Fear Images and the Eclipse of Utopia

Alex Law

The descent into dystopia

Utopia has been out of fashion for some time. It has long since been replaced by images of human catastrophe and survival struggles. Five hundred years ago, Thomas More's original *Utopia* imagined a more civilised but highly controlled form of society in the context of extremely violent and dangerous power imbalances between ruler and ruled in his own society. Today, when power imbalances have lessened significantly, utopia is routinely derided as irrelevant, sentimental or fanciful. Fostered by the insecurities, fears and threats of neoliberal crisis, war, terrorism, climate change, and pandemics, critics like Frederic Jameson, Slavoj Zizek and Mark Fisher famously declared that it is 'easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism'.

This reversal is not as recent as is often assumed. Literary dystopias appeared initially in the wake of the French Revolution but the genre, and associated sub-genres, only really developed in the late nineteenth century with rising fears of acute class divisions, science and technology. By the turn of the twentieth century, wishful literary utopias, such as the classless society depicted by William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890), began to be supplanted by disillusioned fearful utopias, most famously the de-civilised worlds of H.G. Wells in *The Time Machine* (1895) and *The Island of Dr Moreau* (1895).

When the term 'Utopia' is invoked today it is often in a semi-ironic way, for instance, as the title of Hassan Nazer's 2013 film about the prospects for widening circles of identification to the level of global humanity or John Pilger's 2013 documentary film about the unrelieved suffering of Aboriginal people in Australia (Robb and Murphy, 2016). 'Utopia' is also the unironic appellation applied to an annual film festival in Greenbelt, Maryland in the States, which screens a wide range of independent films addressing utopia-dystopia themes.

The early decades of the transition to hegemonic literary dystopias coincided with the emergence of cinema as a popular medium following the public screening of short films in 1895. Early cinema briefly revitalised utopian ideals in the form of science fiction fantasy, typically transcending earthly conditions through the visual spectacle of a fantastic voyage to distant planets, most famously Georges Méliès' *A Trip to the Moon* (1902) and *The Impossible Voyage* (1904). Distant planets did not long remain a cause for utopian escape. The Soviet film *Aelita* (Protazanov, 1924) depicted Mars as an advanced capitalist tyranny, a dystopian device taken further and more famously by *Metropolis* (Lang, 1927).

As illustrated by *Metropolis*, optimistic utopias became increasingly ambivalent about images of technological and scientific progress that could equally serve barbaric purposes as they could civilisational ones. This focus was fused in the twentieth century with fears of bureaucratic despotism crushing human autonomy, a genre defined by Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1924), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). A major strain of such dystopian imagery consisted of a high-functioning, governing apparatus hell-bent on hierarchical manipulation and controls to impose order, harmony and unity on submissive or rebellious individuals and groups.

The growing predominance of fearful utopias has shifted in recent decades from these centrally-controlled state societies to ones where a centralised monopoly of the means of violence has all but collapsed in post-apocalyptic scenarios of an unrestrained war of all against all, as in Cormac McCarthy's 2006 novel and subsequent movie, *The Road* (Hillcoat, 2009). Post-apocalyptic dystopias are often more concerned to stimulate the affective responses of audiences than to question how coercive

Alex and his droogs in the film dystopia of *A Clockwork Orange*

systems or political regimes actually emerge, function or might be changed.

A natural fear of utopia?

Images of societal collapse now characterise a veritable deluge of dystopian videogames, television and film. While there is an ancient religious tradition of apocalypse reaching back millennia, contemporary fearful utopias are peculiar to increasingly complex and differentiated societies. Millenarian utopian movements gave way to apocalyptic imagery not only in response to sudden ruptures with the fabric of everyday routine rendered by capitalist crises, rapid technological innovation, warfare and revolution but also in response to more mundane experiences of life in the 'lonely crowd', felt to be deeply impersonal and alienating.

