

# The Tendencies of Technological Political Culture of the Depression Era in the Movie "The Wizard of Oz"

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## Abstract

The attitude towards the technological progress in the United States throughout history varied from the euphoria to the paranoia. In the 1930s, when the Depression put the majority of the American industries into the financial hole, with the percentage of unemployment close to 1/3 of the nation's population, technological progress seemed to be the recovery option, and at the same time the dangerous reason of surrogating the personal with "soulless" machinery.

In the meanwhile the great industry of film making was gaining more and more cultural weight throughout the nation. Never before had the American motion pictures such an influence in the developing and exposing the American identity and culture. It provided and mirrored the ideas of new social structure and values, together with the images of the criticism and optimistic viewpoint, during the harsh days of the Great Depression.

In 1939 Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer brought to screen, at first glance a very far from the technological tendencies, children story, in the innovative Technicolor, "The Wizard of Oz". Nevertheless besides the Technicolor, which on its due showed the advancement of the U.S. technological development, the whole idea of the "world of Oz" represents the desire of the nation to get away from the realms of the Depression, into the colorful world of joy and happiness. The film's core idea is the choice of coming back home from the world of the technological utopia: back to the hard, not colorful but, at the same time, true reality. In this essay I will analyze the both cultural-political tendencies: technological social alienation and critical reality, on the case of the movie "The Wizard of Oz", reconnecting it with the historical-material relationship with the Depression era.

**Keywords:** cinematography, Dream machine, dystopia, Great Depression, machinery, movie magic, Technological progress, The Wizard of Oz, utopia

## Introduction

The attitude towards the technological progress in the United States throughout history varied from the euphoria to the paranoia. In the 1930s, when the Depression put the majority of the American industries into the financial hole, with the percentage of unemployment close to 1/3 of the nation's population, technological progress seemed to be the recovery option, and at the same time the dangerous reason of surrogating the personal with "soulless" machinery. A great example of this fear was shown by Charlie Chaplin in his film *Modern Times*, where he portrayed the machines as the ugly tools of the Big Bosses in their greedy will of gaining more capital (*Modern Times*, 1936). On the other hand in 1937 president Franklin Delano Roosevelt's administration issued the Technological and National Policy, a strategy of reemerging from the economical illness via technological development and savvy. Two years later, corporate U.S. revealed with a triumph its "World of Tomorrow" on the New York's World Fair, utopian view of the technological progress, which will bring prosperity to the state. The technological utopianism and dystopianism had for a long time before that been an integral part of the American culture. Starting with the industrial revolution the United States

citizens were not only moved towards the consumer-way of thinking, but as some scholars argued, since the 1930s had changed their worldview into mechanistic form. As Walter Teague claimed "we are all mechanics today" (Teague, 1940, p. 177). And looking back into the history of the decades before the Depression it was the machines that brought prosperity to the state. So the technological discourses provided the Americans both the feeling of the nostalgia for the old days, and at the same time the upcoming possibilities for the recovery in future. Strictly, the strands of the technological development during the Depression can be divided into three main parts: technological utopianism, dystopianism and the middle group, the one that was mostly favored by the FDR administration. The utopians argued that it was the lack of individual readiness, that played its negative effect on the economy of the United States, and the only way out was to go back to where the age of machinery started – advanced capitalism. Supported greatly by such a tycoon of the automobile industry as Henry Ford and the science director of the World's Fair, Gerald Wendt, the idea was not popular in the masses as they had lack of trust towards the capitalist system that failed in 1929 (Szostak, 1995). On

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the other side, more leftist thinkers were more pragmatic in the analysis of the technology conditions. Franklin Delano Roosevelt after being elected on the second term appointed the National Resources Committee's Subcommittee on Technology which was obliged to encourage, predict and charge the relationships of technology and social welfare. The most unrealistic view of the future technological development was introduced by a small, rather unaccredited political group called Technocracy. This group was eager to give over the social control to the engineers and technicians, for them to calculate and count the social productivity and profit in terms of wasted energy. However, the critics of the tendencies of machinery argued that machines have already gained so much power over the social life of the people, that they had developed "life of their own". It was not the machines that were used, but the people who became enslaved by technologies' absolute status. The answer to the problem for the dystopians was returning to the roots, "home", saying no to the dictatorship of the technological apparatus. As a leader of the 1930s back-to-the-land movement Ralph Borsodi claimed "A comfortable home in which to labor and play....and I, at least, have time for love, for children, for a few friends, and for work I like to do" (Borsodi, 1929, p. 462).

