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Apocalypse, Hope, and Dystopia between Fiction and Society

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We Only Dream of Electric Nightmares

Adolfo Fattori

Scrolling through the various essays hosted in this special issue of FUTURI, the result of the first edition of "Sognielettrici - Festival dell'immaginario fantastico e di fantascienza", one immediately notices the strong prevalence of some keywords such as "dystopia", "apocalypse", "weird" – the substance of our nightmares – to which, however, terms such as "videogames" or "posthuman" act as a counterpoint. The first, a medium, perhaps the most avant-garde of all as a leaven for the imagination, the second, a way of synthesizing a whole range of hypotheses and perspectives relating to the possible ecosystem which will include in various combinations the organic of bodies, the artificial of mechanics and the digital.

However, all these elements have a single root, which in its current form dates back to the years between the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, but which, if we carefully scan into the "high abyss of time", dates back to Greek mythology, and perhaps even earlier. This root is the "electric fire", the invisible energy present everywhere, perhaps embodied in Electra's daughter, Iris, the messenger of the gods, who sows the rainbow behind her.

In short, the imagination of electricity is ancient: the Greeks had realized that electricity is indeed invisible, immaterial, inconsistent... However, it resides – at least in its magnetic form – in solid matter; it is generated (evoked?) by rubbing the right substances together: amber and wool, for example. Indeed, amber gives it its name: in ancient Greek the term for amber is ἠλεκτρον, elektron…

A force that can be beneficial, healing, but can also be unleashed with uncontrollable violence, as happens through lightning. Indeed, precisely in this he demonstrates his divine nature, almost a metaphor for the nature of the most primordial sacred: benevolent but also capricious, vengeful... What could it be, therefore, if not the "vital fluid", the divine substance that gives life to all living creatures? Of course, not to the soul, that comes from elsewhere, but to bodies yes.

It is so inextricable from the dimension of the sacred. And it will remain so for a long time, until the present day – with the logical adjustments to the metamorphoses that the perception of the sacred, the numinous, the invisible has known throughout the ages.

The Californian Erik Davis writes about it very well, articulating in his *TechGnosis: Myth, Magic, and Mysticism in the Age of Information* (2015), originally published in 1998, a reasoning that intertwines the development of communi-

cation technologies with the sacred, religion, the myth, from their origins to the present day – and electricity – the natural energy that moves reality.

Developing his argument, Davis cites a group of Central European theologians of the period between the 17th and 18th centuries, on the threshold of the Enlightenment. They were called "the electric theologians" Johann Ludwig Fricker, Prokop Diviš (for many, inventor of the lightning rod shortly before Benjamin Franklin, and of the first electric musical instrument we know),[1] and Friedrich Christoph Oetinger, who theorized the nature of electricity as a "vital fluid", directly coming from God.[2]

> Far from simply absorbing electricity into existing Christian cosmology, Oetinger's electrical imagination opened up a rather radical and animistic vision of nature. In his view, the world was not a lump of blind clay whose life force directly depended on a transcendent God, nor were its physical forms solely derived from the divine cookie cutters that the Lord used during the first week of creation. Instead, the weird sparks collected by Diviš's lightning-catchers furnished Oetinger with proof of the *anima mundi*, the living World Soul. In this notion, matter is endowed *from the beginning* with spirit, life, and intelligence, and it constantly strives to manifest new forms and new comminglings. (Davis 2015, p. 67 – italic in original)

Davis proceeds in his reasoning, and captures an essential passage, which connects the research of the "electric theologians" with the great, true foundation myth of the contemporary imagination - a progressive dream and an oppressive nightmare at the same time, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*:

This archetypal tale of electro-Prometheanism, which casts electricity as the bridge between science and creation, may be fiction, but it lurks in the shadows of laboratories even today–the embryo of Dolly, the adult sheep cloned in 1997 by Scottish researchers, was kicked into action with a few drops of the electrical fluid. *Frankenstein* was a cautionary tale, part of the Romantic reaction to Enlightenment hubris. (Davis, 2015, p. 69)

The dynamic that develops between the demands of the Enlightenment and the tensions of Romanticism anticipates the dialectic – and the conflict – that will nourish the entire imaginary of industrial and post-industrial Modernity. An imaginary that divides its visions between progressive and optimistic enthusiasms, and dark and distressing images, and between the instances of rationalism and those never dormant of the sacred and the supernatural. Possible utopias transform into dystopias (Fattori, 2017), to colonize science fiction – born in the sign of progress – to contaminate it with the twentieth-century

[1] See: https://insounder.org/milestones-music-history-21-prokop-divis-and-first-electronic-instrument (08/29/2024).

[2] On the same topics see Benz, 2013; Vitiello, in Benz 2013; Fattori, 2013; Paura, 2018.

weird tale, to lead us to the contemporaneity of the new weird - that of Jeff VanderMeer, for example (2014, 2017) – to the primacy of code and digital.

To the "electric dreams" that nourished the first dedicated Festival, and which allow me further reflections.

The history of what we now call digital has proceeded since its beginning – which we trace in the history of eighteenth-century automatons and the first calculating machines – on two legs: the incorporeal, immaterial one of artificial brains, the concrete, material one of machines, which can or cannot have an anthropomorphic appearance (Fattori, Massimo, 2024).

The advancement of the processes that have affected the universe of media – and have exalted the logic of transmediality – has led us more and more towards a dimension of progressive immersion and fusion, even if only perceived, with the virtual sphere. This phenomenon has had a significant acceleration around the years of the COVID-19 lockdown, which pushed us to become increasingly familiar with digital, with "onlife life", as Luciano Floridi (2014) defined it. But, in reality, I believe that the perspective we are moving towards is the one imagined by authors such as William Gibson in *Spoke City* (2007) or *The Peripheral* (2014), or Richard Morgan in the "Takeshi Kovacs saga" (2002, 2003, 2005).

In all these novels the dimension proposed is that of a world – a universe – dystopian, degraded, often ferocious, even if with various articulations and characteristics: post-apocalyptic, degraded, polluted environments, corrupt and barbaric societies, which are reflected in universes immersive virtual machines equally hierarchical and ferocious... A "fourth order of simulacra", perhaps, which not even Jean Baudrillard was able to prefigure when he wrote about the symbolic exchange.

In fact, a circle is closed: the immaterial, disembodied dimension of the digital refers to the sacred, the invisible, the weird and the uncanny, in its creation of another environment, a multiverse that could be comparable to inconceivable, completely alien universes imagined by the "hypernaturalist" rationalism of Howard Phillips Lovecraft (Harman, 2012; Sederholm, Weinstock, 2016).

On the other hand, already at the beginning of the twentieth century Robert Musil realized the coexistence of science and magic in common feeling, writing:

> If it is the fulfillment of man's primordial dreams to be able […] see the invisible and hear the distant speak, hear the voices of the dead, be miraculously cured while asleep, see with our own eyes how we will look twenty years after our death […] if light, warmth, power, pleasure, comforts, are man's primordial dreams, then present-day research is not only science but sorcery, spells woven from the highest powers of heart and brain, forcing God to open one fold after another of his cloak; a religion whose dogma is permeated and sustained by the hard, courageous, flexible, razor-cold, razor-keen logic of mathematics. (Musil 2017, p.54)

Here, I would say that here the short circuit occurs that gives full meaning to "Sognielettrici": the mutual mirroring of the "real" world, the *natural* one, in the *virtual* one and vice versa.

A dialectic that perhaps has as a possible, necessary outcome the fusion between the two, through the most interactive and immersive medium currently available, the videogames in which the player is increasingly indistinguishable from his *avatar*, in a nightmare scenario.

We are such stuff as nightmares are made on.

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Apocalypse, Hope, and Dystopia between Fiction and Society

Elisabetta Di Minico*, Stefano Locati

Introduction

Since the dawn of history, humanity has felt the need to tell its story. Art, literature, religion, mythology, folklore, and philosophy have declined different typologies of narration as "instruments" able to dissect human identities and possibilities and "to help the individual past his limiting horizons into spheres of ever-expanding realization" (Campbell 2008, p. 163). The worlds depicted into these accounts have many facets, from those surrounded by utopian dreams to those trapped in dystopian real and symbolic hells.

"The expression of desire for a different, better way of being" (Levitas 2010, p. 209), utopia creates "hopeful counterworlds" (Moylan 2000, p. XIV) describing ideal and potentially perfect socio-political and cultural realities, often opposite or very different from the contemporary society that inspire them. The word "utopia" was crystalized in its current meaning in 1516 by Thomas More's eponymous work, but the quest for "good places" was already present from the beginning of humanity in the global cultural *corpora*, as many legendary flourishing spaces and times like the Ancient Greek Golden Age, Hyperborea, the Garden of Eden, Penglai, Aztlán or Avalon remind us.

As "the shadow of utopia" (Kumar 1991, p. 99), dystopia builds miserable worlds, dominated by the hyperbolic, theatralized, and radicalized evolution of history and contemporaneity's worst nightmares, including nuclear and ecological disasters, dictatorships, racial or gender-based violence, corruption, pollution, hyper-urbanization, and excess of consumerism and advertising. Dystopia was born in the XIX century, with works like H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* (1895) and *When the Sleepers Wakes* (1899), but, similarly to the aforementioned proto-utopian myths, also "bad places" were already present in human narrative since the beginning of time, in every monstrous, apocalyptic, or tyrannical tale narrated and handed down to us. As Clays (2017) writes:

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> The word 'dystopia' evokes disturbing images. We recall ancient myths of the Flood, that universal inundation induced by Divine wrath, and of the Apocalypse of Judgement Day. We see landscapes defined by ruin, death, destruction. We see swollen corpses, derelict buildings, submerged monuments, decaying cities, wastelands, the rubble of collapsed civilizations. We see cataclysm, war, lawlessness, disorder, pain, and suffering. Mountains of uncollected rubbish tower over abandoned cars. Flies buzz over animal carcasses. Useless banknotes flutter in the wind. Our symbols of species power stand starkly useless: decay is universal. (p. 3)

Dystopia and apocalypse are not the same. While dystopia is linked to "three main, if often interrelated, forms of the concept: the political dystopia; the environmental dystopia; and finally, the technological dystopia, where science and technology ultimately threaten to dominate or destroy humanity" (Clays 2017, p. 5), apocalypse is the catastrophic depiction of the global destruction. From Ancient Greek ἀποκάλυψις, "revelation", its primal meaning was connected with the disclosure of humanity's destiny and related to the Judeo-Christian theology, especially the biblical Book of Revelation, where "the final punishment of sin and the dawning of a new Divine era" (Clays 2017, p. 4) were predicted. Thus, the definition acquired a more negative characterization: apocalypse opens to the end of time and the collapse of society, it is the Doomsday, the Armageddon. "Now such nightmarish scenarios occupy an increasingly prominent position in our vocabulary and our mental world, but without the hopeful outcome promised by theology" (Clays 2017, p. 4). Currently, apocalypse is no longer or not only a teleological destiny linked to a theosophical thought, but also a scream for human self-destruction.

In particular, apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic imaginaries of the 20th century were influences by one the most horrific nightmares of human history: the total nuclear war. Even before the historical and human tragedy of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, several sci-fi dystopian works focused on the dangers of the atomic bomb, including *Deadline* (1944) by Cleve Cartmill, a novel investigated by the FBI for the similarity between the weapon described in its pages and the one created by the Manhattan Project (Guardamagna 1980, p. 62). During the Cold War, the nuclear menace became "the new apocalypse par excellence" (Calcagno 1987, p. 86), as in Philip K. Dick's *Dr. Bloodmoney, or How We Got Along After the Bomb* (1965), where the author – shortly after the 1964 Cuban Missile Crisis – talked about nuclear holocaust, genetic mutations caused by radiations and grotesque characters fighting for power. Cinema, tv series and comics were also inspired by the theme, including manga and anime. Japan dealt with the *pika* (atomic bomb) and the *hibakusha* (atomic bomb-affected people) also allegorically materializing the annihilating power of nuclear weapons through monsters, mutants or other greedy and destructive human and posthuman creatures (Deamer 2014, p. 5), as in the notorious saga of the radioactive *kaiju* ("monster") Godzilla (first appearance: *Godzilla*, 1954, direc-

tor: Ishiro Honda) or in the cyberpunk *Akira* (manga: 1982-1990; anime: 1988) by Katsuhiro Otomo, in which the post-apocalyptic New-Tokyo is threatened (again) by an unstable and catastrophic entity. In the Western culture, one of the most engaging examples of atomic fear in comic books is Alan Moore and Dave Gibbon's *Watchmen* (1986-1987). The story drags the readers into a world with fallen and broken (anti)heroes on the edge of an atomic war. To avoid the MAD (Mutal Assured Destruction), Adrian Veidt/Ozymandias unethically exploits a giant mutant octopus that destroys New York, killing millions of people, with the belief that, after the accident, Cold War nations will put aside their belligerent intentions and decide to unite to protect the Earth from an "alien" threat. In the last decades, new apocalypses are raising in fictional and real narrative discoursers, also addressing ecological fears (environmental disasters, climate change, pollution, etc.), as in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993), depicting a future devastated by both climate change and systemic injustice, or in Rebecca Roanhorse's *Trail of Lightning* (2018), that follows the adventures of a Navajo monster-hunter named Maggie in a flooded and collapsed society.

Thus, dystopia and apocalypse often overlap or support each other in imposing a reign of terror and dismay. Many dystopias arise after apocalyptic wars or events, as in Bong Joon-ho's *Snowpiercer* (2013), a movie - inspired by an eponymous French comic from the 80s – describing a self-sustaining train where, after a climate apocalypse, the surviving humanity, brutally divided in classes, took refuge. Many apocalypses bring dystopian traumas with them, as in the George Miller's franchise *Mad Max* (1979-2014) or in Frank Darabont's TV series - based on the Robert Kirkman, Tony Moore, and Charlie Adlard's comic book series - *The Walking Dead* (2010-2022), where the postapocalyptic fight for survival includes the continuation and/or the restoration of domineering and oppressive dystopian systems that include systemic injustice, human and environmental exploitation, and power relations.

The end of hope or hope, in the end?

In the dystopian, apocalyptic, and postapocalyptic worlds, generally a dark and asphyxiating imagination prevails, and hope seems lost. In one of the most popular dystopias of all time, George Orwell's *1984* (1949), "War is peace. Freedom is slavery. Ignorance is strength" (Orwell 2000, p. 6). The novel is not apocalyptic in a strict sense, there is no doomsday impending on the dictatorial state of Oceania, but the deprivation of consciousness, emotions, memory, and history that the *1984*'s citizens suffer represents the end of the humanity, of the moral compass of our species, of its essence. Orwell's reality is dominated by suspicion, fear, and hate.

Protagonist Winston Smith's existence follows a slow path towards the destruction of hope. He hopes to write his memoir, to freely love Julia, to see the fall of the Big Brother. He hopes the proles, the 85% of the population of

Oceania, "those swarming disregarded masses" (Orwell 2003, p. 72) would sooner or later evolve into a force able to destroy the government. He hopes to contribute to rebellion. At the end, Winston's hope for revolution and human relations becomes hope to a quick death. The Big Brother cannot be defeated because "power is not a means, it is an end" (Orwell 2003, p. 276), it is "boot stamping on a human face – for ever" (Orwell 2003, p. 280). And there are no real possibilities of resistance and fight. Winston breaks under torture and betrays Julia, asking his jailer O'Brien to "do it" to her instead of him.

In Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), dystopia relies on materialism and pleasure and falsifies happiness. Citizens "can be physically and psychologically programmed" (Muzzioli 2007, p. 75) and society uses a "soft totalitarianism that […] abandons physical violence for hidden persuasion" (Muzzioli 2007, p. 75). Emotional relationships and family ties are forbidden or highly discouraged. When John the Savage, a man born and raised in a reservation and unable to adapt to the "utopian" way of living of the World State, kills himself while the other protagonists continue to live in a static and desentimentalized society where socio-political obedience implies the surrender of hope and individuality, reminding of Yevgeny Zamyatin's *My* (*We*, 1924), where, in a transparent and mathematically satisfied reality, the characters like D-503 and I-330 who try to being spontaneous, emotional, and critical, end up annihilated or lobotomized.

The protagonists of *1984*, *Brave New World*, *We* and many other works have no possibilities to overcome their dystopias. But sometimes, even in the most obscure scenarios, even when everything is lost and fight is doomed to be repressed, there is an illogical, powerful, unstoppable hope that spread light into darkness.

In Karin Boye's *Kallocain* (1940), obedient scientist Leo Kall from Chemical City #4 of the World State creates the truth serum Kallocain to establish the "crime of thought". His state is ruled by propaganda, fear, and hatred, citizens are depersonalized, and relations, emotions, and knowledge are atomized. "The State is everything, the group is everything, the individual is nothing" (Boye 1993, p. 123). When Leo starts to question his loyalty to the government, he also rediscovers his feelings for his wife Linda. Under the effect of the drug, they really talk to each other and recognize the mistakes they made and the abuses they suffered. At the end of book, while the World State is subdued by the Universal State, the couple is separated, and Leo Kall is arrested. It seems that everything is lost and desolate, but the protagonists have reasons to live and fight. They discover their humanity, and, for the first time, they experiment feelings and curiosity, they enjoy love and individuality, they aspire to knowledge and improvement. Leo and Linda feel to be part of a new reality and they find hope and comfort in that illusion.

In Alan Moore and David Lloyd's comic *V for Vendetta* (1982-1985) and its cinematic adaptation directed by James McTeigue in 2005, the Norsfire, a fascist party ruling United Kingdom, is overthrown by V, an anarchist antihero wearing the mask of Guy Fawkes, an English revolutionary involved in the Gunpowder Plot of November 5th, 1605. The regime wipes out civil and

human rights, obliterates culture and history, eliminates minorities and oppositions, and builds a state of post-truth using fear of otherness, manipulated information, and surveillance to tame the population. V was detained and tortured in the concentration camp of Larkhill, where also lesbian actress Valerie was imprisoned and killed. The woman wrote a heartbreaking testament, full of pain but still eager for hope and humanity:

> I shall die here. Every inch of me shall perish. Every inch. But one. An inch. It is small and it is fragile, and it is the only thing in the world worth having. We must never lose it or give it away. We must never let them take it from us. I hope that – whoever you are – you escape this place. I hope that the world turns, and that things get better. But what I hope most of all is that you understand what I mean when I tell you that even though I do not know you, and even though I may not meet you, laugh with you, cry with you, or kiss you: I love you. With all my heart. (Moore & Lloyd 2006, pp. 161-162)

The same - almost illogical – hope also illuminates the patriarchal violence of *The Handmaid's Tale*, a novel written in 1985 by Margaret Atwood and adapted into a TV series in 2017. It is a critical dystopia "that includes both utopian and dystopian elements" and tries to break "boundaries" and to transform the "closed pattern of integration-rebellion-integration in an open one, with an ambiguous ending that refuses any form of closure" (Cataldo 2013, p. 156) and a protagonist who obstinately tries to escape from dystopian politics. Ruled by Commanders, the fundamentalist Christian regime of the sterile Republic of Gilead legalizes gender-based violence: women lose all their rights and are enchained to few possible categories: Wives, Marthas (servants), Jezebels (prostitutes), Aunts (instructors and enforcers), Econowives (wives-servants-mothers for the lower-class men), and Unwomen (dissidents who are exiled to the Colonies, contaminated reclusion areas) and Handmaids, fertile women assigned to the richest and most powerful families of the government, monthly raped by their Commanders and forced to bear children for them. Beaten, abused, separated from her loved ones, violated, objectified, deprived of her own name and transformed into a property, the protagonist Offred (Of-Fred Waterford, her Commander) tries to remain a subject, to protect that small inch of freedom Valerie from V for Vendetta talked about. The regime is not able to take it away from her. She keeps believing in humanity, love, and rights, she protects her memory and her faith. Gilead uses religion to justify violence, but Offred is still able to addresses heartbreaking and extraordinary words to a God who she knows is not responsible for her suffering, creating a personal and dramatically parodic version of the *Lord's Prayer*:

> I don't believe for an instant that what's going on out there is what You meant. I have enough daily bread, so I won't waste time on that. It isn't the main problem. The problem is getting it down without choking on it. Now we come to forgiveness. Don't

> worry about forgiving me right now. There are more important things. For instance: keep the others safe, if they are safe. Don't let them suffer too much. If they have to die, let it be fast. You might even provide a Heaven for them. We need You for that. Hell we can make for ourselves." And also: "Deliver us from evil. Then there's Kingdom, power, and glory. It takes a lot to believe in those right now. But I'll try it anyway. In Hope, as they say on the gravestones. (Atwood 1986, p. 194)

Full of a precarious hope is also the finale: Offred is arrested for treason but her lover Nick, a member of the secret police called the Eyes, whispers her to stay calm because the agents are, in reality, members of the Mayday. Offred follows them, without any security, towards an unknown future. "Trust me, he says; which in itself has never been a talisman, carries no guarantee. But I snatch at it, this offer. It's all I'm left with. […] Whether this is my end or a new beginning I have no way of knowing: I have given myself over into the hands of strangers, because t can't be helped. And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light" (Atwood 1986, p. 295).

The bodies of Leo, Linda, Valerie, and Offred endure atrocious suffering, which radically rewrites the self of the subjects and lead to the birth of a new identity. Despite the trauma, these protagonists find a way to abstraction and elevation, they open "the door of the [dystopian] cage" in which they were locked rediscovering feelings, embracing otherness and using hope because, according to Lingis quoted by Solnit (2006), "Hope is hope against the evidence. Hope is a kind of birth. It doesn't come out of what went before, it comes out in spite of what went before (pp. 8-9). "Hope just means another world might be possible, not promised, not guaranteed. Hope calls for action, action is impossible without hope" (Solnit 2006, p. 5). And it's not a case that dystopian character supporting hope like the Handmaids and V have gained real political significance becoming globally recognizable symbol of protest and activism.

Electric dreams and hopes

Fear, anxiety, pain are passive feelings, they imply destruction and rejection. Hope is active, is creative, is resilient. Ernst Bloch (1986) underlined the political relevance of hope:

> Hope, superior to fear, is neither passive like the latter, nor locked into nothingness. The emotion of hope goes out of itself, makes people broad instead of confining them, cannot know nearly enough of what it is that makes them inwardly aimed, of what may be allied to them outwardly. The work of this emotion requires people who throw themselves actively into what is becoming, to which they themselves belong. (p. 3)

Hope is a "militant emotion" that shows people where they should belong,

it is the "most human of all mental feelings", "the furthest and brightest horizon", even in the dark.

Electricdreams has its roots in this hope, the hope that it's not too late to take a stand against real and allegorical apocalypses, to resist fear and hate, to fight back "bad places" not only in fictional dystopias, but also in our daily lives. *Electricdreams*'s basic idea was and is to give resonance and relevance to imagination, opposing the conservative belief that, to discuss and analyze society, the only possible and worthy approach is that of a realism that erases the ideal and fictional impetus. We wanted to make explicit that to understand our world, to live and build a more fair, inclusive, and empowered society, it is necessary to use our imagination and the speculative mode in order to address and question the multifaceted depths of our present, through the lens of the unexpected and of the out-of-the-ordinary.

When we started organizing the first edition of the international conference *Electricdreams – Between fiction and society. Imagination and world building in the aftermath of a global pandemic* (12-14 October 2022), an event supported and hosted by the IULM University of Milan, in collaboration with the Complutense University of Madrid and the HISTOPIA research group, as part of the *Sognielettrici/Electricdreams Internation Film Festival* (11-15 October 2022), we were just coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since 2020, the entire world felt to live an apocalyptic menace and many perceived confinement as a dystopian entrapment. Even if the lockdown was not an actual dystopia, since, quoting Margaret Atwood, it was "an emergency crisis" and "not a deliberate totalitarianism" (Flood 2020), we lived in an alienating reality reminiscent of some dystopian tropes, such as, just to quote the most blatant, the hyper-surveillance of Orwell's *1984*. And, in addition to COVID-19, we also faced (and we are still facing) a barrage of related problems, including the spread of disinformation and conspiracy theories, anti-scientism, growing environmental risks, the introduction of repressive policies, the restriction of civil and human rights in several countries around the globe, international crises, and new atrocious wars endangering the safety and the integrity of the entire world.

Popular culture provides tools to make sense of an increasingly complex situation. Moreover, it introduces the very possibility of resistance because, even in its darkest hour, the darkest story carries within an instigation to mobilize, fight back, and reject fear, hatred, and manipulation. As Eduardo Galeano (1993) argued, "utopia is on the horizon. I move two steps closer; it moves two steps further away. I walk another ten steps and the horizon runs ten steps further away. As much as I may walk, I'll never reach it. So what's the point of utopia? The point is this: to keep walking" (p. 310). Dystopian and apocalyptic/postapocalyptic stories do the same but moving from nightmarish worlds. Showing us the possible dramatic outcomes of contemporary issues (systemic injustice, racism, patriarchy, pollution, etc.), they urge us to "keep walking", to

be aware and alert to avoid dangerous socio-political involutions, because, as Offred says in *The Handmaid's Tale*: "nothing changes instantly. In a gradually heating bathtub, you'd be boiled to death before you knew it" (Atwood 1986, p. 56).

Electricdreams – Between fiction and society. Imagination and world building in the aftermath of a global pandemic supported a debate over speculative/science/fantasy fictions across different media, highlighting their relationships to history, society and to the contingent moment. Moreover, it encouraged us to pay close attention to the influence that both utopian and dystopian narratives exert on everyday life, as they provide possible frameworks to rethink the current conditions and imagine alternatives. How do novels, short stories, movies, TV series, comics, and video-games imagine the apocalypse and what kind of scenarios do they envision? How do utopia and dystopia shape our culture and collective imagination? How do speculative/science/fantasy narratives change in times of global crisis? These are just some of the questions that the international conference explored and that the articles of this special issue address.

Let's take back the future!

The *Electricdreams – Between fiction and society* conference was a significant event not only for the passionate and compelling themes presented but also for its inter- and multi-disciplinary approach, able to connect several historical times and various media together. Moving from different backgrounds and fields, all the articles, in a way or another, embrace a reflection on hope, hopelessness, and (human, ecological, alien, etc.) catastrophe.

Vincenzo Pernice analyzes the retreat from the outside world as a trope in decadent literature, serving as a blueprint for fictionalized treatments of aestheticism, anti-bourgeoisie, pessimism. His work explores the cultural and social implications of contaminating such trope with elements of popular genres like fantasy, horror and science fiction, grouped together under the umbrella term of "fantastika", focusing on three novels (Huysmans's 1887 *En rade*, M.P. Shiel's 1901 *The Purple Cloud*, Aldo Palazzeschi's 1908 *:riflessi*), and three films (Giovanni Pastrone's 1916 *Il fuoco*, Lars von Trier's 2009 *Antichrist* and 2011 *Melancholia*).

Francisco José Martínez Mesa studies relevant examples from the 21st century dystopian cinema, addressing how hope and catastrophe are presented in these "bad places". Using works like Neill Blomkamp's *Elysium* (2013), Thomas Cailley's *Les Combattants* (2014), James De Monaco's *The Purge* (2013), Gary Ross's *Pleasentvill*e (1998) and *The Hunger Games* (2012), the article dissects optimism, pessimism, desperation, and resistance, underling the socio-political value and the ideological implications of recent dystopia in the seventh art.

Riccardo Retez investigates the concept of isolation with a transmedia perspective. Isolation is a concept that has been absorbed by the science fiction genre and

adapted within different media. The article focuses on three types of isolation and their interpretation and exposition within three different cultural products: social isolation, present within the novel *The Postman* (David Brin, 1985); psychological isolation, as proposed by the Japanese animation series *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (Hideaki Anno, 1995); and cultural isolation, and its exegesis in the video game *Death Stranding* (Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2019).

Tonguc Sezen analyzes fictional depictions of urban adaptation to rising sea levels using climate resilience strategies identified by The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change as a guideline. The paper lays out the four generic categories for urban adaptation under different conditions (accommodation, protection, advancement, and retreat) and their diverse portrayals in different media and how advantages and challenges of each are presented in fictional setting.

