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"There was a world once, you punk": Visual Subversion in Fleischer's *Soylent Green*

Introduction

[Thorn:] There was a world once. You punk.
[Sol:] Yes. So you keep telling me.

– *Soylent Green* (Fleischer, 1973)

In many ways, *Soylent Green* is a film about humanity in the future looking back at, and longing for, a world that is long gone – the world of the film's audience in 1973. For the majority of people living in the dystopia of *Soylent Green*, life has been reduced to a struggle for survival due to overpopulation, pollution and diminishing resources. Over 40 million people live in New York City and barely survive on the scarce food and water rations provided by the Soylent Corporation. After one of New York's few wealthy men is murdered in his apartment, police detective Robert Thorn is assigned to the case and slowly but steadily uncovers the truth behind the Soylent Corporation: the new miracle food called Soylent Green is made from the bodies of people who died in voluntary euthanasia clinics.

Before further discussing this film, I would like to explain why I chose *Soylent Green* as the topic of this article and not one of the other films (*Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Blade Runner*, *The Matrix*, and *Minority Report*) discussed in the course.

Initially, the most important factor was the fact that I had not seen *Soylent Green* before and therefore had no preconceived notions about the film which might have distracted me while trying to analyze it from a scholarly perspective. Although this was also the case with *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, I had always been interested in watching *Soylent Green*, mostly because of various references to it in TV shows, most of which parody the film's final revelation that "Soylent Green is people!" (*Soylent Green*), such as this example from *Futurama*:

> **Fry:** My God. What if the secret ingredient … is people?
> **Leela:** No. There's already a soda like that: Soylent Cola.
> **Fry:** Oh, how is it?
> **Leela:** It varies from person to person.
>
> (Morton)

Given the status of *Soylent Green* as a cult classic that was and is spoofed and parodied in popular culture, I was very much interested in seeing and analyzing it.

In contrast to other films in the syllabus of the course, hardly any research has been conducted on *Soylent Green*. Whereas a search for articles on *Blade Runner* in the MLA International Bibliography returns over 100 results written in English, a search for *Soylent Green* returns only one, an article that is "concerned with the scientific and technological regimes of efficiency within [the] broader discourse of a limited earth" (Höhler). A different article by Ronnie Lipschutz focuses on the insight that *Soylent Green* offers "into twenty-first-century capitalism based as it is on the same principles, to wit, commodification of the body" (Lipschutz 573).

Of the little academic writing on *Soylent Green*, the majority of publications deals with the film's political, ecological or social implications rather than its visuals. One notable exception is Vivian Sobchack. In her book *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film*, however, *Soylent Green* is only one of many films analyzed in a broader context. I can only speculate why there is so little research on *Soylent Green* and especially its visuals, but I think there are multiple reasons for this neglect in the past.

First of all, *Soylent Green* is not a particularly critically acclaimed film. Even though it has the status of a cult classic, this is mostly due to the film's 1970s production values that seem unintentionally funny to many modern viewers as well as Charlton Heston's iconic performance, especially in the film's ending scene.[1] Much of the story's premise is lost due to the focus that lies on the classic detective plot. Instead of directly dealing with the problems that arise in *Soylent Green*,

[1] See, for example, the parody of the ending sequence in an episode of *Saturday Night Live* on March 13, 1993 (Season 18, Episode 15).

the plot revolves mostly around Thorn slowly discovering the secret of Soylent Green and his relationship with Shirl.

Furthermore, *Soylent Green* lacks the spectacular special effects of films like *2001: A Space Odyssey* or the somber, intense atmosphere of *Blade Runner*. Instead, it meanders between luxurious apartments in the world of the rich, chases through deserted streets and some scenes that actually depict the consequences of overpopulation that were much more present in Harry Harrison's *Make Room! Make Room!*, the novel the film is based on. When special effects are used, they have not aged well. The scoops in the riot scenes might have looked impressive in 1973 but they do not work in the twenty-first century. In contrast to the strange visuals and distorted images of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Soylent Green* literally relies on brute force. Modern viewers who have seen the spectacular visuals of films such as *The Matrix* or *Minority Report* will not be awestruck by what the special effects in *Soylent Green* have to offer.

