

## DYSTOPIAN FURCATIONS IN MODERN LITERATURE\*

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### ABSTRACT

Modern literature of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had provided several “dystopian furcations” in the history of Western literature, represented most typically by G. Orwell, A. Huxley, Y. Zamiatin and R. R. Bradbury. What were the motivating factors behind these lines of dystopia? In this paper, we are going to discuss the phenomenon of dystopia in modern literature, based on the critical heritage of modern social theory and philosophy. Where does appear the differences between utopia and dystopia? Are the fictional worlds of More, Campanella and Bacon entirely different from the dark illustrations imagined by Orwell, Bradbury, Zamiatin and Huxley? Is there something common inside the imaginary “mechanisms” of utopian and dystopian fictions? These are the core questions we will discuss around this paper.

**Keywords:** dystopia, dystopic worlds, utopia, Orwell, Zamiatin, Huxley.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper, the literary genre of dystopia will be discussed by means of a sociological approach. This discussion is not focused on literary theory or the aesthetic dimensions of dystopian novels, but, instead on the political correspondences between dystopian texts and the socio-political issues of their age. Dystopia is one of the concepts regarding which there is a certain discrepancy between its wide usage and its real, profound signification. This paper may be considered as a modest contribution meant to fill this scientific/theoretical lack regarding dystopia.

### 2. DYSTOPIAN LINES OF THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

Before discussing the sociological and political dimensions of dystopias we decide to focus on three characteristic or typical samples of this genre. Based on

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these samples, is it possible to go forward and to analyze the way this genre functions? What kind of “dark worlds” is described in these novels? What are the connections between these novels and reality? Furthermore, what are the common points and the differences between utopian and dystopian literature? Finally, can we really talk about a furcation?

Let us have a look at the important plot details of the *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) by George Orwell, the English author who is famous for his dystopian/critical style:

*Winston Smith is the protagonist of the novel 1984 and, through his experience, the order of the year 1984 is explained as a dystopia. He is a member of “Outer Party” in this new order. Outer Party represents the middle class of the social stratification developed in this novel. Thought crime is a very dangerous issue in this dystopian social and political atmosphere and Thinkpol (Thought Police) from Miniluv (Ministry of Love) in Oceania seriously investigates the thought criminals for the sake of social order. Inner Party (upper class) and Outer Party (middle class) members are under constant surveillance by Telescreens, so there is no privacy at all in their lives. Big Brother is the leader of this totalitarian social/political order. The motto is: “Big Brother (BB) is watching you.” Smith is working at Minitrue (Ministry of Truth) which produces and modifies the “truth”, creates and changes the past, history, events, etc., always through some fake documents. When a “true” event has been changed, the original version of the document is sent to the “memory hole.” In the social stratification of 1984, Proles (Proletariat) are the lowest class. One day, a love affair starts between Smith and Julia. Thought Police captures Winston and Julia. Winston is tortured during the interrogation. Winston is politically re-educated through tortures and finally accepts his obedience to Big Brother’s authority<sup>1</sup>.*

*Brave New World* (1932) is an earlier dystopia written by another English writer, Aldous Huxley, who describes a fantasy world placed in time much later than 1984 – around 2540:

*This dystopia is based on the productivity values created by Ford. World State governs and organizes everything in this new world. There are some social castes with different abilities and skills created through some biological interventions, during the “production of children”. These castes are: Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta, Epsilon. In “Bokanovsky process,” with some chemicals and medicines, the caste of the baby is arranged. So, the state can always foresee the percentage of population according to its official records. Parenthood and natural birth are highly blamed in this new social order. These are like dirty taboos for the society. The early education is based on hypnopedia (sleep-learning). The ideology of this dystopia is given to children and they are forced to accept their destiny in the conditioning process taking place in their sleep. People perform sex like a social activity and they widely*

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<sup>1</sup> G. Orwell, *1984*, Pergamino, Istanbul, 2011, and [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nineteen\\_Eighty-Four](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nineteen_Eighty-Four)

*consume soma, a drug which keeps them away from melancholy, depression or any other negative psychological problem. The motto of this society is: "Everyone belongs to everyone!". In this social order, everybody is a part of the society, and does not belong to a family. There are neither families nor marriages. The dystopian order considers peoples and cultures outside it as "savages". There is a reference to 20<sup>th</sup> century with the names of characters: Henry Foster, Bernard Marx, Lenina Crowne, Herbert Bakunin, Polly Trotsky, Mustapha Mond, etc.<sup>2</sup>.*

