Dystopia(n) Matters

Dystopia(n) Matters:
On the Page, on Screen, on Stage

Edited by

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**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

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INTRODUCTION

FÁTIMA VIEIRA

Dystopias do matter

In 2005 I edited, along with Marinela Freitas, a book entitled *Utopia Matters* (Porto, Editora UP, Perspective Series). The book was divided into two parts: the first was composed of statements by reputed scholars from the field of utopian studies, who explained why utopias really matter. The second part of the book, which in fact corresponded to its subtitle, dealt with "utopian matters" and was in turn divided into three parts: Theory, Politics, and Literature and the Arts.

This new book published by Cambridge Scholars replicates the structure of the book of 2005, but it now gravitates around a topic which one would expect to find at the other end of utopia. However, as is made clear by all the texts included in the first part of the volume, there are more affinities binding utopia and dystopia together, with regard to their aims and objectives, than differences setting them apart.

As in 2005, the contributors to the first part of this volume are reputed scholars who were asked to make a statement explaining why dystopia matters; they were given complete freedom as to the way they would deal with the topic – the only exception was the limit of the number of words. Some chose to address the issue by attempting to offer a definition of dystopia, to trace its history and its kinship with utopia; others resorted to dystopian texts to exemplify the relevance of their perspective; and a third group presented very personal testimonies on their discovery of dystopia and on their disappointment with regard to the way it has invaded the political dimension of many countries in the world. In any case, the links between utopia and dystopia were described as if they were almost correlative in their function: to begin with, "*every utopia contains dystopia*" (Ribeiro); rather than being the negation of utopia, dystopia may paradoxically be its essence (Claeys); dystopia can well be seen as the "shadow of utopia" as it emerged in the wake of the latter (Kumar); or we can think of it as the alter ego of utopia, always "pull[ing] its dreamy companion back to earth" (Davis).

In one way or another, the need for dystopia is recognised by all the contributors. In fact, if "the name of this world is dystopia" (Moylan), we need it not only because it is a way of "exorcis[ing] one's ghosts" (Gallardo), but also because it "reminds us that our dystopia could get worse" (Sargent), because it makes us think (Sargisson), because it is "a form of resistance in and for our times" (Baccolini), because it may well be "a necessary step towards a better world" (Ashworth).

The final idea, then, is that dystopia is as needed as utopia; in spite of the "overwhelmingly individualistic focus of many dystopias" (Balasopoulos) – as happens in fact with many utopias – despite our awareness of "[h]ow difficult it is to make utopian progress" (Arnold), human beings will always find "ways of coping with (…) dystopia" (Blaim), as there will always be a "tiny element of hope (…) glimmering, that the forces of dystopia will inspire in some part of humanity" (Davidson). Dystopia is no doubt relevant if we think of it as a "concerted, strategic and practically oriented reflection on a future" (Ferreira). This is, in the end, the way we are bound to live: "fearing for the worst, hoping for the best, with a perennial oscillation between 'if' and 'but'" (Geoghegan), and cautiously proceeding in the construction of our future.

The concept of dystopia

As I mention above, when I invited the contributors to the first part of the volume to write a statement on the importance of dystopia, I did not know exactly what to expect: it was an open invitation, and, as such, all sorts of perspectives would be welcome. The idea was that the importance of the volume would derive precisely from that variety of views. After I received the different contributions I realised, however, that adding to this variety, the volume actually benefitted from the presentation of different definitions of the concept of dystopia which, when put together, form a sort of well-informed forum that will no doubt prove to be useful to all who may be interested in the topic. This certainly justifies that we revisit the contributions where such definitions are offered.

After he has reminded us that the current prevailing concept of *critical dystopia* suggests that the possibility of utopia exists within some dystopias, Lyman Sargent stands for the idea that "dystopias are jeremiads", because they are often similar, in their approach, to the "early Puritan sermons in New England" which "accus[ed] the people of backsliding, of losing the confidence of God (…[and went]) into great detail about the specific ways that the peoples (…[had]) erred". The dystopia, Sargent contends, "mostly without the religious element, does

the same thing, although often implicitly. The dystopia is presented as what has happened as a result of human behaviour, of people messing up".

