

Introduction

'Screening utopia in dystopian times'

Leimar Garcia-Siino and Sean Guynes

When we set out to put together this special issue on global utopian film and television a year ago, it did not occur to us how rapidly – and some might say, apocalyptically – the world would change, despite our many years in sf academia; it definitely feels like a year straight out of an overly dramatic disaster film.

2020 began with auspices of war in the Middle East as the United States ordered airstrikes against a military base near Baghdad; Iran announced it will no longer abide by the nuclear deal and five days later launched a missile strike against Iraq. Those were the first eight days of January. Meanwhile, starting in 2019, but rapidly growing into a catastrophe by January, Australian bushfires garnered the world's attention also during the first two weeks of 2020 as they grew into what is now referred to as the Black Summer. By March, the fires spread across 46 million acres, destroying ecosystems – including killing an estimated one billion animals – and displacing thousands from their homes. Then, of course, the worst pandemic in a hundred years, the novel coronavirus COVID-19 (SARS-CoV-2) began spreading around the world at the end of January. As of this writing, the US death toll has surpassed a hundred thousand, while the world is at over four hundred thousand known casualties. Worryingly, as countries consider reopening and easing down on lockdown restrictions, the beginnings of a potential second-wave are starting to be felt, with scientists warning that casualties could reach as high as two hundred thousand in the US by September 2020. This is nothing to say of the world's ongoing sociopolitical struggle with science, truth, opinion and religion; the devastating effects of late-stage capitalism and the threats of a coming recession; and the ever-looming global climate catastrophe.

2020 makes many dystopian tales seem tame by comparison. Indeed, when we began writing this introduction, protests following the murder of George Floyd and the subsequent revival of broad political investment in Black Lives Matter – as of early June, now the largest globally organised civil rights movement in history – had yet to start. Yet, arguably, visions of utopia seldom emerge during times of peacefulness and quietness. As Michael J. Griffin and Tom Moylan put

it in their introduction to *Exploring the Utopian Impulse: Essays on Utopian Thought and Practice*, ‘these dark times of closure, exploitation, privilege, and violence call out more than ever for Utopia’s transformative energy as a necessary stimulus to sociopolitical transformation’ (11).

We must at this moment make the caveat that, with this special issue, we do not seek to prescribe a single, rigid definition for ‘utopia’ (nor of sf), but have instead encouraged our contributors to consider ‘utopia’, as Lyman Tower Sargent suggests in a review in *Utopian Studies* 19.2, as ‘an “essentially contested concept” or a concept about which there is fundamental disagreement, which should signal that a writer must carefully stipulate how the concept is being used rather than assume that others will understand without further explanation’ (351). As the essays in this issue hopefully show, utopian ideologies, narratives and frameworks can be used to both reflect and reshape national, social and cultural identities, positively in some cases and negatively in others.

‘Screening Utopia in Dystopian Times’ seeks to confront a pressing problem at the intersection of media and utopian studies, a problem that in fact seems to virtually define the intersection of such studies. As early as 1982, Polish philosopher Leszek Kołakowski contended that utopian writers and thinkers had ‘lost both the intellectual support and their previous self-confidence and vigor’, pronouncing that ‘one can hardly quote an important utopia written in our epoch’ (137). Three decades later, sociologist and utopian theorist Krishan Kumar concludes that ‘the unwillingness to essay the literary utopia suggests a distinct lack of confidence in its capacity to be effective, as well as a failure of the utopian imagination’ (95). Kumar follows other historians of utopia in pinpointing the ‘social conflicts of the 1960s in Western industrial societies’, including the Hungarian and Czech suppressions in 1959 and 1968, the ‘May Events’ in Paris in 1968 and the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989 as key events in the retreat of utopia from narrative and theory (103). Unsurprisingly, this period coincided with the emergence of both neoliberalism and globalisation and witnessed the explosion of dystopian media to bestseller and blockbuster status.

However, as the essays here will demonstrate, the utopian ideal is neither exclusive to literature nor to the west, though scholarship does not seem to have entirely caught up yet. While essays in Rajagopal and Rao’s *Media and Utopia* (2016), for example, chart some of the trajectories of global utopian film, scant attention is paid to utopian film and television in the wake of the 1970s. If the state of scholarship is any indication, it would seem that the last 50 years has seen a palpable decline in the production of utopian texts in favour of bleaker, dystopian tales. And yet, it is with the increase of globalised media

and the advent of social media, as well as the increase in both the pursuit of nostalgia and the desire to escape/prevent the various incoming ecological, political and social global crises, that the past 50 years of film and television have given rise to more nuanced and critical elaborations of utopia, often in the form of political thinking.

