what could loosely be called 'the spirit of utopia'. Interestingly, many of them are also using Science Fiction as the genre of choice to communicate their ideas.

For example, and most prominently, SF author Neal Stephenson has started Project Heiroglyph to create science fiction stories that inspire new technologies (Newitz, 2012). It is his view that the larger culture and the genre specifically suffer from 'innovation starvation' and have lost a sense of optimism and capacity about 'big projects' such as manned space travel. He calls for a return to the 'Golden Age' of SF literature, roughly the decade of the 1940's, when techno-optimism was the norm. This is clearly a form of the utopian spirit. Although techno-utopianism tends to overlook the political-economic structural failures that are currently inhibiting the kinds of projects Stephenson dreams of, it is certainly a step away from the dystopianism that has recently characterized the genre.

Fine artists in the UK such as Shezad Dawood, with his multi-media installation project and film *Piercing Brightness*, and the Otolith Group have also begun to work on project that attempt to revive a spirit of utopia in their work (Fitch, 2012). In an interview, Dawood echoed the sentiment outlined above as follows:

Sci-fi, [can be seen] in terms of the global narrative around migration, collective inheritance, possible utopian paradigms... if you look at the state of the Booker prize and others these days, the only really serious fiction that's been produced since the 60's and 70's has been in Science Fiction. I think of people like Samuel Delany's *Dahlgren*...it's really quite radical. I suppose in Sci-Fi, you could say graphic novels as well, that's where the real subversion seems to take place, the real *détournement* of the next generations. Which I think is very important in a society that speaks globalization while enforcing borders and reducing not just our cinema options, but our shopping options. The very fact of some mode or space of resistance is more urgent than ever. And I think that's where Science Fiction and graphic novels can create alternate spaces for thinking. Whether it's Foucault or Philip K. Dick, it's creating a space for free thinking.

There seem to be more and more artists working in Science Fiction. I'm seeing more and more artists work where Science Fiction and Utopian paradigms is coming to play a more important part...With Sci-Fi and utopian/dystopian paradigms playing a greater part in contemporary art, you just have to look at the world around us. Whether it's the Arab Spring or Europe crashing down, we're living in a state of disarray where everything we've been told is quite patently false. We should've woken up and smelled the coffee quite sooner really. Ok, let's do it now, but that's obviously going to have a knock-on effect through the culture at large. Even through the mass-market. You're seeing more edgy, brutal work. I think, "Ok, that's fine, but what do we think past that?" How do we look at something that takes a more long-term gamble. We seem to be suffering the consequences of multiple short-term gambits...My work isn't afraid to think in a longer term way and take on certain ideas of utopianism. (Fitch, 2012)

Ben Rivers, Jeremy Deller, Emily Wardill are also working in this vein. Dawood, Rivers and Wardill are also fine-art (i.e. non-narrative) filmmakers. Some documentary filmmakers have also begun to broach the topic. Maya Borg's *Future My Love* and Sam Green's *Utopia in Four Movements* take a look at actual present-day utopians in their documentaries.

So what then are some strategies for reviving the 'spirit of utopia' in the narrative arts? And is this even possible? Is there anything about narrative that would be inherently constraining to a project of reviving a 'spirit of utopia'? And how do SF narratives speak to these questions specifically?

As it turns out, there has been some thinking done on this topic. The most notable work, indeed the only work I could find that explicitly addresses the question, is Fredric Jameson's *Archaeologies of the Future* in which he explores the relationship of Science Fiction literature to utopian thinking. What follows is an attempt to unpack and clarify his argument here, particularly in the 1982 essay *Progress versus Utopia, or, Can We Imagine the Future?*

First, it should be clear enough that Jameson is sympathetic to the project of reviving a spirit of utopia. In an interview with Joshua Glenn, he claims that the current enfeeblement of this spirit "saps our political options and tends to leave us all in the helpless position of passive accomplices and impotent handwringers". The interviewer goes on:

The question, for thinkers like [Jameson], is how to revive the spirit of utopia...without repeating the errors of what Jacoby has dubbed "blueprint utopianism," that is, a tendency to map out utopian society in minute detail. How to avoid, as Jameson puts it, effectively "colonizing the future"?

Is the thought of a non-capitalist utopia even possible after Stalinism, after decades of anticommunist polemic on the part of brilliant and morally engaged intellectuals? (Glenn, 2005)

Jameson does think it is possible, but as above only in certain forms or modes. Simply representing one's idea of utopia in a narrative, Jameson claims, is not what is wanted. Primarily because revolutionary communist utopianism was wrecked on the shoals of the Soviet State-Communist reality. After the horrors of Stalinism and the socio-economic implosion of the Soviet Union, it was no longer possible to credibly represent a non-capitalist utopia in art. Dreaming of a better world had become dangerous. Glenn refers to the seminal 20th Century intellectuals in the anti-utopian tradition: Arendt, Popper, Niebuhr. Their

influence is quite evidently dominant today and echoed in the relatively recent sentiment of Christopher Hitchens expressed in the epigram at the top of this essay: most who read it would regard as the merest common sense or prudence.

