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Unfiltered Cinematic Thoughts from the Age of the Pandemic

The Quarantine Film Diaries





Pavle Levi

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Three classic dystopian science fiction films from the 1970s — **Soylent Green** (1973), **The Omega Man** (1971), and **Logan's Run** (1976) — provide useful metaphors for some aspects of the present moment. Made at the time when the post-apocalyptic genre was in full swing, and world capitalism

was beginning a sustained transformation into its now-widespread neoliberal (post-industrial, speculative, and viciously anti-welfare) phase, these films — these “cinematic models” (as one may wish to call them by analogy with the currently oft-evoked scientific “prediction models”) — incite thinking about the socio-economic, ideological, and political underpinnings of the COVID-19 pandemic culture of distancing and isolation.

This text will itself *not* abide by the rules of proper distancing. Rather than respect common distinctions and clear-cut lines of separation, it will *freely, in an unfiltered manner, intertwine cinematic fiction and today's reality*. The coronavirus has temporarily brought the world to a halt. In this interregnum, to appropriate Antonio Gramsci's well-known formulation, a great variety of strange, impure (at times contradictory), and morbid symptoms appear...⁰¹



01 Gramsci's exact words are: “In this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.” See Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London: The Electric Book Company, 1999), 556.

[1] Soylent Green

Or, People on the Stairs



Richard Fleischer's *Soylent Green*, set in a New York City of economic and ecological catastrophe in the year 2022, may have been a case of futuristic science-fiction five decades ago when it was made. Today, less than two years before it is supposed to take place, it seems more like an educational film done in the style of hyperbolic realism.

Soylent Green depicts an overpopulated society suffering the consequences of uncontrolled greed and protracted disregard for the environment. The opening credits sequence, a synoptic montage of documentary-like photographs (both in color and black and white), effectively establishes the theme of rampant twentieth century industrialization leading to drastic depletion of resources, severe food and water shortages, extreme poverty, and irreparable pollution (the glass-house effect). The film particularly emphasizes unchecked corporate domination and an unbridgeable class divide that separates the extremely rich 1% from the poverty-stricken rest, the 99% of the population.

To be sure, in *Soylent Green*'s dystopia, no one has it easy.⁰² But the socio-ecological cataclysm, much like the coronavirus, is no “great equalizer” either.⁰³ Patriarchal white masculinity is still hegemonic. Sexism is unbridled.⁰⁴ Small groups of wealthy corporate types (let us not forget the celebrities), who inhabit the high-rises and keep away from the filthy and dangerous streets, are clearly suffering the least. They rely on the services provided by the combined apparatuses of private support, leisure, and population control: personal assistants, concierge doctors and firefighters, concubines (referred to as “furniture”), and the police.⁰⁵ Those who are employed by the wealthy and by the system (whatever is left of it) struggle significantly more, but above all they still feel fortunate to be able to get by. Finally, there is the mostly undifferentiated mass of disenfranchised people, by far the largest segment of the population, who simply seem to be written off, left to die in the overcrowded streets.⁰⁶

- 02 So polluted is this world that beautiful and healthy Nature (oceans, animals, fields) exists in it only as an archive of spectacular moving images, which one gets to see — if one is lucky (privileged) — projected onto gigantic screens as one lays dying in a hospital for assisted suicide.**
- 03 Charles Trepany, “Madonna calls coronavirus ‘the great equalizer’ in controversial message from her bathtub,” *USA Today* (March 23, 2020).**
- 04 “The shadow pandemic: Violence against women and girls and COVID-19,” report, *UN Women* (April, 2020).**
- 05 Alex Williams and Jonah Engel Bromwich, “The Rich Are Preparing for Coronavirus Differently,” *The New York Times* (March 5, 2020).**
- 06 Consider in this light the dramatic disproportion between the number of COVID-19 cases in different borrows of New York, the U.S. city most affected by the illness: the fewest number of cases is to be found among the residents of Manhattan; the highest number of cases is to be found in the working class neighborhoods of Brooklyn, Queens, Staten Island, and the Bronx.**





This situation is given powerful visual expression in the film's bizarre mise-en-scene. As police detective Frank Thorn (Charlton Heston) enters the building where he lives, he literally has to walk over heaps of lethargic, semi-dead people — piles of bodies stretching across hallways and stairs, all the way to the door of his apartment! A heavily armed guard sits there and protects the sanctity of Thorn's abode.

The privacy of one's home (even a home as modest as Thorn's happens to be) — the ability to effectively seclude one's self from the rest of the world, *to shelter-in-place or self-isolate, if need be* — is here clearly cast as a tremendous class and racial privilege. Even when it is necessary, for reasons like the current need to safeguard one's health amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the quarantine is a luxury that is not readily available to everyone.⁰⁷ In a world that does not wish to recognize any alternatives to the logic of private property, many — way too many — are deprived of the basic human right to have a home. This shameful lack

of interest in prioritizing, and ensuring, a safe place of residence for *all* people, must be recognized as an elementary, structural failure of capitalist democracy: a failure that is, furthermore, directly, causally related to a larger network of interconnected problems that define today's malfunctioning (in some places, as this pandemic has made blatantly clear, practically non-existent) neoliberal institutions of public health.⁰⁸

07 Va Lecia Adams Kellum, "The Intersection of Homelessness, Race, and the COVID-19 Crisis," *National Alliance to End Homelessness* (April 7, 2020).

