



Reading the Dystopian Imagination in Films: Parallels Between the Science-Fiction Narrative and Reality

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Abstract

A post-apocalyptic scene in the dystopian world is usually set in an uninhabitable place with clear signs of disintegration, characterized by extreme suffering, fear of oppression, violence, segregation and class-division based on identity politics for complete control of the general population. The narrative is often built around a large-scale disaster and raises crucial questions about the future. The reason why dystopian narratives matter in the present scenario is in relation to the political situation as well as the condition of women in modern society which is alarmingly concerning. Reality mirrors the dystopian imagination which embodies these socio-political concerns. It launches a dialogue about the future and in doing so, becomes a form of resistance towards it. This paper explores the fascination with dystopian narratives in science-fiction films while drawing parallels between fiction and reality considering the recent pandemic, in order to address the appeal of dystopia as a genre. It presents science-fiction narratives as a necessary step towards the possibility of a better world through the critique of the present, despite the overwhelmingly melancholic imagination the genre embodies.

Keywords: Science-Fiction, Dystopia, Narratives, Films Studies.

Dystopia takes up the task of illustrating a nightmarish illusion in the abundance of happy fantasies that are common in all forms of entertainment. It provides the same effect that tragedy provided, that is, a refreshing idea and more than anything else, cathartic pleasure. A tragedy requires excessive suffering to befall on a person of high status, so that it will affect a large number of people indirectly. If we see it in this sense, a dystopia is the tragedy that strikes the whole world. It is what Stephen Greenblatt describes as the human practice of producing “carefully demarcated playgrounds,” a space where one could freely experiment with ideas that might otherwise lead to dangerous conclusions (Wagner, 2002). Screenwriter Stuart Fischhoff

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noted that there is a sense of psychological release in watching dark fantasies on screen. He believes that these experiences create a safe space where people can experience their fears of ecological, economic, political and cultural crises and realize them safely in the “movie world” (Biscossi, 2018). There is a level of comfort in knowing that it is not entirely real.

Dystopian movies invite the audience to live, for a few hours, in a desolated environment where humanity is desperately trying to survive. This offers the viewer a way to remember and value the present. The insight that the movie provides may result in two outcomes, either encourage people to do what they can to avoid such future tragedies, or accept the reality of this impending doom. The narrative raises crucial questions regarding the future, once the ‘disaster’ strikes (Kaplan, 2016). Representation of a post-apocalyptic scene in the dystopian world is usually set in an uninhabitable place with clear signs of disintegration, characterized by extreme suffering, fear and oppression. These are often shown as a result of the cruelties imposed by humans upon other humans, and therefore, the cause and the blame lie with the people themselves. Hence, the need for such a reminder towards the human capacity for destruction.

What are some of the other, seemingly insignificant things with which viewers identify with, and why do they find such meaning in them? The ‘meaning’ here, isn’t a symbolic one, as the search for symbols can lead to never ending discussions and explanations. The question is what narrative elements are meaningful in terms of people’s own stories, and why? What is the reason for this fascination with dystopian narratives? The 1998 movie, *The Truman Show* raises a number of philosophical questions, such as the problem of free will, but it also gives us reason to think about television programs of a certain kind. Why do we (mostly) prefer to watch programs that give the illusion of the ‘real’ in some form? What difference does it make for the viewing experience that there are ‘real’ people in the show? On reality TV, UK’s *Big Brother* (created in 2000) and its Indian counterpart *Bigg Boss* (created in 2006), to take an obvious example, the interest element in both the shows is similar to what goes on in the movie. The viewers, just like in the film, are watching a real person, who may act unpredictably. Therefore, simple voyeuristic interest aside, the unpredictable nature of the show is where the appeal lies. Anyhow, *The Truman Show*, *Big Brother* as well as *Bigg Boss* all share another similarity: the Orwellian surveillance of a ‘Big Brother,’ the ‘boss’. In the act of watching, it makes the audience a pseudo authority figure, omnipresent and watching over all things. Such elements from the dystopian imagination are everywhere; and even though the idea of complete surveillance is, overall, grim and horrific in real life, the unpredictability or relatable subject matter and the voyeuristic pleasure that the audience generates from it, makes the content enjoyable to watch.

