

Utopias Project

Commentary

A New Beginning (ANB) is a futuristic film set in 2221 portraying human colonisation of Mars. It draws on the ideas of environmental degradation, Earthseed religion and Acorn community, as well as space travel from Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993), to construct an eco-friendly, utopian society based on Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516). Central to the story is human salvation and living in harmony with the environment, encouraged by the implementation of laws, technological innovation and a hint of Christianity, which ultimately aims to enlighten the human mind and act as a 'catalyst for radical change' (Levitas, 2010, p. 6).

Firstly, the film adopts folkloric narration to promote the friendly tale of an astronaut named Leo, who has successfully landed on the rigid surface of Mars. In *Sower*, narrator Lauren Olamina stresses the excitement of space exploration stating that, 'space could be our future [...] we can run a space station, a station on the moon, and soon, a colony on Mars' (Butler, 2014, p. 25-26). Inspired by Lauren's religion of Earthseed, whose destiny 'is to take root among the stars' (2014, p. 78), Leo is a symbol of hope for humanity and Mars is a place where idealism can be realised. In his review of *Sower*, Philips (2002) emphasises that Butler's novel is 'a pathway to utopia' (2002, p. 299) and the film is an extension to this view. Many critics argue that the central problem in many utopian stories is that they are set too far into the future, to the point where they are 'difficult to believe in, and difficult to tell about, [they] might seem to be unreachable fantasies or make-believe Kingdoms' (Rothstein et al., 2003, p. 3). The recent landing of NASA's Perseverance Rover on Mars 2021 suggests

that space travel is very much a possibility and shows how the human mind is limitless in terms of combining science and mechanical engineering.

Another critique about utopian literature is that it consists of too many unrealistic concepts or inventions. Goodwin and Taylor (2009) argue that ‘A utopia composed of robots or Martians is not a valid political text for us, unless their behaviour is recognizably human’ and ‘would not deny the symbolic and critical force of absurd inventions such as emotional computers’ (2009, p. 19). Even though utopias cross between the genre of science fiction (Parrinder, 2000), their main function is to illustrate how we can change our attitude and crumbling present-day society into a virtually thriving one and, ‘instead of trying to discover the laws of nature, [we have] preferred to invent them’ (Berneri, 2019, para. 10). A science fiction film like *Blade Runner* (1968) and the invention of its mood organ and empathy box designed to control human emotion would not, to a larger degree, encourage people to make better judgements or follow the achievable nature of utopianism, which holds at its core the desire to lead a better life (Fátima, 2010). When assessing the environmental issues in *Sower*, Lone (2016) reinforces this point because he states that ‘The way human beings are using technological innovations has brought all living organisms including mankind on the brink of apocalypse’ (2016, p. 24). Thus, ANB follows the journey of an ordinary man to an unknown place to prepare an environment which the rest of humanity can escape to.

In a way, Leo’s landing embodies aspects of the Christian faith in the sense that he represents the story of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden: ‘God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground – trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food’ (BibleGateway, n.d., lines 8-9). Thus, the film draws on our origin and poses the question: where has humanity gone

wrong? When phase two sparks success, the apple trees grow rapidly and produce a great level of offspring. Knowing this information, NASA recruits a group of farmers to help Leo with the agriculture on Mars by testing their virtue; almost like the Acorn community from *Sower*, where people with good intentions have come together. Within the narrative, there are images of melting ice caps, flooding and desperate measures since critics argue that utopias ‘lack any dynamic or historical dimension, being unable to locate the present with regard to the past or future or alternative possibilities, and so unable to facilitate change or to make value judgements’ (Goodwin & Taylor, 2009, p. 10). Hence the film merges both the present and the future; uses time-shift as a way of ‘inversion of the present for critical purposes’ (2009, p. 14).

Nonetheless, ANB presents a unique structure in terms of the environment, which to some scholars can be viewed as ‘artificial’; a setting where there is an ‘authoritarian love of symmetry’ (Beneri, 2019, para. 10). Mars has been renamed to Merth and reflects the reset of our own world. Divided into three sections, the planet accommodates the needs of both the animal and human species, plus nature. The climate is regulated by pumps which use geothermal energy from volcanoes to produce enough carbon dioxide to create conditions suitable for each section. As Palmer (1984) points out: ‘As long as national characteristics and success were dependent upon climate and geography, such things as change or utopia were impossible unless the environment changed’ (1984, p. 167).

Lastly, the laws that apply on Merth closely resemble those of More’s *Utopia*. Merthians participate in agriculture and like Utopians, ‘agriculture [...] is so universally understood among them that no person [...] is ignorant of it’ (More et al., 2016, p. 68). In their work on utopian ecocriticism, Kamps and Smith (2016) highlight More’s strong connection to ‘man

being a rational creature' thus members of ANB 'follow the natural way of things' (2016, p. 121). Life on Merth is governed by NASA who understand the environment better than anyone else and are advised by professionals from humanitarian sectors. The society is dictated by age and people have the freedom of choice in terms of labour and recreational activities. Gueguen (1978) praises More for his 'medieval outlook' and his 'consistent contribution to the cultural, and especially spiritual heritage of medieval Christendom' (1978, p. 43) which shows that a 'Christian politics is possible' (Raitiere, 1973, p. 146).

Ultimately, the beauty of Merth lies in its simplicity and by eliminating money and implementing earthly elements into our lifestyle, 'Utopianism creates a political program, giving direction and meaning to the idea of progress' (Rothstein et al., 2003, p. 3).