Utopias in Nonfiction Film

Simon Spiegel

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Utopianism is an interdisciplinary concept which covers philosophy, sociology, literature, history of ideas, art and architecture, religion, futurology and other fields. While literary utopianism is usually dated from Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), communitarian movements and ideologies proposing utopian ends have existed in most societies through history. They imagine varied ideal beginnings of the species, like golden ages or paradises, potential futures akin to the millennium, and also ways of attaining similar states within real time. Utopianism, in the sense of striving for a much improved world, is also present in many trends in contemporary popular movements, and in phenomena as diverse as films, video games, environmental and medical projections. Increasingly utopia shares the limelight with dystopia, its negative inversion, and with projections of the degeneration of humanity and nature alike. This series will aim to publish the best new scholarship across these varied fields. It will focus on original studies of interest to a broad readership, including, but not limited to, historical and theoretical narratives as well as accounts of contemporary utopian thought, interpretation and action.

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To Margrit, for making it possible

Everything will be alright in the end,
and if it's not alright, it's not the end.
– Mark Kermode

We will keep going, we will keep going, because there is no such thing
as fate. Because we never really come to the end.
– Kim Stanley Robinson, *The Ministry for the Future*

Preface

While the past year certainly won't be remembered as a utopian period, there was still much talk about utopias and dystopias. Especially during the beginning of the pandemic, the general feeling was, at least in Western Europe, one of moving closer together—albeit only spiritually and not physically—and of confidence that our governments would try to combat the virus; maybe not necessarily in the best way, but at least with the best intentions. During the various lockdowns, there was initially also much talk about whether the decreed pause would lead to reflection and introspection and consequently to fundamental changes in how we live our lives. Unsurprisingly, that didn't happen. Inertia is too great, and, above all, the vested interests in our current system are too strong—unjust as it may be. Both the hope for change and the feeling of solidarity have faded and at least partly given way to conspiracy theories and quarrels about face masks.

Utopias propose alternatives to the existing order; they present elaborate schemes for running a state, describing the laws and offices we need for a just society. But if there is one thing we've learned during lockdown, it is that much of this is idle talk, that, in the end, nurses, bus drivers, postal workers, garbage collectors and supermarket cashiers are of greater systemic importance than deep thinkers who believe they know how things should be done.

Fiction has insufficiently prepared us for the current situation: neither global pandemics nor utopian upheavals play out the way we would expect from countless novels and films. While many utopias want to get rid of useless professions such as bankers and lawyers, they rarely talk about nurses or supermarket cashiers.

Which is not to say that utopias have it all wrong. In a piece for *The Guardian* that is equally smart, funny and deeply moving, Italian writer Francesca Melandri wrote about her experience of lockdown and how, ultimately, everything comes down to class. As Melandri sharply observes, it makes all the difference whether you suffer through lockdown 'in a house with a pretty garden or in an overcrowded housing project' or, as I might add, whether you happen to be the US president who has the latest miracle cure at his disposal or a refugee in a camp with no access to proper medical care. This is the point where utopias become relevant again. The question of how goods and services can be equally and justly distributed, how the members of a society can support each other in the best way, is at the very core of utopian thinking.

Writing an academic study and having it translated is a minor task compared to the building of a just society. Still, in order to do it, I also relied on the support of many helpful people. I am most grateful to Margrit Tröhler who supported the original research project, *Alternative Worlds: The Political-Activist Documentary Film*, generously funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation, which was the basis for this book, as well as this translation.

Sincere thanks also go to Andrea Reiter, my fearless comrade-in-arms in the aforementioned research project, to Thomas Schölderle whose *Utopia und Utopie* was one of my central references and who served as an invaluable intellectual sparring partner, as well as to my fantastic companion Peter Seyferth.

Utopian studies is a vast field of research, which touches on a wide range of academic disciplines. Especially for the analyses in Part II, I repeatedly had to rely on the advice of experts from other fields. One of the most beautiful experiences during the writing of this book was that even complete strangers would respond to my inquiries and often agreed without hesitation to read parts of the manuscript.

Chapter 6 on the films by defa-futurum required extensive archival research, something I have never done before. I could never have finished it without the help of Barbara Barlet, Kirsten Otto, Gerhard Wiechmann, Sonja Fritzsche, Evan Torner, Karlheinz Steinmüller and the team at the Federal Archives in Berlin Lichterfelde.

Caspar Battegay served as my expert for the Zionist utopias in Chap. 7, while Bernd Zywietz provided valuable information on ISIS videos. Equal thanks must go to Eva-Maria Seng for her critical input on Chap. 8, as well

as to Seraina Winzeler and Isabel Krek from Cinémathèque suisse who helped me in my research for Chap. 9.

Among my many colleagues at the Department of Film Studies at the University of Zurich who in one way or another have contributed to this book, Daniela Casanova and Philipp Brunner deserve special mention for constantly supplying me with new literature and films, respectively.

For this English version, my thanks go to Gregory Claeys for making it possible, to Emily Russel for shepherding me through the whole process and especially to my diligent translators Alexandra Berlina and Susie Trenka.

I also want to thank my friends and colleagues at the various conferences of the Association for Research in the Fantastic, the Utopian Studies Society and the International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts who provided feedback, critique and encouragement, as well as Ralf Bülow, Gerry Canavan, Matthias Christen, Jens Eder, Tereza Fischer, Barbara Flückiger, Marcy Goldberg, Ken Hanshew, Andreas Heyer, Jörg Hartmann, Peter Kuon, Susanna Layh, Robert Leucht, Sascha Mamczak, Serguei A. Oushakine, Ivo Ritzer, Franz Rottensteiner, Lyman Tower Sargent, Alan Schink, Simon Schlauri, Lars Schmeink, Jens Schröter, Hans Ulrich Seeber, Sherryl Vint, Ursula von Keitz, Rhys Williams, Annina Zuberbühler, my parents and, of course, Jason Isaacs, who told me how to write a professorial thesis.

Not only do utopias rarely talk about garbage collectors and supermarket cashiers, they also have little to say about the challenges of family life. They trust that the main problems can be solved by a few simple rules. Again, reality proves to be much more complex. Even without lockdown, running a household is almost as challenging as designing a better society. Few things are as important for our individual happiness though as the people closest to us. For many utopian moments, I am eternally grateful to my wife Nadine and our sons Linus and Mischa.

Greencity, Zurich, Switzerland, during the second wave

Praise for *Utopias in Nonfiction Film*

"Comprehensive and thorough, *Utopias in Nonfiction Film* takes a new direction in its surprise application to documentary that has the potential to shake up the field."

—Jane Gaines, *Columbia University, USA*

"Spiegel has introduced a new sub-genre to utopian studies, the documentary film. The book covers an impressive range of films, making the book one of the few truly international and comparative works in utopian studies."

—Lyman Tower Sargent, *University of Missouri-St. Louis, USA*

"Simon Spiegel's magisterial overview of utopian documentaries and nonfiction films is a treasure trove of information and unearths many forgotten and half-forgotten films, providing perceptive discussions of sidelined movies that deserve his (and our) critical scrutiny."

—Eckart Voigts, *University of Braunschweig – Institute of Technology, Germany*

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Introduction

Countless myths and religious tales are testament to the fact that human beings have always dreamed of a better world. More than 500 years ago, this longing took on a specific literary guise when the English humanist Thomas More published his *Utopia* in 1516. Although it took some time until other authors caught on, More's creation proved to be extremely successful. In the ensuing centuries, many have followed suit and came up with their own utopian designs.

Is today's world better than the one More lived in? The verdict highly depends on the aspect we focus on. There is no doubt that the distribution of wealth is grotesquely unequal: Half of humanity combined owns less than 1 per cent of the world's wealth, while the richest per cent possesses 45 per cent of all assets.[1] Each day, thousands of people have to take refuge from war, hunger and injustice, and millions who suffer poverty are forced to scrape by with degrading, often perilous jobs. Even in the affluent West, where the situation is much better than in most parts of the world, it is still often one's social background that determines success and prosperity.