Mario Tirino and Lorenzo Denicolai reflect on 'retro-mediation' as a new logic of remediation of past (audio)visual cultures fueled by the feeling of living in a dystopian present. Examples taken from the American TV series *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-2019), *Pose* (2018-2021), *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017-) and *Pushing Daisies* (2007-2009) are used to explore pandemic visual culture and the audiovisual images of the pre-COVID-19 and COVID-19 eras.

Alice Giuliani explores how digital images may articulate more-than-human worlds, moving from Alex Garland's New Weird film A*nnihilation* to discuss the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman, the environmental concerns hidden behind the cancer metaphor, and the connections between fiction and real life traumas like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Javier Álvarez analyzes how Margaret Atwood, in *Oryx & Crake* (2003), embarks upon a post-apocalyptic narrative odyssey that intricately addresses genetic engineering, environmentalism, social stratification, and the profound repercussions of human violence. Central to his paper's discussion is the intriguing interplay between Guy Debord's seminal construct, *The Society of the Spectacle*, and the overwhelming presence of Liquid Modernity – a concept eloquently fleshed out by the distinguished sociologist, Zygmunt Bauman.

Holly Parker and Deanna Holroyd focus their analysis on the perceived techno-utopia of popular video-game *Stardew Valley* (ConcernedApe, 2016) and argues that despite presenting itself as an escape from the fast-paced pressures of 'real-life', the game remains heavily informed by neoliberal ideologies. Players experience a sense of achievement-induced satisfaction when they reproduce the American Dream and the neoliberal focus of productivity, success, autonomy, and the commodification of play.

Lorenzo Di Paola and Giorgio Busi Rizzi presents Gipi's science fiction graphic novel *La terra dei figli* (2016), focusing on its societal fears of environmental catastrophe and the disintegration of human-centered values in a post-apocalyptic world. While fitting into the groove of the postapocalyptic and dystopian genre, the graphic novel stages a metaphor for a future society that has abandoned literacy in favor of post-digital practices, thus performing

a critique of the practices and values of digital culture and online communities, providing an insight into the complexities of contemporary media and its social and personal impact.

Tamiris Bura Froes explores the post-apocalyptic video-game *Horizon Forbidden West* (Guerrilla Games, 2022) and the quest for survival and hope of the protagonist Aloy. She embarks on a mission for restoring human history with the Tenakth tribe. The paper deeply reflects on the utopian message that emerges from the Tenakth's engagement with the past and their ritualistic approach to the fragmented lives of their ancestors, using them to ensure their immediate survival among the ruins of a dead civilization.

Despite, the theoretical divergences, the multitude of points view, the interplay between different media and different centuries, this issue wish to show the future horizons we should avoid make real and the hope that we still have time to save us from apocalypse and to convert dystopia into an inclusive, empowered, and eco-sustainable utopia.

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Shadows in the Shelter. "Fantastika" Variations on a Decadent Trope, between Literature and Cinema

Vincenzo Pernice

Abstract

Since J.K. Huysmans's novel *À rebours* (*Against the Grain*) appeared in 1884, the retreat from the outside world became a trope in decadent literature, serving as a blueprint for fictionalized treatments of aestheticism, anti-bourgeoisie, pessimism. This paper aims to explore the cultural and social implications of contaminating such trope with elements of popular genres like fantasy, horror and science fiction, here grouped together under the umbrella term of "fantastika", a category promoted by writer and literary critic John Clute since 2007 to describe the fantastic (non-realist) as a whole in narrative media. Three novels and three films will be taken into account, using a transmedia approach to highlight the relevance of the "fantastika isolation" formula not only when it actually started in the long 19th century, but also in contemporary cinema, as to encourage further analysis on its fate. The three novels are Huysmans's 1887 *En rade* (*Stranded*), M.P. Shiel's 1901 *The Purple Cloud*, Aldo Palazzeschi's 1908 *:riflessi* (*:reflections*). The three films are Giovanni Pastrone's 1916 *Il fuoco* (*The Fire*), Lars von Trier's 2009 *Antichrist* and 2011 *Melancholia*.

While none of the above mentioned case studies can be regarded as popular – with the partial exception of *The Purple Cloud* –, they all include imaginative elements inspired by fantastika (nightmares, visions, haunted houses, the last man on Earth, the end of the World). In doing so, distinguished authors seem to look for more entertaining ways to develop their otherwise static plots centered on one or two isolated characters. Yet, consistently with an elitist conceptualisation, their sociopolitical ideology appears to remain intact: accepting popular clichés does not translate into a more democratic literature or cinema.

Keywords: Art Film, Decadent Literature, Fantastika, Long 19th Century, Transmedia Studies

Introduction

Since Joris-Karl Huysmans's novel *À rebours* [*Against the Grain*] appeared in 1884, the retreat from an outside world perceived as ugly and repellent became a trope in decadent literature, serving as a blueprint for fictionalized treatments of aestheticism, individualism, anti-bourgeoisie, and pessimism. This paper aims to explore the cultural and social implications of contaminating such trope with elements of popular genres like fantasy, horror, Gothic and science fiction, here grouped together under the umbrella term of "fantastika", a category promoted by writer and literary critic John Clute since 2007 to de-

scribe the fantastic (non-realist) as a whole in narrative media (Baker, 2015; Encyclopedia of Science Fiction, 2023).

In today's context of fluid and constantly evolving global narrative, the use of umbrella terms and macro-genres such as fantastika has been encouraged by several scholars, so as to enhance the similarities of the fantastic (or fantasy) and science fiction, with particular reference to their reception by readers (Bombara & Todesco, 2021), since "Fantastika consists of that wide range of fictional works whose contents are *understood* to be fantastic" (Clute, 2017, p. 16). Thus, even authors not traditionally associated with genre fiction such as Grazia Deledda and Ada Negri can be included in this conceptualisation (Bombara & Todesco, 2021, p. xvi).

The emergence and aftermath of the Decadent movement[1] between the 19th and the 20th centuries coincide, in fact, with the birth of a modern entertainment industry as we know it, where successful books and films often belong to the above-mentioned genres. In this context, it shall be noticed how much renowned authors took inspiration from fantastic imagery, with the most obvious example being Oscar Wilde in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890).

In this paper, three novels and three films will be taken into account, using a transmedia approach to highlight the relevance of the "fantastika isolation" formula not only when it actually started in the long 19th century, but also in contemporary cinema, as to encourage further analysis on its fate. The three novels are Huysmans's 1887 *En rade* [*Stranded*], M.P. Shiel's 1901 *The Purple Cloud*, Aldo Palazzeschi's 1908 *:riflessi* [*:reflections*]. The three films are Giovanni Pastrone's 1916 *Il fuoco* [*The Fire*], Lars von Trier's 2009 *Antichrist* and 2011 *Melancholia.*

The birth and development of genre fiction has historically been linked to countries with a flourishing publishing market, sustained by the demand of literate consumers, as in the case of Huysmans's France and Shiel's Great Britain, whose fantastika inspiration may have benefited from the success of Gothic and science fiction novels and stories in their languages. As for Pastrone's and Palazzeschi's Italy, this is a nation where genres in the strict sense of the word were established with some delay, due to the backwardness of the publishing market (de Turris, 2014), nevertheless the influence of the fantastic on acclaimed or even avant-garde Italian authors has been verified (Weber, 2010, pp. 89-96). Finally, the cinema of Danish von Trier has been included in several studies on so-called contemporary Nordic or Scandinavian Gothic (Holmgren Troy et al., 2020). The notion of fantastika thus helps to bring out a unity in different times and geographical areas, consistent with the current direction of studies, whereas more restrictive and traditionally understood categories would tend to keep the various phenomena separate.

[1] The definition of "Decadent movement" is still controversial (Giovannetti, 2016). In this paper, it is meant to indicate a broad range of Western, mainly European, culture, spanning from the 1880s up until around World War One. In this sense, the Decadent movement shall include Symbolist art and literature, while also comprehending interior decoration, early cinema and lifestyle (Vergine, 2012).

While none of the above mentioned case studies can be regarded as popular – with the partial exception of *The Purple Cloud* –, they all in fact include imaginative elements inspired by fantastika (nightmares, visions, haunted houses, the last man on Earth, the end of the World). In doing so, distinguished authors seem to look for more entertaining ways to develop their otherwise static plots centered on one or two isolated characters. Yet, consistently with an elitist conceptualisation, their sociopolitical ideology appears to remain intact: accepting popular *clichés* does not translate into a more democratic literature or cinema.

Nightmares and Toxic Clouds in the Long 19th Century Literature

Huysmans's 1887 *En rade* is one of his lesser known novels[2]. It tells the story of Jacques and Louise, a husband and a wife who seek refuge from their Parisan creditors in a *chateau* in the village of Longueville, in rural France. They both detest practical life, with Jacques being described as a pretentious intellectual and Louise as mentally ill and unable to housekeeping. Far from finding peace in an idyllic landscape, they soon realize how miserable their everyday life is in the castle. Furthermore, their much desired isolation is often interrupted by her vulgar peasant relatives.

The *chataeu* itself soon becomes the setting of some potentially disturbing events. In Chapter 2, the realistic plot leaves place to the visionary story of a girl who is about to lose her virginity with the king of a fairy-tale palace, made of countless gemstones. But as soon as Jacques wakes up, the reader understands it was just a dream. The same happens with the description of the Moon as a mineral realm (Huysmans, 1887, Chapter 5), the possibility of marketing perfumes of dead people out of their corpses (Huysmans, 1887, Chapter 9), plus some incoherent horrific visions (Huysmans, 1887, Chapter 10). These dream sequences were highly regarded by Surrealism (Matthews, 1969, pp. 28-40), with André Breton going as far as including an excerpt of *En rade* in his 1940 *Anthologie de l'humour noir* [*Anthology of Black Humour*].

The setting of Huysmans's plot is immediately presented as the typical environment of a Gothic novel (Praz, 1968; Reim, 1993). In this run-down *chateau*, the imagination of the main protagonist runs free: Jacques's first dream is actually interrupted by mysterious noises, but turns out it was just and owl screeching; in order to escape from tedium, he even goes treasure hunting in the basement, finding nothing but dust. His decadent isolation is nor a relaxing vacation nor an exciting adventure, instead being just irritating and dull. At

[2] Only a handful of English translations have been made, titled: *Becalmed* (by Terry Hale, Atlas Press, 1992); *A Haven* (in *The Decadent Reader*, edited by Asti Hustvedt, Zone Press, 1998); *Stranded* (by Brendan King, Dedalus European Classics, 2010). An Italian translation by Stefano Brugnolo was published under the original title *En rade* by Piovan in 1990.

the end of the novel, while still incapable of facing their financial problems, Jacques and Louise go back to Paris: "canailles pour canailles" ["scoundrels for scoundrels"] (Huysmans, 1887, p. 318) he now prefers to engage with the sophisticated ones.

The pessimistic and sarcastic undertone confirms the novel's belonging to the Decadent movement, together with its stylistic features. The extensive descriptions of Jacques's dreams and the overall Gothic atmosphere enhance *En rade*'s aesthetical purposes, rather than acting as a form of advancement of the plot, whose captivating premises are completely disregarded.

Something similar happens in Shiel's 1901 *The Purple Cloud*. The story focuses on Adam Jefferson, the presumed only survivor of a mass extermination caused by the titular mysterious cloud. The novel has achieved fair commercial success over the decades and today is considered a classic of post-apocalyptic science fiction. However, this should not eclipse its artistic ambitions (Morgan, 2009), to be traced back to a decadent *milieu*. Not only is the narrative explicitly set "In these days of 'the corruption of the upper classes', and Roman decadence of everything" (Shiel, 1977, p. 32), but many other clues can be found in the text.

In addition to being a doctor, Adam is an intellectual too, author of a treatise on science applied to art. Upon his return from a polar expedition, he comes across an endless trail of corpses, whose detailed description occupies most of the volume, according to a discursive strategy consisting of listing and accumulation. Corruption and decomposition are the true isotopes of the novel: decay is literal.

The pinnacle of this *décadence* is the monument that Adam decides to erect for himself, an enormous golden palace on the island of Imbros. The styles adopted here are said to be Egyptian, Homeric and Jewish, together with references to the museums of Paris and London, not to mention a lake filled with wine. He also has a preference for Orientalism, wearing Turkish attire. This variety of styles refers to the 19th-20th century eclecticism of interior decoration known as *bric-à-brac* (Praz, 1994, pp. 362-367). Italian readers could thus recognize in Adam's palace a foreshadowing of the Vittoriale degli Italiani (Terraroli, 2001), the monumental complex of poet and war hero Gabriele d'Annunzio, started in 1921.

Unfortunately for Adam, his isolation will provide only temporary relief, turning out into an illusion of salvation or redemption. The meeting with Eva/Leda – a woman, the only other human being survived –, brings him back into caring for the outside world, while an earthquake destroys his palace, confirming its vanity.

Therefore, despite the captivating premise, *The Purple Cloud* should not be considered a properly popular narrative, due to its slow pace, the ambiguity and inconsistency of the protagonist, and the open ending, whose only certainty is that self-reclusion is not a solution to the struggles of humanity. While

considered a founder of modern post-apocalyptic fiction, nevertheless Shiel remains the author of a decadent novel.

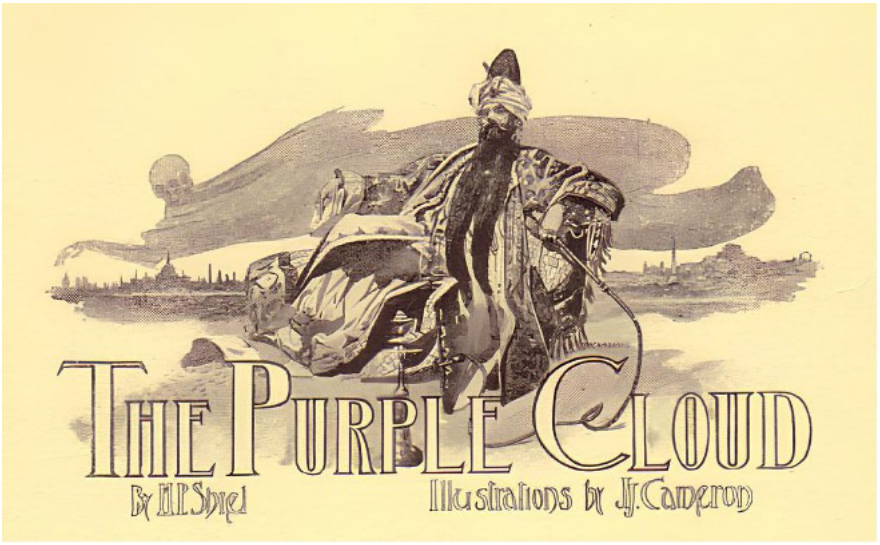

Figure 1: *The Purple Cloud*, title illustration by J.J. Cameron for *The Royal Magazine*, depicting Adam in his Turkish attire.

As for Palazzeschi's 1908 *:riflessi*[3], the writer himself indirectly established its reliance on the Decadent movement when, years later, recalled it as his "liberty [i.e. Art Nouveau] novel" (Palazzeschi, 2004, p. 1396), reminding him of "those films starring Lida Borelli" (Palazzeschi, 2004, p. 1419). At the same time, he highlighted elements of popular fiction when calling it a detective story, while suggesting links with the fantastic when he added this piece in his 1943 collection of early works titled *Romanzi straordinari* [*Extraordinary Novels*].

The first part of the book presents the letters written by Valentino, a young and handsome man, to his lover Johnny. The former has retired in his manor in a fictional Tuscan countryside. In this lonely and abandoned place, Valentino has no social interactions, with the exception of few necessary contacts with two old housemaids, who supply him his food and take care of practical tasks. The action takes place in November, the month associated with the deaths in Catholic tradition: the novel, in fact, was re-titled *Allegoria di novembre* [*November Allegory*] since its second edition.

The manor is described as dusty and filled with shadows, while the weather is mostly rainy and foggy, perfectly fitting the melancholic temperament of the inhabitant, who finds himself hearing music from no apparent source and having visions of a beautiful woman. In a paranoia attack, Valentino even sets

[3] Apparently, the novel is yet to be translated into English ("Aldo Palazzeschi", 2022).

fire to some haystacks, calling them "conspirators". The first part of the book abruptly ends when the protagonist announces Johnny a forthcoming party in his manor.

In the short second part, the reader is presented with newspaper clippings reporting contradictory news about the sudden disappearance of Valentino. We learn, however, not only that he was a prince, but also that the villa where he retired is the same where his mother committed suicide fifteen years before, while a party was taking place. Has the young man committed suicide too? Was the manor haunted by the ghost of his mother? Is it just a joke or the imagination of a disturbed personality? Palazzeschi left no answer, ending the narration with intentional mystery.

Once again, a distinguished author composed a work full of fantastic suggestions drawn from popular fiction, inserting them into a complex narrative. With its introspective tone and suggestive descriptions, without forgetting parallels and leitmotifs, Palazzeschi has created a novel where it is the atmosphere that stands out, rather than the plot. In doing so, he paved the way for avant-garde fiction (Weber, 2010, pp. 41-57), bending fantastika to his own personal expression.

Evilness and Colliding Planets, from "Cinema Dannunziano" to Contemporary Art Films

Il fuoco is a 1916 silent film directed by Giovanni Pastrone under the pseudonym of Piero Fosco, starring Febo Mari and Pina Menichelli[4]. This motion picture epitomizes many features of Italian "cinema dannunziano", inspired by the sophisticated atmospheres of d'Annunzio's theatrical and narrative works (Cherchi Usai, 1985, pp. 84-90; Verdone, 1963). The title itself derives from his novel *Il fuoco* (1900), even though the story is completely different. The film is divided into three acts, titled *La favilla* [*Sparkle*], *La vampa* [*Flame*] and *La cenere* [*Ashes*], symbolising the stages of love.

Mario Alberti, an unlucky painter, is invited by an owl-like poetess in her Gothic castle, furnished in a typical decadent fashion. While sharing days of passion in absolute privacy, Mario paints his first critical and commercial success. However one day, after waking up, he is informed that his lover left the castle to join her husband. Both he and the viewers ignored until then that she was married. Completely devastated and obsessed, the painter seeks for the woman, finally finding her in a classy gathering. She pretends not to recognize him, causing the man to lose control. The film ends with Mario being taken away, believed to be mad.

The last shot is a close-up of the evil laughter of the poetess. While in-

[4] The film is available on the Internet Archive (Pastrone, 1916).

Figure 2: *Il fuoco*, film poster depicting Mario asking the poetess to "burn his soul".

carnating the decadent stereotype of the *femme fatale*, Pastrone also made sure to characterize her appearance as some sort of wicked witch. *Il fuoco* is famous for Menichelli's costumes, hairdressing and make up, resembling an actual owl shown in the Gothic castle. Furthermore the turning point of the picture, when the woman asks the painter to follow her, could be interpreted as a spell or even a curse. She breaks a lamp and starts a fire: comparing human emotions to flames, she urges Mario to choose between a dim but enduring love or a short but intense passion. "Burn my soul!" he answers.

This scene, along with the Gothic setting and Menichelli's look, implies the possibility of a supernatural reading of a seemingly realistic story, as far as interpreting the painter selling his soul to an evil presence. In doing so, *Il fuoco* may add a pinch of fantasy in the "cinema dannunziano".

Between 2009 and 2013, contemporary Danish director Lars von Trier released three films usually grouped together under an unofficial *Depression Trilogy*: 2009 *Antichrist*, 2011 *Melancholia*, 2013 *Nymphomaniac*. Apart from the main subject matter, they all share a reliance on some of the most popular genres in fiction and entertainment: respectively horror, sci-fi and porn. Although inspirations and references to genre fiction can be found in most of von Trier's *oeuvre* (Badley, 2011; Badley, 2022), *Antichrist* and *Melancholia* stand out for their greater reliance to traditional genres, to the point of being included in some encyclopedic thematic volumes (Booker, 2020; Leffler, 2021; Power, 2018). By taking these two films into account, however, this paper does not mean to interpret them as part of the historical Decadent movement, instead to highlight their revival of decadent tropes and devices within a current fantastika setting.

It should be noted that in von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg's Dogme 95 manifesto, the directors themselves criticized a perceived individualism and *décadence* of contemporary cinema, claiming that "the individual film will be decadent by definition" (von Trier & Vinterberg, 1995). After having distanced

himself from many of the rules established in this manifesto, it is legitimate to ask whether von Trier can now be considered a 21st-century decadent.

Antichrist stars Willem Defoe and Charlotte Gainsbourg as the unnamed protagonists, virtually the only two actors in the whole film. The plot of this highly stylized picture revolves around the couple's own therapy in a cabin in the woods named Eden. The action takes place after the death of their child, and explores the themes of sex, violence and satanism.

Just like in Huysmans's *En rade*, the two are a husband and a wife who retreat from society. Instead of a proper plot, *Antichrist* presents a disjointed narration, challenging the viewer's understanding of the events. Furthermore the film's aestheticism reveals itself in von Trier's trademark *tableaux vivants*, often reminiscent of Symbolist paintings (Titouan, 2017). In addition to that, it must be more than a coincidence the fact that the themes of *Antichrist* perfectly fit with the elements summarized in the Italian title of Mario Praz's 1930 classic study on the Decadent movement: *La carne, la morte e il diavolo nella letteratura romantica*, namely *Flesh, Death and the Devil in Romantic Literature*[5].

This leads to von Trier's references to popular culture. While not a strictly genre film, still horror *clichés* are easily recognizable in *Antichrist*, starting from its setting reminiscent of the classic house from Sam Raimi's 1981 *The Evil Dead*. As for the visions experienced by the male character and the audience, they include an infamous talking fox, whose line "Chaos reigns" has inspired countless Internet memes. These circumstances suggest the opportunity to identify traces of fantastika entertainment in what most would call an art film.

The same formula applies to *Melancholia*. The title of the film alludes to a fictional planet that is about to collide with Earth. However the premise of a stereotypical science fiction narrative is transformed by von Trier into a film with clear artistic ambitions, unsurprisingly considered the peak of his career, if not one of the best films of all time (Metacritic, n.d.). While a Hollywood blockbuster would have shown the attempts made by astronauts to prevent the catastrophe (as in 1998 *Armageddon*, for example) or vice versa the disasters caused by the impact between planets, on the contrary *Melancholia* focuses on the psychology of the two protagonists, sisters Justine and Claire, played by Kirsten Dunst and Charlotte Gainsbourg.

The entire picture is set in a single location, the castle owned by Claire's husband. In the first act, we witness Justine's wedding to Michael (Alexander Skarsgård). By the end of the second act, the two sisters and Leo, Claire's son, are isolated from the rest of humanity in the family castle. In the last scene the three await the end of the world inside a "magic cave" made out of branches.

The subversion of the sci-fi genre conveyed by *Melancholia* is remarkable. Von Trier has attributed the film's "romantic" aesthetic to his own depression (Von Trier, 2011). However, upon closer inspection, it is a Romanticism already

[5] English translations are titled *The Romantic Agony* (Praz, 1956).

tending towards *décadance*, since the soundtrack consists of the prelude to Richard Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde* (1857-1859), while the visual component makes explicit references to the works of the Pre-Raphaelites[6]. During a scene in the first act, for instance, Justine replaces some art books open on pages reproducing abstract pictures with others dedicated to realist masterpieces, including some by the Brotherhood (Titouan, 2017). The film poster even recreates the painting *Ophelia* (1851-1852) by John Everett Millais. The aesthetic ideals of this missed disaster movie are therefore unmistakable.

Making Beauty out of a Mad World

The observed fantastika variations on the decadent trope of self-isolation lead to two final remarks, dealing with fiction and imagination on one hand, and with society on the other.

First of all, it is crucial to underline that none of the analyzed cultural artifacts can be regarded as popular in the strict sense, since both the three novels and the three films were targeted to a seemingly élite audience. Yet they all borrow elements from popular fiction, especially from fantastic and sci-fi genres, with architectural forms such as castles and cabins acting as the perfect conjunction between decadent and collective imagination. This combination does bring consequences on a formal and structural point of view. While not exactly fantasy adventures, yet *En rade*, *:riflessi* and *Il fuoco* show that adding a pinch of Gothic can make sophisticated literature and "cinema dannunziano" more amusing.

In addition to that, the intention of subtle parody inherent in these works shall not be underestimated, suggesting an ironic and tongue-in-cheek approach to popular fiction, whose tired *clichés* are redeemed thanks to conscious artistic choices[7]. This becomes clear in von Trier's *oeuvre*.

Finally, society. At first look, it seems that these individualistic stories have very little to do with collective issues. But if we interrogate the reasons why their characters avoid social interactions, by choice or circumstances, some deep connections may emerge. Huysmans's Jacques and Louise seem to escape from capitalism, while Palazzeschi's cryptic Valentino for sure is a gay man struggling to deal with the death of his mother. The trajectory of Shiel's Adam symbolizes the vanity of power and earthly goods. And who is Pastrone's unlucky painter, if not an artist incapable of succeeding in a material world? At last, von Trier's controversial female protagonists are women questioning gender roles, traditional science and medicine (Butler & Denny, 2016). Here lies the modernity of the *décadance* and its reliance to past and present crisis.

[6] The continuity between the Pre-Raphaelite movement and the Symbolist-Decadent movement has been analysed in the essays collected in Benedetti (2012).

[7] See Martín-Clavijo (2021), note 9, for a bibliography on the analogies between fantastic discourse and parodic discourse (pp. 102-103).

The world is a bad place to live in, Western society has no room for such eccentric personalities, these stories tell us. But is isolation the solution? Of course not, but never an alternative is presented as well. So even when revived by popular fiction, the decadent trope of self-reclusion stays true to its original pessimism and its aesthetic standards, being beauty the only thing worth of significance. Far from making these narrative works verbally or visually accessible, fantastika elements act as a pool to draw on, subject to exploitation. In the end, for our highbrow authors, dealing with popular *clichés* does not lead to a more democratic or constructive art. If one sets a sci-fi catastrophe in a "magnificent castle", "it can hardly avoid becoming... beautiful" (von Trier, 2011). Hence, if literature and cinema will not save the world, at least they can make it a more tolerable place.

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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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Transcodification and Synthesis of Social, Psychological and Cultural Isolation in Sci-fi Narratives: from Literature to Video Games

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Abstract

This study intends to observe and investigate the concept of isolation with a transmediality perspective, opening the analysis to multiple access points for the study of original forms of adaptation and an approach to phenomena of narrative synthesis and transcoding (Jenkins, 2016). Defined as "exclusion, by desire or circumstance, from relationships or contact with the usual environment" (Cacioppo et. al., 2011), isolation is a concept that has been absorbed by the science fiction genre and adapted within different media, through original narratives that revolve around humans – conceived as "human beings". The concept of isolation is declined in stories and media from multiple perspectives; this contribution focuses on three types of isolation and their interpretation and exposition within three different cultural products: social isolation, present within the novel *The Postman* (David Brin, 1985); psychological isolation, as proposed by the Japanese animation series *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (Hideaki Anno, 1995); and cultural isolation, and its exegesis in the video game *Death Stranding* (Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2019).

The aim of the contribution is to provide a reconstruction and chronological mapping regarding the declination of the concept of isolation through the three texts, according to a Hegelian logic that sees in the third text the synthesis of the previous ones. From literature to video game, through transmediality approach, it will be possible to highlight how the narrative designed and implemented by each of the three texts is structured through multiple levels that configure different interpretative dimensions, ludic-performative realities and reading levels concerning the role and meaning of the human being in contemporary society. To read David Brin's novel, to watch Hideaki Anno's series or to play and experience Death Stranding is to understand altruism and face isolation, actions that are currently as necessary as ever in the reality of the contemporary world.

Keywords: Isolation, Transcodification, Sci-fi, Literature, Video Games

This study seeks to delve into the multifaceted concept of isolation from a transmediality perspective, encompassing diverse entry points for the examination of distinctive forms of adaptation and an exploration of phenomena related to narrative synthesis and transcoding (Jenkins, 2016). Isolation, in this context, can be defined as a state of "exclusion, whether driven by individual desire or external circumstances, resulting in a detachment from customary relationships and a withdrawal from conventional environmental contexts"

(Warburton and Lui, 2007, p. 48). Nevertheless, it is of paramount importance to establish a clear demarcation between the concepts of isolation and loneliness. Given the previous definition of isolation, loneliness can be defined as "the emotional response stemming from the disparity between one's desired level and quality of social interaction and the actual state of social contact" (Ashraf & Galor, 2011). In the further pages it is possible to look at how these two concepts intersect and sometimes clash, shedding light on the intricate dynamics of human connection and detachment.

