RETRO FUTURES: A VISION OF THE FUTURE IN EUROPEAN SCIENCE FICTION FILMS (1979-1991)*

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INTRODUCTION

Since the end of the 1980s, numerous studies have been published on science fiction films, reflecting the enormous interest that this genre has aroused.[1] The attention it has received is a response to the extraordinary rise in the production of science fiction films over the past three decades, especially in the United States. In the 1980s, the comparatively lower popularity of European films partly explains their lack of representation in academic discussion. Published for the most part in the United States or the United Kingdom, these studies offer a geographically skewed view of science fiction that examines the genre in terms of Hollywood filmmaking practices. Very few studies have included European films in their analyses – not to mention films of other nationalities, with the exception of Japanese *anime*. The few European pictures that do rate a mention are for the most part British films, in what appears to be almost more a concession to readers in the authors' native market than a genuine interest in exploring the diversity of the genre. Prejudices in relation to the place of origin of these films have affected their visibility; or—and this is perhaps even more troubling—it has been taken for granted that the conclusions drawn by the hegemonic Anglo-American discourse can be extrapolated to all science fiction films.[2] However, these assumptions need to be questioned because they do not reflect the reality.

While it is true that the number of mainstream European science fiction films is hardly comparable to the volume produced in Hollywood, their presence should not be undervalued. Throughout the 1980s, filmmakers like Bertrand Tavernier and Terry Gilliam chose to make films in this genre. And even more significantly, novice directors like Peter Greenaway – *The Falls* (1980) –, Luc Besson – *Le Dernier Combat* (The Last Battle, 1983) – and Lars von Trier – *The Element of Crime*

(Forbrydelsens Element, 1984) – all used a science fiction story for their first or second features. However, none of these films, nor any of the many others that will be analysed in this article, have been included in discussions by science fiction film historians and theorists. The main reason for this absence, as I hope to demonstrate below, lies in the fact that these 1980s films do not fit within the parameters established by American science fiction in the same era.

The first obstacle to correcting this perception is that, although some scholars have taken an interest in certain science fiction films made in Europe and other parts of the world, in general they have limited their studies to the film industry of the nation in question, often considered in isolation with no reference to other contemporary films exploring similar themes.[3] Another recurring problem is that some science fiction films have only been studied from the perspective of auteur theory. There is hardly any unifying view of European science fiction to overcome this fragmentary perspective. In this sense, the research presented here is intended to contribute a more balanced view, although of course it is not without its own limitations. For example, although it would certainly have been desirable, this research does not include the rich cinematic traditions of the East, nor any films from either northern or southern Europe. The prolific Italian tradition of science fiction, with around 70 films produced in the decade of the eighties, has been explicitly omitted because most of those films focused mainly on exploiting Hollywood blockbusters with impunity. The early false sequel *Alien 2: On Earth* (Alien 2 - Sulla Terra, Ciro Ipollito [credited as Sam Cromwell], 1980) or *Robowar* (Bruno Mattei [as Vincent Dawn], 1989), inspired by *Predator* (John McTiernan, 1987), are prime examples of this trend. What I am interested in here, however, is analysing a series of science fiction films that attempt to offer a perspective that breaks away from what Anglo-American literature has identified as characteristic of the genre.

To this end, I have selected a series of films produced by three major European film industries: West Germany, France, and the United Kingdom (although some of the films analysed are actually co-productions between these countries or with other nations). It is therefore important to bear in mind that the conclusions drawn here do not refer to European cinema as a whole, but only to a specific group with a shared way of understanding science fiction. Indeed, it is not my intention here to suggest that there is a single "European" form of science fiction that can be contrasted against an "American" form. However, it is possible to speak of a movement within the genre which, over a very specific span of time (from 1979 to 1991), developed a set of narrative and aesthetic approaches which, in view of their singular nature, are worth analysing as an alternative to what the academic discourse on science fiction has had us believe up to now. To explore this movement, this article will focus on an analysis of the depiction of the future, a traditional theme in science fiction films in general, but which is particularly prominent among the European pictures made during the period studied.

A FUTURE THAT DOESN'T LOOK PLASTIC

The huge success of *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977) led to a boom in the science fiction genre in the United States over the following decade, with emblematic films like *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982) or *Terminator* (James Cameron, 1984) marking a second golden age of science fiction cinema in the United States (Lacey, 2000: 168). From that moment on, studios began allocating generous budgets to the production of science fiction and horror, two genres that had been relegated to the category of B-movies until quite recently.