The rebalancing of the utopia-dystopia continuum has been shaped by specific processes of increasing social complexity and differentiation. State and corporate authority, market exchange, urban density and mass communications generate unintended consequences that elude the purposeful control of individuals, groups and institutions. As insecurity becomes routine, it is experienced as an existential affront to collective self-images of sovereign human autonomy. Alongside fears of science and technology and social breakdown as major preoccupations, a mounting sense of environmental crisis has further called into question machine civilisation and mass consumerism.

Dystopia is often understood as part of a primal human condition of eternally recurring existential fears. After all, it may be argued, constant fear and paranoia have induced horror after horror throughout human history, from slavery, religious terror, political despotism, mob rule, concentration camps, witch-hunts, anti-Semitism, eugenics, and so on. In his wide-ranging study of more than one hundred and fifty literary dystopias of the past two centuries, Gregory Claeys (2016) adopts a naturalistic anthropology of an original and constantly recurring state of psychological anxiety as a permanent feature of the human condition. Collective fears are projected onto 'enemies' that both bind together the inner group and expel or destroy outsiders. Much of this argument relies on psychological theories of 'the crowd' in mass society proposed by Le Bon, Freud, Gasset and others who emphasise a supposedly

'primitive' disposition for irrational 'mental contagion', hypnotic suggestibility or 'transference' of collective pathologies, atavistic impulses that malevolent charismatic leaders are only too ready to magnify and intensify.

'Natural fears' may be modified by social processes but can never be entirely dispelled. Fears of a 'mental contagion' were registered in the 1970s by a moral panic over the 'meaningless violence' increasingly tolerated by a 'permissive' popular culture. Here the film dystopia of *A Clockwork Orange* (Kubrick, 1970) was viewed as an especially egregious example. Anthony Burgess's 1962 novel was intended as a critique of the dystopian loss of human autonomy promoted by then fashionable behaviourist psychology. Stanley Kubrick withdrew the film from UK cinemas in 1973 amidst fears of copycat violence, home invasions and rape inspired by the film's scenes of youth brutality. Some worried that the fashion style of the young gang of 'droogs' in the film represented a subcultural transition from skinhead gangs to glam rock that was no less threatening to social order. Although young working-class males in the UK wore make-up and bowler hats as part of the 'Clockwork gang style' they continued to favour 'bovver boots' associated with skinhead violence (Kramer, 2011: 101-6).

Politics of dystopia

The relationship between politics and utopia remains strained. Twenty-first century utopian solutions to capitalist decay, corporate oligarchy and environmental calamity are rarely rooted in the unequal power imbalances of everyday politics. As Claeys (2016: 495) argues, "most dystopias today take us into the future without substantial explanations as to how we have descended into the dismal state we encounter". In so far as resistance is depicted, dystopias typically place their best bet on the fate of small groups of activists and survivors. The focus is less often placed on grotesque structural inequalities than on heroic and resourceful individuals possessed of a peerless survival instinct.

Feminist literary dystopias have explored the relationship between anxieties about reproduction, technology and power imbalances since at least Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915). Feminist utopias or dystopias include Ursula K. Le Guin's 'ambiguous utopia', *The Dispossessed* (1974), Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). The hugely successful television adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017-2019) oscillates ambiguously between the cruel optimism of the merciless, resourceful heroine, June, who will do whatever it takes to destroy the dictatorship of Gilead, and the necessary pessimism required for the struggle to reach utopia (Canada).

The balance more often tilts in favour of what Lauren Berlant (2011) called the 'cruel optimism' of struggling

for a constantly deferred, unattainable goal. For Mark Fisher (2009), the film adaptation of P.D. James' (1992) feminist dystopia, *Children of Men* (Cuaron, 2006), marked a qualitative shift in dystopian narratives. Instead of functioning as a catalyst for imagining a coherent alternative to the present, *Children of Men* projects an image of what Fisher calls 'capitalist realism'. In the child-less world of the film nothing new can possibly be born. Capitalist realism can only promise more and more of the same meaningless residue of vicarious consumption, "when beliefs have collapsed at the level of ritual or symbolic elaboration, and all that is left is the consumer-spectator, trudging through the ruins and the relics" (Fisher, 2009: 4).