But there are also positive things to report: Infant mortality, extreme poverty and illiteracy have decreased significantly in the last decades, while the average life span has doubled in the past century; the worldwide level of education and vaccination coverage have also been increasing for years.[2] In addition, crime rates have been dropping since the 1990s, at least in the

Western world.[3] According to psychologist Steven Pinker, we now live 'in the most peaceable era in our species' existence'.[4]

It may be because of these very different views of the world that the concept of utopia is currently very present but also highly controversial. Commentators in newspaper articles and online take turns asking for new utopias, lamenting their death or celebrating their disappearance. While there is no consensus on whether utopias are to be welcomed or dismissed, they seem impossible to ignore. Academic research also proves to be very lively: utopian studies are experiencing a veritable boom, and the sheer number of new publications has become almost unmanageable.

What is surprisingly absent in this discussion though is the medium of film. Or rather: film is normally only mentioned in the context of the alleged dominance of dystopias. Since science fiction has risen to become Hollywood's blockbuster genre of choice, dystopian films are now one of the cornerstones of the US film industry. Hollywood is often called a dream factory, yet it hardly ever deals with utopias.

The lack of utopian films is often regarded as a consequence of our dire times. But it is by no means a new development. Although there is a long and rich tradition of literary utopias, no corresponding genre exists in cinema. This is not really surprising, since fiction films are not well suited for positive utopias; the reasons for this will be analysed in Chap. 3.

The dominance of dystopian films is also evident in academic literature. There are very few studies that deal with positive cinematic utopias; here too, the focus is on dystopias. What seems to be completely forgotten in this context is that the medium of film is in no way limited to fiction. Yet nonfiction films have so far been ignored in utopian studies. This is where the present study comes into play. Documentaries and propaganda are, as I will explain later, much better suited for utopias than fiction films. Although research has not paid much attention to this field, numerous films that are much closer to literary utopias than any fiction film have been produced. These utopian nonfiction films are the focus of this book.

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This study is divided in two parts. Part 1 is devoted to basic theoretical concepts. Chapter 2 gives an overview of utopian studies and defines, based on More's *Utopia*, the utopian genre. While the focus is first on literary utopias, Chap. 3 then turns to film. Here, I lay out the basic argument why nonfiction film is much better suited for utopias than fiction

film. Chapter 4 is then devoted to nonfiction films and the question of how this form can best be defined; Roger Odin's concept of semio-pragmatics will be central in this context. In Chap. 5, I bring the various strands together to propose a semio-pragmatics of utopia.

Based on the theoretical deliberations in part 1, I turn to various groups of nonfiction films in part 2. Since there has hardly been any research on utopian nonfiction film, my study aims to be a pioneering work. For this reason, I have no intention to cover a specific type or tradition of documentary or propaganda film in exhaustive detail. Rather, my aim is to roughly stake out the terrain using significant examples. As a consequence, my corpus is quite eclectic and very diverse—both historically and geographically.

Quite deliberately, each chapter follows a different approach in regard to content and methodology. In sum, the four chapters should give an idea of the richness of utopian film.

*   *   *

Although the utopian film is not as rare as often thought, it is by no means a common form. The majority of films I look at are not well known, still, many of them are freely available online. All films that I could find online can be accessed at www.utopia2016.ch/bilder-einer-besseren-welt. While the quality of the versions available is sometimes subpar, they should help to follow my analyses.

When mentioned for the first time, films are cited with their original and English title as well as the name of the director, year of release and country of production; on later mentions, only the original (short) title is given. Film titles are printed in SMALL CAPS, while literary works are in *italics*. Unless otherwise indicated, translations are my own.

Individual parts of this book have been published in English before. The central concept as laid out in Chaps. 2 and 3 was developed in 'Some Thoughts on the Utopian Film' in *Science Fiction Film & Television* 10.1 (2017): 53–79. The parts of Chap. 6 on the Zionist propaganda film LAND OF PROMISE and on ISIS propaganda videos have been published as 'The Utopia of the Holy Land: The Zionist Propaganda Film LAND OF PROMISE as Utopian Text', *Transgressive Utopianism: Essays in Honor of Lucy,* eds, Raffaella Baccolini and Lyman Tower Sargent (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2021), 163–179; and as 'The Utopia of the Caliphate: Reading ISIS Propaganda Videos as Utopian Texts', *Utopia and Reality: Documentary, Activism and*

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Utopian Concepts

On Utopia

Though utopias have been declared dead on several occasions, research into the genre is proving to be extremely lively and has split up into numerous sub-disciplines that differ in subject matter and method and that are sometimes even diametrically opposed to each other. For the individual researcher, the field is hardly manageable. Accordingly, it is not my aim here to give a comprehensive overview but rather to develop the concepts relevant to the investigation at hand.

One consequence of the different approaches is the lack of a uniform nomenclature, which is already apparent in the very term 'utopia': the neologism coined by Thomas More in his *Utopia*, published in Latin in 1516, can mean very different things depending on the context. Apart from the colloquial—usually pejorative—meaning of a fanciful idea or cloud cuckoo land, several traditions have developed in academic research. The differences between these are not trivial; in fact, they touch on fundamental issues. Even the question of what kind of object should be called 'utopia' is open to debate: is it a literary genre, a political concept or a general philosophical principle?

In a now-classic essay, Lyman Tower Sargent distinguishes between 'Utopian literature [...]; communitarianism; and Utopian social theory'.[1] Thus, to him, utopian literature is only one of several possible conceptions and research fields related to utopia. This field is the focus of the present study, which explicitly defines 'utopia' as a literary or film genre. In this, I

follow Rick Altman, who describes genres as a group of films that share certain semantic elements—typical characters, props and settings, as well as stylistic parameters—and a 'syntax'—that is, mainly particular plot structures.[2] However, genres are not objectively inscribed into a text. They are conventional terms shaped and changed by usage. The production and reception of a genre always takes place against the background of *genre awareness.*[3]

Genres neither exist as timeless platonic entities, nor are they stable over long periods of time and across different cultures. Producers, recipients, critics and scholars use genre categories in different ways, contributing to ongoing *regenrification*. In his model, Altman therefore emphasises the pragmatic aspect, that is, the question of when and how particular genres are assigned to particular films, and by whom. He understands genres as *multi-discursive* entities shaped by different 'user groups'. For genre studies, this means that strict, supposedly objective taxonomies cannot adequately describe genres and their historical development. What we need instead is a historical-discursive approach that takes into account the various *generic users.*[4] As we will see later, utopia is a particularly flexible genre, which has undergone significant changes over the course of its 500-year history.

Proceeding from Altman's model, we have to be aware that it is quite impossible to *discover* a hitherto unknown genre. Genres do not exist per se but are defined by their respective *generic users.* It is important to note here that there is no tradition of utopias as a film genre (as I will discuss in more detail). Accordingly, I am not claiming that there is a distinct genre of utopian film 'in the wild' that merely needs to be tracked down. Instead, I suggest that it could be fruitful to call certain films—those that have semantic and syntactic similarities with literary utopias—filmic utopias. To me, the genre of utopia is primarily useful as a heuristic category.

In defining utopia, I am guided by the model developed by political scientist Thomas Schölderle in his *Utopia und Utopie.*[5] Beginning with More's *Utopia,* Schölderle surveys the history and study of utopian literature to examine whether the text that gave the genre its name serves well as a prototype. In literary studies, it is common practice to refer to More's text as the origin of the genre; Schölderle's achievement lies not so much in introducing a fundamentally new concept but in combining the findings of literary studies and political science into a manageable model, which also happens to be suitable for film studies.