If we were to further explore what makes the bleak imagination of the future so enjoyable for the general population, it could be as The Guardian suggests, because the genre reaches for the possibility of a utopian future, providing hope in the sense that there is something to aspire to: ‘a chance for change’ (Armitstead, 2012). Claire Curtis, a professor of political science at the College of Charleston specializes in dystopia. She explains that the stories put forward dual ideas. The first one is where we relate to the narrative, imagining ourselves in that situation of utter chaos, and going through the realization of fear and dread. The second is, when it gives people hope to work against that fear (Sacks, 2020). Unlike an anti-utopia, which is simply a work that rejects the concept of utopia and offers no hope of a better world, a dystopia seeks to push its audience to re-examine their ideas of what is desirable.

In the world we live in, it is crucial to remind ourselves what dreams of an ideal world

Reading the Dystopian Imagination in Films: Parallels Between the Science-Fiction Narrative and Reality

look like, how a ghastly world comes into existence and what lies in between that causes the transition in either direction. This purpose is fulfilled by films which are interested in the notion of creating perfection, a utopia (an ideal state) and dystopia (the flawed one). There is a strong case for suggesting that humanity stands at a crossroad of choice today, regarding the direction we decide to take. This is an extension of the belief that if we are to have a prosperous future, we will need to make a contribution towards it by consciously choosing to work for that future in the present. The future, in itself, is not a tangible object that can be attained but rather, a state of conditions that will have to be maintained. It is a constant process which begs attention as well as action.

The hellish prophecies from science fiction call for these actions through their warning. For instance, feminist writers today are using dystopian tropes to explore what might happen if hard-fought advancements in women's rights and equality are reversed. Hence, there is an exponential growth in the production of feminist dystopian novels in the market. Beyond feminist concerns, dystopian narratives incorporate other social injustices as well. For instance, Prayaag Akbar's *Leila* (2017) addresses communal violence, identity politics and class division as citizens are divided into residential sectors based on their religious identity. The segregation is amplified through patriarchal values that increase inequality in the name of purity.

The position of women in India has always been an unsettling topic and this sub-genre of feminist literature projects concern around women's equality in a country largely working on patriarchal views. Basically, work in this category sends out a warning against constant political inaction and how religious fundamentalism along with the technological advancements may end up curbing women's freedom. The similarity between these narratives and the reality of India is both horrifying and alarming. The growing problem of sexual assault, erosion of basic rights in addition to the diminishing female representation in leadership roles on ground level limit their contribution in the society. The themes in *Leila* strike at the heart of India's pride and its diverse cultural identity. It leads us to the question, 'are we living in a dystopia?'

This type of imagination takes its subject matter from the reality of today's socio-political scenario. Leni Zumas tells "The New York Times", "One of the things about looking at the world through a feminist lens is that we are already in a dystopia" (Alter, 2018). On the other hand, since a growing number of people are reading and writing this type of fiction, something that would have been impossible under an active totalitarian government that bans free expression, we may find comfort in the fact that we are able to engage in such discourse in literature and films which means we are not there yet. However, it cannot be overlooked that today the dystopian genre has moved hauntingly closer to reality than ever before. Novels published in 2018 like Leni Zumas's *Red Clocks* and Ling Ma's *Severance*, Christina Dalcher's *Vox*, and Sophie Mackintosh's *The Water Cure* are some examples of fiction where dystopia becomes a reflection of the world in which we live (Delistraty, 2019). British novelist Sophie Mackintosh's (2018) debut novel *The Water Cure*, uses fantasy and science fiction to tackle the issues around women's future. It is a story of three sisters living in isolation on a desolate island and trying to shield themselves from an outbreak that is causing women to fall ill because of toxins that men can transmit to women. The sisters are taught to avoid contact with men and undergo cleansing rituals that include drowning, drinking salt water and exposing themselves to extreme heat and cold. The book raises questions about gender inequality, misogyny, violence against women, the erosion of reproductive rights and the topic of institutionalized sexism. Mackintosh spoke about this to "The Guardian" in 2018 saying, "There are so many things happening at the moment, such as #MeToo and the abortion referendum. It shows that

women's bodies are still very much up for debate" (Delistraty, 2019).