Russian author Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1924) is a political dystopia inspired by *Brave New World* with its dark fiction:

*People of We live in a state where all lives continue transparently. Human activities are watched easily by the authorities, there is no room for privacy. People are all named with some codes like D-503, R-13, O-90 and I-330. It is a widely digitalized and scientifically regulated dystopia. The Bureau of Guardians watches everybody in order to prevent any rebellion against the state. Pleasures (especially) of people are very strictly arranged by authorities and there is little unorganized free time in a day. The purpose is to control and organize even that free time. D-503 and I-330 meet in Ancient House, the only non-transparent place in the state. I-330 confesses that she is a member of the secret organization against the One State. Their purpose is to destroy the wall which separates the state from the rest of the world. D-503 goes out of the state through some tunnels starting from Ancient House. D-503 has a "Great Operation", which is a psychosurgical operation done in order to prevent any possible negative psychological tendency against the order. D-503 spied I-330 and her organization to the Benefactor so that they are sentenced to death by the authority<sup>3</sup>.*

What is common in these dystopian texts? Maybe many things, but most importantly a dark environment based on collectivism, statism, totalitarianism, control, censorship, etc. Let us remember the publishing time period of these samples: between 1924 and 1949. It is very clear and has been mentioned many times until today that this kind of dystopian literature emerged as a critique of the communist system in Russia and its periphery, existent from 1917 until the 1990s. So, this "nightmare" had nothing to do with any possible risk in the future. It deals with something which already existed in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### 3. DYSTOPIA OR LITERARY REFLECTION OF STATE SOCIALISM

Dystopia is defined as "an imagined place or state in which everything is unpleasant or bad, typically a totalitarian or environmentally degraded one. The

<sup>2</sup> A. Huxley, *Cesur Yeni Dunya*, translation: U. Tosun, Ithaki, Istanbul, 2013, and [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brave\\_New\\_World](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brave_New_World)

<sup>3</sup> Y. Zamyatin, *Biz*, translation: F. Arıkan-S. Arıkan, Ithaki, Istanbul, 2014, and [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/We\\_\(novel\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/We_(novel))

opposite of Utopia” (Oxford Dictionary)<sup>4</sup>. Are dystopias really opposite to utopias? It is arguable. In order to understand the social basis for dystopias we should see the correlations between the realities of communist experience and their possible expressions in science fiction.

Karl Marx had talked about a temporary “dictatorship”. He said: “Between capitalist and communist society there lies the period of the revolutionary transformation of the one into the other. Corresponding to this there is also a political transition period in which the state can be nothing but *the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat*” (Marx, 1999: Chapter IV). Lenin was following his teacher and said: “The transition from capitalism to communism is certainly bound to yield a tremendous abundance and variety of political forms, but the essence will inevitably be the same: the dictatorship of the proletariat” (Lenin, 1999: Chapter II, 3).

Marx, Lenin and their all followers were in the same line with the previous utopian tradition (More, Campanella, Bacon): a total organization of society and people, for the common good of everybody. Apparently there was no room for “individual” and “individualism”, either in literary utopianism or in the so called “scientific”, materialist communism of Marx and his disciples.

The word utopia was used first in the work with this title, written by Thomas More in 1516. Utopia was imagined by its author to be an ideal social project which is organized in an island. The term is coming from “ou” (negative affix) and “topos” (place), words belonging to ancient Greek. So, literally it means “a place which does not exist” (Omay, 2009). The problem is that there is an important difference between its existence and non-existence. When utopias come to exist and get blended with reality, then there is a problematic issue. As Adorno says: “The abstract utopia would be all too easily reconcilable with the most devious tendencies of society. That all human beings would resemble each other, is exactly what suits this latter. It regards factual or imagined differences as marks of shame, which reveal, that one has not brought things far enough; that something somewhere has been left free of the machine, is not totally determined by the totality” (Adorno, 2005: Chapter II, 66). So, the reality and the “devious tendencies of society” captured “utopias” in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially in the case of Marxism. This is the main inspirational source for the majority of dystopian novels.

