

Sci-Fi Movies and the Pessimistic View for the Future Controlled Society of Totalitarianism

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Abstract. The author proposes a view that most science-fiction movies that described not just the future technological development but the life in the future social organization are pessimistic and depict dystopian, rather than utopian societies. They can provide useful guidance to increase our awareness of what technology might bring to the user experience and of how we should take care for not falling into such a social organization.

Keywords: Sci-Fi movie, future society, dystopia, utopia, totalitarianism.

1 Introduction

Since the optimistic earliest work of science-fiction (sci-fi) movies such as “A Trip to the Moon” (1902) by Georges Méliés, movies categorized as such have been describing the state of possible future development of technology such as “Ralph 124C 41+ (one to foresee for many)” (1911) by Hugo Gernsback (though not a movie) as well as monsters and aliens as the subjects of entertainment. On the other hands, there are some serious movies that described the life in the future society. I point out that future societies described in such movies tend to be mostly dystopian ones, rather than utopian, although some of their stories have positive endings in order to satisfy the audience.



Fig. 1. A scene from “A Trip to the Moon” (1902)

2 Utopia and Dystopia

The criterion that differentiates dystopia from the utopia may vary, depending on the movie analyst’s viewpoint. Some could claim that even a free and wealthy country can be categorized as a dystopia, if people living there cannot have a positive attitude and mindset, which will lead to a negative result, the opposite of a happy life. What is such a life? The PERMA Model describes it.

The PERMA Model was developed by a positive psychologist, Martin Seligman, and was published in his influential 2011 book “Flourish”. PERMA, an acronym for a model of well-being, proposes five building blocks of well-being and happiness:

- Positive emotions: feeling good
- Engagement: being completely absorbed in activities
- Relationships: being authentically connected to others
- Meaning: purposeful existence
- Achievement: a sense of accomplishment and success

However, in this discussion, I believe many sci-fi movies describing the life in the future society take an opposite view, and I shall focus on their self-evident dystopia and, in particular, totalitarianism.

Table 1. A tentative classification of dystopian sci-fi movies

Happy Ending	Unhappy Ending
“Metropolis” (1927) by Fritz Lang	“1984” (1956) by Michael Anderson
“Fahrenheit 451” (1966) by Francois Truffaut	“THX-1138” (1970) by George Lucas
“Logan's Run” (1976) by Michael Anderson	“ZPG” (1971) by Michael Campus
	“Soylent Green” (1973) by Richard Fleischer
	“1984” (1984) by Michael Radford

In Table 1, I tentatively listed sci-fi movies that deal with a future society under the control of totalitarianism. This table excludes sci-fi movies that are not focused on the totalitarian organization of a future society even though the situation is set in the dystopian future.

This is the reason why such movies as “Shame” (1968) by Ingmar Bergman, “A Clockwork Orange” (1971) by Stanley Kubrick, “Futureworld” (1976) by Richard T. Heffron, “Time of the Wolf” (2003) by Michael Haneke, etc., were not included in the table. The table is not yet complete; upon further analysis, additional movies could be added.

3 Dystopia in the Real World

I am a movie lover and watch one to two movies per day! I have found it rather difficult to find sci-fi movies that describe a utopia. One reason for the imbalanced proportion between utopian and dystopian movies might be the historical facts of human civilization, in which there have been many totalitarian and autocratic societies. We can remind ourselves of such cases as Germany under the regime of Hitler, the Soviet Union under Stalin, China under Mao Zedong, Cambodia under Pol Pot, and more and more if we limit the list just to World War 2 and afterwards.

Most movies are made to entertain audiences. Sometimes, however, serious themes, such as the nature of dystopia, will be adopted for raising the consciousness of people about their own futures, so they will be able to avoid the circumstances that will lead them again into dystopia.

4 How Can Dystopia Become Possible?

Some dystopian movies include an explanation of the process by which the society has come to accept such a regime. For example, “1984” refers to a nuclear war, “Soylent Green” mentions a population explosion and the consequent shortage of food, and “ZPG” and “Logan’s Run” also refers to a population explosion. “Metropolis” and “THX-1138” do not have such causes; hence the audience is placed into an unexpected situation from the beginning without any explanatory narrative.

