21st-Century Dystopia and Utopia and a Re-Centring of Humanism

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Abstract

Classic dystopia (Swift, Wells) identifies the plagues of society. However, even in 21st-century works that partly do so, committed purposes are at times defeated by individualism, superficiality and mere entertainment. Commercialized dystopian science fiction, accompanied by an ideology of cynicism and an aesthetics of spectacular and violent exaggeration, seems indeed to be one of the current prevalent strategies of literary and cinematic representation of the imminent future (e.g. *The Hunger Games*). Alternative to spectacular dystopia are a realistic, yet imaginative belief that the future can be modified to the benefit of sentient beings, and, on the level of aesthetics, a reflective and un-spectacularized poetics addressed to the mind and including humane emotions. Positive examples in recent science fiction are *Arrival* film and story and the film *Advantageous*. *Arrival* is a fictional utopia, but there are social prefigurations which are not necessarily separate from daily life (e.g. Wright's *Envisioning real utopias*). And if a total type of utopia (as in texts by More, Campanella, and Fourier) might be unsuitable for the present, a useful concept is Calvino's "dust like utopia", a minimalist yet effective approach to social responsibility. Finally, anti-Machiavellian humanism should be encouraged, based on the important values of equality, solidarity, compassion and ethical behaviour. Whenever such concerns have fallen to the margins, they deserve to be re-centered. References in this field are essays by Piketty, Stiglitz, and Harvey.

Introduction

The first part of this paper proposes to look at some international science-fiction films that explore human society and behaviour in either a negative or positive light, and more specifically in terms of dystopia and utopia. The second part focuses mainly on some essays on post-humanism and inequality. On the whole, this paper expresses a need to re-centre humanist ethical and aesthetic values.

1. *Some samples of 21st century dystopian and utopian science fiction*

Commercialized dystopian science fiction worldwide, accompanied by an ideology of cynicism and an aesthetics of spectacular exaggeration, seems to be one of the current prevalent strategies of literary and cinematic globalized representation of the imminent future.

A Western example is the series of films *The Hunger Games*, directed by Francis Lawrence and Gary Ross (2012-2015), based on Suzanne Collins' novels. This group of films depicts a social dystopian society where the politics of the ruling elite are all-winning, but the oppressed finally stage a revolt. Its aesthetics appears rather excessive in portraying the killing techniques of the archery-based games which give the title to the series, and in depicting the violent means adopted by strong-willed adolescent heroes to lead a revolution. The main social background is progressive and supports collective action, but the motif of brutal combat is commercial. One might argue that, by contrast to its anti-establishment political ideology, the action side of the film aims at entertaining and increasing sales.

An Eastern example might be Korean director Bong Joon Ho's film *Snowpiercer* (2013), based on *Transperceneige*, a graphic novel by Jacques Lob, Benjamin Legrand and Jean-Marc Rochette.[1] As the present author stated in a previously published essay,[2] this film combines synergies of Eastern and Western cinematography and it constitutes a globalized popular product for consumption, intended for those who like fast action and violence. The message conveyed is rather black since the plot focuses on the fight of human beings against their fellow human beings until most die. Yet, the survival of two innocent young characters, a girl and a boy, would seem to indicate the possibility of a post-apocalyptic positive future of rebirth of humankind.

More moderate in spectacular aesthetics and more serious in thoughtful content, though still a partly cliched action work deploying use of martial arts, is Japanese film *Cutie Honey: Tears* (2017), directed by Asai Takeshi, a story of integration as well as conflict between humans and cyborgs in a dystopian society. A final duel ends with the defeat of evil dictatorial political power, and it is therefore suggested that dystopia based on greed, inequality and insane totalitarianism might give way to the utopia of wiser humans and cyborgs able to cooperate and cope with excessively uneven class distinction, environmental pollution, and the peril represented by emotionless cynicism.

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[1] *Transperceneige* (graphic novel 1984-2000), Tournai, Casterman, 2013.
[2] Roberto Bertoni, "East/West Interaction in Some Comics Written in French", in Roberto Bertoni, ed., *Aspects of science fiction since the 1980s: China, Italy, Japan, Korea*, Trinity College Dublin and Trauben Turin, 2015, pp. 23-42.

