When the Frame Becomes Hope: Lights, Shadows and Mirages in Dystopian Films in the Twenty-First Century

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Abstract

The boom experienced by dystopian cinema in recent years has given rise to the appearance of a new series of films whose content and theme seem to differ significantly from the classic films of the genre in the 20th century. This article seeks to analyze the factors that have contributed to offering us these new dystopias and to explain the reasons for this growing pessimism that characterizes these productions. However, not all current dystopian films follow the same paths. It is also possible to find other films, possibly less popular and successful, whose future scenario does not translate into such negative or hopeless visions. Their proposals, on the contrary, invite a more optimistic vision, based on everyday experience and mutual human support. Through the analysis of some films linked to these two lines of reading, the article seeks to offer a more complex and realistic view of the current dystopian panorama, far from the dominant catastrophism. In this sense, the work starts from the premise that these cinematographic narratives contain great value because they contain ideas and ideals about the world and our place in it, ideas that are by no means neutral, as they have great ideological implications with a high degree in our attitudes and our ways of seeing and perceiving the world.

Keywords: Dystopia, post-apocalyptic fiction, young adult, cultural studies, politics, ideological hegemony.

Introduction

In recent years, the international film scene has experienced a revival of the dystopia, as evidenced by several films both in their orientation and their content. This is a surprising phenomenon: although the genre never completely disappeared, after a striking boom in the last third of the twentieth century – with releases as powerful as *La Jetée, Fahrenheit 451, A Clockwork Orange, THX 1138, Silent Running* or *Blade Runner*– its presence and impact declined. Inevitably, a number of questions arise: what can the current boom in production be attributed to? Do current themes and approaches reflect the same anxieties and concerns of the past, or do they project a different vision of reality? And above all, given the pessimism of these recent films' imagery, is there any room for hope?

This article seeks to demonstrate that, despite being coeval, many of these new productions differ considerably when it comes to addressing their respective subject matters and conveying them to the audience.

The two sides of dystopia

Most recent dystopian productions depict highly organized societies which, in keeping with the 1960s and 1970s films mentioned above, seek to channel the undesired effects of impulses and inclinations inherent in the human condition (passion, violence, desire, pain, etc.) through institutionalized sanctioned vehicles. Some of these new films describe the rebuilding of society after a tragic collapse (economic crisis, war) and the desire of the citizens to not repeat similar mistakes in the future. Obsessed with the definitive eradication of all the threats that endanger the status quo, dystopian regimes often promote and institute repressive social practices and norms to eliminate any form of conflicts from their community, together with all their potentially disturbing elements such as subjectivity, impulses, emotions, and memory (*The Giver*, Noyce, 2014; *Equilibrium*, Wimmer, 2002). Others (*Divergent*, Burger, 2014; *The Hunger Games*, Ross, 2012) sort Earth's population into five big factions to eradicate the big evils: aggressiveness, ignorance, deceit, selfishness, and cowardice, which caused its previous demise. In the French film *Carré Blanc* (Leonetti, 2011), a setting more akin to *1984* depicts a totalitarian world where denunciation and humiliation are openly encouraged, along with the elimination of the weak and the implementation of policies promoting high birth rates and traditional family values.

In almost all these homogenous settings, we witness an exaltation of communitarian values at the expense of the individual as well as the traits that create distinct individualities, including blood ties. From their births, members of these societies are educated and trained to submit to the community and its decisions. They are not individuals that freely choose their occupations and statuses, but rather perpetuators of a system who comply with criteria that reflect its principles of rationality and functionality.

In contrast, the settings of other films present us with a process of social division and stratification more familiar to the spectator: the possession of resources determines the allegiance of members of a given society to one world or another, as seen in *Elysium* (Blomkamp, 2013). For instances, in *The Hunger Games* (Ross, 2012) there is a centralized State power, The Capitol. A number of post-apocalyptic territories located in North America are subjected to The Capitol's authoritarian rule. In *Elysium*, the wealthy enjoy the benefits of technological advances in an isolated, outer-space habitat. The rest of humankind struggles on an overpopulated, overcrowded, and polluted Earth. In both societies, individuals do preserve their individual liberty and consciousness,

though. Their existence is not constrained by mechanisms of social framing within an organic and clear-cut outline, but rather limited by more subtle and diffuse parameters, such as the aforementioned social stratification in *Elysium* and the exclusive socio-professional specialization in *Divergent*. These are considered natural, even when their arrangements and workings provide constant evidence to the contrary. The same can be said about the setting of *The Purge* (DeMonaco, 2013), a police, totalitarian State formed after an economic collapse that stages an annual event during which all crime is legal in order to eliminate exceeding population, especially the poor and the homeless.

