Dystopian Furcations in Modern Literature*

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ABSTRACT: Modern Literature of 20th Century had provided several “dystopian furcations” in the History of Western Literature, namely represented by G. Orwell, A. Huxley, Y. Zamiatin and R. R. Bradbury most typically. 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 (Frankfurt School, Walter Benjamin, Giorgio Agamben). Where does appear the differences between Utopia and Dystopia? Are the fictional Worlds of More, Campanella and Bacon entirely different than the dark illustrations 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, dystopian literature, science-fiction, Orwell, Zamiatin, Huxley, Bradbury

Introduction

In this paper, the literary genre of dystopia will be discussed through a sociological approach. This discussion is not focused on literary theory or aesthetic dimensions of dystopian novels. This is actually much more focused on the political correspondences between dystopian texts and socio-political issues of their age. Dystopia is one of the concepts which have a discrepancy between its wide usage and reality in profound analysis. This paper may be considered as a modest attempt to fill this social scientific / theoretical void about dystopia.

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Dystopian lines of 20th Century

Before discussing the sociological and political dimensions of dystopias we can decide to focus on three characteristic or typical samples of this genre. Based on the samples noted below, is it possible to analyze how this genre functions? What kind of “dark worlds” is described in these novels? What are the connections between these novels and reality? Also, what are the common points and differences between utopian and dystopian literature? Can we really talk about a furcation?

Let us first 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 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 1984’s social stratification. 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 surveillance constantly 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 Minitruer (Ministry of Truth) which produces and modifies the “truth”, continues, 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 his interrogation. Winston is politically re-educated through tortures and finally accepted his obedience to Big Brother’s authority.

Brave New World (1932) is an earlier dystopia by another English writer, Aldous Huxley, which describes a fantasy world 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 is 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 in their sleeps. People perform sex like a social activity and they widely consume soma, a drug keeps them away from melancholy, depression or any other negative psychological problem. The motto of society is: “Everyone belongs to everyone!”. In this social order, everybody is a part of the society, 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 20th Century with the names of characters: Henry Foster, Bernard Marx, LeninaCrowne, Herbert Bakunin, Polly Trotsky, Mustapha Mond, Etc.

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

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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. Bureau of Guardians watch everybody in order to prevent any rebellion against the State. Pleasures (especially) of people are very strictly arranged by authority and there is little un-organized free time in a day. The purpose is even to control and organize that free time some day. D-503 and I-330 meet in Ancient House, 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 that separates the State from the rest of world. D-503 goes out of the State through some tunnels starting from the Ancient House. D-503 has a “Great Operation”, which is a psychosurgical operation in order to prevent any possible negative psychological tendency against the order. D-503 spied I-330 and her organization to the Benefactor and they are sentenced to death by the authority.1

What are common in these dystopian texts? Perhaps many things, but most importantly a dark environment based on collectivism, statism, totalitarianism, control, censorship, etc. Let us remember the publishing time periods of these samples: between 1924 and 1949. It is very clear and mentioned enough till today that this kind of dystopian literature has emerged as a critique of the then existing communist system in Russia and its periphery, which started from 1917 and continued until 1990s. So, this “nightmare” had nothing to do with any possible risk in the future. It was about something which already existed in the first half of 20th Century.

**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 opposite of Utopia” (Oxford Dictionary)2. But are they really opposite of utopias? In order to understand the social basis for dystopias we should analyze 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 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 following his teacher 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 followers were in line with the previous utopian tradition (More, Campanella, Bacon): a total organization of society and people, for the common good of everybody. Apparently

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2 [http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/dystopia](http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/dystopia)
there was no room for the “individual” and “individualism” either in literary utopianism or in so called “scientific”, materialist communism of Marx and his disciples.

The word “utopia” was first used in the work by Thomas More, in 1516, as an ideal social project which is organized in an island. The term comes from “ou” (negative affix) and “topos” (place) in ancient Greek. So, literally it means “a place 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 is the reality and “devious tendencies of society” captured in “utopias” in the 20th Century, especially in the case of Marxism. This is the main inspirational source for the majority of dystopian literature.

Peoples of the World have seen that this “dictatorship” does not disappear easily as said. There was a serious problem of basic human freedom in the communist bloc. In the first half of the 20th Century Orwell, Zamyatin, Huxley and others were criticizing the reality through a literary perspective. Minds of people were controlled through several ways in dystopian fictions. Governments were deciding everything without the willing contribution of individuals. For the common good of the state and its citizens the political authorities were deciding everything (Gerhard, 37). Individual thought or initiative lost its power in 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, there is virtually no concern with freedom in early utopias, except, sometimes, to deplore its growth. They are concerned with order, established hierarchy, and obedience. Nineteenth-century utopias 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 (Sargent, 573). So, the lines between utopias and dystopias are not so concrete and sometimes blurry. If the loss of “individual freedom” is a measure to consider a text as 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 nightmare 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 elements between utopias and dystopias, what makes one a dream and the other a nightmare?

Dystopias: Conditional Nightmares
The question is, rather, what makes a dystopia a nightmare? After Agamben we know that the sovereignty takes “camp” as a political model in modern societies. 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 not dystopian critiques against this camp model, as there were classical dystopias against communist regimes.

I do not intend to rely on a “conspiracy theory” but it is clear enough that, single dystopian texts of the first half of 20th Century and their arguments overlapped with the political needs of the 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, the so called Western democratic values and freedoms, since any political systems or values may be dream or nightmare to different kind of political identities and social subjects / actors. We cannot say that something is internationally and universally “good” or “bad”. Every social, cultural, political case is dependent on some conditions. There is no “nightmare” for everybody or “dream” for everybody.

When we look from this point of view, the Western audience is seriously affected by losing their individual freedoms. Being a part of a collective, a community, a totality? No way! However, “freedom” is one of the most romantic and ambiguous philosophical words in 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” against liberal concepts, when the danger (i.e. communism) disappeared; this genre has lost its meaning and basis.

Conclusion
After this short discussion we have seen that dystopian literature is not the critical view of general human tendencies. This was like a particular response against the challenges of communist state. The target of the critique of dystopian novels was totalitarian state socialism. When this social and political...
model, communism disappeared, dystopia genre became weaker. 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 kind of nightmare which finds some popular expressions in the reality-shows rather than sophisticated literary texts. So, the biggest furcation may be the shift of “dystopian” experiences from literature towards TV screens, quite suitable to the current level of “spectacle society”.

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