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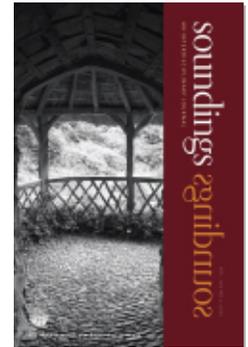
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# Science-Fiction Films and “Love”: Toward a Critique of Regressive Social Relations

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## *Abstract*

In the narrative structure of many science fiction films, “love” is an element whose importance frequently goes unrecognized, especially as far as the intended “message” of particular films as a form of social commentary is concerned. Typically, such messages pertain to troublesome trends in modern societies that have been shaping constellations of business, labor, and government, and which have resulted in the formation of peculiar systems of social relations. While the stability of any society depends on the existence of a specific system of social relations, in modern societies, such systems often are in conflict with the norms and values according to which individuals are expected to live their lives, and are thus, inherently regressive. Christopher Nolan’s *Interstellar* (2014) and Denis Villeneuve’s *Arrival* (2016) provide excellent foils for highlighting the workings of regressive social relations, and for the kind of price humans and humankind pay in the process.

**Keywords:** social theory, critical theory, film studies, social relations, science fiction, Christopher Nolan, Denis Villeneuve, critique

*“Individual science fiction stories may seem as trivial as ever to the blinder critics and philosophers today—but the core of science fiction, its essence, the concept around which it revolves, has become crucial to our salvation if we are to be saved at all.”*

ISAAC ASIMOV (1978, 7)

### Introduction: “Love” in Science-Fiction Films

In the literature on science fiction films, an element that tends to be overlooked (or underestimated) is the important role that “love” frequently plays in their narrative structure, especially as far as the intended “message” of particular films as a form of social commentary is concerned. Typically, this message pertains to disconcerting aspects of the state of affairs in a particular modern society, the genus “modern society,” or human civilization as a whole, as its condition resulted from modernization processes that began to proliferate in the early nineteenth century. The disconcerting aspects apply especially with regard to the society–nature link, or tensions and conflicts between different ways of life represented by industrialized societies and indigenous populations and cultures. Well known science-fiction films that feature the theme of “love” conspicuously include *Blade Runner* (1982, dir. Ridley Scott), *The Terminator* (1984, dir. James Cameron), *Dark City* (1998, dir. Alex Proyas), *The Matrix* (1999, dir. Lana and Lily Wachowski), *Solaris* (1971, dir. Andrei Tarkovsky; 2002, dir. Steven Soderbergh), *Avatar* (2009, dir. James Cameron), *The Adjustment Bureau* (2011, dir. George Nolfi), *Cloud Atlas* (2012, dir. Lana and Lily Wachowski and Tom Tykwer), *Oblivion* (2013, dir. Joseph Kosinsky), *Edge of Tomorrow* (2014, dir. Doug Liman), *Interstellar* (2014, dir. Christopher Nolan), *Arrival* (2016, dir. Denis Villeneuve), and many others. In each of these films a specific type of love which deviates from (and occasionally is in pointed opposition to) conventional and common types of love—though it is consonant with the ideal of selfless love—triggers social transformations that would not be possible without one character uncompromisingly committing to another, thus attaining the ability to engage in actions which previously would have been unimaginable.<sup>1</sup>

On the one hand, depictions of love illustrate how relationships between individuals who purportedly care for each other have become warped in modern societies. Established practices of love more often than not reflect continuous changes in society, which increasingly are being shaped by economic, organizational, and technological processes, imperatives, and developments, and which are inversely related to genuine relationships between human beings. In no small measure, these processes, imperatives, and developments add up to a “constitutional logic” in modern societies which corresponds with the retreat of social, cultural, and political dimensions and modes

of cooperation that are not a function of economics, power, and technology. In retrospect, the social forces and mechanisms (esp. Hedström and Swedberg 1998) that emerged with capitalist market economies and industrialization at the beginning of the nineteenth century have been playing a much greater role in shaping social life than human qualities, and often contrary to appearances. Phenomena that in the literature on current trends typically have been framed and analyzed in terms of neoliberalism as beginning during the late 1970s and 1980s (e.g., Metcalf 2017), originated more than two centuries ago with the pursuit of prosperity qua capital accumulation in the "machine age" (e.g., Bonefeld 2017); the early twenty-first-century version of these phenomena denote a retreat of the "social" being theorized in terms of *posthumanism* (e.g., Miller 2012). Conventional practices of loving are prone to replicating and feeding back into the constitutional logic of modern societies, as the latter is inversely related to the capacity to care for another person, except if doing so serves one's own purposes above all else.<sup>2</sup> Usually, such practices adhere to mass-mediated projections of how to love—which encourage related activities within a relatively narrow bandwidth. As Adorno put it many decades ago, genuine love for another necessarily amounts to an act of conscious resistance (Adorno [1951] 1978, 172). In the age of social media, even what used to be thought of as conventional perspectives on love are attaining an air of resistance, as the percentage of those who successfully enter meaningful relationships appears to have been in decline for some time. On the other hand, to the extent that they do occur, such relationships begin much later, begging the question of whether—after a decade or more of unsuccessful, unfulfilling, meaningless and unsatisfying relationships—individuals still have the patience or the capacity to experience love in a manner that is not entirely shaped by attitudes acquired much earlier, under conditions of frustration and situational duress, and which threaten to override whatever capacity may remain.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, in science fiction films, renderings of choices about when and how to love another person provide opportunities to communicate to audience members that one of the most personal decisions anyone makes in life is prone to reinforcing how modern social orders in their specificity—that is, as American, German, Japanese, Russian, Chilean society, and so on—maintain stability through myriad ideas that are tied

to culturally distinct yet interconnected processes as the substructure of modern social life. If unobserved, and viewed instead as natural features of progress, these processes are likely to become increasingly deleterious to genuine relationships. After all, each and all of these features at their core are driven by underlying logics which, once unleashed, are not subject to human control, but rather part and parcel of what influences the contexts in which decision-making processes occur: they define the perimeter within which actors make choices, or are unable to do so. Absent determined efforts to the contrary, and a rudimentary willingness to resist seemingly overwhelming trends, choices that are possible in turn tend to reinforce existing perimeters.

To be sure, particular processes may turn out to foster certain human qualities and advance related goals. Yet, it will be difficult to determine whether they support humans as humans and the “social” as it would be consonant with our willingness to collaborate for the purpose of improving the human condition and empowering forms of solidarity (as opposed to mechanical forms of intersubjective cooperation that do not encourage individuals to aspire to anything beyond regenerating the status quo), or because we have come to conceive of humans and the “social” as functions of the above processes, imperatives, and developments—a dilemma the discourse about posthumanism has been trying to clarify in a variety of ways. In an age of proliferating crises, implicitly accepting how we view each other (e.g., in terms of race, class, gender) and how to envision the successful and fulfilling practice of love (as it represents, for present purposes, an array of other concepts and ideas) is likely to feed back into patterns that are consonant with conditions (e.g., with regard to structures of inequality and systems of power) that engendered those crises. Yet, despite such concerns, the most personal decisions individuals make regarding others also hint at the potential of a different type of social order emerging in the future. In science fiction films, this potential often comes to bear, to a greater extent than in any other genre—though typically in “coded” fashion, not explicitly—and not in ways that are consonant with the function romance and “love” fulfills in other genres, where they tend to be directed at the attainment of happiness confined to couples, or restoration of a lost past.<sup>4</sup> It is not surprising, then, that in most science fiction films which involve a tale constructed around love, there rarely is a happy end; usually, the

film's conclusion is more ambivalent, and although it may not amount to an unhappy ending, frequently there is an undeniable tragic element.

