

throughout the Western world in the late 1920s, and Lang is said to have conceived *Metropolis* on a visit to New York City, which clearly inspires many of the urban images. Still, *Metropolis* is very much a reflection of its specific historical context, powerfully expressing the anxieties of German society in the late 1920s and providing a warning of coming tyrannies that would acquire added significance with the rise of Hitler a few years later.

The film is set in the year 2000 in a futuristic city somewhat reminiscent of that in Wells's *When the Sleeper Wakes*. The class structure of capitalist society has been concretized in this future society in the separation of the citizenry into two distinct groups. One group, the "Masters," rule the city while leading lives of extravagant luxury and hedonistic pleasure. The other group, the workers, live in darkness and drudgery, laboring in subterranean rooms to tend the machines that create the high-tech paradise in which the Masters revel. As the film opens, a spirit of rebellion is gradually growing among the oppressed workers, though they are dissuaded from violent revolution by their reverence for Maria, a worker's daughter and a charismatic leader who preaches a doctrine of moderation and compassion. The male protagonist Freder, son of Metropolis's ruler Joh Fredersen, becomes fascinated with Maria and descends to the machine rooms, where he experiences first hand the degrading and dehumanizing conditions suffered by the workers and thus becomes sympathetic to the workers' cause. Meanwhile, Fredersen, concerned about the growing potential for rebellion among the workers, enlists the scientist Rotwang to aid him in quelling that rebellion. Rotwang then kidnaps Maria and replaces her with a robot duplicate of his invention. He instructs the robot to instigate a self-defeating workers' rebellion, which will thus presumably discredit Maria, though the exact motivation behind the Fredersen-Rotwang plot to foment rebellion among the workers is unclear from the film. The workers respond with a violent attack on the machines that also leads to the flooding of their underground city. Realizing that "Maria" has led them to this self-destruction, they turn on her and burn her at the stake, discovering as she burns that she is in fact a robot. Fredersen, meanwhile, rescues the real Maria from Rotwang and convinces his father to make a pact with Grot, leader of the workers, to cooperate in rebuilding Metropolis.

This somewhat sentimental ending clearly detracts from the social and political content of Lang's film. Similarly, the unclear motivations of many of the characters' actions combine with a number of allegorical and symbolic elements to make the plot a rather confused jumble. On the other hand, it should also be pointed out

that all prints of the original German version appear to have been destroyed and that existing American versions have been altered in ways that are not entirely traceable but that may in some cases substantially alter the narrative flow of the film. (Lang himself referred to the American version as his film's "mutilated surrogate.") In any case, *Metropolis* is far more important for its striking visual images of modern anxiety over technology and urbanization than for its plot or its specific figuration of the social situation in the fictional city of Metropolis. The automated city of Metropolis and the elaborate laboratory of Rotwang have been an important inspiration for any number of subsequent science-fiction films. And the film's columns of downtrodden workers, trudging mechanically to and from their workplaces, heads down and spirits broken, have remained a vivid part of the dystopian imagination for more than six decades.

Selected bibliography: Heldreth.

ROLLERBALL: Dir. Norman Jewison (1975)

Based on the William Harrison short story "Roller Ball Murder," *Rollerball* depicts a future dystopian world in which giant multinational corporations (which separately act as monopolies in the fields of energy, housing, transportation, food, services, and luxury) have gained complete control of the world, and conventional governments have been rendered obsolete. This future world is rather typical of corporate dystopias: high technology provides material luxuries for all, but individual citizens become increasingly reliant on technology to the point of losing their humanity; culture is reduced to a combination of banal electronic procorporate propaganda and violent mass-media spectacles; and corporate rule brings a certain efficiency to society, but at the expense of a loss of individual freedom. Indeed, the clash between corporate policy and individual desire provides the principal driving force for the film, as it does for so many dystopian works.