Several more recent examples of globalized spectacular science fiction might be quoted here, including perhaps, most famously, the recent episodes of the *Star Wars* saga, the so-called *Sequel Trilogy* (2015-2017), directed by J.J. Abrams and Ryan Johnson, in which freedom fighters operate in action stories that are typical in commercial entertainment, thus standing a few steps apart from philosophical reflection, accurate representation of the negative sides of society, and realistic portrayal of a credible war situation. Surely the archetypal fight of *Shadow* ("the dark side") against *Wisdom* adds interesting Jungian connotations to this story,3 yet its potential for social analysis and introspection is obscured by exaggerated evil doing and noisy battles similar both to cliched air duels from Second World War movies and fast contemporary video games.

Dystopia and utopia could be a way to identify the plague of society and ways out of them. This was the case with world-wide well known classic predecessors, such as Lucian, Jonathan Swift, and H.G. Wells in Western literature. In the East, with due caution for difference in philosophical approaches between Europe and China, one could perhaps mention Confucius, and even Mao Zedong as Douwe Fokkema does,4 and among the numerous modern utopian and dystopian classics from Japan, one of the most prominently translated into Western languages is Ryūnosuke Akutagawa's *Kappa*.5 However, contemporary spectacular commercialization defeats the committed purpose of this kind of works because, as suggested by the cinematic examples listed above, it results, partly if not entirely, in banalization of serious questions, accompanied by mere entertainment which is at contrast with dramatic sociological scenarios.

Perhaps, what we need in the place of 21st-century spectacular dystopia is a projection towards constructive changes in mentality, and a realistic, yet imaginative belief that the future can be modified to the benefit of sentient beings. On the level of aesthetics, a reflective and non-spectacular poetics, addressed to the analysing mind and the compassionate emotions of film-goers, might be preferable to loud and violent shows and special effects. Let us see two examples: Jennifer Phang's film *Advantageous* (2015), and a film directed by Denis Villeneuve, entitled *Arrival* (2016) and based on Ted Chiang's "Story of your life".6

A few words, first, on *Advantageous*. The style of this socially committed science fiction film is elegant. It averts sensational statements and imagery, thus enhancing its

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3 As noted, among others, by Christopher Booker in *The Seven Basic Plots*, London and New York, Continuum, 2014.

4 Dowe Fokkema, *Perfect Worlds: Utopian Fiction in China and the West*, Amsterdam University Press, 2011. See in particular, in Chapter 7, the section entitled "The Confucian Concept of Perfect Virtue", pp. 166-171, and Chapter 15, "Mao Zedong's Utopian Thought and the Post-Mao Imaginative Response", pp. 321-344.

5 Among essays on Japanese utopia and dystopia, see Susan J. Napier, *The Fantastic in Modern Japanese Literature: The Subversion of Modernity*, London and New York, Routledge, 1996. See in particular Chapters 5, "Logic of Inversion: Twentieth-Century Japanese Utopias", and Chapter 6, "The Dystopian Imagination: From the Asylum through the Labyrinth to the End of the World", pp. 141-220.

6 Ted Chang, *Stories of Your Life and Others*, London, Picador, 2015. Previous versions of the ideas expressed here on *Advantageous* and *Arrival* had been published in Italian under the form of reviews in online journal *Carte allineate* (ISSN 2009-7123), available from:
http://cartescoperterecensionietesti.blogspot.ie/2015/12/jennifer-phang-advantageous.html;
and: http://cartescoperterecensionietesti.blogspot.ie/2016/12/denis-villeneuve-arrival.html.

content in a thoughtful, and therefore intellectually effective way. The acting has good theatrical quality. The main topic is the development of automation and artificial intelligence with a number of negative social consequences such as high rates of unemployment, increase of inequality, the collapse of the middle class, and in particular the social disadvantage of women. The fifty-year-old woman-model and manager protagonist, confronted with being fired due to age, and in order to keep an adequate level of employment, undertakes an experiment conducted by her firm, during which her brain is transferred into a younger body. The operation is successful, but a number of problems appear in her second life, in particular her maternal love vanishes, and as a result her emotions change and her family life is damaged. In addition to the main themes of eugenics and the evolution of work in an imminent post-human future, this thoughtful film mentions terrorist attacks that take place in the background among the indifference of most spectators; future technological objects imagined functionally and realistically; high-rising urbanization; in brief a future that we can understand and on which we have to reflect because it derives from problems we are beginning to confront now.

