



Dystopia – Ambiguities and Paradoxes Enveloping a Changing Genre

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Abstract	Original Research Article
<p>Generic change, the birth, death or metamorphoses of types of texts happen all the time, their compass including not only factors within art history but also some of a context-bound nature, such as ideology, the political regime, habitus, interferences with other generic forms.</p> <p>The essay is looking at several modes whereby dystopia's generic identity has been destabilized to the point where it leaves the sphere of non-factual sliding into realistic modes of representation or crossing the border that separates world and text. Probing into the reasons behind such mutations, our research has taken us to new considerations of theorists engaged in space studies, affect and trauma studies.</p> <p>Keywords: Dystopia, Utopia, Generic Ambiguity, Generic Paradigms</p>	

1. THE UTOPIA/DYSTOPIA BINARY

According to *The Free Dictionary*, *utopia* is an ideally perfect place, especially in its social, political, and moral aspects or an impractical, idealistic scheme for social and political reform. The opposite of *utopia* is *dystopia*, which is, according to the same dictionary, an imaginary place or state in which the conditions and quality of life are extremely bad or unpleasant, and people live under the auspices of oppression or terror.

On the one hand, a *utopian society* is a beautiful one, with a general pacifistic attitude, in which poverty and misery have been removed, very few laws are necessary, money is useless. In terms of religion, utopia is close to the Judeo-Christian concept of the Garden of Eden and Heaven and the Buddhist concept of Nirvana. In terms of science, in a utopian society, advanced science and technology will abolish suffering and death.

On the other hand, this concept of freedom as transcendental and universal has come under attack by

political philosophers, such as Isaiah Berlin, who coined the concept of negative freedom from the state, that is, the imposition upon the individual to take into consideration personal responsibilities and consequences of giving vent to individualistic will that may harm the rest of society: Liberty is not the only goal of men. I can, like the Russian critic Belinsky, say that if others are to be deprived of it - if my brothers are to remain in poverty, squalor, and chains

- then I do not want it for myself, I reject it with both hands and infinitely prefer to share their fate. (Berlin 1969, p. 18)

Here is an unexpected reversal: a dystopian condition – lack of freedom from the state – serves a utopian dream of social harmony. Berlin is not entirely original. This issue was previously thematized by Alexander Pope in his *Essay on Man* (1734) where self-love is pitted against social love, with due warnings regarding the disastrous consequences of their imbalance. How far is Berlin's concept of negative freedom from the communist ideology of "understood necessity" which imposed collective modes

of behaviour repressing individual intentionality.

Contrariwise, in a *dystopian society*, people lead dehumanized and often fearful lives. They are familiar with totalitarian dictatorship, glorification and justification of violence. Emerging at a time of scientific and industrial revolution, dystopia shows technology replacing humanity, serving as warnings to contemporary man. From Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1626) to Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward, 2000–1887* (1888), utopian projects relied upon the benefits of science and the technological progress it enables. It was Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) that first raised the alarm around their dark side, calling attention to the ethical responsibilities of the experimenter of genius and the heading of humanity towards a posthuman condition. Unlike the romantics' demonic figures, possessed of fascinating powers but doomed, Frankenstein had set out on a utopian project, the creation of a perfect and immortal human race, but it turned dystopic in the end. The implications in point of ethical relevance should be taken into consideration, character construction being different in the star wars of competing and destructive powers.

In an article, "The Imagination of Disaster," Susan Sontag speculates on this kind of dystopian character filled with remorse and trying to redress the harm they have done:

The science fiction films are strongly moralistic. The standard message is the one about the proper, or humane, uses of science, versus the mad, obsessional use of science. This message the science fiction films share in common with the classic horror films of the 1930's, like *Frankenstein*, *The Mummy*, *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. (Georges Franju's brilliant *Les Yeux Sans Visage* [1959], called here *The Horror Chamber of Doctor Faustus*, is a more recent example.) In the horror films, we have the mad or obsessed or misguided scientist who pursues his experiments against good advice to the contrary, creates a monster or monsters, and is himself destroyed—often recognizing his folly himself, and dying in the successful effort to destroy his own creation. (Sontag, 1965, web)

Such examples provided by Sontag are *The Mysterians* (1957 Japanese film directed by Ishirō Honda), where the renegade scientists, lured by the technological glamour of another civilization, decides in the end to destroy the Mysterian space ship dying in the act. In *The Fly* (1958 film, directed by Kurt Neumann), a scientists who works in his laboratory on the invention of a matter-transmitter machine for the good of mankind, becomes its victim, is transformed into a monster, and, realizing his mistake, destroys his laboratory and orders his wife to kill him.

