

**Technology, Mankind and Dystopia with the Help of
H.G. Wells's *Time Machine***

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Abstract

When they first appeared, dystopias were also known as anti-utopias due to the fact that they are the opposite of utopias. Utopias help us travel to uncharted ideal worlds, while dystopias try to show how a given society destroys itself when technology is a core element in its progress. Since the idea of progress is linked to technology, these types of novels are often set in the future, where society has developed greatly and so has its technology. Therefore, dystopias are usually within science-fiction, which gives freedom to the author to explore hypothetical future settings and consequences. Some critics also argue that dystopias are a reaction to World War I, which left a damaged and disappointed society. There was a feeling of disenchantment, so the possibility of reaching a utopia was no longer valid. Instead, dystopias seem to be the destination to which society was heading. Wells has been chosen for this TFG because “The importance of H.G. Wells (...) as dystopic progenitor (...) has been well documented” (Aldridge, p. 17). Although he also wrote in other genres, his influence in dystopian science-fiction is much noted and he is considered to be one of the fathers of science-fiction itself.

1.- Introduction

H.G. Wells wrote a novel about time travelling but only using this temporal gap to prove a point: this is where society is going. Firchow (2004) argued that the Time Traveller's voyage might not have been into the future but, in fact, into the past. He did not realize that Wells's narrator tells the direction of his unusual trip: "The laboratory grew faint and hazy, then fainter and even fainter. To-morrow night came black, then day again, night again, day again, faster and faster still" (Wells, 1975: 21). He perceives the days moving forward, so it is to be assumed that the future is his destination. Moreover, when he finds himself in the Palace of Green Porcelain in episode VIII, the protagonist describes a series of creatures, such as a "huge skeleton barrel of a Brontosaurus" (Wells: 73). The Time Traveller even exclaims that he "stood among the ruins of some latterday South Kensington!" (Wells: 73). Therefore, it can be safely concluded that he is in the future and not in the past. The message of the novel could not have been conveyed otherwise. This tale aims to serve as a kind of moral exercise. Wells fears, as we can extract from the book, that his present-time society may be heading to a similar fate.

His choice of destination date might seem random but "Wells chose as his landing time the year 802,701. Thus he expanded the time and created a feeling of infinite time" (Niederland, 1978: 112). Niederland himself also argues in his article that this great "leap in time, which denies the present and carries the author into a fantasied futuristic world, away from illness and the threat of death" (Niederland: 111). As will be further discussed in the pertinent section, fantasy and science fiction have a close relationship with dystopias, the chosen genre for this particular piece of research. Wells had more than good reasons to be willing to escape "the threat of death" also, for he suffered from

pulmonary tuberculosis for many years during his life (Matthew, 2004). All these factors led him to write, as many researchers have claimed, one of the most influential dystopias that have been written.

2.- The birth of Dystopias

One cannot discuss dystopian novels without introducing the concept of utopia. However, a “dystopia is not merely “utopia in reverse” as it has often been called, but a singular generic category issuing out of a twentieth-century shift of attitudes toward utopia” (Aldridge, 1984: ix). Therefore, it is generally argued that dystopias and other similar genres, such as anti-utopias, are a response to utopias. That is, authors of dystopias are not trying to write the contrary of a utopia but reacting to the main ideas that are enclosed in utopian novels.

One of the most influential works is obviously Sir Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516) for it contains the idea of a remote civilization in which order seems to have been achieved. Other researchers also argue that Plato’s *The Republic* (circa 380 BC) also known as *Utopia* or *A Modern Utopia* was the first to portray a society which was flawless (Aldridge, 1984). Regardless of who was the first to introduce such concept, it is widely accepted that More’s work is used as a reference in most utopian novels. His ideas and his imagination appear to be the entrance door for this type of stories, as Aldridge says: “More erected a formal model, a literary paradigm from which future fictional works of conscious utopian intent would borrow” (Aldridge: 3).

The majority of these utopias, as Fitting (2010) points out, are placed in a distant, uncharted or even undisclosed locations. This may be a consequence of the continuous expansion and discovery of new worlds back in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. In other words, since the Earth seemed to keep revealing hidden places, these were the

perfect settings for these hypothetical yet possible societies. Following More's defectless *Utopia*, utopianism aims for perfection although not through totalitarianism (Claeys, 2010). However, it is extremely difficult to achieve this perfection without using some kind of control over the population. Freedom is the price to pay in these utopian remote civilizations in order to obtain the desired goal.