Gregory Claeys adds to the discussion by describing the three variants of dystopianism: the first variant perceives "the pursuit of the secular millennium" (i.e., secular perfectibility) as "the greatest tragedy of modernity"; the second variant somehow "perverts" the idea of the first, as it aims to implicitly contradict the overhasty association of utopianism with totalitarianism and thus "preserves some form of the concept of 'utopia' for positive contemporary applications". The third variant may best be described as a function of the way it presents "negative visions of humanity generally, and secular variations on the Apocalypse". As Claeys points out, in spite of the diversity of traditions encompassed by dystopianism – which prevents us from seeing it as a mere "mirror image of utopia" – there are a few constants which rely on an antithetical relationship: "if utopia embodies ordered freedom, dystopia embodies unfreedom"; "just as the Garden of Eden and Heaven remain prototypes of utopia, so hell performs the same role for dystopia"; if in "the democratic utopia" one makes "the right decisions and create[s] free and affluent society", in dystopia one is "deprived of these benefits". Claeys ends his essay by contending that "totalitarian dystopia of our times" should not be seen as an inversion of utopia or anti-utopia but, rather, as a "misinterpretation of utopia itself", for it departs from the idea that utopia embodies a quest for a "perfect" society which is not accessible to human beings.

Krishan Kumar traces the genealogy of dystopia, stressing the idea that it "emerged in the wake of utopia". According to Kumar, "[T]he earliest forms [of utopia] seem to have been satires on the rationalist and scientific utopias of More and Bacon". The reason why "it is mainly in the twentieth century that dystopia truly comes into its own", Kumar explains, is that its targets, right from the beginning, have been the "'grand narratives' of modernity" – "reason and revolution, science and socialism, the idea of progress and the faith in the future" – and "most of these elements (…) only really spread on a significant scale in the latter part of the nineteenth century". Kumar further underlines the partial picture of the future that any dystopia implies, insofar as it "pick[s] out the most distinctive and novel features" of each time and "present[s] them in the form of an imaginatively realised society".

Laurence Davis propounds a perspective of dystopia which departs from a redefinition of utopia itself. Davis points out that one of the problems with the traditional definitions of utopia is the "insistence that all utopias necessarily abstract from or break with history in a transcendent

perfectionist fashion". By resorting to examples which derive from his study of "an alternative minority utopian tradition" with a "distinctively anarchistic or libertarian socialist character", Davies argues for the relevance of a "clear analytical distinction between transcendent and grounded utopias", explaining that the latter "help to shape existing practices by converting the given confines of the here and now into an open horizon of possibilities". According to Davies, dystopia combines "satire on existing society with a parodic inversion of transcendent or controlling utopian aspirations". Its main target, then, is not utopianism as such but that particular kind of utopianism which is not concerned with its historical fulfilment. As Davis concludes, "[D]ystopia serves not to highlight the futility and folly of all utopian aspirations, but to remind us of its historically and biographically rooted origins and limits".

Vita Fortunati contributes to the discussion by concentrating on an analysis of the utopian potentialities of the *critical dystopia*. Fortunati examines this concept with regard to feminist dystopianism and, more specifically, to the dystopian work of Ursula Le Guin and emphasises the way it relies on a revision of the utopian paradigm. As Fortunati evinces, behind this sort of dystopianism there is a defence of the utopian spirit, not a wish to annihilate it. Feminist critical dystopias such as Le Guin's clearly subvert the way canonical utopias were constructed, demand a more active role on the part of the reader and suggest alternatives rather than prescribe blueprints. They provide us with the idea that ours is a journey which needs to be constantly re-planned, and which will never hopefully reach an end. The critical dystopia, Fortunati insists, "prefigure[s] a horizon of hope", "showing the reader a road that must start in the present, a dialectic that must begin from now-here".

From the analysis of the contributions to the first part of the volume, one easily concludes that utopia and dystopia are both needed. As Sargent rightly points out, dystopia is needed because it presents us a gloomy future we have definitely to avoid, but it really only works when it is assisted by its counterpart, eutopia, which "remind[s] us that better, while difficult, is possible".

Intermezzo

"Hell upon a Hill" is a well-informed and intelligent reflection by Artur Blaim on the concepts of anti-utopia and dystopia, which suitably bridges the first and the second parts of the volume and thus constitutes a convenient *intermezzo*.