With a recurring focus on the cruel optimism of competitive resilience of individuals, dystopian films mirror the neoliberal ideal of human capital attuned to the uncertainties and insecurities of market turbulence. Individualised survival strategies of the precarious working class in post-2008 crisis films *In Time* (Niccol, 2011), *The Hunger Games* (Ross, 2012) and *Elysium* (Blomkamp, 2013), Gregory Frame (2019) argues, merely reproduce a debilitating form of human capital. As resourceful individuals strive to achieve a life worth living, it is one that is constantly frustrated and denied by the worsening inequities and cut-throat competition of crisis-soaked neoliberal political economy. Conversely, flawed individuals are doomed to fail. In the case of *Joker* (Philips, 2019), Arthur Fleck's lonely descent into murderous psychosis follows from the consequences of unrelieved personal humiliations at the same time as his medical support is withdrawn thanks to funding cutbacks.

Despite this, utopia is typically modelled on small-scale, communitarian village societies and dystopia on a large-scale surveillance society. A number of films from the late 1990s – *Pleasantville* (Ross, 1998), *The Truman Show* (Weir, 1998), *Dark City* (Proyas, 1998) and *The Matrix* (Wachowski and Wachowski, 1999) – depict artificially constructed worlds operating behind the backs of the protagonists. While these worlds offer a false complicity with a secure but banal utopian life, Peter Fitting (2003) argues that only *Pleasantville* challenges the popular idea of a hidden conspiracy of sinister forces manipulating everything behind the scenes.

What Orwell in *1984* called 'groupthink' is represented as a prison-house for expressing 'authentic' individuality, exacerbated today by the intensities and sensitivities of social media as well as manipulated realities. Groups themselves take on a dystopian tinge, beset by internal competitive struggles for social standing, and where "the less successful, always resentful of those who surpass them, will employ gossip, bickering, backbiting, innuendo, and sabotage to try to reduce their enemies back to the average level or lower (Claeys, 2011: 41)".

Ofelia resists dystopian fascist tyranny through her adventures in the fantasy world of *Pan's Labyrinth*

Fearful or wishful, feasible or fantastic utopias?

Over the past fifty years or so dystopias have often been defined by generalised criteria of neo-fascism, authoritarianism and violent illiberalism in Hollywood films ranging from *The Wild Bunch* (Peckinpah, 1969), *Straw Dogs* (Peckinpah, 1970), *Dirty Harry* (Siegel, 1972), *Rambo* (Cosmatos, 1985), *Se7en* (Fincher, 1995), *Natural Born Killers* (Stone, 1994), *Kalifornia* (Sena, 1993), and *Starship Troopers* (Verhoeven, 1997). What these and many other films show are some of the difficulties in defining dystopia as a genre distinct from other genres to which it may be interrelated, such as science fiction, musicals, thrillers, *film noir*, and so on. More stringent definitions of film utopia as a distinct genre typically depend on detailed depictions of social and political organisation associated with literary utopias in the form established by More.

Other-worldliness on its own is insufficient grounds for constituting utopia-dystopia. For instance, Wegner (2003) classifies *Ghost Dog* (Jarmusch, 1999) and *Fight Club* (Fincher, 1999) as 'naturalistic dystopias'. Set in post-industrial urban wastelands, both films, Wegner argues, appeal to a nostalgic longing for village-style utopia while recognising the limits of its stagnant cohesion of communitarianism and repressive identities no longer thought worth saving. Although both films meditate on class and gender anxieties, neither transcends the 'resigned pessimism' of naturalistic dystopias that, in the end, nothing much can be changed. On the other hand, a strain of naturalistic and magic realist films, from *Rome Open City* (Rossellini, 1945) to *Land and Freedom* (Loach, 1995) and *Pan's Labyrinth* (del Torro, 2006), do in fact posit political resistance to the nightmare conditions of dystopian fascist tyranny. Such films pass through what Tom Moylan (2000: 195) called the 'necessary pessimism' of dystopia by an explicit refusal of complicity with the anti-utopian temptation to passively indulge in the empty pleasures of nihilism.

