



Heike Endter. *Ökonomische Utopien und ihre Bilder in Science-Fiction-Filmen*
Economical Utopias and their Images in Science Fiction Films.

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At the heart of Heike Endter's 2009 dissertation, published in 2011 as *Ökonomische Utopien und ihre Bilder in Science-Fiction-Filmen*, lies the assumption that art history, as a field and with its unique methodology, can provide an insight into film studies that has not yet been discovered and made accessible. Interestingly, Endter seeks to argue this unique insight as a benefit of art history, a discipline threatened by neoliberal ideals of employability, by analyzing a field of interconnected terms that directly address this threat: "utopias, the economy, the visual and science fiction film" (9; all translations are mine). She is driven by the idea of a "use value," both morally ("what is good") and economically ("what it is good for"), that she identifies at the center of the science fiction genre in the form of a utopian imaginary but unusual for utopian studies, not in regards to politics but in regards to economics (9). She sets out to apply Panofsky's method of iconology (an interpretative reading of the visual components of an image) in combination with a sequential analysis of film images (i.e., a narrativization of the cinematic text), in order to gain access to the constitution of such economic utopian spaces. What is to be gained here, she argues, is the "sensual experience of abstract and in themselves invisible economic topics and motifs" (35) via the cinematic.

Endter structures her analysis along the lines of four concepts, "Machine Humans," "Three Edenic Gardens," "The Corporation," and "Consumption," but not before shortly addressing her corpus, her methodology, and her terminology. And here we encounter some of the problems that her approach and her chosen field reveal: Endter is an art historian, and her intended audience is either an interested art audience or other art historians, as the choice of her publisher suggests (not an academic publishing house but one dealing

in artists' work catalogs and exhibition documentation). This has major ramifications for the academic value of the book though, as the study never really addresses the reasoning behind either the corpus of works chosen or the academic terminology and discourses made use of and referenced.

In terms of the corpus, Endter somewhat arbitrarily decides to use only U.S. productions of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries but strays from this by including the early German silent film *Metropolis* (1927), making it the only non-U.S. film in the book, and the 1960 version of Well's classic *The Time Machine*. This limitation is not only crippling to her argument of a socioeconomic and utopian reading of the films, when clearly Eastern European (e.g., Polish or Soviet) and Asian (e.g., Korean, Japanese) films would have allowed a much more productive counterreading and a broader historical base would have allowed an asynchronous discussion; but it also shows her restricted knowledge of the field. All of her choices are well-known and already rather well-discussed (even overly so) science fiction films, despite the fact that Endter claims *Rollerball* and *Logan's Run* to be "lesser known" (33) examples of the genre. There is little left to be said, even in terms of visual analysis, about *Alien*, *Blade Runner*, or *The Matrix*—all of these films have had numerous essays, even monographs, written about them.

Even more problematic, though, especially considering the book's claim to academic merit, is that there is not enough theory behind the analysis. Endter does not provide a discussion of current discourses on film theory, utopian studies, or science fiction studies, nor does she have any grounding in economics or political sciences—all of which would have lent more credence and academic weight to the individual readings. This becomes most clearly problematic when dealing with a definition in which the economic becomes something ubiquitous in contemporary society and the utopian becomes the "wished-for" of "de-economization" and "de-capitalization" (17). On the one hand, Endter claims to deal only with representations of the economics of "contemporary reality" (17), before then relegating all utopian thinking to fictionality and giving her definition of *utopia* (taken from a conversational dictionary) as "narrative of an imagined (hoped for or feared) state of society as a model or corrective for existing conditions" (18). The contradiction of her claim is never addressed, and the dimensions of utopian political or communal thinking beyond fictionality are left out completely—something that is even more astonishing given the fact that Endter herself claims to have attended the 2008 Utopian Studies Society

conference in Limerick, where “four discussion rounds were devoted to utopian philosophy and as many to utopian approaches to politics” (14 n. 2). There is no mention whatsoever of the political thought on utopia in the works of Artur Blaim, Gregory Claeys, and Ruth Levitas (to name but a few) or even of the academic clarity derived from definitions of *utopia*, *eutopia*, *dystopia*, and *anti-utopia* that Lyman Tower Sargent and Tom Moylan provide.

