

UCHRONIA OR DYSCHRONIA?

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ABSTRACT

The literary genre called science fiction has its remote origin in Plato's work *The Republic*. But it really began to be pure political literary fiction with Thomas More's *Utopia*, developing in literature and cinema, reaching an important part of the seventh art. Since the 16th century, utopia has been transformed into dystopia. Now, in this transformation the name *Utopia/dystopia* has lost its meaning. Today we must speak of *uchronia/dyschronia*. But whether a narrative is one or the other depends on the point of view of the reader/viewer.

KEY WORDS: *Utopia/dystopia*. *Uchronia/dyschronia*. Novels and Films science-fiction. *Utopia*. *New Brave World*, *Fahrenheit 451*. We. Evgueny Zamiatin.

The purpose of these pages is to briefly analyse¹ the interpretation of the character or characters and the reader, in the genre called “utopia and dystopia”. In my opinion, the character of one class or another depends on the reader, how and where he is located in the author’s story.

But first I must specify that, although it has been consecrated by tradition since the work of More, calling these narratives as utopian or dystopian is wrong. The Greek term that gives rise to “utopia”, *οὐ* -no- *τόπος* -place, whose first use appeared in Thomas More's narrative known as “Utopia”, (but whose full title is *Libellus vere aureus, nec minus salutaris quam festivus, de optimo reipublicae statu, deque nova insula² Vtopia*) referred to the insula that the author is talking about, which was inexistant, was no where³. More described a society in a land that did not exist, and this essential geographical reference highlighted that, in the author's opinion, there was no place where that ideal society could exist. In the evolution of this political-social-literary genre, the importance of place was replaced by interest in a specific society, at a specific time, which could, unlike More's idea, be possible, at least in its negative aspect. That narrative took place in an imprecise future, as a continuation of the present of which it was its consequence. The place of that society is the same planet, the same society within an indeterminate time, and consequently it stopped being an *ου τόπος* to become an *ου Χρόνος*.

The original meaning of More gave rise to the term having two different meanings, one that of the place (as More wanted to imply) and the other that of a

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¹ This article is an advance summary of the book I am writing on the same topic

² *Insula* means “island” in latin.”

³ In reality, the first utopian society would be Plato's in “*The Republic*” and before More's “*The City of God*”, by Augustine of Hippo, could also be included.

plan for the creation of a society that was wished to be perfect. The question I raise in these lines is precisely this one: perfect for whom?

From “utopia” the term “dystopia” has been created, the meaning of which has little to do with the etymology of “utopia”, as nowhere place, and everything to do with the second meaning, attempting to define a non-existent present society but negative for human beings, therefore in direct opposition to More’s utopian society. From describing a place, the centre of the story changed to describe a society that is on our planet, in our world. Furthermore, using the Greek term *dis*, (δυσ) goes beyond the simple negation of “u”, as it indicates a deep displeasure, something very negative, while in itself “u” does not carry any value judgment⁴. Nowadays there is no reason to talk about a non-existent place, because the importance has been transferred from the location to the concept of time, as if the author wishes to warn of what is going to happen in order to try to avoid it.

In the evolution of this genre, the society continues to be described in detail and the place is vaguely known. What is imprecise is time, when what we are reading or seeing occurs. Thus, More's utopian genre has evolved to the genre that dominates the 20th century, since Yevgeny Zamyatin's work “We”⁵. By focusing the problem on the time, I consider that the correct name of this genre must have evolved parallel to the importance of the time/place relationship, so it must be “*uchronia*” from the Greek *ou* -no- and *Χρόνος*, -time- and, for consistency, instead of dystopia we should speak of “*dyschronia*”⁶, and taking into account that in this case there is a part of society opposed to the other, one of them being a very negative description of what exists positively in the other, that part of society is *dyschronic*, but not the whole, since the other part would live in a happy, prosperous time in *Ευημερία*.

Obviously, we start from a time in which the existing society has evolved from the standards of the one in which the reader lives. The essential fact is that, within that future society, presumably the majority of people are favourable to the way of life that the narrative describes, and consequently, from that perspective, it is a *uchronic* society, in an *Ευημερία*. The point is that the reader/viewer does not feel identified with this society, thus making it *dyschronic*. I understand by this term, a really negative time, totally contrary to what that part of society that suffers from it would like. Such would be the case, for example, in *New Brave World* or *Fahrenheit 451*. But it is the reader/viewer who considers it *dyschronic*, not the majority of the population, so the reader/viewer imposes his values, disqualifying what that majority desires, in an attitude similar to “*if I can't be happy like this, neither can you*”.