Not surprisingly, a productive approach to interpreting the social content of films in the science fiction genre suggests that we conceive of them as a venue for relaying messages that are directed at curious or eager audience members, in order to encourage them to reflect on their lives, as they inevitably are embedded within and embody corresponding practices, modes of organization, and ways of relating to nature, in politics, culture, society, and especially economics. While it is possible to read novels or watch films in science fiction without considering our own involvement in the prospective fate of our world, from the local and national to the continental and planetary levels, and instead to focus on their sheer entertainment and escapist value, doing so amounts to wasted opportunities and is ethically spurious, regardless of whether or not the future looks grim; inevitably, focusing on science fiction as entertainment only entails lack of interest in the trends and future circumstances that shape our coexistence, and more importantly, the refusal to acknowledge our individual and shared responsibility in the present state of affairs, regardless of whether or not we have the power to influence it in constructive ways (see especially Suvin 1979; also Dahms 2020).

In many science fiction films, though often ignored, the intended message as it is linked to the depiction of love functions as a cipher for the nature of social relations that we are part of, which we participate in and through our activities and convictions replicate and sustain, how we take them for granted, and how they are problematic. Specifically, love serves as a reference point for emphasizing how in modern societies, at the individual level, committing and contributing to the emergence of a qualitatively different system of social relations is an imminent necessity for the future to have the potential of being more than a mere continuation of patterns that have been defining our past and present. Yet, prevailing, commercially driven and mass-mediated culture (as anticipated, e.g., in Adorno's critique of the "culture industry"<sup>5</sup>) actively subverts the appreciation of love as anything more than the selfish satisfaction of personal needs, paradoxically presented as the many personal, social, humanitarian, moral and existential returns resulting from caring for others, and while projecting tales designed to suggest that romance is a marker of a successful life. Undoubtedly, love plays an integral role in many kinds of

novels and films, and in a range of genres, in large measure because audiences more easily can relate to at least one or a few characters, and project themselves into a narrative structure for purposes of vicarious fulfillment of desire, adventures, “being special,” or just experiencing emotional reactions that are absent from everyday life.

To explicate how science fiction films employ love as a code for highlighting regressive aspects of the system of social relations—or an entire system of social relations if destructive aspects threaten to overtake constructive ones—and without which “actually existing” modern societies would not have arisen and could not exist, I begin by providing a cursory glance at how the issue of social relations has featured in the literature in social theory in general, and in sociology, in particular.

In subsequent steps, I address the dilemma of critique today, and illustrate how two recent science fiction films—Christopher Nolan’s *Interstellar* (2014) and Denis Villeneuve’s *Arrival* (2016)—highlight how, depending on the condition of modern society and humankind, systems of social relations constitute a disorienting and inherently inconsistent field of tensions between the potential of progress and the threat of regression.

*Interstellar* and *Arrival* form a pair, inasmuch as both are tales anchored in established notions about such profoundly familiar features of our reality as gravity and time, which have defined our entire existence as a species, both before, and even more so, since the beginning of the modern era.

Nolan’s *Interstellar* is situated in the near future and tells a story about humankind either not having been able to function as the steward of our planet, or having neglected related responsibilities, as a consequence allowing animal and plant life to deteriorate to the point where humans’ bare survival is at stake. In fact, humankind’s only chance for survival is to leave the planet. However, departing from Earth represents a major hurdle. Resources are scarce, and technology is not sufficiently advanced. Under such circumstances, a small group of scientists and astronauts, with the help of a NASA-trained pilot, engage in a last-ditch effort to find a different home in a distant galaxy. Yet, even if they should be successful, the main obstacle that remains is the problem of gravity: for humankind to escape an apocalyptic fate, an accurate and practically applicable theory of gravity must be formulated. Far from our solar system, facilitated by his love for a person

who does not know whether he is still alive, the fate of humankind hinges on the decision of one man to risk everything and to face possibilities he never would have been able to imagine.

Villeneuve's *Arrival*, by contrast, takes place in the present, after the arrival of twelve spaceships at different locations around Earth. What do they want? Why are they here? Are they a threat? There are no answers, in part because there is no basis for communication. In Montana, a linguist and a theoretical physicist are charged with making contact and establishing a common language. While especially the efforts of the linguist start to pay off, something unexpected is beginning to happen to her perception of reality: the linear fabric of time begins to unravel, and as she learns to communicate in the aliens' language, her entire existence is undergoing a transformation: she is experiencing what is yet to happen, the conduit being a person who has not been born yet—her daughter. As communication between different countries that have participated in a global effort to establish a common basis for communicating with the aliens is terminated, and the armed forces of many nations are preparing to attack the visiting spaceships, with consequences that are unpredictable, the linguist acquires the ability to overcome the limitations of her previous mode of existence, as she commits to loving a person who does not exist yet, thus transcending the bounds of established social relations, in the process facilitating successful communication with the aliens.

In closing, I will spell out how *Interstellar* and *Arrival* suggest that for human civilization to attain lasting progress, human beings in exceptional circumstances must commit in uncompromising fashion to acts of faith which, under normal circumstances, would be inconceivable. If successful, such acts will alter the existing system of social relations, however threatening and frightening this prospect may be.

### **Theorizing Social Relations in the Modern Age**

Every society is a system of social relations. In concert with the scaffolding provided by social, political, and economic structures, and through the multiplicity of processes that sustain societies, the systems of social relations make a contribution to the stability of social order. This system also facilitates the fulfillment of an array of functions which ensure the safety

and survival of both the vast majority of its members, and of society itself.<sup>6</sup> In modern societies, these functions have been proliferating at an accelerating rate, and absent a major catastrophe, will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.<sup>7</sup> Yet, despite its importance, there have been few explicit and direct efforts to discern and describe the type of social relations at the heart of modern societies, as they facilitate the fulfillment of an array of functions. In fact, except in a vague sense, social scientists tend to be oblivious to this system's existence, implicitly take it for granted, glean over ubiquitous related inferences, focus on micro-level forms, or neglect to appreciate the potential analytical and diagnostic power that would result from spelling out a rigorous concept of social relations. Illuminating and identifying the material importance of the specific system of social relation that corresponds with modern societies, and its central role in maintaining the warped reality of the latter, once recognized, inevitably would draw attention to the irresolvable dynamics that has been shaping successive adaptations in politics, culture, economics, and society, to accelerating transformations in economy, organizations, and technology. Part of the problem is that because individuals are prone to normalize the specific system of social relations without which modern society could not exist, this system prescribes the formation of individual identities to a large extent, and undercuts important transformations of our collective identity in an age threatened by impending apocalypse.<sup>8</sup>

Although the concept of social relations regularly is employed and referenced in the sociological and social-theoretical literature, its meaning, substance, and possible uses frequently are elusive. The concept originated in the works of European classical social theorists, especially Karl Marx and Max Weber. As a consequence, the concept tends to appear in Anglo-American social theory in translations of Marx and Weber and in the related secondary literature, as it is linked to the German beginnings of social theory and theoretical sociology. This pattern suggests that social relations are consonant with a mode of reflection and theorizing which is European rather than Anglo-American in orientation, with the concept representing efforts to verbalize ideations which are familiar in the former rather than in the latter. Recognizing the importance of social relations for theorizing modern society would suggest an orientation toward grasping dynamic features as central to modern social life (see Dahms 2007).