2.1   More's *Utopia*

Since More's *Utopia* is crucial to my investigation, I first take a brief look at the *truly golden little book, no less useful than entertaining* ('vere aureus, nec minus salutaris quam festivus'), as it is called in the subtitle, and its various interpretations.[6] *Utopia* is divided into two books. The overarching framework is a conversation in Antwerp. The real Thomas More was in Bruges as a royal envoy and indeed took advantage of an interruption in the negotiations to visit Peter Gilles, the town clerk of Antwerp, in the summer of 1515. In *Utopia*, it is a character named Peter Gilles who introduces the first-person narrator, Thomas Morus, to the widely travelled Raphael Hythlodaeus. *Utopia* essentially consists of a dialogue between these three characters, with Hythlodaeus speaking by far the most, while Gilles contributes almost nothing. The conversation in the first book (written after the second) discusses whether learned men like Hythlodaeus should go into the service of princes while also dealing with the social situation in England. It is in the longer second book that Hythlodaeus reports in detail on the island of Utopia,[7] which he had come across as Amerigo Vespucci's travelling companion in the New World and whose political and social organisation he deems exemplary in many ways.

In a long monologue—only at the very end does the first-person narrator take the floor again—Hythlodaeus describes the political and social institutions of the Utopian community. The layout of the cities is described, as are administration, agriculture, marriage laws, warfare and religion. Reason is the highest commandment, and everything is organised in accordance with it. On this basis, a kind of moneyless communism is practiced on Utopia, with the state ensuring that all citizens receive what they need to live. Since people's basic needs are met, and everyone owns as much as the next person, envy, greed and resentment are unknown to the Utopians. This also eliminates the cause of most crimes.

In Hythlodaeus's depiction, Utopia appears as an almost ideal community; he only criticises its religion. Since the island is cut off from the outside world, its inhabitants are unaware of Christianity at the time of his arrival. There is—restricted—religious freedom. Aggressive missionary work is frowned upon and severely punished. Everyone may believe what he or she wants, although it is clear to the Utopians that only religions that acknowledge a higher being and the immortality of the soul are reasonable. Consequently, atheism is not tolerated, and the Utopians prove receptive to the teachings of Christianity.

The big question that has always driven research on *Utopia*—and which has a direct influence on how the genre is conceptualised—is whether and to what degree the order outlined in *Utopia* corresponds to More's ideal. Is he really describing what he considers 'a republic's best state', as the subtitle of the third edition says,[8] or does he pursue other aims with his writing?

Commonly, 'utopia' is used to describe a perfect—or at least a better—state, and numerous interpreters have read and continue to read More's text as a largely straightforward description of a desideratum. However, there is much evidence to suggest that the utopian order does not fully correspond to its author's ideal. For instance, it is often overlooked that for the devout Catholic and later martyr More—and for all utopian writers of the early modern period—original sin must have precluded the realisation of ideal conditions.[9] Moreover, the religious pluralism of the Utopians was hardly to his liking. More would never have endorsed shared property, either: on the contrary, he expressly advocates private ownership in various writings. Nor is there any other indication in More's life that he ever worked towards a different social order, even though as a dignitary under Henry VIII—he had made it as far as Lord Chancellor—he would have had the opportunity to do so.

But even if we turn away from the real author and his possible intentions, concentrating entirely on the text instead, there are numerous clues that suggest a different reading. The first of these is the title, *Utopia*, which can be understood as both 'οὐ-τόπος' (non-place) and 'εὖ-τόπος' (good place); in English, both versions sound the same.[10] The very title thus indicates the unreality of what is being told, as well as questioning its value. The name Raphael Hythlodaeus is also ambiguous: while the first name refers to God's ambassador, the archangel Raphael, the surname can be translated both as 'enemy of gossip' and as 'buffoon narrator',[11] two readings that lead to very different interpretations of the narrative. And even if we go with 'enemy of gossip', things do not become much clearer. The first-person narrator, Morus (the Latinised version of the author's own name can also be translated as 'fool'[12]), approves of some Utopian conventions but remains sceptical to the end, never becoming an unconditional supporter of the Utopian order.[13] And finally, on closer inspection, some of the Utopian institutions appear highly problematic.

One example of this is warfare. The beginning of the section on war emphasises the peaceful nature of the islanders: 'War, as an activity fit only for beasts and yet practiced by no kind of beast so constantly as by man,

they regard with utter loathing' (199). Consequently, they do everything to avoid military conflicts 'by stratagem and cunning' (203), by way of bribery or the use of mercenaries. But if fighting cannot be avoided, they prove to be accomplished warriors. No surprise here, since their 'men and women alike assiduously exercise themselves in military training' (201).

This is where contradictions first become apparent. In view of the Utopians' supposed peacefulness, the number of permissible reasons for war seems downright absurd. The inhabitants of Utopia support friendly nations in the event of war and even lead vengeance campaigns for them; they also liberate oppressed peoples from tyrants. But that's not all—if their island is threatened by overpopulation, 'they enroll citizens out of every city and, on the mainland nearest them, wherever the natives have much unoccupied and uncultivated land, they found a colony under their own laws' (137). The colonised peoples must adapt to Utopian customs: 'The inhabitants who refuse to live according to their laws, they drive from the territory which they carve out form themselves. If they resist, they wage war against them' (137). Thus, the alleged humanism ultimately reverts to 'a cunning and highly Machiavellian foreign policy'.[14] As Schölderle notes: 'Like European rulers, the Utopians cry out against war at the top of their voices and invoke their love of peace—only to find all sorts of reasons to fight after all'.[15]

In literary studies as well as in research on More and humanism, it is now largely undisputed that these ambiguities are intentional. More was a great lover of ancient satires and wordplay (he translated several works by the Roman satirist Lucian), and his writing, originally intended for a small circle of humanists that included Erasmus of Rotterdam, obviously follows this tradition. This can be seen in the numerous descriptive names, for instance: The capital of Utopia is called Amaurotum ('foggy or shadowy city', probably alluding to London) and is ruled by Prince Ademos ('without a people'); the city's river is named Anydrus ('waterless'). Understanding these puns requires knowledge of Greek, which More's original audience surely had.

Unlike other political scientists, Schölderle draws on literary studies to argue convincingly that *Utopia* is not the draft of an ideal state. Consequently, he argues, the text is not conceived with implementation in mind; it is not intended as a political programme. But what is it then? The reverse conclusion, that More was merely engaging in an extended literary hoax, would be just as wrong. This becomes evident in the first part of the book, which discusses the period's social problems in England, among

other things. Here, Hythlodaeus vigorously pleads against responding to the increasing number of thieves with ever harsher punishments. The rise in crime, he says, has its origins primarily in the behaviour of wealthy land-owners, who are using more and more common land for sheep breeding and textile production, thus depriving small farmers of their cultivable land. The sheep 'begin now […] to be so greedy and wild that they devour human beings themselves and devastate and depopulate fields, houses, and towns' (65 sqq.). As a result, many smallholders have no choice but to beg or steal.

In addition to pointedly criticising the political situation of the time, this passage also contains other elements that are characteristic of *Utopia* as a whole: for example, the conviction that crime depends on social conditions, and thus, that political decisions can influence individual behaviour. The image of sheep devouring humans is an example of a satirical reversal, as is typical of the whole book, and here aimed directly at a political grievance. While the second book alone might pass for a jocular thought experiment, the first book's intention of social critique is hard to deny. The fact that More wrote large parts of the first book after the second one[16] additionally underlines the serious aim of the work as a whole.

Norbert Elias speaks of the need to maintain a balance between two extremes when interpreting *Utopia*; between

> the idea that the plan of a better society developed in it had the same closeness to reality as Marx's *Communist Manifesto* and the opposite view that this plan was no more than a 'merry jest', without any relationship to reality.[17]

It is precisely in the interplay of the two parts, the realistic 'recto' and the utopian 'verso',[18] that the true purpose of *Utopia* becomes apparent: it is a serious critique of contemporary conditions, but at the same time, it creates a counterimage that continually oscillates between ideal and satire. The non-place Utopia is contrasted with the reality of More's time—which was anything but perfect. It's impossible to pinpoint with absolute certainty what position the text or its author takes in relation to the narrative, but it is clear that, in some central points, *Utopia* does not represent More's ideal.