Consequently, it is the reader who qualifies the narrative as a happy time or *Ευημερία*, or an unhappy time or *dyschronia*. This is a value judgment based on the reader's experience in their society or the one they would like to live in, because let us not forget, that all *uchronia/dyschronia* is based on a comparison between what

⁴ I am in debt for all these details to Professor Researcher Dr. Pedro Bádenas de la Peña.

⁵ The writing concluded in 1921, being partially published in 1924 in the United Kingdom and in its entirety in 1926 or 1927, according to different sources.

⁶ I understand that the term *diachronic* or *diachronic* is not applicable, because they are the antonyms of *synchronic*, which has nothing to do with what I intend to explain here.

the observer believes is ideal and what he/she wants or fear, that can happen. This projection of the value system itself from the historical situation itself was already pointed out by Arnold J. Toynbee who wrote in this regard that “in any era of any society, the study of history, just like other social activities, is governed by the dominant trends in time and place”⁷. Without a doubt, an in-depth study would require going back to the origin of the idea of transformation of the known society into a better one, a truly exciting study. In the creation of *uchrony*, More's Utopia, there is an acceptance of the impossibility of returning to the past, to the biblical Paradise, and therefore the ideal society is located in the future as an evolution of the present, being the diagnosis of the present, the starting point of a prognosis.

Thus, to limit ourselves to just one example, we note that, in the first decades of this century, the genre was dominated by a prognosis focused on political movements such as communism, fascism and national socialism. The future feared was a totalitarian society, annihilating personality, and as the most obvious examples we can point to Zamyatin's pioneering work “We”, many of the descriptions in this novel will be reflected in “Metropolis”⁸ or in Orwell's work “1984”⁹, who, like A. Huxley, recognizes the influence of Zamyatin. Echoes of Russian are also perceived in Bradbury's novel “Fahrenheit 451”¹⁰. However, as the reality or memory of authoritarian regimes faded, the new ghost that plagued planning for the future was technology, the environment, the scarcity of resources, the struggle between the poor and the rich, existence itself and the right to live, etc. fully justifying Toynbee's quote above: the principles of the society in which one lives and what one expects or would expect from it, determine the vision of the world.

I would like to point out that my interest is not in those works that can be included within the general and not very exact term of “science fiction”, although some novels, later made into films, are really memorable, and I will quote first, naturally, “2001, a space odyssey”¹¹ and in a more introspective aspect “Solaris”¹². My study, and these lines, focuses on narratives or films that deal with the future of an entire society, not specifically the spiritual aspect of human evolution, as is the

⁷ “Study of History” vol. I. p. 23.

⁸ The script for this 1924 film directed by Fritz Lang was by Thea von Harbor who then wrote the novel, published in 1926. Unlike what usually happens in the vast majority of cases, the script gave rise to a novel.

⁹ The novel is from 1948, and the first film version is from 1956 directed by Michael Anderson and the second version is from 1984 directed by Michael Radford, which is the one we will analyse here.

¹⁰ The novel is from 1953 and the first film version was in 1966 directed by François Truffaut. In 2018 another version was made by Ramin Bahrani, which is a very free adaptation of Bradbury's work. The version we will refer to here is Truffaut's.

¹¹ Kubrick's 1968 film has a script written by the director himself and the author of the novel, published the same year, the scientist and writer Arthur C. Clark.

¹² The novel, from 1961, is by Polish author Stanislas Lem, and there are two film versions, the first, Russian, from 1972, by director Andrei Tarkovski, and the second, North American, from 2002, directed by Steven Soderbergh. These two versions are further proof of the accuracy of Toynbee's comment because through the production, the theme being exactly the same, the two different cultures, Russian and North American, are evident.

case of the two novels and films cited. As uchronic and dischronic literature is very abundant, from the work of a 16th century precursor Tommaso Campanella and in the next, Margaret Cavendish or Cyrano de Bergerac, to occupying an important position in the seventh art, I am forced to select a brief but as representative range as possible, from the United Kingdom to Albania, from Russia to the United States, trying not to judge but only to present, abstaining as much as possible from any comment regarding the technical elements, if it is a film, or literary, if it is a work, because my objective is the society itself that is described, not the technical support or the purely literary aspect used to describe it.

