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Filmmaker Sam Green Tackles 'Utopia in Four Movements'

By Hillary Weston



Following the success of his critically-acclaimed film, *The Weather Underground*, Academy Award-nominated documentarian Sam Green decided to create a multi-dimensional live documentary that investigates the history of the utopian impulse, and challenges the audience to imagine their own ideals for the future. If that sounds heavy, it's because it is. *Utopia in Four Movements* is half film, one part lecture, and one part rock show. Running this week at The Kitchen in Chelsea, Green narrates the performance as local band Quavers

provide a live soundtrack. We caught up with Green to discuss what drew him to the concept of utopia, the show's multimedia platform (itself a kind of utopia), and the shifting ways we digest media.

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How do you pick the subjects for your documentaries?

Ideas just come to me. I read about something or see an image and I just get enthralled by it. It becomes almost an obsession, so over the course of making a film for several years, that's what keeps me going.

What sparked your interest in the Utopian project?

When I was making *The Weather Underground*, I did a lot of research on the '60s and I came across something called *The Crisis of Leisure Time*. I went to the library to look up what exactly this was, and in the '60s, there was a study focused on what we were going to do in 30 years when there was so much automation, and people's standards of living were so high, that our biggest problem would be, 'What do we do with all of our leisure time?' I was struck by the fact that 40 years

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ago people could be that optimistic about the future. And if you think about it now, most people probably feel that the future is going to be a worse version of the present. So that idea just got me thinking about our time now and our imagination in regards to the future and hope.

When did you decide you wanted to do it as a live documentary?

I had shot all these different stories and was figuring out a way to put it together, and somebody asked me to do a presentation about the project. That sounded fun, so I asked my friend Dave Cerf, who had done the music for *The Weather Underground*, if he would just come and make a live soundtrack. I set up a power point presentation about the project and it really worked. I had made a lot of films before where there was always something restrained about it: You're alone in the film and it's a very solitary experience. This was weird because it was like talking, and there was just this live energy. The idea of everybody at home watching a movie about utopia on their iPod is depressing. Having people together in space, there's something very fitting about it.

What exactly does the live performance entail?

I'm narrating and also showing some video clips and still images. It sort of goes back and forth between being a lecture and a movie. I sometimes call it a fancy lecture or a live movie. Sometimes you're very aware of being in the room, and sometimes it's back to the magic of cinema where you're sort of engrossed in what's happening on the screen.

I heard you compare the film to a poem, especially how the segments function as connecting parts. Tell me more about that.

There's a lot of different ways of talking about things. You can make a film that's very clear and has a voice of authority. I didn't want to make something like that. I like films that are a little more opaque. I hoped this was something that's more moving on an emotional level, something that works like a poem, so it lingers with you and makes you think and doesn't speak in clear newspaper prose. Utopia and the imagination are slippery, and have to be approached in a sideways manner that's emotional and poetic.

The segment about the mall in China, the biggest mall in the world, was so powerful, and the shots felt so desolate.

Well, the kinds of films I make are about feelings. I approach them because I have a strong feeling. We were looking at examples of capitalism in China, and I had

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read a lot of articles about the rise of China that mentioned this specific mall and the fact that the world's largest mall was located in China and not in the U.S. So it was really strange to go there and have it be so empty. It was weird and disturbing. There's something very powerful about it and it sort of defies words. There's a feeling that comes from that big spectacular failure.

Did you choose to stage the show live so that it would be a unique, one-time viewing experience?

That's definitely one of the reasons. As a filmmaker, you have to either accept that your stuff is going to be on an iPhone or someone is going to be watching it while they check their e-mail. I'm not against the internet, it's even great for some movies. But for the films I make, I want people to really feel them in a strong way. There's something about sitting in a theater when the lights go down and your phone's off and you completely give yourself over to the experience that's very powerful and doesn't happen when you're watching something on a laptop.

The reviews out of Sundance called it the most compelling screening of the festival. What was your experience there like?

The band we work with is from Brooklyn, called the Quavers. When we got into Sundance, we had to figure out how to do this with a band. Until that point, Dave Serf was just kind of cuing music with his laptop. We had been sending music back and forth, but we went to Sundance a couple days before and holed up in a condo and just worked for 12 hours a day putting this thing together. I felt like Jefferson Starship.

When you're in New York or San Francisco, do you have any favorite restaurants or bars that you like to go to?

In San Francisco, I went to this bar the Rite Spot. We're always looking for a place to go late at night where we can eat, drink booze, and talk, and the Rite Spot is the perfect place. I moved to San Fran in the early 90s and this was the first bar I went to. It's never changed, so there's something very charming about that.

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