

Sam Green's Utopian Cinema

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The word utopia means, literally, no place and this is a movie that unlike almost all other movies can only be in one place at a time, this place you're in now with its filmmaker Sam Green and musicians. These live performance films 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.

Maybe little utopias are realized all the time, the utopias of people together in spirit and in body for a dance or a protest and everything in between. And sometimes we only realize their sweetness as they recede. A lot of us now look back at the golden age of cinema as a bygone paradise, the communion of strangers in the dark with each other, with darkness, with light, with story, with enchantment, drawn together to see a flicker of projected light come to life onscreen.

Were you to ask people if they'd be comfortable sitting in the dark surrounded by strangers from all walks of life, people would undoubtedly say that sounded scary, but every evening all over the world, we pay admission and settle in to do exactly that, and the audience becomes the Greek chorus of the film, laughing, snickering, hushing or fidgeting, instructing each other how to see and hear.

Television chopped up movies with commercials and put them in the middle of domestic distraction, but that was nothing compared to this moment when films are on your iPhone and your laptop and in fuzzy tiny windows on YouTube. The worst thing about these new modes of viewing isn't that they diminish cinema as visual and imaginative spectacle. The worst thing is that they're watched furtively and alone. Cinema, which was once a great banquet in a dream palace, is now often a snack devoured absentmindedly in isolation. And only in society, only together, do we have the power to live out those old dreams, or new ones.

Utopia is sociable, and Sam Green's work gives you back the sociability of a movie, the way it was always about coexisting, by making it as live as a silent movie with an orchestra, a nineteenth-century Chautauqua lecture, a sermon or a party. Take it as an invitation to think about utopia, not only the old ones that might have failed, but whatever faint aroma of paradise might arise in a room where you hope and think and breathe with others.