Likewise, the techno-bureaucratic utopias of men like H.G. Wells, as exemplified in films like *Things to Come*, were also impossible to view as anything but naive after the cataclysms of the early 20th Century had played out on the world stage. One idea of utopia, that the world would progress by a bureaucratically managed scientific rationalism, had been tried and found to be less progressive than previously thought. This idea is interestingly at the core of one view of what SF literature does and how it works: that SF plausibly extrapolates possible futures from present reality. Jameson:

The common-sense position on the anticipatory nature of SF as a genre is what we would call a *representational* one. These narratives are evidently for the most part not modernizing, not reflexive and self-undermining and deconstructing affairs. They go about their business with the full baggage and paraphernalia of a conventional realism, with this one difference: that the full “presence” – the settings and actions to be “rendered” – are the merely possible and conceivable ones of a near or far future. Whence the canonical defense of the genre: in a moment in which technological change has reached a dizzying tempo, in which so-called “future shock” is a daily experience, such narratives have the social function of accustoming their readers to rapid innovation, of preparing our consciousness and our habits for the otherwise demoralizing impact of change itself. They train our organisms to expect the unexpected and thereby insulate us ... (Jameson, 1982)

However Jameson does not accept this view of SF:

If I cannot accept this account of SF, it is at least in part because it seems to me that, for all kinds of reasons, we no longer entertain such visions of wonder-working, properly “science-fictional” futures of technological automation. These visions are themselves now historical and dated – streamlined cities of the future on peeling murals – while our lived experience of our greatest metropolises is one of urban decay and blight. That particular Utopian future has in other words turned out to have been merely the future of one moment of what is now our own past. (Jameson, 1982)

SF author and critic China Mieville supplies one of the reasons for this:

You might think that in the aftermath of two world wars, a holocaust that deployed both hard and social sciences to mass-industrial slaughter, an epoch that shattered the reformist daydreams based on the chugging on of bureaucratic rationality, the upheavals of the avant-garde modernisms precisely in repudiation of this comprador species of rationalism and the pulp-fantastic wings of that modernism, you might think that you would see a certain caution about claims of the self-evident progressiveness of self-styled rationalism. (Mieville, 2009)

There are other reasons, beyond overcoming historically grounded skepticism, why simply representing a utopia won't serve to revive the utopian spirit. In early utopian literature, such as that of More and later Fourier, one was presented with an intricately worked out socio-political system. These authors had imagined the functioning of their ideal societies from the legal and economic institutions down to the minutest details of when and what people should eat, how to have sex, and the like. Given our contemporary globalized, multi-cultural, heavily mediated post-modern world, these social blueprints now appear amusingly preposterous especially at their level of detail; certainly not anything to be taken seriously as a social program. The idea that one person or small group of people are capable of conceiving an entirely new social system in all its complexity has been rendered quaint. This is what Jameson names and rejects as “blueprint utopianism”. Not only are these systems internally self-contradictory and impossible to implement without a great deal of violence, but they also

“colonize the future” as Jameson puts it. These blueprint utopias preclude innovations and solutions to social problems well in advance of their implementation in addition to restricting the free choice of the people living within them.

So if we are not simply represent utopias in art, if the art is not to be necessarily utopian in content, then is there any possibility of it being utopian at all? Jameson believes that there is such a possibility, and that this possibility is within the form of the genre itself regardless of the particular content of any SF work.

In reality, the relationship of this form of representation (SF), this specific narrative apparatus to its ostensible content – the future – has always been more complex than [simple representation]. For the apparent realism, or representationality of SF has concealed another, far more complex temporal structure: not to give us “images” of the future ...but rather to defamiliarize and restructure our experience of our own *present* and to do so in specific ways distinct from from all other forms of defamiliarization. From the great intergalactic empires of an Asimov ...[to] the conapts, autofabs, or psycho-suitcases of the universe of Philip K. Dick, all such apparently full representations function in a process of distraction and displacement.

...this discovery: that the present – in this society, and in the physical and psychic dissociation of the human subjects who in habit it – is inaccessible directly ...Elaborate strategies of indirection are therefore necessary if we are somehow to break through our ...insulation and to “experience” ...this “present”, which is after all all we have.

It is this strategy of indirection that SF now brings to bear on the ultimate object and ground of all human life, History itself. (Jameson, 1982)

In other words, SF doesn't teach us about the future, since it cannot as the future is quite obviously unknowable, but our own present. And our present is opaque to us due to the rapid changes that technological innovation, one of the defining features of the dynamism of capitalism, brings about.

