

- 2008** This year a sweater won't do, Where will you be? - The day After Tomorrow
- 2019** You Have Been Chosen - The Island
- 2035** What will you do with yours? - I, Robot
- 2293** I've seen the future and it doesn't work, Zardoz
- 3978** Somewhere in the universe there must be something better than man! - The Planet of the Apes
- 40000** Who can save the universe? - Barbarella

Wandering through the Future by Marjolijn Dijkman

Part of project 'Lost in the Future' developed for Sharjah Biennial 8, 'Still life, Ecology and the Politics of Change'.
Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, 2007

Text by Sabine Hillen developed for the exhibition 'Filmische Wahrheiten', Heidelberger Kunstverein, Germany, 2007



**Wandering through the Future
2008 - 802701 AD.**

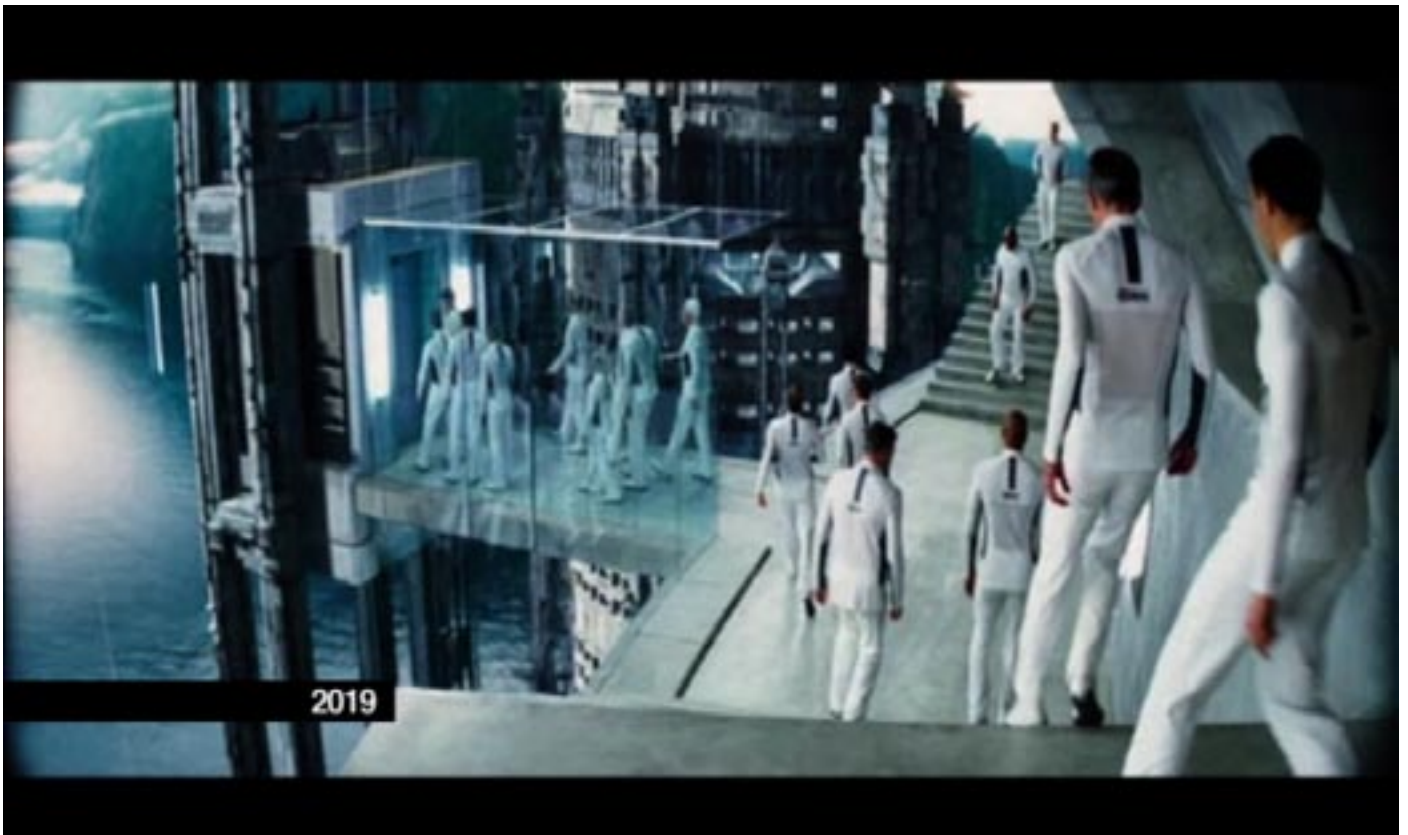
Text: Sabine Hillen
Stills: Marjolijn Dijkman



Wandering through the Future offers a variety of ways to explore the future, even if time in these scenes seems to deny reference to precise historical settings. Makers of science fiction mark the universes they create with years and dates mainly to make their fiction believable. When we consider the images only, the near and more distant futures do not differ significantly. Taking on the perspective of the future, progress is an abstract element and a close look at the fragments does not suffice to enable us to establish the period of time they refer to.

The time line, constructed with scenes from the golden age of science fiction until the millennium, draws on a broad stock of themes such as snow-clad nature landscapes, explosions that make buildings shake, frantic mobs of people that flee the assault of clocks... What strikes us most, when we consider the evolution in past decades, is that fear becomes increasingly highlighting fear and the rise of social criticism in recent productions. They ensure that the audience will at all times bear in mind that a disaster is bound to happen in the not so distant future.