By this means, the aforementioned definition of isolation delineates three key dimensions: contact, exclusion, and environment. By dissecting each of these core elements, it is possible to discern three distinct manifestations or types of isolation: social isolation, psychological isolation, and cultural isolation.

In this analysis, the portrayal of social isolation in various stories and media from a multitude of perspectives will be explored, elucidating its prevalence and impact across different contexts. While social isolation finds its manifestation in the narrative of *The Postman*,[1] the examination of psychological isolation is undertaken through the studying of the Japanese anime series *Neon Genesis Evangelion*,[2] offering insights into how this form of isolation is depicted and explored in the realm of animation storytelling. Finally, cultural isolation is exemplified by the video game *Death Stranding* - written, created, directed, and produced by Hideo Kojima and his Kojima Productions company in 2019 -, in order to better understand how isolation can manifest within the context of gaming and digital environments.

By engaging with each form of isolation, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive examination of the concept, elucidating its diverse dimensions and highlighting the ways in which it is represented and explored in various media forms. Ultimately, this endeavor seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding isolation and its significance in contemporary society and media. Through an interdisciplinary approach that draws from literature, animation, and video games, the research aims to provide a nuanced and comprehensive analysis of this multifaceted concept.

The starting point is the comprehension of social isolation that, within the context of this study, is rigorously defined as "an objective condition characterized by physical seclusion that hinders or restricts the development and expansion of a diverse social network, resulting in limited interaction with other individuals and the broader community" (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009, p. 449). This definition underscores the quantitative nature of social isolation, emphasizing the measurement of an individual's social connections and interactions.

[1] Published in 1985 by Bantam Books, New York.

[2] Anime series created by Hideaki Anno, distributed by GAINAX Studio (Japan) from 1995 to 1997 and then re-created by the same author as a four-movies remake saga under the name *Re-building of Evangelion* from 2007 to 2021.

The Postman, a novel by David Brin, serves as a compelling exemplar of how the concept of social isolation is adeptly adapted and contextualized within the science fiction genre. The narrative unfolds within a post-apocalyptic and dystopian world, presenting the journey of Gordon Krantz, a solitary figure wandering through the desolate Oregon countryside. His discovery of a United States Postal Service uniform leads him to assume the role of a mail carrier and federal inspector for the 'Restored United States of America', thereby initiating a transformation in the dynamics of social isolation. The key elements that contextualize social isolation within the narrative encompass Gordon Krantz himself, the various communities he encounters during his journey, and the impending collapse of civilization. These elements are portrayed both in Brin's novel and in the subsequent movie adaptation directed, produced, and starred in by Kevin Costner, despite its cinematic shortcomings. Within the post-apocalyptic world of *The Postman*, the survivors have organized themselves into distinct communities, each resembling quasi-tribal units, isolated from one another. Krantz's odyssey involves traveling from one community to another, using his memorized Shakespearean poems to entertain and connect with people. A pivotal moment occurs when he stumbles upon a postal van and dons the United States Postal Service uniform, igniting his mission to reestablish communication and connections between these isolated communities. However, not all of them are receptive to this effort, such as the group of hyper-survivalists known as the Holnists, who vehemently oppose any change to the existing order in a world ravaged by catastrophe. To rekindle hope, the communities require narratives or myths that are firmly rooted in reality and nourished by genuine social investment. Krantz's transformation throughout the narrative is remarkable.[3] Initially portrayed as a solitary figure, a reluctant hero, and a mystifier confined by his own self-imposed isolation, he ultimately evolves into a communicator and a facilitator of connections. His role shifts from that of a leader to that of a mediator, battling social isolation by forging new connections and opening avenues to uncharted territories once these connections have been established. In this manner, *The Postman* encapsulates the profound transformation that can occur when social isolation is addressed through the rekindling of communication and the reintegration of isolated communities.

Transitioning to the examination of psychological isolation, it is imperative to provide a comprehensive definition of this form. Psychological isolation can

[3] In one of the concluding passages of *The Postman: A Novel*, author David Brin (2011) states that: "We are all connected, like the stars in the sky", speaking to the inherent interconnectedness of humanity. Brin means that much like the stars are interconnected within the vast expanse of the night sky, humans, too, are interconnected through their shared humanity. They are integral components of a larger cosmic web, wherein their actions and interactions generate ripple effects that influence those around them. This quotation serves as a poignant reminder that, despite differences, human beings are united by a common responsibility to engage with one another with kindness and compassion, paralleling how the stars collectively shine in harmonious brilliance.

be elucidated as a "cognitive process characterized by the establishment of a cognitive divide or exclusion between a distressing or menacing cognition and other thoughts and emotions. This division minimizes associative connections with other cognitive constructs, thereby reducing the frequency of recollection of the distressing cognition" (Franklin & Carr, 1971, p. 234). This concept finds its roots in the pioneering work of Sigmund Freud, who illustrated it through the example of an individual initiating a train of thoughts and momentarily pausing before transitioning to a different subject. The Japanese anime series *Neon Genesis Evangelion* offers a profound representation of the Freudian model of psychological isolation.

In essence, *Neon Genesis Evangelion* is a science fiction anime that portrays a future in which Earth has been destroyed by catastrophic climate events. As humanity grapples with the threat of relentless and destructive creatures known as Angels, a reluctant young man joins a selected group of pilots under the command of his authoritarian and emotionally distant father. Their mission is to thwart the Angel menace utilizing colossal machines referred to as Project Evangelion. Key elements within the narrative, contextualizing the theme of psychological isolation, encompass Shinji Ikari, the youthful protagonist; NERV, the secretive organization tasked with combating the Angels; and the looming threat of the Third Impact, a cataclysmic event posing a significant peril to humanity. *Neon Genesis Evangelion* is celebrated for its status as a cult classic within the science fiction genre, as it incorporates layers of interpretation ranging from religious symbolism to psychoanalysis, from post-humanism to trans-humanism. Among the pilots, Shinji Ikari stands as a prime illustration of the psychological isolation theme. As the son of NERV's commander, Gendo Ikari, Shinji endured abandonment and solitude from a young age following his mother's demise. Raised without the presence of either parent and devoid of companionship, he was steeped in isolation throughout his formative years. His reticence and compliance stem from the profound fear of abandonment, driving him to pilot the Project Evangelion when called upon.

NERV, headquartered underground in the city of Neo-Tokyo 3, operates under the leadership of Gendo Ikari, who is secretly executing the Human Instrumentality Project during the entire story, a grand endeavor aiming to merge all human souls into a quasi-divine entity. Despite Shinji's fervent attempts to escape his father's clutches and the camaraderie of fellow pilots, seeking the isolation he has grown accustomed to, Gendo's ambitions come to fruition during the Third Impact. The psychological isolation of the protagonist intersects with the loneliness experienced by those he encounters on his journey, ultimately compelling Shinji to consider the Human Instrumentality Project as a viable path. In the denouement, Shinji opts for individuality, choosing to reconnect with people despite the inherent trepidation.[4]

[4]As underlined in Anno (1997), the last dialogue Shinji has with Misato, his tutor and manager

Furthermore, the recurrent motif of the train, serving as a manifestation of the psychological isolation as conceived by Freud, significantly influences Shinji's decisions. In *Neon Genesis Evangelion* isolation and loneliness converge and collide, with Shinji personifying isolation while his friend and fellow pilot, Asuka, embodies the theme of loneliness. The anime's complex narrative masterfully explores the interplay between these intricate dimensions of human experience.

In this academic exploration, we embark on an analytical journey that transcends the dichotomy of social isolation and psychological isolation to arrive at a synthesis of concepts encapsulated within the notion of cultural isolation. This Hegelian process posits social and psychological isolation as thesis and antithesis, respectively, culminating in the synthesis of cultural isolation.

Cultural isolation is thus meticulously defined as "the absence of close and empathetic social interactions resulting from spatial separation, instigated by external forces and catalyzed by transformations within the cultural environment of the individual" (Keijzer, Mäs, & Flache, 2018, p. 12). This form of isolation often arises involuntarily, rarely as a deliberate choice made by the individual, but rather as a consequence of external circumstances beyond their control.

The video game *Death Stranding* developed by Kojima Productions, not only serves as an exemplar of a science fiction narrative that incorporates cultural isolation but also embodies the Hegelian synthesis of the preceding themes of social and psychological isolation. The narrative unfolds in a world ravaged by the aftermath of the enigmatic 'Death Stranding' event, which had decimated a substantial portion of the planet, ushering in the presence of supernatural and otherworldly entities.

The central elements of the narrative revolve around the character Sam Porter Bridges, his affiliation with the specialized organization Bridges, and the looming existential threat posed by the Extinction Entity, Amelie, the older sister of Sam. In the beginning of the game, the two separate, and Amelie (not yet perceived as the antagonist), states: "It is a strange word, 'strand'. 'Strand' can mean a thread, a tie. Whereas 'stranding' means to be stranded on the shore. And being 'stranded' means not being able to go home. And now I'm stranded, Sam... here, on the Pacific coast. A thousand miles away... our bond still holds. You are free, but we are still connected" (Kojima, 2019).

In fact, in this apocalyptic world, Sam assumes the role of a deliveryman tasked with traversing a desolate wasteland to reestablish connections between the fragmented city-states of America. Isolation is not merely a thematic ele-

within NERV, is emblematic. In the final moments, Misato urges Shinji to fight: "I've made tons of stupid mistakes and later I regretted them. And I've done it over and over again, thousands of times. A cycle of hollow joy and vicious self-hatred. But even so, every time I learned something about myself. Please, Shinji. You've got to pilot Eva and settle this once and for all. For your own sake. Find out why you came here. Why you exist at all? Answer your own questions".

ment but is intricately woven into the narrative's fabric, evident from the introductory credits of the game, which expound upon the state of post-catastrophe American society and culture.

From the outset, Sam shares striking parallels with Gordon Krantz, portrayed as a lone wanderer navigating the American landscape in search of answers about his past. His character is marked by a particular affliction known as aphenphosmphobia, a profound fear of physical contact and averse to emotional bonds, which Sam frequently exhibits throughout the game. As Sam becomes entangled with Bridges, a specialized organization determined to reestablish societal links through an elaborate infrastructure network, the existential threat confronting humankind becomes increasingly apparent. In a manner reminiscent of NERV in *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, the very objectives of Bridges are poised as a potential peril to all of humanity.

The Extinction Entity – Amelie – unveils a harrowing revelation that Sam's efforts to connect the cities have inadvertently tied each community and, by extension, every soul in America to her, thereby enabling the impending extinction event. It becomes evident that this was her ultimate goal all along. Sam is faced with a heart-wrenching dilemma; he can avert the so-called 'Last Stranding' by severing his connection to the Extinction Entity, but he finds himself ensnared in a complex web of emotions and affections for this supernatural entity, thereby blurring the line between one death deity's fate and the destiny of all life on the planet.

This narrative not only encapsulates cultural isolation but offers a profound reflection on the complexities of human connection, emotional bonds, and the inherent tension between self-preservation and the greater good. *Death Stranding* transcends conventional video game storytelling, delving into the intricate interplay of isolation, societal connectivity, and the sacrifices one must contemplate in the pursuit of collective survival.

The theme of cultural isolation, as depicted in *Death Stranding*, serves as a rich tapestry upon which the intricacies of human existence are interwoven. It exemplifies the transformative power of narratives in reflecting and dissecting the multifaceted dimensions of isolation, ultimately contributing to a broader understanding of the human condition and the inherent paradoxes it presents. In this synthesis, cultural isolation emerges as a potent narrative tool, encapsulating the profound complexities of human interaction, the dilemmas of isolation, and the perennial quest for connection in an ever-changing and unpredictable world.

Cultural isolation, as a synthesis of both social and psychological isolation, is vividly exemplified in the narrative of *Death Stranding*: the game provides a profound resonance with the previously delineated definitions of isolation in its own unique way.

Building on the foundations of social isolation, which involves the objective condition of physical separation and the subsequent limitation of social net-

works, *Death Stranding* plunges players into a post-apocalyptic world where humanity's remnants are divided and physically isolated across vast landscapes. The societal fabric has been torn asunder, and individuals are cut off from one another due to external forces, specifically the cataclysmic events of the *Death Stranding*. This separation is not a matter of choice but a consequence of circumstances beyond their control, underscoring the involuntary nature of their isolation.

Conversely, the game extends the themes of psychological isolation, as defined through the psychological processes that create cognitive divides and minimize associative connections between thoughts and feelings. Within the context of *Death Stranding* this isolation is poignantly portrayed through the character of Sam Porter Bridges. Sam, like the protagonist Gordon Krantz in *The Postman* shares the trait of isolation, signified by his affliction, aphenphosmphobia, revealing a profound fear of physical contact and, in essence, mirroring his isolation from others. This aversion to physical and emotional closeness is a manifestation of his psychological isolation.

Crucially, *Death Stranding* presents a synthesis of the two preceding texts, *The Postman* and *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, where isolation gradually yields to a powerful sense of connection. While both social and psychological isolation are themes that weigh heavily on the narrative, they serve as stepping stones toward a resolution in collaboration and altruism.

In essence, the game underscores that isolation is not an immutable state but a condition that can evolve and be transcended. The thematic essence of isolation, carried over from *The Postman* and *Neon Genesis Evangelion* is recontextualized within the world of *Death Stranding*. As the narrative unfolds, Sam's journey shifts from a solitary quest for answers, mirroring Krantz's solitary wanderings, to a mission of connectivity and reestablishing societal bonds.

The synthesis of these narratives emphasizes that in a world marked by isolation, the quest to rebuild connections and bridge the divides among isolated pockets of survivors holds the potential to unleash both salvation and destruction. Moreover, *Death Stranding* delves into the complexities of human emotions and choices, ultimately challenging Sam to confront the daunting decision of whether to save a supernatural death entity he has come to love or to sever his connection, thus safeguarding all life on the planet. This pivotal moment in the game narrative serves as the culmination of the theme of connection in the face of isolation, echoing the underlying philosophy of *The Postman* and the intricate psychoanalytical interplay in *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. By these meanings, *Death Stranding* emerges as a synthesis of its predecessors, offering a profound commentary on the transformative potential of human connection. It posits that isolation, regardless of its manifestations, can be transcended through collaboration and selflessness. As a medium, it exemplifies the power of narratives to reflect and interrogate the multifaceted dimensions of isolation, ultimately guiding us toward a deeper understanding

of the human condition and the enduring quest for meaningful connections in a world marked by isolation.

This study, aimed at investigating the representation of isolation in the context of transmedia storytelling, draws inspiration from the works of Henry Jenkins and Elizabeth Evans, who have provided essential frameworks for comprehending this dynamic narrative approach (Jenkins, 2010, pp. 943-958). Through the analysis of the three selected texts and their diverse interpretations of isolation, including those presented by fellow researchers, it is possible to discern how isolation can be interpreted as a form of transmedia storytelling. This, in turn, offers multiple entry points to a central theme across different media and narratives, culminating in a unified and coordinated experience for audiences.

Henry Jenkins, a pioneering scholar in the field of media studies, has laid the foundation for understanding transmedia storytelling within the framework of convergent culture: he defines transmedia storytelling as a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple channels, creating a unified and coordinated experience. Jenkins' definition underscores the idea that storytelling is not confined to a single medium but is disseminated and developed across various platforms, engaging audiences in a multifaceted and immersive experience.

Furthermore, Elizabeth Evans expands upon Jenkins' definition, framing transmedia storytelling as an encompassing practice involving "the increasingly popular industrial practice of using multiple media technologies to present similar themes through a range of textual forms" (Evans, 2019, p. 52). Transmedia storytelling takes on a broader meaning, emphasizing the integration of various media technologies to explore similar thematic elements through a diverse array of textual expressions.

The three works examined in this study, along with their respective interpretations of isolation, epitomize the notion of transmedia storytelling. Each of these texts serves as a distinct entry point to the theme of isolation, utilizing different media and narrative techniques to provide audiences with a comprehensive and unified experience – they converge to form a cohesive narrative web that deepens our understanding of isolation and its various dimensions.

To read David Brin's novel is to immerse oneself in the written word, experiencing isolation through the lens of literature; watching *Neon Genesis Evangelion* immerses the viewer in a visually compelling and psychologically complex narrative, revealing isolation's intricate facets; playing and experiencing *Death Stranding* offers an interactive and sensory exploration of isolation within a virtual world, engaging the player in a unique way.

Each of these media offers varying layers of immersion and interaction, allowing audiences to engage with the theme on personal and emotional levels. The transmedia approach to storytelling, in this context, invites audiences to engage with isolation in multifaceted ways, enhancing their comprehension of

the central theme. In the contemporary world, where issues of isolation and the need for altruism have gained renewed relevance, these texts serve as powerful vehicles for conveying messages and insights. They reflect the complex human experience and the enduring relevance of themes such as isolation and the importance of connection and altruism.

In addition to their engagement with isolation, the three works seamlessly fit into the emerging sub-genre of science fiction known as 'hopepunk'.[5] This sub-genre, characterized by narratives that emphasize hope, resilience, and acts of kindness in the face of adversity, aligns with the thematic underpinnings of the three texts.[6] They exemplify the 'hopepunk' ethos, as they explore isolation and resilience while ultimately championing the triumph of altruism and human connection in the face of seemingly insurmountable challenges.

In conclusion, *The Postman*, *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, and *Death Stranding* stand as exemplary instances of the transcodification of isolation within the realm of science fiction narratives. They embody a dynamic journey, culminating in a hybrid space characterized by the emergence of novel production phenomena, subgenres, and narrative convergence that typify transmedia storytelling. These works underscore the transformative potential of storytelling and its capacity to traverse diverse media forms, forging a unified and coordinated experience for audiences.

Throughout this exploration, the concept of isolation has served as a powerful lens through which to scrutinize the characters as multifaceted human beings. In science fiction narratives, isolation becomes a catalyst for the genesis of new subgenres, subsequently influencing the landscape of transmedia storytelling. In this context, isolation unfurls as a fertile ground for the examination of novel forms of adaptation and offers insights into the intricate phenomena of narrative synthesis and transcodification.

Ultimately, navigating the ever-evolving landscape of transmedia storytelling, the concept of isolation emerges as a dynamic catalyst for transcending the boundaries of individual narratives and forging connections across a multitude of media. It invites to explore the rich tapestry of human experiences, and in

[5] As Mancuso (2021) underlines, the Hopepunk (first defined in 2017) describes a reaction to decades of dystopian, nihilistic fiction, and explores how optimism can be an act of rebellion. The worlds described in hopepunk works are not utopian or even necessarily hopeful; the genre is expressed in the ways characters approach issues related to loss, pessimism, violence, amorality, isolation and loneliness. In this context, Hopepunk accepts isolation in the sense that if the life of the characters of these stories are meaningless then the only thing they can do is move forward from there.

[6] This is clearly visible from the ending of *The Postman: A Novel,* written by Davin Brin in 2011: "It was not the creature on the pyre that was reborn, and even in sleep, that surprised Gordon. The great bird was consumed, leaving only bones. But the tree blossomed, and from its flowering branches things uncurled and drifted off into the air. He stared in wonderment when he saw that they were balloons, airplanes, and rocket ships. Dreams. They floated away in all directions, and the air was filled with hope".

doing so, provides new insights into the multifaceted world of storytelling and its ever-expanding potential.

The different narratives aforementioned – elucidating themes of hope, resilience, and the unrelenting pursuit of human connection within a milieu characterized by isolation – provide profound insights into the intricate dynamics of the human experience. According to authors Bill Franklin and Richard Carr (1971), scientific inquiry affords a nuanced comprehension of the neurobiological, psychological, and sociological substrates that underlie these cardinal facets of the human condition (pp. 230-237). By this mean, cognitively, these narratives illuminate the convoluted processes within the neural milieu, delineating the cognitive responses to adversarial circumstances and their consequential impact on the sustenance of hope and the manifestation of resilience. Psychologically, an intricate tapestry of emotions, cognitions, and behaviors unfolds, detailing the psychological constituents inherent to the human experience amid periods of isolation. Moreover, from a sociological vantage point, *The Postman*, *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, and *Death Stranding* unveil broader societal ramifications entwined with the pursuit of human connection. They underscore the pivotal role played by social networks, communal support structures, and shared experiences in fortifying resilience and fostering the tenacity of hope. A deeper psychological exploration of these narratives not only enriches the comprehension of the human experience but also contributes empirically informed perspectives to interventions and strategies aimed at cultivating well-being amidst conditions of isolation. In conclusion, the narratives that generate and explore hope punk in a world marked by isolation offer profound insights into the intricacies of the human experience. Through a critical lens, we gain a deeper understanding of the cultural, psychological, and social dimensions that underpin these fundamental aspects of the human condition. As we unravel the threads of these narratives, we find that, in the tapestry of human existence, hope, resilience, and human connection are not only enduring but also integral to the very fabric of what it means to be human.

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Survival in Half-Sunken Cities: Urban Adaptations to Sea Level Rise in Speculative Fiction

Tonguc Sezen

Abstract

This paper surveys fictional depictions of urban adaptation to rising sea levels using climate resilience strategies identified by The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change as a guideline. The paper first lays out the four generic categories for urban adaptation under different conditions, namely accommodation, protection, advancement, and retreat, which provide a collection of fluid and interchangeable options. Preservation and creating alternatives are identified as the two main distinct characteristics of these strategies. The paper then focuses on their diverse portrayals in different media and how advantages and challenges of each are presented in fictional setting. The portrayals of accommodation are shaped by the envisioned magnitude and timeframe of sea level rise and generally underline the temporary nature of the strategy, while stories of long-term adaptation of coastal cities rely on techno-optimistic solutions. Stories depicting protection through exaggerated hard engineering projects underline how they also preserve and amplify existing social inequalities. Advancement in speculative fiction also relies on extreme engineering, inspired by existing and proposed architectural projects, each with diverse sociocultural connotations and visions for alternate societies. Retreat stories emphasize the broader implications of climate change and depict it as a long-term, evolving, and challenging process with uncertain outcomes. The paper concludes with a general assessment of common and divergent characteristics of the portrayals of the main climate resilience strategies in speculative fiction.

Keywords: Sea Level Rise, Climate Change, Speculative Fiction, Climate Resilience, Urban Adaptation

Introduction

Amongst the many consequences of human-caused climate change, sea level rise (hereinafter referred to as SLR) and its impact on coastal cities and settlements stands out as a central theme in numerous works of climate narratives across media. Linking it with ancient myths and traditions of flood narratives, Trexler (2015) argues that SLR as a narrative theme offers a familiar entry point to comprehend climate change. Compared to more complex issues like ocean acidification or biodiversity, SLR and flooding provides a more familiar and tangible local disaster scenario with extreme individual and social consequenc-

es audiences can identify with. These consequences are not purely functional, as in the lost of a place to live in and organize a society, but also entail severe and irreversible loss of material and immaterial heritage (Reimann et al., 2018). According to Dobraszczyk (2019), putting the spotlight on the possibilities for urban life in a world transformed by SLR, narratives of adaptation can compel audiences to assess their individual and collective roles and options for addressing the consequences of climate change.

Scientific projections on SLR vary due to gaps in our understanding of Earth's climate and the intricate interplay of socioeconomic and technological factors influencing human activities (McVeigh, 2023). Thus, while all SLR projections entail extreme water levels and wave heights, submergence of coastlines, and alterations of coastal geomorphologies as consequences (Goodell, 2018), there are multiple directions for stories of urban adaptations to SLR to take in terms of magnitude and timeframe. In this regard, this paper surveys the depictions of urban adaptation to rising sea levels using climate resilience strategies identified by The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) as a guideline. The paper first lays out the ways IPCC proposes for urban adaptation under different conditions, and then presents diverse portrayals of these strategies in different media, focusing on how advantages and challenges of each strategy are presented in fictional setting.

Mitigating Strategies for Coastal Cities and Settlements

Despite the challenges posed by the uncertainties around SLR, preparing coastal cities and settlements and developing future adaptation strategies for coastal communities is an essential necessity. Emphasizing environmental uncertainties and socio-economic inequalities shaping the availability of these options, the IPCC offers a set of climate resilience strategies for coastal communities (Glavovic et al., 2021). These are organized into four generic categories: accommodation and protection, which focus on preserving urban environments as much as possible, and advancement and retreat, which seek new alternatives for communities.

Regarded as one of the prevalent strategies employed to counter present degrees of SLR, the accommodation of the built environment seeks to mitigate the vulnerability of coastal cities and settlements through adaptive action (Doberstein et al., 2019). Various techniques are proposed to achieve accommodation, including increasing drainage capacity, retrofitting existing buildings against flooding, and adopting amphibious design principles in future developments (Barsley, 2020). The next strategy, protection, aims to create various types of barriers against SLR ranging from hard engineering measures like sea walls and dikes to the establishment of natural sponge zones through retaining mangroves and marshes. Contemporary successful flood defenses like the

Delta Works storm surge barriers in southwest Netherlands provide examples of how the protection strategy may be implemented in the future with time and investment under suitable conditions (d'Angremond, 2003). The third option, advancement, proposes the creation of new elevated land masses through land reclamation from the sea, which not only protect the new hinterlands but also generate areas for further growth. New York's Climate Resilience Master Plan partially adopts this strategy and proposes the extension of the shoreline towards the East River instead of building protections which would isolate the city from the sea (The Mayor's Office of Climate Resiliency, 2021). Finally, retreat as a strategy aims to reduce exposure by moving people and assets out of coastal hazard zones, with its extreme case being the relocation of island nations. Entailing cultural, socioeconomic, and equity considerations, retreat is one of the most challenging alternatives for coastal communities, potentially precipitating a global humanitarian crisis unless effectively addressed by environmentally conscious local and global policies (Hauer et al., 2020). Rather than being strict alternatives to each other, these strategies represent key options available to coastal communities, each with its own challenges and limitations. Communities might adjust, combine, and sequence them in different ways while managing and balancing emerging environmental factors, available economic and technical resources, and psychosocial and socio-political expectations. The decision-making processes on how to protect coastal cities and settlements thus face challenges beyond the dynamics of the SLR.

Multiple factors can shape how societies choose to prepare and adapt to SLR. Evaluating climate resilience strategies as design solutions, Stefen Al (2018) argues that local governments may be driven by priorities beyond the defense of coastal cities and settlements–namely the economy, community, or ecology. This approach views changing waterfront typologies not only as a risk to mitigate but also as an opportunity to reshape coastal communities' relationship with water and restore the ecological and environmental health of the shoreline in the long term. However, when assessing the same strategies from economic, legal, and policy perspectives, McGuire (2019) underscores the political challenges surrounding decision-making processes. Limited resources, uncertainties regarding long-term risks and benefits, and legal roadblocks like property rights pose significant hurdles for governments in implementation. Furthermore, the presence of techno-optimistic attitudes further complicates the process. Techno-optimism, considered by its critics as a form of covert climate denialism, posits that the factors driving climate change may be managed and eventually overcome by new technological solutions (Petersen et.al., 2019). Its advocates suggest that investments should be directed towards the research and development of such technologies instead of adaptation strategies. Pilkey and Pilkey (2019) argue that techno-optimism, coupled with a 'too rich to flood' mentality among the upper classes, reflects false expectations fueled by the desire to maintain the status quo and decreases the priority of SLR in the

eyes of decision-makers. Consequently, this diminished priority contributes to the potential failure to implement any climate resilience strategy. In this regard, narratives of not only consequences of SLR, but also implementations of different resilience strategies play a major role in exposing and exploring the options and challenges coastal communities face.

Discussions on the portrayal of resilience strategies in climate narratives bring forth a range of perspectives, incorporating cautionary concerns alongside constructive suggestions. Echoing the warnings against techno-optimism, Rabitsch and Fuchs (2022) emphasize the need to avoid portraying climate resilience strategies as easy solutions which can be implemented within short periods of time. Hageman (2012) asserts that climate change and its ramifications, along with how communities navigate them, should be more than backdrop elements in a narrative; rather, they should constitute integral components of the story. Advocating for a symbiotic relationship between climate narratives, art, and design, Dobraszczyk (2019) argues that the representation of resilience strategies should foster a holistic approach in envisioning the futures of urban submergence while encouraging radical responses to it. These views parallel with the intrinsic nature of climate resilience strategies as a collection of fluid and interchangeable options towards an uncertain and complex space of long-term possibilities.

