

'Goddamn you all to hell!'

The revealing
politics of
dystopian
movies

Chris Berg



‘There is, of course, every reason to view the next century with fear,’ wrote a *New York Times* film reviewer in 1976 after having watched the Charlton Heston vehicle *Soylent Green*.

Smug pessimism of this type is hardly unusual in political commentary. Indeed, in only the last few years, Hollywood has released *V for Vendetta* and *Children of Men*, each of which claim that the Iraq War is the beginning of a cycle of oppression that will lead to dictatorship. Over the last century, the dystopian film has reflected society’s fears of monopoly capitalism, totalitarian socialism, environmental catastrophe, technology out of control, and now, in *V for Vendetta* and *Children of Men*, theocracy. The obsessions of the left are reflected in the dystopian movie.

But dystopias are never that simple. Certainly, the dystopian movie presents filmmakers with their opportunity for futuristic pessimism. The dystopia—a fictional society that got lost on the way to utopia—differs from traditional science fiction by its emphasis on political and social systems rather than science or technology, and therefore allows filmmakers to speculate wildly on the political future. But the genre has a tendency to trip up filmmakers, and the way it does so reveals much more about Hollywood leftism than it does the cultural fears of the broader population.

The Orwellian dystopia

George Orwell may not have invented the dystopia—John Stuart Mill coined the word in 1868, and Orwell’s vision was drawn from both Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *We* and Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*—but with the cultural status of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, he owns it. Orwell defined the now archetypal dystopian society in response to the Stalinist communism—an omnipotent, omnipresent state with a single-minded control of its citizens. And the descendants of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are many. The films *THX 1138*, *Fahrenheit 451*, *Alphaville*, *Sleeper*, *Brazil*, *The Island*, *Equilibrium*, *Logan’s Run*, *Renaissance*, *The Running Man* and others are derived from Orwell’s vision of a totalitarian police state.

The traditional dystopia is concerned with the spectre of the over-bearing state—the typical plot trajectory involves the protagonist rejecting the dictatorial controls of the government and finding out the horrible truth. In the 2005 film *The Island*, Scarlett Johansson and Ewan McGregor escape their post-apocalyptic dictatorship—which is run like a totalitarian fat camp—only to realise that their world was entirely artificial.

The evolution of the dystopian genre can reveal much

about the popular obsessions of filmmakers and the audience, but each time those fears fall back upon a fear of the omnipotent state. For instance, even a sub-genre of dystopian films in the 1970s which featured environmental collapse eventually reveal themselves to be more concerned with state oppression than the environment. If this is a reflection of our cultural fears, then the contemporary environmentalists who would like the government to involve itself more and more in our individual choices have a much tougher task ahead of them than current opinion polls suggest.

Dreaming of the apocalypse: environmental dystopias

Paul Ehrlich’s 1968 neo-Malthusian tract *The Population Bomb* has been entered into history as a colossally inaccurate prediction of apocalyptic overpopulation. Ehrlich’s calculations of hundreds of millions of people starving to death in the 1970s and 1980s as population outstripped resources failed to account for agricultural innovation and slowing birth-rates in developed nations.

But *The Population Bomb* wasn’t just a simple prediction of global food shortages. To pound his message home, Ehrlich devised an array of future scenarios which could only occur as a consequence of his bleak mathematics. Ehrlich was quick to hedge his bets—‘none of [the scenarios] will come true as stated, but they describe the kinds of disasters that will occur as mankind slips into the famine decades’—but that didn’t stop the Stanford University Professor from wild grade-school speculations that tenuously connected to his arguments. For instance, by 1979, Ehrlich foresaw that:

Only the outbreak of a particularly virulent strain of bubonic plague killing 65 per cent of the starving Egyptian population had averted a direct Soviet-American clash in the Mediterranean.

By 1980:

... general thermonuclear war ensues. Particularly devastating are the high altitude ‘flash’ devices designed to set fire to all flammable materials over huge areas.

After describing his most appealing scenario, which predicts the starvation and death of merely half a billion people, Ehrlich challenges the reader to imagine a more optimistic future, which he is pretty sure can’t be done.