Nevertheless, it is also worth considering one final group of films of particular interest, albeit much smaller in number and distinct from the recent phenomenon of Young Adult Dystopian Films, fuelled by the success of the novels on which they are based and conceived as blockbusters. *How I Live Now* (McDonald, 2013) deals with a traumatic experience of a young teenager in the English countryside at the outbreak of World War III. *Love at First Fight* (*Les Combattants*, Cailley, 2014), apparently a no-frills romantic comedy, deals with the initiation of two somewhat reclusive men in their early twenties who are increasingly drawn together by their common despair over the future. Finally, *Into the Forest* (Rozema, 2015) deals with the traumatic experience of two teenage sisters after losing their father in the context of a massive, continent-wide power outage that appears to be part of a world-wide technological collapse and of their hopeful and humanistic answer before the disaster. In all these films, we are presented with scenes of daily life resembling contemporary reality. Members of those societies face little sense of danger or threat, except in the case of the protagonists, usually women, who face a bitter struggle to achieve twin objectives: physical survival and fulfilment of their own destinies.

However, to detect better the great differences between these categories of films, it will be necessary to carry out separate analyses of their two constitutive aspects: setting and plot.

The setting

A great number of dystopian screen productions, in particular recent ones are inspired by successful books and sagas originating in the young adult literary genre. As in their literary models, the screen versions of *The Giver, Divergent* and *The Hunger Games* adhere to this prototype of Young Adult Dystopian Films. All of them open with the premise of an already-existing post-apocalyptic framework, upon the ruins of which civilization is rebuilt. The new societies reflect the survivors' responses to fateful events of the past which caused the collapse of the old ones. While remaining vague, these events usually hark back to an environmental catastrophe or world war. Thus, a new beginning is imposed, geared towards the eradication of the sources of human behaviour

that led to disaster. In this sense, the inequality associated with the free play of passion and individualism appears immediately identified as a major factor of instability and conflict, and ought to be repressed and fully eliminated.

From the outset, these films acquaint us with a social fabric that is perfectly balanced and undivided, apparently devoid of conflict or dissent, and in which conformity is not coerced, but rather attained by reason and agreement. Nevertheless, slowly but imperceptibly, almost subliminally, and as a counterpoint to the description of this placid utopian society, these films use the *mise-en-scène* to plant hints of dissonance, apparently harmless and meaningless, but strongly anchored to the spectator's cultural and historical context. The goal is to awake and evoke a growing sense of unease and dissatisfaction with that setting among the audience (Dyer, 1992). Therefore, running parallel to the utopia being presented on screen, another world emerges, unseen, implicit, resulting from the desires induced in the audience and opposed to this deception because it denounces the inadequacies of the new order and hence clashes with it (Althusser, 1971; Pecheux, 1982; and more recently, Jameson, 2016; Featherstone, 2015). Those inadequacies stem from ideals or principles such as liberty, creativity, and personal fulfilment that, inscribed in the individual's self-conscious, are constructed by modern western social ideology and the normative models of our current world. These are crucial references, as they whip up nonconformity and a growing distance from these utopian settings, even though their benchmarks lie, paradoxically, off screen.

Once this process has been set in motion, the spectator is progressively overwhelmed by monotony, uniformity, and subjugation, and is increasingly disoriented by a discomfort with a series of increasingly evident deficiencies. In the context of children's literature, the arousal of such frustration leads to a spirit of rebellion against an adult world that is established but far-off, contributing to a reinforcement of the young protagonists' subjectivity and identity vis-à-vis their active and conscious intervention in the world (agency). This is not the case in the audio-visual entertainment. Here it is not a matter of defining individual subjectivities, but rather of generating a sense of unease among the audience at the flagrant insufficiencies of these well-intentioned communities. But despite their shortcomings, our societies are subject to remedy. Naturally, the scope of these categories of sensibility is bounded by the range of inadequacies that the capitalist system can redress, and which in general derive from the culture of personal effort, individualism, transparency, freedom of expression and consumerism, sidestepping or excluding all others as Dyer (1992) forcefully explains.

In this sense, the visual recreation of a world in black and white, as set out by *The Giver*, for example, constitutes a powerful resource which, despite its lack of originality – having already been used in other dystopian films (*Pleasantville*, Ross, 1998; *Renaissance,* Volckman, 2006) – is extremely effective in evoking the real atmosphere of repression and control lurking beneath the uto-

pian rhetoric (Fitting, 2003): the monochrome becomes the essential element in the staging of the story, a non-representative symbol equipped with a considerable capacity for arousing a distressing sense of monotony and uniformity in the audience, at first disconcerted and then actively predisposed against that model of society.

