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Introduction

Science fiction is about the future. This is an obvious thing to say, though its obviousness conceals a debate that has perhaps not yet taken place – a debate over the nature of this future. Science fiction generally takes the future to be self-evident; the future is 'the day after tomorrow,' or another day more distant, but in any case a day on which the human struggle continues. As we will see, science fiction futures in this sense express our utopian hopes and dystopian nightmares, distilling in often spectacular visions what we see as best and worst about our present.

Both Darko Suvin and Frederic Jameson have argued for a science fiction future in this sense, as a 'critical' exploration of our present conditions and their limits. However, there is an alternative future, a future undetermined by the present – a future that explodes in an event that changes the conditions of life and takes us beyond the merely existent. This would be a future that was not simply a reflection of current modes of being, but the eruption of a becoming capable of producing something genuinely 'new'. Such an understanding of the future can be found in Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of the 'untimely' and in the work of Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Felix Guattari that follows and makes use of it.[1] It can also be found in certain rare but invaluable science fiction films that escape their conditions of possibility to give us visions of...something else.

In order to stage this confrontation over the future, or even 'the future of the future', it will be necessary to rehearse the respective arguments of our

protagonists. It will also be necessary to examine some science fiction films that do (and others that do not) echo these philosophical debates in a more artistic way. In doing so, this essay will focus on 'dystopian' films, as these constitute the currently dominant sub-genre of sci-fi, a sub-genre defined by its somewhat political 'critique' of the present. Such films therefore embody the stakes of the future, offering either a political commentary on our current conditions or exploring another type of politics, one that seeks to overcome these conditions in incendiary inventions and so define a new future for 'political art'.

Science fiction as 'cognitive estrangement'

Even the most cursory glance at the academic field of 'science fiction studies' will see that it is a genre built on hope – more specifically, on *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* by Ernst Bloch. According to Bloch hope drives the utopian imagination, and as such it has been installed as the active principle producing the speculative futures of science fiction. Hope is our desire for a better, different future; a hope both personal and political that appears on a scale that is sometimes commonplace and sometimes magnificent. In this sense, the future is recognised by what it contains that is 'new', or as Suvin has argued (drawing on Bloch), science fiction narratives are generated by a 'novum', a 'totalizing phenomenon or relationship deviating from the author's and addressee's norm of reality'.[2]

In dystopian films this *novum* is usually a brutal form of socio-political domination and/or exploitation that the protagonist attempts to escape or defeat. The *novum* therefore establishes the difference of the future by 'estranging' the reader from the present. The *novum* is also consistent with current scientific knowledge (distinguishing science fiction from fantasy), making its appearance not only conceivable in, but also critical of, the present. The *novum* is science fiction's very own *Verfremdungseffekt*. This process of critical reflection is the 'cognitive estrangement' achieved by 'science fiction' (each of the terms mapping onto the other), and defines, according to Jameson, science fiction's fundamentally political nature. As he argues, '[o]ne cannot imagine any fundamental change in our social existence which has not first thrown off Utopian visions like so many sparks from a comet.'[3]

As the dominant understanding of the structure and method of science fiction, 'cognitive estrangement' sets the conditions for the appearance and political efficacy of the future. These conditions are unapologetically

dialectical, making the present and past both the condition for the future and the horizon of this future's political action.[4] Jameson puts it clearly, arguing that the utopian fantasies of science fiction 'defamiliarize and restructure our experience of our own *present*'.[5] As such, science fiction is, following Lukács, a form of 'realism' that does not show us the future as such but is instead 'a symptom and reflex of historical change'.[6]

Suvin makes the following case:

> [b]orn in history and judged in history, the novum has an ineluctably historical character. So has the correlative fictional reality or possible world which, for all its displacements and disguises, always corresponds to the wish-dreams of a specific sociocultural class or implied addressees.[7]

The future in these terms expresses its conditions of possibility – conditions found in the human history of the present. The critical and political function of science fiction is therefore to illuminate those possibilities and encourage us towards those that the film advocates. Jameson has drawn radical conclusions from this supposed dialectic between the present and its future, arguing that in science fiction 'the shock of otherness, is a mere aesthetic effect and a lie'.[8] Instead, he argues, what is 'authentic' about science fiction

> is not at all its capacity to keep the future alive, even in imagination. On the contrary, its deepest vocation is over and over again to demonstrate and dramatize our incapacity to imagine the future.[9]

The future in a radical sense, in the sense of something truly new, is definitively impossible according to Jameson, because it must by definition be Outside our powers to imagine it. It is precisely the status of this Outside that I wish to contest.

For Jameson, any science fiction future is first of all an ideological expression of the present that produces it, and must be treated as such. 'Always historicize!', he exhorts. 'This slogan is the one absolute and we may even say "transhistorical" imperative of all dialectical thought.'[10] Indeed, he later claims that there is no utopian vision of science fiction future that 'is not some mere projection of our own situation'.[11] According to Jameson, this 'epistemological pessimism'[12] means that although science fiction is unable to give us a new future (something absolutely different or other), it does 'succeed by failure' inasmuch as in 'setting forth for the unknown, science fiction finds itself irrevocably mired in the all-too-familiar, and

therefore becomes unexpectedly transformed into a contemplation of our own absolute limits'.[13] In this sense, he argues, the problems science fiction always had in imagining the future is actually its strength, 'in that it forces us precisely to concentrate on the break itself: a meditation on the impossible, on the unrealisable in its own right'.[14]

This is depressing news for both fans of science fiction and for fans of the future. It seems as if in science fiction studies, if not in science fiction, there is no time for an incendiary future, a future with new values and visions and the new body that these call forth. However, I will argue that this future, this radical alterity (what Nietzsche called the 'untimely', Foucault the 'outside' of 'heterotopia', and Deleuze and Guattari the utopian 'event'), emerges in some dystopian science fiction films which offer an alternative to the insistence of critical theory on a dialectical 'future' that is chained to the present.