Additionally, the alarmist predictions by Paul Ehrlich that were the trigger for the fear of overpopulation that spawned *Make Room! Make Room!* and *Soylent Green* never became true, at least not in the Western world.[2] It is therefore easy to dismiss many of the implications present in the film. In other words, I would argue that *Soylent Green* seems to be neglected by academics mostly because it does little to elaborate on the interesting background of its story but rather treats it as merely the setting of an ultimately very conventional and bland detective plot. Moreover, it suffers because special effects failed to recreate the terror of riots in a vastly overpopulated city that is so compelling in the novel and even on the film poster. Together, the film's shortcomings result in a lack of timelessness compared to films that enjoy a higher degree of interest in scholarly writing, such as *Star Wars*.

Although the film does not have a high standing among critics, in my opinion, *Soylent Green* is – despite its flaws – still a film worth seeing today. One of the reasons for that is its sometimes subtle use of visual subversion, which is the topic I will analyze in the following. Instead of dehumanizing people directly, *Soylent Green* visually subverts the staples of life in order to make the viewers aware of how the things they take for granted may easily be lost in the future.

Visual Subversion

Before talking about *Soylent Green*, I will explain visual subversion as used by Vivian Sobchack and give a few examples of how this technique is used in other films. In short, visual subversion is "the alienation of the familiar" (Sobchack

[2] Having published several articles and books on the subject of overpopulation and its effects, Paul Ehrlich was a central figure in the discourse that led to the publication of *Make Room! Make Room!* and the making of *Soylent Green*. His most famous work is *The Population Bomb* and Ehrlich, professor of Population Studies at Stanford University, also wrote the introduction to the paperback edition of *Make Room! Make Room!*.

107). More precisely, an entity or abstract concept that is familiar to the viewer is visually related to something alien and strange. Consequently, the viewer is caught somewhere between familiar territory and the disconcerting unknown. In contrast to the solely new and alien, the "opposing impulses" (108) created by the connection of familiarity and strangeness create a disturbing and uncomfortable atmosphere rather than a simply frightening one.

One example of the effects of visual subversion can actually be found in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), a film that was also part of the syllabus. In *Body Snatchers*, people created by seed pods take over a small town. The *pod people* look exactly like the humans they replace and in fact only their close relatives are able to notice that there is something wrong with them. Although they are sure that something is wrong, they cannot comprehend it and question their own judgment. This can be seen in a scene where a woman doubts her impression that her Uncle is not who he used to be. To quote her friend, the film's protagonist: "No one could possibly impersonate your Uncle Ira … the trouble is inside you" (*Body Snatchers*). Similarly, the viewer can often only guess who has already been taken over and thus watches the character's every gesture, creating an uncanny aura of paranoia.

The pod people in *Body Snatchers* are not run-of-the-mill aliens but visual equivalents of humans that lack one defining feature of their counterparts: emotion. Thus, they are *dehumanized*. The effect created is not so much the fear of the unknown but rather the fear of the familiar turning into the unknown, causing the need to question everything that is familiar.

Visual subversion is a common technique in Science Fiction film and not limited to the dehumanization found in *Body Snatchers*. In the opening sequence of Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* …, the familiar concept of the contemporary city is visually subverted. In this sequence, the protagonist awakens in a hospital and soon finds out that no one else is in the building. He then stumbles to the outside and wanders through the city of London without seeing another human being. The city is completely devoid of any human life except for himself. This stands in stark contrast to what a viewer would expect of a densely populated urban area like London. Through the use of extreme long shots and a very slow pace as well as an eerie silence instead of the noise of modern cities, this sequence makes for a very uncomfortable beginning of the film. With regard to the two film examples, then, visual subversion is best described as "[t]he way in which the secure and familiar are twisted into something subtly dangerous and slyly perverted" (Sobchack 124).

In the remainder of this article I will analyze how *Soylent Green* visually subverts the familiar and point out what it does differently in contrast to the previously mentioned examples.

Visual Subversion in *Soylent Green*

In my thesis I claim that *Soylent Green* does not feature the same kind of visual subversion that is found in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* because it does not dehumanize people but rather their living conditions. While the latter is rather obvious, it is also directly stated in the film that it is not the people that have changed:

> [**Thorn:**] When you were young. People were better. (sic)
> [**Sol:**] Oh. Nuts. People were always rotten. But the world was beautiful.
> (*Soylent Green*)

As Sol states, the world used to be different, but people have not really changed as they have always had the same flaws. The same idea is also stressed on the film poster which reads, "It's the year 2022 … People are still the same."