Scholars tend to regard the points on which Hythlodaeus and the first-person narrator agree as More's own opinions.[19] Other passages—for example, those about the Utopians forging their slaves' chains and their

chamber pots from gold—are obviously meant as satire. Then again, some parts of the text resist conclusive interpretation. For instance, what should we make of the fact that the Utopians are allowed to examine each other naked before marriage? This can hardly be a serious suggestion, and if the passage has a satirical intention, its purpose remains obscure. Perhaps it is simply a jest without deeper meaning? No matter how we read individual passages, there is much to suggest that the various elements of More's utopian counterproposal have different functions and that the text quite deliberately oscillates between direct criticism, satirical exaggeration and, occasionally, pure silliness.

Elizabeth McCutcheon argues that More's 'aesthetics of honest deception' is deliberately designed to be ambiguous,[20] that his goal was *not* to send a clear 'message'.[21] 'It would be both misguided and impossible to explain away the ambiguities, contradictions, and formal paradoxes of *Utopia*',[22] she writes. *Utopia* presents a (supposedly) rational countermodel to reality. How to judge this counterimage in detail, however, is left to the attentive reader; its real value therefore lies in the discussion it triggers. To return to Schölderle, More is thus 'not concerned with transferring the fiction he describes into reality but with returning to reality with an eye sharpened by contemplating Utopia'.[23] The very fact that *Utopia* questions the status quo by designing an alternative is more important than the particular political order that this alternative suggests.

Because of its 'mirror function',[24] any utopia is to a large extent bound up with the context of its origin, and consideration of the historical background is therefore indispensable to the analysis of any utopian ideal.[25] Many modern-day scholars tend to envision the author of *Utopia* as 'too modern'. Thus, religious tolerance on Utopia is often interpreted as a sign of More's progressiveness. But the real More—who in his later writings rages against Lutherans and other 'heretics', who approves of torture and the death penalty, and who finally accepts death on the scaffold for his faith—would probably not have conformed to this assessment. Reception, too, changes with the historical context: many of the classic utopias that represented better societies in the eyes of contemporary readers appear as rather uninviting totalitarian states today.

With *Utopia*, More created a model for the entire genre; to what extent his successors followed him in their intentions, but also in terms of ambiguity and polyphony, varies from case to case. Only very few, however, engage in such elaborate confusion as More does in his paradigmatic text.

Arguably, even fewer intend their utopias as political programmes to be implemented exactly as described.[26]

   At the end of his study, Schölderle presents a table listing constitutive, typical and possible characteristics of utopia (Table 2.1). For him, utopias are always 'counterfactual fictions',[27] which typically (but not necessarily)

Table 2.1 Schölderle's matrix of criteria, Schölderle, *Utopia und Utopie*, p. 479

Criterion of distinction	Form	Content	Function	Intention
Mandatory	• Contrafactual fiction	• Universal socio-political counter-image • Ideality	• Critical description of the status quo • Putting reality into perspective	• Social criticism • Normative tendency (intention to improve)
		• Rationality	• Thought experiment • Horizons of possibilities	
Typical e.g.	• Literary fiction	• Isolation	• Social and technical innovations	• Not meant to be realised
	• Narrative frame	• Static design	• Instruction and education	• Meant to inspire discussion
	• Includes a variety of forms	• Collectivism	• Capacity to warn/detect early on	
		• Homogeneity		
Contingent e.g.	• Literary form (satire, dialogue, travel narrative, novel, exchange of letters, diary)	• Model of transformation	• Entertainment	• Will to put draft into effect
	• Philosophical treatise			• Philosophy of history/social prognostics/
	• Idealised draft of constitution			• Blueprint for political action
Method of interpretation	Text-immanent approach			Hermeneutic/ biographic

appear in narrative form. However, Schölderle's concept of fiction is rather vague; in particular, his distinction between fictional and narrative forms is not very useful. Since I will address fiction theory in more detail in Chap. 4, a brief clarification will suffice here: Utopias concern things—namely, utopian states—that do not (yet) exist in the author's reality, and they usually describe these states in the form of a narrative. However, the narrative framework is not a mandatory prerequisite.

As an example of a non-narrative utopia, Schölderle cites Gerrard Winstanley's *The Law of Freedom* (1652).[28] Winstanley was a London cloth merchant and Protestant reformer in Oliver Cromwell's time. In a long pamphlet titled *The Law of Freedom in a Platform,* which was addressed to Cromwell, he outlines an alternative social order. Like More, he criticises the behaviour of wealthy landowners, which in his eyes encourages crime. One of his central demands is the abolition of private property; in addition, 'his writing contains almost all the central topoi of a classic utopia'.[29] However, Winstanley refrains from framing his treatise with a narrative. Moreover, unlike More, he envisioned his new order not just as a counterimage to reality but as a political programme to be put into practice.[30] From 1649 to 1650, Winstanley and his fellow campaigners actually tried to realise their ideas in a colony on St. George's Hill—to no avail. Both the lack of a narrative framework and the intention to realise the project are atypical of utopias. Nevertheless, Winstanley's tractate resembles utopias in several respects: he 'remains true to their critical thrust, develops a universal and rational alternative model and refrains from recommending violent means'.[31]

Utopias 'tend to be universalised embodiments of ideal-typical, rational and socio-political counterimages'.[32] Schölderle uses the term *ideality*, not so much to suggest that utopias necessarily reflect the ideals of their author—More's text, for instance, does not—but that they are ideal types in a Weberian sense. In other words, all levels of the envisioned state are governed by an overarching principle in a consistent and contradiction-free (and thus rational) way. This is related to the *universality* of the utopian design. The point here is not to improve individual areas but to redesign and reorganise society as a whole. This absolute and holistic aspect reveals the unreal, model-like character of utopias while also accounting for readers' fascination with—or distaste for—the genre. For Schölderle, *Utopia* is an attempt 'to playfully explore pure reason as a principle of state and social policy'.[33] The entire organisation of the Utopian society is based on utilitarianism, which has numerous positive

effects in economic and social terms but also questionable consequences in areas such as warfare.

2.2   Utopian Topoi

More's *Utopia* provides the model that all utopias draw on to some degree. But it is hardly surprising that the genre has evolved a good deal in over 500 years, producing various subgenres, such as the *robinsonade*,[34] *the mirror for princes*[35] or the *bildungsroman*.[36] Still, a number of core elements remain present throughout, notwithstanding the many changes, especially since the beginning of the twentieth century. Be it Charlotte Perkins Gilman's feminist utopia *Herland* (1915), B. F. Skinner's behaviourist utopia *Walden Two* (1948) or Ernest Callenbach's ecological *Ecotopia* (1975)—the recourse to the classic tradition and its tropes is always recognisable.[37] This applies not least to *critical utopias* (see the end of this chapter), which subject the classic model to a fundamental critique. Yet here, too, the model remains present throughout.

In what follows, I will outline the central building blocks of a classic utopia, that is, its semantic and syntactic elements in Altman's sense. In essence, I will follow Schölderle's approach. Although one may argue about which aspects are constitutive versus merely typical, his model proves extremely useful, especially in regard to texts such as *The Law of Freedom* as well as critical utopias, which sometimes deviate considerably from the original *Utopia*.

An important prerequisite for the success of any utopia is *isolation*. The early examples are all *spatial utopias*, mostly on remote islands in as yet unexplored parts of the world. This spatial isolation is constitutive for More: Utopia was originally a peninsula, but its founder, the legendary King Utopos, ordered a wide trench to be dug and thus artificially cut off the island from the mainland. The utopian state exists as a self-sufficient entity, isolated from the potentially harmful outside world, and exchange with other peoples is reduced to a minimum. This artificial seclusion makes the utopia a decidedly worldly entity, in contrast to religious and mythical ideas of a better world. At the same time, it shows the experimental character of the utopian project: like a laboratory, the isolated location creates a controlled environment whose 'results' can be studied.[38]

Equally characteristic of the classic utopia is its *static* design. Society and the course of history are not understood as constantly changing but rather as largely rigid phenomena; only the smallest alterations are

possible. Although the selection of the leaders is often described in detail, their function is usually purely administrative.[39] The political process has largely been abolished, since no fundamental changes are necessary. This can also be seen in the way the authors treat the emergence of the utopian state—the phase before the utopian order is fully established. If it really were a matter of implementing the utopian blueprint, this would actually be the most interesting phase. But the reader usually receives only a very vague account of a utopia's birth—another indication that the goal is not to realise the utopia but to compare reality to a smoothly running comprehensive model.