In the meantime the great industry of film making was gaining more and more cultural weight throughout the nation. Never before had the American motion pictures such an influence in the developing and exposing the American identity and culture. It provided and mirrored the ideas of new social structure and values, together with the images of the criticism and optimistic viewpoint, during the harsh days of the Great Depression. On the other hand, contrary to the common belief, the film industry was not 'Depression-Proof' and suffered a steep decline along with the fortunes of the nation as a whole the following years. It suffered a savvier decline in the profit starting from the 1932 (Sklar, 1975, p. 123). The only studio that never faced the need in capital was Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, the same studio which in 1939 brought to screen, at first glance a very far from the technological tendencies, children story, in the innovative Technicolor, "The Wizard of Oz". Nevertheless besides the Technicolor, which on its due showed the advancement of the U.S. technological development, the whole idea of the "world of Oz" represents the desire of the nation to get away from the realms of the Depression, into the colorful world of joy and happiness. The feature shows "a triumph of technology" and serves as an example of why the Hollywood got the nickname "dream machine". In the reviews of Fricke, Scarfone and Stillman, they are praising the "wizardry of technology", pronouncing the movie the "one of the greatest technical feats the screen has to its credit" (Fricke et al., 1989). Yet Joshua David Bellin in his analysis of the movie is arguing that the movie on the contrary is projecting the other way of thinking of the period: the apocalyptic view of dehumanization and isolation of the society, interchanging people with the heartless technological apparatus (Bellin, 2005). The film's core idea is the choice of coming back home from the world of the technological utopia: back to the hard, not colorful but, at the same time, true reality. In this essay I will analyze the both cultural-political tendencies: technological social alienation and critical reality, on the case of the movie "The Wizard of Oz", reconnecting it with the historical-material relationship with the Depression era. On the basis of

the theories of technological utopianism and dystopianism, the movie can provide the connection with the policy of the time with both: top to down, elites' influence on the social structure and, at the same time, the down to top, grassroots' attitude towards the technological policy of the government.

## The Utopian and Dystopian Reading of Movie Sequences

The starting sequence of the Kansas is exposing the dark, black and white feature of the dull, routine and unattractive reality, at the same time legitimizing the up-coming beauty and variety of colors in the Land of Oz. The picture is referring to a farm suffering from the Dust Bowl, a period of severe dust storms which caused a huge damage to the agriculture of the United States in 1934-36. There are no plants, no crops, at the same time the protagonist's aunt, Ema, is only confirming the association of the Depression-era viewer with his harsh reality by telling three of her employees, that they may be out of job even before they know it. The technology used in the farm is far too outdated. Among the used ones are the telegraph wires, lamps and wagons on animal power. There are almost none of the modern facilities of the time like: telephone, radio or even electricity. In fact, the only machine in the farm "old incubator" has apparently "gone bad". This critique view of this sequence can be read as the distrust in the machines which are unreliable and can be broken so easily. The main hero, Dorothy, wishes to escape this world of technological regression, she wants to get far away from the technologically unintelligent society, which is best represented in her song "Over the rainbow". This song is mirroring the will of the United States nation in social alienation from the reality. The dreams of a better land, search for a new frontier, crossing which the life would become better (Harmetz, 1977, p. 31). The song is strictly utopian, providing the ideas of hope. Coming back to reality we can witness that the only working machine-technology, a bicycle, belongs to cruel Miss Gulch. The personage of Miss Gulch as many fairy tale antagonists represents pure evil. Her appearance, robotic movements, an emotionless face exposes her as a part of the technology which is intruding into a quiet and peaceful life of the farmers. In the character of Miss Gulch, technology is the first time reflected in a heartless way, when she insists to euthanize Dorothy's dog, and threatens to strip off the farm if Dorothy's aunt and uncle will not follow her demands.

It is not till the "land of Oz" is exposed to the viewer where one can realize the drastic comparison of the dull reality and the orchestra of colors in the illusionary world. The correspondences between the two worlds help us to understand the relationship between them (Fowkes, 2010). Dorothy meets three friends which are exaggerated inversions of the three farm-employees. The Wicked Witch of East, like Miss Gulch riding a bicycle, is riding a broom. The scene showing the Emerald city in the far is copying the opening sequence of the movie. So the question to be asked is: Is Dorothy away from Kansas? The Land of Oz, seems to be the allegory of what Dorothy's home would look like if technological progress prevailed there. It is the land of technological utopia, where technology is linked to magic. Stillman and Scarfone wrote in their memo-advice to the producers of the movie in 1938: "The Whole background should be

more modernized than it is in the book. When Frank Baum wrote this story... there were no autos, no radios, no airplanes.... I think our Wizard of Oz background should be a Fairyland of 1938, and not of 1900" (Stillman & Scarfone, 1999). It should be mentioned that the word 'modernized' often meant 'technological' during the Depression Era. Nevertheless we see no actual technology mentioned in the memo in the final version of the movie. Instead the creators used the parallels to the technology, bounding it with magic.