Blaim presents an historical perspective on the various attempts made by different scholars, since the 1970s, to define these concepts and ends up by putting forward the suggestion that we should see anti-utopia as a "certain *function*, or to adapt a more radical position – *use* of the dystopian texts, and not as a literary genre". He further rightly notes that most of the times anti-utopianism fights not against utopian thought and attitudes as such but against a particular utopian view or project, with the intention of favouring a competing one.

The introduction, in the theoretical framework of this volume, of the concept of anti-utopia, and the refinement of the way it differs from dystopia, is no doubt important for the second part of the volume, where anti-utopia is often if not exactly conflated with dystopia, at least clearly set in the background of the described scenes.

Dystopian Matters: On the Page, on Screen, on Stage

The second part of the volume is divided into three sections, each composed of essays examining the way dystopian views and discourses have pervaded contemporary literature, film and theatre, respectively.

The first section – "Dystopia on the Page" – offers an analysis of some of the best-known canonical dystopian and critical dystopian novels from a variety of perspectives. Julie Millward deals with language issues in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *Swastika Night* and *Facial Justice*; Adam Stock offers a reading of George Orwell's dystopia as post-Enlightenment critique, whereas Sofia Sampaio provides us with a reassessment of the novel as a fictional construction of totalitarianism, thus releasing it from the common ideological framework in which it is normally inscribed.

The next two essays examine the writings of the Polish author Stanislaw Lem: Andrzej Sławomir Kowalczyk focuses on the introduction to *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub*, interpreting it in terms of utopian/dystopian convention, while Zuzanna Gawrońska looks at "The 13th Voyage", *Return from the Stars* and *Eden* in an attempt to reconstruct "the conceptual frame and ideas forming a consistent system of utopian and anti-utopian thought emerging from Lem's writings".

The section closes with Daniel Cojocaru's essay, who applies René Girard's theory of religion to J.G. Ballard's dystopian novella *Crash* to evince the thesis that "[e]utopia cannot be created through violence". Georgeta Moarcăs, in turn, examines three dystopian novels published during the Romanian communist regime – *The Black Church*, *Farewell, Europe!* and *The Second Messenger* – in order to offer relevant conclusions on the connections between ideology, utopia and literature.

The section "Dystopia on Screen" is composed of six essays, three on Polish films and three on American films, which, when put together, provide us with an interesting framework for reflection on Polish and American dystopianism. The section opens with an essay by Ludmiła Gruszewska Blaim, who examines the reception of Pietr Szulkin's film tetralogy (1979-1986) and evinces how it has changed over the years – ranging from a critique of the communist regime to "philosophical, genological or comparative studies discussing Szulkin's films in terms of 'asocial ficion' (…) or as a part of the Western tradition of anti-utopia and dystopia". The two other essays rely on the consideration of two comedies by Polish film director Juliusz Machulsky. Marta Komsta's essay focuses on the SF comedy *Sexmission* (1984) and demonstrates that the film – which presents a dystopian futuristic view of a sex role-reversal society – can be seen as Machulsky's dystopian commentary on Charlotte Perkins Gilman's novel *Herland*. Katarzyna Pisarska's essay, in turn, examines the way Machulski criticised the Polish communist system in *Kingsajz* (1987) by parodically representing it as "Szuflandia", a dystopian country of gnomes.

Justyna Galant's essay examines David Cronemberg's *Videodrome* and offers an interpretation of the "absolute lack of logic which characterises the actions of both the major proponents of new realities", thus pointing to the film director's intention of showing that our society is in such a terrible need for a "philosophy" that it is contented with half-baked utopian plans. Sofia de Melo Araújo concentrates on *Equilibrium*, by film director Kurt Wimmer, and compares it with Huxley's *Brave New World* and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to conclude that in the film hope still glimmers at the end of the dystopian tunnel. Finally, Miguel Ramalhete Gomes compares Alan Moore and David Gibbons's graphic novel *Watchmen* (1986-1987) to its eponymous filmic adaptation directed by Zack Snyder in 2009. Ramalhete Gomes examines both the novel and the film within the framework of the concept of "critical dystopia" and explores questions of "historical transience" in the two objects.