Peoples of the world have seen that this “dictatorship” does not disappear easily, as it is said. There was a serious problem of basic human freedom in the communist block. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Orwell, Zamyatin, Huxley and others were the criticizing reality through a literary perspective. Minds of people were controlled in several ways in dystopian fiction. Governments used to decide for everything without the willing contribution of individuals. For the common good of states and their citizens the political authorities used to decide everything (Gerhard, 37). Individual thought or initiative lost its power in

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<sup>4</sup> <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/dystopia>.

dystopian fiction, “we” took the place of “I” and the “collective” authority dominated over single individuals. According to Gerhard, “it is interesting that whenever a person in dystopia begins seeing oneself as an individual, he or she feels sick” (Gerhard, 39, 43). Sargent discussed that “many utopias are, from the perspective of individual freedom, dystopias. Some have this appearance because the author wants to emphasize a value seen to be in conflict with freedom. This value is usually equality, order or security. It is possible to trace a pattern of the dominant values found in utopias. For example, virtually there is no concern with freedom in early utopias, except, sometimes, for the tentative to deplore its growth. Utopias are concerned with order, established hierarchy, and obedience. Nineteenth-century utopia were primarily concerned with equality, and while many of the authors clearly believed that an egalitarian social system would enhance personal freedom, this was a secondary concern. In the twentieth century most works have been written as dystopias, but the positive utopias written in recent years...” (Sargent, 573). So, the lines between utopias and dystopias are not so concrete, but sometimes blurry. If the loss of “individual freedom” is a criterion to consider a text to be a dystopia, then it is not easy to find a non-dystopian work in the genre of utopia.

In dystopias there is a variation of “panopticon”. Panopticon “reverses the principle of the dungeon; or rather of its three functions – to enclose, to deprive of light and to hide – it preserves only the first and eliminates the other two. Full lighting and the eye of a supervisor capture better than darkness, which ultimately protected. Visibility is a trap” (Foucault, 1977: 200). In dystopian novels individuals are trapped in “visibility” by the state.

The dystopias are nightmares because there “the concept of individuality is vanishing – personal life merges with the social, human body and mind are appropriated according to the communal needs of the state” and “in a dystopian world, not only the state and its police apparatus fulfill the role of “disciplinary mechanisms,” regimenting the human body and permeating all layers of society, but ordinary people as well” (Gerhard, 101, 56). However, if there are a lot of common things between utopias and dystopias, what makes one a dream and the other one a nightmare?

#### 4. DYSTOPIAS: CONDITIONAL NIGHTMARES

The question is: What makes a dystopia to be a nightmare? After Agamben we know that in modern societies sovereignty takes “camp” as a political model. As he says: “The camp – as the pure, absolute, and impassable biopolitical space (insofar as it is founded solely on the state of exception) – will appear as the hidden paradigm of the political space of modernity, whose metamorphoses and disguises we will have to learn to recognize” (Agamben, 72, 73). However, today there are

no dystopian critiques against this camp model, unlike classical dystopias which were written against communist regimes.

I do not intend to rely on a “conspiracy theory” but it is clear enough that the only dystopian texts of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and their arguments overlapped with the disappearance of political needs of capitalist and democratic West. Otherwise, it is not possible to explain why this genre appeared in a particular period and disappeared with communism. On the other hand, it is also interesting that there are no dystopian representations of individualism, and of the so called Western democratic values and freedoms. Because any political system or value may be a pleasant dream or a nightmare to different kind of political identities and social subjects/actors, we cannot say that anything is internationally and universally “good” or “bad”. Every social, cultural or political case is dependent on some conditions. There is no such thing as a nightmare of everybody or a pleasant dream of everybody.

When we consider this point of view, the Western audience is seriously affected by losing their individual freedom. Being a part of a group, a community, a totality? No way! However, “freedom” is one of the most romantic and ambiguous philosophical words on the world. If these suggestions are to be accepted, then the argument of dystopian literature is based on pure, liberal and individualistic ideological fears. This is why it is “conditional”. It only existed under the “dangers” which menaced liberal concepts, and when the danger (*i.e.* communism) disappeared, this genre lost its meaning and basis.

## 5. SEVERAL FINAL REMARKS

After this short discussion we have seen that dystopian literature does not represent the critical view of general human tendencies. Dystopia represented a particular response against the challenges of the communist state. The target of the critique of dystopian novels was the totalitarian state in socialism. When this social and political model, *i.e.* communism, disappeared, the genre of literary dystopia became less and less represented in writing. Most interestingly, a serious dystopia of individualism has not been written yet. Why? Maybe because the dominant discourse has no problem with individual rights and freedoms, at least on the surface. However, from another point of view, another dystopian situation can be discussed as well. Perhaps individuality and freedom exist as a different sort of nightmares which find some popular expressions in the reality-shows rather than in sophisticated literary texts. So, the biggest furcation is maybe the shift of “dystopian” experiences from literature towards TV screens, in a way quite suitable to the current level of “spectacle society”.

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