Utopia, anti-utopia, dystopia

We will come back to this philosophical debate soon enough. First, however, we must understand what constitutes dystopian science fiction. Both Suvin and Jameson convincingly show how science fiction forms part of the utopian tradition and how this includes an anti-utopian strain that appeared as early as Yevgeny Zamyatin's book *We* (1921), then was firmly established by Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell's *1984* (1949). Rather than exploring our utopian hopes for political change, these novels present a future in which social transformation has been repressed by force. Although Huxley and Orwell produced their biting satires of totalitarian social planning from a position on the left of Stalin's party communism, others quickly developed their condemnation of 'utopia' into a general rejection of the possibility of co-operative forms of politics.[15]

These 'anti-utopias' display what Suvin calls a 'dystopian pessimism', where the narrative trajectory does not open new alternatives for the present situation but uses the *novum* to condemn utopian desires for social transformation by showing how they lead to the violence of totalitarian government. In this way, Suvin argues, anti-utopias have a mythic form (as opposed to the epic structure of what he calls 'critical dystopias') that confirms the supposedly a priori, eternal, and necessary rhythms of history. As Suvin puts it, 'mythological events are cyclical and predetermined, foreseeable descents from the timeless into the temporal realm'.[16]

We can see this mythic narrative in many post-apocalyptic films, where a global catastrophe of Biblical proportions wipes the slate clean, again, producing a 'reset' that is also a repeat. This repeat is determined by certain supposedly unchanging 'truths' – most obviously, humankind's inevitable drive to dominate others through violence, but also, and as a counter-balance, humanity's desire for personal freedom and its commitment to love and the family unit as the basis of social organisation.[17] Anti-utopian science fiction consistently confronts these two aspects of a quasi-transcendental 'human nature' and its pessimism derives from the victory of the former over the latter (as in *1984*), or the extremely reduced scale of the latter's perseverance.

In *The Day After Tomorrow* (Roland Emmerich, 2004), a single couple and their son survives a global flood, while in *Waterworld* (Kevin Reynolds, 1995) and *I am Legend* (Francis Lawrence, 2007), a 'patchwork' family struggles to survive in the face of the violent anarchy that seeks to destroy it.[18] It is precisely because these families are 'mythic' in nature, embodying universal human values that are supposedly in all of us, that hope is given. 'Utopia' (if it can be said to exist in these films) is not a vision of a better future achieved through political processes – it is the defeat of a failed politics and the return to the eternal human values that this politics has repressed. This narrative is often deployed in the name of a clearly conservative agenda, as in *Zero Population Growth* (Michael Campus, 1972), an anti-counter-culture film that shows how an entirely collectivised society represses basic individual rights, most poignantly the right to be parents. The utilisation of the anti-utopian narrative by the Christian right reaches its apogee in *The Book of Eli* (The Hughes Brothers, 2010), which tells of the fight for the survival of Christianity itself.[19]

According to Suvin, there also exists a more militant kind of dystopian science fiction narrative – a critical version based upon the epic form. Here, he writes, events are 'presented as historically contingent and unforeseeable (and thus as a rule historically reversible)'.[20] These 'critical dystopias', as they have become known, project contemporary anxieties about increasing social control into a dystopian future, but give explanations as to how they arose and explore strategies for overcoming them. In such films, a future totalitarian government reflects in exaggerated form the 'bad' politics of today, whether that of the religious right (e.g., *V for Vendetta* [James McTeigue, 2005], *Equilibrium* [Kurt Wimmer, 2002], or *The Handmaid's Tale* [Volker Schlöndorff, 1990]) or of capitalism in its Fordist (e.g., *THX 1138* [George Lucas, 1971]) or post-Fordist (e.g., *The Island* [Michael Bay, 2005] or *In Time* [Andrew Niccol, 2011]) incarnation. It then falls upon the film's

hero to either organise the resistance or escape, and in so doing direct our 'critical' judgement against the repressive elements of our present. As a result, Jameson argues, the narrative structures of utopian and dystopian texts are not simple opposites, as are utopian and anti-utopian texts, but 'in reality have nothing to do with each other'.[21]

Some commentators claim that 'critical dystopias' emerged in the 1980s as a specific response to the rise of neo-liberalism. The negative portrayal of corporate capitalism in films such as *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979) and *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982) seem to support this view.[22] These films also offer a seemingly 'neo-liberal' solution to these totalitarian scenarios: the inalienable human right to individual freedom. In *Alien* (or films such as *THX 1138*, or its loose re-make *The Island*), this 'right' is presented as a natural 'drive' or 'essence' defining the human, while in *Blade Runner* it is more ambiguously placed as an 'individual' right shared by human and cyborg. It is precisely this insistence on the universality of our 'human right' to freedom that is entirely consistent with Jameson's claim that we cannot really imagine a truly 'Other' or 'new' form of politics (inasmuch as political revolution in dystopian films is premised on the epistemological limits of the 'human'), while it also clearly exposes the political limitations (and even complicity) of such a strategy. It is this 'catch-22' of dystopian narratives (simultaneously critiquing the totalitarian political tendencies of contemporary capitalism, but in the name of an essential human freedom that is itself one of capitalism's core assumptions) that will concern us in this study. This is a problem that foregrounds the need in science fiction for a 'new' and 'inhuman' future, and highlights the achievements (but also the strangeness) of those few films that have realised this goal.

The dangers of the digital interface

In recent times we have seen a deluge of films warning of the totalitarian dangers of the digital interface. The most famous are obviously *The Matrix* trilogy (The Wachowski Brothers, 1999-2003), where technology is both the enemy (in its autonomous and insect-like form) and humanity's greatest weapon (when under our control) – a distinction so precarious it requires the intervention of a messiah ('Neo', or 'the One') to unite the opposites and move them towards a higher sublation. Although there may have been the potential to explore this 'new' and higher type of cybernetic being, its otherness is utterly extinguished under the film's religious overtones and stubborn insistence on 'freedom of choice' as the essence of the human.