Although American movies were well received by European audiences, they do not appear to have contributed much to an increase in

Death Watch (La mort en direct, Bertrand Tavernier, 1979)

the production of science fiction films in Europe. With the exception of the Italian case, there is no evidence that they had a significant impact on the way films were made either. The massive budgets of Hollywood films, the types of narratives, the contamination of science fiction with the action genre, and, above all the conception of these films in the tradition of the "cinema of attractions" all had little influence on European cinema in the 1980s. This is not intended to suggest that they operated in complete isolation or that no mutual influences are perceivable, but it does mean that they stand out for a series of differences related to a diverse range of aspects. One enlightening example: the hypermasculine cyborg, an omnipresent character in the science fiction films of the eighties and nineties (one need only think of the various Terminators, Robocops, and their countless imitations), is at best an incidental figure in the films that form the object of this research.

My initial hypothesis is that despite the diversity of cultures and industries that are systematically referenced in any analysis of European film production, in the period studied here it is possible to detect significant thematic and stylistic similarities that transcend national borders and suggest a particular way of conceiving the depiction of the future. The main films included in this study are: *Death Watch* (La mort en direct, Bertrand Tavernier, West Germany/France, 1979), *Light Years Away* (Les années lumière, Alain Tanner, France/Switzerland, 1981), *Kamikaze 1989* (Wolf Gremm, West Germany, 1982), *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Michael Radford, UK, 1984), the director's cut of *Brazil* (Terry Gilliam, UK/US, 1985), and, as an example straddling the eighties and nineties, *Delicatessen* (Jean-Pierre Jeunet and Marc Caro, France, 1991).

RETRO FUTURES: THE HISTORICISING TECHNIQUE

The first specific feature of European science fiction in the 1980s is that it can prove difficult to classify certain films clearly within the genre. The setting, characters, costumes and props are often different from those normally used in sci-fi films. It is quite rare to find supercomputers, spaceships or cyborgs, because the inspiration for the development of the stories is not the future, but the past.

As paradoxical as it may seem, the characteristic feature of these visions of the future is their "retro future"[4] appearance, i.e., a conception of the future based on historicising elements. It is an approach that seems even stranger given that in the Hollywood films of the period the action is usually set in the present (*Terminator*), or in a scenario projected just a few years ahead, in a future that is still recognisable to the spectator (*Blade Runner*). While the inhabitants of the future metropolises in the US science fiction can allow themselves to be seduced by useless products advertised in the media, the characters in European science fiction are deprived of such benefits of progress; instead, they barely subsist in dilapidated buildings in cit-

ies plagued by shortages, living off the vestiges of a lost civilisation.

Indeed, one of the most surprising aspects of the *mise-en-scène* of most of these films is their historicising technique. Although it could be argued that the use of historicist pastiche is not exclusive to European cinema—David Lynch's *Dune* (1984) is one obvious counter-example that immediately springs to mind—the purpose it serves is different. The visual aspect of *Dune* offers the spectator a technologically advanced future that nevertheless evokes a mythical past. In this sense, the *mise-en-scène* proposes a scenario closer to the fantasy genre than to science fiction. In the opulent splendour of both *Dune* and the *Star Wars* saga, there is an evident element of heroic epic that is completely absent from the European films. For this reason, when American films turn their gaze on the past, their purpose is in fact to imbue the setting with an aristocratic ambience.

Conversely, the European interest in historicising settings is associated with a number of interrelated factors. The main factor is the memory of the devastating effects of the Second World War, which is alluded to metaphorically, or, to a lesser extent, the tense atmosphere of a hypothetical post-Cold War (this factor will be explored in the section below titled "Post-war Hardship and the Totalitarian Threat"). The second factor is related to a markedly cynical attitude towards progress. In American science fiction, there seems very little room for doubt as to the beneficial effect of technological advances. Indeed, technology is praised even when its results are harmful: only its misuse is deemed worthy of condemnation. This is reflected in the fact that in Hollywood films, technological devices always operate correctly. They only break down for the purpose of infusing a scene with dramatic intensity. Conversely, in European films, technical deficiencies are commonplace, even in the most basic devices, which are often depicted as obsolete or completely unusable. In the formerly luxurious hotel in the film *Bunker Palace Hôtel* (Enki Bilal, 1990), thick mud instead of water comes out of the tap, and the air conditioning doesn't work. Similarly, in the dilapidated apartment building in *Delicatessen*, everything is breaking down. The taps don't work, and the film's protagonist is actually hired as a handyman to repair the many defects that afflict the building, while also responding to other emergencies.