There are no idlers in Utopia. Everyone works according to their mental and physical condition. Since work is equally distributed, and since many useless trades have disappeared, the daily working hours can be massively reduced: More pegs the number at six, and some of his successors go even lower. Money is abolished on Utopia and profit-oriented trade is presented as superfluous, since everyone gets what they need to live anyway. The rejection of all luxury goes hand in hand with *common property*; clothing and houses tend to be uniform and practical. Meals are taken together; education is provided by the state. In many utopias, collectivism leads to a virtual abolition of privacy; in some cases, even reproduction is controlled by the authorities. Eugenic tendencies appear in utopias early on.[40]

Uniformity is also reflected in the structure of the cities. As More writes: 'The person who knows one of the cities will know them all, since they are exactly alike insofar as the terrain permits' (117). Although this is not yet apparent in early illustrations (Fig. 2.1a, b), the cities on Utopia are square and largely symmetrical. The tendency towards symmetry is additionally reinforced by More's successors. The solar city described in *Civitas Solis* (*The City of the Sun,* 1602) by the Dominican Tommaso Campanella is round and protected by seven city walls.[41] Johann Valentin Andreae's *Christianopolis* (1619) has a similar design.[42] This tendency towards geometrisation also points to the model character of the designs (see beginning of Chap. 8).

Even the inhabitants of the utopian state prove to be uniform. This point is both central and problematic: the design of a conflict-free society requires a utopian human being. The utopian order can only function if it is accepted unconditionally by all citizens. In positive terms, this means that all inhabitants must be intelligent and reasonable enough to recognise that the ruling order is the best of all possible systems. In less friendly

Fig. 2.1 (a–b) Illustrations of the *Utopia* editions of 1516 (left) and 1518 (right)

terms: 'The utopian subject is a filler exclusively serving the needs of the whole'.[43]

As Martin d'Idler has pointed out, the idea of a *New Man*, that is, 'a radically changed human being', who is 'above all ethically but often also physically and mentally distinct from preceding humans', is 'a pillar of utopian designs'. Circularly, the utopian order both presupposes altruistic humans and creates the conditions for this 'human refinement'.[44]

Education is of eminent importance. It guarantees that the utopian state is continuously supplied with suitable citizens. They not only lack negative qualities such as envy, hate and greed but also deviant ideas, that is, any form of originality.[45] As a result, 'utopian characters are boringly healthy and beautiful'[46]; or as Stephen Greenblatt puts it in regard to *Utopia*: 'Utopian institutions are cunningly designed to reduce the scope of the ego'.[47] Dramaturgically, the characters are passive; they 'have almost no effect on their environment—but instead of reflecting their disempowerment, this lack of agency signifies the perfect harmony between their desires and their surroundings'.[48]

There is no difference between the needs of the community and those of the individual, since utopias claim to know and satisfy *the true human needs*. The distinction between *true* and *false* needs (such as excessive luxury) exists in any classic utopia, at least implicitly. The utopian design can only claim to be universal because it is based on *'true human nature'*.[49] Within the logic of the genre, the recognition of true human needs and the refinement of humanity (as emphasised by d'Idler) are not contradictory.

What is rarely spelled out is the fate of those who oppose the utopian order. Especially in the initial phase of the state, before everyone has benefited from utopian betterment, there must inevitably be people who still have 'false' needs and who dislike the new order. But the classic utopias remain silent on this—not too surprisingly, as there is simply no room for deviant thinking in a utopia. Thus, the classic utopia plants the seed that will grow into the *dystopia* of the twentieth century.

* * *

Schölderle's model offers a useful framework for describing utopias and related forms. As this should sufficiently outline the object of my study, I will not dwell on the differences to other genres in any detail. However, one distinction does seem necessary, especially with regard to the medium of film: the relationship between utopia and science fiction (SF).

The close connection between SF and utopia is undisputed, but there is no agreement on the exact nature of the relationship. In the past, SF research has often sought to elevate the genre by referring to canonical predecessors such as Plato, More or Bacon. SF was thus declared the direct and logical successor to utopia. The fact that these 'ancestral works' are probably unknown to most SF authors and readers and that their influence is at best indirect was deliberately overlooked. As for utopian studies, there are significant national differences: while German-speaking scholars sometimes seem determined to draw the sharpest possible line between SF and utopia, Anglophone scholarship prefers a more fluid transition between the two.

Even among those authors who see similarities between the two forms, assessments differ. For Wilhelm Voßkamp, for example, 'the boundaries between literary forms of utopia and purely technically oriented science fiction literature are fluid'.[50] Darko Suvin, on the other hand, who was particularly influential in the early phase of SF scholarship, sees utopia as

'the *sociopolitical subgenre of science fiction*'[51]—a position largely followed by Fredric Jameson.[52] Adam Roberts also sees major overlaps but nevertheless argues that 'utopian fiction must be discussed as a parallel development to SF'.[53]

A defining quality of SF worlds is that things that are not possible in our everyday world happen in them. SF is characterised by a *novum* (plural *nova*),[54] that is, a novel element that is not (yet) possible in reality and that significantly shapes the fictional world. In contrast to fantasy and other *non-realistic* forms, SF suggests that the novum is compatible with the scientific laws of the real world, at least in principle. It presents the fictional universe as an extension or expansion of our world, while fairy tales and fantasy are set in separate universes that follow their own—magical—laws. By contrast, the SF novum is essentially possible and does not violate the familiar scientific-technological world order.

However, this claim often remains just that: a claim. Many typical SF nova—time travel, faster-than-light travel, the various monsters and aliens—are not plausible according to our current state of knowledge. Whether they will ever become possible is irrelevant. It is not so much scientific plausibility but the *impression* of technical feasibility that is crucial for SF, and this impression is achieved by means of a *technological aesthetic*. An SF novum like a spaceship or a robot is recognised as a typical SF element because it *looks* like a technical device (or because it is described accordingly in a text); because it is obviously a man-made machine that can be constructed and operated with the requisite skills, which can be learned. How the spaceship or the robot is actually supposed to work is irrelevant. I call this genre-defining process of making things appear realistic *naturalisation*.[55]

Unlike SF, utopias do not need to feature a novum. Though More mentions inventions such as artificial incubators and sophisticated war machines, these do not shape the fictional world to the same extent as the novum does in SF. In Francis Bacon's fragment *New Atlantis* (published posthumously in 1627),[56] one of the earliest successors of *Utopia*, the focus is on scientific research. But the emphasis is less on the nova that shape the fictional world than on the organisation of research; the researchers' findings have only limited influence on the lives of the islanders.

Classic utopias focus on the social order rather than on scientific and technological innovations. This has changed over time, however, and with the *temporalisation of utopia* (see next chapter), the genre migrates into the future, increasingly emphasising the concept of scientific and

technological progress.[57] The experience of the industrial revolution led to SF nova becoming regular features in utopias, though they never became a necessary condition. William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1888), for example, is set in the future but largely dispenses with technological innovations. Instead, Morris's world in many respects looks towards a medieval, pre-industrial ideal. In *Herland* and also in *Island*, Aldous Huxley's last novel published in 1962,[58] technological and scientific progress only play a subordinate role.[59]

Elsewhere, I have described SF as an *aesthetic-fictional mode*.[60] By using the term 'mode', I want to suggest that the notion of science fiction encompasses more than just a genre in Altman's sense, of an ensemble of semantic and syntactic elements. Rather, SF stands for a certain type of *fictional worlds*, which can provide the setting for various genres. Some of them, such as the *space opera* or the *time travel story*, are more or less SF-specific and thus tied to the SF mode, while others can also be realised in other modes. Examples of the latter include thrillers, comedies—and utopias.