Wild speculations about the future have been a staple of the environmentalist doom-saying ever since; and this sort of casual jumble of non-fiction and undisciplined fantasy doesn’t speak well for environmental pop science.

Ehrlich’s book set the tone in the early 1970s for a whole new type of dystopia. Gone are the obsessions with a monolithic state apparatus and the subjugation of individuality depicted in Zamyatin’s *We* and Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*—new visions of dystopia arose out of environmental tragedy. And the blame for humanity’s fall no longer lies with power-seeking bureaucrats and dictators, but with humanity

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itself. In the view of the environmental doomsayers, our own failure to keep pollution and population under control inadvertently leads us towards a dystopian future. And so when Charlton Heston curses mankind at the end of *The Planet of the Apes*, he speaks for Paul Ehrlich.

The Population Bomb was both serious enough to capture the imagination of the embryonic leftwing environmental movement and fanciful enough to directly inspire a boom in dystopian culture—within a year, Captain Kirk had been abducted by a race of space aliens to solve their overpopulation crisis. The book's morally repulsive suggestions about coercing Indian males to undertake vasectomies and adding sterilisation to the food supply seem ready made for pot-boiler fiction. The 1971 film *The Last Child* depicted a society that had implemented a one-child policy and where the elderly were refused medical treatment, and the next year's *Z.P.G.* showed a United Nations-esque ban on procreation for a thirty year period. And in 1973 Charlton Heston (an actor who appears to have been purpose-built for dystopia and angry revelations) uncovered the terrible truth behind *Soylent Green*, a synthetic food substitute made necessary after the United States had suffered complete economic and environmental collapse.

The 1976 classic *Logan's Run* sets an Aldous Huxley-style pleasure dictatorship in a Paul Ehrlich world. The free-love and relaxation of the inhabitants of a domed city (a barely disguised shopping mall in Dallas) is only interrupted by the requirement that they have to be killed when they reach the age of thirty. When two escape, they discover themselves in the ruins of a Washington DC that has, it is implied, been decimated by environmental catastrophe caused by overpopulation. *Logan's Run* packages all

of the major dystopian fears together—a fear of technology (the dictator is in this case what appears to be a self-aware computer), a fear of population controls in the midst of a resource crisis, a fear of the loss of individuality (the Logan character featured in the film's title actually has a more typically dystopian name—'Logan 5') and a fear of environmental apocalypse.

But it isn't accurate to describe dystopian visions of *Logan's Run*, *Soylent Green*, *Z.P.G.* and *The Last Child* as direct ideological spawn of Paul Ehrlich. The films sympathise with those characters that rebel against the population restrictions—the woman who defies the state by having a baby, the security man who escapes the domed city, and the cop who continues to investigate a murder in defiance of his superiors—and the resolutions inevitably show the masses awakening to the horrible truth. By the time the credits appear, Ehrlich's suggestions that the government forcibly sterilise the population have been judged as repugnant—as have the suggestions of our modern anti-natalist that we limit population growth under the banner of climate change. The moral simplicity of a Hollywood film turns out to be more ethical than the views of the Sierra Club and other environmentalists who were impressed by the perverse recommendations of *The Population Bomb*.

Furthermore, the environmental dystopias may initially appear to represent an entirely new cultural fear—that of ecological collapse—but they eventually reveal that they share the obsessions of 'traditional' dystopias—a monolithic organisation exerting super-normal controls over an unwilling or ignorant populace. Overpopulation and food shortages may be terrifying, but that terror is trumped by the fear of an omnipotent state.

Orwellian dystopias after the end of the socialist dream

While the dystopian genre has thrived over the last century, depictions of utopias have all but disappeared. The only utopias that are presented are ones that have failed. Part of this is because utopias are inherently dull. For instance, *Gulliver's Travels* only loses its pace when Jonathan Swift finally tries to describe his ideal society. The race of intelligent horses called the Houyhnhnms may be perfect, but from a literary perspective they are bland and uninteresting compared to the Lilliputians. George Orwell claimed that this narrative failure of Swift's presented a major problem for socialist thinkers—the society where everybody is happy is a boring society. And it's hard to string a narrative around a society in which there is nothing going wrong.