More interesting are films that gleefully explore a dystopian psychopathology unleashed by the Internet. Brett Leonard's *The Lawnmower Man* (1992) and *Virtuosity* (1995) are early examples of films that explore the potential of the interface for producing sexual and sociopathic violence, individualising (and so spectacularising) this potential in a glamorous, monomaniacal, and villainous *übermensch* who is finally defeated by a downtrodden but determined everyman hero. Once more, the distinction between a dystopian future and its defeat is based on a simple moral value: human weakness is in fact human strength, as it prevents us from hubris. The good are human (i.e., romantic, emotional, tormented by the ambiguities of choice) while the cyborg is evil (cold, calculating, God-like).

Also of interest is the film *Strange Days* (Kathryn Bigelow, 1995), where new technology allows the direct exchange of a murderous rapist's experience with that of their victims, in a kind of delirious s-m fantasy where everyone is a 'switch'. Snuff porn, rape, voyeurism, violence – it is as if the Pandora's box of perversion has been emptied out and rolled into one interfaced 'hit' (like reality TV, only 'realer' and more addictive). *Strange Days*, like the Leonard films, finally restores emotional sanity with the defeat of the bad guys and the emergence of the romantic couple, reassuring us that new technology is not the problem, only its 'users' are.

What is also notable about these films is the rather cursory manner of their 'critique' compared to the way they lasciviously revel in the 'forbidden fruit' the interface has obligingly unleashed. As Lenny, a 'dealer' of the new interface in *Strange Days*, declares (the drug-metaphor perfectly encapsulating the film's ambivalence): 'I'm the main connection to the unconscious.' It seems obvious that the 'critical' dimensions of these films are merely a flag of convenience, providing the excuse for their gleefully hypocritical indulgence in sex and violence. The category of 'critical dystopia' therefore seems to have little grip on what is really going on in these films, which is the capture of our instinctual desires by image-commodities.[23]

Such films pose a real challenge to both Suvin's and Jameson's political understanding of dystopian films, because they illustrate how easily critical 'reflection' can be instrumentalised within the amoral 'atrocity exhibition' that these films are really selling. Certainly, the return to human values marks a limit of the political imagination in these films. However, this limit is not 'critical' because it is simply the narrative condition of the pleasure we take in indulging our techno-enhanced fantasies; it cedes the power of invention and transformation to the nihilist desire to destroy ourselves. Jameson is fond of saying that we find it easier to imagine the destruction of all human life than a political alternative to capitalism – though

perhaps we should take this remark in a positive sense, as meaning that it is contemporary capitalism that now owns our powers of invention and uses them to imagine a future in which humanity is overcome, utilising this 'threat' to its 'human' consumers to generate a profit. In this sense, I will argue, it is in films that embrace this invention of the inhuman while jettisoning any residual human, neo-liberal values where we will see the emergence of a 'new' future, and of a politics that announces it.

Let us return to those dystopian interface films that offer (an often formulaic) critique of virtual reality in favour of the human. These films almost invariably advocate a return to what is 'real' (after having placed this very concept under question) – the human body with all its flaws and weaknesses, the love of a good woman, a modest (i.e., normal and therefore healthy) sense of self, and the human rights of individual freedom and happiness (a value that vaguely invokes all of the previous ones). These values are posited as universal not because the films show any great commitment to them, but because they allow an expedient moral resolution to a narrative focused almost exclusively on dark delights.

Similarly unrealistic are the political solutions offered by these films, which usually involve the extraordinary actions of a superhero. In these two aspects of the critical dystopia film we clearly see the political limits of understanding science fiction films in terms of cognitive estrangement. When cognitive coherency (i.e., present reality) dialectically defines the estrangement of the future, then rational and human factors become the epistemological limits of the politics of science fiction. While this suits the generic ubiquity in the dystopian narrative of an alienated individual fighting against a repressive political system, it also means that this resistance inevitably folds back into the ridiculous clichés of the action film that reduce political transformation to entertainment. This can be seen clearly in films such as *V for Vendetta*, *Equilibrium*, and *In Time*, which purportedly advocate mass uprisings but also make clear that popular insurrection depends on and is subsequent to the acts of a remarkable (*In Time*) or super-human (*V for Vendetta*, *Equilibrium*) individual.

In Time is particularly disappointing in this regard, beginning with a quite harrowing dramatisation of the phrase 'time is money', as people over the age of 25 are given one year to use as currency – once their time/money runs out, so does their life. In the ghettoes, according to the film, people live day by day; also, the film is not afraid to show us how capitalist growth rests on corpses. Admittedly, this is all ameliorated by the fact that people stop aging once they reach 25. So although life is tough in the ghetto, everyone makes a pretty corpse. In this sense, the *novum* of the film actually serves

to distract us from the worst brutalities of our own reality at the same time as it fully exploits them.

The film then takes us over into the gated community of the 1%, in which our wise-guy hero initially excels before being undone by his working-class naivety. At this point the film suddenly switches to a Bonnie and Clyde-style caper with Robin Hood overtones, as the proletarian hero and the daughter of the richest capitalist join forces to rob banks and distribute time/money to the poor. This 'revolutionary' action culminates in the people being liberated from their wage-slavery, allowing them to overwhelm the walls dividing rich and poor. Although there is perhaps a faint suggestion here that the revolution begins by abolishing private property, what seems to motivate the protagonists and finally explains their remarkable status is their ability to love across social divisions, exemplifying the truism that not only is love equal but it is also humanity's saving grace. Similarly, in *V for Vendetta*, the superhuman abilities of the hero V are explained by his exposure to a chemical during experiments on political prisoners held in detention camps. This is merely background to the story, which instead emphasises V's education and culture, his tender empathy, patience, and strength. In other words, V's superhuman abilities are not extraordinary but in fact the distillation of everything that makes humans good.