Thus, utopia is a genre that has been increasingly realised in the SF mode since the nineteenth century, but it can also appear in other modes. Beginning with the twentieth century, most utopias can be considered SF, but the reverse is not true. A large part of cinematic and literary SF stems from a tradition of adventure stories and other popular fiction with little connection to classic utopias (for dystopias, see *next chapter*).

2.3   Utopian Transformations

In every genre, later works do not merely reproduce their predecessors but also react to them, modifying, revising and subverting certain elements. Utopias offer an exemplary instance of this intra-generic dialogue: hardly any position of the classic model has remained unchallenged. Hans Ulrich Seeber speaks of the 'self-criticism of utopia' in this respect and notes that 'the keenest critics of various versions of utopian thought are mainly the authors of literary utopias themselves'.[61] Authors react to the limitations of the classic model by constantly developing it further.

Over the centuries, there have been numerous proposals—many of them largely forgotten today—that modify the classic paradigm against the backdrop of their historical context while also following it in many respects. More comprehensive changes occur from the late nineteenth century onwards, substantially transforming the genre; new forms such as

dystopias and later *critical utopias* emerge, which question the fundamental premises of their predecessors. This is not the place for a comprehensive history of this development. In what follows, I will provide a roughly chronological overview of some important changes that the genre has undergone in its 500-year history.

In the model established by More, the relationship between the state and the individual is clearly defined: Utopian citizens submit to the state order. As the needs of the community and the individual appear to be congruous, there is no conflict between the individual and the social order. Accordingly, early utopias are populated by a homogenised mass of faceless citizens—a vision that no longer appears attractive today and that has given the genre as a whole the reputation of being totalitarian. However, utopias did not remain limited to this authoritarian type; a tradition of leaderless utopias was established early on. Andreas Voigt has introduced a distinction between *archist* utopias, which support state control, and *anarchist* utopias.[62]

The abbey Thélème in François Rabelais' *Gargantua* (1534), where the only rule is the hedonistic 'Do what thou wilt', is regarded as a precursor to the anarchist utopia.[63] Another early instance is Gabriel de Foigny's novel *Les avantures de Jacques Sadeur* (*The Southern Land, Known*), published anonymously in 1676.[64] It describes a utopian Terra Australis, where a community of hermaphrodites lives in complete harmony without any kind of ruling structures. Despite these early examples, the anarchist tendency remains a marginal phenomenon for a long time that only really begins to flower in the nineteenth century, when anarchism emerges as an independent political movement. Eventually, in the twentieth century, the anarchist utopian tradition becomes an important influence on the development of the genre (more on this later).[65]

Other central characteristics of the classic utopia are isolation and stasis. These begin to change in the late eighteenth century, in a process that Reinhart Koselleck calls the 'temporalisation of utopia'.[66] With most of the globe explored, the idea of an unknown island has lost much of its original plausibility. Simultaneously, the concept of time is changing, as 'natural time is being transformed into historical time'.[67] Moreover, Rousseau was propagating the idea of *perfectibility* over the course of historical development—a concept that receives a biological foundation of sorts with the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origins of Species* in 1859. Though the concept of natural selection is decidedly not teleological, Darwin's theory of evolution exerted a great influence on utopian

literature, often in vulgarised versions, in which evolution is (mis)understood as a deliberate process of improvement. Here, the 'more highly developed' utopian society often appears as the inevitable, quasi-biologically determined end point of an ever-advancing political and social process. As a consequence, there is a gradual shift towards the future, with spatial utopias turning into temporal utopias.

At this point, the character of utopias changes in several ways. The experience of scientific and technological progress made technological innovations an increasingly important part of utopian designs. Utopias tend more and more towards SF and a focus on progress (cf. pp. 24–27). Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888),[68] one of 'the most influential bestsellers of American literature',[69] which describes Boston in the year 2000, is typical in how it enthusiastically celebrates innovations such as a credit card system or a kind of cable radio.

Since utopian places are no longer accessible through spatial travel, time travel becomes a common motif, indeed, a necessary vehicle of utopian literature. While the first instances of time travel are often not explained at all or in more or less magical terms—in Louis-Sébastien Mercier's *L'An 2440* (1770, *Memoirs of the Year Two Thousand Five Hundred*),[70] for example, the protagonist simply falls asleep and wakes up almost 700 years later—the late nineteenth century sees a gradual '*science-fictionalisation*' in this respect. *Looking Backward*, whose protagonist Julian West is put into a trance through mesmerism and only awakens 113 years later, undertakes substantial rhetorical effort to make this long slumber halfway plausible. Finally, with H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895),[71] a novel that is strongly influenced by both Darwin and the utopian tradition, the novum of the time machine is established as a literary motif.[72]

Temporalisation leads to other significant changes as well. By moving into the future, the utopian state is no longer a place that already exists and can thus potentially be visited and examined; instead, it becomes the product of a historical process. The utopian world may not yet exist, but it *could* one day become a reality—it is already latent in the imperfect present.

With the demise of the classic utopia towards the end of the nineteenth century—and partly due to Darwin's influence—the very process that leads to utopia increasingly comes to the fore. *News from Nowhere,* for instance, deviates from the classic pattern by giving ample space to the description of the—rather bloody—revolution that leads to the utopian

state. The respective chapter, titled 'How the Change Came', is the longest in the book. And in H. G. Wells's work, the dynamics of the historical process take on a central role. Although Wells is primarily remembered as the author of *scientific romances* such as *The Time Machine* or *The War of the Worlds* (1898)[73] today, he was arguably the most important author of utopias at the turn of the century. In his foreword to *A Modern Utopia,* first published in 1905, he programmatically addresses the changed conditions and their consequences for utopias:

> The Utopia of a modern dreamer must needs differ in one fundamental aspect from the Nowheres and Utopias men planned before Darwin quickened the thought of the world. Those were all perfect and static States, a balance of happiness won for ever against the forces of unrest and disorder that inhere in things. […] Change and development were dammed back by invincible dams for ever. But the Modern Utopia must be not static but kinetic, must shape not as permanent state but as a hopeful stage, leading to a long ascent of stages. Nowadays we do not resist and overcome the great stream of things, but rather float upon it.[74]

From 1900 onwards, Wells advocated a socialist world state in numerous novels, nonfiction books and essays. A large part of his vast literary output was dedicated to this project. In keeping with the new dynamic quality he observes, many of his texts no longer depict the sole optimal state but merely one *possible* solution. The path leading there is more important than the final result. The pamphlet *The Open Conspiracy from* 1928 is paradigmatic in this regard, as it describes how the eponymous 'open conspiracy' of intellectuals and other progressive-minded people could realise a world state. Wells deliberately refrains from describing the goal of the 'conspiracy' in more detail; one chapter of the book even bears the title 'No Stable Utopia is Contemplated'.[75]

Utopia's temporalisation also affects the form of the genre. Classic utopias are static not only in conceptual but also in narrative terms: More and his successors tend to systematically describe the state at the expense of developing a plot. The framing story is often a travelogue. 'In utopian stories a frequent device is for someone, generally a first-person narrator, to enter the utopia and be shown around it by a sort of Intourist guide'.[76] Neither the traveller nor the utopian guide undergoes any significant development; there is no gripping plot, no action, only a 'largely static, encyclopaedic description of the other world'.[77]

The embedding of this static description into a narrative leads to a structural conflict, which Peter Uwe Hohendahl calls the 'narrative problem of the utopian novel'.[78] Narratives unfold in time and action is always dynamic. But since the classic model focuses on conveying a social blueprint, the plot serves merely as a pretext, as a frame. According to Hohendahl, this contradiction, inherent in utopia from the beginning, increased from the eighteenth century onwards, spawning various subgenres, such as the robinsonade, in which the adventure component comes to dominate over the systematic description.