This idea has been expressed elsewhere by SF authors and theorists. Warren Ellis, a SF writer of some reknown, has claimed that we live in “the Science Fiction condition”, a situation in which all past futures have now materialized and the most fantastic situations, such as instantaneous global communication, are now considered normal and mundane. So mundane that we cannot even see it for what it is (Ellis, 2012). Ellis cites cultural theorist Marshall McLuhan who noted that “we look at the present through a rear-view mirror. We march backwards into the future.” Essentially pointing out that because of the rapidity of change, the present we think is the present is already long past. Another well-known SF author, Kim Stanley Robinson is also a proponent of this view. Asserting that SF is the only literature that can actually be about the present. (Flood, 2009)

This sort of delayed understanding of our present is indeed partly due to the pace of technological innovation, but also due to the unevenness of the spread of innovation. SF writer William Gibson has famously said that “the future is already here, it is just unevenly distributed.” Some individuals and societies are early-adopters of technology, capitalist social relations and institutionalization of scientific rationalism. There is always a techno-avant-garde in some branch of science somewhere and this is variable.

Interestingly, Ellis thinks with Jameson, that SF is utopian in the sense that it is an antidote to what he calls “manufactured normalcy”. “The idea...that things are designed to activate a

psychological predisposition to believe that we're in a static and dull continuous present." Compare this observation to Jameson's earlier characterization of a "windless present" and the similarity is clear.

So how does SF teach us about History itself? Jameson continues:

I would argue, however, that the most characteristic SF does not seriously attempt to image the "real" future of our social system. Rather, its multiple mock futures serve the quite different function of transforming our own present is not the determinate past of something yet to come. It is this present moment...that upon our return from the imaginary constructs of SF is offered to us in the form of some future world's remote past, as if posthumous and as though collectively remembered.

...that all these things [of our present] are not seized, immobile forever, in some "end of history", but move steadily in time toward some unimaginable yet inevitable "real" future. SF thus enacts and enables a structurally unique "method" for apprehending the present as history, and this is so irrespective of the "pessimism" or "optimism" of the imaginary future world which is the pretext for that defamiliarization. (Jameson, 1982)

This emphasis on form over content strikes me as a remarkable insight. What Jameson appears to be saying is that to revive the 'spirit of utopia' it isn't necessary to tell utopian stories per se, but just to change our relationship with our present by seeing it as a past. The lack of a spirit of utopia is essentially a condition of alienation from our own present by not seeing it as historically contingent. When you think that what exists now is all that can possibly exist, you are fundamentally alienated from your own present, because the present is always changing. What you think is, and always will be, is entirely false because of the consistency of change. So to think that we live at "the end of history" and that "there is no alternative" is to live completely disconnected from your own lived experience. SF reconnects us to that lived experience by transporting us to the future, any future, so that we can see and connect to our own present more clearly. Presumably once we are thus re-connected, our sense of agency will be invigorated. Perhaps such an exercise can take us out of the position of "passive accomplices and impotent handwringers" (Glenn, 2005).

Or perhaps not. On the one hand Jameson's point makes a good deal of sense. It is a commonplace to view dystopian narratives as cautionary tales. To read Orwell's *1984*, for example, not as an attempt to actually predict the future, but to follow certain trends in contemporary society through to an extreme conclusion and thus horrify the audience into vigilance against the trend. The point of the work is to "succeed by failure" as Jameson puts it. By imagining the worst-case scenario we can better secure ourselves against it.

But what of apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic scenarios? Typically these narratives show the total breakdown of contemporary society and more often that not what results, in the imaginations of the writers, is a war of all against all, social chaos. It seems to me that these stories reiterate the foundational mythos of our current social order first outlined by Hobbes: hierarchy, authority and social control by a minority are necessary to prevent a reversion to a state of nature of perpetual warfare. Of course this view of the humanity's 'state of nature' has been extensively debunked, but do not such narratives enable it to persist? Are these not stories that reinforce our fears about alternatives by presenting any alternative as much more undesirable than the situation we live in currently? Or indeed doesn't presenting the only alternative as complete collapse, as opposed to transformation, not simply frighten people into implied consent?

Jameson appears to respond to this objection in two ways. First, he argues that these types of narrative reveal a deeper psychological urge and that they “ought to be interpreted as evidence of a collective desire to start over from scratch.” Glenn elaborates:

These books are more utopian, in a way, than [blueprint utopias] Jameson claims ...because the latter offer false hope that ameliorative reforms might transform society. “What utopian thought wants to make us aware of is the need for complete systemic change, change in the totality of social relations, and not just an improvement in bourgeois culture”. (Glenn, 2005)

So by enacting out our fantasies of systemic change, no matter how post-apocalyptic or dystopian, we are somehow reinvigorating the utopian impulse, or the spirit of utopia itself. We are allowing ourselves to even conceive of and acknowledge a desire for systemic change in the first place.