Then, with the French Revolution (1789 - 1799) came the first "dystopian turn" (Claeys, 2010: 110) where "we witness a dialectal relationship emerging between three elements: utopian thought, here some of the underlying principles of the Revolution; the creation of fictional utopias; and a fictional anti- or dystopian response" (Claeys: 110). The revolution in France sought freedom for the people, which is the missing element in these utopian worlds, and it gave awareness of the need to fight for freedom. Furthermore, more than a century later in 1917, the Russian Revolution took place. In this revolution we can observe the fact that communism itself resembles a kind of utopia. It "produced a living and breathing alternative to capitalism. The reality of the Soviet Union certainly contributed to the rise of the anti-utopia" (Fitting, 2010: 140). It now appeared that utopias were the goal to avoid and not the one to which society should look forward to achieve. These anti-utopias were apparently a device which told us that there was an alternative to utopia. A citation from Nicolas Berdiaeff that can be found in "Huxley's epigram to *Brave New World*" (Aldridge, 1984: 11) reads as follows:

Utopias seem much more likely than we had thought in the past. (...) Utopias are possible. Life marches toward utopias. And yet a new age may be dawning, an age in which intellectuals and the educated classes will dream of ways to avoid utopias and to return to a nonutopian less "perfect", freer society. (Huxley 1946)

That is, there was a kind of awakening and this utopian state was feared rather than desired. Thus the blooming of a new anti- or dystopian current of thought seemed quite logical because there was a need to run from a utopian future.

Most possibly, the major event that triggered the rise of dystopian fiction was World War I. It left a damaged and disappointed society. There was a feeling of disenchantment, so the possibility of reaching a utopia was no longer valid. Instead, dystopias were seen as the desired destination for society. In other words, “twentieth century dystopia becomes the predominant expression of the utopian ideal, mirroring the colossal failures of totalitarian collectivism” (Claeys, 2010: 108). At that moment, the way to describe or portray the world needed to make a drastic change for social and political development were not really positive (Claeys, 2010). Therefore, the civilizations that are presented to us in dystopias are not ideal anymore. On the contrary, they are described as mostly fatalistic in order to indicate where our society is heading towards and ultimately, avoiding this outcome.

2.1.- Influential Dystopias that shaped the future

To fully understand dystopias, we need to take a look inside the dystopian novels that are believed to be the most influential and relevant to the topic discussed: *We* (1924) by Eugene Zamyatin, *Brave New World* (1932) by Aldous Huxley and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) by George Orwell. *We* describes a society devoted to harmony where “only the most minimal periods of privacy are permitted” (Aldridge: 38). We encounter again the conflicting relationship between freedom and social order. It seems that one cannot exist in the other’s presence for people prefer avoiding conflict than having to decide which actions are good and which are not. The leaders of this dystopia have taken away society’s freedom because it only provides them with pain and

negativity (Aldridge, 1984). Shielded behind these claims, the government feels entitled to do as much as necessary to keep society in line. The individual is not important; the priority lies on the group. All the controlling and manipulating is done through science, so “[t]he positive charge (...) comes from opening the floodgates of the individual psyche in rejection of the machine image imposed on the collective” (Aldridge: 34). That is, the dystopic hero separates himself both from the group and science. His world begins to shatter when he sees a series of objects which cannot be accounted for through mathematics.

There is also a clear-cut separation between the civilised and the uncivilised. What is more, this boundary is so intense that “city dwellers are taught to associate this world with unknown terrors, to consider it a forbidden zone which no one is allowed, nor, in fact, desires, to enter” (Aldridge: 38). People have been told that uncivilised territory which is not controlled by them, that is, by science, is off-limits. This conflict brings us to *Brave New World*, where we also find different places for those who live in a world of science and those who do not. “The Reservation and the Savages as antithesis and mirror image to suggest (...) that new world citizens have been lowered through a manipulative scientific vision to resemble primitives” (Aldridge: 54). Again, those who live within the rules of science are the civilised, but to the reader’s eye this modern society might appear as “primitive for there are some rituals that are shared by both the savages and the apparently civilised. Both have an almost irrational faith for a higher power; for the former it is Christ and for the latter it is science. We see that the only difference among them is the name they give to this “deity”.