Roberta K. Timothy, "Coronavirus is not the great equalizer — race matters," *The Conversation* (April 6, 2020).

08 Katy O'Donnell, "Trump's libertarian housing regulator refuses to bail out mortgage firms with public money," *Politico* (April 16, 2020).

- 09 **Danielle Zoellner, “Coronavirus: Jeff Bezos, world’s richest man, asks public to donate to Amazon relief fund,” *Independent* (March 24, 2020).**
- 10 **Abdi Latif Dahir, “‘Instead of coronavirus, the hunger will kill us.’ A global food crisis looms,” *The New York Times* (April 22, 2020).**
- 11 **Friedrich Engels, *Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, online edition, *Marx/Engels Internet Archive* (2000), 13.**
- 12 **Mark Stevens, “Reading Marx on Halloween,” *Jacobin* (October 31, 2018).**

While the vast majority of the world’s inhabitants in the second decade of the twenty-first century experience tremendous suffering, the biggest corporations, such as Soylent Industries and Amazon, keep growing their wealth despite the pandemics, the ecological cataclysms, and the collapse of all but the most oppressive social institutions. For instance, Amazon is maximizing its profits from shipping and delivering goods to clients who have temporarily been immobilized in unprecedented numbers (due to various quarantine and curfew orders). At the same time, the richest corporation in the world is hypocritically demonstrating its “humane” character by asking its clients to also contribute to a relief fund it started on behalf of its contract employees who are working during the pandemic.⁰⁹ Similarly, Soylent Industries are entrepreneurially turning widespread hunger into a source of wealth by processing dead people into a novel, branded article of food called “Soylent Green.”¹⁰

Speculating about the prehistoric past, Friedrich Engels wrote: “At this time, owing to the continual uncertainty of food supplies, cannibalism seems to have arisen, and was practiced from now onwards for a long time.”¹¹ Extending Engels’s line of reasoning, *Soylent Green’s* “cinematic model” projects that the twenty-first century will literally be the age of commodified cannibalism.

“Life under capitalism,” Mark Steven recently wrote, “is the experience of horror, the irreversible liquefying of human substance and its necrophagic consumption.”¹² Or, as Frank Thorn realized when, following Soylent’s production process, he came face to face with the fundamental truth of capitalist democracy:

“Soylent Green is people!” ●

isolation...





[2] The Omega Man

“They sure don’t make pictures like that anymore!”

Los Angeles, 1977. It is two years after a plague pandemic triggered by biological warfare. The U.S. President's strategy of "economy first, lives second" (protect the elite's wealth, then worry about ordinary people's health) has tragically backfired. Instead of the "very good job of only 100,000 dead," almost the entire world's human population has been wiped out.¹³ In developing his cinematic "disease model," director Boris Sagal does not go as far as accusing the World Health Organization for this fiasco, or characterizing the plague as "the Chinese virus," but he does exhibit a genuine Cold War mentality by situating its origins in the Sino-Soviet border conflict.¹⁴



Colonel Robert Neville (once again played by Charlton Heston) is a military scientist and the ultimate beneficiary of centuries of racial and gender discrimination: a white man, he is the sole survivor immune to the plague because he has had timely access to a preventive treatment.¹⁵ He injected himself with an experimental vaccine he was developing when the pandemic broke out. Neville roams desolate city streets during the day, but despite his "immunocapital," he has to shelter-in-place at night because he is being pursued by a group of infected and dangerous nocturnal creatures.¹⁶ These mutants, the Family, as they call

themselves, are a frightening, medieval-looking religious sect that has rejected all modern technology. Led by the priestly Matthias, they see science as the ultimate evil and Neville, a trigger-happy army doctor, as its epitome and irritating leftover.

- 13** David Smith, "Trump says keeping US Covid-19 deaths to 100,000 would be a 'very good job,'" *The Guardian* (March 29, 2020).
- 14** "Trump Cuts Funds for World Health Organization as Oxfam Warns Pandemic Could Push Half a Billion into Poverty," *Democracy Now!* (April 15, 2020).
Robert Mackey, "Trump Shrugs Off Spike in Anti-Chinese Racism, Even in His White House," *The Intercept* (March 17, 2020).
- 15** Zak Cheney-Rice, "COVID-19's Racial Death Gap Was Predictable," *New York* (April 8, 2020).
"COVID-19: A Gender Lens," report by *United Nations Population Fund* (March 2020).
Blake Farmer, "The Coronavirus Doesn't Discriminate, But U.S. Health Care Showing Familiar Biases," *NPR* (April 2, 2020).
- 16** Kathryn Olivarius, "The Dangerous History of Immunoprivilege," *The New York Times* (April 12, 2020).