The canon of feminist dystopian literature reflects on the status of women's rights, and the direction of progress towards equality between the sexes. The significance of this literature in today's political climate is beyond what one can imagine. Fátima Vieira (2013) in her work, *Dystopia(n) Matters: On the Page, on Screen, on Stage* talks about how the role, contribution and representation of women have been reduced. It demonstrates the reality of the relationships between men and women in a country steeped in patriarchal culture. The idea validates Dystopian literature expert, Raffaella Baccolini's fear of living in a dystopian reality. This type of fiction mirrors the present anxieties in a dystopian world, and at times, encourages the act of peaceful demonstration against injustice. For instance, a classic of the genre, Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel, *The Handmaid's Tale* inspired political activists to dress in the red robes and white bonnets and gather at state capitals around America to oppose policies that restrict women's access to abortion and health care according to a "New York Times" report (Alter, 2018). Baccolini firmly believes in the importance of this genre as a form of resistance in our times (Vieira, 2013).

For authors who contributed to the origin of dystopian literature, like Aldous Huxley writing in the 1930s, the concern of unrivalled expansion of nationalistic ideas and growing threat to individuality was of the utmost importance. George Orwell's work found the issue of obstinate governments like Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia, a matter of concern due to the erosion of civil liberties through monitoring and regulating citizens. Both the author's anxieties for the future reflect how the state produces controlling and disciplinary bodies through the utilization of technology and the human dependency on it. In this regard, it would not be far-fetched to say that the world is a dystopia in progress that is being constructed every day through the enforcement of surveillance, the heightened use of technology and the exchange of individualism for a collective identity. Today's dystopian vision shares many of its attributes with the imagination of Huxley or Orwell, but where it stands out is in our ability to make such fiction a reality through technology faster than ever before.

The main reason why the dystopian narrative matters lie in both the political situation and the condition of people in modern society. The parallels that Baccolini draws in her essay, "Living in Dystopia" between Italy and Orwell's imagination, precisely mirrors our own 'local dystopia' (Vieira, 2013). A "soft" regime, as she calls it, has daily broadcasts from the prime minister that remind her of the 'Big Brother' from Orwell's *1984*. In a practice similar to the novel, a new enemy is often dictated and history is tampered with through media control, since in every dystopian world, the control of media is fundamental for the survival of its regime. Those who digress are personally and publicly attacked. The situation in the real world is in no way identical to how far Orwell takes it. Regardless, we need the dystopian imagination, not only because it provides a way of self-expression, but also because it plays the role of a cautionary tale which reminds us that things could get worse. It launches a dialogue about the future, and becomes a way of resistance towards it. More than anything else however, it is a necessary step towards the possibility of a better world through the critique of the present one, despite the overwhelmingly melancholic imagination the genre embodies.

When it comes to films, the common goal is to entertain the audience and not necessarily to promote a revolution. At the end of the day, the inherent value of any form of art, or its genres and subgenres, can be separated from all didactic, moral, political or ideological functions; and essentially be conjured for the sake of aesthetic pleasure alone in the market driven economy. In 1976, when writer John Wagner co-created the comic book

Reading the Dystopian Imagination in Films: Parallels Between the Science-Fiction Narrative and Reality

character of Judge Dredd with editor Pat Mills, he would have never thought that his fictional world could come this close to reality. However, with climate change, a deadly pandemic, the dwindling state of democracy, economic crisis, AI and automation taking human jobs, Wagner's work has become strangely prophetic. The creators are, in no way, blind to the situation. In an interview, Wagner issues concern over the degradation of democratic norms around the world (Sacks, 2020). We have established that the world of literary dystopia is nightmarish, alarmingly plausible, and yet, deeply fascinating. "It seems like we have a lot of things piling up on each other in a way that wouldn't really be believable in a serious apocalypse movie or fiction," young adult writer Scott Westerfeld told "NBC News" (Sacks, 2020). Westerfeld is particularly referring to the pandemic, the wildfires and the government's less than ideal reaction to it all. Unprecedented wildfires impacted Australia and the West Coast of the United States in 2019, reinforcing a bleak future marked by climate change. Moreover, mass protests against injustice and violence of extremism due to racial segregation have taken to the streets in many countries, often coming into conflict with police and government troops.