In this novel, government control has gone a step further and it is even present in the creation of human beings. “Science has tamed society” (Claeys, 2010: 115), which has been subordinated “to the machine and to the scientific ideal as such” (Claeys: 115)

to the latest extreme. Huxley took Zamyatin's concept of group well-being before individual needs and concluded that "the creature must be altered in order to create a stable society" (Aldridge, 1984: 53). A strong and blind belief in science "justifies the alteration and manipulation of the species" (Aldridge: 57). Thus, science is the weapon to achieve what is believed to be the ideal social order, although it may be not lead civilization to a safe harbour.

While "the abuse of science is Huxley's great theme, that of power, Orwell's" (Claeys, 2010: 118). "War is peace" justifies the production of machinery to fight a war but at the same time society is controlled because of this production. Humans seem to be, in a way, in the service of machines and not the other way around. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* there is a clear dominance of the machine. Every little movement is controlled by Big Brother. There are cameras everywhere and it seems almost impossible to escape his big red eye. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Brave New World's* futures, then, share the particularity that freedom is nowhere to be found amongst the people. However, the former's is repressed by the means of pain and the latter by pleasure (Claeys, 2010).

2.2.- The aims of Dystopias

We are aware that dystopias are a reaction to utopian novels. Even more, it shall be said that the "dystopian ideal has also been linked (...) [to] the "end of utopia"" (Claeys, 2010: 107-108) because it is looking for an alternative. These utopias are no longer valid and, therefore, the main aim of the dystopia is to prove that what utopias provide has, in fact, expired.

One central objective is to "make a comment on human life" (Hillegas, 1967: 14). The human being and the environment that surrounds him are the key elements in this

genre. It is through human nature that we are told these stories precisely because it is what these novels are aiming to unravel. However, it is not a mere and empty comment. On the contrary, it is an observation that gives room for reflection; it seeks a reaction. Using Fitting's words, "(t)he critique of contemporary society in the dystopia implies the need for change" (Fitting, 2010: 141). The desired outcome is that the reader realizes the negative aspect of his/her society and the necessity of avoiding what he/she can see portrayed in the dystopia.

As it was mentioned above, individual freedom is a strong theme in dystopias. During their contemporary life, the individual was left aside in favour of the collective interest. Thus, it seems logical that dystopian novels "critique and ridicule that worldview for its adherence to instrumental values, its elevation of functional and collective ends over the humanistic and individual." (Aldridge, 1984: 17). The writers of such novels wanted to give the individual the space that they thought it needed. From their point of view, the group cannot be given more importance than the particular being. Otherwise, the balance is lost and the consequences, as they narrate, might become disastrous and even irreversible.

In these novels, as will be explained in the following sections, science is a core element. It is widely assumed that dystopian writers are critical of science and its application in the daily life, for they were only beginning to see the possibilities of technology when they wrote these stories. They could only let their minds wander through their wildest dreams to predict what the future may bring. Nonetheless, these writers had experienced the rationalism that walks hand-in-hand with science and knew the negative side of it. Therefore, there was a desire to "ridicule a society's mechanistic vision of mind and body, its attempt to translate scientific rationalism into a mode of life" (Aldridge: 65). Although rationalism might be a valid line of thought, dystopian

writers did not believe that it should be the one to guide human life, at least in an extreme manner. There was a kind of fear regarding the uses of technology. It can be observed that in dystopias certain amoral actions are justified by means of science and rationalism. Take, for instance, the artificial way of creating human beings in *A Brave New World*. Nobody in the society of the story questions whether it is the right choice to make because it is the rational one. Thanks to science human beings can be created without flaws and be born with a specific purpose in the world. Since it is rational, it does not seem wrong in their eyes and society takes it as valid. As we can deduce, scientific thinking is one of the sources of dystopia (Aldridge, 1984). Although we are dealing with works of fiction, dystopian writers aim to point out the negative outcomes of relying solely and blindly on science and technology.

An essential element in dystopias are the characters that introduce us to their worlds. It is through their eyes that we see the ultimate consequences of their ancestor's decisions. Similar to other literature genres, the protagonist walks a path that will change him/her (Aldridge, 1984). This change is "central to the narrative" (Aldridge: 33) and it is not only a necessary step for the plot but also what the author wants us to mirror. That is, our empathy for the character should lead our thoughts to the realization that we need to make a similar process.