In Marx's writings, the main reference point to the issue of relations pertains to "relations of production": the question of some members of society own, control, and put to work the means of production, for their own benefit—the bourgeoisie—and at the expense of those who are responsible for the labor of production—the workers. Marx's (and, to some extent, Engels's) references to social relations evolved over the course of their writings and also highlight issues of translation—what exactly is being translated as "social relations" or "social relationships," and the question of whether such designations capture the substance of Marx and Engels's relevant writings. Here are a few exemplary passages:

Economic categories are only the theoretical expressions, the abstractions of the social relations of production. . . . [D]efinite social relations are just as much produced by men as linen, flax, etc. Social relations are closely bound up with productive forces. In acquiring new productive forces, men change their mode of production; and in changing their mode of production, in changing the way of earning their living, they change all their social relations. . . . The same men who establish their social relations in conformity with the material productivity, produce also principles, ideas, and categories, in conformity with their social relations.<sup>9</sup>

[C]apital is not a thing but a social relation between persons, established by the instrumentality of things.<sup>10</sup>

[C]apital is not a thing, but rather a definite social production relation, belonging to a definite historical formation of society, which is manifested in a thing and lends this thing a specific social character. . . . [T]he capitalist process of production proceeds under definite material conditions, which are, however, simultaneously the bearers of definite social relations entered into by individuals in the process of reproducing their life.<sup>11</sup>

Max Weber's work also includes explicit references to social relations, especially in his magnum opus, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, in the section, "Basic Sociological Concepts." "Social relationship"

is one such concept, and Weber covers it on just over two pages (26–28), and he returns to the subject in a typology he advocated, distinguishing between communal, associative, open, and closed relationships (40–46). To be sure, as is characteristic of this section of *Economy and Society*, Weber’s purpose was not to capture the substantive nature and qualities of social relationships in modern industrialized societies, but to facilitate definitional clarity by identifying formal characteristics. As he wrote,

The term “social relationship” will be used to denote the behavior of a plurality of actors insofar as, in its meaningful content, the action of each takes account of that of the others and is oriented in these terms. The social relationship thus consists entirely and exclusively in the existence of a probability that there will be a meaningful course of social action—irrespective, for the time being, of the basis of this probability.

A social relationship can be of a very fleeting character or of varying degrees of permanence. (27–28)

It is important to Weber to note that social relationships usually have content, that actors are cognizant of the fact that they enter into and partake in a specific type of relationship, and the latter usually is subject to termination, depending on its perceived meaning from the vantage point of individual or institutional actors.

One well-known effort in the United States to promote the study of social relations was Talcott Parsons’s initial propagation—and subsequent key role in its successful establishment, in no small measure for reasons of institutional academic politics—of the “Department of Social Relations for Interdisciplinary Social Science Studies” at Harvard University, which had been influenced by European social thought. It comprised anthropology, psychology, and sociology and lasted from 1946 until 1972.<sup>12</sup> Parsons’s rise to global prominence as a sociological theorist after World War II was grounded in his studies and appropriation of the theories of Emile Durkheim and especially of Weber, as reflected in his notoriously Germanic writing style.<sup>13</sup> However, rather than engaging in rigorous

analyses of American society as a unique and distinctly modern system of social relations, the department merely assembled several social sciences under one roof, excluding economics. The omission of the latter, no doubt due in part to an understandable unwillingness on the part of economists to consider participation in such an arrangement, still is problematic, since it is impossible to study modern society as a system of social relations without explicit consideration of economic relations and the economic structure of inequality that is characteristic of capitalist economic systems. Tellingly, in his own work, Parsons did not make an effort to clarify or promote the study of social relations.

The first notable reference to social relations in social theory after Weber was the collection of essays by Alfred Schütz, edited by Helmut R. Wagner, *On Phenomenology and Social Relations* (Schütz 1970). While the concept of social relations is employed explicitly, it largely refers to intersubjective relationships, which are assumed to constitute social life, rather than being expressive of structural features of modern societies that shape forms of inter-subjectivity. Considering or acknowledging structural features that shape how humans interact was not meant to be, and never was, part of Schütz's interests or agenda.

Another instance of drawing attention to the study of social relations was a volume entitled *The Grammar of Social Relations* (Schneider 1984)—a collection of “the major essays by Louis Schneider” edited by Jay Weinstein, in which the concept of social relations is not only not discussed, but in which it only appears twice, once in the introduction by Weinstein (11), and one other time in the chapter by Schneider on “Some Psychiatric Views on Freedom and the Theory of Social System” (127–48, specifically 124). In the introduction, Weinstein wrote,

[Schneider's] perspective is decidedly structural-functionalist, with strong emphasis on the interaction between cultural and social elements. This, in brief, focuses the attention of the sociologist on the systemic properties of social relations: Parts and wholes affect one another in intricately complex and consequential ways, and social scientists—and psychiatrists and other professionals as well—cannot afford to ignore this. (11).

In another stab at social relations, in Asif Agha's monograph, *Language and Social Relations* (2007), the author posits that society is impossible without language, but he does not engage in any examination of social relations as they are *not* a function of distinctive language regimes; like with Schütz (and Schneider, to the extent that his approach matters), the working assumption is that the system of social relations as it reflects structures of inequality and the workings of power regimes is secondary to the linguistic structure which prevails in distinctive contexts. Although one might expect the concept of "social relations" to warrant greater attention in the index, oddly, there are only two references (10 and 14), although there are a few more throughout the book (1, 13, 84). As Agha writes,

Social relations vary across human societies in ways that are limitlessly varied, endlessly susceptible to reanalysis, periodic stabilization and change. Yet they are highly systemic in each locale for persons who recognize themselves as so related. The goal of this book is to show that such possibilities of variation and change, and their actual determinacy for particular social actors, can only be explained given an adequate conception of language in human affairs. (1)

[L]anguage mediates social relations not only among persons who are co-present but also among persons who are separated from each other in time and space. Social relations are mediated by signs that connect persons to each other, allowing persons to engage with each other by engaging with signs that connect them in a semiotic encounter. (10)

Thus, it is a common feature of perspectives on social relations presented by social theorists and sociologists that social relations continuously are being regenerated, more or less actively, through the practices and habits of individuals as members of groups and aggregates—from the family to voluntary and occupational groups and the nation-state, and beyond—especially with regard to members of other groups. At times of personal or social crisis, individuals may experience disturbing consequences that result from the workings of the system of social relations, but since the latter are highly unlikely to register on

their "radar" of social, political, cultural and economic categories (especially without the necessary training), they are prone to identify as the cause of crises and disturbances either structural features, such as social inequality maintained by class differences, or members of certain demographic groups, or "the system," or "capitalism." As the above overview suggests, in the history of social theory and social thought, the terminology of social relations frequently has been employed, but rarely clarified or spelled out in a manner that illuminates and illustrates the nature and overall importance of the system of social relations to modern societies, and to the study of the latter.<sup>14</sup>

### **Neglecting "Love": Science-Fiction Films and Regressive Social Relations**

In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno (1966, 262) wrote,

Horizontally as well as vertically, everyone is connected with all others, is tingeing all others, is being tinged by all others. The doctrine in which enlightenment most recently used causality as a decisive political weapon, the Marxian [hypothesis] of superstructure and base, almost innocently lags behind a state of affairs in which economic and social relations and ideologies inextricably exist within each other—like the machineries of production, distribution, and domination—and in which the living human beings became a piece of ideology.<sup>15</sup>

In his usually cryptic style, Adorno contended that in so-called communist countries (above all the Soviet Union), the ideological reliance on Marx's analytically oriented distinction between economic "base" and legal, philosophical, political, scientific and ideological "superstructure" to promote power-political goals in the context of the East–West conflict, and to criticize forms of artistic production that were not to the Communist Party's liking, had become *anachronistic* in light of post-World War II developments in advanced industrialized societies. Adorno's point was intriguing for two reasons. On the one hand, Adorno's observation indirectly pointed toward the rise of poststructuralism and postmodernism during the decade that followed, originating in France subsequent to disappointment resulting from the failed 1968 uprising in Paris.