The pandemic created another parallel between reality and the novels of Orwell. The stoppage of transportation and stay-home orders were reported as the government tightened restrictions, imposing complete 24-hour curfews in order to contain infections. The shortcomings of the system started piling up with the prohibition of freedom of speech. The manipulation and control essential to hinder free speech is easily possible through the internet, ironically, a system with a far-reaching network that was built to connect individuals in society. It can easily become a tool for 'Big Brother' style surveillance with the use of digital data as a means of control. A dystopia is typically pessimistic and with the deep anxiety and dread that took over during the pandemic, reality seemingly became an extension of the dystopian vision of fiction. When a catastrophic situation threatens the entire world, the measures taken by governments restrict fundamental rights, freedoms and needs of its people who voluntarily contribute by putting the need for survival before their rights and the importance of freedom. What is expected in a dystopia is this voluntary obedience. In societies thus created, without exception, bureaucratic administration, religious values or technological developments control masses.

The imagination of a 'tech dystopia' had it broadly right: humans plugged-in staring at screens all day. The smartphone addiction and digital dependency had been a problem for some time now, though during lockdown the internet did bring people together in useful and meaningful ways through online support groups, remote working options, and ways of staying connected with loved ones. According to a study, global online content consumption doubled, as millions joined 'WhatsApp', 'Netflix' and 'TikTok' (Bartlett, 2021). Lockdown without zoom calls, online shopping, delivery services, or 'Netflix' would have been much more inconvenient. Anyhow, with the increased use of digital media the personal information stored digitally through the apps is entrusted to private corporations or state powers. Corporations becoming more powerful and technological monopolies are the last thing that the world needs but where the rest of the market sustained losses as a direct or indirect consequence of the pandemic, companies like 'Amazon', 'Apple' and 'Facebook' flourished like never before. A recent study by the US consultancy McKinsey found that the digital interaction between consumers and businesses sped up by approximately three to four years, and digital product and service offerings by seven years, a trend that is unlikely to reverse (Bartlett, 2021). Amazon's Jeff Bezos became the first person ever (in nearly four decades) with a \$200 billion net worth making him the richest person in the world in 2020, as a result of change in consumer habits in the coronavirus pandemic according to Forbes (Ponciano, 2020). The fastest growth was seen in the case of Zoom that went from under 700,000 users in January 2020 to over 13

million in a few months in the UK alone (Bartlett, 2021).

Moreover, the pandemic brought the fantasy of dystopia in the form of virus outbreak movies and the chaos that follows after to the reality of everyday life. The actual footage from intensive care units and the crematoriums in India, tells the complete story of the terrifying collapse of the medical system, declaring that the dead of Covid-19 are victims of the flawed system as well. In the UK, despite the rapid vaccine rollout, there is no denying that multiple government missteps, contradictory statements, incompetence, miscalculations and delayed responses contributed to the death toll (McMullan et al., 2021). While progress was made, the system largely failed almost throughout the globe. Official steps taken by governments around the world to avoid further losses in the battle against the pandemic backfired due to misinformation. It is bizarre how these images of disaster appear to be realising the nightmares explored in dystopian cinema. German media and film expert, Denis Newiak finds it rather surprising that even after a pandemic situation was played out so vividly on the screen multiple times, the hospitals and the governments were still, to a large extent, "not ready" for anything like it (Kürten, 2020). He noticed subtle elements in several pandemic related films, concluding that "the genre deals with larger issues like fake news and conspiracy theories; it looks at how businesses profit from fear and sales of ineffective fake drugs as well as how society increasingly becomes polarized" (Kürten, 2020).

Considering these, the real-life developments become uncomfortably familiar to virus outbreak movies. Many film experts looked into how cinema foreshadowed the COVID-19 pandemic years ago, making us see movies like South Korea's *Flu*, India's *Virus*, and UK's *28 Days Later* in a whole new light. The plot of such fictional material predominantly follows the transmission of a virus, seemingly produced in private laboratories or transmitted from a bat or mice. *28 Days Later* for instance, became the first of many in the sub-genre of dystopian films focused on the outbreak of a disease in the UK (Macdonald et al., 2002). The imagined catastrophe begins with a scene in which activists set lab animals free from their cages not knowing that they are infected with a "rage" virus that turns them into frothing, savage killers. The virus quickly spreads to humans, and when a man named Jim awakens in an empty hospital and walks outside, he finds a deserted London. The image of a series of shots where he wanders Piccadilly Circus and crosses Westminster Bridge with no other person in sight strangely resembles the post-lockdown deserted roads that we are familiar with. Transmitted by bodily fluid, the virus transforms the infected into enraged, wild-eyed, indiscriminate killers with a compulsive need to attack. Though, it is not how viruses typically work but despite the virological liberties of *28 Days Later*, it revives national debates on biological warfare and the search for weapons of mass destruction in the form of microbial plagues.