Preserving Urban Environments

Despite the diversity of protection strategies proposed by the IPCC, accommodation and protection seem to get much attention in climate narratives, as they present transformed, yet still familiar urban environments to audiences. However, these portrayals sometimes require the transformation of the core characteristics of these strategies as well. As one of the most prominent climate resilience strategies in use today, accommodation of the build environments mainly focuses on enhancement of survivability of existing buildings and infrastructure against temporary flooding through retrofitting (Barsley, 2020). The fictional depictions of the strategy as a response to permanent substantial SLR however, either re-appropriate this temporary characteristic, or introduce extreme versions of transformational adaptation to prolonged exposure to the sea. Both variants feature partially submerged buildings, usually high-rises, while in the former they act as temporary shelters, in the latter they undergo a transformation into artificial islands or even urban archipelago.

Exemplifying temporary habitation, J. G. Ballard's seminal climate change novel, *The Drowned World* (1962), depicts how scientists coming from a retreated society reside on the upper floors of the city's symbol buildings while exploring a flooded London. In Jean-Claude Mézières and Pierre Christin's comic *Valerian: The City of Shifting Waters* (2010) looters turned rebels occupy

parts of the crumbling half-sunken New York before its destruction under the waves. In Mathieu Bablet's comic *Carbon and Silicone* (2021), the titular androids retreat to one of the last standings buildings in mostly submerged Tokyo for more than a decade until sea levels reach their shelter. In these narratives, individuals or small groups often have minimal or no ownership claims on the buildings they inhabit, and their efforts to adapt them to SLR are likewise limited.

Narratives featuring communities responding to permanent SLR through flexible, parasitic architecture present a step towards a full accommodation of half sunken cities. In Brian Wood and Garry Brown's global cataclysm comic *The Massive* (2019), most half-sunken cities share a fate of abandonment, but as an example of a community led effort, Hong Kong manages to adapt itself to SLR by repurposing floating debris collected from the sea and transforms its high-rises into an interconnected port network. A similar example of adaptation can be seen at the beginning of Frédéric Blanchard and Fred Duval's comic *Renaissance* (2019), where half-sunken landmarks like the Eiffel Tower are expanded by ad hoc additions of prefabricated living pods and platforms to house communities. In both stories, it is implied that despite their initial success these haphazard solutions had reached their limits, but before any alternatives could be explored, the survivor communities fall to attacks from outside.

Narratives of long-term, top-down, coordinated efforts in accommodation run by governments and supported by corporate interests contrast to these random, spontaneous, and temporary forms of adaptation. Miami in Lisa Joy's neo-noir film *Reminiscence* (2021) keeps its semi-submerged downtown alive by adapting its buildings to SLR and controlling flood cycles with the help of barriers, while leaving older sections of the city to slowly crumble into the rising seas. Robbie Morrison and Jim Murray's graphic novel *Drowntown* (2013) similarly depicts a flooded London, which still acts as a financial and political center, thanks to being transformed into a city of canals thanks to the investment of shady corporations. Overall, while their appearances change, the social and economic structures of these cities endure, retaining their inherent inequalities and corruption.

Despite featuring corporate corruption, stark class disparity, and urban negligence, as a novel focusing on the interplay between finance, property, and climate change, Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140* (2017) provides a coordinated and balanced mode of transformational adaptation. In Robinson's story, high-rises in half-drowned lower Manhattan not only survive but flourish thanks to technological, social, and economic interventions. Application of new composite materials transform structures built on bedrock into waterproof artificial islands, which are connected by sky bridges to form neighborhoods. As co-ops owned by residents, individual buildings are then organized to produce their own energy and food by utilizing new carbon neutral production techniques. Finally, multiple co-ops are structured as mutual aid societies,

which could provide additional material and fiscal services, including their own digital currencies. Robinson's half sunken New York is described by Bellamy (2018) as a case for highly localized self-sustainability for adapting communities to climate change and SLR, while Rabitsch and Fuchs (2022) underline the importance of grassroots institutions in achieving this. However, while praising the detailed depiction of anti-capitalist economic action in Robinson's utopia, McBride (2019) also criticizes the novel for its reliance on technological and economic achievements in the background. Indeed, core technologies used to adapt the high-rises to SLR do not exist today. Therefore, despite its detailed portrayal of climate change and socio-economic foresight, the adaptive solutions in New York 2140 are in many ways techno-optimistic, like many other stories featuring inhabited half-sunken cities, as they try to employ a short-term adaptation strategy for a long-term challenge with unknown aspects.

Following the real-life trend of coastal hard engineered solutions which modified %50 of global shorelines (Dafforn et al., 2015), protection of coastal settlements through various types of barriers, especially high seawalls also get much attention in climate narratives. In Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl* (2009), Bangkok, a bastion against agricultural biotechnology corporations, is protected against rising sea levels by a giant sea wall and supporting pumps. Similarly, massive sea walls towering next to city blocks of Los Angeles and New York can be seen in different iterations of the Blade Runner (Johnson & Guinaldo, 2021) and The Expanse (2011-2022) franchises. In John Lanchester's *The Wall* (2019), United Kingdom, run by an authoritarian regime, is surrounded by the National Coastal Defence Structure which not only stands against the rising seas but also climate refugees. Tabletop role playing games like *Shadowrun* (WizKids, 2007) and *Cyberpunk RED* (R. Talsorian Games, 2022) speculate on the potential social consequences of walling off cities and societies by featuring sea walls with growing slums attached to them. In all these narratives sea walls seem to have two main functions. By preserving megacities mostly as they are, they preserve the core aspects of the capitalist order which led to the climate catastrophe and continues to risk the ecological future of the planet (Hageman, 2012). At the same time, by physically isolating and reordering cities, they impose the pressures of the same catastrophe on lower classes (Hamblin & O'Connell, 2020). As a result, all these fictional sea walls are depicted as being targeted by rebels and revolutionaries from within and from outside, leading to varying levels of destruction. In *The Windup Girl* and *The Expanse*, the destruction of the pumps and the sea wall respectively are prominent plot points, forcing urban populations to retreat. While in the former retreat is portrayed as a new beginning for Earth, in the latter it takes the shape of a grim exodus from the planet.

New Alternatives for Communities

Despite opposing each other as reactions to SLR, both advancement and retreat narratives portray departures from existing urban settings and paradigms in varying degrees. While stories of retreat in speculative fiction are intrinsically rooted in the experience of loss, advancement narratives entail elements of opportunism and stubborn confrontation against SLR. In this regard many science fiction stories diverge from more critical climate narratives reflecting on real life failures of advancement, as in the stories of sinking landfills (Courtois, 2021), and instead focus on extreme engineering solutions.

Mega projects inspired by traditional stilt houses and houseboats are the two major types of exaggerated advancement found in speculative fiction. Distancing these new urban developments from older cities, advancement in those stories also functions as a means of dismantling ties with the existing social structures. In Sam J. Miller's novel, *Blackfish City* (2018), the privately owned city of Qaanaaq is architecturally modeled after oil platforms on metal legs, with its primary objective being the exploitation of climate refugees. New London in the TV series *Brave New World*, loosely based on Aldous Huxley's novel of the same name, is constructed atop of its flooded predecessor, featuring hundreds of meters high colossal columns supporting multiple wide horizontal surfaces, upon which the new idyllic city emerges (Wiener et al., 2020). The verticality of the structure also reflects the societal order of the city. While upper class residents do not perceive the artificial nature of New London, lower class citizens live and work near the columns and other infrastructure and witness the fragility of their world. Unsurprisingly, despite their wondrous engineering, the artificial cities in both stories fall from within following uprisings.

Acknowledged as an experimental variant of advancement strategy by the IPCC (Glavovic et al., 2021), floating habitats are another common trope in speculative fiction, featured in novels like Stephen Baxter's *Flood* (2008) and Sakyō Komatsu and Kōshū Tani's *Japan Sinks: Part II* (2006), as well as Daniel Pecqueur and Nicolas Malfin's comic *Golden City* (2004-2023), and Sid Meier's strategy game *Civilization VI* (2K, 2016). However, as Dobraszczyk (2019) notes, most narratives incorporating them neglect to consider the dynamic nature of the seas and potential distributive effects of climate change, such as ocean acidification, and thus fail to address the limits of urban adaptability to marine ecosystems. Moreover, the floating city concept comes with multiple socio-political connotations. In western tradition floating cities are fetishized by libertarian and counter cultural movements seeking autonomy from central governments (Dunn and Cureton, 2020). In Japanese tradition, they are explored by Metabolist architects as a way of building organically growing cities, out of a desire to overcome the destruction of the Second World War and to protect Japan's national sovereignty, while also being used in fiction to critique these same desires and methods as forms of expansionism (Gardner, 2020).

Due to these connotations, adversarial relations between floating habitats and communities keeping ties to the land and old cities is a common trope in narratives featuring them.

Compared to other resilience strategies, retreat is the most challenging and at the same time potentially most effective one. Its fictional depictions are diverse in line with the timeframes and magnitude of potential conditions forcing it, but they appear to share some bleak tones. In Dale Pendell's *The Great Bay* (2010), which tells the millennia long story of the flooded Central Valley in California, retreat from coastal cities fails to have any significant mitigating effect, as rapid SLR is coupled with other disasters, including a pandemic, and humanity slides back to a more primitive way of living. Steven Spielberg's *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001) depicts two distinct time periods. The main portion of the story features a technologically advanced society enjoying life in inland suburbs and new coastal cities as the flooded old ones either slowly crumble, or in rare occasions are accommodated by tech companies for shady purposes. However, the film's ending reveals that despite its temporary success, the retreated humanity still fails to adapt to ongoing climate change in the following relatively short time frame of 2000 years and goes extinct. These narratives underline the interconnected nature of the consequences of climate change and pose the question of whether a society compelled to retreat because of rising sea levels can secure its survival amidst further impacts of the climate change.

Not all retreat narratives are that fatalistic though. The framing story of George Turner's *The Sea and Summer* (1987) illustrates how retreat may shape the evolution of a highly climate-aware advanced society over generations. Yet, as the main body of the novel unfolds, it becomes apparent that this enlightenment comes at a steep price. The initial breakdown of coastal defenses prompts a retreat stratified by class. While the upper classes move inland, most of the population is forced to endure inhumane and oppressive accommodations in partially submerged high-rises as refugees. Moreover, the narrative suggests that future generations may be struggling to fully grasp these hardships endured by their predecessors during this transformative process. Focusing on the process of adaptation itself, the goal-oriented medium of video games on the other hand posit retreat as challenge in the form of a new type of slow re-colonization of the planet players must undertake, either in an orderly fashion under corporate control as in *Anno 2070* (Ubisoft, 2011), or as a last-ditch effort of bands of climate refugees, as in *Floodland* (Ravenscourt, 2022). In both games players are challenged by both environmental factors and the other human factions, conveying the social complexities inherent in retreat. All in all, these narratives characterize retreat as a new but uncertain and challenging beginning, a long-term evolving process that undergoes continual change and requires constant adaptation.

Conclusion

Narratives depicting cities and coastal settlements facing the threat of SLR, collectively serve as an invaluable tool for cultivating a holistic understanding of the intricate interplay between climate change, humanity, and its aspirations for sustainable adaptation. On an individual level, each story provides further insights into the potential challenges of the resilience strategies they portray. Stories centered on strategies preserving current urban environments seem to accurately depict their viability primarily in optimistic scenarios of SLR and acknowledge their inherent fragility as long-term solutions. Similarly, narratives depicting retreat align with IPCC projections, highlighting the complexities of this strategy. Finally, most narratives of continuous adaptation address the ongoing and evolving nature of climate change in a comprehensive manner, reflecting the fluidity inherent in the IPCC's resilience strategies. However, techno-optimism prevails in stories relying on extreme engineering solutions or wonder materials, whether to maintain urban environments or create alternatives. These narratives strive to balance their reliance on future inventions with intricate portrayals of the social and economic challenges such solutions may introduce. Continuation of class disparity, corruption, and exploitation of climate refugees are thus common themes. Overall, while the magnitude and timeframe of SLR, and their material limitations are defining factors of the success or failure of resilience strategies in climate narratives, social and humanitarian costs of maintaining them also play a major role.

Climate change entails various unknowns and uncertainties. Given a trajectory of energy-intensive global economic practices heavily dependent on fossil fuels, coastal cities and settlements may experience sudden and extreme SLR. Adaptation may become unattainable, and both protection and advancement may falter, leaving retreat as a potentially costly but necessary, yet still uncertain only option. Depictions of urban adaptations to SLR in speculative fiction can help us envision such futures and encourage audiences to act upon their prevention. Nevertheless, further studies on the details of these depictions in a holistic manner is needed. A deeper analysis of how individual resilience strategies are depicted, on which aspects their creators focused and which aspects they left out can foster a deeper understanding of these visions and their viability.

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The Virus Filter: Retro-mediation, Dystopia, and the Remediation of Audiovisual Imaginaries[1]

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Abstract

The paper starts from a twofold observation. Firstly, as a "total social fact" (Mauss, 2016), COVID-19 has redefined crucial moments of individual and collective life (birth, marriage, death, etc.) and every dimension of human activity (economy, politics, culture). Secondly, the pandemic imposed a new iconography based on identifiable objects and practices (masks, disinfectant gels, supermarket queues, vaccine syringes, etc.) (Mitchell, 2017; Pintor Iranzo, 2020). In some ways, a reversal of dystopian narratives, literary and audiovisual of previous decades seem to many. Therefore, we intend to reflect on 'retro-mediation' as a new logic of remediation of past (audio)visual cultures fuelled by the feeling of living in a dystopian present. This logic directly connects with Richard Grusin's 'pre-mediation' (Grusin, 2004; 2010) processes. On the one hand, retro-mediation is shaped by the forces of pre-mediation, which, by simultaneously containing and fuelling anxiety about the pandemic management, foster emotional alertness and constant familiarity with the visual cultures of the virus. On the other hand, retro-media logics are defined by the virus' ability to affect our imagination since our bodies – authentic biological media – become the 'mediators' of contagion and, therefore, central factors in the re-imagination of the past. Thus, retro-mediation will be analysed as a media logic of re-imagining the past, which – in the wake of the reversal of dystopia in the present – takes the form of retroactive remediation through which users project symbols, icons, and dystopian elements, drawn from pandemic visual culture, onto the audiovisual images of the pre-COVID-19 years. The examples examined, taken from the TV series *The Big Bang Theory*, *POSE*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, and *Pushing Daisies*, will highlight the sociocultural mechanisms brought into play by retro-mediation, capable of conditioning the forms of production, reproduction, and reconversion of social imaginaries (Marzo & Meo, 2019).

Keywords: Retro-Mediation, Radical-Mediation, Pre-Mediation, Dystopia, Social Imaginary, Visual Cultures.

Introduction

Many novels, movies and TV series have recounted future eras in which

[1] The two authors jointly designed the paper. Mario Tirino wrote paragraphs 1, 3 and 4, Lorenzo Denicolai wrote paragraphs 2 and 5.

viruses ravaged humanity, changing the social structures of the Western civilization. The COVID-19 pandemic, therefore, could be conceived as a kind of inversion of a dystopian future, which has been reversed in everyday reality around the world, starting in the early 2020s. The COVID-19 pandemic is a very clear example of a 'total social fact.' According to Marcel Mauss (1924), an event can be called a "total social fact" when it is capable of affecting all rites of passage of human beings and every sphere of social action. A full-bodied visual imaginary (Pintor Iranzo, 2020), populated by objects such as masks, disinfectant gels, syringes containing vaccines, and practices such as the discipline of access (the queue), immunization, and sanitization, was generated by multiple subjects before, during, and after COVID-19.

Our work intends to start from the concept of pre-mediation developed by Richard Grusin (2004, 2010). Indeed, this concept offers a theoretical framework within which we can reflect on a new media logic, to which we have given the name "retro-mediation." Retro-mediation is shaped by the affective and cognitive forces triggered by pre-mediation, which were produced both by those narratives that pre-mediated the pandemic and by the everyday rituals of institutional communication and news media.

As Grusin (2010) explains, pre-mediation serves a dual socio-communicative function. On the one hand, through information disseminated circularly by institutional agencies (the official sources) and the news media, it contains anxiety regarding an unknown future full of danger. On the other hand, however, pre-mediation feeds on this continuous production of data and information: in this way, it feeds disquiet and anxiety, as viewers are in search of continuous confirmation or denial of their concerns. Ultimately, the cultural logic of pre-mediation has fostered emotional alertness and intimacy with the iconography of the virus.

In contrast, retro-mediation can be defined as a media logic of re-imagining the past. At total social events, such as a war or, indeed, a pandemic, there is the reversal of dystopian scenarios in the present. On the basis of such concretization of dystopia in everyday experience, retro-mediation acts as a kind of retroactive remediation of cultural and media products of the past: we project onto them symbols and icons of the dystopian present.

As we will see shortly, retro-mediation can thus be interpreted as the embodiment of a massified dystopian gaze on pre-pandemic cultural objects, which are re-experienced based on the emotional experience of the viral catastrophe and the aesthetics it generated.

Pandemic Media

In the past three years, the world has faced a pandemic that has produced remarkable consequences on the daily activities of millions of people. COV-

ID-19 has changed our experience of the world in many spheres of daily interaction: education, work, health, leisure, and especially social relationships. Lockdowns have also changed our relationship with the media. Due to force majeure, individuals have perceived technology as the only concrete alternative to human relationships. Digital connections made it possible to bypass the prohibitions imposed by the emergency. Digital environments have assumed a primary function in educational and training processes, in commercial exchanges, and in almost all professional activities.

The effects of this scenario of profound mediatization of society and culture are evident: a notable rise in media consumption; the strengthening of imbalances and inequalities related to hyperconnectedness (generally attributable to various forms of digital divide); and the reorganization of entire sectors of cultural and media business.

In this context, our specific object of analysis was the proliferation of social-media imagery triggered by COVID-19, capable of profoundly affecting both the perception of everyday reality and the reinterpretation of audiovisual products "consumed" during the pandemic. This action of re-interpretation of pre-pandemic media products consists of attributing to particular objects and signs a meaning different from the original one due to the conditioning of pandemic imagery.

Our paper, therefore, aims to illustrate this socio-communicative process, which we call "retro-mediation," from a theoretical framework in which Media Theory, Sociology of cultural processes, and Film Studies coexist.

Social Imaginaries and Media Imaginaries

Our paper starts from two closely intertwined research questions.

1) Has COVID-19 changed the ways in which we construct and perceive social imaginaries? In what ways?

2) Can we identify a new media logic, called 'retro-mediation,' whereby we project the cultural anxieties generated by the pandemic onto the cultural products of the pre-pandemic era? What role do visual imaginaries of the pandemic play in this process?

As we mentioned earlier, COVID-19 in its globalized and mediatized dimension can be conceived as a true 'total social fact' (Mauss, 1924). Indeed, the pandemic affects every sphere of human action (political, economic, social, cultural, etc.) and every rite of passage in personal life (birth, marriage, funeral, etc.). It prompts sociologists and media theorists to reconfigure the conceptual tools at their disposal, with the aim of analysing the mutations of social imaginaries in greater depth.

Charles Taylor (2004) defines the imaginary as "the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on be-

tween them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations" (p. 23).

These modern social imaginaries has three main characteristics: (1) "The way ordinary people 'imagine' their social surroundings (…) is carried in images, stories, and legends (…)"; (2) "the social imaginary is shared by large groups of people, if not the whole society"; (3) "the social imaginary is that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy" (Taylor, 2004, p. 23).

Social imaginaries and media imaginaries, therefore, are not the same thing. However, media imaginaries can somehow contribute to the fortification or, conversely, to the devastation of social imaginaries. In any case, social imaginaries and media imaginaries are part of a larger collective imaginary, nurtured by contradictory dynamics.

It seems useful to us, therefore, to reflect on the relationship between these two essential symbolic and social structures. Media imaginaries can be conceived as an always-on communicative process (Abruzzese, 1973, 2007), a kind of processual and myth-making machine, continuously fed by an uninterrupted flow of media narratives (novels, movies, TV series, comics, video games, and so on). Media imaginaries concur to produce shared definitions of reality in the same way that social imaginaries do. Indeed, in the digital age, increasingly the social construction of reality is partially replaced by the media construction of reality, as Nick Couldry and Andreas Hepp (2016) write. Within this theoretical framework, we intend to reflect on the concepts of pre-mediation and retro-mediation in relation to the profound mutation of imaginaries (social and media) activated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The concept of pre-mediation, formulated by Grusin (2004; 2010), refers to the ability of information media (in particular, television) to pre-figure the future, presenting multiple possible scenarios, on occasions of crisis such as natural disasters, wars, and terrorist attacks.

Pre-mediation has the paradoxical ability to contain users' anxiety and, at the same time, to fuel it. On the one hand, it offers answers with respect to the uncertainties of an unknown future. On the other, it – through ritualized, daily appointments – nurtures a constant state of alertness in media users.

However, the digital mediascape is characterized by multiple media logics and no longer by a single media logic (Altheide & Snow, 1979). As Couldry and Hepp (2016) state, in the last two decades we are dealing with a "media manifold," which is fluidly shaped through the fusion of multiple media, which hybridize with each other. This dynamic of re-mediation, theorized fully by Jay D. Bolter and Richard Grusin (1999), lays the foundation for the evolutionary trajectories of the global media system. The media system, in the digital age, is mainly characterized by a proliferation of communication and information spaces and, therefore, a democratization of media access. One of the effects of these processes is the intensification of pre-mediation processes.

Within this composite "media manifold," digital media and traditional media coexist and influence each other. Digital media act as true affective environments (Farci, 2019; Tirino & Castellano, 2020), mediating collective affectivity. Old media – television in particular – are still active players in pre-mediation processes. Old and new media, during the pandemic, similarly helped to pre-mediate future scenarios on the growth of infection curves, the number of deaths, the effectiveness of vaccines, and so on. In Italy, for example, two communicative rituals, such as the daily bulletin of the Civil Defense and the cyclical press conferences of the Prime Minister, Giuseppe Conte, have consistently pre-mediated future pandemic scenarios.

The digital mediascape is marked by a friction between different forms of pre-mediation. The pre-mediated future scenarios are very different from each other. Some achieve the effect of defending the legitimacy of public health policies. Other scenarios, however, challenge such policies: they criticize prevailing definitions of reality, fomenting phenomena such as conspiracy and denialism. Different forms of pre-mediation are related to as many ways of conceiving and imagining social interactions. Alongside 'intensive' pre-mediation, there is 'slow' pre-mediation. While the former is related to the crucial role of news media (particularly all news media, such as broadcasters providing 24-hour news), the latter is fueled by various types of narratives.

Novels[2], films[3], television series[4], and comics[5] have imagined dystopian fictional universes in which a pandemic, due in some way to the uncontrolled and uncontrollable spread of viruses, disrupts the social, political, and economic arrangements of the Western civilization.

On the basis of available statistics and data, research in the fields of Future Studies, virology and infectious diseases has, over the decades, outlined some scenarios, more or less likely, on the effects of possible future pandemics. These fictions can be conceived as forms of "slow" pre-mediation of visual imaginaries of the pandemic. In some way, the COVID-19 pandemic was experienced by many individuals as a kind of inversion of a dystopian future that materialized on the horizon of everyday life.

The joint consequence of this double movement of 'slow' and 'intensive' pre-mediation is that people experience a radical mutation of their social life.

[2] *I am Legend* (R. Matheson, 1954), *Bladerunner* (A.E. Nourse, 1974), *The Stand* (S. King, 1978), *The Last Town on Earth* (T. Mullen, 2006), *World War Z* (M. Brooks, 2006), *The Fireman* (J. Hill, 2016).

[3] *12 Monkeys* (T. Gilliam, 1995), *Children of Men* (A. Cuarón, 2006), *Carriers* (A. Pastor and D. Pastor, 2009), *Contagion*, (S. Soderbergh, 2011).

[4] *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010-22), *The Last Ship* (TNT, 2014-18), *Containment* (The CW, 2016), *See* (Apple TV+, 2019-22), *Station Eleven* (HBO Max, 2021-22), *The Last of Us* (HBO, 2023-present).

[5] *Eden: It's an Endless World!* (H. Endo, 1998-2008), *Y: The Last Man* (B. Vaughn and P. Guerra, 2002-07), *Crossed* (G. Ennis and J. Burrows, 2008-10), *I Am a Hero* (K. Hanazawa, 2009-17).

Indeed, the pandemic has totally altered rituals, rhythms, circumstances and modes of social relations: it has forced individuals to rethink their very lifestyles. The 'new normal' has revolved around a re-design of physical spaces, including intimate ones, and a re-planning of cultural spaces.

As we mentioned earlier, the media narratives of COVID-19 produced the construction of a precise visual imaginary of the pandemic, based on elements such as masks, physical distancing, disciplining access to public activities, coffins, mass graves, personal protective equipment, artificial ventilation helmets, intubated individuals, syringes with vaccines, vaccination centers, empty streets and squares, and so on. This visual imagery has deeply shaped social imaginaries. In particular, it has affected the ways in which we imagine social interactions and relationships.

Moreover, the need to give coronavirus a recognizable face has stimulated the proliferation of different modes of representation. This need is also related to the need of many individuals to rely on the media (especially news media) to understand complex scientific concepts. Many artifacts (videos, posts, etc.) have been created to fulfill this deep communicative need. News media have processed data and information into visual devices, the goal of which is to make the virus cognitively and perceptually visible. Such objects are in effect post-media devices (Eugeni, 2021), i.e., media resources with which users come into contact at multiple levels (cognitive, emotional, etc.). During the pandemic, viewing images of the virus changed our perceptual experience of illness, risk, danger, and relationships, acting especially on the affective level. COVID-19 worked as a prompt (Floridi, 2014) to construct new visual artifacts. These particular objects function as techno-media devices, acting on and with the media users who view them: disposables and human actors form, therefore, a bio-technological assemblage.

From this perspective, we can think of retro-mediation as the result of a kind of short-circuit between media imaginaries and social imaginaries. Media imaginaries nurture a pre-mediation of catastrophe, affecting the restructuring of social imaginaries. Such restructuring of social imaginaries, in turn, shapes the ways in which we perceive and experience media narratives. Ultimately, retro-mediation is exactly this process of retroactive and emotional re-mediation, primarily directed at cultural products of the pre-pandemic past. More specifically, retro-mediation takes the form of the projection of feelings, emotions and affects, related to the 'new' ways of experiencing post-pandemic social life, onto films, TV series, novels, comic books and other cultural products of the pre-pandemic era.

Some Examples of Retro-mediation of TV Series

Let us now proceed to a quick analysis of four empirical cases of retro-me-

diation. The first example is from *Acting Up*, the first episode of the second season of the television series *POSE* (FX, 2018-21), which aired in 2019. *POSE* is an American television drama series about house and ballroom culture, an LGBTQ subculture prevalent in New York City's African American and Latino communities during the 1980s and 1990s. The episode begins with a sequence in which Pray Tell and Blanca, two of the series' main characters, take a boat to Hart's Island. Inside a small office, they explain to an official that they would like to visit the grave of Pray's former partner, Keenan. Later Pray and Blanca move to the grave site and are shocked by the sight of men dressed in protective suits who are carrying wooden crates (marked only with a number) to a mass grave. They go to the grave site and observe men in protective suits carrying numerically marked wooden crates in a collective pile. In the mass grave are piled the bodies of AIDS deaths that have not been claimed by their families.

The viewer who saw the episode during the pandemic makes a direct connection between the AIDS epidemic in LGBTQIA+ communities during the 1980s and 1990s and the COVID-19 pandemic of today. The bodies of those who died from the Coronavirus, in fact, were also hastily buried in communal burials, including in New York City. Both in the *POSE* episode and in the photos documenting the mass graves for COVID-19 sufferers, the tragic dimension of the health catastrophe is visually expressed by the burial of human beings, who have been deprived of the respect and *pietas* they should have rightfully been accorded.

Figure 1: Mass graves in 1990 New York City (*POSE*, episode *Acting Up*, 2019).

