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Mediated Utopias: From Literature to Cinema



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On Utopia, Adaptation, and Utopian Film Analysis

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1.

Artistic projections of ideal states and societies in fictional texts can serve different functions and be put to a variety of uses. Apart from the obvious aesthetic function, such constructions have been often regarded as a relatively attractive way of promoting certain political, social, and economic ideas, and / or verbalising one's objections to the existing order. Polish positivist thinker and educator Alekander Świątochowski observed, —Utopia as an ideal form of social relations is the most common element of the spiritual domain. It constitutes a part of all religious beliefs, moral and legal theories, systems of education, or poems, in short, of all knowledge and works offering normative models of human life (7). During nearly half a millennium after the publication of Thomas More's *Libellus vere aureus, nec minus salutaris quam festivus, de optimo rei publicae statu deque nova insula Utopia*, the aesthetic function of utopia has gradually been reduced in favour of attempts at its practical implementation, beginning with the French Revolution, through nineteenth-century utopian experiments in Europe and America (the founding of numerous intentional communities), to the establishment of such book-based states as the Soviet Union (the writings of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin), the Third Reich (Hitler's *Mein Kampf*), Maoist China (Mao's *Red Book*), or the Libyan Jamahiriya (Kadafi's *Green Book*), which imposed allegedly perfect models on imperfect reality. At the same time, those 'realised utopias'—dialectically both satisfied and dissatisfied with themselves—generated

even more ‘perfect,’ temporally deferred visions (euchronia), suggesting thereby that the ultimate form of the ideal state would come into being once socialism evolved into communism (the Soviet Union, China, and other ‘real socialist states’), or after the Nazis conquered the world and eliminated all undesirables (the Third Reich).

Utopia, regarded either as a fictional mode or a socio-political project, exhibits numerous common characteristics defined by the necessity of delineating the multifarious image of the desired ideal. The spatial organisation of both fictional and non-fictional utopian macro- and micro-spaces reveals a high degree of semioticity, representing the dominant values and principles on which the ideal world model is based: beauty, order, harmony, and symmetry. In contrast to the non-utopian world, the heightened semioticity of its perfect (or infinitely better) version applies to most aspects of social life. If in utopia cultural meaning is inseparably bound to its mode of expression (hence the essential function of rituals and strictly prescribed forms of behaviour), in the non-utopian world the same meaning can usually be expressed in a variety of ways. The ritualisation and theatricality of all forms of social life, encompassing even the most personal relations, illustrate the utopian tendency to eliminate all fortuitousness and thus ensure the permanence of the utopian order. As utopian societies —are built by human beings and are meant for them, rigid laws also —force the individuals to repress their unreliable and unstable nature (Vieira 7).

In the literary utopia multiple narrative frames, whose major role is to prepare the uninitiated reader for an encounter with a relatively perfect or just better world (see Blaim, *Gazing* 71-133), precede the core narrative. The latter contains the description of an ideal state whose advantages are amplified by positive reactions and comments made by a visitor from afar (an external observer), which on the one hand highlight the difference between the utopian and non-utopian orders of things and on the other reveal the contemporaneous reader’s aesthetic canons and socio-political standing. The journey of the main protagonist to a utopian country assumes an educational, rather than adventurous or sentimental character, hence the prevalence of descriptive and explicatory modes in

utopian narratives.¹ Once the visitor crosses the boundary separating his/her own reality from ‘no-land,’ s/he is offered the temporary role of a disciple or a guided tourist whose daily activities are so arranged as to give priority to his / her getting acquainted with various aspects and mechanisms of the perfect state. Due to the amicable guidance on the part of utopians, the process of knowledge acquisition can be depicted as orderly and systemic, which helps the reader easily follow and admire the beauty and logic of the utopian condition.

The particular motifs appearing in the spatio-temporal organisation of the utopian world are invested with a double function. On the one hand, they reveal different properties of that world and on the other, realise the persuasive strategy of utopian discourse, encouraging the traveller’s unquestioning acceptance of the presented solutions. The adoption of utopian ideology seems natural, as the constitutive motifs are intended to embody such desirable general values as happiness, good life, wealth, beauty, equality, freedom, etc., which form the underlying axiological system of the best possible state of the commonwealth. The paradigmatic mode of textual organisation, in which the subsequent signs elucidate and reinforce rather than replace the meanings of the preceding signs (the latter being typical of the syntagmatic ordering), brings the utopia closer to the poetic text (Blaim, *Gazing* 5-6). However, whereas in the poetic text the function of the paradigmatic mode consists in establishing new semantic relations between signs belonging to different textual levels in order to multiply possible meanings, in utopian discourse it aims at reducing any potential ambiguity and more forcefully communicating a single ideological message.

The utopian world identified with an ideal (or the best possible) state explicitly or implicitly projects its negative counterpart representing the author’s reality. This distinction between the ideal and the real defines the expressed programmatic function of the utopian construct as a normative model. A radical critique of the present inheres in the very act of creating the utopian model whose most conspicuous attributes are assumed to be absent in the author’s world. Characteristically, from the very outset, the positive image in utopian fiction has been associated

1 The addition of adventurous and sentimental subplots, which aimed at satisfying the taste of the common reader / viewer, marked an important turn in the development of the genre.

with the negative formula, litotes, or double negation, e.g., —there are no,|| —we have no,|| etc., which introduces the world of the author (and his / her contemporary reader) into the domain of textual relations without referring to it directly. The negative formula draws attention to the presence of the negated undesirable phenomena in the author's world and thus contributes to the emergence of the anti-model implicit in the description of the utopian world. For obvious reasons, the use of the negative formula is drastically limited in filmic utopias. The latter rely mainly on implicit contrasts with the viewer's world.