The film's central image is the game of Rollerball itself, a sort of high-tech extension of Roller Derby designed for the consumption of worldwide television audiences. The game, featuring corporate-sponsored teams of professional athletes, is part of a general corporate strategy of encouraging obedience and conformity and preventing individuality and creativity. In particular, the game is specifically designed so that individual players cannot long stand out as "stars." As Mr. Bartholomew, a chief executive of the Energy Corporation,

rollerball is intended to "demonstrate the futility of individual effort." The game thus relies heavily on teamwork and automation. Moreover, it is so violent that the careers of individual players seldom span more than a season or two, again preventing any one player from achieving stardom.

Despite this design, the film's protagonist, Jonathan E., has become a rollerball superstar, idolized by millions of fans after a long and successful career. The major plot line involves the efforts of the Energy Corporation, sponsors of Jonathan's team, to coerce him into retirement and to end his stardom. But Jonathan, whose very identity paradoxically relies on this game that is designed to efface individuality, staunchly refuses. Moreover, his celebrity status makes it difficult for the corporation simply to drop him from the team. So, as the world championship game approaches, the sponsors gradually change the rules of the already-bloody game in an attempt to assure that in the final match all players (including Jonathan) will be killed. Predictably, however, Jonathan still triumphs, becoming the only survivor of the cataclysmic contest and scoring at the film's end a final goal that nets the world championship for his team and personal glory for him.

If the plot of *Rollerball* ultimately seems to descend to the level of action-film cliché, it should also be pointed out that Jonathan's victory is in fact a rather hollow one. The Energy Corporation that sponsors his team will no doubt receive at least as much glory from his victory as will he, despite the fact that they have done everything in their power to prevent his success. And if the bloodbath that the championship game becomes might surely be expected to alienate even diehard audiences, then so much the better. This final game, in which Jonathan becomes the quintessential individual hero, thus simply becomes a reminder of the disastrous consequences of such individual heroism. In this light, perhaps the most chilling implication of the film is its suggestion that the corporate rulers of this future dystopia cannot lose, no matter what the outcome of Jonathan's effort. Rollerball thus ultimately serves its purpose, and individual effort does indeed appear futile.

Despite such subtleties, however, *Rollerball's* depiction of the future corporate dystopia can sometimes seem rather stereotypical. In particular, the film includes a number of rather clichéd warnings against an excessive reliance on technology. For example, all of the books in this future world are gradually being transferred into computer storage, after which the original books are destroyed. Thus, when Jonathan E. decides to do some library research in an attempt to understand the motivation behind the demands for his retirement, he

finds that books have become unavailable. In order to get the information he needs, he must travel to Geneva to consult "Zero," a giant supercomputer that is fast becoming the world's brain and memory. But "Zero" is unequal to the task. Jonathan finds the computer in the midst of a sort of nervous breakdown, confused and disoriented beneath the weight of the tremendous responsibility placed on it. As a result, most of the information stored in the computer is now lost and cannot be recovered because the originals have been destroyed.

Granted, the "Zero" episode is obviously included for satirical (and even comic) purposes and should therefore not be interpreted on a realistic level. For example, the breakdown of "Zero" (with no backups) is downright silly if taken as a literal warning about computer technology, but it may have some value as a sort of miniallegory about excessive reliance on technology. Still, the depiction of computer technology in *Rollerball* is so patently unbelievable that the satirical message is in danger of being undermined. In general, though the film does suggest that technology and efficient management have brought peace and prosperity to all in this future world, it shows little real appreciation of the complexity of the technological issues it treats. For example, that computers in the film are used by the world's corporate rulers in an attempt to control information makes a valid point, but the film might also have acknowledged the tremendous potential of computers for making information more accessible to individuals.

Probably the most interesting aspect of the film is the treatment of the game of rollerball itself, which can be read as a kind of microcosm of the dystopian society outside the game. Most obviously, the overt violence of the game functions as an image of the fascination of the general population with such spectacles. It also demonstrates the use of popular culture by the ruling corporations to numb the minds of the population and to divert attention from some of the more sinister workings of the corporate system. Among other things, for citizens of this future world the exaggerated violence of rollerball calls attention to differences between the game and "real" life, which thereby appears pleasant and peaceful by comparison, cloaking the fact that the merciless competition of the game is in fact not fundamentally different from the ruthless way the corporations rule the society at large.