The developed technology is best exposed in the personage of the Tin Man. In 1930s among the science-fiction writers it was popular to use the concept of humanized machines or robots. The Tin Man is causing more surprise in Dorothy, than the Scarecrow or talking Lion. At the first glance, the Tin Man's personage is utopian. The miracle of a man made of steel moving, talking and dancing was astonishing for the audience of the Depression era. It seems that he is irresistible. On the other hand his tendency to rust, is dehumanizing, making it impossible for him cry, thus to express full range of emotions. More than that, the Tin Man acknowledges during the talk with Dorothy and Scarecrow that he has no heart, which even more is surprising for Dorothy. The dystopian accusation of the Tin Man is continuing in his song as he says that even having a heart he would be only "kinda human". The Tin Man and all other Dorothy's friends are countered by the Wicked Witch's technology. The Witch has become the prototype of the American horror personage, yet many have not paid attention to the mechanical nature of her magic. In comparison her main opponent the good fairy Glinda's action never are referenced to the modernized technology of the Depression. The Witch's crystal ball represents a greatest innovation introduced in the 1939 Fair-Television. The part, where she is sky-writing the imminence to Dorothy with her broomstick above the Emerald City, looks exactly like an airplane writing in the sky. Of course, all of these technologies were causing miscellaneous feelings among the citizens; nevertheless, in the movie they are filled with negative cast due to their link to the Wicked Witch. Thus, the Witch's power and terror is based on her technological advancement.

The Emerald city is a culmination of the ideological utopianism, the Technocrats were so eager to reach. The whole structure of the city made of precious stone is well organized and technically developed. In the sequences before meeting the Wizard, the three heroes are groomed in the assembly line of fashion. There is no unemployment, no crisis. The organization is perfect as the citizens of the Emerald City are not bothered by the noisy transport or factory machines. The technology is peacefully coexisting here with gardens and trees. All that perception of the ideal world of technology was described in the book of Loeb, also written in the 1930s' "Technological Utopianism" (Akin, 197, pp. 116-131). In his work Loeb says that despite its basis in "modern technology", the technological utopia is not to be "a mass of shooting smokestacks and teeming streets" rather a world of "cleanliness, quire and harmony" (Loeb, 1933, p. 123). The city is representing the ideas of utopians with its harmonically organized structure, the technology in its core nature. Yet this structure is again lack in pure reliance on the safety provided just by the mechanisms. The Wizard's technology is the inversions of the Witch's one. If she uses the magic to reference technology, the Wizard vice versa creates an

illusion of magic thanks to his ingenuity. The Wizard's technology empowers him over the citizens of the Emerald city, the same way like it empowers the Witch. Again, his rule is rooted in the feeling of the fear. Behind the green head, flowing in the air, which he uses to scare his submissions, hides a common, scared person, yet a very talented one.

The utopianism of the Emerald City may be critiqued by the dystopian, since it is a heartless dictatorship of the machines which are killing the individualism and personal autonomy. The middle-group utopians, of FDR administration, idealized the collectivism as an option for the nations' economical recovery, the great administration which will bring order and harmony (Harding, 1938, pp. 129-137). The dystopian argued with that saying that this administrative-machine will rob people of their own personality making them follow the will of a corporate mind. That may be the reason of why the citizens of Emerald city and Witch's minions are all dressed the same, act likewise, and have identical appearance. They all fell under the technological nightmare of totalitarian structure as dystopian scholar would argue. And the disclosure of the Wizard's true identity only confirms that the shown harmony is only an illusion, the willful blindness of those who worshiped his third-rate huckster rule.

## Conclusion

Dorothy possesses the power of exposure against the technological ideology. Unfortunately for her, she can't destroy the technological social structure. She is only capable to reveal the man behind the curtain, the fraud Wizard, the capitalist of the ideology. The Frankfurt school theorist Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno would critique the movie for being a part of the cultural industry – the top down influence of oppression in the mass culture. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, the mass culture, using technology is in order of mass-distribution the industrial culture, creates values and models which are uniform, amorphous, and primitive. They block the initiative and creativity, and require the audience to adore "the realism", by passively accepting information. Cultural industry insidiously substituted personal by general (Adorno, 1944). In the land of Oz, when the guard is telling the citizens of the Emerald city to go home, everybody obeys since they don't know any other alternative, for them the word of powerful Oz is imperative. Their "reality" circulates around the ideology of capitalistic obedience to the structure, set by the authorities. The authorities which are more technologically educated. Dorothy exposes the Wizard being a common human being, thus changing the reality. Her power is better overrunning of the capitalist ideology than the violence. Nevertheless, Dorothy is not revolutionary; her only wish is going back to Kansas.

While the movie is praising the idea of returning home, escaping the technological dictatorship, the Land of Oz still looks very attractive for the audience. Kansas, being very dull and desperate place, is not urging in the viewer the atmosphere of cozy home and family life. Its alienation from the technological comforts is scary and strange for the modern person. So was it for the progressive people of the Depression era. The Land of Oz is not only about the journey and the will for the adventures. The pictures of the imaginary Land drive the nostalgic feelings of the childhood. The fea-

ture remained its historical, cultural importance in the American society. The same importance it provided to the people of the Depression era as the technologically utopian and dystopian analysis of the capitalist structure and the tool for the optimistic alienation from the hard reality.

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