In a similar vein, Endter reads the films mainly by narrativizing them and commenting on both story events and images in terms of specific cultural meanings. She does point out that “filmic images are ‘lettered’ images” (30), meaning that both spoken text and image need to be interpreted in relation to each other, addressing counterpoints or contiguity. In effect, though, her analyses rarely amount to more than retellings, lacking a methodological catalog with which to describe the formal cinematic aspects—why Endter does not, for example, make use of the Bordwellian school of Neoformalistic film analysis completely escapes me. Bringing iconology into fruitful methodological discussion with theories from film or cultural studies would have broadened the scope of the book and resulted in interesting interdisciplinary insights.

The actual insights that the readings produce remain somewhat banal though, when Endter, for example, reads the “Edenic Gardens” of the two discussed *Time Machine* variants as expressions of their respective sociocultural historical moments. The 1960 version thus discusses a “biologically coded class-based society” of Morlocks and Eloy that represents the binary of capitalism and communism dominating the 1960s (85). The 2002 variant, Endter claims, on the other hand, opens up to (post)colonial discourses of racial exploitation and provides the utopian potential of a postracial “biological form of conflict resolution” in the hybridization of races (97). Discussions of both literary and filmic representations of Eden as utopia and the inherent exoticism are missing from her reading, as are historically specific analyses of a broader cultural white privilege and 1960s anticommunist sentiment, which conflicts with her interpretation of Eloy utopian society as decapitalized.

Interpretative readings of androids as “metaphor of economized bodies” (49), as Endter provides for *Blade Runner*, and of the corporation as “unseen but all-seeing threat” (122) in the *Alien* series are neither new nor

shocking and clearly are not based in a radical and innovative approach to reading film through art history. Reading the Borg in *Star Trek: First Contact* as a “doubly negative image,” in their presentation as “technologically infused and interconnected mass” and as “animal society” (62), into the “complete picture of de-individualization” (63) overly simplifies discourse on transhumanist improvement, posthuman subjectivity, and animal-human relations into a catchphrase. Instead of arguing for specific representations of human-alternate subjectivity through a thorough visual analysis of the filmic codes, Endter states that the “view through the eyes of the Borg is distorted both in color and perspective” (64). How the camera here thus addresses an inherent mechanized gaze and the question of Borg subjectivity are left out. The shift in cinematic style, with layers of meaning in focus, depth, resolution, lighting, and movement, is collapsed into a half sentence about distorted images. In the following Endter’s focus shifts to descriptions of Borg armor and its iconological meaning as “covering the body, to keep it safe” (64), which is inverted by presenting the functional parts on the outside. Again, her analysis remains superficial, reducing the complex use of several layers of technology (from mechanical tubes, to electric wires, to digital wireless signals) into one metaphor of the body being reduced to its “machinic quality” and completely ignoring other technologies such as force fields to counter human weaknesses of vulnerability (64).

In all, Endter’s book reads easily and provides an entertaining overview of well-known SF films and their economic metaphorical meanings. On the one hand, for the nonexpert audience it might seek, this could be enough intellectual stimulation to think about science fiction and utopia in terms it has otherwise not done. It might even be a radical move for art historians—that I simply do not know. For someone in film studies, in science fiction studies, or in utopian studies, on the other hand, this book provides no stimulus to engage with the films anew or to take up iconology as a methodological intervention into the way film is analyzed. There is little here to be gained for an academic of these fields, and even though the formal aspects of the book (high-quality print, stylish font and cover) stand out among many a rather ill-formed academic volume, this is by far not a good enough reason to read it.