Alphaville Exists

Chris Darke

'*Jeremiah has never had much success in pretending he doesn't thoroughly enjoy his job.*'   New Maps of Hell, *Kingsley Amis*

Seven and a half miles from the heart of São Paulo there is a gated community which houses 30,000 of the city's richest and most security conscious residents, many of whom travel by helicopter to work among the 17 million other in-habitants of the world's third largest city. According to the Washington Post, 'at night, on "TV Alphaville," residents can view their maids going home for the evening, when all exiting employees are patted down and searched in front of a live video feed.' In his account of 'a walled city where the privileged live behind electrified fences patrolled by a private army of 1,100,' the Post's correspondent failed to discover which keen ironist had named the development after the film by Jean-Luc Godard. Nor, I suppose, would it have been much appreciated had the reporter, as he flew low over the teeming favelas, the prisons and choked high-ways, casually asked his host, a CEO and Alphaville resident, 'You do realise you're living in a movie, don't you?'

Developed by the Alphaville Urbanismo Corporation in the 1970s, Alphaville São Paolo 'resembles its fictional namesake in elaborate and all-encompassing surveil-lance techniques' writes an American professor of urban studies, 'including high walls, hidden cameras and alarm systems … The Alphaville gym specializes in self-defence and is called CIA.' The facts about the development get better, or still worse, depending on whether one prefers dystopia to remain firmly in the realms of fiction or to come fully fledged to life:

To advertise Alphaville, the company sponsored some episodes of a popular prime-time Brazilian soap opera whose leading male character is an architect. The archi-tect and his mistress visit Alphaville where, according to Brazil's Gazeta Mercantil, the characters exalt the safety, freedom and planning of the place, comparing it to the neighbourhoods shown in US films.

And so … Godard's film about a city of the future, shot on location in the Paris of the mid-1960s, has endowed not just one but thirty 'gated communities' in Brazil with its name. And reality, having provided fiction with the raw material for its most dystopian scenarios, returns the compliment by materialising them. The back-and-forth between image and reality is dizzying: from CCTV to soap opera, from European art cinema to aspirational Hollywood and back again. Where does the utopian projection end and dystopian reality begin?

We might call it, with a certain queasiness, the 'Alphaville effect'. But surely this is

only an accident of naming, a sick joke? Are the 'Alphas' paying to inhabit their top-security luxury lock-up only so-called compared to the favela-dwelling 'Omegas'? How long before Alphaville becomes a suburb of Los Angeles, a satellite of Mumbai? As the oracular tones of the supercomputer Alpha 60 remind us at the beginning of Godard's film, there are indeed times when 'reality becomes too complex for oral transmission. But legend gives it a form by which it pervades the whole world.'

Dystopia Discovered & Described

The first question to be asked about Alphaville's dystopia is, how we seriously should we take it? Wasn't Godard's vision of technological servitude, a talking computer-god and a surveillance-ridden city-state already a little derivative, if not old-hat, back in the sixties? And isn't the dystopian element in the film just that, an element, one among many of which the master-collagist avails himself? The answers I propose to these questions are, in reverse order: 'yes', 'yes' and 'very seriously'.

Before considering Godard's depiction of dystopia, it's worth recalling how the word has come down to us. As an invented word for an imaginary place, 'dystopia' designates the worst of all possible worlds but if we consider how familiar the adjective 'dystopian' has become, a shorthand blessing for knee-jerk jeremiahs everywhere, we have to ask at what point in the long history of 'no places' did the bad begin to edge out the good?

The strict meaning of dystopia's antonym 'utopia' is nowhere or no place but has often been taken as meaning good place, as in the title of Sir Thomas More's classic proposal of an ideal society published in 1516. John Carey describes this as being because of 'confusion of its first syllable with the Greek eu as in euphemism or eulogy. As a result of this mix-up another word dystopia has been invented, to mean bad place.' Sensibly deciding that dystopia nevertheless remains a 'useful word', Carey makes a useful discrimination: Strictly speaking, imaginary good places and imaginary bad places are all utopias, or nowheres …To count as a utopia, an imaginary place must be an expression of desire. To count as a dystopia, it must be an expression of fear.

