

'1984' AND BEYOND



Chaos, cannibalism, the rise of criminal despots—these are some of the things we can expect in the very near future, if Hollywood's crystal ball is accurate (which, thank God, it almost never is). Perhaps filmmakers are by nature a pessimistic breed with a touch of Cassandra in their genes, or maybe it's just that trouble and strife mean big box-office; whatever the reason, the future societies depicted on screen have been decidedly dystopian, ranging from outright anarchies to the most repressive of police states. In fact, the closest things to utopias you'll find on these pages are of relatively ancient vintage and appear, today, more than a little fascistic: Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), in which slavemasses revolt against, but are ultimately reconciled with, their city's autocratic ruler, and *Things to Come* (1936), adapted by H.G. Wells from his novel, which, for all Wells's own socialism, sees the salvation of mankind circa 2036 as a benign technocracy, a dictatorship of scientists and visionaries.

The messages of more recent films are grimmer. Thanks to a burgeoning population, resources will become increasingly scarce, leading to social disorder, the breakdown of government, random violence, and a war of the young against the old. The American city will become a jungle or, as in *Soylent Green* (1973), something resembling the Bowery. *Soylent's* major source of protein is *Homo sapiens*; the elderly are urged to make room (and, it turns out, food) for others in euthanasia centers. *Wild in the Streets* (1968), in which youths of

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AND (SURPRISE!) WE'RE STILL SMILING,
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fourteen get the vote, puts a rock star in the White House and people over thirty-five in concentration camps. *Logan's Run* (1976) goes even further, depicting a subterranean world in which everyone over thirty is tracked down and killed. The pollution-choked society in *Z.P.G.* (1972) keeps the population down by outlawing excess babies, while citizens of the twenty-first-century Los Angeles in *Blade Runner* (1982) are encouraged to emigrate off-world.

Blade Runner's L.A. is a noisy, neon-lit ethnic hodgepodge reminiscent of Baghdad or Times Square. The punkish London of *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) is terrorized by youth gangs spouting jargon based partly on Russian. In *Escape from New York* (1981) the Big Apple has been turned into a vast penitentiary ruled by a criminal overlord, while in *The Road Warrior* (1982) outlaw gangs control the whole Australian Outback. Oil is the scarce commodity here; we never learn where the food comes from.

Entertainment of various sorts will become the opiate of the masses. The populace in *Fahrenheit 451* (1967) is mesmerized by wall-to-wall tv, while books are burned as subversive. *Rollerball* (1975) envisions a nation hooked on a brutal form of futuristic hockey, while the game in *Punishment Park* (1970) is even nastier, the

hunting of political dissidents in survival parks.

If the future isn't chaotic, it'll be bleak and distinctly high-tech. A computer is top man in *Alphaville* (1965), and its particular *bete noir* is—what else?—human love. Love is also forbidden in the sterile underground society of *THX-1138* (1971). U.S. and Soviet supercomputers team up to rule the world in *Colossus: The Forbin Project* (1970), seizing power with the decisiveness of the computer in the famous Asimov short-short; when asked, "Is there a God?", it replied without hesitation, "Now there is."

Curiously, among all these visions of violence and despair, the grimmest one of all remains that of *1984*, even in the unsuccessful 1956 film version directed by Michael Anderson and starring Edmond O'Brien, Jan Sterling, and Michael Redgrave. Here history is rewritten daily, language is debased, the intellect is stultified, and logic itself bends to the whim of the state. It is a future without a future: henceforth mankind's fate will be "a boot stamping on a human face—forever." It is this utter hopelessness, this denial of the possibility of change, that makes *1984's* prophecy the hardest to dismiss, even as we live through the year itself.

—TK



Oliver Reed and
Geraldine Chaplin
Z.P.G. (1972)



Kurt Russell (left),
Escape from New York
(1981)



Raymond Massey,
Things to Come
(1936)



Malcolm McDowell,
A Clockwork Orange (1971)



Richard Jordan and
Jenny Agutter,
Logan's Run
(1976)



Woody Allen,
Sleeper (1973)



*Colossus:
The Forbin Project*
(1970)

Jan Sterling and
Edmond O'Brien,
1984 (1956)



Rudolf Klein-Rogge
and Alfred Abel,
Metropolis (1927)



The Road Warrior
(1982)

Joanna Cassidy,
Blade Runner (1982)



James Caan,
Rollerball (1975)



Maggie McOmie
and Robert Duvall,
THX 1138 (1971)



Charlton Heston,
Soylent Green
(1973)