The last section – "Dystopia on Stage" – is composed of three essays which focus on dystopian interpretations of plays by Samuel Beckett, Caryl Churchill and Mark Ravenhill. In his essay, Ian Fraser subscribes to Adorno's reading of Beckett's *Endgame* and underlines its relevance to the understanding of the play, stressing, to the effect, the importance of Adorno's concept of "negative utopia". Siân Adiseshiah examines Caryl Churchill's plays *The Skriker* and *Far Away*, showing how the narrative of the former, although it ends in a dystopian mode, is pervaded with utopian glimpses, whereas in the latter there is no going back from the dystopian

apocalyptic ending. At last, Hande Tekdemir examines the way the epic cycle of sixteen short plays *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat*, by Mark Ravenhill, has been staged in Turkey by theatre director Murat Daltaban and how this has contributed to the creation of a new language which posits what Tekdemir calls a "theatrical utopia".

<p style="text-align:center">*   *   *</p>

What seems evident from an attentive reading of the essays compiled in this volume is that if Dystopia has in fact invaded most forms of contemporary discourse, its sibling, Utopia, has not been eradicated from the scene. In one way or another, all the essays confirm the operability of the concept of "critical dystopia" and show that the tension between utopia and dystopia is instrumental to our cautious, conscious and tentative construction of the future.

PART I

DYSTOPIA MATTERS

Do Dystopias Matter?

Lyman Tower Sargent

I must admit that I have always been more interested in good places (eutopias) than bad places (dystopias). I have been told that that was because I could not deal with the "real world", and my response has always been "Who wants to?" Given our real world, who needs dystopias? At the same time, while I have always been attracted to the pleasure-oriented Cockaigne version of the eutopia, I have always thought of eutopia as a statement about desirable change rather than escape, perhaps because too many colleagues, friends and students who tried to escape into the drug culture ("Reality is for those who can't do drugs" was a slogan of the times) sank into that culture and either never resurfaced or resurfaced damaged. Thus, dystopia has for me always had a strong connection to the "reality" I wanted to avoid, a "reality" that to me needed eutopia to change it.

At the same time, doing the bibliographic work that I do, it has always been clear that the dystopia has been the dominant form of utopianism since around World War I. Some of this is simply because, as Arthur C. Clarke once said on a panel I was on, the dystopia is more interesting to write since it gives the writer an almost automatic entry to conflict that can drive a story. But also with World Wars I and II, Korea, Vietnam, the various revolutions both successful and suppressed, the struggles against colonialism that only succeeded after very high costs were paid, racism, sexism, homophobia, etc., etc., the twentieth century has quite correctly been called the dystopian century, and the twenty-first century does not look much better, although as I write Egyptians are in the streets hoping to topple a dictator just as their neighbours had done in Tunisia. But the problem is what to do after the dictatorship and its supportive apparatus go, and that is where we need eutopia. What can dystopia contribute?

To answer that question, I need to go back to the beginning. When Thomas More coined the word "utopia" he also played on the word "eutopia", and no place became the non-existent good place. As far as we currently know the word "dystopia" or "bad place" was coined in 1747,

and although it was used from time to time, it did not catch on until well into the twentieth century.[1] Since then utopia has included both eutopia, unfortunately spelled "utopia", and dystopia.

Of course, the concepts utopia and dystopia are not that simple. The terms "critical utopia" introduced by Tom Moylan and "critical dystopia" later introduced by Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini (see Moylan, 1986 and 2000; and Baccolini, 2000) mix the two together. The "critical dystopia" in particular suggests that the possibility of eutopia exists within some dystopias, but the problem is how to actualise the eutopia and get rid of the dystopia. Neither the standard dystopia, where some hero or heroine is needed, nor the "critical dystopia", where no such change takes place, is reassuring on this problem.

One of the first utopias I ever read, I and many others thought of as a dystopia, while the author and many others were quite clear that it was a eutopia. That book was B.F. Skinner's *Walden Two* (1948), and even though I read it negatively, I had to admit that Skinner saw it positively, and he said so many times. As a result, it is clear from both internal and external evidence together with the fact that a number of people decided to establish intentional communities modelled on Skinner's vision as expressed in the book that a book could be both a eutopia and a dystopia depending on the reader (on Walden Two communities, see Kuhlman).