In this insistence on universal human values as the foundation of a revolutionary politics, these films are similar to those dystopian films that are concerned with an individual's escape from an oppressive system. Such films are critical insofar as they imagine a future in which human individuality and freedom is under threat, but in doing so they turn this individuality into an essential and eternal truth that must be defended at all costs. The best example of this is the beautiful *THX 1138*, where a society is totally controlled (including sexual relations, emotions, and even faith) in order to maximise a dangerous Fordist labour process. This system (embedded deep underground) is physically enforced by robotic police (modelled on those that were beating students and other protesters in America at the time) and ideologically maintained by a pseudo-religious socialist cult organised around a paternal figure that appears as a hybrid between Stalin and Jesus Christ, who preaches the sanctity of work.

As a result of illegally falling in love with his sexual partner (for which he is punished), the eponymously named hero must, and finally does, escape. After many struggles, he emerges triumphant onto the surface of the planet, where he is silhouetted against an incredibly fiery sunset (a shot echoed in *The Island*, a film that remakes *THX 1138* within the more contemporary biopolitical context of corporate cloning). It is unknown whether the earth's

surface is inhabitable or not, and whether the violence of the setting sun marks a triumphant new beginning for a free man or just man's demise. The future at this point is in fact unimportant, because the film is entirely about the necessity of individual freedom in the face of oppressive (read: socialist) state violence. It is easy to see a neo-liberal agenda here, inasmuch as the film clearly suggests that personal freedom is always in the best interests of society, because (as *The Matrix* will put it quite explicitly) freedom of choice is the very definition of the human.

The problem here is that when science fiction futures are tied to a utopian imagination conditioned by and restricted to the horizon of the present (as they obviously are in the majority of films), they either cynically exploit wish-fulfilment fantasies masquerading as political narratives (of either the dark libidinal or superhuman revolutionary type) or return us to essentialist human values through the reduced narrative of escape. In both cases these utopian fantasies are symptomatic expressions of our political powerlessness and of our inability to imagine a future of anything else. As our futures fold back onto eternal structures of repressed libido or essential human values, it seems as if our earlier distinction between mythic and epic dystopian science fiction was a purely formal one that obscured their similarity, inasmuch as epic narratives tend to affirm the mythical eternity of human values, even if these have been dressed up in the supposed agency of free choice.

Radical dystopias and their untimely future

We will now turn to 'untimely' dystopian sci-fi, where the future is not simply a critical reflection on the present or even a contemplation of our present epistemological limits. These 'radical dystopias', as I will call them, return us to a strange kind of utopian politics, envisioning a future that has escaped its human conditions. Such a future remains historically rooted in the present, but only by revealing what in the present goes beyond it. In this sense radical dystopias conform to Tom Moylan's definitive statement that '[w]hatever its stance, target or outcome every dystopian narrative engages in an aesthetic/epistemological encounter with its historical conjuncture.'[24]

Radical dystopias confront the present with the unhistorical and ontological force of becoming itself, and so open the present onto its immanent outside, onto what there is in it that escapes it. It is in this sense, then, that Nietzsche approaches the question of the future. Like Suvin and Jameson, he does so from the perspective of history, arguing that the values upheld by

(and indeed upholding humanity) determine the emergence of the future. However, for Nietzsche, the values that define the human – values such as freedom or family, which science fiction films inevitably posit as good – are in fact reactionary values that prevent life from overcoming itself, to become something new. From Nietzsche's perspective, the distinction of mythic and epic narratives, of anti-utopian and dystopian films, is irrelevant in the face of their shared human values. As a result, the radical dystopian film emerges from a reconsideration of human values and is defined by the new mores it puts in their place. This shifts the level of analysis from an 'epistemological pessimism' implied by a necessarily human present to an 'ontological optimism' in a future capable of overcoming it. This is to give dystopia a philosophical (and as we shall see, political) definition that takes us far beyond humanity's epistemological frame or the formal analysis of science fiction.

Nietzsche says that we need a '*critique*' of those values that up until now people have taken as 'beyond all questioning'. Without such a revaluation we are condemned to a 'present *lived at the expense of the future*'.[25] What Nietzsche (and then Foucault after him) calls 'genealogy' is a critical process that overcomes essential human values and creates new ones in order to make history serve the power of life. This power, or will to power, affirms a process of overcoming that repudiates the human values of essence, truth, God, and the good in favour of the transcendental and ahistorical force of the future, of becoming itself. Nietzsche writes that '[t]he unhistorical is like an atmosphere within which alone life can germinate and with the destruction of which it must vanish'.[26] However, the unhistorical must exist in and work on history in order for a radically new future to emerge in and as life. The event cannot exist without history, but it nevertheless escapes this history by utilising its unhistorical principle, the immanent and vital force of life.

Nietzsche famously declares the death of God. This announcement struggles to be heard, because although Christian morality no longer dominates life, its mantle has been taken up by science. Science denies the situated body and so 'uproots the future'[27] by eternalising current knowledge in an 'ascetic ideal' of a higher 'truth'. This is, he claims, our modern form of nihilism.[28] In this sense, scientific history is the antithesis of art, inasmuch as art for Nietzsche 'is the great means of making life possible, the great seduction to life, the great stimulant of life'.[29] As a result, it is only by transforming history into art (and for this reason art is the only form of politics for Nietzsche) that a radical future can be preserved and eternally return.[30]