The most important implications of the game of rollerball, of course, are for our own present-day world. For example, the film's depiction of the use of popular culture by giant corporations as a way to pacify and to manipulate the general population recalls a number of

recent critiques of popular culture and shows an understanding of it far more sophisticated than that evident in something like Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, where bad mass culture arises simply from the bad taste of mass audiences. But the film *Rollerball* (itself an example of popular culture) is presumably intended to serve a function in our present-day society that is precisely the opposite of that served by the game of rollerball in the future world of the film. No doubt, for example, the many violent game-action scenes are intended not to appeal to the audience's fascination with violence, but to comment upon and criticize such fascination. Similarly, the game presumably functions for the audience of the film not to obscure, but to clarify certain elements of corporate society and to suggest similarities between this society and our own world. On the other hand, one could argue that altogether too much of the film is devoted to showing the spectacle of rollerball itself, leading one to ask whether the film does not ultimately capitalize on the public's fascination with violence to increase its box-office appeal.

In addition, the film does not ultimately make clear the relation between the world of the film and present-day capitalism, presumably the historical forebear of the corporate society of the future. In particular, the emphasis on competition so central to our own bourgeois society has been lost almost entirely in this future world of global monopolies. Thus, while it may be perfectly consistent for such monopolies to attempt to suppress fantasies of individual heroism through a game like rollerball, this motif ignores the fact that the bourgeois ideology that lies behind the development of giant corporations relies quite heavily on a popular belief (illusory or not) in the possibility of individual accomplishment. Certainly, there is a strong relation between the capitalist economy of today's America and the sports that are currently popular with American spectators. But this relation is far different from that between the corporations of *Rollerball* and the game they invent. It is no accident, for example, that popular spectator sports in present-day America seem designed precisely to *promote* the exploits of individual heroes, who then quite frequently become (by virtue of the fame thus acquired) important corporate assets through the endorsement of commercial products.

Selected bibliography: Hull.

THE RUNNING MAN: Dir. Paul Michael Glaser (1987)

Based on the similarly titled novel by Richard Bachman (better known as Stephen King), *The Running Man* is a somewhat superficial depiction of a future dystopian America that seems designed mostly as a pretext for placing star Arnold Schwarzenegger in on-screen combat with as many outrageous bad guys as possible in the duration of a single film. The film is set in Los Angeles in the year 2017, after a worldwide economic collapse has led to the transformation of America into a totalitarian police state divided into paramilitary zones. The upper classes of this future society seem to live well, with a variety of high-tech devices providing convenience and pleasure. Most citizens, however, live in abject poverty in rambling urban slums. The government maintains its control of these citizens through a combination of physical force and psychological persuasion, especially via television. While most individuals can no longer afford their own television (or their own home), massive public telecreens allow the legions of homeless to watch from the streets, mesmerized by violent spectacles and manipulated by propagandistic slogans. Foremost among these television spectacles is the top-rated game show "Running Man," produced in cooperation with the Entertainment Division of the Justice Department. In this show "runners" (usually convicted criminals of various sorts) are hunted and violently killed by professional "stalkers" for the enjoyment, diversion, and subtle edification of the television audience.

Schwarzenegger plays Ben Richards, a military policeman who is sent to a prison camp after he refuses to fire on an unarmed crowd demonstrating in the streets of Bakersfield to protest the lack of food. The crowd, meanwhile, is slaughtered anyway, and the killings are then officially blamed on Richards, who becomes known as the "Butcher of Bakersfield" after sensational fake television coverage shows him committing the massacre. Richards and several fellow inmates escape from the camp, but are soon recaptured. However, Richards's sensational escape (together with his notorious reputation) gains him the attention of Damon Killian, host of the "Running Man" show, who is always on the lookout for ways to raise the ratings of his program. Richards is then coerced into becoming a contestant. Along with two of his fellow prison escapees and the woman Amber Mendez (who had been instrumental in Richards's recapture, but who has now learned of the falsification of the Bakersfield massacre) he is released into the "game zone," a deserted area of Los Angeles that had been decimated by the "big quake of '97."