- 17 Liz Szabo, “How anti-vaccine activists are using COVID-19 to boost their movement,” *Kaiser Health News* (April 28, 2020).**
- 18 Deleuze’s well-known formulation (inspired by Paul Klee and Franz Kafka) concerns the relationship between cinema and politics, but it pertains to a different context — the high modernist cinema of Alain Resnais and Straub-Huillet. See Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (London: Athlone, 1989), 215–216.**
- 19 Today, when streaming platforms are already steadily eroding the culture of movie-going, one wonders to what extent the economic and the psycho-social fallout of the coronavirus crisis will further endanger the existence of film theaters. On the other hand, since they allow for practices of social distancing to be upheld, drive-in theaters are currently undergoing a small renaissance. See Scott Roxborough, “Drive-In Movie Theatres Thrive Despite Lack of New Titles: ‘People Just Want to Get Out,’” *The Hollywood Reporter* (April 18, 2020).**
- See also: Jurij Meden, “Digital Pandemics or: On Preserving the Audience and the Will to Will,” *Austrian Film Museum* blog (March 27, 2020).**

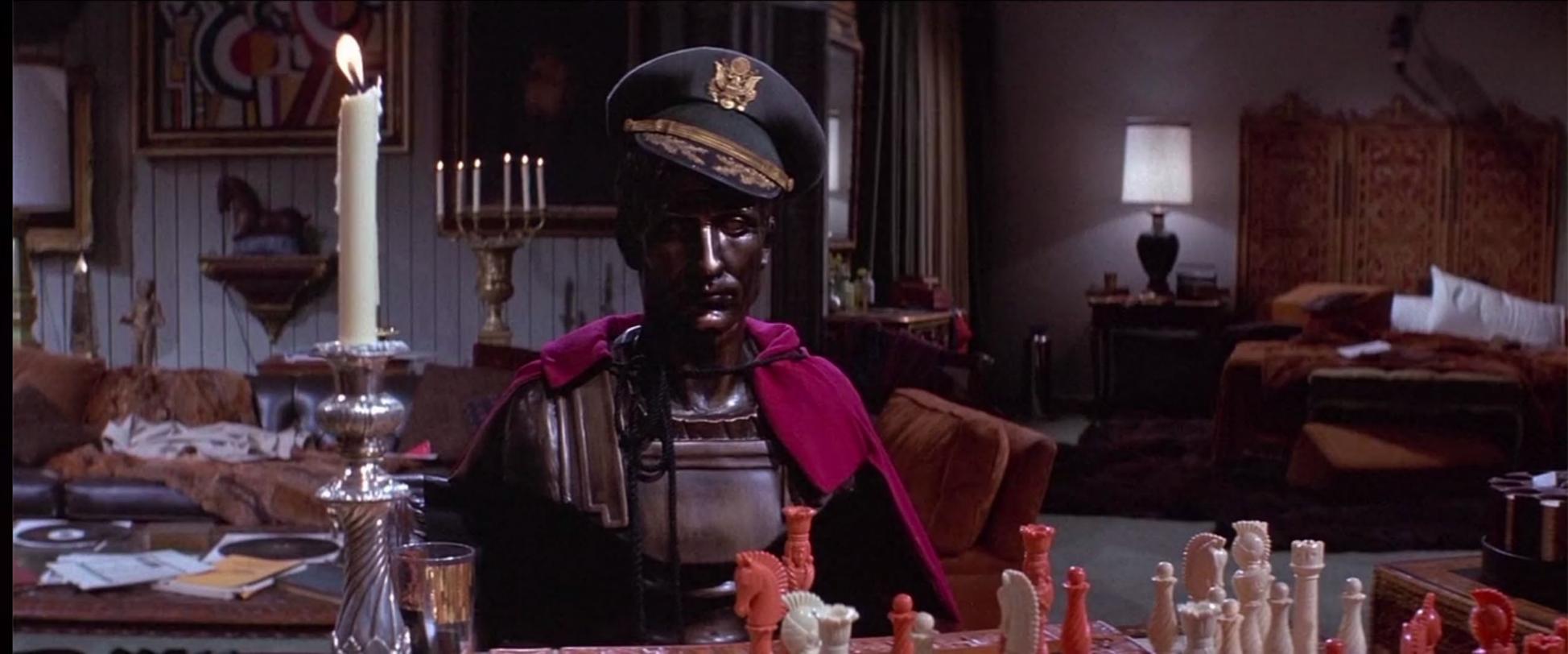
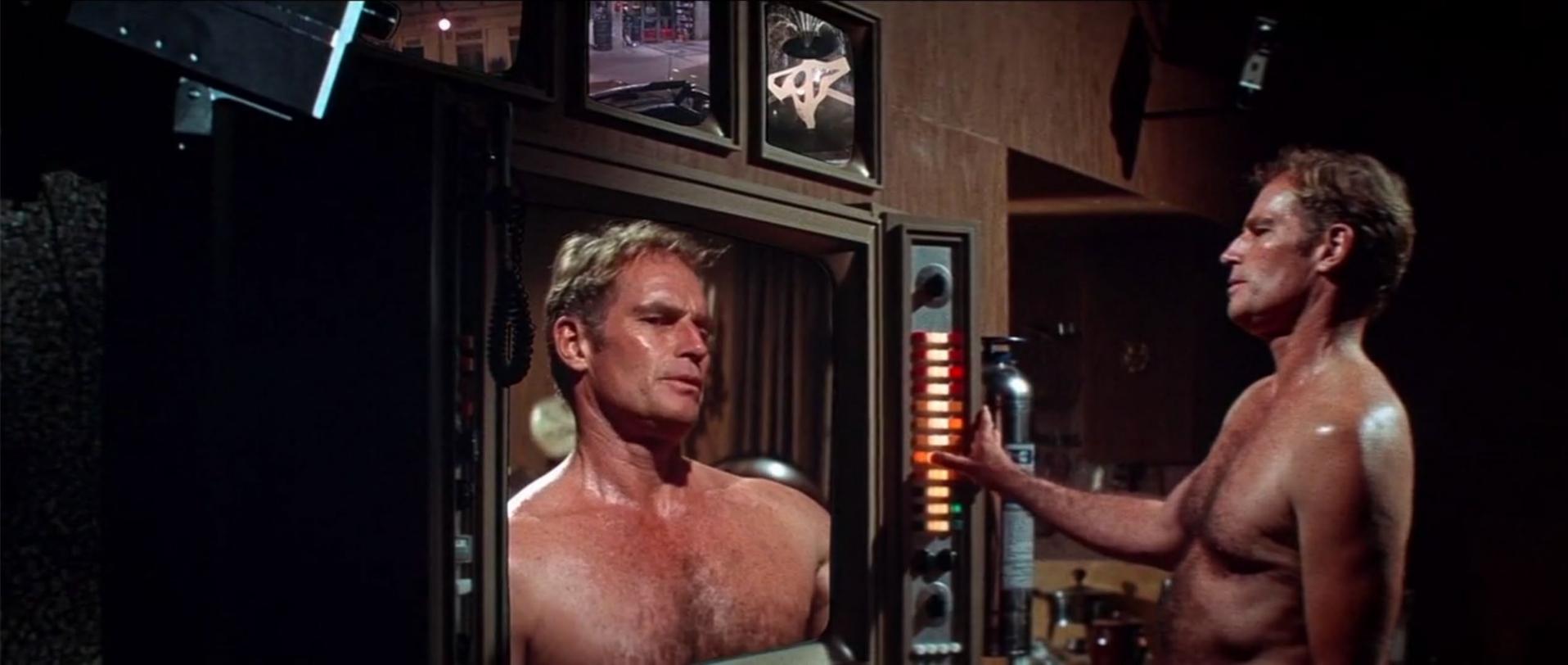
Neville, the Alpha Male-turned-the Omega Man, is in quite a predicament. Either he is in self-isolation in order to avoid the disease (anthropomorphized as a bunch of Luddite, vaccination-opposed religious fanatics),¹⁷ or he is free to wander in public spaces except... there is no longer any public. “The people are missing,” as Gilles Deleuze would have it.¹⁸