The journeys taken through these imaginary places have become a staple of the modern imagination and Carey is right to describe 'desire' and 'fear' as their impetus. Across the twentieth century, these journeys have departed from the desire to control the future and to imagine the techniques by which this might be achieved only to culminate in the fear of having lost control of those same techniques. The British novelist Kingsley Amis came to a similar conclusion in his 1960 study of science-fiction literature, *New Maps of Hell*:

Whereas 20 years ago, the average yawn-enforcer would locate its authoritarian

society on Venus or in the thirtieth century, it would nowadays, I think, set its sights at Earth within the next hundred years or so. The machinery of oppression, then, is wielded not by decadent quasi-aristocrats in ceremonial dress – these are far more common in fantasy – but by business-like managerial types well equipped with the latest technological and psychological techniques for the prevention or detection of heresy.

'Dystopia' really came into its own around the middle of the 20th century, encouraged by a brace of nightmarish fictional speculations that included Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1924), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). Its contemporary coinage was the work of Glen Negley and J. Max Patrick, a pair of American scholars who, in 1952, published *The Quest for Utopia.* Duly coined, the word passed rapidly into common currency. Dystopias extrapolate from the present those signs of modernity whose promise is at best ambiguous and at worse downright frightening and, in so doing, they hold the idea of 'progress' at an ironic, allegorical distance the better to question it. The dystopian scenario need not be the exclusive preserve of science fiction but, with the genre's propensity for speculation, allegory and straightforward prophecy, it appeared as its natural home.

During the 1950s and 1960s a tendency emerges in literature and cinema dramatising a host of fears about the emerging modern landscape and 'dystopian' becomes its accepted description. As Amis observed, with science fiction's focus shifting away from depicting other worlds in outer space towards the otherness of life on Earth, it was well placed to accommodate the fears that were coalescing at the same moment: fears of automation and atomic destruction, of consumerism and standardisation. Each is a typically modern fear stemming from the suspicion that beyond modernity's gleaming carapace, behind the windows of skyscraper and department store alike, forces were at work whose purpose was to control and subjugate humanity. If, by the 1960s, certain conventions were sufficiently well established to be recognised as describing a 'dystopian' vision then Godard, in Alphaville, turns them inside-out, inverting them to make them resonate anew.

One can happily travel through Alphaville ticking off dystopian tropes – 'Tyranny of the Machine', 'Crime of Love', 'Visitor from Another Time', 'City of the Future' – which probably explains why, in 1967, Robin Wood claimed, 'In terms of intellectually worked out prophecy, Alphaville offers little that is new, most of its ideas about the future of society being traceable to *Nineteen Eighty-Four, Brave New World* and other works.' Which is fair, up to a point. Yes, Godard's Alpha-ville may well be indebted to Huxley's genetically-engineered hierarchy which runs from Alpha to Epsilon, just as the all-seeing Alpha 60 can be taken as a surrogate for Orwell's 'Big Brother', but the film also owes something to Zamyatin's depiction of a technocratic autocracy enclosed within a glass city.

But as a low-budget take on Metropolis presided over by a high-tech version of Dr.

Mabuse, Alphaville owes equally to Fritz Lang. Wood's criticism neglects Godard's bravura creation of the city itself, not from sets but through filming some of the most modern structures Paris had to offer in 1965 and from the careful selection of surface detail. This undeniably qualifies as much as an 'idea' as a production decision; beyond simply making the most of a limited budget it also observes the 'presence of the future' that was materialising in the metropolitan fabric of Paris. The British novelist J.G. Ballard summed it up well: 'For the first time in science fiction film, Godard makes the point that in the media landscape of the present day the fantasies of science fiction are as 'real' as an office block, an airport or a presidential campaign.'

It is not only the conventional sci-fi image of the futuristic metropolis that Godard invokes in an inverted form but other conventions as well. The character of Lemmy Caution, for example, is a comical inversion of the 'Visitor from another Time', as Godard admitted: 'I didn't imagine society in twenty years from now, as [H.G.] Wells did. On the contrary, I'm telling the story of a man from twenty years ago who discovers the world today and can't believe it.' And it is this man from the past who must confront the 'Tyranny of the Machine' with the only weapons he has: low cunning, a loaded gun and lyric poetry.