As in the ancient tragedy, something similar to anagnorisis (realization, enlightenment), the characters set out from utopian dreams, which turn into nightmares, but the end is exist from dystopia.

While utopian societies are generally based on the so-called equality of all humankind, dystopia presents societies based on segregation, inequality, and oppression.

If utopia presents a message of hope, dystopia, on the contrary, presents a story told out of despair, sending out an overwhelming message of warning.

Dystopia makes use of tactics of intimidation and sometimes mind control; often a single malefic head of government is responsible for the oppression. Usually, there is a hierarchy that works to the advantage of government loyalists. Thomas More's *Utopia* is an example of utopian society, because humankind has overcome sickness, racism, poverty, and warfare, the future being hopeful, whereas dystopian literature, such as Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, portrays a future world that seems hopeless.

The dystopian society is unbearable, because nearly every aspect of public and private behaviour is regulated by the state, but there is always a protagonist that questions society. It is set in the future but resembles contemporary society.

2. THE INVERTED UTOPIA

George Orwell did not write simply a utopia but an interface of the utopian fiction of the autarchic power system and its leader and the dystopian reality which is its concrete realization. Hence the frequent oxymorons, "Freedom is slavery", which, actually, renders a state of fact. In George Orwell's seminal work, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the concept of utopia takes a dark and twisted turn, giving rise to what can be termed as an inverted utopia or dystopia. Orwell's exploration of this theme delves deep into the interface between utopian fiction and the grim reality of totalitarian societies, where the ideals of political leaders become the nightmare of the people.

The symposium occurred on November 16, 2013, at Boston University School of Law, within a broader symposium titled "America's Political Dysfunction: Constitutional Connections, Causes, and Cures." The specific panel was titled "Utopia as Dystopia?" and focused on whether disagreement over constitutional visions had become so entrenched that each side viewed the other's ideal as a nightmare. This statement underscores the disparities between Barber's and Greve's visions regarding governmental structure. For Barber, an empowered national government with all necessary powers to pursue the positive benefits proclaimed in the preamble is his ideal. However, for Greve, this idea would be a nightmare as he advocates for a federalism approach that promotes greater state autonomy and limits on federal government powers. Conversely, Greve's vision of federalism, which involves power redistribution and greater state autonomy, would be considered by Barber as a "fallacious nightmare." Thus, there exists a profound divergence in their perceptions of the ideal governmental role and structure. In Orwell's dystopian texts, one can observe how in totalitarian societies, the political leaders' ideals become the people's nightmares.

At the heart of Orwell's vision lies the juxtaposition of utopian ideals with the harsh realities of autarchic power

systems and their leaders. Rather than presenting a straightforward utopia, Orwell crafts a narrative that exposes the inherent contradictions and paradoxes within totalitarian regimes. Through the use of oxymorons such as "Freedom is slavery" and "War is peace," Orwell highlights the perversion of language and the manipulation of truth by those in power. These slogans serve as chilling reminders of the twisted logic employed to maintain control and suppress dissent in Oceania.

Oceania itself stands as a stark example of a utopian project gone awry. Initially conceived as a society built on principles of collective prosperity and unity, Oceania devolves into a nightmarish reality where individual freedom is sacrificed on the altar of state power. The surveillance state, embodied by the omnipresent figure of Big Brother, symbolizes the all-encompassing reach of autocratic rule. In this inverted utopia, every aspect of life is subjected to scrutiny and control, eroding the very fabric of society and stripping citizens of their humanity.