This absence of any remnants of the public and the public sphere is made eerily palpable in the film in a variety of ways. Sagal filmed L.A.’s desolate business district (the primary location for Neville’s outings) early in the morning on weekends, using rooftop high angles and the gamut of fast zooms. Before he led the Family, Mathias was a television anchor; the development of the pandemic is largely summarized through flashbacks that take the form of clips from his past news broadcasts. Early on in the narrative, Neville, on the verge of a mental breakdown, hallucinates that all public phones in the city are ringing at the same time. (“There is no phone ringing, damn it! There is no phone.”) And in one of *The Omega Man*’s most memorable scenes,

he goes to a movie theater where he watches Michael Wadleigh’s 1970 documentary, *Woodstock*, all by himself.¹⁹ “Great show,” he declares, “Held over for a third straight year.” As the cinematic monument to the communitarian ethos of the hippie counter-culture unfolds on the screen, Neville is moved not only by the preponderance of people he sees at Woodstock, but also by the festival’s message of love and solidarity. Nonetheless, he concludes with bitter reactionary irony (while casually holding onto his machine gun): “Yup. They sure don’t make pictures like that anymore!”²⁰

- 20 The ideological implication of Neville’s comment is clear: if left unchecked, progressive politics and counter-cultural permissiveness will eventually bring about the social apocalypse and the disappearance of the public. The film’s unmistakable parallel between Matthias’s and Charles Manson’s deranged “Families” drives this point home.**





21 On this point see, for example, the video-conversation between the philosopher and activist Srećko Horvat and the theatre director Oliver Frlić. “Filozofski teatar” (digital edition), April 9, 2020.

22 See Guy Debord, “Separation Perfected,” *Society of the Spectacle* (Zone Books, 1995), 11–24.

See also the veteran Situationist Raoul Vaneigem’s recent statement about “Life against capital and its pandemics,” *Autonomies* (April 13, 2020).