While this scepticism of technological progress is a characteristic feature of these "retro futures", so are the characters' attempts to overcome their hardships. In *Le Dernier Combat*, a young man repairs a light aircraft in order to escape the domain of the leader of the local gang, but he ends up crash-landing when he runs out of fuel. The first scene of this film shows the hero trying to escape his harsh reality in a fantasy with an inflatable doll that gets a puncture and deflates at the most inopportune moment. These scenes make it clear that any device or gadget from the past is now useless in this depressing future. The humour of some of these scenes accentuates the sense of resignation of the characters, who seem

Nineteen Eighty-Four (Michael Radford, 1984)

Brazil (Terry Gilliam, 1985)

to become accustomed to a world where nothing works properly and where finding new uses for old objects is their only means of survival.

In short, Hollywood science fiction maintains a faith in progress that European cinema does not share. The historicist element is a differentiating feature of European science fiction cinema, because in these retro futures the allusions to the past are not merely decorations intended to add a certain sophistication to the visual dimension of the film. On the contrary, they reveal a condition of material poverty and reinforce an idea of the lingering legacy of different historical periods. The retro elements seem to constitute a warning that in the future we will be doomed to wrangle with all the useless junk that has fallen into disuse over time. This accumulation of outdated designs and mechanisms defines the conception of the future in these films, with the intention of underscoring the inadequacy of technology for the satisfaction of human needs. At the same time, it exposes the broken promises made to our ancestors by scientific progress and the postulates of modern urbanism.[5] And it also contains a pessimistic undertone: the circumstances are unfavourable and are not going to change, a disheartening conclusion if we consider that these are supposed to be projections of our future.

The choice of styles from different past eras—a practice that theoretically subverts the basic premises of the genre—became the norm for many European films in the 1980s. Indeed, this trend is the only explanation for the *mise-en-scène* in a film like *Brazil* (1985). In this picture, Terry Gilliam sought to reflect contemporary society, which is why the credits indicate that the movie was filmed in and around London in the same year that George Orwell set the story for *1984*, the novel that served as inspiration for Gilliam's film. In other words, there was an explicit intention to film in locations in the present, and yet Gilliam makes use of a combination of furniture and architectural styles from the past,[6] resulting in the creation of a claustrophobic world replete with monumental vestiges of bygone eras and elements of a nostalgic future. It is an industrial world with an aesthetic bordering on German expressionism and with diverse evocations of Nazi imagery.

Brazil constitutes the norm rather than the exception in the use of retro representations in science fiction. The repeated use of this historicising technique demonstrates that it is a specific feature of this trend in European cinema.[7] And it points to a rejection of depictions of the future that reflect technological progress, opting instead for

gloomy, sombre settings where the usual futuristic gadgets are replaced with obvious signs of the passage of time.

LEAVING THE MEGALOPOLIS AND THE SPECIAL EFFECTS BEHIND

The depiction of the big city plays a key role in science fiction, as the setting in which scientists test out their new inventions and discoveries. It is also the place where technological change is most obvious. This is why sci-fi films are generally set in big cities: Neo-Tokyo in *Akira* (Katsuhiro Ôtomo, 1988), Detroit in *Robocop* (Paul Verhoeven, 1987), or Los Angeles in *Terminator* and *Blade Runner*. Indeed, the release of *Blade Runner* in 1982 represented a milestone in depictions of the city of the future, as perhaps the most influential representation of an urban future since *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1927). Overpopulated, multi-ethnic, multilingual, chaotic... this vision of Los Angeles introduced a model which, not immediately but especially since the mid-nineties, would have a huge impact on the construction of our imagined future. Directed by the British filmmaker Ridley Scott, *Blade Runner* constitutes an interesting case, because although it clearly forms part of the canon of American science fiction cinema, its most ground-breaking elements were precisely the historicising references in its representation of the future. William Gibson, author of *Neuromancer* (1984), the acclaimed novel that launched the cyberpunk genre, noted that the unique element of Scott's film was the inclusion of "urban archaeology" as a sign of the anachronistic presence of history in an urban representation of the future, something completely new for mainstream American science fiction, where previously the cliché had been that everything should have an ultra-modern appearance (Gibson, 2011). In relation to the setting of the film, Gibson argues:

> It is not an American future. Interestingly, it is not American at all. It is a future in which the past is still there. The people live on the roots of the past, something that people are used to in Europe and that isn't a radical concept for Europeans; but for the American imaginary it is astoundingly new. It's like saying: "My God! History is real!" (Gibson, in Lethbridge and Swain, 1997).

The settings for American science fiction films in the 1980s tended to be either urban locations or self-contained spaces where technology dominates everything, like the spaceship Nostromo in *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979). Even films where there is no real projection into the future because the action takes place in the present, the setting is a large, modern, dystopian post-industrial city. Conversely, it is relatively common to find European directors assigning a bigger role to less significant locations or shooting directly in natural settings, in complete contradiction to the conventions of the genre.

The director of *Death Watch,* Bertrand Tavernier, complained in an interview that science fiction filmmaking is subject to even stricter iconographic canons than its literary counterpart. He bemoaned the existence of certain conventions – for example, the obsession with plastic (Audé, 1988) – and defended a filmmaker's freedom to use elements from the past with a timeless quality. Thus, for the re-creation of the future in *Death Watch,* which resulted in more than a few debates with the producers, he insisted on using nineteenth-century buildings based on the following argument:

> Glasgow's Victorian residences will still exist in another fifty years. It is the basic idea of the film: don't make a fake futurism (Tavernier in Audé, 1988: 61).

In the press kit for the film *Light Years Away*, the critic Serge Toubiana asks the director why he chose Ireland to shoot the film when Switzerland – the filmmaker's home country – had been the setting for all his previous films. Tanner's answer is that his conception of the film was incompatible with any locations in Switzerland, which

he classified as "civilised, rich, replete with culture." He defined Ireland as a wild place, a land of legends which, in contrast, seemed to him more primitive than his refined homeland, "a country of trivialised signs" (Tanner, quoted by Toubiana, 1981b: 55). The film's story – based on a novel by Daniel Odier titled *La voie* – is set in an unspecified location on Ireland's Atlantic coast, a place of powerful winds and swift atmospheric changes. Throughout the film, prominence is given to the landscapes and, in particular, to the condition of the sky. The duration of these shots is surprising, and their importance is underscored by the accompaniment of extra-diegetic music. In what would be the filmmaker's first film adaptation of a novel, there is a clear intention to separate this science fiction film from anything that would distract the audience from the experiences of the characters, as if the geographical or sociocultural context were deliberately ignored to concentrate entirely on the two protagonists (Toubiana, 1981a: viii).

To focus on the storyline involving the teaching of an indomitable youth by an old man who channels his impetuous nature, the director chose to eliminate any trace of futurism. No state-of-the-art devices distract the spectator from the plot, which actually could have been set in any isolated corner of the world at any time in history. The only clue suggesting that the story is set in the future is a brief glimpse of the city at the beginning of the film, which recalls the solitary urban landscapes of Soviet skylines, and a few signs warning of radioactivity. It is in fact a cold, deserted city, a crowded mass of identical apartment buildings that look far from welcoming. But the thick of the action takes place in a solitary natural setting on the edges of civilisation.

Light Years Away, winner of the Grand Prix at Cannes (1981), shuns any elements characteristic of depictions of the future city (urban settings, cutting-edge technology, all-powerful multinational corporations) to explore the relationship between a master and his disciple. Alain Tanner also defended the atemporal nature of his film, which he contrasted against a consumerist view of existence:

> The advertising world, which is very powerful, tries to show that there are no difficulties, that all you need to do is buy things. My film is the complete opposite of this ideology. It is set in the year 2000 to show that nothing will change (Toubiana, 1981a: x).

Stripped of any superfluous fascination with technology or consumerism, this vision of the future suggests that there are basic values that will remain thanks to the transmission of wisdom from one generation to the next. Nature thus becomes the contextual frame within which the emancipation of the characters can take place. Based on the premise of timelessness, the characters are brought into the realm of the spectator's experience, making their problems something ordinary and, therefore, universal. In this way, the

Light Years Away (Les années lumière, Alain Tanner, 1981)

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setting in this timeless future takes on the quality of a cautionary tale.