Similarly, Lemmy and Natasha join the ranks of characters such as Winston Smith and Julia in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and D-503 and I-330 in *We* – each guilty of the 'Crime of Love.' In Alphaville, love is not the carnal transgression it is for those other outlaw lovers but a chaste and lyrical romanticism. Love remains a crime, though, because it represents the royal road to the imagination, which allows the lovers to entertain the idea that another world is possible. In the name of 'Silence, Logic and Security' the avowed purpose of Alphaville's city-state is, bowdlerising Diderot, to strangle the last lover with the entrails of the last poet.

One might say that in the eutopian mode all the imagination goes into the world-making, whereas in the dystopian it goes into escaping that world. And, from Zamyatin's *We* – ' … you are sick. And the name of your sickness is FANTASY!' – via *Brave New World's* bliss-inducing drug Soma to the crowd-pleasing pablum of Prolecult as imagined in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the inhabitants of dystopia are everywhere encouraged in their 'eager denial of mind'. The un-policed imagination is the sovereign enemy so, in Dystopia, no one will let you dream. There is another dimension to the idea of the no-place worth mentioning. Godard once claimed that the principal achievement of the new wave was to have established a new country on the map of the world and the name of that country was 'cinema'. What could be more utopian than that?

From no-place to non-places

Science-fiction films tell us as much about the time in which they were made as the future they project and between the two moments – the one specific, the other

nominal (1984, 2001, etc) – a sense develops of their qualities of prescience and allegorical vision. The enterprise of proposing a world-to-be is always a hostage to the future's fortune. The law of diminishing returns that applies as regards special effects bears this out. How soon before Matrix-era 'bullet time' looks as dated as Douglas Trumbull's 'star gate' pyrotechnics in 2001: A Space Odyssey (Stanley Kubrick, 1968)? Which may explain why Alphaville hasn't aged as badly as other examples of the genre; it finds its 'special effect' in the specifically cinematic resource of light. But this light, let's remind ourselves, is the light of the past brought to bear on the presence of the future now.

Would it be going too far to suggest that, in adding the dimensions of past and future to the present of 1965, Godard was able to set the controls of his particular time machine to withstand the very test of time? There's no shortage of films that seek to travel in time following Alphaville, from Blade Runner (Ridley Scott, 1982) and Mauvais sang (Leos Carax, 1986) to Gattaca (Andrew Niccol, 1997) and Dark City (Alex Proyas, 1998). There is also the developing genre of what critic Jonathan Romney has named 'steel and glass cinema' which he describes 'as cinema set in the recognisably contemporary urban world but framed and shot in such a way that it becomes detached, not unreal so much as irreal, bordering on science fiction', examples of which include Elle est des nôtres (She's a Jolly Good Fellow, Seigrid Alnoy, 2002), Demonlover (Olivier Assayas, 2002), Cypher (Vincenzo Natali, 2002) and Code 46 (Michael Winterbottom, 2003).

Romney claims Alphaville to be 'the mother' of such cinema and with good reason. In the forty or so years separating Alphaville from Demonlover it has become evident that the no-place of Godard's dystopia, with its labyrinth of corridors and lobbies, was already one big non-place in waiting. The presence of the future that Godard was keen to capture back in 1965 has since taken shape as a global non-place crossing continents and time-zones. 'It may be that we have already dreamed our dream of the future', J.G. Ballard has mused, 'and have woken with a start into a world of motorways, shopping malls and airport concourses which lie around us like a first instalment of a future that has forgotten to materialize.' Or, to put it another way, Alphaville exists. Everywhere.

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Chris Darke is a writer and film critic based in London. His work has appeared in Film Comment, Sight and Sound, Trafic, Cahiers du cinéma, Vertigo and The Independent. He is also the author of Light Readings: Film Criticism and Screen Arts, a monograph on Godard's Alphaville and Cannes: Inside the World's Premier Film Festival (with Kieron Corless). He has directed occasional works including a video portrait of Chris Marker for the DVD of Marker's La Jetée and Sans Soleil.