The second example involves the well-known sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* (CBS, 2007-19). The protagonists of the series are young nerdy scientists (Tirino & Auriemma, 2021). The episode cited is *The Engagement Reaction*, the

twenty-third episode of the fourth season, which aired in 2011. The protagonist Sheldon Cooper, along with friends, goes to the hospital where Howard Wolowitz's mother is admitted. As he is returning to the waiting room, the extravagant physicist spots a man who is coughing while on a gurney. Terrified of contracting a disease, Sheldon finds refuge in a room, not noticing that a biohazard sign is posted on the door. Once in the room, Sheldon runs into the dumb medical staff, who inform him that he will not be able to leave the hospital because he has been exposed to the virus. Sheldon, terrified, covers his mouth with his T-shirt and declares that he is fine to avoid forced hospitalization.

In the scene with which the episode closes, Leonard Hofstadter, Raj Koothrappali and Howard Wolowitz, dressed in a protective suit, play cards with Sheldon, who is spending the quarantine period in the hospital. The viewer viewing the episode during the pandemic activates a direct connection between this scene and the numerous images of COVID-19 patients stuck in intensive care units. Before experiencing the nefarious consequences of the Coronavirus, Sheldon's paranoid obsession with protecting his own health would have provoked viewers to simply hilarity. However, in the post-pandemic affective atmosphere (Griffero, 2010), the dystopian gaze with which – during the pandemic – we observe protective suits, physical distancing, and viruses triggers in viewers' minds an immediate deferral to the risk of infection. In the world of the "new normal," therefore, even Sheldon's delusional germophobia could be conceived as a legitimate weapon of defense against the unwanted effects of the disease.

Figure 2: Sheldon in quarantine plays cards with his friends, dressed in a protective suit (*The Big Bang Theory*, episode *The Engagement Reaction*, 2011).

The third example is from a dystopian series, *The Handmaid's Tale* (Hulu, 2017-present), based on a novel by Canadian writer Margaret Atwood. The plot recounts a scenario in which the United States is ruled by a theonomic, totalitarian dictatorship that forces the few surviving fertile women, called "Handmaids," to bear children through forced intercourse with the Commanders. In the episode *Unfit*, the eighth episode of the third season, which aired in 2018, the Handmaids are inside the only supermarket they are allowed to go to. Suddenly one of the Handmaids, OfMatthew, steals a gun from one of the guards and threatens to kill Aunt Lydia, a kind of handler of the Handmaids.

In this case, retro-mediation manifests itself through projecting onto the TV series the anguish and tension that viewers experienced in situations where access to public services was strictly controlled and disciplined. Specifically, retro-mediation induces us to interpret as a general condition the imprisonment and disciplining that, in the TV series, is exclusively reserved for women and the Handmaids in particular. The tension that suddenly erupts in the supermarket scene calls to viewers' minds the frequent fights in stores, documented by video and photos, that occurred during the lockdown.

Figure 3: OfMatthew is taken away by Gilead's armed guards after throwing a fit in the supermarket (*The Handmaid's Tale*, episode *Unfit*, 2018).

The fourth example is perhaps one of the most interesting. *Pushing Daisies* (ABC, 2007-09) is an American television series in the comedy-drama genre created by Bryan Fuller and broadcast by ABC. The series centers on the character of Ned, a "pie-maker" who, since childhood, discovers the gift of raising the dead with a single touch. However, this power comes at a high price: in fact, a second touch from Ned kills for good, as he will discover with his own mother. In the pilot episode, *Pie-lette*, Ned brings his childhood love, Chuck,

back to life. However, he faces the painful condition of not being able to have any physical contact with her. In order to express their love, Ned and Chuck are forced to devise a series of devices, such as hugging machines and protective suits with improvised materials. As is well known, similar devices during the pandemic were employed on a large scale to enable fragile and isolated individuals to have physical contact with their family members without running the risk of being infected. In this particular case, retro-mediation works in two ways. On the one hand, the devices created by Ned and Chuck to "touch" each other in the TV series had a romantic and loving overtone. Instead, our dystopian gaze, trained in the pandemic-torn present, prompts us to interpret these objects as everyday contraptions that serve primarily to reduce the risk of infection and are, therefore, deprived of any dreamy tone. On the other hand, Ned's condition, which, in *Pushing Daisies*, is utterly personal and unrepeatable, in the "new normal" is extended to the whole of humanity. In the post-pandemic era, the viewer feels a deep empathy with Ned's character as he experiences his own suffering caused by not being able to touch and be touched by loved ones, especially the elderly and/or frail.

Figure 4: Ned and Chuck kiss, protected by a plastic wrap (*Pushing Daisies*, episode *The Fun in Funeral*, 2007).

Conclusions. Some Basic Principles of Retro-Mediation

Retro-mediation is thus a media logic of reimagining the past. It works as a retroactive and affective "repair," through which users project dystopian symbols, icons, and visual elements, drawn from the visual imagery of the pandemic, onto audiovisual objects produced in the pre-pandemic era. The examples

we have analysed allow us to enucleate the sociocultural processes that that retro-medation could activate.

First, it shapes social imagineries' production, reproduction, and conversion (Marzo & Meo, 2019). Retro-mediation allows us to transfer to cultural objects of the past the feelings of anxiety, distress, and disorientation experienced during the pandemic.

Second, it can be thought of as a dystopian response to the presentification and apparent impossibility of imagining a better future.

Third, retro-mediation functions in an opposite way to Zygmunt Bauman's (2017) concept of retrotopia. While the latter grants individuals emotional comfort through refuge in an idealized past, retro-mediation projects a dystopian present onto the cultural objects of the past.

Fourth, we can better explain the concept of 'retro-mediation' through Carl Plantinga's theory. Carl Plantinga (2009) introduced the concepts of 'emotional contagion', 'memory traces', and 'learned associations'. Emotional contagion is "the phenomenon of 'catching' the emotions of those around us or of those who we observe" (Plantinga, 2009, p. 125): an event's emotional sharing can influence the collective reaction. Similarly, in social media circles, for example, the general reaction to news about COVID-19 played a significant role in structuring widespread sentiment, which became the basis of that collective affectivity, conveyed primarily by images. On the other hand, 'memory traces' and 'learned associations' operate on and modify our experience. The emotions generated by watching a film, and, by extension, any audiovisual product, are "partly the product of learning" (Plantinga, 2009, p. 75). The elements that characterize any audiovisual work of fiction (music, storyline, etc.) activate memory traces connected to users' previous life experiences. According to Platinga, these memories work primarily on an emotional level: they activate emotional intensification uncoupled from the source from which they originated. Retro-mediation, however, operates oppositely. It materializes an affective state from the memory traces linked by the emotional contagion generated by the virus. These traces, reinforced by the previously illustrated pre-mediation, affect the way we view and experience audiovisual texts prior to the emergence of COVID-19.

Fifth, the media logic of retro-mediation can be learned through the agency theory elaborated by Alfred Gell (1999) about ritual visual artifacts. According to Gell, a human agent operates on the non-human agent (a totem, image, etc.), which, in turn, retroactively acts on the human (making him or her feel 'changed'). Similarly, retro-mediation acts on both emotional and cognitive levels and, therefore, results from these two intertwined levels. It derives from emotion because COVID-19 and its images work through emotional contagion, including memory traces and learned associations.

As mentioned above, retro-mediation materializes emotional states and revives them in the experience of visual objects made before the pandemic.

Therefore, retro-mediation is a process of media affect, emotional and cognitive and has retroactive value, especially when applied to audiovisual media.

It can be interpreted as an illusory process, perhaps even a kind of *pareidolia*. Retro-mediation takes the form of a retroactive reading that starts from the object in front of us: a movie, a TV series, a comic book, etc. Such retroactivity is triggered by the multiple acts of pre-mediation from which the visual imagery of the pandemic came to life, often re-signifying ordinary objects. Retro-mediation transformed, for example, a standard surgical mask into a COVID-19 symbol. This artifact evolves into an agent capable of activating associative memory, somewhat connected with the dynamics of emotional contagion. The repeatability of these processes for multiple artifacts, events, and phenomena build the basis for the visual imaginary of the pandemic, which sets up the symbolic *paraphernalia* of post-pandemic dystopia that users have at their disposal to retro-mediate past cultures.

Finally, we highlight three possible developments of our research.

First, it would be useful to investigate the interference between pre-mediation and retro-mediation processes: how do the two modes of perception and re-mediation of audiovisual narratives mutually influence each other?

Second, the media logic of retro-mediation could be investigated over a broader period to test both the symbolic-affective significance of the pandemic on media processes.

Finally, further research could examine the possibility that other events (natural disasters, wars, etc.) may activate similar dynamics of retro-mediation.

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Annihilation (Alex Garland, 2018), Images of the COVID-19 Pandemic, and the Possibility of a Future Without "Us"

Alice Giuliani

Abstract

This article explores how digital images may articulate more-than-human worlds. I begin with Alex Garland's New Weird film *Annihilation* to discuss the ways in which it breaks down the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman, picturing an anti-anthropocentric world in which life flourishes without caring for "us". I engage with the film's story as well as the computer-generated effects that dissolve the human into flows of matter, drawing conceptual convergences. By referring to Gilles Deleuze's third synthesis of time in relation to digital images, I argue that the film can be seen as presenting us with aesthetic articulations of an open and inhuman future to come – of wondrous yet terrifying flourishings of life after "us" humans. Following the environmental concerns of VanderMeer's eponymous novel, from which the film was adapted, I discuss how the film, significantly, evokes imagery of cellular cancerous mutations, contaminations, and post-apocalyptic flourishings of wilderness in spaces that were once inhabited by humans. The final part of this article offers some initial considerations on how *Annihilation*'s concerns are momentous. In particular, by exploring resonances between the film and popular images and discourses from the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, I hope to show how the film – which may be seen as depicting a pandemic of sorts, affecting human and nonhuman entities alike – can illuminate aspects of the present moment.

Keywords: *Annihilation*, Weird, Anthropocene, COVID-19, CGI.

Introduction

In 2020, at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, in the Internet flow of things some curious images began to crop up: Welsh sheep seemingly enjoying a playground wheel, dolphins zooming through the canals of Venice, happily drunken elephants passed out in a field somewhere in China. Some of these images were real, some were not. Some were "fake news", misplaced and misrepresented – curious inaccuracies through which we formulated stories of nonhuman flourishing in "our" absence.

Online, we produced and, in turn, watched *a world without "us"*.

At the same time, in March 2020, I was starting to put together some notes on Alex Garland's *Annihilation* (2018), the cinematic adaptation of Jeff Van-

derMeer's eponymous New Weird novel (2015a)[1]. In the film, in an unspecified region of North America we only know as Area X, a meteorite-like object has fallen onto earth and caused some mysterious transformations to take place in the surrounding environment. Lena, a biology professor and veteran, volunteers for the next exploratory mission into Area X after her husband is the first person to ever return from it, albeit in critical conditions. From the outside, the area appears surrounded by "the Shimmer", a wall of liquid-looking and rainbow-coloured matter – a strange border which expands slowly but surely. Once inside Area X, Lena and her team venture into its strange wilderness. The Area appears as a swampland populated by hybrid life forms. These, Lena observes, are anomalous in many ways: they are inter-species, if not inter-kingdom, crossings, and develop rapidly, randomly, and inexplicably. All that lives in the area is affected by this mutations, swept up in flows of genetic exchanges. Early in the expedition, the team comes across the body of a member of a previous mission, exploded and pinned to a wall by what looks like colourful lichenous and fungal growths which extend from his stomach outwards and onto the concrete. Lena realises that humans are not exempt from the transformations which are reformulating life in Area X: its flows of matter do not care for the human and blur its bodily boundaries with other species. Life and death entwine: as nonhuman life flourishes, the human contemplates its own visceral fragility.

In *Annihilation*, Lena witnesses, as it unfolds, *a future without "us"*.

In this paper, I begin with *Annihilation* and the ways in which the film breaks down the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman, picturing an anti-anthropocentric world in which life flourishes without caring for the human. By engaging with its story as well as the computer-generated effects which dissolve the human into the flows of matter, and by referring to Gilles Deleuze's third synthesis of time to think about digital images, I will argue that the film can be seen as presenting us with aesthetic articulations of an open and inhuman future to come – of wonderous yet terrifying flourishings of life after "us" humans. The story of *Annihilation*, originally inspired by the Deepwater Horizon oil spill (VanderMeer, 2015b), is a story of climate change and anthropogenic contaminations – of more-than-human enmeshments, a changing planet, and the possibility of human extinction. In VanderMeer's novel, if the forces of environmental change which erupt in Area X are of alien origin, they are also a clear metaphor for human-made ones. The author's environmental concerns are, then, kept alive in Garland's adaptation: the film, significantly, insistently evokes imagery of cellular cancerous mutations, as well as post-apocalyptic flourishings of wilderness in spaces that were once inhabited by humans.

[1] This paper is part of ongoing work on Garland's film. For the part of this work that has already been published, which I also reference in this article, see Giuliani (2023). In this paper, I sketch out a further extension of my thinking about the film.

In the final part of this paper, I will offer some initial considerations on how the perspective the film offers onto an inhuman future is momentous. In particular, by exploring resonances between the film and popular images and discourses from the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, I hope to show how the film – which may be seen as depicting a pandemic of sorts, affecting human and non-human entities alike – can illuminate aspects of the present moment.

Digital Images of Inhuman Futures

As I have argued elsewhere (Giuliani, 2023, p. 108), the way in which, in *Annihilation*, bodies are remixed and re-mattered, as it were, is strongly evocative of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of becoming, as elaborated in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Here, Deleuze and Guattari (2013) describe becomings as instances of symbiosis, assemblage, and alliance which "bring into play beings of totally different scales and kingdoms, with no possible filiation" (p. 278). Becoming is a transformation not based on reproduction or representation: it is a nonlinear movement unbound from pre-determined flows of progression and regression; a permanently impermanent state of material relation and transformation which "produces nothing other than itself" (Deleuze & Guattari, 2013, p. 277). While an in-depth discussion of becoming is beyond the scope of the current paper, I want to reiterate that it is my argument that *Annihilation*, like the concept of becoming and anthropogenic climate change, invites us to contemplate a world of entanglements and relations, in which the human loses its long-standing status as an isolated and privileged entity in the world (Giuliani, 2023)[2]. At the same time, as I have argued in the same article, in *Annihilation* the process of disintegration and becoming-other of the human is matched by a process of becoming-digital (Giuliani, 2023): a digital film, it sees the digitally captured human body turned into manipulable data so that, quite pragmatically, becomings and transformations may become visually possible[3]. In this paper, I argue that the film's images articulate a future without us.

Theorists of digital cinema have already begun to trace connections between digital images, contemporary media culture, and future-oriented thinking. D. N. Rodowick (2007), for instance, writes that "synthetic or digital expressions always have an air of science fiction about them" as they "anticipate a future world that has already emerged in the present" (p. 176). In her discussion of "neuro-images", Patricia Pisters (2015), in turn, notes that "we have entered a period in which we, collectively, predominantly think from a fu-

[2] For in-depth commentary on anti-anthropocentrism in Deleuze and Guattari see, for example, Beaulieu (2011), Ruddick (2017), and Stark (2017).

[3] In a short article, Toby Neilson (2020) also notes that, while in certain films about environmental trouble there is a tendency to distinguish between recorded humans and computer-generated nonhuman entities, *Annihilation*'s peculiarity lies in its blending of the two through the use of CGI.

ture-perspective," (p. 127; see also Pisers 2011; 2012) according to a temporal flow that moves from the future into the present. If Rodowick (2007) insists that the futural quality of the digital has to do with a feeling of frustration with respect to our inability to "attain the more nearly perfect (future) knowledge of computers and computer communications" (p. 176), Pisters (2015) rather emphasises "a sense of openness of the future with respect to expectancy and archiving" (p. 128). For Pisters (2015, p. 8), this kind of thinking is to be understood in relation to what Lev Manovich (1999) calls the "database logic" of remixing which permeates digital image culture. Databases and their operations, she argues, have fundamentally to do with a view of time that is rooted in the future: "Remixing and re-ordering are things that one does from future points of view, in *the third synthesis of time*", which "cuts, assembles, and (re)orders from the virtual of the past and the future to create something new" (Pisters 2015, p. 128, emphasis added). Pisters connects the operations of databases and digital culture to a particular way of seeing time that matches what Deleuze (1994) calls, in *Difference and Repetition*, the "third synthesis" or "empty form" of time. Rooting her argument in Deleuze's *Cinema* books (2013a; 2013b) as well as *Difference and Repetition*, she argues that, while what Deleuze calls the "movement-image" can be associated with his first synthesis of time (of the present) and the "time-image" can be associated with the second synthesis (of the past), what she names the contemporary "neuro-image" is an expression of the third synthesis of time, or of the future as eternal return (Pisters, 2011; 2015). Pisters' (2011) broader argument, which concerns itself with films that picture "directly [the] mental landscapes" of the characters (p. 110) while adopting a remixing logic, takes a rather different direction from the one that is pursued in this article[4]. However, her work offers useful insights: the point of view "from the future" that Pisters discusses is fundamentally related to a number of future-oriented phenomena of contemporary culture, from the proliferation of surveillance and prevention strategies to – and this is particularly relevant to my discussion – the question of the future of planet Earth (Pisters, 2012; 2015). I ask, where else can the third synthesis of time be found? How else can digital images articulate the world according to a similar futural logic? To what ends?

In the third synthesis of time, developed by Deleuze in *Difference and Repetition* via Nietzsche's concept of the eternal return, the past and the present are dimensions of the future, in a synthesis that "cuts, assembles, and orders from them, to select the eternal return of difference" (Pisters, 2012, p. 139). As the past and the present reoccur, they "return" but not as the same, instead giving birth to the "absolutely new itself", which is a "repetition […] by

[4] Pisters' discussion of the futural temporality of "database logic" mostly focusses, by carrying out a more strictly Deleuzian film analysis, on the formal and narrative "impurities" of films that combine the moving-image and time-image regimes.

excess" (Deleuze, 1994, p. 90). Return, from the point of view of the future, is mediated by "the intermediary of metamorphosis" (Deleuze, 1994, p. 90) – the truly new (the unfathomable, the unthinkable, the unpredictable) can only come to be through multiplication, variation and incessant change, and infinite assemblages of what was already there, which becomes a dimension of what is to come. Thus, the third synthesis of time "affirms everything of the multiple, everything of the different, everything of change" (Deleuze, 1994, p. 115) – in other words, it is the time of becoming. The third synthesis of time as eternal return also brings with itself the tension between life and death that, as I have hinted above, is distinctive of the philosophy of becoming: Daniel Voss (2013) explains that, while becoming necessarily carries a destructive potential and has a "lethal impact", it also, and most importantly, "manifests a positive and productive power" by bringing "the abandoned subject to a point of metamorphosis, when all its possibilities of becoming are set free" (p. 207). This open-ended, horrifying but flourishing, future of change and metamorphosis is that which we see in *Annihilation*, but it is also the prospect of our own extinction – imagined as making way for nonhuman life to continue without us. At the beginning of *Difference and Repetition*, when Deleuze (1994) writes that "[this] should have been an apocalyptic book (the third time in the series of times)" (p. xxi), he associates the third synthesis of time with the kind of end-of-the-world speculation, the thinking at the limits, that philosophy and science fiction should, in his view, preoccupy themselves with. I argue that *Annihilation* relies on digital images as belonging to the third synthesis of time to undo the human and open it up to something *else*. This dissolution takes place, in the film, on the brink of the apocalypse – at the limit of a well-known, all-too-human world, and against the background of environmental collapse. The film and its images, then, ask of us that we imagine the end of *our, human,* world – which is what we did, in that spring of 2020.

Looking at Images of the COVID-19 Pandemic through *Annihilation*

Annihilation's visions of empty human dwellings, populated exclusively by wildly growing vegetation and nonhuman animals because of the diffusion of an infectious force, possess a striking resonance with the images of empty cities which circulated at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. I want to suggest that the environmental impetus and interest in contamination of *Annihilation*, while born out of concern for the BP Oil Spill, may speak to other events linked to anthropogenic climate change–chief among them, and the topic of this last section of my paper, is the Coronavirus pandemic.

The burgeoning effects of the Shimmer on planet Earth, leading to a re-articulation of the human's position within it, resonate with questions, posed by scholars of critical posthumanism and New Materialism, about nonhuman

agencies and their destabilising effects on the world as "we" know it. Jane Bennett (2010), in her book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, argues that to consider the vital agency of nonhuman entities may illuminate the existence of a lively world of broad and shifting assemblages. In a short passage, she mentions viruses as the kind of nonhuman agent which may turn all-too-human worlds upside-down, writing, "Can an avian virus jump from birds to humans and create havoc for systems of health care and international trade and travel?" (Bennett, 2010, p. 107). If Bennett's comments are prescient, this is because the COVID-19 pandemic is surely not the first major viral event to enter the course of human history. Here, however, I want to linger on two of the specific ways in which Coronavirus called for anti-anthropocentric thinking and posed the question of a world without us, and suggest that these may be illuminated by *Annihilation*. Firstly, if pandemics may be nothing new, the intensity of the digital mediation of Coronavirus and its aftermath is unprecedented, and thus constitutes a specific reason for attention from media scholars. Images of the pandemic and their online circulation arguably became, to borrow Elizabeth Ezra's (2017) words, one of "the ways in which humans are prosthetically engaged with life beyond the human in the global age". Through *Annihilation*, I have considered modes of becoming-other of the human in conjunction with its becoming-digital, as well as the post-anthropocentric potential of the digital remix and "database logic". Now, I use them to discuss images of the pandemic. Secondly, I argue that the affective ambiguity, or tension, that pervades *Annihilation*, in which horror and wonder are mixed and which is typical of New Weird fiction (Ulstein, 2017), also chimes with, and thus speaks to, the multitude of emotional responses that accompanied the online circulation of images of empty human dwellings during the pandemic.

In this last section, I want to delineate some initial thoughts on the potential relevance of *Annihilation* to the present moment, by looking at the images of nonhuman flourishings within emptied-out human dwellings which circulated on social media at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic as laboratories of worlds and futures without "us". I will do so here in the form of a few questions and provisional reflections.

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How did we become-other and -digital during the COVID-19 pandemic? Firstly, it is worth noting that the Coronavirus pandemic was part and parcel of the Anthropocene. The diffusion of SARS-CoV-2, a zoonotic virus (World Health Organisation, 2021, p. 82), was sparked by and at the same time brought to the fore the complexities of already existing more-than-human material entanglements (Gibbs, 2022). At the same time, during the COVID-19 pandemic, we also entered new becomings. We became-virus as it circulated within our bodies, and as we witnessed ways of living and dying with it. We became-virus

as potentially dangerous carriers, capable of affecting others. We also became-virus in some kinds of potentially dangerous popular environmental discourse, which asked, echoing a famous monologue from *The Matrix* (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999), if it is "us humans" who are, in fact, *the* virus – are "we" the dangerous parasites of planet Earth? At the same time, we also became-digital or, perhaps more correctly, our becoming-digital intensified. We were asked to share our data for research and contact tracing: our (infected) bodies were turned into information – "*bits of life*", to use Nina Lykke and Anneke Smelick's (2008) figuration. We became-digital as we watched the pandemic unfold on a variety of home screens and, at the same time, turned to those same screens to seek solace and connection at a distance. Our affects became entangled with digital devices and moving images: Netflix and TikTok became places of respite.

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Does the remix logic of "viral" pandemic images articulate a kind of thinking about the future? The images of animals wandering in formerly human dwellings became a pandemic sensation: the question of the relationships and boundaries between humans and nonhumans went "viral", as it were. Videos of playful Welsh sheep, photographs of deer wandering the streets of Nara, penguins enjoying a walk around an aquarium, and ducks in the squares of Paris were circulating on TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, and shared again and again by news outlets. Some of these were real, some were cases of misinformation: the videos of dolphins reclaiming the canals of Venice, Italy were in fact shot in Sardinia, and the news of corn-wine-drunken elephants passed out in fields somewhere in China were quickly debunked. The existence of these images was informed by the workings of database logic as described by Pisters: they were continuously remixed and reworked, assembled in Twitter threads and YouTube compilations. In some cases, as "fake news", some of these images returned not as the same, but recontextualised and carriers of new meaning. The various logics of remixing that animated the circulation of these images, I argue, conjoined with their content, solidified into a kind of future-perspective and became a way to collectively imagine and work through the affects of a future without "us".

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How does it feel *to imagine a world and future without "us"?* It is not a concern of this paper to evaluate the veracity of the reports in question: what interests me is the way in which these images without humans – a version of what Joanna Zylinska (2017) might call "nonhuman photography" – carry the imagination of a world after the extinction of the human. If fear and horror were pandemic affects, what seemed to be circulating along with these images was also a kind of sense of wonder and relief at the prospect of "rewilding": in

an article for the *New York Times*, Helen Macdonald (2020) argues that these images offered "comfort". She writes that, while the COVID-19 pandemic is a consequence of anthropogenic climate change and thus adds to already-circulating anxieties, these reports "work against such corrosive forms of cynicism and despair." (Macdonald, 2020) This leads me to another question:

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Are the world and future pictured by Annihilation *utopias or dystopias?*[5] The kind of relief at the sight of nonhuman life doing "its thing" in "our" absence carries a risk: that of falling into the ecofascist fantasy of a planet Earth that is "purging itself" from humans as a virus (Klein, 2020). Some questions of an ethical and (bio)political nature emerge: What about those who are *actually* dying? What about the *embodied* experience of being exposed to the virus? And *who*, exactly, is exposed, at risk, and dying? To what extent COVID-19, as it encounters a world, becomes a form of violence perpetrated on certain bodies rather than others? The violent (under)tones of this kind of discourse are noted by Macdonald (2020) herself, as she writes that

> One particular slogan, with variations, appears repeatedly in comments: 'We are actually the virus to our Mother Earth, and coronavirus is just an antibody.' Wildly misanthropic and scientifically incoherent, it is a sentiment that has been circulated approvingly by white supremacists keen to blame immigration and overpopulation for the world's ecological ills.

Even without descending into ecofascism, the question of how far anti-anthropocentrism could go is a pressing one for critical posthumanism. Cary Wolfe, interviewed by Ron Broglio for *Angelaki*, words this well as he asks, "are we then supposed to allow anthrax, and Ebola virus, and Hanta virus, and S.A.R.S., and so on, to achieve their creative flourishing even if it means, you know, a 70 percent die off of the human population?" (Wolfe as cited in Broglio, 2013, p. 184). In a roundtable with Wolfe, Claire Colebrook also asks a particularly helpful question in this respect, when she wonders about the viability of a flat ontology in which "I speak as if from nowhere" (as cited in Anthropocene Curriculum, 2013, 17:16). While answering these questions is far beyond the scope of this paper, I do want to suggest that *Annihilation* may have a suggestion to make, which is neither utopian or dystopian: the film, with its tones typical of the New Weird genre, with its entwining of life and death, suggests that generative possibilities are to be found only by harnessing affective tensions. For thinking about open and non-anthropocentric worlds and futures, we may need *both* terror *and* wonder.

[5] I would like to thank Elisabetta Di Minico for posing this question to me.

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From Modernity to Dystopia: Debord's the *Society of the Spectacle* in Atwood's *Oryx & Crake* as an Outgrowth of Bauman's Liquid Modernity

Javier Álvarez

Abstract

Margaret Atwood (2003) in *Oryx & Crake* embarks upon a post-apocalyptic narrative odyssey that intricately addresses genetic engineering, environmentalism, social stratification, and the profound repercussions of human violence. Central to this paper's discussion is the intriguing interplay between Guy Debord's (1967) seminal construct, *The Society of the Spectacle*, and the overwhelming presence of Liquid Modernity – a concept eloquently fleshed out by the distinguished sociologist, Zygmunt Bauman. In Bauman's framework, Liquid Modernity is typified by a society in a relentless state of transition, constantly reshaping its identity. This fluid societal model becomes deeply intertwined with Debord's exposition on "The Spectacle" as rendered in Atwood's dystopian world. Within the novel, we encounter a sharp critique of a Western society increasingly subsumed by an insidious consumerism and an ever-expanding entertainment complex, wherein even the most private and intimate dimensions of human life are not exempt from commodification. Atwood's masterful juxtaposition of these potent theoretical concepts accentuates an intrinsic relationship between the evolving paradigms of modern society and its seemingly inexorable trajectory towards a dominion marked by unbridled consumerism, superficiality, and alienation. Furthermore, *Oryx & Crake* functions not merely as a reflective lens into the excesses and pitfalls of Western capitalism and its resultant socio-political divisions but also, and perhaps more pertinently, as a prescient warning – illuminating a potentially bleak and calamitous horizon for human civilization.