A similar approach is taken in *Death Watch*: the natural settings are given greater prominence as the film's hero frees herself from a society whose conventions constitute a violation of her privacy. As in *Light Years Away*, any traces of futurism are absent from both the sets (the film is shot in Glasgow, a city known for its Victorian architecture) and the costumes, which are notably understated, to prevent the film's appearance from becoming quickly outdated. And also like Tanner's film, special effects and electronic music are left out in the interests of concentrating on the human conflict (Audé, 1988: 61).

The absence of futurist features is a choice that European directors adopt consciously. Based on statements by the filmmakers themselves, budgetary considerations do not appear to have anything to do with the decision. Rather, the choice is based on a desire to avoid the clichés associated with the science fiction genre, motifs that these directors find hackneyed, or even ridiculous, as Tavernier suggests (Audé, 1988: 58). As a result, European science fiction films of the 1980s generally lack obvious special effects, a fact that constitutes a striking contrast with Hollywood, where each new film tries to push the possibilities offered by new technologies further than the last one. Even in *Death Watch*, the only film studied here that features a male cyborg as a character (a man who has had a camera surgically implanted in his eyes), there is no effort to present this character as a wonder of technology at which the spectators are expected to marvel. Inscribed in the purest tradition of "auteur cinema", Tavernier's rejection of special effects could not be more explicit: "I wanted a film without special effects so that I could concentrate on the characters" (Audé, 1988: 61). Although he doesn't mention Hollywood films, which at that time were inevitably associated with special effects in science fiction, his assertion leaves no room for doubt about what is perhaps a somewhat limited perspective on the use of this key element of the genre. Tavernier, however, opts for aesthetic understatement because he worries that special effects would distract the spectator from the message he seeks to convey. Irrespective of whether we agree with him on this point, what is worth noting here is his desire, and that of many other directors, to reject formulaic visual approaches to science fiction films. In short, this stance reflects a clear intention to reject certain conventions of *mise-en-scène* in this genre.

POST-WAR HARDSHIP AND THE TOTALITARIAN THREAT

While one of the defining features of science fiction films in Europe was the "retro future" aspect of their settings, it is interesting to note that this fascination with the past tended to be confined to a very specific period: the years of hardship immediately following the Second World War, or alternatively, the consequences of a Cold War that may heat up at any moment. Although the references are not always explicit, films like *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1984), *Brazil* (1985), *The Handmaid's Tale* (Volker Schlöndorff, 1990), *Bunker Palace Hôtel*, *Delicatessen* and, to a lesser extent, *Le Dernier Combat*, focus on the consequences of a war that looks suspiciously like the previous one or an imagined replay thereof.

In the case of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Brazil*, the connection to the post-war period is obvious because both films depict scenarios of desolation

imagined by George Orwell in his novel *1984*. Completed at the end of the 1940s, in the early years of the post-war period, the British novelist warned of the dangers of giving into totalitarianism. Michael Radford's film was the first to be released, and the film more faithful to the original story. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* presents a gloomy but effective *mise-en-scène* proposing a recognisable dystopia of gloomy settings and charmless spaces. The cult to Big Brother and the mass gatherings evoke Orwell's worst fears. To accentuate the impression of material scarcity and monotony, the members of the Party all dress in a simple uniform with the appearance of blue overalls. It is a gloomy world where the only natural light that appears is in the scene in which the protagonist Winston Smith and fellow dissident Julia give free rein to their blossoming romance after sneaking away, albeit for only a short time, from the dark hallways of the Ministry.

Brazil, a second film adaptation that appeared just a year later, departs from the original text to offer an imaginative re-creation in which, as John Hutton notes, despite the mixture of architectural styles, the predominant element is a re-creation of the 1940s (Hutton, 1986: 6). Images of the Marx Brothers, *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942) or *The Great Dictator* (Charles Chaplin, 1940) fill the minds of the inhabitants of the metropolis. In the streets, propaganda posters recalling the familiar designs of Second World War posters encourage passers-by to be government collaborators, with slogans like "Suspicion Breeds Confidence" or "Don't suspect a friend, report him."