So, how were the totalitarian and autocratic societies possible in the real world? Examples that I have cited in the previous section were cases in which an older regime was destroyed, and people believed in propaganda that a better society will come about. This belief delivered controlling power to a totalitarian leader. Today, many of the countries mentioned above are more democratic, which seems to suggest that a totalitarian society is a transitional state before the eventual emergence of a democracy.

This leads to a next question: Is democratic society the final form that will last forever? If we think about the future not far from present time, with the likely circumstances of an energy crisis, the shortage of underground resources, the shortage of food, the population explosion, and the cost of upgrading developing countries, it seems reasonable to think the entire world will be thrown into turmoil.

Table 2. Negative aspects in dystopian sci-fi movies

	Domination	Propaganda	Behavior Monitoring	Mind Control
"Metropolis" (1927) by Fritz Lang	Rich			
"1984" (1954) by Rudolph Cartier	Party	"Hate!"	AV system, spy	Special Device
"1984" (1956) by Michael Anderson				
"1984" (1984) By Michael Radford				
"Fahrenheit 451" (1966) by Francois Truffaut	Firefighters	"Waste books!"	People	
"2001 A Space Odyssey" (1968) by Stanley Kubrick	HAL		Robot	
"THX-1138" (1970) by George Lucas	Government	"What's wrong?"	People	Red capsule
"ZPG" (1971) by Michael Campus	Government	"No babies!"	Flying object	
"Solaris" (1972) by Andrei Arsenyevich Tarkovsky	Solaris		Through mind	Solaris reads the mind
"Solaris" (2002) by Steven Soderbergh				
"Soylent Green" (1973) by Richard Fleischer	Government	"Eat Soylent Green!"		
"Logan's Run" (1976) by Michael Anderson	Government	"Life must end at 30!"		

5 Dystopia and Future Technology

From the viewpoint of user experience, it would be good to focus on the development of devices and systems to achieve positive objectives, like those described in the PERMA Model. However, we should also consider how the future devices and information/communication technology (ICT) can be used to control society, which would lead us into a negative life experience.

Table 2 shows how domination, propaganda, behavior monitoring, and mind control are described in several dystopian sci-fi movies. Domination concerns social organization and is less related to ICT. Future technology may be related to propaganda and mind control, but here I shall focus on behavior monitoring. Regarding this aspect, the ubiquitous technology will be one of the plausible means to achieve the controlled totalitarian society.

The following technologies are available now and will be reinforced in the near future. They all have the potential to deliver information to those in control of governments, systems, communication networks, and devices:

Mobile Device. Devices such as laptops, tablet PCs, and smart phones equipped with global positioning system (GPS) can send the location of the device user.

Internet-Related System. Internet-related system gives personal information such as preferences, political attitudes, social groupings, and other personal information to those in control by analyzing the contents of SNS, blog, email and the log data of illegal access to the prohibited sites. Such technologies for the Big Data as data mining, massively parallel machine, grid computing, distributed file system and others have already been realized.

Small Chips. Small chips such as RFID and IC-tags, implemented in many varieties of personal and professional objects, will send the location and handling information of the object (or the person) to people in control.

Video Cameras. Video cameras are now set up at various places in and out of homes, business and government buildings, travel-system stations and routes, and commercial shops of all kinds and are already used to trace the move of suspects.

Surveillance by Satellite or Airplane. This kind of system will provide the detailed pictures and specific locations of particular objects and people. Although it is influenced by the weather condition and the vegetation and is unable to make the reconnaissance of people in underground, video camera will give some supplemental information.

Biometrics. Biometric system including physiological, psychological, and behavioral measures will give information about and provide accurate identification of the person.

Scene Analysis and Pattern Recognition. This kind of technology analyzes the pictures taken by organizations, government, and individuals that will give sufficient information to identify people, places, and objects in almost any environment or location.

When such technologies are in the hands of those who have a strong will to control people, the world drifts quickly and inexorably to a state far worse than those described in dystopian sci-fi movies. To wake us up and to help us prepare for the future, we can thank and learn much from sci-fi movies, even the most dystopian, about the possible future state of the world. Then we, as the audience, can and should utilize that information to stimulate our good-natured imagination to navigate better alternatives.

Reference

1. Seligman, M.E.: Flourish. Random House Australia, North Sydney (2011)