

MONTHLY MOVIES

COPYRIGHT (C) T. Rob Brown

Movie Review column for *Dvino Magazine*, a monthly production of *The Laredo Morning Times*.

July 2021

Copyright © 2021 T. Rob Brown, owner TRB Photography & Writing

Dystopia or Utopia?

By T. Rob Brown

From its darkest to its brightest titles, science fiction—in its broadest form—is one of the most diverse genres in film. Action-adventure films set in space, often part of the space opera subgenre, dominate the overall genre; yet there are much darker places where sci-fi treks as we look at dystopian societies of the future.

On one hand, people imagine utopia, a place where we live our best lives in a future filled with perfection, love, understanding, and harmony. The opposite of that is the dystopian future—one where we live in a more believable yet imperfect world; a world filled with injustice, control, fear, misunderstanding, war, and where love is rare.

In the world of film, many critics agree this sub-genre began with 1927's black-and-white historical film "Metropolis." This film is also credited as one of many inspirations for "Star Wars," especially in terms of the droid C-3PO. It depicts a dark world where the workers of society are controlled by corporations while the rich live decadent lives in a seeming utopia.

This film becomes a common topic in critical theory and film study courses as we look at its representation of the contrast between the two castes of society and the chaos that results in the film due to these disparaging differences. Directed by Fritz Lang, this film received an 8.3/10 on the International Movie Database and a 97% Tomatometer score on Rotten Tomatoes along with a 92% audience score.

Historically, it would be some time before another great dystopian film would make its mark on the silver screen. By the late 1960s and into the 1970s, people began to embrace this subgenre with films like “Planet of the Apes” (1968), “THX-1138” (1971)—the breakout film for director George Lucas, “Soylent Green” (1973), and “Logan’s Run” (1975). Each of these dealt with the vision of a dark future society, one far less than ideal. These films make us question each time we give away personal freedoms in exchange for what others might call security or safety. How far is too far?

In professional communication studies, we look at rather a film takes the role of passive or active stimulation. Does it make us think? Does it make us question our own reality or existence? When a film’s message pushes beyond mere entertainment and raises these important questions, it becomes active stimulation rather than mere passive stimulation. This is when a film has true meaning.

By the 1980s, dystopian films began to take on a new sub-subgenre, if you will, as they followed the footsteps of the late great author Philip K. Dick. Dick was a master of the dystopian genre and is often credited as being one of the founding fathers of the cyberpunk sub-subgenre. Many modern dystopian films include cyberpunk elements. You might not necessarily recognize Dick by his book titles: “Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?” or “We Can Remember It for You Wholesale.” On the other hand, you’ll more likely recognize the films based on his works: Harrison Ford in “Blade Runner” (1982), Arnold Schwarzenegger in “Total Recall” (1990) and the 2012 remake, “Screamers” (1995), Gary Sinise in “Imposter” (2001), Tom Cruise in “Minority Report” (2002), Ben Affleck in “Paycheck” (2003), Keanu Reeves—along with Winona Ryder, Robert Downey Jr., and Woody Harrelson—in “A Scanner Darkly” (2006), Matt Damon in “The Adjustment Bureau” (2010), and Ford again in “Blade Runner 2049” (2017). Singlehandedly, he may be the greatest influence on this genre.

While not literally based on his works, films like “The Matrix” (1999), “Dark City” (1998), “eXistenZ” (1999), “Johnny Mnemonic” (1995), “Equilibrium” (2002), and “Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind” (2004) certainly feel like they’ve been inspired by Dick’s stories. Aside from the issues of the dystopian society, Dick often deals with other issues in terms of memories, self-identity, and never quite knowing the identity of the real opposition character of the story. Often, it’s not until the end of the story when we discover who’s really who.

These films make us question, what does it mean to be human? Can artificial life be just as real as human life? At what point do we draw the line between what is real and what is not? Or, does it even matter as much as we think it does? These themes even border on the concept of transhumanism.

“Blade Runner,” in my opinion, is the greatest film of the dystopian genre. Director Ridley Scott expertly crafts a dark society of the future—a world where Earth is the old world and many people left to earn their fortune off world. Meanwhile, there are a group of Nexus 6 model replicants—artificial humans—running around. Rick Deckard (Ford) must put a stop to these replicants before they cause problems for their makers, the Tyrell Corporation.

This film was so influential that it spawned a hit song by the 1990s hard rock band White Zombie: “More Human Than Human” on the “Astro-Creep: 2000—Songs of Love, Destruction and Other Synthetic Delusions of the Electric Head” album. Whew, that’s a long title. “More Human Than Human” is the slogan of the Tyrell Corporation. In the song, lead singer Rob Zombie even identifies himself as a Nexus 1 model replicant.