Dystopian discourse reverses the utopian model by presenting a bad world, characterised by Lyman Tower Sargent as —a community where socio-political institutions, norms, and relationships between its individuals are organised in a significantly less perfect way than in the author's community|| (9). If utopia —embodies ordered freedom, dystopia embodies unfreedom and exposure to the constantly capricious rule of a supremely powerful force, which may be human, natural, superhuman or utterly artificial|| (Claeys 17). The dystopian world model, sustained by surveillance and efficient coercive mechanisms evoking fear, only implicitly projects its anti-model—a eutopian image of a world introduced either in sporadic counterfactual musings about a better present or future, or in flashbacks (memory snaps from the past).

The dystopia, which as a genre negatively mirrors the utopia, adopts different principles of text construction: it foregrounds narrativity at the expense of descriptiveness, and favours plot rather than setting. Moreover, as Rafaella Baccolini observed, in contradistinction to the classic pattern of utopian narrative centred on a —guided journey|| to an ideal land, dystopian narrative begins in *medias res*,² —without a dislocating move to an elsewhere|| (in Moylan 48).³ The homogeneity of dystopian

2 This, of course, is true of twentieth- and twenty-first century dystopias. In early modern times, dystopias such as Joseph Hall's *Mundus Alter et Idem* (1607), Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), anonymous *Private Letters from an American in England to his Friends in America* (1769), and George Walker's *Vagabond* (1799) followed the same narrative pattern involving an outside visitor to the dystopian land as utopian texts did. The *medias res* formula is clearly re-defined in filmic dystopias. See Gruszcewska-Blaim, —Rhetorical Beginnings.||

3 It is not always the case, as Andrzej Zgorzelski observes in relation to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, where the title, setting the action of the novel in the future, functions as a narrative equivalent of the time-travel motif.

narrative and space is challenged by the counter-narrative that —inscribe[s] a space for a new form of political opposition (Moylan 190). Instigated by citizens of the dystopian state, among them the main protagonist, the political opposition exposes ruthless truths concealed behind appearances by —opening up unexpected channels of communication that require a renewal of codes (Gruszevska-Blaim, —/Re-/ appropriated spaces 169). Apart from the dystopian counter-narrative (or para-counter-narrative, if inscribed by the dystopian state), minor subplots or discrete events also breach the homogeneity of dystopian narratives by producing a short-lived eutopian mapping temporarily reorganizing the otherwise dystopian arrangement of dominant and dominated spaces (—/Re-/appropriated spaces 167).

The development of characters' mimetic and synthetic functions (*sensu* Phelan) constitutes another distinctive feature of the dystopia. Contrary to the utopian techniques of characterisation highlighting the thematicity of the presented figures, the individualisation of the dystopia's protagonists as if excises them from the negative context and reveals their 'otherworldly' potential. A shift from the position of participant to that of observer, crucial for the emancipation of the dystopia's main characters, parallels an unguided, experiential, and pointillist process of acquiring knowledge of the dystopian reality. The awakening of the protagonist and his / her recognition of the dystopian lie, typically ignited by some blatantly counterfactual or emotionally cataclysmic event, come as an epiphany rather than a methodical accumulation of information. Although the awakening sets in motion the counter-narrative, yet it seldom entails a decisive breakthrough in the history of a particular dystopia. Whenever it does (e.g., by means of a happy ending), the victory of the anti-model, which restores normality, reduces the dystopia's essential cautionary function through extrapolative exemplification.

The concept of dystopia has often been used either synonymously or interchangeably with that of anti-utopia, leading to the multiplication of contradictory definitions. To avoid further confusion, a different set of distinctions has been proposed, in which *utopia* and *dystopia* retain their status as genre labels, whilst *anti-utopia* is redefined as anti-utopian function, or use of those generically dystopian texts which aim at criticising particular utopian texts and projects, or which question utopian-

ism as such (Blaim, —Hell upon a Hill 80-94). Unlike in Soviet Russia and Eastern Europe, where the anti-utopian function was inseparable from the idea of the communist utopia, in the West it was almost invariably bound to the tendency to ‘utopianise’ the political and social *status quo* by questioning the possibility of any radical change for the better. On the whole, what many twentieth-century anti-utopian texts objected to was the totalising rather than the totalitarian tendency of utopianism, and, in particular, its supposedly ‘unreasonable’ dissatisfaction with the real. Already in the 1980s, one could notice a change in the uses of anti-utopia in the Western context. After 1989, the destabilisation of the former opposition between Eastern and Western politico-military blocks made the use of anti-utopian discourse a matter of private ideals and / or ideological preferences rather than global political divisions expressed by the metaphor of the Iron Curtain. On the other hand, some unexpected developments, such as recent events in Ukraine and on the Crimean Peninsula, could result in anti-utopian discourse’s taking a wholly new turn.

2.

Film adaptations of politically engaged utopian or dystopian fictions demonstrate their heightened sensitivity to changing socio-political conditions, but most importantly to the radically different demands of the medium to which they are ‘translated.’ More than any other mode of artistic expression, film adaptation of canonical literature, —an example of convergence among the arts, perhaps a desirable—even inevitable—process in a rich culture (McFarlane 10), makes us, the knowing audience (*sensu* Hutcheon), aware of how detailed our rendering of the discursive into the conceptual / mental images is. The aim of the adaptation, according to Brian McFarlane, is —to offer a perceptual experience that corresponds with one arrived at conceptually (21). Trading upon the phantasy of screenwriters and directors, cinematic adaptation of literary fiction builds its own narrative and audio-visual sequences with elements that activate —our informed sense of similarity and difference between the texts (Sanders 25). In film projection that we recognise and experience as an adaptation, both the original concretisation of the literary source—or rather what has been retained in our memory as such—and the concretisation by filmmakers enter the process of forming