Addressing dystopia as a critical utopia, as a necessary pessimism and not merely a positive utopia, Schulzke (2014) argues that virtual dystopias challenge existing institutions and ideologies more effectively than traditional media. Game dystopias are designed to be more dynamic than literary or film dystopias, enabling players to become active participants in

Zootopia – "cultural diversity celebrated?"

creating or reproducing dystopian scenarios. A game like *BioShock* follows the descent into dystopia of an Ayn Rand-style utopia, the underwater city of Rapture, inhabited by a world elite of leaders, entrepreneurs, artists, and intellectuals given free rein to pursue their individualistic appetites unhindered (Aldred and Greenspan, 2011). Since games constrain and guide players they are compelled to actively reproduce the inescapable contradictions of deeply troubled worlds. This arguably stands in contrast to positive utopian games like *The Sims* where gameplay tends to uncritically mirror the real world, for instance by accumulating consumer goods and erasing unequal original starting positions in social space.

Claeys does not discuss videogame dystopias and offers only a brief digression on film dystopias, which he judges as inferior to literary dystopias. Film is primarily a simplistic form of entertainment that subordinates plot and character to action and visual effect. At the more serious end of film dystopias, Claeys concedes, are literary adaptations and documentaries. Contemporary audiences, Claeys assumes without further ado, are "jaded by computer gaming" and are even more inured to simulated violence than film and television audiences.

Against the grain of categorising the film utopia-dystopia continuum as a fixed genre appealing to a

Feasible fear-images	Feasible wish-images
Animal Farm *A Clockwork Orange* *Handmaid's Tale* *Joker*	*Zootopia* *Utopia (Nazer)*
Fantastic fear-images	**Fantastic wish-images**
Children of Men *Metropolis* *The Matrix* *The Road* *Starship Troopers*	*Wizard of Oz* *Pan's Labyrinth*

Fig 1: Plotting Films as Feasible-Fantastic and Fear-Wish Images

predetermined audience segment, it may be more useful to begin from the working model of utopia developed by the sociologist Norbert Elias (1982). Elias's model includes both wishful utopias and fearful utopias, and hybrid combinations. Utopia represents a fantasy image of the hopes or fears of the possible consequences of acute but unresolved human problems, tensions and conflicts. Here the focus is on collective fantasy images of social relations and the state rather than idiosyncratic fantasy images of lone individuals. A public must exist that responds to the desires or fears of utopia and the form of symbolic communication. To prevent the concept of utopia from becoming too unwieldy and wide-ranging, and therefore being unable to fulfil its specific function as a means of human orientation, Elias was determined to ground utopia in fantasy images of present-day or future terrestrial societies and excluded fantastic and extra-terrestrial images of utopia.

As someone concerned to situate human societies in long-term perspective, Elias was alert to the increasing scope for the feasibility for human society to realise utopian plans and engage in social experiments and technological innovation in contrast to the impossibility of Thomas More's utopia five hundred years earlier. Utopia should no longer be understood in the pejorative sense of an unrealistic or illusory state of affairs. Yesterday's improbable utopia may become tomorrow's self-evident routine. Contemporary utopias must allow for this ambiguity. On the other hand, with current hype of AI, machine learning and robotics, prophetic technological futures are projected that may never happen, or at least not in the ways envisaged. Sharply uneven discrepancies between the level of control of nature, of each other, and of the self, lowers the threshold for collective uncertainty, fears and threats. In reality, Elias argued, the growing chain of social interdependencies has made global solidarity a more realistic prospect for humanity yet a deeply felt loss of security, stability and certainty restricts the emotional solidarity of people to more familiar sites of local and national identifications.