Keywords: Dystopia, Margaret Atwood, *Liquid Modernity*, *The Society of the Spectacle*, *Oryx & Crake*, Guy Debord, Zygmunt Bauman.

Introduction

In his seminal 1967 treatise, Guy Debord, the French philosopher and literary figure, critically assesses the ramifications of capitalism upon contemporary society. He posits a perspective wherein social interactions have devolved, becoming a mere vestige of their former selves. Debord (1967) articulates, "The spectacle represents money for contemplation's sake; at this juncture, the entirety of practical utility has been exchanged for the full scope of abstract representation. The Spectacle isn't merely subservient to pseudo-utility–it epit-

omizes the very pseudo-utilization of existence" (p. 19). Embedded within the 49th thesis of *The Society of the Spectacle*, this excerpt encapsulates Debord's critique of modern Western societal dynamics. Delving into the nuances of present-day society, he unveils the transformative effects of capitalism on both the macrocosmic and individual dimensions. Puchner (2004) elucidates, "the term 'spectacle'" does not simply denote the mediatization of post-war Western capitalism, but its entire ideology: television; advertising; commodity fetish; super-structure; the whole deceptive appearance of advanced capitalism" (p. 3). Challenging the premise that the Spectacle merely operates as a tool for capitalism to mollify and distract the populace, Debord, in collaboration with other avant-garde artists and political scholars, founded the Situationist International (1957-1972). This movement emerged as a pointed response to the global implications of capitalism he discerned. Morgan and Purje (2016) posit that through an adept paraphrasing of Marx, Debord cements an intrinsic linkage between the Spectacle and economic dynamics. They suggest that interpersonal interactions have shifted from authentic exchanges to representations – a metamorphosis from genuine being to mere semblance. However, a divergence from the Marxian legacy is evident in the Situationist International's emphasis. Instead of production, there's a pronounced focus on consumption, as Best and Kellner observe (2017), who highlight this change of paradigm: "While traditional Marxism accentuated production, the Situationists spotlighted the significance of social reproduction and the emergent paradigms of consumer and media-centric societies post-Marx" (p. 1). In conclusion, Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* provides a critical foundation for understanding Atwood's portrayal of a capitalistically evolved society in *Oryx & Crake*, which he perceives as the malady afflicting the Western hemisphere. Essentially, he reinterprets "Marxist notions of commodity fetishism and alienation tailored for the cinematic, advertising, and televised epoch" (Morgan & Purje, 2016).

Three decades post the release of *The Society of Spectacle*, Zygmunt Bauman, the eminent Polish sociologist and philosopher, unveiled his 1999 magnum opus, *Liquid Modernity*. In this seminal work, Bauman paints society as being perpetually in flux. Antiquated social architectures dissolve, ushering in an order dominated by privatized concerns. The erstwhile communal ethos is supplanted by a pervasive pursuit of individual objectives. The notion of self-establishment is relegated to obsolescence. Bauman (1999) elucidates:

> Our prevailing socio-cultural milieu can be aptly termed as "light" or "liquid" modernity, a stark contrast to the erstwhile "heavy", or more aptly "robust" and "solid" modernity. The current form is not rigidly constructed or managed; it is an omnipresent, permeating, and saturating variant of modernity. (p. 339)

This liquescence engenders a milieu wherein traditional anchors, mores, and normative reference points cease to offer stability or guidance. Gane

(2001) asserts that "the conventional paradigms, ethical codes, or stable referential entities no longer present reliable orientation in individual life trajectories" (p. 269). Familial ties and ancestral roots diminish in importance, overshadowed by an intensified focus on personal ambitions. Bauman (1999) notes the attenuation of reflective strategies for goal attainment and highlights the rampant surge of desirables in modern contexts. Baudrillard (1990), in *Fatal Strategies*, terms this overwhelming array of possibilities as "hypertely", elucidating the sheer volume of potential avenues an individual confronts. Margaret Atwood's dystopian narrative, *Oryx & Crake*, provides poignant illustrations of the themes expounded upon in *Liquid Modernity* and *The Society of the Spectacle*. Atwood, a multifaceted Canadian literary figure, eschews the label of science fiction for her work, advocating for its categorization as speculative fiction. She delineates the distinction, asserting that while science fiction ventures into realms of the fantastical, speculative fiction navigates plausible terrains – "events that could conceivably transpire" (Potts, 2003). Framed within this speculative genre, Atwood's narrative intent seeks to render the reader not as a mere consumer, but as a reflective entity. She opines that literature should function as a mirror where readers discern not the author, but their own visages and the sociocultural milieu they inhabit, as elaborated in *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (Atwood, 1975).

The aim of this paper is to explore how Liquid Modernity and the Spectacle are inextricably linked in this novel, with the latter being the unavoidable consequence of the former. In *Oryx & Crake* Atwood portrays a polarized society deeply influenced by a consumerist attitude, where individual goals are significantly superior and more important than public interests, and where the concepts of roots and family have been relegated to be a second order need. The notion of family is discussed in *Survival*, where Margaret Atwood (1975) states that "in Canadian literature the family is handled quite differently. The Canadian protagonist often feels just as trapped inside his family as his American counterpart, he feels the need for escape but somehow he is unable to break away" (p. 131). This exploration of *The Society of the Spectacle* and *Liquid Modernity* in *Oryx & Crake* leads us to a polarized society, in which Atwood skilfully weaves these theories.

A Spectacular Society Promoted by a Liquid Reality

Oryx & Crake, the first novel of Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy depicts a world ruled by the pharmaceutical industry, where "the relationship between the individual and society is changing because the concepts of identity, individual and individuality are becoming meaningless" (Palese, 2013, p. 1). The upper class of society lives in the "Compounds," which are places designed with the only aim of consumption and promotion. Together with these Com-

pounds the reader finds the Pleeblands, places where the low social class is relegated to a life of second order. Atwood places special emphasis to describe the difference between these two places and the economic power of the former, stating that life in the Compounds is easier and more comfortable than in the Pleeblands. This difference between these two places shows an example of liquid modernity:

> To meet the standards of normality, and to be recognized as a mature and respectable member of society, we must respond quickly and efficiently to the temptations of the consumer goods market. The poor and the idlers, those who have neither a decent income, or credit cards, nor the prospect of better days, are not up to these requirements. (Palese, 2013, p. 2)

The Compounds, with their focus on consumption and status, reflect Bauman's 'Liquid Modernity', in which social structures are ephemeral and individual-centric, and Debord's 'Society of the Spectacle', where life is reduced to a series of superficial images and representations.

Throughout this book, the main character, Jimmy, narrates his life in one of these Compounds before the apocalypse caused by his best friend, Crake. Jimmy "faces a consumerist society that naturalized violence and favors science over any artistic expression. A satirical version of our highly capitalist society" (Silva de Sá, 2014, p. 4). The book portrays both realities: the main character's life in the Compounds and how he has to struggle in order to survive in the hostile and dystopic environment he finds after the apocalypse. During his life in the Compounds, Jimmy notes that each Compound, owned by different pharmaceutical firms, is designed to captivate and attract, reflecting the fluid reality of his existence. Every Compound seems to be better than the other, and being promoted not only means better life conditions, but moving to a better Compound. Individual effort is the only way to promote rather than team work. As Jimmy states, "the HelthWyzer Compound was not only newer than the OrganInc layout, it was bigger. It had two shopping malls instead of one, a better hospital, three dance clubs, even its own golf club" (Atwood, 2008, p. 61). HelthWyzer means the highest social status in a society where appearances are the most important and useful way to establish a social relationship. As Morgan and Purje (2017) state:

> Being is replaced by having, and having is replaced by appearing. We no longer live. We aspire. We work to get richer. Paradoxically, we find ourselves working in order to have a "vacation." We can't seem to actually live without working. Capitalism has thus completely occupied social life. Our lives are now organized and dominated by the needs of the ruling economy.

Debord's (2014) assertion in his thesis 42 that "the Spectacle is the moment

in which commodities reach complete occupation in social life" (p. 55) seamlessly aligns with Atwood's depiction of a commodity-driven society in *Oryx & Crake,* where Jimmy tells how his life is after getting a promotion:

> After a while he was granted a promotion. Then he could buy new toys. He got himself a better DVD player, a gym suit that cleaned itself overnight due to sweat-eating bacteria, a shirt that displayed e-mail on its sleeve while giving him a little nudge every time he had a message, shoes that changed colour to match his outfits, a talking toaster. Well, it was company. He upgraded to a better apartment. (Atwood, 2008, p. 294)

Food business is also absorbed by the Liquid Modernity and the Spectacle. Atwood, through Jimmy's narration, reveals how genetic engineering has been co-opted by capitalist motives, altering food production to prioritize speed and volume over nutritional equity. Nevertheless, this fast production of food is not focused on eradicating hunger or finding a balance in the extremely polarized society they are living in. The protagonist's depiction of a world where meat is not only a luxury commodity but also a symbol of socioeconomic disparity, underscores the skewed priorities in a society where technological advancements in genetic engineering are exploited for elitist benefits, rather than addressing fundamental issues like hunger. Not only expensive but also pure and real, being able to afford something as simple as a steak means power and wealth, thus, giving the consumer a status in a society affected by the illness of capitalism where commodities and abundance are the best way to boast. Taking into account that genetic engineering and artificiality play an essential role in a consumerist and capitalist society, Jimmy explains how the industry of coffee is affected by the desire of production and consumption with the only goal of becoming rich:

> Happicuppa coffee bush was designed so that all its beans would ripen simultaneously and coffee would be grown on huge plantations and harvested with machines. This threw the small growers out of business and reduced both them and their labourers to starvation-level poverty. (Atwood, 2008, p. 210)

Therefore, food is not used as a means of help, but as a way to grow rich. This displacement of small growers by Happicuppa epitomizes the fluidity of Bauman's Liquid Modernity, while simultaneously reflecting Debord's notion of the Spectacle, where capitalist interests override communal welfare. The catastrophic impact of Happicuppa on small-scale producers exemplifies how liquid modernity destabilizes traditional economic structures, while the emphasis on profit maximization mirrors Debord's concept of the Spectacle, wherein human relationships are subordinated to market interests. Moved by a capitalist motivation, Happicuppa growers only aspire to the accumulation, creating

bigger bushes, hence getting more money. Consequently, more money will give the chance to get bigger machines for harvesting, creating a capitalist spinning where the main goal is prosperity through a disproportionate process of production and consumption. The alienation of the worker makes them unable to focus on public interest, selling his labor as a commodity on the market, despite the fact that that capitalist desire negatively affects others up to the point of losing sustenance. Concurrently, the way Happicuppa system impoverishes small growers makes reference to the importance of individual achievements above the public interest, one of the main characteristics of this liquid modernity described by Bauman. Together with the application of genetic engineering in nourishment, the posthuman field cannot escape from the influence of the capitalist system. In the novel, scientists deal with animal mutations in order to create customized organs that are to be used in humans:

> The pigoon organs could be customized, using cells from individual human donors, and the organs were frozen until needed. It was much cheaper than getting yourself cloned for spare parts or keeping for harvest-child or two stashed away in some illegal baby orchard. (Atwood, 2008, p. 27)

While superficially aimed at human benefit, these human-animal hybrid technologies, as Braidotti critiques in *The Posthuman*, ultimately serve the capitalist agenda, distorting natural inter-species relationships for profit. Rosi Braidotti (2013) explains that "advanced capitalism and its bio-genetic technologies engender a perverse form of the post-human. At its core there is a radical disruption of the human-animal interaction, but all living species are caught in the spinning of the global economy" (p. 7). Guy Debord asserts that the Spectacle is an instrument to pacify the masses, so despite the fact that this human-animal combination seems to be designed to offer an ephemeral solution to human illnesses, it is actually promoted by a capitalist desire.

More evidences of this link between the Liquid and the Spectacular are found in the way the pharmaceutical business acts. Guy Debord describes the Spectacle not only as a mediatization of the society, but also as a dictatorship where the government is free to act away from the public opinion. In his book *Comments on The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord (1988) states that "the nuclear industry, both military and civil, demands a far higher level of secrecy than in other fields" (p. 35). However, Atwood gives a different approach in her novel. In a world ruled by the pharmaceutical industry, those who take command of the Compounds have the power to manipulate, create, and destroy. During a conversation with his friend Crake, Crake explains Jimmy how HelthWyzer, the biggest and most profitable private business in this plausible future depicted by Atwood, alters medicines in order to get more money from the citizens the medications are supposed to heal:

> So, you'd need more sick people. Or else – and it might be the same thing – more diseases. New and different ones. Right? HelthWyzer, they've been doing it for years. There's a whole secret unity working on nothing else. Then there's the distribution end. Listen, this is brilliant. They put hostile bioforms into their vitamin pills – their HelthWyzer over-the-counter premium board, you know? (Atwood, 2008, p. 247)

The preoccupation with physical appearance further exemplifies the intertwining of liquid modernity and the Spectacle, transforming body image into a consumable commodity: "Being individuals in the liquid society does not simply mean being good consumers, but also being competitive goods in the global market. Such condition does not only require the purchase of 'fashion items,' but, also, the purchase of a 'fashionable body'" (Palese, 2013, p. 1). In the novel, Jimmy describes people's obsession with their physical condition, always following the pattern of the perfect body that can be shown to the others in an attempt to prove economic wealth. A perfect physical condition is no more a goal that has to be achieved through hard work, time, and perseverance, but a commodity, something that can be purchased. People in the Compounds are constantly bombarded with advertising of sculptural bodies, and the catalogue of products is almost unlimited, including "cosmetic creams, workout equipment, Joltbars to build your muscle-scape into a breathtaking marvel of sculpted granite. Pills to make you fatter, thinner, hairier, balder, whiter, browner, blacker, yellower, sexier, and happier" (Atwood, 2008, p. 291). Our own lack of capacity to look for a true meaning for reality leads us to create an adulterated image of reality. At the same time, the Spectacle plays an essential role in happiness. The capitalist spectacular society pacifies the masses offering new goals, new achievements: "Capitalism – having already served out most basic survival needs (the means to food, shelter, etc.) – relies on fabricating new desires and distractions in order to propagate itself and maintain its oppression over the working classes" (Morgan & Purje, 2016). The perfect body is one of the many distractions that society has to offer. Since individuals are no longer attached to a solid and stable social form, they have to get a fashionable body in order to become productive members of a capitalist society. Being healthy used to be one of the main aspirations years ago, but the situation is the opposite now in the liquid modernity described by Bauman. Dominic Boyer (2002) affirms that "Bauman's schema is valuable: 'fitness' is an ideal of ever-ready-to deploy corporeal energy appropriate to flexible post-industrial work rhythms, just as 'health' calibrated the human body to more stable and predictable industrial rhythms" (p. 355).

The BlyssPluss Pill, a pivotal element in Atwood's narrative, crystallizes the fusion of the spectacular and the liquid modernity, symbolizing the ultimate commodification of human desire and vulnerability. Moved by the misanthropist desire of eradicating the human being, Crake designs it as a way to create

a pandemic that wipes out humanity. The pill is thought to give the humans the chance to strengthen their feelings and senses, but it actually contained the virus of an Ebola-like disease. The advert created to sell the product is the paradigm of the Spectacle:

> Throw Away Your Condoms! BlyssPluss, for the total body experience! Don't live a little, Live a Lot! Simulations of a man and a woman, ripping off their clothes, grinning like maniacs. Then a man and a man. Then a woman and a woman, though for that one they didn't use the condom line. Then a threesome. (Atwood, 2008, p. 367)

The strikingly vibrant nature of this advertisement effectively captivates the audience's attention, compelling them to perceive it as the latest coveted commodity in the marketplace. This pill is the perfect combination of Debord's and Bauman's theories. In a world where the traditional social bases are melting, experiencing new sensations becomes a priority. This emphasis on individual achievements and experiences leads to the constant search of happiness in a society which is in a constant change. Thus, leading to the extreme of making "everything in capitalist society a commodity produced for the market" (Watts, pp. 96-97) or, in other words "the commodification of everything" (Hall, p. 545), encompassing the commodification of the human body itself, regardless of the moral dilemmas it may entail. BlyssPluss pill reflects the essence of the Spectacle, where the individual is a slave of the immediacy of the present moment. Additionally, the BlyssPluss ad explicitly sexualizes, selling unattainable ideals.

Conclusion

In *Oryx & Crake*, the reader finds a nation based on the increasing predominance of private issues, individual goals, and consumption. Surrounded by a capitalist and consumerist environment, the Compounds offer their citizens everything they might desire in an attempt to keep them happy and pacific. Atwood deals with a capitalist spinning in which Zygmunt Bauman's *Liquid Modernity* and Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* are interconnected in order to show a plausible future for our culture. Rooted in western ideals of self-determination and private enrichment, traditional social structures, such as familial bonds and long-term residency, have dissolved into a state of flux, echoing Bauman's concept of liquid modernity. This preoccupation with private affairs and material enrichment, manifested in the pursuit of fleeting pleasures through commodities, embodies Debord's critique of the Spectacle as a distraction from deeper societal issues. Hence, concurrently, this process of "liquefaction" gives place to a society based on secrecy which exerts a continuous bombard with advertising of commodities considered to award their owners a

higher social status. In this liquid-spectacular society, the concept of commodity has transcended to an extent in which everything can be purchased and sold. Happiness, Beauty, a Perfect Body, and even the most intimate aspects of life have turned to be mere objects for production and consumption. Alienated from the real world, citizens who have lost the old values of friendship and home, live in an artificial reality in which they consider that the acquisition of products is the best way to establish a social relation by means of an altered image of the self, based on the imperious necessity to live the present moment. The "liquefaction" of traditional values engenders a profound emptiness within the individual. In response, there emerges a reoriented hierarchy of values, where personal objectives are prioritized over collective well-being. The capitalist state exploits this dynamic, offering ephemeral goods disguised as personal aspirations, intended to fill this existential void. This process establishes a pattern of behaviour in society that is compliant and malleable. Ultimately, Atwood's *Oryx & Crake* not only portrays a society marked by a vacuum of traditional values and profound alienation but also serves as a critique of a culture ensnared in the cycle of "work hard, buy harder".

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Success Narratives and the Nuclear Family: *Stardew Valley*'s Neoliberal Ideologies Re-Packaged as a Techno-Utopia

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Abstract

In an age of neoliberal pressures and fast-paced living, the features commonly associated with slow country-living (gardening, foraging, crafting, local festivals, et cetera) have come to be idealised for their therapeutic qualities and community building practices. This desire to 'return to simple pleasures' is evident in the recent upsurge in popularity of contemporary country life video games, such as *Animal Crossing*, *Stardew Valley*, *Apico*, and *Spirittea*. This article focuses on the perceived techno-utopia of *Stardew Valley* and argues that despite presenting itself as an escape from the fast-paced pressures of 'real-life', the game remains heavily informed by neoliberal ideologies. To make this claim, we examine how *Stardew Valley*'s proposed techno-utopia remains subject to the self-improvement and meritocracy narratives that are central to neoliberal thought. Utilising a critical framework of video game theory and neoliberalism, we unpack how *Stardew Valley* sees players experiencing a sense of achievement-induced satisfaction when they are rewarded for the labour of studiously tending to flowerbeds, crops, and animals, and restoring the community centre. Moreover, players are encouraged to build relationships with characters to expand their homestead and be rewarded with a family. In doing so, the game reproduces the neoliberal focus of productivity, success, autonomy, and the commodification of play, while also epitomising the perceived achievability of the community-driven, two children, white picket fence ethos of the American Dream. In short, this article aims to demonstrate the inescapability of neoliberal ideology within virtual spaces by exploring how the escapist, techno-utopian vision *Stardew Valley* presents actually reproduces the very systemic conditions of neoliberalism that the game wants to help users escape from.

Keywords: Stardew Valley, Video Games, Neoliberalism, Meritocracy, Techno-Utopias

Introduction

In an age of neoliberal pressures and fast-paced living, the features commonly associated with slow, country-living (gardening, foraging, crafting, local festivals, et cetera) have come to be idealised for their therapeutic qualities and community building practices. This desire to 'return to simple pleasures' is

evident in the recent upsurge in popularity of contemporary country life video games, such as *Animal Crossing*, *Stardew Valley*, *Apico*, and *Spirittea*. However, rather than offering an escape from the fast-paced pressures of 'real-life', we contend that these contemporary country life video games are informed by neoliberal ideologies and thus subscribe to, and reinforce, neoliberal success narratives and the "perfectibility of the individual" (Verhaeghe, 2014b). This article focuses primarily on the perceived techno-utopia of *Stardew Valley* and argues that, despite presenting itself as an escape from 'real-world' expectations, the game remains heavily informed by neoliberalism.

To illustrate this point, this article analyses the popular open-ended farming Role-Playing Game (RPG) *Stardew Valley,* which was first released in 2016. As of March 2022, 20 million copies of *Stardew Valley* have been sold across all gaming platforms (Clement, 2023) and the game has been credited as "the *de facto* standard for all farming simulator games" by online gaming communities (Finley, 2021). The in-game narrative of *Stardew Valley* is vastly different to the "first-person shooters" that were causing authorities so much anxiety across the Western world throughout the early twenty-first century (Isbister, 2016, p. 11). Rather, this open-ended country-life RPG creates a story where the gamer plays as the central protagonist who relocates to Stardew Valley after inheriting their grandfather's somewhat dilapidated farm. As *Stardew Valley*'s official website puts it: "armed with hand-me-down tools and a few coins, you set out to begin your new life!" (https://www.stardewvalley.net/). With these tools in hand, players "learn to live off the land" as the game encourages players to grow crops, raise livestock, fish, forage, cook, mine, improve the town, and build relationships with in-game townsfolk (https://www.stardewvalley.net/). Completing these tasks allows the player to "become part of the local community", while restoring the farm, exploring the town's buildings and finding in-game love (https://www.stardewvalley.net/). The entire game progression thus centres on creating a profitable farmstead, solving quests throughout the town, and building relationships with the non-player characters (NPCs) in the game. This paper interrogates how this popular country-life RPG utilises these resource-based quests and success narratives to produce a contemporary techno-utopia that is informed by neoliberal ideologies.

This article begins by first laying out the theoretical underpinnings of techno-utopias and neoliberalism that inform our research by situating our research within the broader study of politics within video games and postmillennial game theory. While much research on videogames, politics, and neoliberalism to date has focused on top-selling video games, the breadth and ever-evolving nature of the field means that many video games currently remain underdiscussed (Oliva, Perez-Latorre & Besalu, 2018). Our research thus contributes to current academic discussions surrounding videogames and digital culture under neoliberalism. We begin our analysis of *Stardew Valley* by focusing on the logic of the game to illuminate how the narrative progression and in-game

quests reflect and recreate neoliberal ideologies and conditions. Our neoliberal reading of *Stardew Valley* centres on three main points: the gentrification narrative of the Community Centre, the success narrative, and the incentive to develop in-game friendships and a family within the game. Our analysis of these primary examples demonstrates how *Stardew Valley* adopts the pretence of a techno-utopia whilst simultaneously subscribing to, and perpetuating, the particular neoliberal ideologies of productivity, autonomy, the family, and the commodification of play. In doing so, our research sheds light on how popular culture and everyday engagements with technology create spaces for neoliberal conditions to cement themselves as inescapable, integral ideologies of our twenty-first-century world – even within supposed moments of 'escape'.

Techno-Utopias, Neoliberalism, and The Politics of Video Games

Our argument rests on the underlying premise that all artifacts, digital or not, have politics (Winner, 1986). In other words, video games, just like any other technology, artifact or social practice, are not just shaped by the social and political climates in which they are produced and experienced, but are politically significant in their own right (Winner, 1986); video games are inherently political technologies that both require particular kinds of political relationships in order to exist, *and* are compatible with these political values. Indeed, as Ian Bogost (2010) argues, video games can be understood as expressive and persuasive mediums, insofar as they express existing socio-cultural and political positions, while also holding the power to disrupt or change these positions. As such, this paper explores *Stardew Valley* as a technological, aesthetic, and narrative-driven artifact that: 1) is demonstrative of the political values of its cultural origins, its designers, and its presumed target audience; 2) requires these same political values to thrive in order for it to exist; and 3) reproduces these values through its game design, aesthetic choices, narrative decisions and technological affordances. In doing so, we acknowledge that the political values that we see as embedded in the game are not experienced or understood in the same way by everyone. Rather, we offer an analysis shaped by our own political context and values, that does not strive for universality, but instead aims to examine the various ways in which these values are "at play" in *Stardew Valley* (Flanagan & Nissenbaum, 2014).

Existing cultural criticism on politics and games typically understands video games as the technological means through which collective, cultural memory of historical and political events is mediated (Matei, 2023; Pötzsch & Šisler, 2019). Similarly, post-colonial video game scholars are interrogating games as sites of hyper-capitalist globalization, militarism, and economic inequality (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2013; Dooghan, 2019). Indeed, there is a whole school of video criticism that applies post-Marxist and/or anti-colonial per-

spectives to in-game narratives and the material conditions of video game culture (see, for example: Bonenfant, 2021; Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2021; Kerr, 2017; Whitson, 2019). However, too little attention has been paid to the political values embedded in the technological architecture and mechanics of games themselves (Flanagan & Nissenbaum, 2014), or on how the contemporary political landscape of neoliberalism has impacted game narratives and aesthetics. Although there is an emerging body of work that examines the neoliberal logics of gameplay metrics (Brock, 2021) and competitive success models (Vorhees, 2015) within the e-sports industry, the focus on neoliberal ideologies as interwoven with gameplay narratives, specifically, remains absent in these discussions. As such, our work contributes to the understanding of video games as political objects, by interrogating how, despite presenting itself as an escape from the fast-paced pressures of 'real-life', *Stardew Valley* narratology remains heavily informed by neoliberal ideologies.

Broadly speaking, neoliberalism is a political system that harkens back to free-market libertarians, and glorifies individual self-interest, economic efficiency, and unbridled entrepreneurship. Michael R. Glass (2016) outlines neoliberalism as a "pervading hegemonic discourse that shapes the economic, social, and political world" (p. 352). Neoliberalism positions the individual at the centre and focuses on maximising profits to such an extent that concepts like "work-life balance" and "micro-wardrobes" have become pervasive guiding principles that help maximise efficient use of time. However, as Glass states, while these motivations shape the world, neoliberalism cannot be enacted by itself; it requires so-called "agents" that help it "develop into such a significant ideological feature on the landscape of late capitalism" (p. 352). In short, our quotidian behaviours and choices are shaped by our neoliberal motivations, which, in turn, continue to mould the political structure and practices we enact to perpetuate the regime – a regime from which *Stardew Valley* is far from exempt.

Video games, especially those offering idyllic slow-country living narratives such as *Stardew Valley,* are typically touted as providing ways to escape the fast-paced "9-to-5 daily grind" of neoliberalism that Glass outlines above. Players are turning to these sorts of games to relieve the pressures of life under neoliberalism. Indeed, the stress-relieving pull of *Stardew Valley* forms part of the game's brand identity, with popular gaming technology magazines such as *Wired* asking if "Video Games Can Be a Healthy Outlet for Stress Relief". Notably, this article outlines how "people who play to burn off stress [...] are joining the gamer ranks in droves", using *Stardew Valley* as the cover image to demonstrate this point (Krishna, 2023). Similarly, online therapy platforms such as *Hero Journey Club* have begun using games such as *Animal Crossing*, *Final Fantasy* and *Stardew Valley* for group therapy sessions to combat stress, loneliness and help mental health (Hero Journey Club, 2024). In short, players are turning to games like *Stardew Valley* to escape the pressures of their lives under neoliberalism.