All of this is perfectly realised in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968) when the astronaut Bowman kills the super-intelligent machine HAL, a dystopian embodiment of the ascetic ideal, and then plunges into the avant-garde art cinema of the Stargate. This highly abstract sequence functions to dislocate Bowman and the viewer from any form of human subjectivity, to the extent that once we emerge into the Regency room at the end of the film we are seemingly outside any human form of time or space. We are now ready for the final transformation of the human into the Starchild, as both Kubrick and Nietzsche have it. For Nietzsche and Kubrick it is art that finally defeats science, by imposing on it an 'inspired variation' that comes from a 'great artistic facility, a creative vision'.[31] The genuine historian, Nietzsche says (and we could apply this to the science fiction director), has the power to make 'the universally known into something never heard before .... Only he who constructs the future has a right to judge the past.'[32] This then is the sense in which, as Deleuze puts it, '[t]he genealogist is something of a fortune-teller, the philosopher of the future'.[33] The genealogist is an artist in judging the past (and revaluing it) according to the criteria of creation. By doing so, they create a new future. As Nietzsche states:

> [t]rue philosophers reach for the future with a creative hand and everything that is and was becomes a means, a toll, a hammer for them. Their 'knowing' is *creating*, their creating is a legislating, their will to truth is – *will to power*.[34]

Foucault's concept of genealogy is drawn directly from Nietzsche. For Foucault, it is not individuals or countries that create history, because history is instead a constant play of asubjective forces, a continual process of emergence that the act of genealogy directly intervenes within. This is what Foucault calls 'effective history', a history without constants in which nothing is fixed, a history that produces its own discontinuity by constantly reconsidering the values defining who and what we are. In this way, Foucault says (and it is a very beautiful idea) '[k]nowledge is not made for understanding; it is made for cutting.'[35] Genealogy attempts to reverse an existing relationship of forces by introducing something new into it. Foucault believes that this genealogical act will create a new future. As a result, genealogies are 'anti-sciences' that attempt to discover (discover meaning here construct) an 'insurrection of knowledges'.[36] Genealogy, Foucault says, 'is the tactic which, once it has described all the local discursivities, brings into play the desubjugated knowledges that have been released by them'.[37] Desubjugated knowledges are those non-human forces that are produced

within and work on history. Rather than conforming to pre-existing truths they introduce an unthinkable outside to science itself.

Foucault writes that genealogy is 'a use of history that severs its connections to memory, its metaphysics and anthropological model, and constructs a counter-memory – a transformation of history into a totally different form of time'.[38] This new form of time will be the future. Nietzsche and Foucault therefore offer us an ontological approach to the future rather than an epistemological one. For them, the problem of creating something new is not located at the epistemological limits of human knowledge and history but at the edge of being, where the future emerges as the inhuman horizon of the human itself.

Abstraction as an aesthetic of the future

Once again, how does this untimely event of the future emerge in dystopian science fiction films? Unlike cognitive estrangement and its aesthetics of alienation, the event operates through an aesthetic of abstraction. By abstraction, I do not mean the formal abstraction associated with abstract painting (although, as it does in *2001*, this may play a part).[39] What I mean instead is a process by which a film does not simply alienate the viewer from their present but rather forces them to revalue their epistemological framework. Still, the question remains: *how*?

Deleuze's books on cinema offer many examples, one of which he calls 'any-space-whatevers'. This is a space that is not identifiable as any actual space, one that 'has eliminated that which happened and acted in it. It is an extinction or a disappearing, but one which is not opposed to the genetic element.[40] The any-space-whatever is abstract, inasmuch as it eliminates both narrative and character, producing as a result what Deleuze calls 'pure Powers and Qualities', creative potentials that open up new aesthetic futures. The 'any-space-whatever' therefore exists 'independently of the temporal order', inasmuch as it appears 'independently of the connections and orientations which the vanished characters and situations gave to them'. This appearance of 'deconnection and emptiness'[41] gives rise to what Deleuze calls 'hallucination'.[42]

I have already mentioned the Stargate sequence and the Regency room that follows it in *2001* as an example in this respect (which is no surprise given Kubrick's obvious reliance on Nietzsche[43]). Another wonderfully abstract film is *Glen and Randa* (Jim McBride, 1971), a post-apocalyptic work that is neither mythic nor epic in its narrative and offers a compelling

alternative to the anti-counter-culture films from the early 1970s. *Glen and Randa* instead affirms the hippie experience in the most radical terms possible: as an absolute break with human subjectivity that ushers in a new age with new values. What these values might be seems almost impossible for us to grasp.

The film's protagonists appear as a teenage Adam and Eve that have gone beyond good and evil. Their child-like innocence is bereft of any emotional or moral commitments and their aimless wanderings appear without purpose. Indeed, the film's post-apocalyptic setting seems devoid of time itself, as the characters have neither memory of the past nor any sense of a possible future. Glen and Randa occupy a permanent and untimely now and although the film seems to be a coming of age story culminating in the birth of their child, nothing is learned on this journey. After Randa dies in childbirth (an event to which Glen has no emotional reaction), the old man who has become their friend tells him he can name his child anything he wants. Glen, however, does not respond, and this direct refusal of the paternal function is a dramatic rejection of the family as the basis for social organisation.

The film fearlessly advocates anarchy without organisation, and when Glen says 'we should go somewhere', the two men, the baby, and a goat get into a small boat and sail into the setting sun. This final image (it is tempting to read it as a reference to Nietzsche's use of the ocean as a metaphor for absolute immanence) makes the point in a powerful way, despite being inspired by a vaguely utopian desire to visit the city 'Metropolis', a desire which is utterly irrational and without emotional intelligence. Glen and Randa are animals in Nature, where they act with a necessity that is not explainable according to any human motivation, becoming instead abstract and asubjective forces living in complete immanence with their universe. What is so impressive about the film is that it refuses to employ any of the counter-cultural clichés for such an existence; there is no Eastern mysticism implied and absolutely no enlightenment. As a result, the film does not offer a reflection on our present; it is instead a mysterious refusal of it. For the viewer, Glen and Randa's unrelenting blankness, their abstract movement, is extremely disconcerting, and we are left adrift in the sea, without reference points. We must decide for ourselves what to make of the film's beautiful and terrible protagonists. Here, Deleuze's deconnected and empty 'any-space-whatever' encompasses not only the film's world but those who experience it, opening an untimely and extremely uncanny space in which something new is created.[44]

Another example can be found in Jean-Luc Godard's dystopian science fiction film *Alphaville* (1965), where a computer-run society suppresses emotion and art in favour of a purely scientific rationality. Enter Lemmy Caution, a secret agent from the exterior who falls in love with Natacha, the daughter of the man he has been sent to assassinate. He does assassinate his target, and along the way his emotional intensity and interest in poetry manages to short-circuit the computer Alpha-60, which runs Alphaville according to a strictly rational but nevertheless totalitarian logic. While the narrative formulaically rehearses the classic dystopian scenario pitting human emotion against the coldly rational machine, the film's aesthetic construction works against these critical allegiances.