This disappointment engendered profound disenchantment with both socialist aspirations to transform capitalism and faith in enlightened progress forging ahead, a sentiment that fell on fertile soil in American academia (see Cusset 2008). On the other hand, Adorno was calling for a refinement of the base-superstructure distinction through rigorous reconsideration of the link between both. Although it only is possible to hint at a solution to the problem Adorno posed, what began to facilitate the link between “base” (mode of production, requisite relations of production as they are conducive to continuous capital accumulation via economic development and growth, structure of inequalities, forms of institutionalized power) and “superstructure” (ideas, ideologies, political discourse, mass media, entertainment, arts and culture, etc.) is a system of social relations that situates individuals within a highly intricate web of identities and group configurations that are perceived as natural and which provide a conflicted sense of belonging. It is this conflicted sense of belonging that produces ever more intense experiences of cognitive dissonance.<sup>16</sup>

During the decades following World War II, the prospect of accelerating progress exerted an incalculable amount of influence on politics, culture, and society—and especially economics—around the world. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, this prospect has been dimming, and prior certainties relating to continuous and reliable progress have diminished greatly. During the last quarter of the twentieth century, poststructuralism and postmodernism put forth the most prominent and explicit critiques of the idea, the reality, and the nature of progress. Rather than readily accepting the narrative of the success and progress of modern societies, a growing number of thinkers and scholars, initially in France, endeavored to examine modern societies as contingent forms of social organization: not as the pinnacle of human evolution that would persist from that point forward, but as a temporally and spatially specific phenomenon which would be replaced by one or several other forms of social organization in the future. In light of various crises that began during the 1970s—the economic crisis in the form of the first major post-World War II recession; the legitimacy crisis of the modern state and the “crisis of democracy” (see Dahms 2009); and emerging awareness of an impending ecological crisis and the “limits of growth”—the formulation and promotion of poststructuralist and postmodernist critiques in different ways highlighted how faith in progress had been both naïve and expressive of the penchant in Western societies to subscribe to their own ideologies.

Arguably, in the interest of furthering qualitative progress, the core institutions of modern Western societies could and should have encouraged citizens to critically examine, in constructive and disciplined fashion, and according to clearly identifiable criteria, the peculiar force-field of Keynesian public policies directed at sustaining economic growth, liberal-democratic political ideas, and the accelerating pace of environmental destruction, to assess, whether and in which ways was this force-field reconcilable with ideas about the autonomy of self-determining individuals capable of taking responsibility for their own lives and choices. Yet, rather than encouraging the majority of citizens to make efforts directed at attaining higher levels of self-possession, core institutions performed key functions in making sure that individuals tacitly abided by, actively supported, or compelled each other to reinforce, the spectrum of precepts that facilitated political stability, social order, and the reliable humming of the economic machine.<sup>17</sup> After all, the critiques formulated by poststructuralists and advocates of postmodernism became prominent just as the foundations of neoliberalism took hold. While institutions (and the specific type of personalities that were allowed to be at their helm) pushed individuals to adhere to terms that were consonant with the social, political, and cultural realities of the 1950s and 1960s, these realities were not as clear-cut as the retrospective projections suggested they had been, and the 1980s saw the rise of an entirely new form of social contract. By the end of the twentieth century, Darko Suvin, without doubt the foremost theorist of science fiction, concluded:

Overwhelmingly, this twentieth century is a time of betrayals. Great expectations, enormous efforts, at a few supremely important points (1917, 1945) wondrous, breathtaking breakthroughs authorizing the most sweeping hopes ([Ernst] Bloch)—and yet at the end of it, looking backward at it, a huge disappointment. The hope was a historical wager, and the wager did not pay off. The enemies outside and inside ourselves were too many, too tough. (Suvin [1999–2000] 2010, 362).<sup>18</sup>

To be sure, the critical analyses of modern society put forth by poststructuralists and postmodernists were complemented and expanded further, into other aspects of social life and areas of intellectual endeavor, by such types

of critical theory (in the wider American sense) as feminist theory, critical race theory, postcolonial theory, queer theory, and indigenous critiques, at the same time as progress itself has become the subject of ever-increasing and intensifying critique (e.g., Allen 2016). All of these theories are versions of what was presented in 1937, by Max Horkheimer ([1937] 1972), in terms of the distinction between traditional and critical theory.

Central to the contradictory ways, modes, and patterns that mold forms of co-existence in the modern age is the tension between formal and substantive processes, which are mediated via corresponding institutions. On the one hand, modern society is based on formal mechanisms that from the outset had the potential of turning into dynamisms, and which are at the root of the process of modernization: the replacement of human labor by machines (technology), economics in a specific register (capitalism), and a particular version of formal organization (bureaucracy). On the other hand, the legitimacy of modern societies is tied to substantive claims relating to modes of collective action, decision-making, and organization that recognize the sanctity and value of human life, in general, and individual humans, in particular, to a greater extent than any previous society, and which are inspired by ideas and claims related to social, political, and cultural modernity: non-repression and protection of individuals and freedom to associate and to engage in collective action at the level of community or society, political participation in self-government according to democratic principles, cultural autonomy, self-determination, and freedom of expression. In principle, as suggested by Max Weber, technology, capitalist economics, bureaucracy, civil society, politics, and culture each evolve according to unique and distinct “inner logics,” but empirically, a certain amount of imperialism is undeniable, with each logic trying to pull some or all of the others into their own orbit (see Dahms 1997). The historical experience of socialism provides an example of the logic of civil society with the help of nominally democratic state apparatuses trying to assimilate the other logics to its own; neoliberalism currently (and to a continuously increasing extent since the 1980s) provides an example of capitalist economics supported by corporate bureaucracy trying to evince the other logics and to replace them with its own.

The tensions between the above-mentioned inner logics determine the perimeter of the system of social relations at the heart of modern society, as

the type of social system that up until now has had the greatest influence on how human civilization has developed and adapted to changing circumstances since the late eighteenth century.<sup>19</sup> In addition, they also frame specific systems of social relations in particular societies which further reinforce the stability of social, political, and economic structures and systems of power in distinctive, regionally and nationally unique ways. How we relate to each other as individuals in many ways reinforces systems of social relations, in most instances without our knowledge, regardless of whether the systems facilitate progress or regression, and depending on how we conceive of this binary distinction. In fact, as I will try to illuminate, it is in the very nature of existing systems of social relations that most of us would be hard pressed to conceive of them at all, in part because they facilitate both progress and regression, and at the same time. Moreover, systems of social relations neither “cause” individuals to act and behave in particular ways, nor does their regressive quality, when and where it occurs and is on display, emanate from human, social, or interactive qualities and modes of conduct; these qualities and modes are expressive of structures of inequality and systems of power as they emerged and took hold during the modern era. While the matrix of inequalities and power does not determine modes of interaction and communication, it does exert a high degree of influence over what can and cannot be said or done (and how), and over which interactions and communications are considered acceptable or not, or call for positive or negative sanctions.<sup>20</sup>

Historically speaking, systems of social relations have been highly stable. This stability is due in part to the fact that social relations are somewhat amorphous, “liquid” (Bauman 2000, esp. 160-65; Bauman 2003; Palese 2013), and situational, and thus, difficult to discern in rigorous fashion: they are not directly observable and require a measure of acute sensitivity on the part of the observer. Within the context of social, political, and economic structures, social relations enable individuals to situate themselves in ways that are conducive to acquiring functional identities which, paradoxically, are consonant with both the material conditions that prevail in modern societies, and the norms and values according to which individuals are supposed to live their lives, interact with others, and fulfill an array of tasks. In this sense, social relations mediate between society and individual—this mediation is necessary for social stability, and it leads to tangible outcomes that support the latter,

regardless of whether individuals are cognizant of this fact or not. In fact, the less cognizant individuals are of this connection, the more reliable the supportive role of existing social relations is likely to be.