These games offer this escape by creating what Caroline Edwards (2019) terms "utopian moments" that allow the players to temporarily "step outside" of neoliberal ideologies (p. 50). Edwards (2019) argues that we must "disambiguate the utopian impulse and, in particular, liberate it from fixed notions of utopia-as-totality" because, in contemporary representations of utopias, "there is no journey to the utopian island" (p.50). Rather, she posits that, while utopian narratives are "traditionally located at the edges of the known world, of capitalist circuits of trade and exchange", a utopian narrative can also include texts that "are set in mimetic and recognisable worlds, but which also contain non-contemporaneous moments […] that punctuate what is otherwise a relatively realist straightforward sort of narrative" (Edwards, 2020). What is important about Edwards' clarification (2020) that contemporary utopian narratives are often set within recognisable worlds is that they offer moments of escape from material life but are crucially depicted as "the best of all possible worlds".

Applying Edwards' categorisation of the contemporary utopian genre to *Stardew Valley,* with its American small-town aesthetic, evocation of "simpler times" and anachronistic farming details, it becomes clear that the game presents "utopian moments" which offer moments of technological escape from the material life of neoliberalism and the "discreet disconnected trap of individual subjectivity" (Edwards, 2020). As players meander through the land, fishing, planting, and tending to their crops, they not only spend time "unproductively" away from their "real life", but they are also able to temporarily step outside into a digital universe in which neoliberal ideologies do not appear to be the guiding ideological principles. However, despite *Stardew Valley's* initial appearances as an idyllic, techno-utopia, the ideologies governing the ludic dimensions of the game do not align with this. As such, this article focuses specifically on the narratology of *Stardew Valley,* and the game play mechanics that have a direct impact on the in-game narrative (such as restoring the town, completing object collections and building relationships through 'hearts'), to demonstrate how *Stardew Valley* contains strong evidence of the neoliberal ideologies that surround the context of its creation.

The Neoliberal Success Narrative

The goal of *Stardew Valley* is for players to expand their farm and acquire assets. Self-improvement and success narratives are therefore central to the logic of game progression. Paul Verhaeghe (2014a, 2014b) discusses the ways that capitalism and neoliberal politics encourage and manage particular goals and narratives surrounding success. Verhaeghe argues that "thirty years of neoliberalism, free-market forces and privatisation have taken their toll, as relentless pressure to achieve has become normative" (2014a). Under a neoliberal system, such as the one in the US, people are increasingly encouraged to achieve higher and higher grades, to be well paid, to marry and reproduce, to own property,

and so on (Verhaeghe, 2014b). The neoliberal need to succeed, then, motivates and manipulates our choices. With this cultural context in mind, we will now discuss how this neoliberal ideology of success and constant improvement is evident in one of *Stardew Valley's* core overarching game narratives which centres on the repair, or gentrification, of the town's community centre.

Early in the game, players must decide whether they would like to repair the town's dilapidated community centre building by acquiring and then donating, game resources, or whether they would like the building (and indeed the rest of the town) to be sold to the Joja corporation who will turn it into a warehouse. The Joja corporation is not only the owner of the town's chain grocery store, JojaMart (which players discover is draining profit and customers away from the town's locally-owned store), but is also the protagonist's former employer. If the player agrees to pursue the JojaMart gentrification narrative, the community centre becomes a metallic warehouse with industrial pipes; an eyesore against the warm autumnal aesthetic of the town. A fleet of homogenous workers wearing uniforms somewhat reminiscent of police or prison guards become the "custodians" of the warehouse, and, upon its official opening, brandish a banner declaring "SUCCESS" (fig. 1). The exaggeration of the metallic dystopian warehouse with its army of de-individualised labourers and "evil" overseers is certainly not subtle – and nor is the allusion to the neoliberal success narrative. By choosing to gentrify the community centre, players are made aware that they are subscribing to an overtly capitalist ideology which prioritises the success and expansion of large business enterprises over locally-owned "community" ones and compromise the town's status as an idyllic country escape from the protagonist's corporate past.

Fig. 1 – An image of the community centre transformed into the Joja warehouse. Image found on - How To - Stardew Valley - Guide about Morris | Tom's Hardware Forum (tomshardware.com)

This thinly-veiled game design intentionally encourages players to "step outside" of the neoliberal, capitalist success plot; players are instead steered to pursue the community centre restoration narrative, as a perceived form of rebellion against the real-world and in-game capitalist society that they've come to escape. If players choose this alternate narrative, they restore the community centre by growing, crafting, mining, and foraging for goods to donate to the center in 'bundles'. Once all the bundles are complete, the centre is restored back to an idyllic purple building, complete with charming awnings, window shutters, and happy Pelican Town residents (fig. 2). Moreover, upon restoration of the community centre, the JojaMart supermarket closes permanently and is subsequently struck by lightning and turned into a community movie theatre at which players can congregate to advance their in-game relationships. Although it is possible to acquire the cinema under the JojaMart gentrification narrative, it must be purchased using gold (the game currency). Similarly, all the other assets that players receive as rewards for completing bundles when restoring the community center must also be purchased, if players choose to instead pursue the JojaMart gentrification narrative. In other words, restoring the community center allows players to be reliant on foraged and hand-grown/-crafted goods, explore their town, make friends, and support their community, while choosing the JojaMart gentrification narrative makes all future in-game relationships, experiences, and assets more reliant on financial transactions.

Fig. 2 – An image of the restored community centre. Image found on Tips for Restoring Stardew Valley's Community Center Within One Year (thegamescabin.com)

The juxtaposed utopian/dystopian imagery of the two narratives is clear, and suggests that players are able to actively step away from overt capitalism towards a more tranquil community-led game, if they choose the community

centre restoration narrative. However, while this community centre narrative superficially appears to allow players to step outside of neoliberal ideologies by distancing themselves from the dystopian capitalist agenda of the workplace and the Joja narrative, it nevertheless promotes the neoliberal idea of success (Verhaeghe, 2014b). The acquisition of goods is necessary for the restoration of the community centre; namely players must acquire items such as special fish, flowers or gems, that can only be found or made once certain thresholds have been met in the game (fig. 3). As such, players must consistently strive towards expanding their resources and skill-set in order to progress, thus demonstrating the ideologies of consumerism and meritocracy that are central to the internal logics of the game.

Stardew Valley is not the only game to subscribe to these logics. According to Flanagan and Nissenbaum's work (2014) on community driven RPGs such as *FarmVille*, on the surface, these games' "values appear to involve community, generosity, responsibility, good will, trust, friendship, and gender equity" (p. 28). However, they posit that under the surface, "the game also involves the exploitation of these values, and this exploitation often negates the positive values" (Flanagan & Nissenbaum, 2014, p. 28). This can be seen too in *Stardew Valley,* when players spend hours merrily foraging and planting crops, or patiently fishing to find the specific fish needed to complete a "bundle", just to achieve the sense of satisfaction of unlocking further quests and becoming closer to restoring the community centre. Importantly, Flanagan and Nissenbaum (2014) also recognise the disconnect between game graphics and game values, by acknowledging how *FarmVille* "does not reflect the values that players might expect to encounter in actual farming, such as sustainability, biological knowledge, land stewardship, tradition, and empathy. Indeed, the game actively undermines some of these values" (p. 28). Similarly, while *Stardew Valley's* game design encourages players to lean into the anti-capitalist narrative of the community centre restoration, successfully completing the restoration simultaneously encourages players to subscribe to the neoliberal need to "achieve" (Verhaeghe, 2014b), and even rewards players with the ultimate neoliberal symbol – a golden trophy for completion.

Significantly, while the game presents the gentrification plot as a choice, repairing the centre through completed "bundles" is in fact *necessary* for players to gain access to particular plots and get the most out of their gameplay (fig. 3) – a fact that does not go unnoticed by the gaming community (see Friend, 2021). This further reinforces the notion that players are manipulated into subscribing to the neoliberal objectives they seemingly escape. Aptly, Verhaeghe's work (2014a) on neoliberalism and success allows us to further interrogate the façade of choice and freedom in the game here. Verhaeghe stresses that "we are forever told that we are freer to choose the course of our lives than ever before, but the freedom to choose outside the success narrative is limited" (2014a). Applying this concept to the game, the façade of choice is evident in S*tardew*

Fig. 3 – An image of the goods required to complete a 'bundle' and restore on of the rooms in the community centre. Image found on Stardew Valley Player Calculates Minimum Gold Needed to Complete Community Center (gamerant.com)

Valley when we recognise that choosing to restore the community centre rather than sell it to Joja developers is necessary for players to experience the game to its full potential. As such, while the game presents a superficial sense of tranquillity, its narrative design nevertheless navigates players towards a very specific "acceptable" storyline that subscribes to neoliberal notions of success.

The Neoliberal Family

The complex and multifaceted nature of in-game relationship-building further subscribes to this success model when we consider how players are required to "gift" items they have foraged or harvested to NPCs in order to marry and have children. Each NPC living within the town has favourite items, and "gifting" these favourite items helps increase the number of hearts (used as a visual indicator of relationship level) that the player's character has with the NPC. These favourite items may include seasonally farmed fruit like strawberries, foraged flowers like daffodils, fish like rainbow trout or crafted artisan products like cheese. The players then react to the gifts, and if they like them, the heart counter increases. The player repeats the process until they reach the maximum number of ten hearts. Successfully reaching the maximum heart level then allows the player's character to marry the NPC and, upon successfully upgrading the character's house, have a maximum of two children (fig. 4), (Steam, 2023).

Fig 4 – An image from Google Play advertising the game and showing the family. Found on Stardew Valley – Apps on Google Play

What is significant here is how the in-game relationships again centre around the neoliberal self-improvement narrative, whilst also privileging consumerism. According to Oliva et al. (2018), the experience of "freedom" to explore and create your own storyline in videogames "is based on the idea of consumption choices given by the market: acquiring objects, weapons or clothing, accumulating 'experience points' and investing them in new abilities for the character, customizing our avatar's appearance and so on" (p. 615). While Oliva et al.'s research focuses primarily on action games such as *Assassin's Creed*, their discussion of in-game choices can be clearly extended to *Stardew Valley*'s relationship narrative. In *Stardew Valley*, romantic choices centre on successfully completing tasks, and acquiring objects; rather than "accumulating experience points", players accumulate hearts and level-up their relationship status. Material possessions thus play an integral role in *Stardew Valley* and the game rewards self-sufficiency. As Oliva et al. (2018) continue, "in neoliberal societies, we are expected to construct, manage and project our identity through our consumption choices, and this identity must give us exchange value" (p. 615). The "exchange value" for items in *Stardew Valley* is love. For example, if the player wishes to pursue the relationship narrative, once a player has *chosen* which NPC they wish to romance, they must acquire/produce specific goods and "gift" them in order to be accepted by their chosen in-game lover. Each correct gift leads to an increase in relationship status, meaning that not only must players literally buy love, but that the capitalist focus on materialism and commodities underpin the very logic of game progression.

After the player has completed the required gift-giving steps and reached a

10-heart relationship with their chosen NPC, they cannot simply cohabit with the character, but must actually marry them in order to progress their relationship. Once married and living together, players must then upgrade their farmhouse twice, by accruing enough gold from the sale of items they have grown, fished or foraged, to make adjustments such as building a nursery with a crib. Only once these stages are complete and the relationship level is maintained, are players able to take the next step and produce or adopt children. Players are only able to have a maximum of two children – one girl and one boy – to perfectly epitomise the imaginary of the nuclear family, living the white-picket fence American Dream (Loewen, 2011). The stability of the suburban nuclear family has long been privileged by Anglophone leaders such as Barack Obama and David Cameron and has been central to their neoliberal policies (Crossley, 2016). Indeed, family has long been associated with neoliberalism and narratives of productivity and success; pregnancy and parenthood are often viewed as "labour" in many forms, whether through the commercialisation of surrogacy that Sophie Lewis discusses in *Full Surrogacy Now* (2019), or the gendered affective labour of stay-at-home motherhood (Fortunati, 1995; Jarrett, 2016). This neoliberal notion of success that accompanies the achievement of having a stable nuclear family, and the labour involved in creating and maintaining it, are also central to *Stardew Valley*. The game privileges neoliberal ideals of materialism and the commodification of the family by encouraging players to overcome the in-game hurdles of acquiring a family. These multiple quantifiable markers of achievement and "success" demonstrate how the relationship-building dynamic of *Stardew Valley* subscribes to the success narrative that we highlighted above, thereby reflecting the complexity of neoliberalism and the way it seeps into postmillennial gameplay.

Conclusion

What is clear then, is that despite *Stardew Valley* being marketed and widely understood as a reprieve from the daily grind of the "real" world, the game simply *appears* as a momentary techno-utopia where players are able to temporarily step outside neoliberal ideologies (Edwards, 2019). The constant cycle of foraging, fishing, and farming that underride the successful completion of the community centre, alongside the relationship and family-centricity of the game, creates a player experience that distinctly subscribes to the same neoliberal expectations that motivate our everyday lived experiences. Players are encouraged to build relationships with characters, to expand their homestead and be rewarded with a family. In doing so, the game reproduces the neoliberal focus of productivity, self-sufficiency, self-improvement and the commodification of play, while also epitomising the perceived achievability of the friendly neighbour, two-children nuclear family, white picket fence ethos of the Amer-

ican Dream (Loewen, 2011). Through the crafting of these in-game narratives, *Stardew Valley* players are steered to perform active practices that reflect the political and economic structures of Western neoliberalism, thus blurring the boundaries between in-game and out-game experiences that are indicative of our increasingly digital age.

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Post-apocalyptic and Integrated? A Mediological Analysis of Gipi's *La terra dei figli* (2016)

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Abstract

This paper examines the works of Gipi (Gianni Pacinotti), a seminal figure in Italian graphic novels, through the analysis of his science fiction graphic novel *La terra dei figli*. The study explores how Gipi foregrounds societal fears of environmental catastrophe and the disintegration of human-centered values in a post-apocalyptic world. While fitting into the groove of the postapocalyptic and dystopian genre, the graphic novel stages a metaphor for a future society that has abandoned literacy in favor of post-digital practices, thus performing a critique of the practices and values of digital culture and online communities.

The study underscores Gipi's view of the divisive effects of the Internet on society, particularly through phenomena such as filter bubbles and echo chambers. It emphasizes his concern about social media's potential to deteriorate communication and exacerbate social division. Gipi's work signals a longing for a lost literary culture, exemplified and symbolized by physical books. Despite this, the study questions whether his fear and resistance to societal change are typical responses to inevitable transformations. By investigating Gipi's portrayal of literate versus digital cultures, this study provides insight into the complexities of contemporary media and their societal impact.

Keywords: Graphic Novel, Digital Critique, Digital Culture, Literacy, Post-apocalypse, Dystopia

Introduction

Known by the stage name Gipi, Gianni Pacinotti is without a doubt one of the mainstays of the Italian comics and culture industry.

His extensive career has spanned various phases of comics publishing history. He made his debut in the 1990s at the height of the comic magazines crisis, and achieved artistic consecration thanks to the cultural and editorial affirmation of the graphic novel format, of which he has proved to be one of

[1] This contribution was conceived, discussed, and revised jointly by the two authors. Nonetheless, Lorenzo Di Paola originally wrote the sections 1 ("Such stuff"), 3 ("The men), and the conclusions. Giorgio Busi Rizzi wrote the introduction and the sections 2 ("The end") and 4 ("No country"). Giorgio Busi Rizzi's work is supported by an FWO (Fonds voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek – Vlaanderen, Research Foundation – Flanders) senior post-doctoral fellowship [Grant 1284024N].

the most technically gifted and versatile interpreters. Just to mention book-long, self-standing stories, Gipi authored the critically and publicly acclaimed *Appunti per una storia di guerra* (2004), *Questa è la stanza* (2005), *S.* (2006), *LMVDM. La mia vita disegnata male* (2008), *Unastoria* (2013), *La terra dei figli* (2016), *Momenti straordinari con applausi finti* (2019), and *Stacy* (2023)[2]. This extensive production has made Gipi one of the protagonists of a novel interest of the Italian cultural establishment towards comics – or rather, "graphic novels". In fact, following the mechanisms of artistic and cultural legitimization (Lesage, 2023), the graphic novel format and its appeal to the high-brow sensibility appeared to seamlessly transform comics into an adult product, finally worthy of the attention of intellectuals. As a result, in 2014 *Unastoria* was nominated for the Premio Strega, almost entering the list of finalists for the prestigious literary prize.

Gipi has gained additional fame through his recurrent participation in the Italian satirical talk show *Propaganda Live* and due to his controversial online persona. In particular, a controversy arose in 2021 following a comic strip he drew, concerning an episode of the Italian #metoo debate (we will discuss it in detail in section 4). *La terra dei figli* was published shortly before these events, in 2016 (later to be adapted into a film of the same name, directed by Claudio Cupellini, in 2021), and yet it already bears the sign of Gipi's conflicted relation with Internet communities and digital practices. However, before we examine the dense intersection of these threads, we must introduce the book in relation to the post-apocalyptic genre.

Such stuff as nightmares are made of: science fiction and the (post-)apocalypse

Aligning with the tradition of science fiction, *La terra dei figli* ventures into possible futures while providing a commentary on (what the author perceives to be) the present condition and trends. Through these stories, society explores its deepest fears and confronts the potential threats that the future may hold. The narrative thus serves as a mirror, reflecting both potential future trajectories and a critical examination of our present reality. As Philip K. Dick (1999) explains it:

> We have a fictitious world; that is the first step: it is a society that does not in fact

[2] To this, one may add the story collections *Esterno notte* (2003), *Diario di fiume e altre storie* (2009), *Verticali* (2009), *Baci dalla provincia* (2011), *Boschi mai visti* (2018), *Effetti collaterali* (2018), *Il pugile* (2018), *Il cacciatore di cuori* (2019), *Il mondo moderno* (2019), the first issue (of three envisioned) *Barbarone sul pianeta delle scimmie erotomani* (2022), and the script of the fantasy comic book *Aldobrando* (with Luigi Critone, 2020). Gipi also directed three films: *L'ultimo terrestre* (2011) and the mockumentaries *Smettere di fumare fumando* (2012) and *Il ragazzo più felice del mondo* (2018).

> exist, but is predicated on our known society […]. It is our own world dislocated by some kind of mental effort on the part of the author, our world transformed into that which it is not or not yet. This world must differ from the given in at least one way, and this one way must be sufficient to give rise to events that could not occur in our society - or in any known society present or past […] a new society is generated in the author's mind, transferred to paper, and from paper it occurs as a convulsive shock in the reader's mind, the shock of *dysrecognition*. He knows that it is not his actual world that he is reading about. (pp. XVIII-XIX)

While our discussion does not focus on the evolution of the genre, it is crucial to acknowledge how the 20th and 21st centuries have significantly altered the perceived role of science and technology. In the 19th century, these fields were mostly viewed with a sense of optimism and as harbingers of progress and prosperity, encapsulated in the formula "magnificent fortunes and progress" ("le magnifiche sorti e progressive", Leopardi, 1845). However, global tragedies and crises over the past two centuries have eroded this optimistic view. The once central role of humanity in the grand scheme of things has been radically challenged by exploring our positioning as a more and more peripheral part of a complex and interconnected global system. Moreover, our relationship with technology and the media landscape has become increasingly intricate, and the faith in a bright, technology-driven future has been undermined by a series of historical events and a growing awareness of the multifaceted impacts of technological advancement. The modern subject now finds itself navigating a reality where the promise of science and technology is intertwined with potential perils and uncertainties, reshaping our collective imagination and expectations of the future. Technology

> in recent years has changed its scope, creating not just new tools but new habitats, expanding into the territories of the living and the biological, exponentially increasing the transformative power of the human through genetic engineering, nanotechnology and neuroscience. [...] Technology, in other words, is no longer located upstream or downstream of the imaginary, but enters in *medias res*. That is, it intervenes within the neurological, social and technical mechanisms of production of the imaginary itself by invading (or creating out of whole cloth) the human circuits and devices of its production. (Musso, 2019, p. 132, our translation)

All these tensions converged in and intertwined with a feeling of loss of future, a condition that Fisher (2012) defined "hauntological"[3] and linked to con-

[3] Hauntology explores how the unexpressed past, especially its forgotten or suppressed aspects, continues to influence the present. Mark Fisher uses this concept to analyze cultural and musical trends of the 21st century, where music and art often reflect a nostalgia not just for the past, but for futures that never materialized. Hauntology characterizes a cultural era that is stuck, unable to imagine a promising future, trapped in a cycle of repetition and revisitation of what already exists.

temporary capitalism, and that Frezza (2015) has called "endoapocalyptic"[4]. It is "a time of the end without end", an endemic apocalypse in which being on the brink of survival is not an isolated event, but an endemic phenomenon, a constant in the fabric of the narrative imaginary. This led to the rekindling of old anxieties; fears related to scientific and technological progress, perhaps dormant or unacknowledged, have resurfaced and are now being re-actualized through the lens of the catastrophic imaginary.

Contemporary science fiction has elaborated on this reflection by merging with other narrative genres, especially horror. No longer confined to stories of space exploration or adventures in distant worlds, the genre has become an unsettling mirror of the collective anxieties related to science and technology, a means to explore the complex dynamics between humanity and the evolutions of its (natural and technological) environment.

The end of the world as we know it: *La terra dei figli* as post-apocalyptic cautionary tale

The narrative in *La Terra dei Figli* unfolds against a backdrop where the future seems indeed absent, and an endoapocalyptic setting prevails. The characters' interaction with technology is significantly reduced, yet, paradoxically, this very absence is a central driver of the story. Gipi's book depicts a world after a planetary tragedy whose origins remain mysterious, although they seem to be a fallout of contemporary environmental crises.

The opening of the book reads: "Whole chapters could have been written in history books on the causes and reasons that led to the end. But after the end, no more books were written" (Gipi, 2016, n.p., our translation). This incipit sets the tone for the narrative, emphasizing the loss not only of the world as it was known, but also of means to share and pass knowledge, to understand and learn from the past, to archive and historicize. We are thus facing the *end of history* in its proper sense (in an even larger sense than Fukuyama's – 2006), since any possibility of narrating the human experience and transmitting collective memory is nullified. Even more radically, the epigraph states that after the end *no more books* were written. This perspective challenges us to reconsider the human experience in the absence of its current social, cultural, and cognitive scaffolds, and raises a question that has much to do with the posthuman: if we consider humanism to be linked primarily to tradition and the traditions

[4] The concept of endoapocalypse presupposes the ubiquitous presence, in our imaginary, of a form of apocalypse that does not follow traditional models of eschatology or messianism, where a final judgment or redemption is generally expected. Endoapocalypse is instead a continuous, infinite process, a sort of "endless end time", where the apocalyptic epilogue is constantly reimagined. Apocalypse thus becomes an *ende*mic phenomenon, a permanent and persistent condition that does not lead to a new beginning but to a continuous decay or destruction without conclusion.

of literary knowledge and creation, what becomes of humanity and its anthropocentric worldview when these foundations crumble?

The story focuses on two brothers who live in a swamp with their father, who merely educated them to survive. The father's approach symbolizes another stark departure from the ideals of modern humanism, which traditionally emphasize literate-style education and the values and social systems it implies. The boys' father even forbids his children to use words like "love" and "care", considering them dangerous relics of a bygone era where such feelings were relevant. Humanist values are hence useless, if not harmful; in such a post-apocalyptic landscape (and conversely, metaphorically, in our current mediascape) "the era of modern humanism as the model for schooling and formative education is over with, because the illusion can no longer be maintained that large political and economic structures could be organized on the amiable model of the literary society" (Sloterdijk, 2017, p. 196).

However, alphabetic culture plays a key role within the story. After the death of their father, the boys discover his diary, which they unsuccessfully try to read. Gipi ingeniously portrays this moment, allowing readers to seemingly perceive the writing through the eyes of the two illiterate boys. Compositionally, the scene foregrounds its focalization: if we imagine that we are witnessing an internal focalization aligned with the children's perception, we can hypothesize that they are facing words that are meaningful, but unintelligible to them. Nonetheless, on a more suspicious reading – if we assume that the focalization is external, or that the children's illiteracy is not the diriment element – one can legitimately advance the hypothesis that the diary is full of meaningless scribbles, simulacra of the words that once existed, traced by the late father in a memorial, mimicking a gesture that is now emptied of its meaning. The diary would thus become through the story a paradoxical, postapocalyptic version of the ideal of writable text postulated by Roland Barthes (1970)[5], taking on the meaning attributed to it each time various characters read it and report back to the boys. Both interpretations, anyway, emphasize the disconnection from the past and underscore the significance of alphabetic signs as carriers of a conventional, accumulated, yet powerful meaning, now begone and alien to the protagonists.

Moreover, the passage does not only highlight the cultural and cognitive chasm between the old world and the new, but more radically places the anthropic perspective, the *human gaze*, as only one of the possible readings of the world. This shift in perspective has profound implications. It challenges the long-held notion that humans, as speaking and writing beings, are the central interpreters and definers of the world through their system of signs and mean-

[5] Barthes imagined "writable texts" to be open-ended and polysemic, containing multiple layers and possibilities of meanings. They can be interpreted in various, often contradictory ways, radically depending on the reader's interaction with the text, which becomes, in a way, a proper rewriting of that text.

ings. What happens instead, it asks, when humans cease to be the measure of all things, when they lose the ability to imbue the world with meaning through the complex web of signs with which they have covered the world?

The men in the high illiterate castle

According to most science fiction – and to Gipi's, for sure – such a transition would imply a deanthropologization of the world. In such a scenario, the central, dominant position of humans is questioned; the boundaries that divide accepted dichotomies such as culture and nature, humans and animals, become blurred and porose, allowing us to perceive a different world (a world that has in fact existed all along, but was obscured by the anthropocentric perspective), in which the primacy of man is nothing more than the result of a perspectival illusion. Moreover, the world in *La terra dei figli* is likely the result of pollution and environmental harm, suggesting that its downfall depends on humanity's failure to see itself as deeply interconnected with other living beings.

Nonetheless, and despite environmental critique being a salient theme in *La terra dei figli*, we believe that the real focus around which Gipi's narrative obsessively revolves is the relationship humans weave with media and technology. Instead of exploring human/machine hybrids, the story fictionalizes the consequences of a shift in human cognitive processes due to the current technological and media landscape.

Interestingly, in Gipi's view, the catastrophic consequences of this shift involve a regression not so much to the animal, but to the illiterate. This is most evident in the depiction of another group of humans in the story, known as "i fedeli" (the faithful, or the believers). They embody the remnants of today's digital society and the dynamics of social networks; their mode of communication is a sparse and fragmented idiolect, a pastiche of internet keywords and social media trends, stripped of their original meaning and transformed into a haunting gibberish. Gipi's comic foregrounds language as the primary indicator of the human/non-human border. As Farci (2012) argues:

> If we consider the hypothesis that humanism is linked primarily to the tradition of literary knowledge, it is likely then that some of the major issues related to the posthuman coincide with the nature of the social bond that emerges in the relationship between the dimension of consumption and the use of current technological devices. [...] Such a transition marks the emergence of a new subjectivity, which Abruzzese defines as 'illiterate' [...], since it is completely uprooted from any textual and aesthetic tradition, as well as foreign to the social pact between writing and literature. This new anti-modern, anti-historical and anti-social subjectivity […] disposes for the first time of communication platforms that it has never been able to leverage before, except through the mediation of the ordering languages of institutions. (p. 15, our translation)

La terra dei figli accordingly posits that social networks, at some unspecified time before the story's events, have altered the social and cognitive structures of humankind. After the fall, this transformation has given rise to the new society of the *fedeli*, who communicate in an ungrammatical language completely foreign to literary culture. This language is dense with words and syntagms characteristic of contemporary times, reflecting ongoing alterations in linguistic norms, such as the pervasive use of 'k's replacing the 'c-h' nexus[6], and the recontextualization of popular internet elements like kittens into tools for divination. English words integrated into Italian, such as "giga", "granny", and "hot", are redefined as primitive signs of approval and celebration.

The portrayal of the *fedeli*'s language in the book performs a critique of internet culture, equating it with a degeneration of communication and cognition. This degradation is further symbolized by associating internet culture *tout court* with pornography, which is implicitly blamed for stupefying and corrupting the online community. The tribe of the *fedeli* mirrors and exemplify the worst behaviors seen on the web: hate speech, cyber balkanization, emotional illiteracy, gullibility, and a lack of critical thinking in the face of misinformation. Like the most toxic social media groups, they ostracize, attack, even destroy those who are different or not aligned with their views. In the comic, this manifests literally in their hunting and killing of outsiders, to the point of brutality and mutilations.