At precisely the point where this conflict is to be resolved (in the love scene between Lemmy and Natacha), the film offers us a highly abstract sequence filled with non-diegetic shots and cuts that turn this conflict productive. Natacha has already explained she does not understand the meaning of the word 'love' (which the computer has removed from the dictionary), producing a strange coupling around a half absent and obscure emotion. Accompanied by her voice-over (derived from Paul Éluard's *Capitale de la douleur*[45]), we see a series of close-ups of the two protagonists alone and staring straight into the camera, as if into a mirror; this is punctuated by shots of them embracing and of them both looking into the camera, all of which emerge and recede into blackness.

This sequence embodies love as something outside of both her and his knowledge and experience, producing a hauntingly ambiguous *pas de deux* that escapes both the clichés of the genre and those of the rational language of the cinema itself (especially obvious through the lack of classical construction in the sequence). This is not an *alienation* of the image but rather its *abstraction*. It does not carry with it a meaning that could resolve the dystopian opposition of man and machine, of logic and love; instead, it uses this opposition to construct a strange and beautiful sequence without cognitive or emotional coherency; not the representation of the new but its actual emergence. It is an opening made by the event of love, an opening onto the outside of the rational logic of *Alphaville* (as dystopian society and as diegetic film) but which has nevertheless been produced by it. The abstraction leading to a new future is in this sense a method rather than a program or a formal device. We do not know what the future is because the future is precisely that part of the now that has no being, but only rather a becoming. It takes place according to our current conditions, but in ways both insignificant and life-changing (here, a love scene), it exceeds them.

Abstraction is not formalism. Each time it appears in a different form, as new, because as Deleuze puts it, the future is the eternal return of difference.

My final example is David Cronenberg's amazing film *Videodrome* (1983), which explores a dystopian vision of the televisual interface. The film shows the disturbing consequences of a tumour – the videodrome – which enters the body of the protagonist (Max) when he watches a pirate broadcast of a scene of torture and rape. The videodrome provokes hallucinations that allow Max to be controlled by shadowy corporate forces and then by a charity treating the TV addiction of the homeless. The videodrome both frees and feeds off the libidinal forces instrumentalised by the mass media – but these forces finally prove uncontrollable by capital and emerge for themselves in an aesthetic that remains stubbornly realist while at the same time subverting any concept of the real.

Although *Videodrome* seems to rudely insist upon the body's presence within the interface's immaterial circulation of information and value,[46] in fact this body is a materialisation of a new form of cybernetic exchange that destroys any distinction between real and virtual, good and evil, and human and technology within the hallucination it creates.[47] The interface offered by the videodrome is neither an alliance with nor a sabotage of corporate television – it is a new kind of broadcast that collapses the dichotomies that both the mass media and its human consumers depend upon. The videodrome is both organic and inorganic, producing a new flesh both in Max's body (which opens to receive a gun and then ejects it so it can become melded to his hand) and in the 'body' of the interface (a television and a videotape that become soft and fleshy organisms).

Similarly, although the film initially distinguishes Max's reality and his hallucinations via script devices, as the film progresses these fall away and it becomes not only impossible to tell them apart but meaningless to try. This point is extremely important in relation to the dialectical understanding of science fiction, which hangs a good deal of the cognitive coherency of the genre (its science) on its realism. However, in *Videodrome*, Cronenberg turns the genre's realism against it, using it to render reality and hallucination indiscernible and so refusing the viewer's alienation any ground. As a result, the final scene of Max's apparent suicide cannot even be understood as a cathartic self-sacrifice, because by this stage even the categories of life and death seem to have dissolved.

Videodrome depicts an absolute phase change emerging through the interface, an unleashing of libidinal drives leading to permanent schizophrenia, a continuous death drive in which capitalist systems are immolated along with any sense of humanity. Max performs a slow swan dive into

nothingness – not as some sort of resigned and nihilistic act, but as the utterly abstract figure of what Foucault calls the 'attraction for the infinite void', a 'fascinating indifference that greets him as if he were not there, a silence too insistent to be resisted and too ambiguous to be deciphered and definitively interpreted'.[48] By the end of *Videodrome* we have moved beyond the paradigm of dialectical negation, not to mention dystopia and all that goes with it, and have entered a world in which images are real hallucinations. As Deleuze describes them, '[h]allucinations are independent, alienated, off-balance, in some sense embryonic, strangely active fossils, radioactive, inexplicable in the present where they surface, and all the more harmful and autonomous'.[49]

Therefore, the great achievement of the film is the way it turns realism and abstraction into the same thing: *a real hallucination*. In this, the films motto 'long live the new flesh' affirms a powerfully inhuman and sublime force that obliterates its conditions in order to conjure an entirely new future. The videodrome's inhuman flesh convulsed by libidinal forces is not outside Max – it is Max, but a Max that has been abstracted from his humanity. This is the sense in which the outside is immanent for Foucault and Deleuze; the outside is matter abstracted from its meaning and form, and so able to become something else. As Deleuze describes it in his book *Foucault*; '[t]he outside is not a fixed limit but a moving matter animated by peristaltic movements, folds and foldings that together make up an inside: they are not something other than the outside, but precisely the inside *of* the outside.'[50] *Videodrome* is, as Foucault put it (without mentioning the film),

a fiction that cancels itself out in the void where it undoes its forms and appears with no conclusion and no image, with no truth and no theatre, with no proof, no mask, no affirmation, free of any centre, unfettered to any native soil; a discourse that constitutes its own space as the outside toward which, and outside of which, it speaks.[51]