Therefore, despite their idyllic appearance, the societies depicted in these films find their raison d'être in their capacity to question the audience about their own societies' deficiencies. What has until then been presented as a utopia ends up losing those characteristics which initially rendered it attractive and are now unpalatable. It is in this context that the utopia becomes dystopia, that is, a model of society that is considerably worse than our present one (Sargent, 1994), but it goes even further than that. So much so that it becomes an anti-utopia, since the aim is to persuade potential spectators of films like *The Giver* or *Divergent* that any experiment or project of a perfect society organized based on centralized planning or control of people and their interests inexorably leads to the nullification and the loss of individual liberties and rights, and ultimately to a state of sheer unhappiness.

The plot

As argued above, by directing the course of events and limiting the spectator's freedom to make decisions, plot and setting are even more decisive in reinforcing constrained responses. We are thus compelled to travel along predefined paths, to the detriment of other potential alternatives.

The dystopian course of many of these films tends to travel along the lines of a progressive shaping of the protagonists' individual identity, and an intensification of the tensions within the restrictive, dominant, normative framework. This results in a final conflict that questions the whole established order. As the focus of the action is located in the conflict between the central character and the community, the spectator is encouraged to extrapolate the protagonist's plight to the actual society in which he or she lives, with the ensuing emotional burden that entails, as it evokes feelings fundamental to the individual condition (self-fulfillment, consumption, creativity, sincerity, affection) but which are entirely absent in the utopian society. This progresses towards a conclusion that precludes any reflection on other hypothetical social possibilities and imposes a narrative outcome that is both closed and predictable. The protagonists' acts of political resistance against the established authority leave no room for other courses of action, as they have no choice but to cause the system's demise. While it remains the case that some of these films foster a relative degree of uncertainty as they end, in most cases this is driven by commercial considerations linked to the need to leave certain loose ends that will keep the spectator's interest in the event of a sequel or a prequel (Sambell, 2003). Such open

endings that, particularly in the case of dystopian literature, sought to generate spaces of uncertainty and ambiguity, as well as hope, become, in many recent cinematographic dystopias and sagas mere instruments to elicit customer loyalty. This is a far cry from any attempt to rally counter-hegemonic cultural forces and threaten the current political and economic system, ruled by patriotism and consumerism.

All the above leads us to the question of the alleged dystopian character of these films. As has already been suggested, in a stricter sense it appears more pertinent to use the term 'anti-utopian' or "faux utopian", since the core of these films' critique is directed towards all projects or experiments in social organization whose central and planned direction, with its reprogramming of conduct and behaviour, poses a totalitarian threat to liberty, the capacity for innovation and individual fulfilment. So much so that all these films make use of these utopias as evidence of the futility of human efforts to achieve perfection through the denial of nature ("I think human nature is the enemy", Jeanine Matthews says in *Divergent*) and even of the very essence of humanity, singled out as the cause of all past misfortunes. These disasters can only be averted through the eradication of the past and its memories (*The Giver)* and/or through the re-education of consciences. This is an anti-utopian discourse, governed by a series of arguments that are far from original, having been set forth at the end of the Second World War by intellectuals such as Karl Popper, Friedrich von Hayek and Jacob L. Talmon, whose main shortcoming was, according to specialists on the subject, their identification of utopianism with perfection (Shklar, 1989; Sargent, 1994; Thaler, 2018; Eskelinen, 2020).

Beneath the anti-utopian discourse of many of these films, there undoubtedly lies a clear willingness to explore conflicts within human desires and expectations, but on the basis of demonstrating that the utopian brand is unreal and unworkable. Nevertheless, this anti-utopian imprint, at the service of official dominant ideology, is not itself free from contradictions. Indeed, the spreading of a message that questions the possibility of change – even, as these films tell, the world has been laid to waste and is ripe for a new beginning – and that assumes that the source of human conflict lies within humans themselves and their very nature, implies the affirmation of the present scenario as the best of all possible worlds. Paradoxically, this rests on the same principles of resignation and conformism against which these films' young protagonists have rebelled.

Nevertheless, not all these films follow the same blueprint. There are of course exceptions that depart from the established pattern. It is indeed the case of two European productions, the British *How I Live Now*, and the French *Love at First Fight*, both on the margins of Young Adult Dystopian Films. They are clear examples of stories with original readings that transgress the dominant anti-utopian discourse. As we will see, in the case of Thomas Cailley's work, this deviation from the dystopian genre is even greater because of its

emphasis on the commonplace, day-to-day reality, as the action does not revolve around an imaginary and somehow fantasied immediate future (martial law triggered by a nuclear terrorist attack, as in *How I Live Now),* but rather around the present itself.