Obviously, the most contemporary science fiction catastrophes do not offer a forward gaze with utopian flavour. The films make the viewers take on the strange position of observers who watch safely from their seats, while characters on a ship go down in stormy weather.



At the beginning of the 21st century, catastrophes exclude the possibility of a future with bright and warm colours. Time perspective in the interstellar Diaspora drifts away from the challenge to represent times to come. It makes the public ponder the causes of 'present' fears such as terrorist attacks, the decline of nature and the millennium bug... Where do we hide when danger is omnipresent?

Since we live in a culture that stresses the risks of the everyday, popular film recycles this fear and urges us to live cautiously and safely. When danger is presented as an option, it is also possible to avoid it. Radio commercials and news reports inform us that disaster strikes when we go for a swim, when we take the kids to school or throw a garden barbecue. The water of the pool can be polluted, the traffic is a high-risk zone and even the meat we buy at the butcher can be contaminated by mad cow disease. It is likely that our dream of a brave new world stretches no further than the ideal of health and safety – this place that is our home will become better when we take regular exercise, when we drive without polluting the air, when we refrain from eating saturated fat...

Recent pictures build upon this list with control options to project them into the future. Two extremes can be the object of representation: the safe and the unsafe, the good and the bad, the flowering and the destruction of nature. In the end, these films tell us more about the present dangers. They do not show a world that is completely opposed to the one we know.



Films of the 1960s and 1970s dealt with the notion of fear differently. Barbarella controlled the universe of her space craft with confidence; Spock's pointed ears made it clear he was an alien – nevertheless his non-human background did not prevent him from being well integrated into the Star-Trek command post. Even the awkwardness of animals that behave like humans did not seem to alarm the viewer for very long. The Planet of the Apes presented a small group of gorillas as genuine models in designer clothes, with neat haircuts and a tongue that was entirely understandable for man. During the sixties and seventies, fear did not just have a cause; it was limited in time and could be overcome. Several open-air shots with day- and sunlight emphasized this belief in utopian schemes.

At the turn of the eighties, the threat of fear became more intense. The imagination of the future seemed obstructed by traumas having their origins in the present. The world of Blade Runner and Independence Day is not so much darkened by the "experience" of a catastrophe. It is the possibility of a disaster waiting to happen that makes life unbearable. Characters travel in space shuttles, hide in decrepit shelters, and do not know what to expect. This uncertainty of what to expect causes their anxiety, not the event in itself.

The world as a whole then appears to be threatened. Forests, oceans and mountains are shot in bird's-eye view, the camera-perspectives plunging deep or rising high. Skyscrapers are illuminated in a city landscape. The focus on some images is so clear that it entails a warning. But what does it warn us of?



Most films of post-industrialized countries show no in-between: no democratic power tries to establish compromise or is ready to sort out situations of alarm. To crush the revolution of clones or robots, a state of emergency is proclaimed in which politics lack central power: different parties of warriors fight against each other with opposite interests. Splinter groups form a “plurocracy” in which tribal communities survive without rules or legislation. In other films political power borders on totalitarianism with dictators taking over decision-making. Being part of the mass means, in these features, to be subjected to an omnipotent sovereign.

If cloning forces us to look differently upon birth and death, this forward gazing also generates a new series of unfortunate events: an unseen form of slavery, the end of freedom and singularity that has become impossible. Robots and clones are “products” or toys in the hands of their makers, until evolution makes them unleash and deploy their powers. Suddenly time has come for the latest invention of man to conquer freedom and autonomy. Obviously, the ends of most films do not sustain a totalitarian worldview. In the end, the underdogs succeed to liberate themselves.

Despite this, the core question that science fiction poses is not only a political one. If the contrast between the sixties and the millennium elicits surprise, this is not simply due to the fact that utopian schemes have disappeared or the political arena is presented differently. It is stranger indeed to see that confidence in technical progress is undermined.



In films of the last decades knowledge no longer engenders better living conditions. The more technique and genetics are used, the more unreliable the consequences appear. The complexity of science is such that probability, still important for writers like Pascal, Musil or Perec, is fading. Predictions with a probable outcome are exchanged for “the unexpected” that is likely to fulfil itself in one way or another. Because of this process, science fiction is shortening its time extension. The narration of what is unexpected can hardly unfold a prospective in the long run.

The hostile attitude towards genetics warns us of the harm knowledge can bring. The sterile world of cloning seldom matches with marital bonds, family ties or social gathering. Erotic behaviour is minimal and sexuality is experienced as dangerous. In order to foil the disaster of the unexpected humans have to live under the control of science, with maximized safety and loss of adventure. When the unexpected can no longer be linked to a positive outcome, only rules and safety measures, regular as clockworks, will control our actions, from the moment of awakening until the time of turning in...

Another way of seeing the future is by referring to the mountains, rivers and desert-like zones in science fiction. Landscapes with stones, trolls and ghosts may offer models that have done away with the eternal search for control. Yet, we can reasonably ask whether this kind of nostalgia offers a serious alternative when it comes to answering the question science fiction wants to resolve. After all, what kind of future do we want to transmit to generations following our tracks? Could it be possible, in the light of their comfort, to bring science and nature under one roof?