Secondly, he says somewhat paradoxically that the ‘deepest vocation’ of the political function of the utopian genre is to:

...bring home, in local and determinate ways and with a fullness of concrete detail, our constitutional inability to imagine Utopia itself; and this, not owing to any individual failure of imagination but as the result of the systemic, cultural and ideological closure of which we are all in one way or another prisoners. (Jameson, 1982)

So the deepest political function of the utopian genre, which by now he is presumably seeing as an Ur-genre incorporating dystopian and apocalyptic narratives, is to show us that we cannot imagine Utopia. What this does is to show us that there is an ‘outside’ to our current conceptions which would thus impel us to reach without. Initially this seems to me to be very counterintuitive. Surely if there is no exit from our current situation, this could prompt despair, paralysis, depression, and acquiescence as opposed to being invigorating. However, upon reflection I can see a certain hopeful logic to it. It reminds me of Plato’s allegory of the cave in which a single enlightened prisoner manages to unshackle himself and temporarily exit the cave. Upon returning and explaining his adventure to his fellow prisoners, they are incredulous precisely because they’d never imagined an ‘outside’. The cave presented itself as a totality. Liberation requires the realization that what was once thought of as a totality actually has boundaries and limits. Jameson is optimistic about how confronting those limits will effect an observer: “It’s only when people come to realize that there is no alternative,” he said, “that they react against it, at least in their imaginations, and try to think of alternatives.” (Glenn, 2005) Perhaps Thatcher was unwittingly sowing the seeds of an idea that would undermine her own supremacy when she proclaimed “there is no alternative”. She hoped that such a pronouncement would lead to acquiescence, but Jameson suggests that it may have given an impetus to a counter-reaction.

While I think I’m clear on the point that Jameson is making, although I must confess I’m not sure I’ve understood it entirely, I remain dubious about his assertion that form takes precedence over content and that dystopian/apocalyptic films can also serve to reinvigorate the spirit of utopia. To be fair, I’m reading from his essay of 1982 and an interview published in 2005, so perhaps he’s changed his analysis on this point. However, even within the text of the 1982 essay, Jameson praises the ‘world dissolutions’ of J.G. Ballard as “testify[ing] powerfully to the contradictions of a properly representational attempt to grasp the future directly.” And shortly following says that:

SF thus enacts and enables a structurally unique 'method' for apprehending the present as history, and this is so *irrespective* of the 'pessimism' or 'optimism' of the imaginary future world which is the pretext for that defamiliarization. The present is in fact no less a past if its destination prove to be the technological marvels of Verne or, on the contrary, the shabby and maimed automata of P.K. Dicks's near future. (Jameson, 1982)

So, again, it does seem that for Jameson the structure is primary, and primary because it demonstrates our 'incapacity to imagine the future'. But immediately following this pronouncement he notes that 'paradoxically' there's been a rediscovery of the nature of utopia as a genre in recent years citing Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*, Joanna Russ' *The Female Man*, Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*, and Samuel Delany's *Triton*. These are all novels that represent utopian societies. The one I'm most familiar with is *The Dispossessed*, which shows what Le Guin calls an 'ambiguous utopia': her imagined utopia is very flawed and she presents it as such. So I suppose it would fit into Jameson's characterization of SF that 'imagin[es] the future...through apparently full representations which prove on closer inspection to be structurally and constitutively impoverished...and to serve as unwitting and even unwilling vehicles for a meditations which...becomes transformed into a contemplation of our own absolute limits'.

Summing up then it doesn't seem to me that Jameson has offered a plausible model for reviving the spirit of utopia. While his account is interesting and could probably use further study, I still cannot quite buy the notion that simply presenting future history in and of itself, regardless of content, can provide sufficient impetus for an audience to begin to consider the possibility of a radical alterity to the current social order. Contemplating our absolute limits seems to be just as easily a predicate for recognizing those limits as absolute and thus deciding not to try to supersede them. Indeed, if the limits are truly absolute, then supercession is an exercise in futility. A revival of the utopian spirit would necessarily be anchored in the insight that the limits of ideology are precisely *not* absolute and thus susceptible to being surpassed or exceeded by human agency.

It also deserves mention here that Jameson is primarily concerned with the SF literary tradition and not SF cinema. I had hoped, in exploring his ideas, to then proceed with an inquiry into cinematic SF. It is widely acknowledged in studies of cinematic SF that it is 50 years 'behind' the literary tradition. That although adaptation of the literature into cinematic versions is frequent, SF filmmaking has not yet kept pace with the production of challenging and innovative works in the SF literary field. There are many reasons for this, which I won't get into here, but in order to parse the possibilities of adapting the great literary works of SF into cinematic variants this subject will certainly be an area for further study and reflection.

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