In *Bunker Palace Hôtel* (1990), the atmosphere similarly evokes a dehumanised, totalitarian world, with architectural echoes of socialist realism (Poirson-Dechonne, 2005: 20). Its director, the Belgrade-born comics artist Enki Bilal, has created a dystopia in cold colours that offers a hermetic vision of the future. Its characters and settings are clearly evocative of the worst years of the iron curtain. Even *Delicatessen* (1991), which is far from being a didactic film, uses a setting that recalls the black-and-white images of the late 1940s. The costumes are inspired by the photographs of Robert Doisneau from this period, accentuating the retro character of a French post-war setting.[8]

Another feature which, as has been suggested in the cases outlined above, appears systematically in the European films of the period studied is the depiction of these future societies as totalitarian. Thus, in *Kamikaze 1989* (Wolf Gremm, 1982), the legislative branch is supported by a repressive executive: "We forbid alcohol because it makes people aggressive," acknowledges the protagonist (Rainer Fassbinder), a violent police officer of very few words. "Then we create a society that invites them to drink and we punish them for it." The impartiality of the law is also called into question in *Brazil*. When the protagonist's boss is told they have fifteen suspects outstanding, he offers a Solomonic response: "Put half as terrorists, the rest as victims," he orders. To underscore the horrifyingly bureaucratic nature of this society, a typist transcribes the cries of pain of a detainee who is being tortured in the next room. And just in case any doubt remained as to the type of society in which the story is set, the set designs in *Brazil* recall the

Delicatessen (Jean-Pierre Jeunet y Marc Caro, Francia, 1991)

architecture of the Third Reich, evident in the hallways of the government buildings and especially in the lobby of the Ministry of Information, a colossally huge hall decorated in dark marble, often thronging with crowds of schoolchildren, and presided over by a statue of a giant eagle.

In reality, these films were simply updating anxieties that were already explored in the urban dystopias offered in the 1960s by the French New Wave. *La jetée* (Chris Marker, 1962), and especially *Alphaville* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1965) and *Fahrenheit 451* (François Truffaut, 1966) depict similar authoritarian states of the future. On the pretext of public security, the elite in these films apply the corrective measures they deem necessary to control the few dissidents who dare to question their ruthless systems. An enforced, asphyxiating equality erases every trace of individuality, while an autocratic government acts without scruples in the interests of maintaining the status quo.

American films were the first to replace the convention of the totalitarian state as the prime dystopian model with another model that is somewhat less terrifying, although perhaps rather more probable : a world dominated by all-powerful corporations. The film that launched this trend was *Soylent Green* (Richard Fleischer, 1973), starring Charlton Heston. Although it owes a great deal to earlier films of its kind – in *Soylent Green* the blame is shared between the politicians and the monopoly marketing the food product that gives the film its title, which are working together in an obvious conspiracy – it would give rise to a new perspective on society. In this film and others that followed it, the greed of the big corporations would be responsible for the future oppression they describe. However, in contrast with the line taken in American films, these European pictures maintain that it is the political establishment (and not the villainous multinationals) that control the lives of the people. Another difference is that the Hollywood films are set in consolidated democracies in the present or in a very near future, probably with the intention of raising an alarm about what might happen in the real world in the short term. In the European films analysed here, all of which are set in the future, the predominant feature is the fear that the ghosts of the past will return, as if to suggest that we will never be safe from the danger of falling back into the nightmare of authoritarianism.

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Much more pessimistic than their American counterparts, the European stories of the 1980s generally depict characters as victims of their circumstances with little chance of turning their situations around; thus, if society is corrupt, the individual will be its accomplice; if it is depraved, the individual will contribute to making it worse, and if it is a repressive society, the individual will be both its victim and its executioner. The inhabitants of the cities of the future since the 1980s have been much more accepting of the world they have been given and barely any of them seem interested in rebelling against it, perhaps because they apparently enjoy much more freedom than the inhabitants of the futures depicted in the 1960s. The "European" version of *Brazil* – as it was referred to, as opposed to the cut-down American version – has no happy ending; instead, with large doses of black humour, it condemns the protagonist, the government employee Sam Lowry, to self-deceit and conformity.[9] The film is heart-breaking because it punishes Sam's ambiguity and withholds his redemption at the last