Conclusion

Although *Videodrome* has some elements that are dystopian, I would like to instead call it a 'utopian hallucination' in the sense given these terms by Deleuze and Guattari. In *What Is Philosophy?* the power that Nietzsche calls the 'untimely' (and that Foucault called 'genealogy') Deleuze and Guattari call 'utopia'. Utopia is for them an operation (rather than an aim) by which the various processes and structures of the actual world are taken 'to the absolute' and become 'infinite movements' that suppresses any internal

limit, 'so as to summon forth a new earth, a new people'.[52] As a result, they understand the term utopia in the sense Fourier did: 'not as an ideal model, but as revolutionary action and passion'.[53] This is an 'active Utopia'[54] that departs from the historical conditions of the present but does not return; it seeks instead to permanently open the present onto the future. Utopia is therefore an utterly autonomous and abstract hallucination that emerges from the present through a process of immanent and genealogical critique, but in itself it is nothing because it is the becoming of the present qua untimely and 'eternal future'.[55] This utopian future is undetermined by the present but acts entirely within and upon it. Deleuze and Guattari claim (using terms very close to Foucault's) it is an event of an 'absolute deter-ritorialisation at the critical point at which it is connected with the present relative milieu, and especially with the forces stifled by this milieu'.[56]

We might finally propose that these utopian events that appear as the abstract hallucinations of dystopian science fiction cinema are radical examples of what Foucault calls 'heterotopias'. These spaces are 'actually localizable'[57] and 'utterly real', while at the same time being a space 'by which we are drawn outside ourselves, in which, as a matter of fact, the ero-sion of our life, our time, and our history takes place, this space that eats and scrapes away at us, is also heterogeneous space itself'.[58] Foucault mentions one example relevant for us here: the cinema.[59] This would be a heterotopic cinema that works through techniques of abstraction, that 'undermines language' and 'destroys "syntax" in advance'; a cinema that 'contests the very possibility of grammar at its source'.[60] Heterotopian cinema therefore destroys cognitive coherency along with any dialectical critique, taking the all too human on a 'passage to the "outside"'.[61]

This is a passage away from representation. As Foucault states, it is 'language [or cinema] getting as far away from itself as possible', this 'setting "outside of itself"' being the act by which 'it unveils its own being' as a 'gap' or a 'dispersion'.[62] As Guattari identifies it, heterotopian science fiction cinema is 'an alterity grasped at the point of its emergence [...]'.[63] This non-dialectical otherness is the object of all creation; it is the production of the new, the emergence of the unhistorical and eternal future. This is the aim of heterotopian science fiction and as such, its ambition and affect far outstrips dialectical criticism and its cognitive estrangement. As Deleuze writes, once again about Foucault, 'the outside is always an opening on to a future: nothing ends, since nothing has begun, but everything is transformed'.[64]

Post-script

'I hold out my hand to the future.'[65]

Notes

1. There are, of course, other philosophies of the new, perhaps most notably the recent work of Alain Badiou and his concept of the event. However, Badiou's ontology is quite different from the thinkers I draw on here, and so it has different connotations for the study of science fiction. I have used Badiou's event to analyse alien arrival films from the 1950s (see Zepke 2006). Phillip Wenger has also drawn upon Badiou in his discussion of science fiction films (see Wenger 2009).
2. Suvin 1988, p.76.
3. Jameson 2005, p. vii.
4. Jameson argues that science fiction is based on 'the properly utopian dialectic of Identity and Difference' (2005, p. xiv). As a result, the dialectic of identity and difference is the philosophical framework or condition of possibility for any political transformation, as well as the condition of possibility for the future itself. What is new (difference) always appears in relation to what exists (identity), making the existent the condition of possibility for its difference.
5. Jameson 2005, p. 286.
6. Ibid., p. 284.
7. Suvin 1988, p. 76.
8. Jameson 1991, p. 286. Dramatising the stakes of our debate, Jameson attributes this position to a 'Nietzschean wisdom' that no longer fears a dystopian future because 'it will by definition be ours' (Ibid.). As we will see, this is a reading of Nietzsche that directly opposes my own, which instead pits Nietzsche against Jameson's pessimism regarding the Otherness of the future.
9. Jameson 2005, pp. 288-289.
10. Jameson 1981, p. 9.
11. Jameson 2005, p. 172.
12. Freedman 2000, p. 103.
13. Jameson 2005, p. 289.
14. Ibid., p. 232. Science fiction has developed a whole sub-genre to deal with this problem: alien-contact. The classic film in this context is Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (1972). For an account of Stanislav Lem's book *Solaris* (1961) and its figure of an unknowable 'Other' in Lacanian terms, see Freedman 2000, pp. 107-110.
15. For example, Karl Popper in *Open Society* argues that the utopian idea that humans will work together to forge a better future can only be achieved through the external application of force. As a result, he argues, the utopian desire for self-determination can only lead to totalitarian rule (see Moylan 2000a, p. 135).
16. Suvin 1988, p. 80. Tom Moylan gives an interesting account of Suvin's developing views on dystopia (see Moylan 2000).
17. Mythic narrative has nevertheless occasionally been used in a progressive way. The excellent *The World, The Flesh and the Devil* (Ranald MacDougall, 1959), starring an effervescent Harry Belafonte, disrupts the inter-racial romance of the two survivors of nuclear holocaust by

introducing a third party to their domestic bliss: a white man. This reveals Belafonte's reversed racism – he abandons the couple because he cannot imagine that the white woman loves him rather than a man of her own race. Here the darker drive of racism emerges as the essential truth of human beings.

