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INCONVERSATION

A REAL FUTURE: Sam Green with Astra Taylor

by Astra Taylor

Sam Green, whose 2004 documentary *The Weather Underground* was nominated for an Academy Award, has a new project. *Utopia in Four Movements* is a “live documentary.” Green cues images and narrates in person while musicians, led by Dave Cerf, perform the soundtrack. “This is a film that’s both about utopia and an attempt to embody it by weaving together images and ideas and spoken words that will never be replicated exactly, a movie being born as you see and hear it, as alive as music,” writes Rebecca Solnit of the uniquely compelling experience. Catch *Utopia* at The Kitchen October 7, 8, and 9. —Astra Taylor

Astra Taylor (Rail): The utopian impulse seems like something that has been theorized away. It’s considered rather reprehensible in some circles, a meta-narrative that’s completely modernist and outmoded—that’s what I remember being told in college anyway. Are you trying to rehabilitate the idea of utopia? Redeem it?

Sam Green: Well, sort of. There’s so much of that critique of the modernist utopian impulse that I *agree* with—I mean, it led to tons of awful things, and in some ways we’ve learned a lot from that experience. But I think it’s one of those things where part of the price of giving that up is giving up some kind of hope and imaginative impulse. I actually got started on this project a long time ago when I was doing the *Weather Underground* movie. I read tons of stuff about the 60s just so I would know what I was talking about and understand that history. A couple times in readings I came across a reference to this thing called “the crisis of leisure time.” I went to the library and I learned that in the 50s and 60s, in sociology there was a field of study that asked what would happen in the near future when there was so much automation and so much prosperity that the biggest problem people had was what to do with all their time off. This was around 1965. And I was amazed, really floored. It was such a striking example of how, not that long ago, there was a sort of hopefulness about the future, an assumption that things would get better, that I really feel is absent today.

Rail: They obviously didn’t read Marx’s *Grundrisse!* [which says: “Machinery inserts itself to replace labor only where there is an overflow of labor powers. Only in the imagination of economists does it leap to the aid of the individual worker. It can be effective only with masses of workers.”] Anyway, it strikes me as a rather benign vision of utopia, one that simply has a lot of leisure.

Green: Right. Well, I mean, I use utopia in what may be a weird way. I feel like there are a lot of meanings of it, and for me, I’m personally not interested in utopian communities—small experiments where people go off and make a perfect world. I’m interested in the utopian impulse when it is a kind of imagination, a societal imagination for a radically different and radically better world. To be able to imagine that not just as one person, but as a society.

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Rail: Where does Esperanto fit in to that definition?

Green: It was developed in the late 1800s by this Jewish guy in Poland who lived in a town, Bialystok, where there were Poles, Jews, Germans, and Russians and they all spoke different languages and they all hated each other and there were pogroms and it was just a terrible place and so he came up with this idea. And the thing I love about Esperanto is that it perfectly mirrors a kind of flowering, and decay, of an arc of the utopian impulse—a kind of modernist utopian impulse—of the 20th century. So, it really took off around right the turn of the century and in the 20s and 30s there were hundreds of thousands of people all over the world that spoke it. In hindsight it's very naïve—the hope that enough people all over the world would learn Esperanto that it could spark a new era of peace and understanding.

Rail: Well, that impulse is kind of alive, at least in technology circles—this idea that the Internet will allow us to all communicate directly, to watch the same videos, to use the same encyclopedia, or whatever. Is that the same thing?

Green: I sometimes feel like a crank because, especially being in Northern California, this comes up: What about technology? I'm pretty skeptical. Look at something like decoding the genome and genetic engineering—sure, that will probably lead to some marvelous advances, but I'm also pretty scared of it. You can look at technology and not see it in the context of capitalism, which often brings out the *worst* parts of those kinds of advances.

Rail: Isn't that sort of what happened with the shopping mall? I found that part of the film to be the most evocative sequence in terms of this theme. I always assumed malls were the result of cynical consumer engineering. I had no sense of the idealistic beginnings.

Green: Victor Gruen, the guy who invented the mall, really came out of the same moment, in some ways, as Zamenhof, the guy who invented Esperanto. He was a European Jew, educated, drunk on modernism—or inspired by modernism—and he believed that buildings could transform people and the way they lived. Zamenhof believed that a language could transform people, and Lenin believed that socialism could transform people. It's all part of that modernist ideal, that people could be transformed. And so, if you follow the story of the mall, it ends at the end of the century with this bankrupt mall in China, owned by the government. It's like this weird communist capitalist hybrid. Through the course of the century the idea of the mall has traced this whole arc.

Rail: Your film *Weather Underground* resonated against the backdrop of September 11, which was a kind of breakthrough moment. And even though we've got various wars and an economy in collapse this political moment feels pretty rudderless to me. I wonder if that's something you're playing with in this project?

Green: I was complaining about this recently to a friend; we were walking around a farmers' market in San Francisco and she said, "Sam, I don't know what you're talking about; this is utopia right here. We don't need big ideas—there's all this great small stuff." And she goes through this list of community gardens in Detroit, the Zapatistas, workers in factories in Argentina, left-wing governments across Latin America, and all of the huge positive changes that have happened over the past 10, 20, 30 years, all profoundly hopeful. And it's true. It's totally true. And that's great, but part of me still yearns for something bigger.

Rail: How does that relate to the final part of your film, which focuses on forensic anthropology? It's not really a big obvious overarching political statement. And forensic anthropology is not a field that one immediately associates with utopia.

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Green: That part, the last part, starts with the time capsule being buried at the New York World's Fair, which was this incredibly hopeful thing. It was to be dug up in 5,000 years and they printed this book all about it—"Here's what we've done! It might be useful for you to know about some of these things!"—and circulated it to libraries all over the world so that if North America was blown up somebody would find this book. I found a copy at the Prelinger Library. It was so *hopeful* and they were so confident, and it was 1939!

Anyway the last part of the film starts with that story and it ends with these forensic anthropologists digging people up at the end of the century, and that too sort of feels like an emotional arc of the 20th century. It's this very concrete step forward that honors people. Forensic anthropologists exhume mass graves and try to determine who's buried there and what happened to them and hopefully that can lead to some sort of justice. It's not about big ideas or the grand sweep of history. It's very concrete. If you think about it, it's terrible enough if you lose somebody in a violent conflict. But to not know what happened to them is almost incomprehensively bad. And so for somebody to come along, and to, not fix that for you, but at least give you some peace is a noble thing. So, I like it; it moves me and actually inspires me on a lot of different levels.

Rail: I want to talk about your position as the narrator, as a live narrator. I'm thinking about the time capsule and the idea of a universal subject—when they buried the time capsule they were speaking for America, if not for all of mankind on some level. In this project you are addressing some huge topics—progress, modernity, history, war, utopia—and I think you were right to take a sort of prismatic view through the four parts. At the same time, by doing it live it's obvious that you are speaking as an individual, as just one person with a particular subject position and perspective.

Green: Well, it is the kind of thing where anybody who would spoke in an authoritative way on this topic could come off as kind of an asshole or...

Rail: Yeah, but there is this sort of Russell Jacoby "end of utopia" thesis that's been out there for a while—older guys who are nostalgic for the days of the universal subject and universal values.

Green: They think identity politics ruined everything, yeah. That's definitely true. Doing the live narration—it's funny because it's much humbler in a way. You're getting up, and you're vulnerable, and you're talking, and it's hard! I mean, I understand why most documentary people don't like voiceover, and I was one of them, but I've actually come around to love voiceover. Now I think most documentarians avoid voiceover because it's *hard*—you actually have to go out on a limb and say something.