The transformation of Oceania from utopia to dystopia is emblematic of the dangers inherent in totalitarian ideologies. What begins as an ambitious vision for a better world descends into a nightmare of oppression and fear. The utopian ideals espoused by the ruling elite serve only to cloak their authoritarian agenda and justify their grip on power. In the process, the aspirations of the people are subverted, their dreams turned into a living nightmare. Orwell's portrayal of Oceania serves as a chilling warning against the allure of utopian visions and the dangers of unchecked power. By exposing the inherent contradictions within totalitarian societies, Orwell challenges readers to question the nature of authority and resist the erosion of individual freedoms. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* stands as a powerful testament to the enduring relevance of Orwell's insights and the need to remain vigilant against the encroachment of tyranny in all its forms.

Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* presents a compelling exploration of the concept of the inverted utopia, where utopian ideals are perverted by autarchic power systems to create dystopian realities. Through the prism of Oceania, Orwell exposes the inherent dangers of totalitarianism and the erosion of individual freedom. The novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell presents a post-war dystopian world where freedom of speech is manipulated as a tool of control, and language is distorted to restrict thoughts and perceptions within a rigid present. Orwell's depiction of this future society serves as an allegory, reflecting real historical contexts and employing a Lacanian framework to illustrate a present devoid of meaning beyond immediate perception. Lacan (1973) posited that language structures our perception of reality and constructs our sense of self. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, cognitive metaphors like "Freedom is slavery" and "War is peace" are linguistic constructs that manipulate reality, reflecting the oppressive power of the Party. These metaphors distort truth and reinforce the dominant ideology, illustrating how language shapes societal norms and individual

consciousness. Through cognitive metaphors, such as container metaphors for spatial limits and visual fields, Orwell emphasizes the characters' perceptions of boundaries and constraints. The physical world, described in terms of decay and ephemerality, mirrors the moral and mental decay of the society under totalitarian rule. Time itself is metaphorically perceived as fluid and disintegrated, with memories distorted and manipulated by the Party to serve its agenda.

The protagonist Winston's dreams and memories reflect a longing for a past reality that contradicts the present, highlighting the Party's manipulation of history and truth. Time becomes an allegory of confusion and suffering, symbolizing the psychological entrapment of individuals within the regime. The pervasive presence of Big Brother as a surveillance tool and symbol of control reinforces the Party's dominance over its citizens. Propaganda slogans, like "War is peace" and "Freedom is slavery", distort language and logic to maintain obedience and submission.

2. TRAUMASCAPES

The interface of utopia and dystopia is most disturbing when the two are placed in superposition. Maria M. Tyumarkin, a Russian emigrant from Gorbachev's Russia to Australia in the late eighties of the last century, coined the word "traumascape" for spaces which bear testimony to traumatic events. Sometimes it is the same building that in the beginning carried utopian connotations but in time it acquired sinister meanings. Such is Berlin, German's capital city, where, for instance, the ruins of Kaiser Wilhelm's Gedächtniskirche are reminiscent both of the glorious dreams of an empire and of the 2nd World War bombing which sealed the country's defeat.

Another story told by Tumarkion is that of the Christ the Saviour Church in Moscow, raised in celebration of the victory over Napoleon's army in 1812. The Bolshevik regime demolished it in view of erecting the biggest building in the world with Lenin's statue on top of it. The sliding of the terrain under the projected edifice put an end to the project, so that, instead of a monument of the Soviet Union spiralling up to the sky, a huge hole gaped grotesquely in the ground.

A most interesting case is Nobel Award winning novelist Kazuo Ishiguro whose speculations on the outcomes of artificial intelligence would apparently classify his novels, *Never Let Me Go* (2006) and *Klara and the Sun* (2021) which critics were quick to classify as "dystopian science fiction." The fictional universe is actually very familiar, posing some questions such as the posttraumatic syndrome generated by social exclusion and peer rejection, by being treated as objects, exchangeable goods or spare parts.