A private event in a public space. This logic is the exact obverse of how some significant aspects of the private/public dynamic have been recalibrated in the age of the COVID-19 pandemic. Today, with world-wide lockdowns in place, the public sphere is almost exclusively virtual in form (digital audio- and video-chats), while resting upon a thoroughly privatized, highly fragmented and individualized, spatial-material base.²¹ Everyone is communicating at a distance, simultaneously maintaining social interactions and self-isolation. What

Guy Debord and the Situationists once diagnosed and attacked in their “critique of separation” as the dominant form of techno-alienation in post-industrial capitalism, has now become the normative starting point of all public discourse.²² It seems only natural, therefore, that a new gesture should also be added to the arsenal of tools that make up the undertaking that is the emancipatory critique of ideology: *the properly political gesture of self-interrogating the ideological content of the private space wherefrom one speaks.*

On this front, one could, for instance, take the lead from filmmaker and artist Slobodan Šijan, who in an ingenious photo-installation called *Fascism in my Room* (2014), collected, systematized, analyzed, and put on display all references to Nazism and fascism that he could find scattered around his apartment: books, photographs, film scripts, historical brochures and fliers, even a bottle of wine.²³

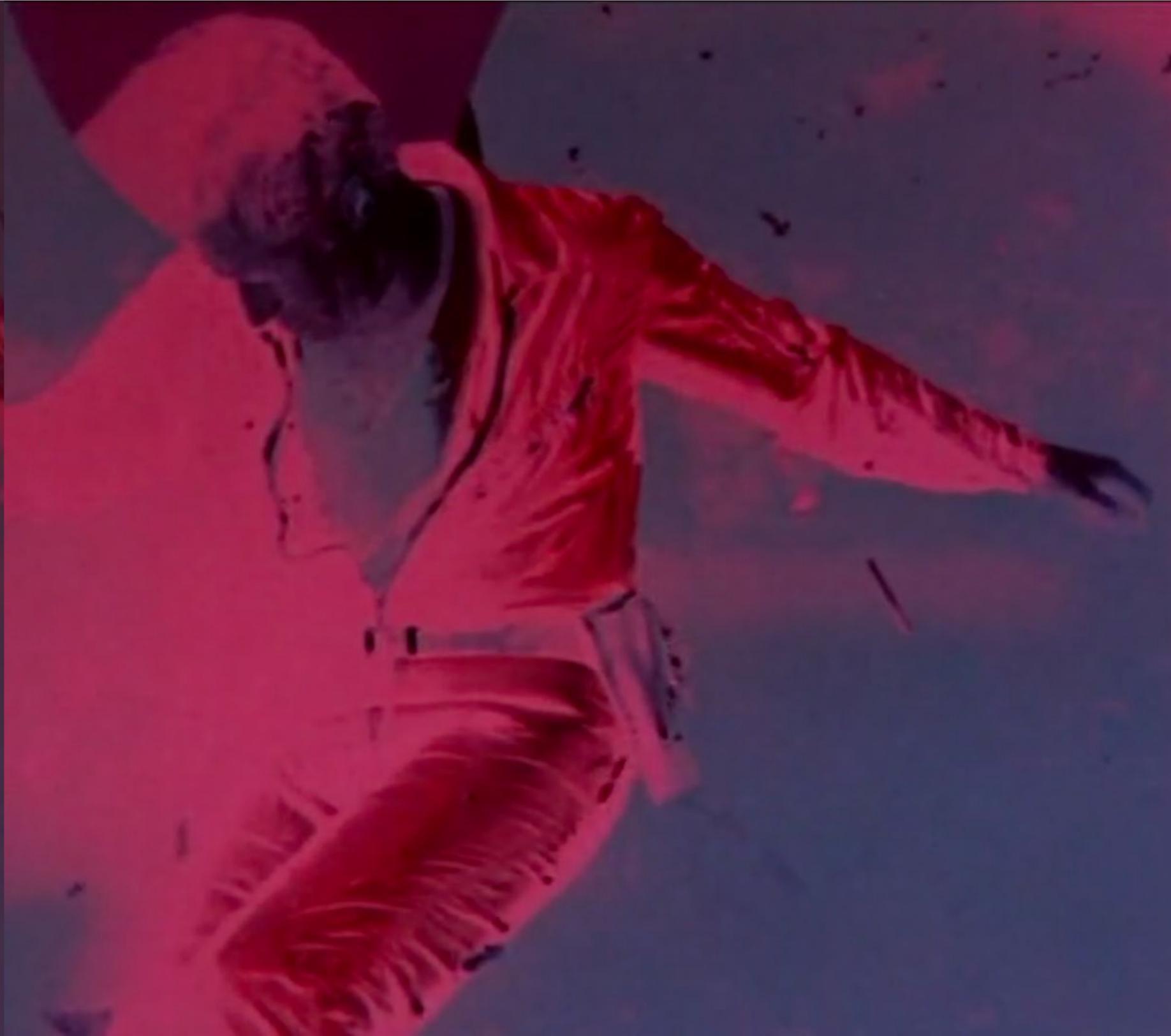
The quarantine seems like the right time to come to terms with the ideological mise-en-scene of one's privacy. Perhaps even Robert Neville — once a scientific representative of the powerful U.S. military-industrial complex, and now merely the “last man on Earth” — could find some time during one of his painfully lonely nights to amuse himself by self-critically reflecting upon his *still surviving impulse to accumulate cultural commodities*: to pile up in his home various precious art object (paintings, sculptures, etc.) — the once-expensive and inaccessible, but now entirely worthless, remains of the bygone human civilization...