According to my thesis, *Soylent Green* instead visually subverts the staples of life, the things most critical for human survival. Among them are access to personal space, privacy, water and food. For "[a] starving person cares very little about writing majestic poetry, buying an impressive-looking car, finding a sweetheart, or avoiding injury – or anything other than the overriding goal of obtaining food" (Ewen). Whilst in the film other needs such as the need for a family are subverted, I will focus on the aforementioned ones as they are either visually more striking or more central to the film. Moreover, the notion of family, for example, is subverted in the film as it is not depicted at all, except for a short scene in which Thorn finds a baby next to the corpse of its mother.

Subversion of Space and Privacy

Even though the lack of space and consequently the lack of privacy are not depicted as strongly as they are in *Make Room! Make Room!* by Harry Harrison, there still is a large number of scenes that try to illustrate the effect of extreme overpopulation in an urban area. Both small cramped spaces such as hallways and open spaces such as the streets filled with people (during the riot scene, for example) are supposed to convey the idea of a completely overpopulated New York City.

Although no numbers are given in the film, it is safe to assume that an overwhelming percentage of the population is homeless. These people spend the day outside in the heat and dirt, and during the night they have to find temporary homes and cram themselves into hallways or onto stairs because the curfew forbids them to stay outside. Without a home and spending their nights together with dozens of strangers cramped into the tiniest spaces, they have no refuge to withdraw to, no place to store their belongings and no walls or doors to secure their physical well-being while they sleep.

These living conditions for the majority of the population are contrasted by the images shown to Sol when he decides to visit one of the euthanasia-facilities.

The previously ever-present grainy brownish filter used during the outside scenes gives way to the vivid and natural colors that appear in the vast landscapes shown on the huge screen during Sol's death. This effect is enhanced by the joyous music as well as the zoom of the camera in one particular moment where the camera starts out with a long shot of a herd of sheep and then zooms out until the sheep can hardly be seen.

In the cramped and overpopulated world of *Soylent Green*, reminders of the past with its vast landscapes and beautiful scenery are used to entice the elderly to die. The waiting lines in the euthanasia-facility show that they are willing to do so as the real world hardly offers the bare minimum needed for survival.

Subversion of Water

Both the original audience and the contemporary viewer take easy access to clean water for granted. Every home has running tap water that you can use to wash yourself or to drink. To us, these are ordinary things. In *Soylent Green*, they are only available to the wealthy people and the ordinary citizens have to make do with rationed water handed out in plastic containers. Even for a policeman like Thorn, water is too rare to use for shaving or even taking a shower. Consequently, the running tap water in Mr. Simonson's apartment amazes him.

Usually, in a film a shot of a character washing his hands would be an afterthought, last a few seconds at best, and would actually not be about the character washing his hands but something else that is going on. In *Soylent Green*, a single shot of running tap water lasts for about 40 seconds, showing how extraordinary such a simple thing is to Thorn. It is not about Thorn thinking about the murder case or even thinking of anything, it is about his pure enjoyment of the water. By putting such emphasis on banalities, it is – in Sobchack's words – "impossible for us to look at the bathroom in the film as a familiar place" (132).

At a later point in the film, it is not the promise of intimacy with Shirl that convinces Thorn to stay in her apartment. It is only when she mentions that they can take a hot shower that he agrees to stay and this is further strengthened by the focus of the camera: Initially, the shot only shows the shower head and the water pouring down and then it tilts down very slowly to show the characters in the shower. Once more water is not just an afterthought but essential to the characters' state of mind.

Subversion of Food

The same can be said about the treatment of the concept of food in *Soylent Green*. As the eponymous miracle food Soylent Green suggests, food is of paramount importance to the story. In the world of *Soylent Green*, there are two kinds of food. There are Soylent products, described as "[t]asteless, odorless crud" (*Soylent Green*) by Thorn and then there is the kind of food that the viewer is familiar with: vege-

tables, fruit, meat, bread. In *Soylent Green*, the latter kind of food is – just like space, privacy and water – available only to the rich people. Even Thorn's superior at the police office is only seen eating Soylent products. These products are the only food available to the common people and at best manage to keep them alive. Visually, the "miracle food" (*Soylent Green*) Soylent Green resembles wafers of metal or plastic and seems to be rather brown than green. Its appearance is wholly inorganic. Hardly anyone would be able to identify it as food without the context of the film and yet a riot starts when the stores run out of it on Soylent Green Tuesday, the only day of the week on which it is actually sold.