Clones or robots are created, not for making work easier but for keeping company to children who are tutored online and do not socialize. The AI ware is expected to

develop feelings, emotions, even to imitate the children's character in order to replace them and console their parents in case they get sick and die. Ishiguro's clones and robots are indeed sensitive, suffering for not being chosen by buyers in the shop where they are displayed, for being cast away to end up alone even if their demise is caused by a selfless sacrifice to save humans, for being rejected in favour of other machines of the latest generation. Even children are "edited" genetically in order to develop higher skills and aptitudes. They never protest in any way, they do not even bear grudge for being discriminating, similarly to immigrants who feel that they are not entitled to the goods reserved for the mainstream culture – a category of people Ishiguro was familiar with.

The plot is improbable, it is a sort of *reductio ad absurdum*, which makes us cautious over the issue of generic attribution. Less than a dystopia, these novels are embittered satires against a posthuman society where the voices of the affect have been muted. The superiority of the robots over human in point of sensibility resembles the White Horses' superiority over the decayed humanity in point of intelligence in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. A satire rather than a dystopia is Ishiguro's display of AI culture, forcing the limits of the genre beyond its generic integrity.

Post-Millennial Perceptions and Post-Pandemic Realities: Living Dystopian is a 2023 book published by academic Pradipta Mukherjee with Cambridge Scholars Publishing. Including narratives of the pandemic, we may say that dystopia has descended into the streets taking a suicidal leap into realism. Nor is this threat to dystopia's self-identity something new. By publishing the self-abjection confessions of political detainees under Stalin in the years of the purges Igal Halfin in *Stalinist Confessions. Messianism and Terror at the Leningrad Communist University*, offered real lives parallels to the Parsons episode in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Dystopia turns real, reality turns fictitious:

For all their crudeness, NKVD interrogations can be described as dialogues, provided we distinguish between the prisoner as the subject of dialogue and the prisoner as a subject in dialogue.² The former is a fictitious persona, a protagonist in a literary creation composed by the investigation team. The latter is a real individual, an author who participates in the composition of the protocol of his interrogation, an agent who introduces fissures into the flow of narrative. Of course, more often than not, the NKVD fabricated the self of the accused, attributed to him wicked beliefs he had never entertained and treacherous crimes he had not contemplated, let alone perpetrated. (Halfin 2009, p. 113)

The book brought to light in 2009 what Orwell might have known or intuited at the time of writing his *Nineteen Eighty-Four*:

'Of course I'm guilty!' cried Parsons with a servile glance at the telescreen. 'You don't think the Party would arrest an innocent man, do you?' His frog-like

face grew calmer, and even took on a slightly sanctimonious expression. 'Thoughtcrime is a dreadful thing, old man,' he said sententiously. 'It's insidious. It can get hold of you without your even knowing it. Do you know how it got hold of me? In my sleep! Yes, that's a fact. There I was, working away, trying to do my bit — never knew I had any bad stuff in my mind at all. And then I started talking in my sleep. Do you know what they heard me saying?' He sank his voice, like someone who is obliged for medical reasons to utter an obscenity. "Down with Big Brother!" Yes, I said that! Said it over and over again, it seems. Between you and me, old man, I'm glad they got me before it went any further. Do you know what I'm going to say to them when I go up before the tribunal? "Thank you," I'm going to say, "thank you for saving me before it was too late. (Orwell, 2009, p. 212- 213).

4. CONCLUSION

By the beginning of the twenty-first century the notion of genre had become inextricably linked to the signifying practices of the media in general, leaving the privileged space of the arts. Nick Lacey (2000) saw genre as "clued" into the particular Zeitgeist, being the product of a particular society, whose generation was mediated by institutions and which answered the audience expectations.

Dystopia is probably the genre which has proved to be the most sensitive to changes within society and to the shifting priorities history deploys before humanity. Born in the late nineteenth century in the gloomy atmosphere created by theories of entropy and degeneration, the new genre was perceived as similar to science fiction through its focus on the threats posed by the technological and scientific revolution which seemed to generate alienation and alteration of man's mode of existence. The totalitarian societies made what had seemed to be the fantasies of mad scientists into a daily nightmare shared by the whole society.

It is now the turn of science and AI intelligence to impact the whole of society and the individuals' everyday life. Dystopia is less and less understood as a bad place that should not be taken for real, its real-life settings modulating it into satire, philosophical fable or even mediatic discourse on current events.

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