The politics of purge in times of self-isolation. ●



23 It was, in fact, a bottle of Italian Adolf Hitler wine, a baffling gift from a friend, that initiated Šijan's “thinking about ways in which fascism imperceptibly enters our homes and survives, consciously or unconsciously, in our lives.” As if in response to the philosopher Rastko Močnik's fundamental political question of the post-state socialist era — “How much fascism?” (Rather than, more simplistically, “Fascism: yes or no?”) — Šijan further asked himself: “What else is there in my home that is directly related to it [fascism]? Curiously enough, I found quite a few items. That is how this installation was made.” Slobodan Šijan, text accompanying the photo-installation *Fascism in My Room* (2014). See also Rastko Močnik, *Koliko fašizma?* (Ljubljana: Studia Humanitatis Minora, 1995).

self-interrogation...



[3] Logan's Run

A New Beginning?





only for pleasure.” Computers, robots, and servo-mechanisms will have been taught to “provide everything.” It would appear that what, back in the early 21st century, some still wrongly saw as an unfair luxury, a privilege of the richest 1% — fending off COVID-19 by using mansions, yachts, and other “nice places” as lockdown locations²⁴ — will, three centuries

indeed, not an issue — whether due to the narcissistic shortsightedness and the socio-political obliviousness that has always accompanied privilege and seems to have also survived the apocalypse; or, because the fear-inducing Carrousel is just another “new age” version of the time-tested religious deception: the promise of rebirth at the price of submitting one’s self to a costumed spectacle of mass extermination (in this case, in an anti-gravitational laser arena).

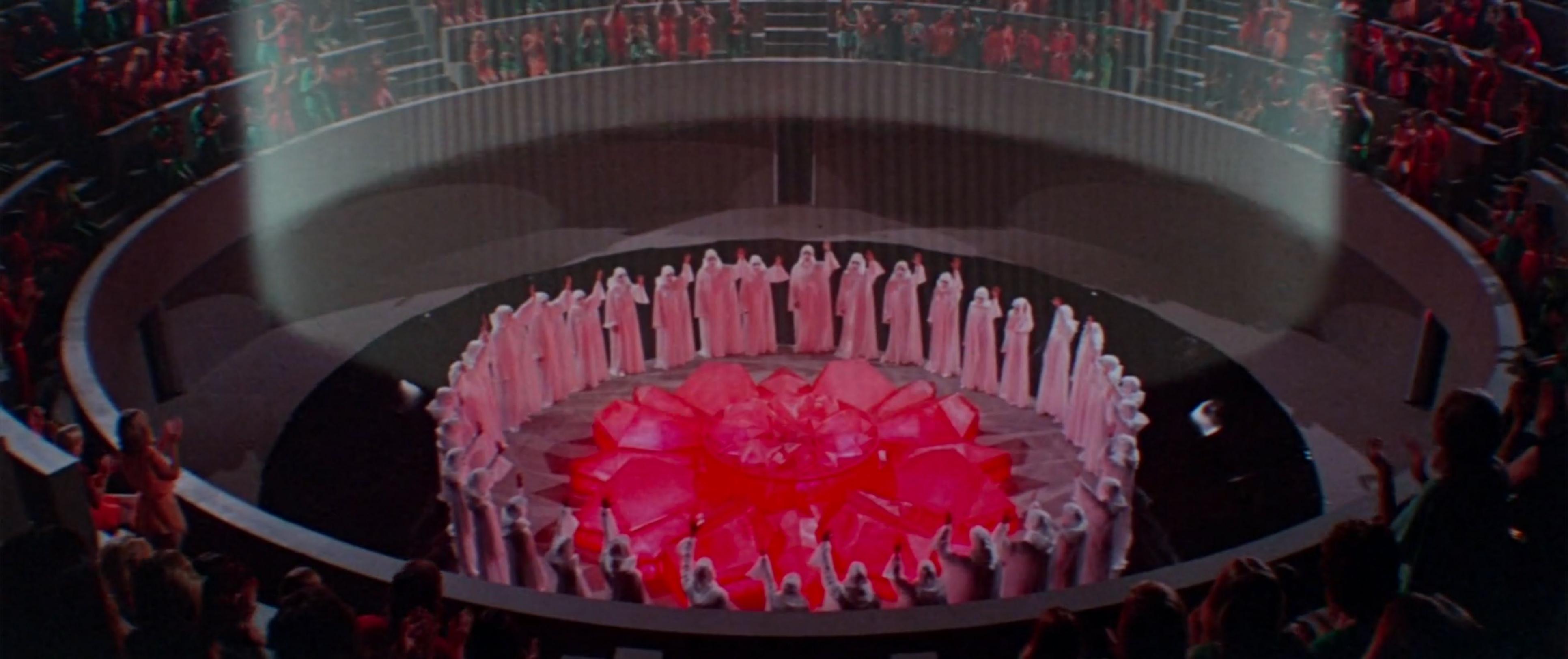
According to director Michael Anderson’s cinematic projection, by the year 2274, current “states of exception” such as isolation and sheltering-in-place will have become the permanent state of things. Survivors of war, pollution, and overpopulation will be living in a *hedonistic quarantine*, “a great domed city, sealed away from the forgotten world outside.” Unlike the world of *Soylent Green*, the post-hippie utopian society of *Logan’s Run* will be utterly free of class conflict, racially homogeneous (conspicuously white), and will “live