A similar issue is seen in some of the novels of Aldous Huxley. *Brave New World* (1932) is explicitly an extrapolation into the future of trends that he saw in his present, trends that he said in a "Foreword" written in 1946 and in *Brave New World Revisited* (1957) were coming to fruition even faster than he had expected. Between these two books, Huxley had written that he believed that he should have given the Savage another, better option, and, of course, later Huxley spelled out a positive vision in *Island* (1962) that has many features in common with *Brave New World*. But *Island* is clearly a eutopia rather than a dystopia. Thus, *Brave New World* was a warning, the 1946 "Foreword" and *Brave New World Revisited* are statements that the world depicted in *Brave New World* is fast approaching, and *Island* at least suggests that a better alternative might be possible, although its ending implies that Huxley was not very optimistic that "the people" would change their ways.

But of course it is not quite that simple. When I read *Walden Two* I had never heard the word "eutopia" and had no real knowledge of the utopian tradition in its various manifestations. I thought *Walden Two* would be a terrible place to live, and others thought it would be a good place to live, so good that they tried to create it. To really complicate matters I also disliked one aspect of *Island*, the manipulation of people who were "little

Hitlers" or "little Stalins", whom the society identifies as potentially dangerous. It worried me that it gave the society too much power, and I argued about it with a friend who had no problem with this aspect of *Island*.

This led me to think about how to read both eutopias and dystopias, and in discussing F.L. Polak's *The Image of the Future* in "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited" (1994), I noted that one weakness in the book was that Polak missed the positive message of dystopias. My approach at that time was extremely simplistic, but I have repeated versions of the same point from time to time, most recently in my *Utopianism: A Very Short Introduction* (2010).

My argument is that many dystopias are jeremiads. Most of the Old Testament prophets have a quite similar approach, but the form, which was one of the standard forms of the early Puritan sermons in New England (see Bercovitch, 1978), has been named after Jeremiah. Essentially the jeremiad accuses the people of backsliding, of losing the confidence of God, and goes into great detail about the specific ways that the people have erred. It then goes on, again sometimes in great detail, to say that God will punish the people for their past, present and future sins. But then, and usually only briefly, it says that if the people change their ways, they will not be punished and could even be rewarded.

I contend that the dystopia, mostly without the religious element, does the same thing, although often only implicitly. The dystopia is presented as what has happened as a result of human behaviour, of people messing up, as, in the Old Testament version, sin. And given the resurgence of Christian dystopianism, the Old Testament version is still relevant. But the message is also quite clearly, it does not have to be like this. And to me this is the important point. People can change for the better, although, remembering Huxley's *Island*, they may not. This is the message that needs to get through in Tunisia and Egypt, as well as, of course, in every other country. Still, it appears that just as writing a eutopia may be harder than writing a dystopia, creating and maintaining a eutopia is harder than creating and maintaining a dystopia. Thus, the "reality" is no more encouraging than the literature. We need the dystopia to remind us that our dystopia could get worse, but we need the eutopia even more to remind us that better, while difficult, is possible.

Note

[1] On the history of the word, see Budakov, 2010.

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THREE VARIANTS ON THE CONCEPT OF DYSTOPIA

GREGORY CLAEYS

What kind of concept is "dystopia",[1] and how does it differ from that of "utopia"? Dystopia is popularly supposed to be an inverted, mirror, negative version of utopia. Unlike "utopia", however, in the first instance, "dystopia" is evidently a much younger concept, dating only from the late nineteenth century, and one moreover not linked to a single text or discernable tradition. *Prima facie*, of course, there is no difficulty viewing these concepts as synchronised or symmetrical: if "utopia" entails the depiction of any kind of idealised society regarded as superior to the present by its author, "dystopia" implies its negation, or any kind of society regarded as inferior by its author. The problems commence when we acknowledge that utopianism is not a purely literary tradition and that "utopia" may be defined in a number of other ways. Indeed while we may generally concede that the common language definition of utopia describes any variety of "ideal" society, the term itself only becomes historically and analytically interesting when we refine this definition. In particular, when we associate "utopia" with the tradition established by Thomas More's famous text of 1516, we are presented with a variety of interesting questions which have a bearing upon the definition of any negation or inversion of the concept.