Yet, again, though significant attention has been awarded to western utopian literature, and to a lesser extent Anglophone utopian film and television, little attention has been dedicated to the utopian currents of wider global film and television post-1968. It is well-documented that dystopian fictions, especially in the YA genre and their transmedia adaptations, succeed not only because they capture a deep symptomatic feeling of the times, but also because their angsty revolutionary protagonists embody much-needed utopian energies for revolution and change. The vast majority of these fictions, however, have been Hollywood blockbusters like *The Hunger Games* (Ross US 2012). ‘Screening Utopia in Dystopian Times’ addressed the lacuna in global perspective, though of course, in small measure, seeking to answer the question of whether utopia is dead or merely transformed, and if so into what. From Hawaii to Germany, to Hungary, to the Middle East and finally Japan, the five essays in this issue demonstrate moments of historical rupture and possibility in diverse mediascapes that allowed makers of animated television shows, made-for-television movies and low-budget indie films and studio dramas from the 1970s to 2010s to express utopian desires for political liberation from Soviet surveillance, ecological devastation, neoliberal malaise and settler colonialism. There is no guiding principle to post-68 utopias other than their wildly diverse expressions of political resistance and survivance in the face of overwhelming odds. Our contributors reveal a complex and diverse field of global utopian media that calls for our attention as scholars of genre, media and the political.

We begin chronologically with Steffen Hantke’s essay on West German film and television in the 1970s, which could not appear at a more relevant time. Hantke looks at three films that depict, respectively, an air-pollution-caused environmental crisis; the naive optimism of space exploration in the face of human-caused apocalyptic doom; and a mysterious deadly epidemic that sweeps through West Germany. Hantke explores the transition from utopian visions to pessimistic dystopia and its performative effects on viewers. Next, Daniel Panka explores the usage of utopian tropes in the Hungarian children’s animated show *The Mézga Family* (1969–78) produced under János Kádár’s relatively liberal regime. The television programme, caught between a futuristic representation of Soviet ideals and a surprising critical undertone resulting from the contemporary failure of those ideals,

embodies what Panka calls a ‘cynical utopia’. Panka offers an important framework for thinking about Soviet and Eastern bloc utopianisms. Then, Sasha Myerson explores the tipping point from critical dystopia to utopia in 1980s Japanese cyberpunk, demonstrating the underlying ideological difference in impetus between Japan and the West’s take on the genre. Myerson argues that a dystopian present fuelled by student protests served as a catalyst impulse to utopian futures – prescient and applicable to our current tenuous reality, with its new wave of student movements. In our fourth article, Joseph Donica turns to Arab documentary and sf films in the wake of the Arab Revolutions of 2010–12 and provides a framework for identifying and analysing the critical role of utopian thought and ideology in shaping not only protests and revolutionary movements themselves, but also the way those movements are filmed and depicted. Through this piece, Donica traces a path from utopian thinking, to utopian charge, to action, bringing attention to the filmmaker’s responsibility to challenge and participate in those revolutionary practices. Finally, Ida Yoshinaga looks at the indigenous futurist work of Hawai‘ian activist-artist Bumpy Kanahale. The piece offers a hard-hitting critical analysis of the role indigenous futurism plays in shaping sociocultural agency. By focusing on behind-the-scenes production, Yoshinaga shows how technology can be brandished to reframe and subversively call attention to indigenous pasts and, by extension, futures – even in the midst of a Hollywood romantic drama!

The year’s events and their global impact inescapably beg the question of how they are going to shape global visions of the future – i.e. what sociopolitical transformation they will beget. There is a simultaneous dystopian undercurrent – not only from the dire and often deadly nature of the events themselves, but from the worryingly autocratic governmental responses thereto – alongside a distinctly utopian undercurrent fuelling the collective consciousness. Post-1968 utopian media – from utopian propaganda constructs promoted by governments, to tales of naive utopian nostalgia that cannot quite be recaptured and tentative critical utopias that call attention to present-day strife and exploitation of certain populations through the very lens with which they are films – provides us critical maps with which to understand not only the longings of the past, but also their imbrication with artistic endeavours the world over.

As our contributors demonstrate, deployment and meanings of utopia are multiple; they shift excitingly and they emerge sometimes only in the counter-reading. But they are there. So we have to be realistic, to demand the impossible of our media, our movements, our moments. Many thanks to the editors of

Science Fiction Film and Television for shepherding this special issue into existence and for our contributors' labour, for bringing us these texts, these readings, these possibilities.

Works cited

- Griffin, Michael J. and Tom Moylan, eds. 'Introduction: Exploring Utopia'. *Exploring the Utopian Impulse: Essays on Utopian Thought and Practice*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2007. 11–18.
- Kołakowski, Leszek. *Modernity on Endless Trial*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1997.
- Kumar, Krishan. 'The Future of Utopia'. *The Epistemology of Utopia: Rhetoric, Theory and Imagination*. Ed. Jorge Bastos da Silva. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013. 94–118.
- Rajagopal, Arvind and Anupama Rao. *Media and Utopia: History, Imagination and Technology*. London: Routledge, 2016.
- Sargent, Lyman Tower. 'Review of *Exploring the Utopian Impulse: Essays on Utopian Thought and Practice*. Vol. 2 of the *Ralahine Utopian Studies* by Michael J. Griffin'. *Utopian Studies* 19.2 (2008): 349–52.