minute, just when the spectator believes that he will escape from the torture chamber unscathed. The changes made for the American re-release of *Brazil* (a 90-minute version compared to the 142 minutes of the original) are especially revealing. First of all, they dilute the ironic tone and many of the elements of the film that subvert Hollywood standards. Sam Lowry is a nicer character in this version and, as a result, has been constructed as a much more conventional hero in every sense. As Katrina Boyd points out, one important difference in the American version is that Sam is unaware of the death of Buttle, an innocent man executed by mistake, a change that completely erases his degree of complicity and turns him into a flat, uncomplicated character who is merely one more victim of the system (Boyd, 1990: 35). In the inevitable happy ending, Sam is rescued in the *deus ex machina* tradition and flees the city happily with his love interest. In short, the edits wipe out any hint of criticism of Sam, turning him into an innocent individual whose long-held fantasy is ultimately fulfilled without any need on his part to effect any change in the society in which he lives.

CONCLUSIONS: THE FUTURE JUST AS IT WAS

In European science fiction films made from 1979 to 1991, it is possible to identify a trend that breaks out of the parameters set by the more established American model. Differences include the creation of a society of the future through a *mise-en-scène* with historicising elements. Nearly all the films analysed here depict a not-too-distant future characterised by technological regression that suggests – although it is never made completely clear – that a fratricidal war has devastated the planet. Although, curiously, the post-nuclear fears that characterised the science fiction of previous decades seemed to have evaporated, the allusions to war experiences or post-war hardships remained. To varying degrees, these films evoke – without explicitly referencing it – the Second World War, and they do so by depicting a tense, politically oppressive environment characterised by privation. Clearly, the many allusions of this kind underscore their connection to Europe's past. Thus, instead of the post-modern metropolises of American science fiction, replete with urban waste yet still vibrant, rising over the rubble of the consumer society, the settings for these films are generally desolate landscapes, lacking in complex technology, whose inhabitants survive without much hope of improvement. The settings suggest a closed society – reduced to a run-down apartment building in *Delicatessen* or a hotel that has seen better days in *Bunker Palace Hôtel* – governed by authoritarian rulers who condemn the survivors of the catastrophe to a life of submission.

In the early 1990s, the interest in portraying desolate settings evocative of the Second World War would give way to the adoption of new strategies whose basic intention was to compete against Hollywood with its own weapons. In other words, the features described in this article are not universal, but are limited to the period studied (1979-1991). *Until the End of the World* (Bis ans Ende der Welt, Wim Wenders, 1991) is one of the first European sci-fi films to abandon the habit of using architecture and landscapes evocative of other historical moments. From 1995 onward, the changes would accumulate to the point of representing a radical turn. With varied degrees of success, European films would begin trying to emulate the tactics of the Hollywood blockbuster, as we find in *The Fifth Element* (Le cinquième élément, Luc Besson, 1997) or *Open Your Eyes* (Abre los ojos, Alejandro Amenábar, 1997).[10] The defining features of the trend described in this article would thus be wiped out in the interests of offering a product better adapted to an audience whose tastes had been drastically altered. The widespread use of special effects from this point may well be evidence of this change.

Nevertheless, before the new trend overtook European cinema, in the 1980s there was a movement that sought to find its own way of depicting the future. Regardless of their country of origin, all the films analysed here reflect a future that rejects utopian visions, although the way of bringing this idea to the big screen varied greatly. With this in mind, when scholars articulate the particular features that define this genre, they should take into account many other films that have so far been undeservedly overlooked.

In a decade of economic prosperity and few significant conflicts in the West, these pessimistic representations of the future are clearly symptomatic of deeply rooted fears. Given its status today as one of the most popular film genres, science fiction offers rich and fertile ground for research and its study should not be reduced to analysing the qualities of films from only one or two countries. Only with the inclusion of these other films that do not easily fit into the existing categories will we be able to develop a clearer and thus more enriching understanding of this film genre.

NOTES

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1 Although certainly not an exhaustive list, the following studies may serve as examples: Sobchack (1987); Kuhn (1990) and the follow-up research in Kuhn (1999); Telotte (1999); Rickman (2004), and Johnston (2011).

2 For example, in the preface to *Liquid Metal,* it is claimed that the anthology covers Europe, the United States and Asia. In reality, however, there are only two articles dedicated to European films (both British) and only one dealing with an Asian film, Otomo Katsuhiro's *Akira*, although its focus is on the influence of *Blade Runner* on the Japanese classic (Redmond, 2004: xi).