For these lines, from all the extensive literature and cinematography, I will choose as an example some of the works that I discuss in detail in my essay, following a chronological order.

“Us” and “Metropolis” focus on a totally industrialized, militarized society (remember, for example, that the workers enter military formation in their factories, all in uniform, etc.). In Zamiatin's work we already find a fact that will be repeated in, for example, “1984”: the vision of the countryside, of nature as a prize, as a reward, for work or as a dream in the face of violence or industrialism all metallic. The countryside, the idyllic vision of the environment, the fight against pollution of the planet, will also have a leading role in future films such as “Wall E”¹³ or “Elysium”¹⁴.

Later, the fear arising from the oppression of totalitarian regimes will be the theme of fiction, as well as the fight against culture: Huxley's society in “Brave New World” (1932) is as authoritarian as the aforementioned “Fahrenheit 451” and of course “1984”. Now, in them there is a part of the population, presumably the majority, that does not consider living in a dyschronic world, quite the contrary: perfectly integrated, enjoys the facilities of that society and in no way sympathizes with that minority that lives in the outside of what we can define as official society. It is the reader, upon becoming aware of official society, who places himself on the side of the minority group, identifying its principles with those of the minority. In all societies that have lived under dictatorships, there is no doubt that an important part of that society agreed with the system or, at least, was not against it: after the death of Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin or Franco, for example not to point out anything other than the longest-serving dictators, a part of the population longed for the dictator. Whether the reason is one or the other is irrelevant for the topic at hand.

There is a novel and film that offers an afterlife of current society in the work, a kind of return, “La Planète des singes”¹⁵ by the writer Pierre Boulle, made into a film with the same title “The Planet of the Apes”¹⁶. In this fiction, a world is imagined in which human beings have destroyed the Planet in which a society of apes developed which is a reflection of what the human world was like before its

¹³ 2008. Directed by Andrew Stanton and script by Stanton and Jim Reardon.

¹⁴ 2013. Direction and script by Neil Blomkamp.

¹⁵ 1963. Julliard. 243 p.

¹⁶ 1968. Dir. Franklin J. Schaffner.

disappearance. What draws attention to this work is the spirit of return to past errors, but this time man suffering himself what he previously made suffer the beings he considered inferior. Logically, the apes are happy because they dominate those who previously dominated them, but that does not mean that the future of the Planet, if it is assumed that the apes develop along the same lines as humans, will improve.

The theme in later works or films has changed: it is no longer the totalitarianism of “1984”, but the use of the human being as an object, as in “The Handmaid’s Tale”¹⁷, although the theme in question that gives rise to the work has changed, health, “Elysium”, or converting time into the currency that allows you to live, buy, etc. in “In Time”¹⁸. Although the plot of these works is more complex than what I indicate in these lines, for us and the topic at hand, the important thing is that all of them have been described as dyschronias (dystopias), in a totally unjustified way, because the type of governors, in Atwood’s work, those who live in space in Elysium or the millionaires in time and those who depend on them in the last of the aforementioned films, will never consider that they live in a horrible society.

On the contrary, as happens in real life, those who live at the expense of the powerful defend that society even more vigorously than the ruling class itself. As such, as in the previous case, it is the reader who qualifies the work, not the members of this majority. Between the previous and the latest works there are several differences and among them the part of the population for and against these societies.

In “Brave New World” or “Fahrenheit 451”, it is presumably the majority of the population who is in favour of the situation that is described as dyschronia, while, in more recent works such as the films mentioned, it is a small ruling class that is imposed to the great (immense) majority of the population. There is consequently a transformation of the author’s perspective: previously, they were only a group “aware” of what was happening, which deviated from the official model. The majority supported the established system because, presumably, they were not aware of the manipulation or exploitation to which they were subjected. This means that no one who is aware of that manipulation can support that system. Once again, we find that the reader/viewer judges what should and should not be. These groups lived marginalized, on an island or in the forest, and were left to live apart in those “reserves”, from which they did not intend to leave either. However, in the most modern works, the majority of the population occupied the biggest part of the territory, with the dominant class or group being the one that lives in reserves, with extreme security measures (In Time) or directly in space, (Wall E or Elysium).