The tradition associated with Thomas More, then, may be described in terms of an adherence to a communal regime in which private property generally is restricted and public life is given priority over individualism. Such a definition is clearly problematic: it does not purport to describe all the texts written in imitation of More, in particular, and it acknowledges that the road to Utopia in More's own account is paved with unclear intentions at best. But it does take into account the fact that utopianism, taken more broadly, clearly does consist of three facets: a literary tradition, an ideology or ideologies, and a tradition of communal living and organisation. The question, then, is what bearing a more refined definition of utopia of this type has for the definition of dystopia and whether it

renders the latter concept distinctly asymmetrical: that is, not usually a mirror negative image of utopia at all.

But there are problems even with the idea of dystopia as the negative of "ideal" societies. Clearly just as one person's freedom fighter is another's terrorist, one person's utopia is another's dystopia. Dystopia, in other words, rather than being the negation of utopia, paradoxically may be its essence. Any privileging of the communal over the individual will for some have dystopian overtones. Writ large, in this view, utopia is the predecessor of totalitarianism, particularly of the Marxist type; such was the essence of the enormously influential Talmon-Popper line of the late 1940s and 1950s, which, though it has nineteenth-century roots, notably in the work of Gustave Le Bon, is today most often associated with Norman Cohn's classic study, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*. (Lately John Gray has notably taken up this particular cudgel.) In this interpretation modern utopianism is quintessentially an extension of the millenarian thrust of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. History possesses a particular *telos*, which is some form of salvation, and culminates in some variation of its secular realisation. In socialism, this consists essentially in the recapturing and/or realisation of some form of social essence, or primeval sociability. For Marx this was early on described in Ludwig Feuerbach's concept of species-being, which was repackaged as a plea for "human emancipation" or "universal emancipation". Utopianism, in other words, is secular perfectibility. (One of many paradoxes here, of course, is that as we have seen Marx did not view himself as a utopian – and in this sense he was correct: he was not a utopian but a perfectibilist.) Realising the essence of the communal involves the suppression of the individual: the family and private life are sacrificed to or subsumed under the greater identity of the society, state, party and/or nation. Students of twentieth-century history, in particular, will have little difficulty assembling a teleological construction of dystopia in which the origins of modern totalitarianism lie in something like the vision described by Thomas More (whether the latter approved of this or not of course remains contentious). Despite Marx and Engels's own famously caustic comments on "utopian" socialism, many Marxists have lent credence to this intellectual chronology, without of course intending such portrayals to show the social and economic system described in a negative light. Utopia is here not dystopia, because the demands it makes respecting the suppression of individuality are justified by the ends achieved in terms of a more just, fair and equal society. To its opponents, however, such a view eventuated in Stalinism in all its manifold forms, in the hyper-politicisation of individual and social relations, in the privileging of conformity over dissent, in leader-worship as a quasi-religious

observance, in systems of surveillance which superseded any such efforts previously, and in the Spartan militarisation of society generally. In the most extreme expression of this view, all forms of socialism and social democracy are guilty of these sins. But for some, of course, these effects were not to be identified with socialism as such but only its perverted Marxist form.

The first definition of dystopia, then, we might term the "identity" definition. In it we see the pursuit of the secular millennium as the greatest tragedy of modernity. A second definition of dystopia will term the latter a perversion of the former, rather than acknowledging any essential identity between the two. This involves a defence of the utopian principle which might be mounted from several directions, including the response that the society portrayed by Thomas More was relatively free and vastly more democratic than most in contemporary Europe and lacked most of those elements we associate with modern totalitarianism. This preserves some form of the concept of "utopia" for positive contemporary application. A third definition will uncouple "dystopia" from the Morean tradition generally and yoke it instead to negative visions of humanity generally and secular variations on the Apocalypse. These may emanate from various forms of social and political oppression; from the domination of humanity by machines, monsters, or alien species; from the imposition of norms derived from specific scientific and technological developments, such as eugenics or robotics; or from environmental catastrophe.