We can conclude that dystopian writers are portraying a distorted picture of a utopian society. Science and humans at the core of the narrative, being inseparable from each other. There needs to exist a balance or, as these writers are warning us, we could become mere slaves to technology.

3.- Science fiction and Dystopias

Dystopias are generally written within science fiction because this genre allows the writer to make the reader travel to impossible worlds with impossible ways of living. However, most often the remote civilization described in a dystopia is claimed to be no other than the writer's contemporary society but with some changes to make it appear foreign. In Fitting's words, "science fiction's specific ability is not so much to predict the future, then, but to show our own present through a particularly effective distorting lens" (Fitting, 2010: 144). As he himself says, science fiction "is at best 200 years old" (Fitting: 137), so it is a relatively young genre that is still evolving. The origins of science fiction, then, can be traced back to three great novels of the nineteenth century (Fitting, 2010): *Frankenstein* (1818) by Mary Shelley, *The Time Machine* (1895) by H.G. Wells, and *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (1864) by Jules Verne. These novels are "a response to the effects of the scientific transformation of the world beginning around the end of the eighteenth century: in the European awareness of history and the future, and in the increasing impact of the scientific method and of the technological change on people's lives" (Fitting: 137). That is, each of these stories focuses on the scientific world and the consequences it may have on the general population. In *Frankenstein* we are presented with a scientist that forgets about the limits of science and acts as a kind of "God" by creating life out of death. In *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* a group of explorers discover a door to the underground and enter a voyage that seems to surpass the limits of what was known until that moment. Finally, in *The Time Machine*, science takes us to a place and a time that were impossible to reach without it. What all these praised novels have in common is precisely the fact that they could not have been written in a genre other than science fiction. It would not have been believable otherwise. The reader needs to activate his/her suspension of disbelief as Samuel Taylor Coleridge pointed out in order to enter

properly in the story s/he has in front of him/her. Moreover, “science fiction brings (...) an awareness of the effects and importance of science and technology” (Fitting: 139). In other words, the core element of science fiction novels, as redundant as it might seem, is specifically science. It is science and technology what allows us to travel to the future (Fitting, 2010), to the centre of the Earth and to give life to a non-living creature.

4.- Technology and Dystopias

The relationship between dystopias and technology is quite tight due to various reasons. Technology had been the means by which explorers in tales such as *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* accomplished their objectives. It was “a tool for social transformation” (Fitting, 2010: 139) because without it, it would have been impossible to imagine such stories. Society was changing and these changes were in some occasions triggered by technology advances. Therefore, literature mirrored what was going on in real life.

Furthermore, some of these innovations were not always positive for society. Although it was not until the middle of the twentieth century, as Fitting points out the invention and use of the atomic bomb shaped significantly the minds of people towards technology and what it could do. Technology was supposed to make life easier; smoother and yet, it proved to be deadly. It is no surprise then, that dystopias blame technology for their problems or at least, put it in the centre of their problems.

4.1.- *The Time Machine* and its technology

The title of the novel itself is already revealing how important science is in the novel. A machine is what gives name to this book. It is unsettling, though, that we are not given many details about the nature of this time machine. Instead, we get a notion of the materials in which it is built: “[p]arts were of nickel, parts of ivory, parts had

certainly been filed or sawn out of rock crystal. (...) [T]he twisted crystalline bars lay unfinished upon the bench beside some sheets of drawings, and I took one up for a better look at it. Quartz it seemed to be” (Wells, 1975: 13). These materials are one of the few clues we find to make up this machine in our heads. A feeling of complexity is thrown to us with this description (Chamosa, 1986), because the invention is so intricate that the only part of it that can be explained is what the eye can meet.

When the Traveller finally reaches his destination, he finds a world which is divided in two different societies: the Eloi and the Morlocks. The former make no use of a spoken language and do not show any interest for either cultural or technological manifestations. They live on the surface and have a childish behaviour and character. By contrast, the latter must live underground since they cannot bear the brightness of light and appear to have some technological, although rudimentary, knowledge.