With Morris's *News from Nowhere* and Wells's numerous works, the turn of the twentieth century produced utopias that modified central points of the classic model. Instead of closed static structures in which the individual is subordinated to society, we now have unfinished, open conceptions that consider the varying needs of their citizens. There are, however, striking differences between individual texts: Morris devises a ruler-free society that manages virtually without state structures and is largely deindustrialised. To the astonishment of the first-person narrator, in the novel's future, the Thames is clean enough for fishing. With its anarchist and ecological slant, *News from Nowhere* was a trailblazer for later utopias. Wells, by contrast, favours an elite rule based on science and technology. Both authors fundamentally modernise the classic model, initiating a process that leads to lasting changes in the genre.

Though some utopias published after 1900 still follow the classic paradigm, the genre overall experiences a crisis. The static conceptions in the archist tradition increasingly lose their appeal, not least due to the catastrophic events of the twentieth century, which make any radically new social system seem potentially dangerous. Accordingly, the dystopia, the 'antithesis to the enticing utopias',[79] replaces positive visions.[80]

As has often been noted, the social structures in typical dystopias such as Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1921), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) share many aspects with classic utopias.[81] Both, utopias and dystopias, present authoritarian and largely static scenarios in which the inhabitants must unconditionally submit to the existing order. The world of Huxley's novel, in particular, could just as well serve as a utopia: technologically far advanced, war-free and permissive, with state-sponsored drug and sex parties. It mainly becomes a dystopia because some of the protagonists refuse to fit into the system; instead, John, 'the savage', expressly insists on his right to be unhappy.

Brave New World is thus a typical dystopia, in which the lack of individuality—a prerequisite for the utopian order for More—is the central problem. The focus is no longer on the smooth operation of the state machinery but on the freedom of the individual. Consequently, the protagonist is no longer an undifferentiated mask but a round character with desires and needs. Often, he or she is initially a model citizen, who then comes into conflict with the rules of the system and eventually becomes a rebel.[82] This rebellion usually goes hand in hand with a love story; in fact, it is often love—or rather, socially unsanctioned forms of sexuality—that makes hitherto well-adjusted protagonists aware of their individuality and inspires them to oppose the existing order.

Dystopias start with a point that tends to go unmentioned in utopias, asking what happens to the individual in the 'optimal' order. Though dystopian and utopian rulers differ in their goals, any archist utopia can become a dystopia if it is populated with characters who dislike the existing order. Thus, the main difference between the two genres lies less in the conception of the state rather than in the perspective on it.

Nevertheless, scholars tend to distinguish between positive utopias and dystopias on the basis of how they conceive their states: if a society follows a '*radically more perfect* principle than in the author's community',[83] it is a utopia, whereas a dystopia is based on a '*radically less perfect* principle', as Darko Suvin argues.[84] Of course, we have to ask who views the community as *radically more* or *radically less perfect*. Suvin and many others use the author and his or her environment as a yardstick. This is quite plausible since many classic utopias appear dystopian to today's readers. But even if we leave aside fundamental methodological concerns, authorial intention is a problematic guideline. After all, what was More's true intention when he wrote *Utopia*? Is the society on Utopia really better? In the eyes of Hythlodaeus, it certainly is, but Morus, the first-person narrator, is more sceptical. What was the intended impression on the reader? Assessments of *what the author wanted to say* vary wildly beginning with More's original text.[85]

Ultimately, the protagonist's function in the dramaturgical structure of the plot seems to me the more useful criterion for distinguishing between the two (sub)genres, since this role is fundamentally different in a dystopia than in a positive utopia. Although More's first-person narrator is sceptical about what Hythlodaeus describes, he does recognise positive aspects in his narrative. This clearly distinguishes him from the typical dystopian

hero, who inevitably comes to stand in total opposition to the existing order.

In dystopias, the hero's rebellion doesn't just mark the society as negative, it also changes the narrative structure in crucial ways. With a few non-conformists fighting against an inhuman system, dystopias have the dramatic plot that utopias usually lack. This also solves the narrative problem described by Hohendahl: in dystopias, the plot is the centre of the novel rather than a mere framing device—and in contrast to classic utopias, dystopias are proper novels. Unlike utopias, dystopias often describe their society only indirectly, as part of the narrative. The journey from the present into the utopian counter-world is abandoned:

> Unlike the 'typical' utopian narrative with a visitor's guided journey through a utopian society which leads to a comparative response that indicts the visitor's own society, the dystopian text usually begins directly in the terrible new world.[86]

Seeber and many others see dystopias as an evolutionary step in utopias' increasing self-criticism and thus as a twentieth-century phenomenon. Though other authors trace their emergence to much earlier works,[87] dystopias undoubtedly experienced several boom phases in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The genre's popularity is probably partly due to its natural propensity for a dramatic storyline, which makes it far better suited to narrative mass media than classic utopias; the struggle of rebels against some tyrannical dictatorship of the future is a staple of modern SF.

The term 'dystopia' has become firmly established to describe a society 'that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which that reader lived'.[88] Yet some terminological issues remain. While 'utopia' stands for a desirable vision in colloquial usage, it is common in academia to use the designation as an umbrella term for both positive and negative visions: *eutopias* and *dystopias*. Rather than clearly distinct categories, the two terms are at opposite ends of a spectrum: as utopias contain satirical and self-critical elements from the very beginning, hybrid forms are quite common. With dystopias, by contrast, exclusively negative examples are far more frequent. The societies of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) feature no desirable aspects.[89]

Thus, I am proposing a model that juxtaposes 'pure dystopias' (which are frequent), on the one hand, with 'pure eutopias' (even though these

are rarely realised), on the other. Classic utopias in More's tradition are mostly impure eutopias, which is why I will use the term (classic) utopias, rather than eutopias.

The terms 'counter-utopia' and 'anti-utopia' cause additional confusion. Although these are often used as synonyms for dystopia, especially the latter is also often defined as an idea directed against utopias or the utopian principle: In this sense, '"anti-utopia" is aimed at what is regarded as a dangerous idea used by a minority in order to prepare for social upheaval'.[90]

An anti-utopia defined in this way is clearly distinct from the self-critical utopia observed by Seeber, which goes back to More (after all, his protagonist Morus is not uncritical of Hythlodaeus's account). And even though dystopias can be seen as an inversion of the classic utopia, they don't necessarily turn against the utopian principle. In fact, 'classic' dystopias stand in the tradition of utopias in that they also proceed from the assumption that undesirable social conditions can be averted or improved. The utopian impetus—the belief in a better society—remains recognisable, at least *ex negativo,* in numerous dystopian works.[91]

Politically, the motives and origins of anti-utopian criticism are anything but uniform. Although Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels dedicate a separate chapter of *The Communist Manifesto* to the utopias of early socialist authors such as Charles Fourier, Henri de Saint-Simon and Robert Owen, they see these as outdated and ultimately reactionary fantasies without any theoretical or practical value.[92] In his book *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (1880), Engels benevolently describes the early socialists as his intellectual predecessors but criticises their utopias. He argues that the detailed descriptions make them worthless as political programmes: 'the more completely they were worked out in detail, the more they could not avoid drifting off into pure phantasies'.[93] Classic Marxism in fact bans all images when it comes to describing the future socialist society. As Marx and Engels put it in *The German Ideology* (written in 1845/46, published in 1932): 'Communism is for us not a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things'.[94]

On the opposite side of the political spectrum, anti-utopian tendencies are even more pronounced. Rather than as literary thought experiments, utopias are seen as blueprints for a supposedly perfect state intended for implementation—and consequently equated with totalitarianism or communism.[95] This approach ignores both the genre's self-critical tendencies

and the newer works in the anarchist tradition. Alongside literary anti-utopias, there is also a long tradition of philosophical anti-utopias. One example is Karl Popper's two-volume work *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945),[96] which draws a direct line from Plato via Hegel and Marx to the totalitarian systems of the twentieth century, emphasising the dangerous nature of utopian thinking as such. But Popper is ultimately not interested in (literary) utopias in the tradition of More; instead, 'utopia' to him means 'the attitudes always underlying the totalitarian systems of Soviet or fascist character'.[97]

In any case, the concept of anti-utopia remains ambiguous and fraught, which is why I have decided to avoid it and instead use the term dystopia with regard to both literature and film (as has become common in utopian studies).

