

Stoppe, Sebastian. *Unterwegs zu neuen Welten. Star Trek als politische Utopie* [En route to New Worlds: Star Trek as Political Utopia]. Darmstadt: BÜchner, 2014. 322 pp. Paperback. ISBN 978-3-94131040-7. EUR 34.90.

For some time now, utopian studies have been experiencing a veritable boom. There is a steady stream of research on very different aspects of utopias, and classics of the field like Tom Moylan's *Demand the Impossible* ([1986] 2014) are being republished in new editions. But despite the obvious interest in utopian topics, one area is still lacking adequate scholarly research: positive utopias—eutopias—in film. The reason for this seems obvious: although positive utopias in the tradition of Thomas More feature a narrative frame, they are not about telling a story but rather focus on the description of a better society. The plot is often reduced to the bare minimum and only serves as pretext for long monologues in which a member of the utopian society describes its different institutions in great detail. The characters—normally a traveler from outside and a “utopian guide”—are mere place holders without any characteristic traits, and since a utopia typically describes a society where everybody is happy there is also no conflict. Altogether, these are very bad conditions for an exciting movie. It is therefore not surprising that none of the classic utopian novels—which actually are not novels in the proper sense—have ever been turned into a film.

Dystopias, on the other hand, are very popular in Hollywood, since they typically tell the story of an individual who rebels against the dystopian society. Here, the protagonist has a clear goal—escaping from or overturning the current order—that nicely fits the framework of a mainstream movie. The current popularity of dystopias is probably not only a reflection of our dire times, but is also due to the fact that they simply provide more exciting stories.

None of this is really new. In fact, in “What Is Utopian Film: An Introductory Taxonomy” (*Utopian Studies* 4.2 [1993]) Peter Fitting already suggested that fiction films are not well suited for utopias and that research would be better conducted in other areas, for example documentary and propaganda films. But altogether, very few researchers have followed Fitting. German-language research also still largely focuses on fiction films. In fact, several studies on utopian films have been published in recent years that more or less follow the argument laid out above. Chloé Zirnstein's *Zwischen Fakt und Fiktion* (2006), André Müller's *Film und Utopie* (2010), and Heike Endter's *Ökonomische Utopien und ihre visuelle Umsetzung in Science-Fiction-Filmen* (2011) all turn to the analysis of dystopian movies like *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), *THX 1138* (1971), or *Blade Runner* (1982), after having explained why eutopian movies are not feasible.

*Unterwegs zu neuen Welten* (On the Way Towards New Worlds) therefore comes as a pleasant change since it takes a completely different approach.

Sebastian Stoppe's study, which originated as his PhD thesis at the Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg, analyzes "whether the *Star Trek* franchise does not constitute a utopian text rather than science fiction" (21). To answer this question, Stoppe first defines the two genres and then describes *Star Trek's* presumably utopian elements.

As refreshing as Stoppe's approach is, there are several problems with his study, and one is already apparent in his basic question—the beginning premise that utopias and sf are phenomena that can and should be clearly separated. While the two genres undoubtedly arose from different traditions and do not stress the same themes, there is considerable overlap between them and ultimately the two terms describe phenomena on different levels. Utopias are about content and intention, while sf describes a specific aesthetics. Stoppe eventually points out these differences but spends much too much time on this, especially considering his rather unsurprising conclusion "that science fiction and utopia are not mutually exclusive but can rather complement each other" (92). Stoppe also seems completely unaware of the research already conducted on filmic utopias. While his grasp of the secondary literature on utopias in general is quite good, he does not refer to any of the studies mentioned above.

After discussing the relationship between sf and utopia, Stoppe turns to his actual subject, *Star Trek*, and spends many pages introducing the reader to the franchise. The different series, the characters and their races, the political connections in the *Star Trek* universe, and many other things are discussed in minute detail—even with diagrams of various spaceships. Here, *Unterwegs zu neuen Welten* feels more like a general introduction to *Star Trek*, sometimes even bordering on a fan publication, rather than an academic study. Ironically, this is probably partly due to the fact the book was originally a PhD thesis. Stoppe could not take for granted that his readers—viz. his supervisors—knew a lot about *Star Trek*. But for anyone with a background in sf studies, there is much common knowledge here. But even if one assumes that the intended reader is a *Star Trek* ignoramus, a lot of the information that Stoppe gives is just not relevant.

For example, the author spends more than eighty pages describing the political system in *Star Trek*, including the various alliances and wars in which the Federation engages. Much of this sheds no light on the question at hand. Stoppe keeps insisting that "politics take an important role in *Star Trek*" (165). This is certainly true, but the same could be said about *House of Cards* (2013-)—which is certainly not utopian—or any other series set against the background of epic conflicts, e.g., *Game of Thrones* (2011-) or the *Battlestar Galactica* reboot (2004-2009). In the classic utopia we normally get a detailed description of the political system, but even after analyzing countless *Star Trek* episodes, Stoppe is not able to draw a coherent picture of how the Federation's

various institutions interact. The reason for this is very simple: in contrast to a typical utopia, *Star Trek* is not really interested in these things.

Stoppe identifies various other elements which he classifies as utopian, including the fact that the world of *Star Trek* is one without money, that the spaceship functions—much like the utopian island—as a closed society, and especially that the series reflects and comments on actual political developments. But once again, none of this is in any way either specific to *Star Trek* or inherently utopian. It is true that many utopian novels describe a state without money, but they also explain how this system is supposed to work. In *Star Trek*, on the other hand, we learn very little about the economy of the Federation. The argument that the *Enterprise* is a more or less self-sufficient system is not very convincing either; the same could be said about any narrative which takes place on board a ship or in a military unit.

As for reading *Star Trek* as a commentary on political or social issues, Stoppe rightly emphasizes that utopias are always a reaction to a very specific historical/political situation. This is also visible in their critiques, which normally target concrete issues; e.g. More quite bluntly says that the behavior of the landlords forces the peasants into criminality. *Star Trek*, however, is never that specific; the series does react to political shifts like the end of the Cold War—this, after all, is not really surprising—but rarely formulates a direct critique. How Stoppe arrives at the conclusion that the universe of *Star Trek* “relates to our reality much like More’s *Utopia* or Campanella’s *City of the Sun*” (283) is not at all clear.

The second to last chapter is devoted to the Borg, which Stoppe reads as a dystopian antipode to the eutopia of the Federation. While this interpretation is certainly valid, it is also a missed opportunity, since the Borg Collective, where every drone equally participates in the hive mind, could equally well be read as a positive utopia. It is almost a truism of utopian studies that classic utopias appear as unpleasant, totalitarian systems to modern readers. They also can easily be turned into dystopias by simply including a character who does not conform to the prevailing order. By the same token, a dictatorial regime like the Borg Collective can be understood as utopian. In some ways, this understanding of the relationship between the individual and the state is closer to the classic utopian tradition than anything in the Federation. Although Stoppe discusses the utopian/dystopian dialectics and even states that the “Federation and Borg Collective are very close in many points” (291) he does not seem to be aware of the full consequences of these similarities.

All in all, Stoppe’s yield is somewhat meager. *Star Trek* certainly shows some utopian aspects, but none of them—nor even their sum—is pronounced enough to turn the franchise as a whole into a utopia. Stoppe’s conclusion that *Star Trek* is not “a classic science fiction narration anymore” (290) but rather a “technological or social [...] and political utopia” (292) seems unconvincing.

If anything, his study shows that *Star Trek* has much more in common with most other sf movies or series than with a utopian novel in the classic tradition.

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