Dystopia, then, is a broad and diverse tradition. Within the context of the European intellectual tradition we may recognise the portrayal of hell and Satanic rebellion as the most important original paradigm underpinning these ideas. The monstrous, too, notably in the modern Frankenstein tale, remains a constant trope in such visions. Seen from this perspective the two characteristic twentieth-century literary dystopias, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, belong to different subdivisions of the wider definition of dystopia. (From the viewpoint of their ruling elites, of course, both represent utopias in the positive sense.) This wider definition is linked to the "identity" definition at a variety of levels; most essentially, it describes an act of hubris (political, scientific or other) which produces catastrophically negative consequences where more modest aims might have prevailed. (Sometimes this can be directly evoked; thus Mary Shelley's monster is in some respects a response to her father William Godwin's philosophy; sometimes it may be viewed as more indirect, or symbolic, as where the existence of the monstrous is seen as an essentially psychological description of humanity's complex nature – as portrayed, for instance, in *Dr Jekyll and*

Mr Hyde.) Thus building machines, even robots, with useful functions might be applauded, where the attempt to create life as such is attended with deeply negative results.

What also links these three definitions is their description of societies where human volition has been superseded or eroded by an authoritative imposition of control from outside – from the leader, party, alien race and so on. In this sense dystopia is antithetical to the idea of popular control, or democracy, in particular. The mass have lost control over even the most rudimentary aspects of their own destinies; they are putty in the hands of fate. It is difficult to resist seeing theocratic authoritarianism (either real or imaginary) as the paradigm of such a context; if utopia embodies ordered freedom, dystopia embodies unfreedom and exposure to the constantly capricious rule of a supremely powerful force, which may be human, natural, superhuman or utterly artificial. Try as we may to separate the definition of utopia from the domain of religion, we are here again brought inexorably back to this starting point of explaining the meaning of the concept of dystopia. For just as the Garden of Eden and Heaven remain prototypes of utopia, so hell performs the same role for dystopia.[2] And both motifs remain a constant, indeed central rather than peripheral, aspect of human experience. From this perspective dystopia is quintessentially a post-political or anti-political (perhaps ante-political, naturalistic) state. Modern politics, we suppose, is intended to give us deliberative and executive authority or collective control over our conditions of life; in dystopia we are merely pawns in the hands of others. In the democratic utopia we collectively make the right decisions and create a free and affluent society (or so it is popularly supposed). In its antithesis, we are deprived of these benefits.

One final observation. It may be fruitful to view the dominant, totalitarian dystopia of our times as a misinterpretation of utopia itself, though the perfectibility view is such an important misreading that it almost overpowers every other interpretation and indeed has become a crucial variant upon utopianism. Utopia is often defined as the portrayal of the "perfect" society. In the Morean tradition, utopia does not portray this "perfection": crime, warfare and folly still exist. Perfectibility is an essentially theological conception, inherited from the mythological pre-history of the Morean tradition. It is not a concept suitable to describing human beings or human societies: the quest for immortality, if forestalled by formaldehyde, remains fruitless. The quest for utopia when seen in terms of perfectibility demands a quasi-millenarian spiritual rebirth or return to original purity, a state of grace or absence of sin, often during the revolutionary process, in which human nature is remade, ostensibly

permanently for the better. A racial, ethnic, national, class or ideological purity is supposedly attained during this process which demarcates the new human nature, "Soviet Man", the "Real Khmer" or whatever, from the old. But as we know too well, this all-too-temporary surge in virtue is always succeeded by a lapse backwards, by moral failings which become inevitable insofar as the ideal aimed at is impossible to attain in the first place. In this variation of the Noble Savage ideal, the romanticised proletariat and peasantry prove rather more savage than noble. The totalitarian dystopia, then, is not an inversion of utopia or anti-utopia but a misinterpretation of the concept of utopia which mistakes the earthly for the divine. This gives us a good sense of how far the concept of utopia remained entwined with religious consciousness through the last century, as well as of the persistence of the millenarian impulse.

Notes

[1] This essay builds upon arguments presented in my (2010) "The Origins of Dystopia: Wells, Huxley and Orwell", in Gregory Claeys (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, Cambridge UP, pp. 107-34; and my (2011) *Searching for Utopia: The History of an Idea*, Thames and Hudson.