We hardly come across signs of a potentially dystopian scenario, and yet it is possible to identify certain features common to them: for example, the story also presents us with characters agonizing over their future, torn between uncertainty and hope. Contrary to the protagonists of the dystopian sagas, and although their destiny does not appear as imposed and pre-established, the prospects of the young Arnaud and Madeleine are no less disheartening. The former is resigned to a predictable and monotonous existence, limited to following in the professional and family footsteps of his deceased father. The apathy and the indifference that dominate his life somewhat resemble what we might find in any straightforward dystopia. In this case, it is the female character that provides the counterpoint, for underneath her apparently pessimistic outlook lies an undeniable willingness to resist. Like Katniss in *The Hunger Games* or Tris in *Divergent*, Madeleine also finds herself lost and confused, and she lacks the means to channel her rebelliousness. Nevertheless, she does not hesitate to seize the opportunity when it presents itself – the army – to secure her survival in a world that she believes is bound to come to an end.

This film has its own rites of passage, a process of internal transformation that will ultimately propel the two protagonists towards a progressive development of their personal identity and in turn a heightened awareness of the reality that surrounds them. Unlike the previously works, this consciousness is not projected so explicitly onto a planned and reductionist social model, but rather appears as the revelation of the infinite (although not always evident) possibilities open to the protagonists as they become agents of their own destinies. The forging of subjectivity is not limited here, as it is in most other stories, to a spirit of rebellion against the system's rigid and coercive structures, but rather crystallizes in the generation of complicities and links between the characters based on an apparently compatible starting point. In *Love at First Fight*, the experience in military boot camps, known as PM (Périodes Militaires), embodies this resistance against one of the institutions that best represents the process of social control and standardization in an environment that is, in this case, close to the authoritarian and oppressive settings of Young Adult Dystopian Films. This is especially illustrative of the process of crystallization of the protagonists' true aspirations. Her initial hard-headedness and his general conformism become progressively diluted and end up converging in that feeling that will lead them to flee the camp, as both long to survive.

Unlike other films, the fact that the course of action does not lead towards a closed or predetermined ending allows for greater complexity in the protagonists' development, as their process of personal growth remains open to further development at the end of the film. In one of the story's final sequences,

Madeleine and Arnaud believe themselves to be in their worst nightmare: the end of the world. Madeleine discovers that her anticipated vision of the future, "premediated" ("the future can be remedied before it happens"; Grusin, 2004) and in her case utterly delusive, has conditioned her reality to the extent that it has set her apart from her real human condition. The end of their lives will only take place once they have given up their hopes and dreams. This confirmation leads them to a new perspective on reality. Truth be told, nothing in their surroundings has really changed, and yet, for them, nothing remains the same. They feel like major figures in the world and in all that surrounds them. They become aware of their capability to impact their environment, and they brace themselves to challenge the established order with all the uncertainty of one who lives in a contingent and changing world.

Although this film should undoubtedly be placed at the margins of dystopian cinema's canon – there is no alternative, the subject is our contemporary society itself –, it conveys a sense of rebellion and resistance without evasion. It does not offer specific solutions to the symptoms of dissatisfaction that our society generates, but unlike other films of clear dystopian topic, *Love at First Fight* merely foreshadows broader scopes of possibility that might suggest openings in the system, and which therefore have a significance which overrides any type of pessimism.

Conclusions

The main potential of all these films stems from the depiction of context: they transport us to social spaces that are imagined but ominously familiar, in which individuals find themselves subjected to processes of annulment and alienation in a climate of resignation and conformity. This does not differ much from what we may observe in contemporary consumer societies. Nevertheless, this estrangement is evanescent, since, despite the plot, by privileging the role of the protagonists and their heroic challenges to the system, these films usually turn the story into a subtle instrument of evasion. They invert the initial signs of unease into a feeling of relief. The ending, closed and without alternatives, is happily resolved with the demise of the system and the restoration of the liberty and individuality that had been lost. As a result, the message transmitted to the spectator encourages demobilization and complacency. There are no reasons for anxiety about potential threats to people's lives and fortunes. In the end, everything here, too, follows its natural course, making human intervention redundant.

Nonetheless, exceptions do exist while these do not necessarily belong to the SF genre, and by no means do they denounce the totalitarian bias of perfect, stable societies, they manage to subtly convey their mistrust of a world that admits to being resigned to fate (Shelton, 1993). These films, perfectly

suitable for inclusion in the category of "critical dystopias" coined by Moylan (2000) and other authors, seek other spaces of contestation and reject the present's faux utopianism. They present us with recognizable settings that address the dominant conformism of contemporary societies and the blatant lack of alternatives. However, this recreation of the social system does not instigate despair, but rather a renewed anxiety that may be partly quelled by anticipation and hope.

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