later, have miraculously become a lifestyle equally accessible to all. Perhaps the dispensable 99% of the population will simply have died away in the process of “natural selection.”²⁵

“There’s just one catch,” Anderson’s model explains. The happy-go-lucky inhabitants of the great domed city must unquestioningly accept the firmly established, extreme measures of population control: “Life must end at thirty unless reborn in the fiery ritual of Carrousel.” For most, this ageist doctrine is,

24 Jim Zarroli, „*The Rich Really Are Different. They Can Shelter In Nicer Places,*” *NPR* (April 15, 2020); Olivia Carville, “*We Needed to Go’: Rich Americans Activate Pandemic Escape Plans,*” *Bloomberg News* (April 19, 2020).

25 Kat Stafford, Meghan Hoyer, Aaron Morrison, „*Outcry over racial data grows as virus slams black Americans,*” *Associated Press* (8. april 2020); Sarah Varney, Melissa Bailey, et.al., „*Nurses, surgeons, janitors: the first US health workers to die from COVID-19,*” *The Guardian* (April 15, 2020).



26 Lois Beckett, “Older people would rather die than let COVID-19 harm US economy — Texas official,” *The Guardian* (March 24, 2020).

27 In this respect, *Logan’s Run* may be seen as taking a critical stab at the hippie “culture of fun,” which in no small measure influenced how the film imagines its own, futuristic youth culture.

Such successful and thorough naturalization of the ideology of radical population control, a *fait accompli* in the future society of *Logan’s Run*, provides a clear aspirational ideal for the early 21st century neoliberal elites deeply opposed to social security programs. Like the Carrousel (although less precisely), COVID-19 preferentially targets the older population. Estimating the number of deaths from the virus that a nation could endure without its economy suffering (and perhaps even benefitting), is the cruel type of calculation the federal, regional, and local authorities in the United States and the European Union have unashamedly been conducting ever since the early days of the pandemic.²⁶

Be that as it may, Logan and Jessica, the film’s principal protagonists (played by Michael York and Jenny Agutter),

are not taking the macabre necessity of population control for granted — and so, they are “running.” “Runners” are outcasts who contest the system’s normative ageist ideology and the egotistical culture of mindless pleasures.²⁷ Logan, however, is initially running because he is a policeman on a mission from the super-computer which is governing the dome-city, to find the Sanctuary — the mythic place of refuge for all runners. Joined by Jessica, a genuine outcast-runner, Logan sets on a long and arduous journey. Along the way they fight Box, a food-processing robot designed (by Soylent Industries?) to turn anything, from plankton to humans, into nutrients. Eventually, they exit the city domes, witness the sunrise for the first time, and explore the no longer contaminated outside world — ruins of human civilization overtaken by unrestrained nature.





Logan and Jessica even befriend an old gray-haired man, who tells them stories about the lives people used to lead outside the domes. Inexplicably, he is now the sole vestige of that culture. A twenty-third century Omega Man? Needless to say, he, too, is white (played by Peter Ustinov).

From the perspective of April 2020, while the coronavirus quarantine is in full effect, it is impossible not to recognize in Logan and Jessica's actions a cinematic wish fulfillment: going outside, back into the world, resuming our lives, returning to reality — this is what billions of

people all over the world are longing for nowadays. However, Logan and Jessica also understand well that there cannot be — there shouldn't be — any simple return to “how things used to be” before the pandemic, and that the “old normal” was an unjust and exploitative socio-economic and political order invested in promoting the anesthetizing false consciousness of hedonism-for-all.