Moving on to *Arrival*, we witness the landing of an extra-terrestrial spaceship piloted by non-anthropomorphic beings called "Eptapodes". A team of Earthlings attempt to decipher their difficult language comprised of "semagrams", or circular symbols carrying meaning. This language is predictive, and its scientific foundation can be found in Fermat's principle: "light travels between two points along the path that requires the least time, as compared to other nearby paths".7 The Eptapode language can see into the future, but a component of free-will is entrusted to the choice to follow or not follow predestined paths. The Eptapodes have come to Earth to help human beings because they know the planet Earth is in danger, and they predict an emergency in their own planet which will be helped by Earthlings in the long-term of three millennia. This is why, before they suddenly and somewhat inexplicably take off, the Eptapodes leave an unspecified gift, but one can guess the gift is their language itself. Human interpretation of this language prevents a war among the superpowers of our planet and opens a future of collaboration and unification between all countries on Earth. This story is complex, well-articulated, rather intellectual but not especially elitist, it is in fact democratically intended for a wide audience at multiple levels of education. The film is visually moderate in special effects, yet imaginative and surreal, with the aliens' spaceship partly comparable to paintings by Magritte, and a curved variation on Stanley Kubrick's monolith from *2001: A Space Odissey*. The utopian last section of *Arrival* prefigures a future in which human beings have to collaborate with each other for survival. The actors are not superhuman but ordinary beings. A pensive film, it runs opposite to the main trend of flashy and trivial plots.

Other than dystopia as found in *Advantageous*, we have utopia in *Arrival*, yet in both cases science fiction is adopted for its potential to engage audiences to react rationally to sociological ideas on the "risk society" in which we already live,8 and analyse the human condition also from psychological and existential perspectives.

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7 http://scipp.ucsc.edu/~haber/ph5B/fermat09.pdf.
8 See Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society*, London, Sage, 2002.

From a global angle, in addition to multicultural aspects in the life of United States authors Phang and Chiang (Phang's Vietnamese and Malaysian-Chinese heritage, and Chiang's Chinese parents), one could mention the attention paid by French Canadian director Villeneuve to initial divergence and final cooperation between China and the West. Furthermore, the Eptapode language might originate from Oriental characters rather than a Western alphabet. There is a serious scientific and linguistic substratum, and the representation of the *other* under the guise of an extra-terrestrial civilization is politically correct since it depicts biological difference of non-humans from humans while it enhances the importance of intercultural communication and mutual understanding. These non-cliched cosmopolitan comparisons and integrations of intellectual elements are indeed deeper than the stereotyped references of some science fiction films from Hollywood to Eastern culture simply by means of devices such as Oriental martial arts.

2. *Utopia, reality, humanism*

Let us gather a few simple ideas.

First, as we shall see a few lines below, utopia is not necessarily separate from reality as in Mannheim's definition: "A state of mind is utopian when it is incongruous with the state of reality within which it occurs".9 And in any case, as Mannheim himself puts it, "it is possible that the utopias of today might become the realities of to-morrow".10

Second, total utopia (e.g. More, Campanella, Fourier) is probably unsuitable for the present time. A more useful concept could be Italo Calvino's "dust like utopia",11 or a set of actions and thoughts that might positively modify the world in which we dwell, called by Calvino "the inferno where we live every day" in his book *Invisible Cities*.12