But from a historical perspective, utopias rather than dystopias have been the dominant literary form. Plato and Thomas More used the utopian society to illustrate their political and economic views, which of course were little more than crude socialism. The late nineteenth century was a busy time for utopianist fantasy—classics of this period included Edward Bellamy's novel *Looking Backward* and William Morris' *News From Nowhere*—but few authors have been able to conceive of utopias that are anything but socialist. (The science fiction writer Robert Heinlein is a notable exception.)

So almost immediately after the world had begun to experience an actual, living communist dictatorship, socialism jumped from a utopian fantasy to a dystopian nightmare. Dystopias replaced utopias just when we realised how bad lived socialism could be—the utopian genre was a casualty of the demise of the socialist dream. Indicatively, *We* was published in 1921—less than half a decade after the Bolshevik *coup d'état*—and



Michael York and Jenny Agutter in the 1976 film *Logan's Run*

was the first novel to be banned by the new Soviet censorship bureau.

As a consequence, from the 'Khrushchev Thaw' onwards, political radicals have been unable to come up with a fully-realised alternative to the status quo. Dystopias are much easier to conceive than utopias—after all, who doesn't oppose dictatorship and forced sterilisation? Devising a plausible non-market economy is much more challenging.

But when Zamyatin and Orwell addressed their audiences in the first half of the twentieth century, it was within the realm of possibility that the Western world could go communist. That same demise of the socialist dream that led to the rise of dominance of the dystopia at the same time made Orwellian vision less poignant—there is simply no chance that the English constitutional monarchy will yield to IngSoc anytime soon.

And so to ensure that their visions remain relevant, filmmakers over the last few decades almost always try to shoe-horn a more modern message into their dystopias. In a particularly grating example of this, *THX 1138* awkwardly shoved an anti-consumerist note into its otherwise traditional Orwellian state. A state propaganda machine first extols Robert Duvall's character to work hard in a typically Stalinist manner: 'Work hard, increase production, prevent accidents and be happy'. But it then goes on to deliver

a message that the Soviet Politburo would have never wanted delivered: 'Let us be thankful we have commerce. Buy more. Buy more now. Buy. And be happy.' This clumsy message against consumer capitalism undermines the otherwise compelling vision of *THX 1138*.

Similarly awkward attempts at relevancy are found in many other dystopian visions. The otherwise clear story of overpopulation in *Logan's Run* is destabilised when the only character who is wise to the cause of humanity's troubles tries to blame our desire for bigger and bigger houses. More recent films have also tried to 'contemporise' their stories uncomfortably—in 2005's *V for Vendetta* and 2006's *Children of Men*, the War in Iraq is variously described as the catalyst for the end of female fertility, a religious dictatorship in England, the suppression of classical art, total social breakdown, and concentration camps for immigrants. Their political message consists of little more than a list of bad things that could happen—a far cry from the consistent and thematically integrated dystopias of Orwell and Zamyatin. And dystopias are most emotionally powerful when they are seen as possible—nobody but the most smug leftist thinks that George Bush's occasional affirmation of his religious faith heralds an imminent theocracy.

The 2002 Christian Bale feature *Equilibrium* completes the migration of the

Orwellian vision from the poignant to the absurd. In this totalitarian state, human emotions are suppressed to reduce conflict and 'Clerics' police the city to seek out 'Sense Offenders'. *Equilibrium* is a successful film from a dramatic perspective, but the improbability of its vision is merely a reflection of the dominant cultural status of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*—*Equilibrium* has now achieved cult status on the basis of its fictional martial art 'gun-kata' and the ferocity of its fighting sequences rather than any political message it carries.

