

Battling the Bigger Machine-A Sci-fi Film Essay on Dystopias

(By Toshio U.-P.)

Science-fiction narratives and settings often delve into the realm of dystopian society with central characters experiencing difficulties fitting into a harsh or unwelcoming reality. This may be due to conditions and feelings of alienation, enslavement, paranoia and inaccessibility. In the study of four sci-fi films dating back to the 1970s and the 1990s, we will attempt to speak of this societal incongruity in a world gone awry.

In Andrei Tarkovsky's film Solaris, astronaut Kris Kelvin finds the world back on planet Earth hard-to-fathom upon his return from a failed space mission where the surviving crew testify to have witnessed 'a giant life form' taking the shape of a viscous and foggy ocean. While being debriefed at an inquest upon their return, interrogators are persuaded the mission failed due to the crew losing their sanity on board the space station. While Kelvin, the mission's psychologist has flashbacks and visions of his past love life while in space, the viewer is left to ponder whether or not to trust such a main character's perception as he struggles to transition back into a solitary and isolated world filled with many painful memories.

In George Lucas' first feature film THX 1138, the main character bearing the same name as the title, inhabits a highly-surveilled and automated dystopia where strict protocols are in place to assure optimal work performance and to control human-human interactions. When LUH 3417 and THX 1138 engage in amorous relations, the latter labour-slave is soon forced to flee detainment and unfair charges of "drug evasion" and "sexual perversion" to live in the uncharted world of the 'super-structure', far enough away from the controlling presence of the state.

In Brad Bird's first animated feature The Iron Giant, the viewer is taken back into 1950s America where Cold War paranoia and a nuclear arms race with the Soviet Union grips the nation. When a spaceship crashes off the coast of Rockwell, Maine, a young boy named Hogarth Hughes is one of the first to meet the 'giant metal man' who soon becomes a friend and a companion. However, the extra-terrestrial robot, who must consume metal to survive, leaves a trail that calls a government agent to town who has ties to the United States military. Soon, the Iron Giant and his allies must halt a bomb raid when the army is dispatched to counter what they believe is a heavily-armed 'foreign' threat to national security.

In Gattaca, we are introduced to aspiring young astronaut Vincent, who inhabits a world where human DNA is used as the principal indicator of future physical and mental capabilities as well as a determinant of future field of study and employment. Vincent's ambitions soon clash with his genetic 'limitations' when a true DNA sample from his cells has him listed as an 'invalid' whose only available career option is low-class labour. Vincent eventually fights unjust accessibility protocols by faking his

genetic identity to gain access as a 'borrowed ladder' to GATTACA Aerospace Corporation and a year-long space mission to Titan.

While dystopias in science-fiction cinema present significant controls and barriers to the un-fit characters living within them, a desire to rebel from these conditions and live in a more old-fashioned world often arises to challenge the grim, highly-technological reality of their present day. This underclass minority is often struggling with a deep attachment to the happier moments in the past such as a fleeting love connection, is attempting to ease tension amid a fatal arms race, or is stubbornly trying to fit into a world with unjust laws regarding bureaucratic profiling. While the world may change slightly through small acts of subversion, most often, such rebellion hardly has any effect on bringing about the more idyllic conditions of the past or the desired new and better world of the future.

Films:

1. Solaris (1972). Dir. Andrei Tarkovsky. Mosfilm. Soviet Union. 166 min.
2. THX 1138 (1971). Dir. George Lucas. Warner Bros. USA. 86 min.
3. The Iron Giant (1999). Dir. Brad Bird. Warner Bros. USA. 87 min.
4. Gattaca (1997). Dir. Andrew Niccol. Columbia Pictures. USA. 106 min.