Systems of social relations also have been malleable, especially in the face of concrete and imminent challenges modern societies have been facing under contingent circumstances, especially if those circumstances might threaten the stability of social order: conditions of war and their aftermath provide examples of such circumstances, as well as changing economic conditions, for example, with regard to profit-making opportunities, expanding or shrinking markets, intensifying competition, automation, and new technologies, from the local, to the national, and the global level, or in certain sectors or industry as opposed to others. History is full of examples that illustrate the capacity of societies to allow for more or less successful qualitative transformations, from the Italian (and Dutch) Renaissance, to the Protestant Reformation and the American, French, Russian and German Revolutions, often in connection with new economic, organizational, or technical and technological innovations. In many ways, these transformations facilitated or prepared the formation of modern society, not infrequently by means of war, or they represented more or less violent and temporary deviations from this process of formation (such as Italian Fascism and National Socialism). Still, modern systems of social relations have proven to be astonishingly inert and resistant to qualitative change, and to prevent goal-oriented structural alterations in politics, culture, and society that would be consistent with the norms according to which individuals are expected to live their lives and to relate to each other. Instead, the systems of social relations keep relying on available means and resources to circumvent qualitative reconfigurations, for example, even when alleviating race, class, and gender inequalities would translate into a greater ability of diverse institutions and organizations in modern societies to meet contingent challenges and to engender an array of related advantages.

As a specific type of system of social relations, modern society constantly and actively regenerates itself, and places individuals in circumstances that typically (but neither universally, nor categorically) are both beyond their comprehension, and even their imagination, especially as far as the workings of such systems are concerned, and how all individuals are implicated in those workings. By and large, in Western Europe and North America, the mutually reinforcing

link between social inequality and social relations has remained stable since the beginning of the modern age, certainly since the beginning of the nineteenth century, despite occasional shifts in the relative size of the upper class, middle class, and working class, as in the U.S. after World War II, when the designation "middle-class society" was justified for the first time.<sup>21</sup>

To an even greater degree than with regard to the social, political, and economic structures they are born into, individuals are prone to relate to the system of social relations they are part of and in which they actively participate as normal and natural. This inclination to naturalize and normalize particular societies as distinctive systems of social relations is due, partly and paradoxically, to the fact that the very structure of individuals' identities, which they view as their own (and as distinctive and highly personal), in reality is shaped by, embedded in, and entangled with the system of social relations in much more pervasive ways than by (and with) the specific array of structures (or the array of specific structures) that characterize particular social orders. In order to fulfill their myriad functions as they relate to the stability and survival of modern societies, systems of social relations differentially promote, rely on and perpetuate privileges as well as prejudices, forms of discrimination, patterns of inclusion and exclusion, projections, and violations of legal and social values and norms, types of solidarity, and perversions of ideas and efforts to realize social justice.

The capacity of the system of social relations to fulfill its functions depends on society's ability to place individuals in a *double-bind* of sorts: to subscribe to ideas about society that are conducive to social stability, but which are in conflict with efforts to understand the principles according to which societies maintain order, thus the need for the social sciences in general, for sociology in particular, as well as for social theory, and critical theory especially. Moreover, if a society's trajectory of social change is following a path that points in the direction of troubling futures, the system of social relations individuals are born into may deserve to be regarded as more or less insidious, particularly when the circumstances are such that individuals have little or no influence on the direction of change, and the possible/likely (as well as impossible/unlikely) futures that are on the temporal horizon.

For instance, all modern societies provide strategies for escaping at least some of the constraints that result from structures of inequality, for

example, various limitations on individual opportunities which correspond with race, class, and gender differences. Yet, reliable strategies for diminishing the stultifying effects of the established system of social relations are rather uncommon, in part because they would involve reflexivity with regard to how our selves are constructed and how they are a function of social order, and because such reflexivity would not feed back into the structuring principles at work in modern societies. Indeed, the success of strategies to escape one structure of inequality (or several intersecting structures) not only depends on the extent and kind of individual effort, even though overall, such efforts usually and directly reinforce how modern societies function and maintain order. By contrast, efforts to escape from the system of social relations necessarily must be far more ambitious, since the extent of individual effort required inevitably goes hand in hand with a radical reconfiguration of the self, and its conscious “separation from society,” a determined effort at intentional alienation, the goal being critical estrangement.<sup>22</sup> Evidently, such efforts are inversely related to the constitutional logic of modern societies. Practically speaking, they also are highly likely to fail at the social level, although they are bound to be truly revolutionary at the individual level.

As societies are becoming more complex, the overall number of functions that must be fulfilled for both its members and society to survive keeps expanding. By implication, the complexity of the system of social relations is likely to increase. As an ongoing evolutionary process and a reality *sui generis*, modern society has refined and amplified its ability to seize upon all available resources to stabilize itself, while endeavoring to protect itself from qualitative transformations that might increase the expectation on large parts of a given population that the gap between facts and norms can and will narrow. In light of tensions between facts—the prevailing material conditions in any society, on the one hand—and norms—values according to which members of society are compelled to conceive of and organize their lives, on the other—narrowing this gap would be impossible without a substantial expenditure of resources, which in turn could threaten the stability of an existing social order as it has been functioning and maintaining stability, that is, as a specific and integrated, albeit non-monolithic matrix of social, political, and economic structures.<sup>23</sup>

Inevitably, modern society—via its decision-makers (elected representatives, office holders, corporate leaders, and so forth)—would need to be responsive to demands that it justify its operations, legitimate its structuring principles, and increase its accountability—all of which represent burdens assiduously avoided, or heeded only when and to the extent that they are unavoidable or beneficial to the decision-makers themselves or special interests.<sup>24</sup> Yet, this impetus to avoid complexity in governance on the part of modern society, as it is mediated through the stabilization of the system of social relations, does not constitute a source of evil; rather, it confirms that even though humans prefer to relate to society as a function and in terms of human existence and categories, in fact, the latter are a function of the former. To the extent that evil is in play, it is the result of our unwillingness or inability as humans to appreciate the *de facto* nature of our social universe, and our place within it, befuddling though it may be. Though we must not accept the entire array of resulting implications, in the interest of holding on to the possibility of qualitative social change, we must understand them. Ironically, and perhaps proportionately, both the visibility of—and members' ability to discern—this increasing complexity may be decreasing, not least in response to the burden increasingly complex social relations impose on all members of society. In fact, heightened complexity in different ways may be the cause of proliferating resentments with regard to modernity, democracy, and globalization.