While it is unnecessary to exclude images of extra-terrestrial and past societies as obstacles to human action, Elias provides a useful model for plotting the scope of film utopia-dystopias. Fig 1 opposite is a tool to trigger debate about where different films, television series and videogames might be plotted along a 'feasible-fantastic' axis and a 'fear-wish' axis. More ambiguous utopias will prove harder to place while feasible and fantastic fear-images are plentiful. For instance, does *Zootopia* (Howard and Moore, 2016), an animated Disney movie aimed at children where the individual prejudices and vices of anthropomorphised non-human animals are triumphantly overcome and cultural diversity celebrated, represent a feasible or a fantastic wish image? An obvious point of comparison is *Animal Farm* (Bachelor and Halas, 1954), Orwell's dystopian parable about the degeneration of the Bolshevik Revolution. Secretly funded by the CIA, the

film adaptation was transformed into fearful Cold War propaganda, complete with a new political ending more congenial to US ideologists. Orwell's necessary pessimism was transformed into the CIA's cruel optimism as a matter of strategic policy.

Dystopia as morbid symptom

By putting crises into sharper relief, film dystopias potentially possess an inestimable survival value. Dystopian films may reflect the sense of a threatening world at the same time as expressing an incapacity for changing it. Gramsci (1971: 276) famously argued that a wide variety of 'morbid symptoms' appear when a social order in crisis is dying but a new one cannot be born. Clearly, there is no shortage of morbid symptoms and unhinged monstrosities in circulation today. By raising unresolved questions utopia assists in the birth of social knowledge about latent possibilities that were only implicitly or vaguely grasped beforehand. Utopia-dystopia performs a maieutic function when older standards no longer fit the world quite so seamlessly yet new standards cannot be explicitly articulated.

In some ways this diagnosis is reminiscent of what Walter Benjamin (1931) called 'left-wing melancholy'. Benjamin's target was a self-satisfied, regressive cultural fixation on long abandoned utopias as the European crisis of the early 1930s surged towards disaster. It is also a condition found in the trauma experienced by left-wing intellectuals with illusions that the Soviet Union represented a fully human future until its unceremonious collapse in 1989. With the crisis of neoliberalism and fears of revanchist populism, the melancholic posture has spread more widely than small circles of fellow travellers. Feeling threatened on all sides, cultural spectatorship magnifies the imagery of dystopian breakdown. Constantly crying wolf by exaggerating the imminent threat to survival of each and every event and personality paradoxically invites complacency about deeper structural crises and creates a false sense of confidence that things will be turn out alright in the end.

Dystopias are not simply premonitions of impending catastrophe or mass violence. They respond to widespread feelings of relatively low levels of human control over social and natural processes, the persistence of social myths, and uncertainty about the future. Fears, well founded or not, are imaginatively heightened and relieved by emotionally satisfying images. Paradoxically, the distended appetite for cathartic fear images emerges as social relations have become more pacified, impersonal and interdependent. Fear-images, either of too much or too little external regulation, allow people to experience a 'controlled de-controlling' of emotionally demanding forms of self-regulation, pacification and security.
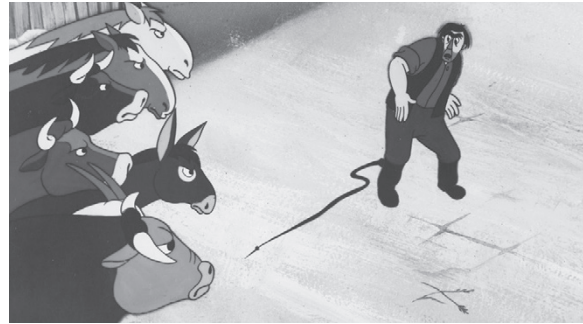
Animal Farm – "Orwell's necessary pessimism transformed into the CIA's cruel optimism?"

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