Outside of the original “Star Wars” trilogy, “Blade Runner” is one of my favorite sci-fi films of all time. It features a superb cast, many of them at the height of their game, giving us a dark vision of the future as only the combined genius of Scott and Dick could provide.

The 1982 classic film, Rated R, received an 8.1/10 on IMDb.com, 90% Tomatometer, and a 91% audience score. It runs 2 hours and 2 minutes. There are several different versions including a Final Cut edition from Scott.

Another great title of the genre is “Children of Men” from 2006. In this one, society is falling apart in 2027 because none of the women have been able to have children for nearly a generation. Schools shut down since there are no children to attend them. After all this time, a single woman finally is able to get pregnant. The future of humanity stands on the edge of a knife.

Theo Faron (Clive Owen) takes it upon himself to protect the pregnant woman, Julian (Julianne Moore), to get her to a safe haven. I found this story original, intriguing, and it raises a lot of questions about sterility and what would happen to humanity if we feared our own ends—not from war, nuclear weapons, or alien onslaught—but from a simple but all-too-real threat: our own mortality.

The R-rated film received a 7.9/10 on IMDB.com, 92% Tomatometer, and an 85% audience score. Runtime: 1 hour and 49 minutes.

Another sub-subgenre to dystopian futures is less specific—it’s when we force other people to fight to the death for our own entertainment, much as the Romans did in the ancient Colosseum. The most famous of this group would be “The Hunger Games” (2012-2015) films. Before that, though, we had “The Running Man” (1987) starring Schwarzenegger and “Battle Royale” (2000).

“The Running Man” is based on the dark mind of famed horror author Stephen King, who wrote the novel as Richard Bachman. People tried for crimes allegedly had a chance to fight for their freedom by entertaining the masses on a live television show hosted by real life’s “Family Feud” and “Match Game” host of the 1970s-1990s era, Richard Dawson. The film is filled with fight scenes and intrigue.

It received a 6.7/10 on IMDB.com, 64% Tomatometer, and 60% audience score. Runtime: 1 hour and 41 minutes. Rated R.

Another sub-subgenre to dystopian futures that you rarely see is the dystopian comedy. Typically, the genre lends itself toward dark and serious films. But one title stands clearly from the others as a piece of comedic satire: “Idiocracy” (2006).

In this film, director Mike Judge (“Office Space” and “Beavis and Butthead”) pits two people of average intelligence, Joe Bowers (Luke Wilson) and Rita (Saturday Night Live alumna Maya Rudolph), against a futuristic society of dimwits. In true satirical form, the film looks at the “dumbing down” of society. It’s a world where water no longer flows in toilets or to water the crops—instead, corporations convinced people that sports drinks are better for those purpose.

From the crazy antics of future U.S. President Dwayne Elizondo Mountain Dew Herbert Camacho (Terry Crews) to the complete lack of legal skills by lawyer Frito (Dax Shepard), this film will have you laughing but still questioning our future on this Earth.

“Idiocracy” received a 6.6/10 on IMDb.com, 74% Tomatometer, and a 60% audience score. Runtime: 1 hour 24 minutes. Rated R.

Other dystopian films to note include “District 9” (2009) by director Neill Blomkamp (“Elysium” (2013) and “Chappie”(2015)) and Robocop (1987).

The newest dystopian future film I recently saw blended itself with the alien invasion sub-genre of sci-fi: “The Tomorrow War.”

This film streams on Amazon Prime and features Chris Pratt (“Guardians of the Galaxy,” “Jurassic World”) as Dan Forrester, a former Iraq war veteran who currently serves as a biology teacher. He is drafted into service again but this time, he’s fighting a war about 30 years into the future to save humanity from what they believe are alien invaders.

I’ve been waiting a while for this one to release. Unlike many arguing over the Hollywood Chrises, I don’t believe Chris Pratt is the worst Chris. Definitely an action film, it features intrigue, family relationship issues, military strategy, a handful of interesting characters, and some pretty cool fight scenes with menacing creatures. It will keep you on your toes with all of its ups and downs. Once the rollercoaster comes to a complete stop, be sure to stick around for a satisfying ending.

Directed by Chris McCay, the July 2021 PG-13 film received a 6.7/10 on IMDB.com, 54% Tomatometer, but a vastly different 81% audience score. The critics and fans aren’t agreeing on this one at all. Runtime: 2 hours and 18 minutes.

“The show must go on.”