As modern societies never exist in pure form, but instead rely on elements that were characteristic of premodern societies, increasing complexity typically has been accompanied by intensifying contradictions. However, as realities *sui generis*, and as evolutionary processes that follow their own logic, modern societies as specific and distinctive, more or less internally consistent societal totalities, are not directly functions of human norms, values, ideas and standards; rather, they are so in mediated form: human norms, values, ideas, and standards serve a multitude of purposes that enable modern societies to function, in the sense that this type of society depends on these purposes being served. Indeed, it is not possible to explain any modern society as a whole solely on the basis of these norms, values, ideas and standards. In fact, the underlying logic of modern societies demands that most individuals subscribe to ideas—including especially ideas about modern society—that are

necessary for its stability and survival, but which do not enable individuals to grasp how, that is, according to what principles and underlying logic, modern societies in reality do maintain order and function, and what exact roles individuals inevitably play in sustaining the latter, especially depending on their position within the system of social relations. Indeed, the stability and functioning of modern societies relies on pre-modern elements (e.g., hierarchies taken to be normal and natural) to such an extent that individuals must not grasp (and, if necessary, actively must be prevented from grasping) that—and how exactly—modern societies function in ways that are in manifest conflict with how they are supposed to function from the human vantage point, in order for these societies to be able to maintain stability.

The interlinked complex and contradictory nature of modern societies is further aggravated by the fact that contingency is an unavoidable feature of modern societies: the future is unpredictable and uncontrollable because the stability and functioning of modern societies is based on self-reinventing processes and programs that continuously are running and reloaded—such as markets, capital accumulation, rationalization, secularization, formal democracy, and technological innovation—and which were triggered by humans at certain points or during certain time periods in history, and which can be relied upon to run by themselves, continually providing “us” with proliferating types of benefits, except at times of crises, when the supply of benefits is threatened. Yet, neither do we control these processes and programs, nor are we in a proper position to carefully evaluate the benefits and especially the costs they bestow on humans, and on the biosphere more generally, in no small measure because these processes define who we are, how we exist, and how we perceive the world—at least to the same extent to which we recognize them as products of human activity. These processes are products of human activity in two regards: first, in the sense that humans in the past were responsible for engendering them, in efforts to meet acute contingent challenges during different time periods and in different geographic locations; and secondly, in the sense that to this day, we dedicate vast amounts of time and energy to guaranteeing that they continue to work their bewildering magic. As modern societies have become more complex, contradictory, and contingent, however, the bewildering nature of their magic has grown increasingly

dark—both more elusive and more disconcerting. Its destructive effects on the biosphere and on human health are a matter of record.

### **The Price of Neglecting Love: Regressive Social Relations and Reigniting Social Evolution in *Interstellar* and *Arrival***

With their explicit focus on the future, science-fiction stories typically imply, involve, or constitute commentaries on certain aspects, if not the totality, of modern industrialized societies, typically focusing on trends that have been or are becoming discernible at the time of conception. Due to the need to present in compelling fashion an imaginary but coherent reality in temporally compressed fashion, often limited to under two hours, science-fiction films constitute social commentaries.<sup>25</sup> Frequently, such commentaries are presented within a narrative structure that relies on the dynamic relationship between two key protagonists, though their relationship is not necessarily immediately apparent, nor is their central significance to the story told, especially not on first viewing. Indeed, depending on the extent of the audience's lack of familiarity with the world that is being portrayed in a science-fiction film, the first time audience members watch a film, they are likely to be so focused on the characters, the plot, and the question of how it all will turn out, that they notice the underlying narrative structure and the director's authorial intent only and quite literally in passing, if at all. Moreover, like in other film genres, nuances and details—in pacing, soundtrack, set-design, camera angles, actors' performances, and many other technical and stylistic regards—especially in well-developed and thought-out, serious, and high-quality works, often are directly tied into and play an important role in illustrating the story-line and overall message. Given the multiple levels of reality that characterize many science-fiction films, moreover, lack of familiarity with the specific spatial environment, temporal reference frame, or novel notions that the audience often, though not reliably, is introduced to or thrown into (the landscape, city, society, world, solar system, or galaxy), typically translates into the need to watch a film at least a few times, to determine whether—and if so, how—it deserves to be regarded as a work of art, and to grasp, appreciate and contemplate it as such.

By implication, it is not unusual for the half-life of masterpieces of science-fiction films to be longer than of films in other genres, as fans or experts continue to discover or uncover layer after layer of intended and unintended meanings and interpretations, by turns thrilling or profound (or both). Myriad historical changes, which have been accelerating and proliferating in many directions and regards since the formation and with the spread of modern societies, as well as the lived experiences of viewers, as they/we have the potential of maturing with age, reveal, show, and teach us “what the film really is all about” and what warnings it was trying to convey. Evidently, this is not to suggest that other films and directors did and do not provide similar opportunities, outside of the science-fiction genre, as the ever-growing literature on films that fill ever larger sections in libraries and more comprehensive websites demonstrate. Among the above-mentioned nuances and details, the dynamic relationship between key protagonists is far more important in science-fiction films than many viewers realize; in the present context, I will refer to *Interstellar* and *Arrival* to illustrate this point.

Science-fiction films tell stories about who we are (and possibly how we became what we are), how we exist on our own and coexist with each other, how we relate to nature—plus: who we may or will become, how (and whether) we will continue to exist (e.g., on our own, against each other), and/or coexist with each other, and how we will treat nature (depending on what will be left of it, and in what form). Science-fiction films either reflect or reflect on—and usually both, but in many different ways—the social circumstances that characterized our world in the twentieth century, and which have been and will continue to constitute it in the twenty-first century and beyond, and the often contradictory modes and patterns that influence, shape, or determine how we relate to each other, and to other creatures on planet Earth. Just as sociology (especially theoretical sociology) is the only social-science discipline (and sub-field) that is concerned—in principle rather than across the board—with how the history of modern societies to date may (or is likely to) prefigure increasingly uncertain futures, so, too, science fiction is the only genre concerned—to whatever extent, in whatever ways—with precisely this same set of issues and challenges. In both instances, to be sure, this concern is fraught by competition for scarce resources for research or film-making (especially of the financial kind), and the first marker of success is that related agendas, projects, and

are monetarily sustainable, which also influences how (and which specific) concerns about the future manifest themselves, are advocated, considered justifiable, marketed, and maintained.

Love is a standard theme in lots of legends, tragedies, dramas, operas, novels and movies; increasingly, it also is being addressed by social theorists as a topic that deserves attention, for instance by Bauman (2003), Dux (1994), Luhmann (1986), Illouz (1997), and others. How do recent theorists address this theme? In addition, there are many movies that revolve around the theme of love, books also sell, and not just romance novels, but also best sellers that promote the benefits of love (Williamson 1992, 2019). The problem with both consists in the fact that love is not something that can be advocated, promoted, hoped for. It is a quality that can be sustained and cultivated, but not generated. Once it is lost as a social quality, it may be lost forever. However, if it persists, it ought to be possible to redirect it.

Put differently, love is a capability that increasingly appears to be incongruous with the reality of modern societies, for example, as work societies fraught with scarcity and increasing social and economic inequality, and diminishing solidarity. On the one hand, love must be put forth as an ideal, conjured up and called upon; on the other hand, love serves the purpose of stabilizing modern society and of reinforcing its operation by distracting from the unsettling dimensions of life in modern society, as it is fraught—but for now, not entirely defined—by alienation, anomie, and disenchantment.