As Jonsson points out, “The Eloi and the Morlocks (...) represent opposite poles of his [Wells’s] fear for human society: feeble domestication through a lack of competition and brute savagery through return to base instinct” (Jonsson, 2013: 304). We learn as the story moves on, that the Morlocks feed the Eloi only to feed on them afterwards. Society has returned to a state of savagery, as Jonsson says, which is slightly hidden behind a curtain of domestication. Claeys (2010) argues that the Morlocks are in fact the slaves in this society because they would not be able to survive without the Eloi. However, he forgets that this relationship swings both ways. One cannot live without the other, regardless of the fact that the Morlocks are actually killing what keeps them alive to survive. “The machines are overpowering and tyrannizing the weak creatures, Elois, via their perfect technological advances, in comparison with the other group who have not been capable of applying these forms of developments in colonizing the others” (Eshaghi, 2015: 160). The technology that the Morlocks use is far from

advanced. However, when compared to the advances that the Eloi use, a clear difference can be observed, which is what sets one above the other in the predator-prey relationship.

The Time Traveller says that he “saw a real aristocracy, armed with a perfected science and working to a logical conclusion the industrial system of to-day” (Wells, 1975: 57). He proposes that the Morlocks are the aristocrats of this future society because they possess the knowledge and control of technology, which is what sets them up as the ruling class and thus, the aristocrats. Furthermore, the Traveller believes that the “industrial system” of his current time is responsible for this outcome. He makes a distinction between the Eloi and the Morlocks by saying that “the Upper-world man had drifted towards his feeble prettiness, and the Under-world to mere mechanical industry” (Wells: 89). These two species have different natures. The Eloi are only worried about the superficiality of beauty and enjoyment itself, while the Morlocks only pursue technological advances. It can be noted that the main difference between the two is the role of technology in their lives. Sadly, neither of them seems to have a complete existence without the other so it can be assumed that technology may need to have a presence, although not absolute, in human life. “Wells portrays the cause of the (...) struggle between the science and conscience, through manifesting (...) how the technological and scientific innovations detach man from the established and acquainted regulations” (Eshaghi, 2015: 159). Wells, as well as the Traveller, seem to position themselves against the Morlocks. Since they are clearly linked to technology in the story, it is technology that carries the guilt for this “detachment” process that the human being has undertaken.

Chamosa talks about the theory of progress and how Wells seems to choose the opposite outcome to what this said theory postulates. In other words, it states that as

time goes by, there is a sense of progression, of going from worse to better. However, Wells portrays a future in which this theory cannot be applied. Technology had erased such possibility. The Time Traveller has regrets; he admits the he “grieved to think how brief the dream of the human intellect had been. It had committed suicide” (Wells, 1975: 88). Having trusted that technology would be the solution to all problems led them to this horrible conclusion. The Traveller admits that this society is apparently utopian because the Eloi did not suffer from any diseases and they seemed to be content with their lives as they were. They did not feel the need to improve and since “there is no intelligence where there is no change and no need of change” (Wells: 89); “human intellect” stopped moving forward and actually started moving backwards instead. Quoting Vitale: “[t]here is (...) no need of adaptation – because utopic conditions have already been reached” (Vitale, 2015: 26).

5.- Conclusion

The relationship between human beings and technology is complicated, as we have seen in *The Time Machine* and other dystopias. Dystopian writers did not have a blind faith in science and went beyond the obvious advantages to find the possible consequences of the uses of technology. They had reasons to be pessimistic and believed that future would be not as bright as many desired. Wells, in his novel, predicts “a cyclic reversion – as the only future for humanity” (Vitale: 16). He thought that society was not moving forward, that all these technological advances were actually damaging the nature of the human being. The Time Traveller himself “saw in the growing pile of civilization only a foolish heaping that must inevitably fall back upon and destroy its makers in the end” (Wells, 1975: 105). Not only would technology produce fatal damage but it would also destroy humanity itself.

In fact, looking at how we interact with technology nowadays, their predictions may not be as science fiction as they could become reality. There is no doubt that science has changed our lives for the better but we cannot let ourselves be corrupted by the power that technology gives. After all, we are human, not Gods, and there are some things that should be left uncontrolled. Perhaps someday in the future, or in the past, we will bump into a funny-looking stranger who claims to come from a distant yet familiar place, saying that we are too late; that we cannot prevent what is coming.

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