[2] If the Garden of Eden is the key model for the original Western, Judaeo-Christian utopian tradition, expulsion from it would possibly imply that subsequent human life is itself "dystopian".

Utopia's Shadow

Krishan Kumar

Dystopia is not so much the opposite of utopia as its shadow. It emerged in the wake of utopia and has followed it ever since. So close are the genres that it is not always clear what is a utopia and what a dystopia. William Morris thought that Edward Bellamy's utopia, *Looking Backward*, was a dystopian nightmare, at least from his point of view; American college students of the 1950s and 1960s found Aldous Huxley's dystopia *Brave New World*, with its easy availability of sex and drugs, a distinct utopia. Authors are not always fully in control of their material. Given that Huxley later wrote a utopia, *Island*, that employed many of the techniques of *Brave New World* – including the use of drugs – given that Huxley himself seems to have taken to the lifestyle of southern California that originally provided the inspiration of *Brave New World*, who is to say that Huxley wasn't secretly drawn to the world that he attempted to satirise in his dystopia? Perhaps the students were right to discern the utopian elements in *Brave New World*.

As a response and a riposte to utopia, dystopia was of course a later genre. The earliest forms seem to have been satires on the rationalist and scientific utopias of More and Bacon. Of these Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* was the most powerful and influential. Similar in style and substance was Voltaire's *Candide*, a satire on the Enlightenment's utopian creed of progress. Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* is another agreeable example of an attack on the Victorian faith in science and technology. From the earliest days therefore the targets of the dystopia have been some of the most cherished shibboleths, what others have called the "grand narratives", of modernity: reason and revolution, science and socialism, the idea of progress and the faith in the future.

Since most of these elements of modernity only really spread on a significant scale in the latter part of the nineteenth century, it is not surprising that it is mainly in the twentieth century that dystopia truly comes into its own. Here we get the classic examples of the genre: Zamyatin's *We*, Huxley's *Brave New World*, Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-*

Four. All three were responses, direct or indirect, to the utopias of science and socialism that were best expressed in the many utopias written by H.G. Wells in these years, from *A Modern Utopia* to *The Shape of Things to Come*.

It is an interesting question to ask, Which of these dystopias most appeal today? Which seem to have been the most prescient, in the sense of most being in tune with contemporary realities? Zamyatin's *We* is the most stylish, from a literary point of view: spare and piercing, making effective uses of some of the devices of literary modernism. He certainly anticipates much of the analysis of totalitarianism that we find in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and even – in the sexual arrangements, for instance – some of the elements of *Brave New World*. But Zamyatin's terse and elliptical way of presenting his material makes it difficult to assess it in political and sociological terms. What we get is an evocation of mood, a sense of power and terror which is extraordinarily effective but which leaves as it were the "machinery" of the society largely unexplored. Hence it is difficult to say how far the state of the world today matches up to the society of *We*. Certainly we might agree that terror and power remain persistent realities in the world; in that sense Zamyatin may be said to have given us a timeless glimpse of an enduring feature of modernity. But it remains largely in the metaphorical mode; its lack of detail makes comparisons with the more concrete features of today's world difficult.

Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* abounds in detail; that has always been one of its great strengths and one of the sources of its continuing appeal. Everyone remembers the clock that strikes thirteen; the absence of the small luxuries of life, such as toiletries; the rituals of tea-making in the room above the antique shop in the proles' quarter where Winston and Julia have their romantic trysts. *Nineteen-Eighty Four*, Orwell seems to want to remind us again and again, is a novel, not a political tract. It has many echoes of some of his earlier novels, such as *Coming Up for Air*.

This is one reason why it is wrong to abbreviate the title of the novel to *1984*, as if it is a date. As a date, 1984 is irrelevant to the novel; it simply reverses the last two digits of the actual date – 1948 – when Orwell wrote the novel. To concentrate on the date is to treat the work as prophecy, and this is something that Orwell was at pains to deny. His book was, he said, a warning, not a prophecy. It was meant say: something like this *could* happen, and it might if we don't do something to stop it. To dismiss Orwell's vision because, by 1984 or thereabouts, what he said might happen did not happen (or did it?) is to miss the point of Orwell's analysis of what he regarded as some powerful tendencies in modern society: some