In terms of how modern society treats nature, animals, the earth, humans, history, art, ideas, and the world of the mind, however, love is the last word that would come to mind. We can find exceptional as well as everyday examples of love, but their reliable occurrence and ubiquity for all practical purposes is an objective impossibility: paradoxically, societies cannot work and maintain order without links among humans and between humans and the world in general that fall under the heading of what we commonly refer to as love, and modern societies are functionally integrated systems that undercut real love by promoting false love.

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, in recent years, there has been a proliferation of science-fiction films that feature love more centrally than many viewers are willing (or able) to discern or appreciate. Even among these films, two motion pictures, *Interstellar* (2014, dir. Christopher Nolan)

and *Arrival* (2016, dir. Denis Villeneuve), stand out: at their very core they present arguments about how we have been or persistently are in danger of destroying our future, more or less actively, and how we accept this fact—and how this condition can be visualized with reference to the power of real love. Both films illustrate how the existing systems of social relations in modern societies in the early twenty-first century have destructive consequences that we have accepted as natural and normal. Yet, if we want the future to be “the undiscovered country” (thus the title of *Star Trek IV*, 1991, dir. Nicholas Meyer—the last movie with the original cast—referring to the future) to look forward to, and a better place, specifically, a societal condition characterized by a higher degree of correspondence between facts and norms—a correspondence that is not the result of force, but rather the result of conscious choices by self-possessing individuals who recognize themselves as members of both distinct social groups and the human species—as modern society does promise, we must work toward and allow the emergence of a qualitatively superior system of social relations. Although an adequate treatment of *Interstellar* as well as *Arrival* would require careful consideration of the treatment and incorporation of theoretical physics and linguistics in the films, respectively, both tell stories that are easily relatable.

In *Interstellar*, we find ourselves in the relatively close future, in the American Midwest, as humankind is facing the prospect of starvation within the foreseeable future. After a significant reduction in the size of the human, animal, and plant population, growing crops is becoming increasingly difficult, and as we enter this world (not the film, which starts in a more distance future, in retellings of what life on Earth was like during the time-period in which the early part of the film is set), corn is the last remaining major source of food, all others having died. Cooper (Matthew McConaughey), a farmer (and former NASA pilot), and his father Donald (John Lithgow), son Tom (Timothée Chalamet, Casey Affleck), and daughter Murph (Mackenzie Foy, Jessica Chastain, Ellen Burstyn) struggle with the challenges of everyday life, as a series of events start to occur that lead Cooper (unintentionally, with his daughter) to the secret site and remnant of NASA. He learns that humankind must leave Earth if it wants to survive, and resources are available for one more exploratory mission to another solar system (in another galaxy, no less, via a wormhole near Saturn), which he must lead. Despite the angry pleadings

of his daughter Murph, who will have to stay behind, Cooper agrees to pilot the spaceship, to save the world (the remainder of humankind, to be precise). After months in space (which correspond with decades on Earth), and several disappointing and harrowing experiences, the only survivors of the mission, Cooper and Dr. Brand (Anne Hathaway), the daughter of the lead scientist of NASA (Michael Caine), agree on an act of utter desperation: Cooper will enter a black hole with an android, in hopes to obtain data which—if it can be communicated to Earth—ought to enable Murph (who became Dr. Brand's father's most promising student) to solve the problem of gravity, which will enable what is left of humankind to leave Earth. In the black hole, Cooper comes upon the "Tesseract," a materialization of time-space consisting of seemingly infinite manifestations of Murphy's childhood room, represented in three-dimensional space. After reaching the point of utter desperation, Cooper (with the help of the remaining android, TARS) comes to realize that the Tesseract was placed in the black hole—by aliens—to enable Cooper to communicate with his daughter, across time and space. In what may well be one of the most exhilarating moments in film history, Cooper understands and succeeds, and—with the Tesseract collapsing—realizes that not aliens, but more advanced humans placed the Tesseract in the black hole, to enable humankind to survive.

By contrast, *Arrival* is set in the present, also in North America, and begins just as alien ships are arriving in several locations around Earth, hovering above ground or sea level. It is apparent that the aliens want something, but we quickly learn that there is no common basis for effective communication (no "universal translator," as in the Star Trek universe). We are introduced to Dr. Louise Banks (Amy Adams), a linguist, and Dr. Ian Donnelly (Jeremy Renner), a theoretical physicist, plus Colonel Weber (Forest Whitaker), who is in charge of the United States' response to the appearance of the aliens. We find out that Banks and Donnelly are tasked with making contact with the aliens, within their ship, above the Montana prairie, to try to establish a common basis for communication. At the other eleven sites around Earth, similar efforts are underway. Initially, the nations involved in this global effort cooperate and share information. After many attempts, largely to the credit of Dr. Banks, the team achieves initial successes, while she is undergoing a peculiar change. The film began with an apparent flashback that turns out to

be a flashforward, and is interspersed with flashbacks that we learn cannot be such, since none of what Banks appears to be remembering has happened yet. Rather, as she acquires the ability to communicate with the aliens, she realizes that the latter do not perceive time in linear fashion, and that their perception of time and space differs radically from that of humans. As Louise begins to learn to communicate in the alien language, she also begins to think like them, and her perception of time and space is being altered in the process. As a consequence, she understands the aliens' reason for visiting Earth and is able to avert a military confrontation between the aliens and humans that would have been triggered by the navy of the People's Republic of China. The aliens depart, without leaving any trace of their visit. The message they succeeded to convey is that 3,000 years hence, they will need to ask for human-kind's help, but humanity will need to have advanced sufficiently by then to be able to help the aliens. The gift the aliens brought is their language. Once deployed, it will enable humans to overcome their differences and to collaborate without the typical friction and waste and suffering, thus trigger a leap in evolution unimaginable before the arrival of the aliens, from within the existing system of social relations.

These short summaries leave out many details that are important in various ways. My focus is on the theme of love as it facilitates a critique of regressive social relations, as depicted in the films. In both, humans are exactly the same as we are now: in *Arrival*, it is present-day Earth/United States that provides the setting; in *Interstellar*, the future is so near that there are no major differences in levels of technology or individuals' attitudes, except to the extent that they are forced upon humans in light of the dire circumstances. What separates Cooper and Dr. Banks from "us," though, is that both are so committed to specific relationships (and corollary responsibilities) that they persist and survive extreme circumstances, in no small measure because of the nature of their commitments, in both cases the love for their daughter. In the case of Cooper, feelings of guilt about having abandoned his daughter bolster his determination not to fail. In the case of Louise Banks, despite her knowledge that her future daughter (Jadyn Malone, Abigail Pniowksy, Julia Scarlett Dan) will die of an incurable disease and that this prospect will destroy her marriage with Ian Donnelly, the daughter's father (due to Louise's ability to call up all of her entire life's

experiences at any moment), she not only decides to make possible and share in her daughter's life and existence, but it is her related commitment and conviction that enables her, like Cooper—as a German saying would have it—to “jump over her own shadow,” the shadow that the existing system of social relations casts on all of us, making sure that we won't engage in acts of desperation and faith that might alter the existing system of social relations, especially for the better.

To bring this article to a close, two more points: first, relating to a quote from *Interstellar* pertaining to love; and second, a concluding statement about social evolution. The quote is of a remark made by Dr. Brand, as the crew is facing a fateful decision:

We love people who've died . . . where's the social utility in that? Maybe it means more—something we can't understand, yet. Maybe it's some evidence, some artifact of higher dimensions that we can't consciously perceive. I'm drawn across the universe to someone I haven't seen for a decade, who I know is probably dead. Love is the one thing we're capable of perceiving that transcends dimensions of time and space. Maybe we should trust that, even if we can't yet understand it.