The Albanian author Ismael Kadaré describes in his work “The Palace of Dreams”¹⁹, the control of human beings through the control of the mind, which is reached through the knowledge of each person’s dreams.

¹⁷ The author of the novel is Margaret Atwood and it was published in 1985. The film directed by Volker Schlöndorff is from 1990 and a script by Harold Pinter. The series began in 2017, there are six seasons and it has had 12 directors and 15 scriptwriters.

¹⁸ 2011, scripted and directed by Andrew Niccol.

¹⁹ 1981, several editions in the main languages.

There are two films that deal with the problem of subsistence and the end of life, “Soylent Green”²⁰ and “Logan’s Run”²¹. In both films, but especially in the later, the population is perfectly integrated and considers his ascension (elimination) on his birthday as enormous luck. It is true that the protagonist and a friend manage to escape, but by chance, since the protagonist is a police officer, and upon meeting his future escape partner, he becomes interested in those who live in the underworld, a minority that does not accept dying out of obligation, on his birthday at the age that power decides.

A significant fact in many of the novels and films we discuss is that the protagonist is a police officer or a member of the administration of the oppressive State, in the case of Smith in “1984”, who for one reason or another discovers that the world he lives in is not as perfect as he thinks and rebels against the powers. But in others, like “Elysium” or “In Time”, it is clearly a class struggle, of those who have against those who have not, who are the majority.

At the end of the 20th century and in the 21st, attention focuses either on ecology, as in “Wall E”, on access to health care, “Elysium”, or on the length of life, “In Time”. In the last two works cited, the conflict is not between a specific ideology and those who oppose it, but between those who have access to health and life, which is evidently the dominant class, and those who do not have access to them, and they must fight to have it. This is the oppressed, exploited class, mixed with all kinds of criminals in a society radically separated from the rich, in one case by barriers almost impossible to overcome (logically the protagonist does manage to do so) or directly in space (although through subterfuge, the protagonist also reaches it).). Thanks to this “conquest” of the other space, the space of the powerful, a distribution of time begins or access to medicine is achieved.

In summary, science fiction literature and cinema that concerns us in these lines are examples of why I consider that the qualification of uchronia or dyschronia is a value judgment of the reader/spectator, depending on where they are situated. On the one hand, there is the part of the dominant society, which, in most of the works mentioned, has the support of the majority of the population. It could be considered that, if the reader/viewer sympathizes with, supports oppression, mental control, economic exploitation, etc. On the other, there are the oppressed, the exploited, those who do not allow themselves to be manipulated, who are banished to reserves, islands or forests (in “Fahrenheit” for example) and, in any case, alien to the “integrated” society of whose advantages they have given up to enjoy.

In certain cases, it is the majority of the population (In Time, Elysium) that is subjugated by the ruling class, which is the one that lives in inaccessible areas, a kind of luxury reserves. It all depends on the relationship that one establishes between oneself and the narrative. Considering that these are dyschronias means placing

²⁰ The film is directed by Robert Fleisher from a screenplay by Stanley R. Greenberg that takes the idea from Harry Harrison's novel *Make Room!, Make Room!*

²¹ The novel is by William F. Nolan, has the same title, and was published in 1967. The film is from 1976, directed by Michael Anderson.

oneself on the oppressed, exploited side of society. But, if this situation is clear when it comes to the majority of the population, when we refer to “New Brave World” or “Fahrenheit”, criticizing what the majority of the population considers good and where in principle its members are happy, is a self-appointment holder of what Good and Evil is. It is to think that the majority of the population does not see “the truth” because it is mentally manipulated, it means, in a word, to become the ethical judge of society and forcing everyone to be happy not as they understand it, since they are manipulated, but as one, the reader/the viewer understands it.

And so, to wake up from mental deception, a dictatorship of one's own way of thinking is established. Seen in this way, uchrony is that society be as I want it to be and for this, they are freed from the oppression of their ruling class to impose their own oppression on them, which, obviously, is not considered to be such oppression. Thus, the liberators become oppressors.

Current works show a panorama that is much closer to reality and affects more the human condition as it is. It is not about looking for other forms of society, but rather the works limit themselves to denouncing what may happen if the current situation develops in the same way. Nevertheless, the truth is that many of these theories describe a society about to emerge.

We will discuss all this in detail in my essay.