A classic film of virus outbreak, the film *Contagion* starring Kate Winslet follows the spread of a virus transmitted through human touch (Shamberg et al., 2011). The public health officials try to identify and contain the disease before a vaccine is developed in order to stop the spread. CNN shared that the writer, Scott Z. Burns consulted the representatives of the World Health Organization to correctly portray the infectious diseases, while Kate Winslet worked with the US Centre for Disease Control and Prevention to embody the character of an epidemiologist charged with leading the world through the crisis. Various other medical experts were consulted as well. Laurie Garrett in a 2001 article for CNN described "Contagion" as "part fantasy, part reality and totally possible" (Rogers, 2020). The final scene in the film reveals the origin of the fictional "MEV-1" virus, though debatable, again drawing a similar picture as bats are considered by some epidemiologists to be the possible source of the coronavirus. The film shows a pig that ate a piece of banana dropped by an infected bat, the virus gets transferred

Reading the Dystopian Imagination in Films: Parallels Between the Science-Fiction Narrative and Reality

into humans through the pig and the cycle begins. Further, the film has some similar symptoms for the infected who experience fevers and profuse sweating, pounding headaches, sore throat and cough.

Scholars around the world have been asking themselves: ‘Are we living in a dystopia?’ It is undeniable that the change in the world with regard to the way it worked and socialized has been drastic. The similar nature of this experience, regardless of geographical location, had strangely brought the diverse cultural identities of the world together. The tragedy arising from this episode in human history united humanity in their moments of grief and hope. The lockdown measures implemented to curb the explosive spread of infections severely limited the freedom of half of the society, whereas, the other half had to face even more severe consequences, either by putting their life in danger as essential workers, or, facing financial hardship because of not being able to work as a daily-wage earner. The incident exposed the flaws of the present system and launched a number of debates, single handedly. Aside from having long lasting adverse effects on the economy, it brought, to the forefront, the Marxist segregation present in society. Just as the pandemic broke the divisions in class by affecting all people regardless of gender or identity, at the same time, it created a distinct divide in the experience of suffering on the basis of economic background. The divide here, in the experience of this adversity, is created with the kind of effect it has on the masses. On the upper & middle class the effect is more psychological while for the daily-wage earner, it is not only the struggle to survive the medical challenges of the pandemic but also, a threat to their economic survival as a whole.

The first requirement of a life changing disastrous event was fulfilled by the pandemic and considerably altered the society as we knew it. The ‘new normal’ established in the mandatory masks and sanitizer, and the psychological deterioration shared among the public marked our move towards the new world order. The hold of technology in the daily life of an average individual increased with the emphasis on a socially distant way of living. That aside, the loss of humanity in deteriorating values is the direct result of the reality of death becoming so routine that the growing number of casualties became just that, a mere number. During the peak of this crisis came instances of hoarding essential drugs, black marketing and over charging desperate friends and families of people suffering from COVID-19 complications. Exploitation, even in such a difficult time, was present everywhere. Moreover, there is currently so much Covid-related fraud that the UK government has even created a dedicated helpline for it (Bartlett, 2021).

This is the horror of our times and yet, the other side of the coin boasts of an increasing amount of people who came forward to help strangers. The system had failed them but in the quest for survival people around the world came together to help each other in whatever way they could. The previously labelled weapon of manipulation, the internet, more specifically, social media platforms, in the hands of the people becomes a tool for spreading information about the availability of hospital beds, oxygen cylinders and medicines. It launched a campaign against the virus through these small efforts, for the people, by the people themselves. It brings us to another feature of the cinematic imagination of dystopia wherein, humanity with its attribute of kindness restores the hope for a better future and combats hopelessness. With the idea that a disastrous situation created a new way of living, in the middle of the loss of humanity, mass suffering, horrific conditions and hopelessness; I conclude that 2020 had indeed been an experience similar to a dystopian film. With the experiences of the pandemic, dystopia is no longer a mere concept but, to use Artur Blaim’s term, “an existential experience” (Vieira,2013). However, future generations will look back at 2020 as the year of mistakes,

tragedy, change and human resilience.

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Reading the Dystopian Imagination in Films: Parallels Between the Science-Fiction Narrative and Reality

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