Thus, a social group such as the *fedeli* is not only the continuation of our contemporary lawless society (of a society without fathers, Recalcati would say[7], hence literally a *terra dei figli*); even more so, they are the embodiment of the paroxysmal consequence of this tribalization of the web: within online communities, one finds oneself interfacing with social micro-groups, whose components and members share the same interest, experience, passions and emotions (Maffesoli, 2004); and everything else is foreign. Hence, Gipi takes to extremes phenomena that can be detected on the Web, such as filter bubbles and echo chambers: they are forms of selectivity of a different nature, the former determined by the filtering logics imposed by the algorithms regulating digital platforms, the latter by the constant exposition to the thoughts and ideas of people with similar beliefs, implied by the structural properties of the networks (Bentivegna & Boccia Artieri, 2019, pp. 363, 119).

In the comic, such division and tribalization are taken to an extreme. Gipi himself made no secret of how the strongly negative characterization of the

[6] One cannot help but notice that the stigmatization of the ch nexus in place of k, which was very common when the early diffusion of cell phones had given new popularity to abbreviations aimed at communicative economy, makes sense only in writing, and not, *strictu sensu*, in the dialogues of the comics characters, where the two morphemes serve the same function in Italian.

[7] A significant part of Recalcati's production around the years 2010s revolved around the idea that hypermodernity put a definitive end to the father figure as the symbolic embodiment of a law that is not tyrannical but nevertheless curbs the immoderation of desire.

fedeli points to them being heirs to the practices, imaginaries and cultures of web users:

> ... for me, this is about our times. This was a way of pouring out all my anxieties about the modern world or, rather, societies in general. […] the *fedeli* talk in a stupid way, they are all idiots. I hope that their being dumb doesn't make them less scary. Because to me idiocy is much scarier than controlled wickedness. (Gipi as cited in Stefanelli, 2016, our translation).

No country for old men: the digital, Gipi's anxieties, and the polarization of activism

This is telling of a larger, complex dynamic in the digital age, where the proliferation of diverse voices and the rapid evolution of social norms and languages act as a microcosm of larger societal shifts and conflicts. What Gipi's diagnosis is leaving out is an understanding of social transformations and the struggles of minorities who, during the triumph of literate culture, had little to no space, and who today, especially thanks to the web, finally found a place to voice their positions; admittedly, sometimes in aggressive ways, in line with the communicative dynamics typical of online social networks.

The book then reflects the conflicting relationship that Gipi has woven over the years with online communities of activists and comic fans, which led him to theatrically (and repeatedly) announce his retirement from social networks, bemoaning their evil effect:

> likes, retweets, they have an immediate effect, they strengthen you in your beliefs, they warm your heart, they make you feel part of a community, a tribe. I had a hundred thousand followers and I knew pretty well how they would react every time I wrote something. I knew that if I had unleashed them against someone, reporting any nonsense, they would have probably followed me. […] I knew that, but I did it anyway. Because there is nothing to do about it: no matter how much one hates power, as I do; if you have it, you exercise it. [...] Social media are built in such a way that if you don't have a strong character, they can make you a worse person. […] They're a perfectly functioning business, basically founded on a disease. (Gipi as cited in Mirenzi, 2021, our translation)

As anticipated, Gipi has indeed been more than once reproached for his online behavior, the most famous case being that of a strip he published in 2021 on his Instagram profile in the wake of the #metoo movement, after the rape allegations against Ciro Grillo and Beppe Grillo's attempts to defend his son. Gipi's strip showed its protagonist, the "Modern Commissioner", grappling with the "paradox" of two women accusing each other of violence, both purportedly bound to be believed (and innocent) by the mere fact that they are

women. This intended satire of the alleged condescension of the justice system towards women who report violence, and of the media's habit of condemning perpetrators well before any trial, provoked an intense wave of criticism, with several cartoonists taking sides in favor or against Gipi. As a result, the author distanced himself even further from social media. In his words, Gipi describes it as the feeling of no longer recognizing himself in the language and struggles carried out by the community he recognizes as his own:

> Several times the fascists threatened to beat me up. These were things I expected them to do, which I never cared too much about. The real sorrows I got from the other side, from those on the left. […] I kept repeating to myself, "How can't you see that I'm on your side?" And every time I engaged in a discussion with them, the more I tried to explain myself, the more they would zero in on me with the usual accusations: the "white male," the "privileged straight cisgender", etc. Many different people were using the same words. (Gipi as cited in Mirenzi, 2021, our translation)

This fear seems so central in Gipi's worries about our times that it was the thread that kept together several pages he posted, since September 2022, on his Instagram account, and that eventually became his latest graphic novel *Stacy* (2023). Like any true dystopia, *La terra dei figli* is thus not so much a cautionary tale about the future but rather a poignant commentary on the past. There lies what the author believes had already been irreversibly lost; namely, the social and cultural patterns that were once safeguarded by literary culture, and that by definition defended civilization itself.

The pivotal role given to alphabetic culture is clearly discernible in the story, and further stressed by the only written artifacts featured in it: the father's notebook and the book of the god *fiko*. The two are the only apparent instruments of redemption in the story, able by the sheer force of their evocative literary power to enliven lost values and *literally* write the possibility of an optimistic ending to the story we read (Gipi as cited in Stefanelli, 2016). Interestingly, though, they do so by means of the interpretation of a presumably barely literate mediator that reads them to an illiterate audience. The scenes in which a text is read to others leave ample room for interpretation: do the readers really know how to read, are they interpreting the text in front of them as needed, or are they illiterates who completely reinvent the signs in front of them? Whatever the answer, the power of literature stands out as redeeming the new world from its own brutality.

Conclusions

Gipi's work and personal experiences reflect a profound concern with the cultural and social impacts of the digital age, particularly the rise of social me-

dia. He fetishizes the established norms and values of literate culture as the only possible cure to what he perceives as a social apocalypse brought about by the unregulated, chaotic nature of the digital. In doing so, he leaves traces of a clash – a generational one, and one between literate and illiterate cultures, between the gatekeeping of legitimated culture and the anarchic chaos of digital ones – that is leaving marks on the contemporary social body, establishing a generational divide that mostly stems from a technological one, and which is making the current media ecosystem increasingly complex to read.

Despite the title of the book seems to suggest a reading similar to the Recalcati's diagnosis of the contemporary disappearance and lack of fathers as lawful figures (2017), Gipi's sons are not (only) children without guidance. The author's grief for the loss of (a) language and the rise of new cultural forms (interpreted as the frightening triumph of idiots) rather bears a striking resemblance to an archetype of post-industrial times, namely the

> increasingly recurrent lamentations about the cultural degradation of youngsters, about their indifference to the past, about their ignorance, about their dislike of books, about their disregard of anything but their own present. […] Intellectuals, writers, cultural workers bound to their provinces of personal prestige – react in ways as empty and repetitive as they are alarmed. Priests of vanishing values and rituals, they despair of their own demise far more than that of the young. Convinced that in the forgetfulness, vulgarity and aphasia of the new generations there is no content to be found, but dullness and deafness, rejection and aggressiveness, consumerism and inertia, these avid mentors of youth decay go no further than dismayed observation of disaster. (Abruzzese, 2003, pp. 240-241, our translation)

Gipi's stance resonates with these premises in the face of the complexities of our current media ecosystem. It reflects the challenges in reconciling the established cultural paradigms of the past with the rapidly changing realities of the digital age. This conflict extends beyond communication styles and media choices; it affects how civilizations generate knowledge, establish communities, and negotiate power and identity in an increasingly connected and technologically driven world.

La terra dei figli addresses how these generational and technological divides are profoundly changing societal dynamics, from personal interactions to the collective cultural and political discourse. As differences grow, they challenge us instead to find ways to foster more inclusive culture and communication that reflect and respect the values of both the literate and digital world.

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Restoring Hope Through the Patchwork of Human History in the Post-apocalyptic Video-game *Horizon Forbidden West*

Tamiris Bura Froes

Abstract

In *Horizon Forbidden West* (2022) a sequel to the post-post-apocalyptic adventure game *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017) we witness the consequences of this immeasurable loss as Aloy crosses the ruins of our civilization. Her explorations put her in contact with a tribe known as the Tenakth, fierce warriors who live for battle. This tribe built an entire mythology around fragments of information from the so-called Old Days, specifically, from a military unit called the JTF-10 which the tribe calls "The Ten" whose soldiers fell during an ancient battle against the machines responsible for the destruction of life on Earth. The member of this tribe along with Aloy and the player are engaged in a process of restoration of human history through patchwork of all the fragments scattered through the world. The player then is placed in the position of observer and quilter, observing how humanity's loss of itself through the loss of its history while, by interacting with those fragments experiencing that loss and actively participating in the reconstruction of the past. This paper will reflect on the utopian message that emerges from the Tenakth's engagement with the past and their ritualistic approach to the fragmented lives of their ancestors, using them to ensure their immediate survival among the ruins of a dead civilization.

Keywords: videogames, patchwork, post-apocalypse, *Horizon: Forbidden West*.

Introduction

What happens "after the end of History"? (Jameson, 2003, p. 695) or, more specifically, how do we avoid repeating past mistakes if we lack the knowledge of them? Guerrilla's action-adventure post-post-apocalyptic[1] games *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017) and *Horizon Forbidden West* (2022) provide points of reflection on the importance of the past to inform the present and the possibility of a future. In this post-apocalyptic world humanity faces great challenges, from deadly machines, environmental collapse, constant conflict among tribes, and scarcity of resources to the difficulty in creating a better future with the lack of an easily traceable past. The Horizon series can be defined as what Lyman Tower Sargent (as cited in Moylan, 2000, p. 74) called a critical utopia for its inherent utopia potential (Farca, 2019).

[1] "We like to call [the setting] post-post-apocalyptic" (Eschler, 2017).

The *Horizon* franchise has received extensive scholarly attention from the release of the critically acclaimed *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017)[2], some praised it for its ecofeminist protagonist (Woolbright, 2018), other criticized it for the contradiction between its anti-capitalist, ecofeminist story and the gameplay that encourages players to accumulate resources while also naturalizing capitalism due to its meritocratic system that eliminates difference (Condis, 2020; Nae, 2020), others focused on Aloy as a character who disrupts gender norms within the media of video games (Forni, 2020; Vieira, 2018; Swain, 2023). Relevant to the topic of this paper is Falkenhayner's (2021) article on *Horizon Zero Dawn* arguing that it can be understood as enabling the "recovery of a sense of agency for a posthuman future that is based on affective experience" (p. 2). Central to this "affordance for futurity" is hope, an emotion that points towards a "re-imagining the present relation to futurity" (Falkenhayner, 2021, p. 2). I believe that this centrality of hope and its view as a catalyst against "cultural inertia" (Gatton, 2017; Wegner, 2020 as cited in Falkenhayner, 2021) is also one of the themes addressed in *Horizon Forbidden West* (2022) through the Tenakth tribe. Thus, through the metaphor of patchwork my aim in this paper is to discuss how the Tenakth found a way to rebuild a hopeful approach to the future through their willingness to learn from the scattered information they could find on those who came before and how through this process of restoration they teach us the restorative role of memory for the survival of humanity even through the harshest living conditions.

"I would have lost my mind if I had not had my quilts to do": Horizon's engagement with patchwork

Central to the act of patchwork quilting is its double function, as a necessary revitalization of old fabrics that otherwise would have been discarded, and as a specifically female art form (Mainardi, 2018, p. 558). More than practical goods the quilts were cherished, valuable objects that sometimes had a date, name of the quilter, and the person who would inherit it (Mainardi, 2018, p. 558). As a metaphor for the act of restoration through assemblage of a broken past the quilt is what Elaine Showalter (1991) describes as "an art of making do and eking out, an art of ingenuity, and conservation" (p. 149), further, it "reflects the fragmentation of women's time" (p. 149). In the Horizon series the fragmentation of time isn't exclusive to women but to all of humanity living in a world bereft of commodities and tangible connection to the past, so the tribes must make do with what they have available, understanding the "transient nature of all wholes" and, albeit forcibly, becoming "accustomed to living and

[2] The game won a Writers Guild of America Award for Outstanding Achievement in Videogame Writing (2018)

working with fragments" (Baker & Baker,1985 as cited in Showalter, 1991). How can the tribes work with fragments? It is my argument that they do so by "quilting" the fragments of the Old World into the fabric of their cultures, the Tenakth being the tribe who seems to have taken this practice more seriously.

Before going into exactly how the Tenakth are quilters in their approach to the past I would like to draw a comparison between the steps required to create a patchwork quilt and those performed by the historian. Showalter (1991) lists four steps in quilting:

> The quilt-maker first selects her colors and fabrics, traditionally using recycled clothing or household material with emotional associations; and cuts out small, geometrically shaped pieces. These fragments are then 'pieced' or joined together in a particular pattern to form a larger square unit called a 'patch' or 'block.' The patches are joined together into an overall pattern, usually a traditional one with a name that indicates its regional, political, or spiritual meaning. Finally, the entire fabric is stitched to a pad- ding and heavy backing with a variety of large-scale embroidery motifs. (p. XX)

This process is not dissimilar to what Elliot and Kapell (2013), following E. H. Carr's definition of history as a "corpus of ascertained facts", describe as a process of "selection, assembly, and presentation" (p. 5). In both *Horizon* games one of the main activities is the reconstruction of humanity's past through a selection, collection, assemblage, and interpretation of heterogenous, sometimes conflicting pieces of information. The information is mostly gathered through datapoints, which can be seen all over the map as lore or in mission-specific location providing context to it. Aloy, acting as a quilter, historian, and archivist (Lanni, 2023), slowly reconstructs the world by adding sub-functions to Gaia, the terraforming AI who then can restore the biosphere, piece by piece, a process facilitated by her freedom from "limitations of time and space: the freedom to give greater attention to some things than to others and thus to depart form strict chronology" (Gaddis, 2020, p. 20).

As Showalter (1991) explains, the shift of American identification to the melting pot, and the dangerous associations post-WWII, to the heterogenous quilt as one that best described a contemporary view of American culture. No longer bound to the delusion of exceptionalism, Americans could embrace their diversity and multiplicity through the shift from fusion to piecing, thus acknowledging each individual contribution to the formation of a collective American identity (Showalter, 1991, p. 168). Throughout the narrative of *Horizon Forbidden West* it becomes clear that the exceptionalism mentioned by Showalter often becomes self-destructive and has led to master narratives that rather than ensure the survivability of humanity, has deprived us of our humanity altogether. In fact, while listening to the several audio recordings from the days prior to the destruction of all life on Earth we recognize the richness in

each individual's (hi)story as the people recording their final days all have something valuable to teach the future generations. Moreover, as Baccolini (2003) argue when discussing the critical dystopia, there is power in storytelling, especially one that, paired with the preservation of memory, encourages a sense of responsibility towards the past. This taking responsibility then may become subversive if paired with the preservation of memory of past events and the narration of often-neglected stories. In *Horizon Forbidden West* we help Aloy force other characters to acknowledge the importance of the past as, given that the world ended, it may teach the current generation to not follow suit. Finally, rather than the fusion of the melting pot that would see all difference forgone in favor of a homogenous worldview, the patchwork highlights the beauty in a community built from heterogenous elements, all working in their own way to tell their stories – incredibly human stories.

As Payne (2020) argues in his book on post-apocalyptic fiction, the genre is ultimately about adaptability and survival, one that becomes necessary and is thus revealed after the apocalypse. In *Horizon Forbidden West* the focus on adaptability and survival are central to the narrative as the threat of a second apocalypse is imminent and those who refuse to adapt are doomed to die. The tribe that best follow the genre's focus on survivability are thus the Tenakth since they had to adapt to the harsh environmental conditions of the West as well as the constant threat of the machines. As a game that, among other things, deal with the tragedy of the loss of a collective memory while we follow Aloy through the ruins of our civilization, there is a pull towards the reconstruction of the events that shaped that world. This pull is informed by what Tobeck and Jellerson (2018), call an "aesthetic of care". From the very beginning of *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017) we are encouraged to feel connected to the young protagonist and share with her the sadness over what has been "irretrievably lost" (Tobeck & Jellerson, 2018, p. 17). Although we know what caused the apocalypse, there is still much to know of what we that humanity who created it was like before their extinction. In the post-apocalyptic vision provided by *Horizon Forbidden West*, one in which the past is tangible enough to be seen and sometimes heard, but intangible in the lack of historical records, lies a desire of "worldmaking" (Dietrich, 2022), meaning a world remade out of the remains of the previous one as an urgent strategy to prevent (Dietrich, 2022, p. 330). Therefore, as have been anticipated, the tribe that takes this desire literally is the Tenakth with their settlements made from ruins of fallen airplanes and abandoned museums.

The Tenakth – sewing together the Visions

The Tenakth tribe lives in the Western side of North America, in what they call the Clan Lands, their history is, "heavy with blood and death. But also,

with honorable deeds" (*Horizon Forbidden West*, 2022). The Tenakth's practice of patchwork begins with their choice of their main stronghold, the Memorial Grove, previously known as the Mojave Battlefield Memorial Museum, which contained holographic exhibits of militaristic propaganda and it's the main source from which the tribe inferred information from the past. Upon arriving there, the first Tenakth found glitched holograms narrating the feats of the JTF-10 squad. Because of their damaged state, the sentences came off incomplete. Thus, in a hologram called "Military Life", meant to glorify the JTF-Ten, what is heard by the first Tenakth to find them is "ten...acth" rather than "the jtf-ten acted..." (*Horizon Forbidden West*, 2022) and from this corrupted file the tribe got its name and its purpose. However, while the initial glitched part was harmless, giving them their name, the final part of the message informed their misguided obsession with war:

> NARRATOR: Come---- ------- --- soldier ---of --- THE [DATA CORRUPTED] Ten.
> NARRATOR: ------- join ------ force Ten act-TTTTTTHHH --- [DATA CORRUPTED] ----led by ----war [DATA CORRUPTED]. ---
> Bodies ---- were---weapons ---for battle. [DATA CORRUPTED] ---- Dared --- ---- it all.

This corrupted hologram did more than simply give them their name, it gave them their identity and shaped their history into one made of/for constant war. The Grove then became a contested place, cause of constant fight among the three clans but nobody managed to retain control of the Grove for too long. This time of inner conflict is remembered as the Clan Wars, such was its brutality that by the time Aloy meets the Tenakth there are very few elderly among the tribe since a long life was not possible for a Tenakth. Therefore, a small, corrupted glimpse of the past nearly annihilated a tribe, such is the danger of the manipulation of the past in the *Horizon* games. The time of blood and death only ended when by a series of fortunate events, one fierce warrior, an AI, and a Vision from the past. In the precise moment Hekarro was in the now throne room Gaia activated her auto destruction function thus sending her sub-functions to seek refuge across the globe. One of them, Aether, found its way to the Grove and the power surge made activated a holographic message "addressed to a nation *in need of hope*", from the peacekeeping effort's leader, Anne Faraday:

> If we look into the future through the lens of the recent past, our fears loom: wars raged against machines, scarcity of food and water. Storms that drive us from our homes, but true courage means facing those fears with conviction instead of cynicism. Leading the peacekeeping effort with these brave men and women, these 'Marshalls' of the new southwest... has strengthened my conviction that when we are united, we can overcome any threat. Join me – join us – in that conviction as we strive for a nation and *a world without want or war*.

Chief Hekarro embodies the utopian longing discussed by Farca (2019) in his study of utopia in digital games. Despite not being able to understand the context nor why it was playing to him, but through "the act of imagination" (Sargisson, 2003 as cited in Farca, 2019, p. 6) managed to fill in the gaps inferring that the previous civilization also had endured hardship, had also fought wars, but in their strength had found a way to live a better life, one based on peace rather than war, on union rather than division. Because of this echo from the past Hekarro rebuilt the Tenakth in its hopeful image, thus entering the Grove as a conqueror and remaining in it as a leader. The fact that the entire tribe embraced his vision and abandoned their destructive ways demonstrate the value the Tenakth place in their ancestors, as the Vision would only appear again when Aloy activates the sub-function before taking it with her.

Gaddis (2002) claims that the past is already outside of our grasp, thus we can neither retrieve nor relive, only represent it. This representation is performed ritualistically by the Tenakth as they reenact the deeds of the Ten, thus engaging in the socially constructed notion of collective memory not as a natural phenomenon but as socially constructed through ritual and repetition (Caselli, 2021). As each clan took a preference to one hologram, each tribe have built their rituals around the environment in which they live and in which the Ten fought. There is one ritual that seems slightly different from the others, highlighting this clan's complex and perhaps hopeful nature; in the Sky-Clan, which is in the snowy mountains, the young are required to climb the mountain in duos – as the "Ten" presumably did – to the top and descend with a flower that only grows there. Once they manage to descend carrying the flower, they are declared warriors and receive their "warrior markings". It seems almost anachronistic that a rare flower is the token of strength required by this warmongering clan, signifying their respect to the land as much as to the Ten and each other.

One highlight of the restorative approach the Tenakth have to the past is the mission that sees Aloy recover ten black boxes from the ruins of airplanes belonging to the JTF-10 squad. Those audio recordings are the only remaining trace of the humans who lived and died on that land and restore their lost voices to the present. Other than giving us and the Tenakth something real of some of those legendary warriors of old, the brief audio logs are small, fragmented narratives of humanity's last days; on a smaller scale, they serve as a bridge between the past and the present. At the end of the mission, if we stay close enough to her, we can see and hear the NPC who collects them listening to the recordings while offering a commentary to each one. The following summarizes the tribe's respect towards the past: "we can never truly know those soldiers but if you [Aloy] find their voices we can honor them" (Guerrilla, 2022). For us, as observers and participants, narrators and audience (Chapman, 2016), it is a powerful moment when the first recording starts to play because it is as if we could see echoes of their existence resonating with this tribe that worships

them as gods while they died in such a human way.

The transmission of knowledge is addressed by Lanni (2023) who argues that Aloy and her allies, including the Tenakth, are "quasi-inheritors of the idealized principles of the APOLLO archive" (p. 7) due to their openness to sharing knowledge with each other and with their tribes. This openness is exemplified by the Chaplains, the people tasked with the role of memory-keepers for the Tenakth. They are important to the tribe for that reason, to preserve as much as they can before all the holograms (the Visions) turn dark forever. The transmission of the information they gather through the holograms is performed both orally, through the reenactments of the Ten's feats, and through body painting. Thus, like the women artists who made beautiful patchwork quilts to the next generations, the Chaplain ensure the transmission of knowledge to their descendants. Furthermore, the Tenakth uses a form of patchwork, in its original meaning, by mixing colors, machine parts, fabric and leather to create impressive armor which serve a double function, first it camouflages them as they are mostly compatible with the environment, the desert wear red and yellow, the jungle, green and blue, the snowy mountains, white and light blue; the second is probably to intimidate their adversaries, as a Tenakth in full armor looks like a hybrid of barbarian warrior and machine.

Finally, despite their flaws the Tenakth show a great sense of honor and respect for the memory of those who came before them and what they had to endure in their tragic predicament as well as a willingness to understand that utopia, in its fragile state as it is in a post-apocalyptical world, can only be achievable if it is a process. Although mostly misguided in their militaristic ideology, this warrior tribe understands the importance of collecting, honoring, and learning from the fragmented traces of a not-yet forgotten past. Moreover, through their own version of patchwork of human (hi)stories, they offer an alternative vision to the future, one that is neither too arrogant to learn from past mistakes, nor too passive to fully commit to an outdated ideology. If, as Baccolini (2003) claims, utopia is both reachable and a process, tied to memory and storytelling, it appears that even in their strange ways the Tenakth may be closer to utopia than those who called them bloodthirsty savages.

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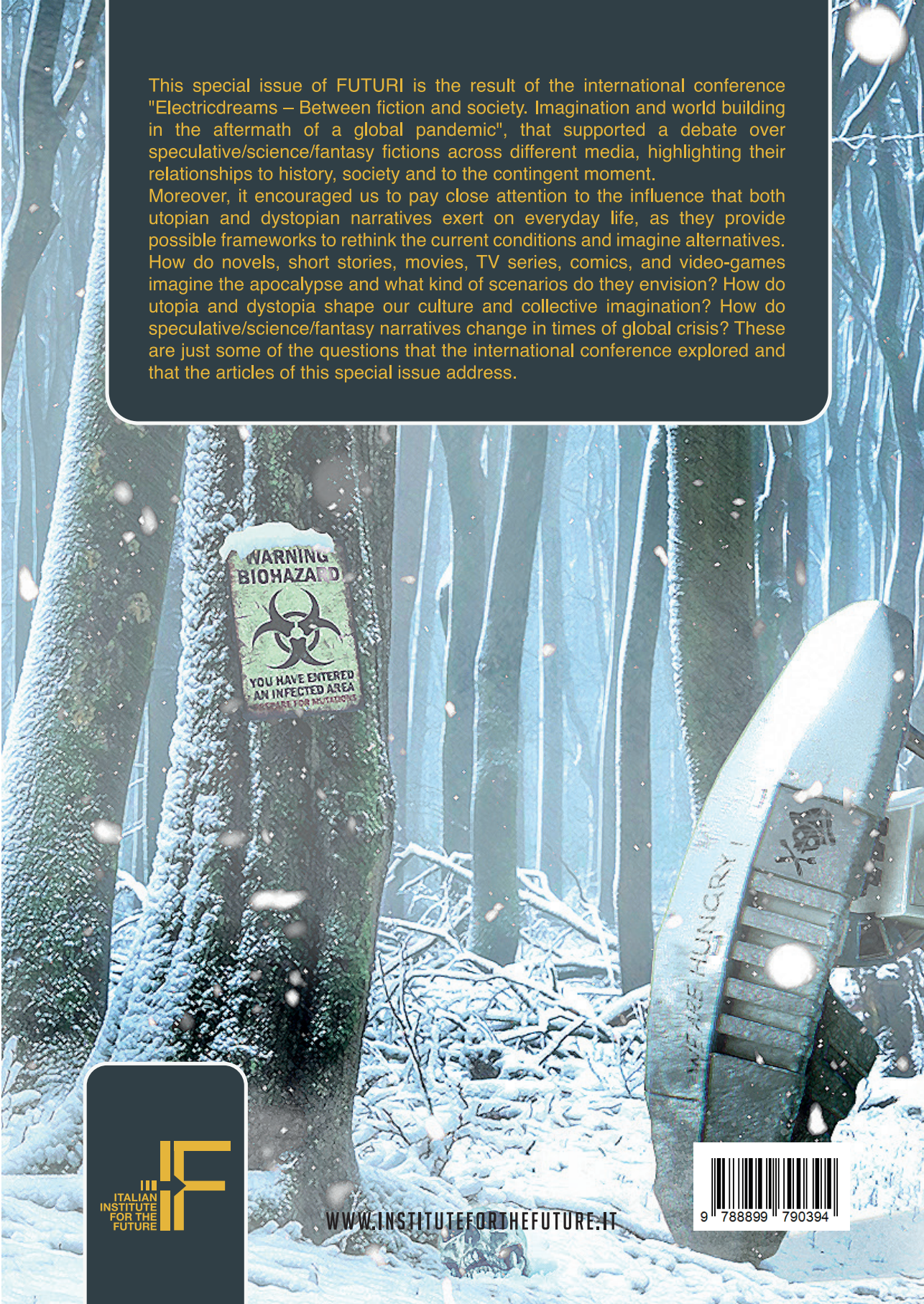
This special issue of FUTURI is the result of the international conference "Electricdreams – Between fiction and society. Imagination and world building in the aftermath of a global pandemic", that supported a debate over speculative/science/fantasy fictions across different media, highlighting their relationships to history, society and to the contingent moment.
Moreover, it encouraged us to pay close attention to the influence that both utopian and dystopian narratives exert on everyday life, as they provide possible frameworks to rethink the current conditions and imagine alternatives. How do novels, short stories, movies, TV series, comics, and video-games imagine the apocalypse and what kind of scenarios do they envision? How do utopia and dystopia shape our culture and collective imagination? How do speculative/science/fantasy narratives change in times of global crisis? These are just some of the questions that the international conference explored and that the articles of this special issue address.



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