18. *I Am Legend* is a remake of *The Omega Man* (Boris Sagal, 1971), which highlights the anti-family values of the collectivised forces that oppose the hero by not only swathing them in the trappings of black-magic, but by having them refer to themselves as 'the Family'.

19. These examples of films involving the post-apocalyptic re-foundation of traditional values are the tip of an iceberg that extends from early films in the sub-genre (e.g., *Panic in Year Zero* [Ray Milland, 1962]) until today. It also includes those films that are pessimistic about the worth of human values, seeing them as either a shallow and false veneer over the true fact that life is by nature nasty, brutal, and short (e.g., the brilliant pre-apocalyptic film *On the Beach* [Stanley Kramer, 1959], or the harrowing recent film *The Road* [John Hillcoat, 2009]), or insist on the impossibility of a new start (e.g., *Idaho Transfer* [Peter Fonda, 1973]). Similarly, films that base humanity's new start on the negative values of violence and domination (e.g., *No Blade of Grass* [Cornel Wilde, 1970]), or envision a future world inexorably decaying back to its original state of pure evil (in Lars von Trier's first film, *The Element of Crime* [1984], a detective tracking the rapist and killer of young girls either becomes him, or was him from the beginning [it is not clear which]), nevertheless affirm the mythical and eternal nature of these values.

20. Suvin 1988, p. 80.

21. Jameson 1996, p. 55.

22. Nevertheless, a good case could be made for including *Punishment Park* (Peter Watkins, 1971) amongst critical dystopias. This is a film that eschews any attempt to present resolutions (a fact that makes the film more, rather than less, complex) in favour of a quasi-documentary portrayal of state brutality and murder against political protestors.

23. For a fuller discussion of interface films in these terms see Zepke 2011.

24. Moylan 2000a, p. 181.

25. Nietzsche 2006, pp. 7-8.

26. Nietzsche 1997, pp. 63-64.

27. Ibid., p. 95.

28. The ascetic ideal emerges in the third essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals* as the evaluation of things according to an immaterial 'beyond'. As such, it is perpetuated by scientists who '*still have faith in truth*' (Nietzsche 2006, p. 112).

29. Nietzsche 1967, p. 452.

30. Nietzsche 1997, pp. 86-87.

31. Ibid., p. 93. For a detailed account of the relationship between *2001: A Space Odyssey* and Nietzsche see Zepke 2007.

32. Ibid., p. 94.

33. Deleuze 1983, p. 94.

34. Nietzsche 2002, p. 106.

35. Foucault 1977, p. 154.

36. Foucault 2003, p. 9.

37. Ibid., pp. 10-11.

38. Foucault 1977, p. 160.

39. On a formal level, science fiction has seldom explored the potentials of aesthetic abstraction, preferring visual and diegetic realism. One notable exception is *Tron* (Steven Lisberger, 1982), which developed a beautiful and highly abstract monotone look that drew heavily on early cinema. This film offered the nascent sub-genre of interface films and its CGI technology an

exploration of abstraction and its related hallucinations – an offer that has unfortunately been mostly declined. By the time of the sequel *Tron: Legacy* (Joseph Kosinski, 2010), the aesthetics of digital space was firmly entrenched – it was a techno-club.

40. Deleuze 1986, p. 120.
41. Ibid.
42. Deleuze 1989, pp. 12, 46, 55, 167, 263.
43. Referenced in many ways but most obviously in the famous theme music *Also Sprach Zarathustra* by Richard Strauss.
44. It is worth mentioning two other interesting science fiction films that take a different but related approach to abstraction. Derek Jarman's *Jubilee* (1978) and Peter Greenaway's *The Falls* (1980) both create an abstract experience through a technique of proliferating fragmentation. *Jubilee* intercuts a dystopian future London that has descended into punk chaos (with dialogues between the historical Queen Elisabeth and the poet/philosopher John Flood) in a way that makes it impossible to resolve the various narrative threads. Even more radical in this regard, *The Falls* is a quasi-documentary that reports on the eruption of new languages and their special relationship to bird's following an unexplained cosmic event. The film documents a dizzying mutation in human beings and its use of the objective documentary form deliberately foregrounds how this cannot handle, let alone comprehend, the event that exceeds it.
45. Thanks to Arturo Silva for pointing this out.
46. Vindt and Bould (2006) argue that *Videodrome* rejects any transcendence of the flesh by the virtual interface and info-capitalism.
47. This is one of the strongest aspects of the film. Although clearly positioning the sado-masochistic and murderous images of the videodrome as a kind of black hole that sucks Max into it, the hallucination it produces is also strangely liberating and empowering. This is quite different from *Demonlover* (Olivier Assayas, 2002), another film which revolves around the black hole of sado-masochism and murderous images produced by the eponymous website. However, *Demonlover* figures this 'attraction for the void' as a kind of essential entropic drift into which both the narrative and the already soulless characters fall, doomed from the start.
48. Foucault 1998, p. 153.
49. Deleuze 1989, p. 113.
50. Deleuze 1988, p. 97.
51. Foucault 1998, p. 153.
52. For an admirable explication of Deleuze and Guattari's understanding of a utopian future in relation to the science fiction of Octavia Butler, see Bogue 2011.
53. Deleuze and Guattari 1983, p. 63.
54. Ibid., p. 302.
55. Ibid., p. 132.
56. Deleuze and Guattari 1994, p. 100.
57. Foucault 1998, p. 178.
58. Ibid., pp. 177-178.
59. Ibid., p. 179.
60. Foucault 1989, p. xix.
61. Foucault 1998, p. 148.
62. Ibid., p. 149.
63. Guattari 1995, p. 117.
64. Deleuze 1988, p. 89.
65. Guattari 1995, p. 134.

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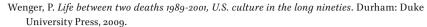
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