*Interstellar* has been referred to as the 2001 of the twenty-first century, in reference to Stanley Kubrick's masterpiece, *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). One point that commentators and film critics had in mind (along with many other similarities between *Interstellar* and *2001*), and which also applies to *Arrival*, is that all three films suggest, nay, insist, that humankind has the capacity to move beyond the present state of affairs, the present mode of collective human coexistence, and coexistence with nature (that is, Earth), and that it must be focused on this capacity, if it is to not sink back to earlier states of affairs, which in all likelihood will be characterized by more suffering, more violence, less justice, and less reason. We should never settle on the notion that what we are, collectively, is all that we can be. Accepting such a notion would rock our claim to being humans at its (and our) very core.

In *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966, 39–40), Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann wrote, in an amusingly anachronistic dictum,

Because of its capacity to transcend the “here and now,” language bridges different zones within the reality of everyday life and integrates them into a meaningful whole. The transcendences have spatial, temporal and social dimensions. Through language I can transcend the gap between my manipulatory zone and that of the other; I can synchronize my biographical time sequence with his; and I can converse with him about individuals and collectivities with whom we are not at present in face-to-face interaction. As a result of these transcendences language is capable of “making present” a variety of objects that are spatially, temporally and socially absent from the “here and now.” *Ipsa facto* a vast accumulation of experiences and meanings can become objectified in the “here and now.” Put simply, through language an entire world can be actualized in any moment. This transcending and integrating power of language is retained when I am not actually conversing with another. Through linguistic objectification, even when “talking to myself” in solitary thought, an entire world can be appresented [*sic!*] to me at any moment. As far as social relations are concerned, language “makes present” for me not only fellowmen who are physically absent at the moment, but fellowmen in the remembered or reconstructed past, as well as fellowmen projected as imaginary figures into the future. All these “presences” can be highly meaningful, of course, in the ongoing reality of everyday life.

It would seem, then, that our better selves are not beyond reach after all. Rather, it is our willingness to accept limitations without question, to allow love, language, and our ability to enact and deploy both to become truncated, along with our imaginary, that is the problem. *Interstellar* and *Arrival*, then, would appear to be vocal and visually stunning reminders that our humanity is contingent on our willingness to put it into action, not within the context of the existing system of regressive social relations, but with regard to what such a system could and should look and be like, involving us not as passive recipients and perpetuators of the burdens of the past, but the promoters of a future that must be faced with open eyes and a willingness to look

beyond—especially beyond the social and economic inertia and temporality that have been defining our condition.

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## Notes

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1. For now, I am referring to “love” (rather than simply love) to encourage readers to maintain a measure of distance to the phenomenon inferred, for an array of reasons: while we generally yearn for it, we also assume to know what it is, what it means to others, that we usually are in agreement with others about what it signifies, and how to attain, practice, and maintain it. Yet, as always is the case when a term supplants what ought to be understood as a concept, specific forms of “love” are in the eye of the beholder and subject to practice, with conflicting and even mutually exclusive meanings that are influenced by established conventions and pre-judgments in time and space, that is, in specific societies, at particular points in time. With regard to the link between “love” and radical transformation, see my longer paper.
2. E.g., Chen (2017), on the trend “to view partnership in more economic terms.”
3. E.g., Hudson (2015); if every relationship—e.g., via social media, online dating sites, etc.—is measured by its capacity to comply with set expectations and base pragmatics, individuals are unlikely to have any sense that a relationship could be and do more than serve clear-cut and practical purposes. See also Kennedy and Pantou (2019) and the documentary-style film *Fluidity* (2019, dir. Linda Yellen).
4. See especially Wartenberg’s (1999) book on how certain types of romance films have a subtext that points toward qualitative changes, though never of the entire social structure or order.

5. Although the first mention of the concept of the “culture industry” was in Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* ([1944] 2002), ch. 4, it is generally understood to have been Adorno’s contribution, above all. See also Steinert ([1998] 2003), Behrens (2004), and especially Khandizaji (2017).
6. The qualifier, “vast majority,” hints at the fact that modern societies, like pre-modern societies, though typically in more subtle ways, still prioritize the safety and survival of members of some groups over the safety and survival of others, and that they do so in ways that feed back into the stability of social order in its specificity, i.e., as actually existing social, political, and economic structures. See Jouet (2017).
7. This is not suggest that the process of differentiation will continue forever, since it is highly likely that processes of de-differentiation will begin at some point, if they have not done so already, since without proper training, the human capacity for facing increasing complexity is likely to have objective limits. E.g., Woodhead (2016) and Loosen (2017).
8. In *The Truman Show* (1998, dir. Peter Weir), a film situated in the near future depicting a “reality show” with the same title that centers on Truman Burbank (Jim Carrey), who discovers that he is the only person in the show who is not an actor, the god-like creator and director of the show, Christof (Ed Harris), sardonically observes, “We accept the reality of the world with which we are presented. It’s as simple as that.” For an intriguing discussion of the issue of apocalypse in science fiction, see Paik (2010), especially the chapter that includes a detailed discussion of *The Matrix* (1999, dir. Lana and Lili—formerly Andy and Larry—Wachowski) and the difficulties to conceive of and depict viable strategies to bring about qualitative social change (ch. 4).
9. Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1847/poverty-of-philosophy/cho2.htm>.
10. Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, Vol. I, ch. 33, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch33.htm>.
11. Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, Vol. III, ch. 48, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1894-c3/ch.48.htm>.
12. See Best (2015), 12–16.
13. See Parsons (1991).
14. A much more detailed discussion would be required here with regard to recent interpretations of Marx; see especially Postone (1993) and Furer (2019), esp. ch. 5. See Dahms (in preparation) for a related focused discussion.
15. My translation. The published translation of Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics* is notoriously problematic; the quote is a part of a section on causality. In the only available translations (Adorno [1966] 1973), there are several errors in this passage alone (267–68), e.g., Adorno intentionally “Germanified to tinge” to get his point across; the translation “superstructure and infrastructure” is highly unusual, in the related literature (“superstructure and base” is the established terminology); Adorno referred to the doctrine/hypothesis as “Marxian,” not “Marxist.”
16. For a promising perspective on the base–superstructure distinction, see Thompson (2014).

17. Per Lipset's (1996) characterization of the "American creed," for instance, such precepts would include "liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire" (19), along with an array of assumptions about business, labor, government, the good life, the American Dream, taxes, the right to bear arms, and many others.
18. See also Reckwitz (2019); Ther (2019).
19. See Morris (2011), Osterhammel (2015), Reinhard (2016).
20. See, e.g., Martin (2003).
21. See Dahms (2006).
22. See Darko Suvin's (1979) use of estrangement and cognition.
23. The distinction between facts and norms has been addressed most prominently by Habermas ([1992] 1996). As ought to become apparent in the conclusion of this article, there is a high degree of affinity between the vanishing point of his theory of communicative action (Habermas [1981] 1983, 1987) and the message of *Interstellar*, and especially of *Arrival*.
24. Max Horkheimer's "racket theory" (1985) is most instructive in this regard. See Scheit (2018) and Fuchshuber (2019).
25. By comparison, television series constitute other kinds of challenges and opportunities, as they provide ample time for, often rely on, and even require intricate and complex character development and the construction and development of multiple politically, socially, economically, culturally, and environmentally distinct reference frames that would be impossible to depict and capture in movies.

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