Third, one might associate the concept of "dust like utopia" with the possibility of "realistic utopias" to be started now. Even more than to Rawls' concept of "realistic utopia" understood as justice in international relations,13 one might refer here to Eric Olin Wright's "egalitarian visions of an alternative world",14 to be pursued in non-violent ways through "the capacity to mobilize people for voluntary collective actions of various sorts".15 Olin Wright's "real utopia" has highly democratic criteria which "constitute viable alternatives to existing arrangements" and "contribute to […] social empowerment".16 Some of the existing examples this author gives are the projects realized in Porto Alegre and the running of *Wikipedia*. Further projects of real utopia

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9 Karl Mannheim (1936), *Ideology and Utopia*, London, Routledge, 1991, p. 173.
10 *Ibidem*, p. 183.
11 Italo Calvino, "Per Fourier 3. Commiato. L'utopia pulviscolare" (1973), in *Saggi 1945-1985*, Milan, Mondadori, 1995.
12 Italo Calvino, *Le città invisibili* (1972), in *Romanzi e racconti*, ed. Mario Barenghi and Bruno Falcetto, Vol. 2, Milan, Mondadori, 1992. English transl. by William Weaver, San Diego, New York and London, Harcourt Brace & Company, 1974, p. 165.
13 John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples with The Ideas of Public Reason Revisited*, Harvard University Press, 1999.
14 Eric Olin Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias*, London, Verso, 2010, p. 10.
15 *Ibidem*, p. 113.
16 *Ibidem*, p. 150.

should be formulated especially in relation to equality, an issue which has been explored widely by fundamental authors such as Thomas Piketty, David Harvey and Joseph Stiglitz.17

Fourth, and most prominently, anti-Machiavellian humanism should be encouraged based on the important values of solidarity, compassion and ethical behaviour.

Fifth, the humanist stance of this paper does not exclude awareness of some changes in society that are at times called post-human. In its mirroring of contemporary concerns, science fiction films depict post-human worlds both in terms of societies lacking benevolence and of beings integrating human and cybernetic organs. In the East one might refer to Japanese *Cutie Honey: Tears*, mentioned above. Perhaps the clearest Western examples are Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) and its sequel *Blade Runner 2049*, directed by Denis Villeneuve (2017). In the *Blade Runner* films we find sensational rapid stunts but also important ethical preoccupations on what it means to live in a non-fully anthropocentric world. The artificial intelligence beings in these two works develop an individual conscience of their own which leads them to rebel against human beings in the first film, and to give birth and create a new half-human and half-cybernetic race in the sequel. As a point of reference to dystopian/utopian anticipation of real and present scientific and philosophical concerns, some of Rosi Braidotti's theory on post-humanism might be applied in this case.18 She questions unethical versions of post-humanism and she sides by an ethics of vitality that takes into account the direction towards post-humanity, which in her view would appear to be irreversible. This ethical idea is rather intriguing, even though the present writer is diffident towards *post* prefixes and interested instead in the main semantic content, the word humanism. Similarly, under the aegis of the concept of the post-human, non-anthropocentric views are expressed, among others, by Leonardo Caffo.19 Questioning anthropocentrism in the name of fair opportunities for of all living beings is a valid idea, yet, once again it is unclear why it should come under the headline of post-humanism instead of merely humanism. Therefore, the transparent mere idea of humanism is what is relaunched here for our present and future.

Conclusion

The aesthetic stance in favour of humane and reflective commitment, as expressed by discussing a few science fiction films in the first part of this paper, and the ethical and social concerns conveyed above on the formulation of a collective variety of humanism, seemed to have fallen to the margins this century, but they deserve to be re-centred as it is shown by reflection taking place in recent sociology and philosophy, some example of which have been briefly illustrated in the second part. The problem is global. On a worldwide scale, the theory and practice of realistic utopias has become urgent, and it is therefore worthwhile to undertake it.

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[17] Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, Cambridge, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014. David Harvey, *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism*, London, Profile Books, 2014. Joseph E. Stiglitz, *The Price of Inequality* (2012), London, Penguin, 2013.
[18] Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, Cambridge, Polity, 2013.
[19] Leonardo Caffo, *Fragile umanità. Il postumano contemporaneo*, Turin, Einaudi, 2017.