Dystopias take present tendencies that are perceived as negative to their horrific conclusion. With often deliberately satirical exaggeration, they show the disaster that looms if we fail to stop the harmful developments in time. In this, they often reveal a reactionary or at least a conservative, nostalgic tendency: the terrible future is juxtaposed with a supposedly beautiful past. A typical example of this is EQUILIBRIUM (Kurt Wimmer, US 2002), which shows a world where feelings are forbidden. In a key scene, the protagonist, a highly decorated member of the anti-feelings police, enters a secret rebel storage room that turns out to be a veritable junk shop crammed with paintings, lamps, armchairs and knick-knacks of all kinds. The turning point typical of dystopian plots—the moment when the protagonist changes from conformist into rebel—occurs when he listens to the overture of Beethoven's Ninth on an old-fashioned gramophone.

This kind of 'dystopian conversion' can be found in many dystopias. The horror of the dystopian urban behemoth—at least in film, dystopias are usually set in big cities—is contrasted with idyllic images of a nostalgically idealised past. Thus, a rebel mindset manifests itself not only in the fight against an inhuman system but also in a love for 'old things', for a supposedly natural, traditional way of life.

Dystopias—or rather, their authors—exercise the self-criticism diagnosed by Seeber in its most radical form, focusing on the fundamental principles of utopia itself. However, this dark turn is not the end of the genre's evolution. In the 1970s, it receives a new boost. The anarchist and ecological tendencies initiated especially by *News from Nowhere* are coming to fruition now, for example in Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia*, which—as the title suggests—centres on ecological concerns, while *bolo'bolo*

(1983) by Swiss author Hans Widmer (under the pen name P. M.) explicitly aims at overcoming state structures.[98]

Formally, *Ecotopia* is still largely written in the classic tradition, with descriptive passages dominating over the plot, whereas *bolo'bolo* dispenses with all narrative framing. In the so-called *critical utopias*, this relationship is a different one. As sociologist Ruth Levitas notes in correspondence with Lucy Sargisson, 'pluralism and postmodernity have made it difficult to articulate committed alternatives'.[99] Critical utopias react to the new conditions and give the genre yet another twist by criticising the classic tradition, especially its patriarchal perspective—while at the same time presenting positive alternatives.

These alternatives are neither total nor totalitarian like the classic utopias, but—in the spirit of Levitas—pluralistic and open-ended.[100] Tom Moylan, who develops the concept of the *critical utopia* through analysis of four American SF novels,[101] all of which are strongly influenced by radical contemporary currents, especially feminism,[102] puts it as follows:

> A central concern in the critical utopia is the awareness of the limitations of the utopian tradition, so that these texts reject utopia as blueprint while preserving it as a dream. Furthermore, the novels dwell on the conflict between the originary world and the utopian society opposed to it so that the process of social change is more directly articulated. Finally, the novels focus on the continuing presence of difference and imperfection within the utopian society itself and thus render more recognizable and dynamic alternatives.[103]

A key feature connecting the four novels examined by Moylan is their high degree of self-reflexivity. In *The Dispossessed, for* example, Ursula K. Le Guin juxtaposes an anarchist order with a capitalist one, showing the shortcomings of both (despite clear sympathies for the former). Another similarity between the SF novels analysed by Moylan is that technological innovations are not mere accessories but integral to the structure of the works.[104] For instance, SF nova such as time and space travel allow for the exchange and comparison between different fictional worlds in Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* and Le Guin's *The Dispossessed,* respectively. The two works' narrative style also stands in the tradition of SF. In contrast to the classic utopian tradition and also to *Ecotopia*, which was published around the same time, most critical utopias are novels with a suspense-oriented plot and round characters that invite emotional

involvement. At the same time, the texts are characterised by '(postmodern) narrative experiments, innovative narrative strategies, structural fragmentation, multi-perspectivity and polyphony'.[105]

These critical utopias, in turn, give rise to various hybrid forms. Constance Penley introduces the term *critical dystopia* to describe SF films such as LA JETÉE (Chris Marker, FR 1962) and THE TERMINATOR (James Cameron, US 1984), which—unlike post-apocalyptic narratives such as the mad max series or A BOY & HIS DOG (L. Q. Jones, US 1975)—deal with the genesis of a dystopian world. These films 'suggest causes rather than merely reveal symptoms'.[106] The concept of critical dystopia is subsequently taken up by other authors, though its meaning changes. The focus is now on the relative openness of critical dystopias. While there's no escape for the protagonist in 'classic dystopias' such as *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or *Brave New World*,[107] critical dystopias gesture towards the possibility of change. They 'negate the negation of the critical utopian moment and thus make room for another manifestation of the utopian imagination within the dystopian form'.[108] Finally, in Kim Stanley Robinson's novels *Red Mars* (1993), *Green Mars* (1994) and *Blue Mars* (1996),[109] which I will touch on in the last chapter, utopia and dystopia thoroughly interpenetrate each other. Here, the Red Planet is settled by a succession of different social systems, and the hope for a fairer world is preserved despite setbacks.

* * *

As this brief historical outline has shown, the genre is characterised by a high level of consistency as well as great flexibility. The essential themes, most already present in More, remain the same over the centuries. However, the concrete form and the way the texts address the central questions vary greatly. With the beginning of the twentieth century, those aspects of the classic model that appear problematic today take centre stage.

As mentioned previously, *Utopia* itself is not an unambiguous depiction of the best possible state but rather an experiment intended to stimulate the reader's reflection. In its aims, then, More's novel is quite close to critical utopias. Few of More's direct successors display his ambivalence, ambiguity or openness.[110] Opinions differ as to whether the genre's variations since the late nineteenth century reveal genuinely new tendencies or merely aspects that are inherent in More but have not been brought to

fruition for a long time. Whether we see the developments of the twentieth century as a return to *Utopia* or as something genuinely new is ultimately secondary. What seems more important to me is the high degree of flexibility in More's model, which allows us to draw connecting lines right up to the present.

As every form of historiography does, according to Hayden White, genre history uses certain narrative patterns.[111] A more or less explicitly evolutionary model, which describes the development of a genre as a constant process of refinement, seems particularly popular. This model tends to overlook the fact that many (or most) works in a genre are not part of the *avant-garde* that drives its development. Instead, they adopt the established patterns unchanged. Be it literary genres such as detective fiction, medical and other romance novels or cheaply produced television series and direct-to-video productions—there is no lack of works that merely reproduce the conventions of a genre rather than pushing its boundaries.

This also applies to utopias. The widely accepted version of this genre's history describes a development from spatial utopias to temporal ones, the subsequent change to dystopias and finally to the critical utopias. While we can undoubtedly trace this line, it is worth remembering that the classic form never really disappeared.[112] As we will see especially in connection with utopian films, works blissfully free of self-criticism have always existed in parallel to the dystopias and critical utopias on which research usually focuses.

The talk of the death of utopia may be politically motivated, but often, its root is simply a lack of awareness of published works. Numerous utopias were produced after 1900, but most of these had little impact and did not find a broad audience. Hans Werder is probably right in his assessment that the supposed decline of utopia is less a question of production than of reception. There is no lack of utopias, but it is the dystopias that attract attention, especially the 'big three' by Zamyatin, Huxley and Orwell.[113]

2.4   Functions of Utopia

Before addressing the question at the heart of this study—whether there is such a thing as a utopian film—I would like to return to the basic functions of utopia and review some of the aspects discussed in the previous sections. The following overview is deliberately schematic and not intended to suggest that the various aspects can always be clearly separated in practice. Moreover, the functions listed do not occur with the same