The proper food, on the other hand, is sold at black market grocery stores protected by armed men. For a small amount of groceries Shirl has to pay $279, a price that – startling as it is to a contemporary viewer – becomes even more estranging when it is adjusted for inflation: $279 in 1973 equal about $1,353 in 2008. In a city where hardly anyone has a job, a single proper meal costs more than $1,000, assuming that the value of the dollar in the film was supposed to equal the actual value in 1973 ("Consumer Price Index"). The emotional reaction such a meal causes is thus not surprising in this context but astounding nonetheless. In one shot, Sol is at first awestruck by the sight of a piece of beef and only moments later he realizes what the world around him has become and how it has changed during his lifetime. The sight of such a common thing to the viewer as a piece of beef causes him to cry and leaves him devastated, forcing the viewer to reflect on his own reaction to such banalities and compare them to the effect they have on the characters.

In what is probably the most extreme case of visual subversion in the film, Sol and Thorn celebrate their dinner, which also marks the first time that Sol eats anything other than Soylent products. In this sequence of about two minutes, the characters do not talk at all except for the Yiddish toast *L'Chayim*, meaning literally *to life*. Combined with the celebratory music it seems like they try not to talk because it would ruin the moment. Although they do not talk, their reactions to the food and the whole ritual of cooking and eating together become obvious in their gestures and facial expressions. And to someone like Sol, who grew up religious and remembers the old world, eating such a meal becomes a spiritual experience.

Before, eating food was merely something that was necessary to survive, a means to an end, but the completely different experience of actually cooking food, putting it on a plate and paying attention to all the other little details of eating a dinner that are so much taken for granted by the viewers, are extremely special to the characters. Consequently, the camera focuses on all these small details such as using a spoon to put the meat on the plate or the stalk that is left over after Thorn eats the apple. The fact that Thorn waits for Sol to eat the apple and imitates the way Sol rubs it on his shirt also shows that Thorn does not know how to eat an apple, which both amuses and irritates the viewer. Another small detail of which there are many in this sequence is the fact that Sol has to use a plastic fork, pre-

sumably because they possess only one proper silverware fork as they are completely useless when all you have to eat are Soylent crackers or wafers.

Just like the bathroom in the shot mentioned before, this dinner may at a first glance be similar to what a viewer would expect a regular dinner to be like in a film, but there are so many things that defamiliarize the whole event, only some of which have been mentioned here. This is not only a dinner, it is much rather a celebration of things trite to the viewer and also serves as escapism from the bleak reality of *Soylent Green*. Not coincidentally does the sequence end with a fade to the next shot, a transition that is unique in the film that otherwise only has clear cuts thus giving the sequence an almost dreamlike quality.

Conclusion

Despite its numerous flaws, *Soylent Green* also has some strong points, some of which I have discussed in this chapter. While there may be more impressive, intelligent or engaging science fiction films, *Soylent Green*'s attention to small details in many scenes is worthy of praise, and it is a testament to good film making when such subtle things as a plastic fork or the stalk of an apple contribute more to the defamiliarization of the viewer than big, expensive special effects.

Soylent Green differs from many science fiction films in that it does not feature any alien species invading the world or huge technological breakthroughs. On the contrary, there seems to be no scientific progress at all. The very few rich people do live in quite luxurious and extravagant apartments, but they look like apartments from the 1970s and not from the year 2022. *Soylent Green* is science fiction in which science has not found the answer to the world's problem. By putting emphasis on the notion that people have not changed, it urges viewers to reflect on their own attitude and actions and this is successful to a large extend because of the subversion I have analyzed in this article. For these are the things that establish the connection between the familiar actual world the viewer lives in and the dystopian future of *Soylent Green*.

Calling it "an interesting bad film" (Johnson 62), William Johnson wrote in his review: "[t]he best scenes in *Soylent Green* are effective because simple: Thorn reveling in water from a faucet or in a dinner of genuine meat and vegetables – luxuries almost beyond imagining in his world" (62). Through the creation of such a similar yet alien world by means of visual subversion, *Soylent Green* manages to make us aware of just how much we take for granted and it makes us realize that resources which seem abundant nowadays may very well be depleted in the not-so-distant future.

In the end, it is not only the film's take on a society that is pushed towards – and ultimately beyond – its limits, but also the techniques of visual subversion employed that makes it a film worth seeing, even 36 years after its release.

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