3 One exception is the monograph *Ciencia ficción europea* (Latorre et al., 2001), a special edition of the journal *Nosferatu* which, although it dedicates some sections to national film industries, adopts a broader vision of the genre.

4 "Retro future" is the term used by the directors of *Delicatessen* to describe their work, which recalls *Brazil* in so many ways, an influence readily acknowledged by the filmmakers (Ordóñez, 1996: 32-33). The story is set in Aubervilliers, a suburb in the northeast of Paris, in the year 2015, although the location and date were not ultimately included in the film.

5 On the critique of modern utopian architecture in science fiction film, see *Tabula rasa* (Rivera, 2005).

6 Paul M. Sammon and Don Shay list the diverse architectural styles in the film, identifying the most emblematic buildings (1989: 21).

7 In addition to the films mentioned earlier, which will be the object of a more detailed reflection, there is also the French-German film *Malevil* (Christian de Chalonge, 1981), the Danish *The Element of Crime*, the German-Canadian *The Handmaid's Tale*, the French *Le Dernier Combat*, and, outside the period studied, the French film *Peut-Être* (Cédric Klapish, 1999).

8 Jean-Pierre Jeunet acknowledged this influence in an interview for *Positif* by Ciment, Rouyer and Thirard (1991: 43).

9 On the problems in the United States with the complete version of *Brazil*, see Marks (2009: 101-102).

10 On the evolution of European dystopia in the 1990s, see Merás (2005).

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RETRO FUTURES: A VISION OF THE FUTURE IN EUROPEAN SCIENCE FICTION FILMS (1979-1991)

Abstract

This paper posits the emergence of a European trend in science fiction films between 1979 and 1991. Focusing its analysis on a key theme of the genre, it identifies a number of films produced in France, West Germany and the United Kingdom that established a new way of imagining the future. Despite their different origins, films such as *Death Watch* (La mort en direct, Bertrand Tavernier, 1979), *Light Years Away* (Les années lumière, Alain Tanner, 1981), *Kamikaze 1989* (Wolf Gremm, 1982), *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Michael Radford, 1984), *Brazil* (Terry Gilliam, 1985) and *Delicatessen* (Jean-Pierre Jeunet and Marc Caro, 1991) all departed from the parameters of contemporary American cinema with *mises-en-scène* and choices of narratives that gave rise to an alternative way of conceiving the science fiction genre. The conclusion of this research is a call to move beyond the conventions that have defined the articulation of studies of this genre in the interests of enriching the debate about what constitutes a science fiction film.

Key words

European cinema; Science-fiction; Dystopia; Historicism; 1980s; Totalitarianism; Future.

Author

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RETROFUTUROS. UNA VISIÓN DEL FUTURO EN EL CINE DE CIENCIA FICCIÓN EUROPEO (1979-1991)

Resumen

Este artículo defiende la aparición de una corriente europea en el cine de ciencia ficción entre los años 1979 y 1991. Fijando el análisis en un tema clave del género, la representación del futuro, una serie de películas estrenadas en Francia, Alemania occidental y Reino Unido establecieron una forma novedosa de imaginar el porvenir. A pesar de sus diferentes orígenes, films como *La muerte en directo* (La mort en direct, Bertrand Tavernier, 1979), *A años luz* (Les années lumière, Alain Tanner, 1981), *Kamikaze 1989* (Wolf Gremm, 1982), *Mil novecientos ochenta y cuatro* (Nineteen Eighty-Four, Michael Radford, Reino Unido, 1984), *Brazil* (Terry Gilliam, 1985) o *Delicatessen* (Jean-Pierre Jeunet y Marc Caro, 1991) se distanciaron de los parámetros del cine estadounidense coetáneo y optaron por una puesta en escena y un tipo de narrativas diferenciadas, lo que dio lugar a una forma alternativa de concebir el género de ciencia ficción. Este ensayo aboga por superar las convenciones bajo las cuales se han articulado los estudios sobre este género con objeto de enriquecer el debate sobre lo que constituye una película de ciencia ficción.

Palabras clave

Cine europeo; ciencia ficción; distopía; historicismo; años ochenta; totalitarismo; futuro.

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