The inefficient dystopia

By contrast, Terry Gilliam's joyfully absurdist 1985 film *Brazil* is a much closer reflection of the lived experience of totalitarian socialism. In *Equilibrium* and *THX 1138*, the totalitarian state is an efficient state—public servants are passionate, dedicated, and above all, effective, and the trains run on time. In *Brazil*, Orwell's state has fallen into disrepair. The omnipotent eye of the dictator is revealed to be a vast and sluggish bureaucracy. State employees watch old movies when the boss isn't watching them—the workers are more like Charlie Chaplin than Alexey Stakhanov. Individual bureaucrats act as bullies rather than servants of the state. And in *Brazil*, tyranny is delivered in triplicate. Terry Gilliam may have set out to make an absurdist comedy out of the traditional dystopia, but in doing so, he made a society which accords more



Christian Bale in the 2002 film *Equilibrium*

closely with the USSR depicted in memoirs about life in the Soviet Union, especially in the post-Stalin era. Endemic corruption and bureaucratic mismanagement is the experience of socialism, not the clean, streamlined and seamless unitary state of Orwell. Pyongyang's incomplete and structurally unsound Ryugyong Hotel is more representative of real-world socialist architecture than Oceania's glistening white Ministry of Love. But in traditional anti-communist dystopias, the government is never so unglamorous as to run out of money. Orwell thought totalitarian communist governments would be terrible, but he also thought they would *work*.

Perhaps then the most poignant dystopian film made in the last half century is Stanley Kubrick's 1971 film *A Clockwork Orange*. Upon first glance, *A Clockwork Orange* is not immediately recognisable as a dystopia. The biggest indicator—a totalitarian state—is absent in Kubrick's vision. Indeed, the plot pivots around a politician desperate to solve the crime problem before the next election. And *A Clockwork Orange* strides across so many themes that its political views are not immediately obvious.

But *A Clockwork Orange* is a startling film about a decaying socialist Britain—not the socialism of the eastern bloc, but mid-century democratic socialism. The depraved protagonist Alex lives in 'Municipal Flat Block 18A, Linear North', part of a vast housing project which is so poorly maintained that it appears to be

decomposing. The democratically elected government is revealed to be on a slow decline towards totalitarianism. A writer who eventually kidnaps Alex is described as a 'subversive', and perhaps more indicatively, the Minister of the Interior lets slip that he needs to clear the prisons of normal criminals to make room for political prisoners. And it is a society that is about to breakdown. After all, it is quickly indicated that Alex and his droogs are not the only gang terrorising England—law and order appears to be the government's biggest problem.

When *A Clockwork Orange* resonates, it does so because social breakdown and socialist decay are very real features of west European states today. The northern banlieues around Paris are just the sort of low-income ghettos which are inhabited by Alex. In these areas, the state is present but ineffective—delivering welfare but not order—and the inhabitants are both oppressed and independent. Indeed, when David Cameron describes England's 'broken society', he raises the spectre of ultra-violent and truant adolescents.

The vision of *A Clockwork Orange* is, like all dystopias, an exaggeration, but it is far more real than the states of *Logan's Run* or *THX 1138*. And *A Clockwork Orange* manages to be far more cynical than a democratic socialist like Orwell could ever be. (Both Kubrick's politics, and the politics of Anthony Burgess who wrote the original novel, could hardly be de-

scribed as standard arts industry leftyness. Indeed, Burgess went onto write his own dystopian homage to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, which he titled *1985*, that featured a Britain dominated by trade unions and where Islam had become the dominant political force.)

Images of dystopia are necessarily reflections of their time. When Orwell wrote his book, he addressed it to fellow-travelling socialists—his story was directed at his comrades who supported the Soviet 'experiment'. Subsequent dystopian visions—at least those ones that have been more than just paint-by-numbers duplications of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*—have variously railed against environmental destruction, corporate monopolies, genetic engineering, censorship, technological dependence, religious extremism and neo-conservative warmongering. But they always oppose the state—even in those films that blame corporations for the ills of the world, it is the state that provides the power to oppress.

But when a dystopian vision fails, it fails because it misunderstands the nature of the contemporary state. *Brazil* and *A Clockwork Orange* are more ominous dystopias because they are—perhaps surprisingly considering that one is an absurdist comedy and the other a violent criticism of behavioural psychology—realistic.