In the end, Logan and Jessica do not find the mythic Sanctuary, but they do learn a much more important lesson: the world outside the privileged environment of the domes is a real rather than a mythical place; as such, it is a site of tremendous *potentiality*. Novel communitarian links and better, more equitable social relations can — and should — be established there. What Anderson’s film thus ultimately points to is what Louis Althusser once described as “the empty space” that is “the precondition of political practice”: a space of *possibility* that is empty in order, subsequently — eventually — to be filled up with elements and agents of a concrete, articulated socio-economic vision and struggle.²⁸ *Logan’s Run* does not offer any specific ideas or solutions how to build a new society the benefits of which would not be limited only to the select few (based on this or that set of discriminatory criteria), but it does, at least, recognize that a genuine “summoning of *all*” is a necessary initial step in that direction.²⁹

By the film’s end, Logan has emancipated himself. On the other hand, Jessica was, from the outset, much more advanced in her thinking; she always vehemently opposed the dome-society’s principles of total control. From the system’s obedient instrument of violent oppression, Logan turned into an advocate of social progress, an instigator of rebellion, and an activist for a new communitarianism. It is his impassioned balcony speech (not exactly on par with Lenin’s famous ‘April Theses’ balcony speech three and a half centuries earlier, but not entirely dull either) that ultimately, in the film’s final scene, provokes the massive movement of people outside the city domes.

It remains to be seen whether and how the people will respond to the opportunity that presents itself to them as they emerge from their shelter: to imagine a mise-en-scene of more egalitarian existence, to initiate an honorable, healthier social contract...

On Saturday, April 11, 2020, a coronavirus patient died in a New York City hospital. His last words were:

“Who is going to pay for it?”³⁰ ●

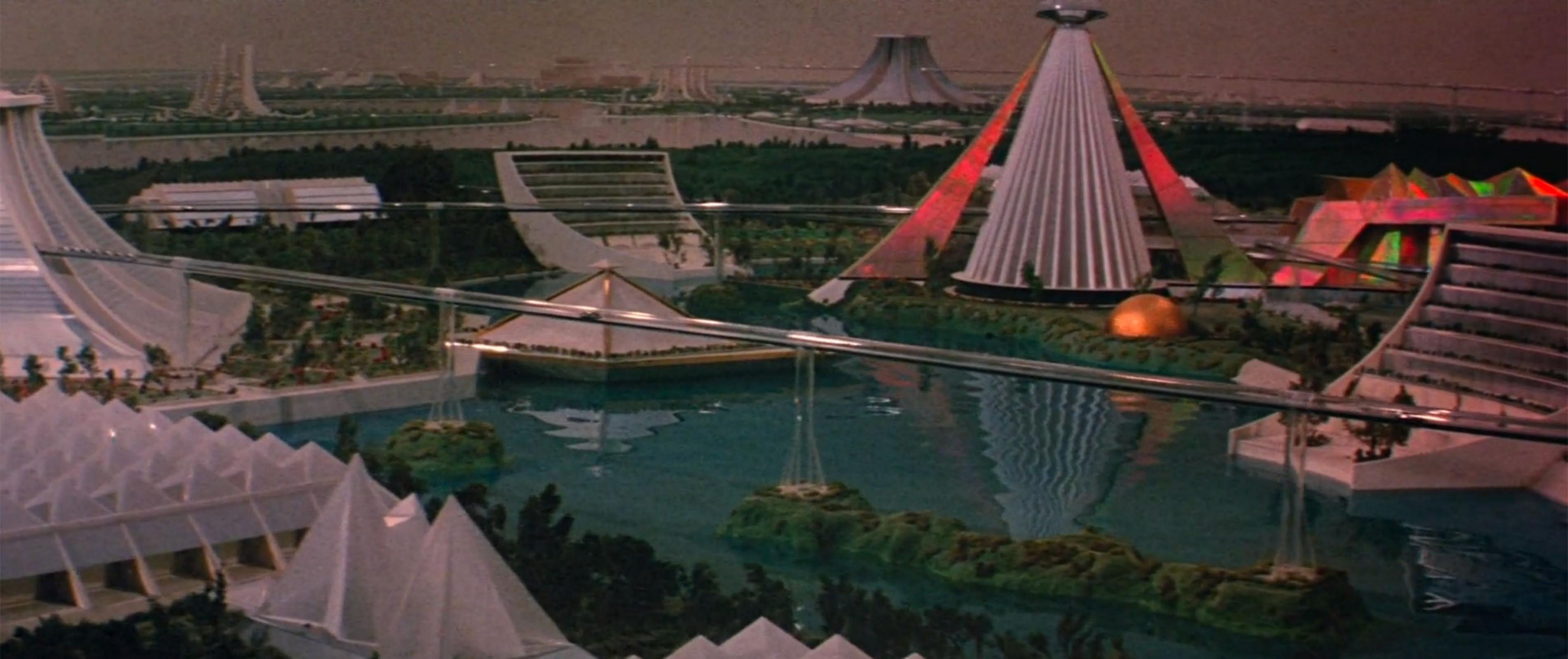
28 Louis Althusser, *Machiavelli and Us* (London: Verso, 2000), 20–23, 32.

29 Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics* (London: Verso, 2006), 141. Italics added.

30 Alaa Elassar, “A nurse revealed the tragic last words of his coronavirus patient: ‘Who’s going to pay for it?’” *CNN* (April 11, 2020).



re-emergence...





who?

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