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AMERICAN NIGHTMARES

Dystopia in Twenty-First-Century U.S. Fiction

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To Letizia and Federico,
My unwavering pillars of strength.

To my parents, Maria Grazia and Maurizio,
A permanent fixture in my life.

And to my grandmother Natalina.
I will always remember your stories.

It is one of the peculiarities of the imagination
that it is always at the end of an era.

Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel*

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments ... i

INTRODUCTION: Dystopia, at the End of an Era ... iii

PART ONE: Framing Dystopia

CHAPTER ONE: On Defining Dystopia ... 1

CHAPTER TWO: Dystopia, SF, and Genre Blurring ... 15

1. Utopia/Dystopia ... 17
2. Dystopian Fiction and Speculative Fiction ... 26
3. Dystopia and Science Fiction ... 30
   - 3.1 The Beginning: Gothic Footprints, Fantastic Relics, Historical Revivals .. 38
   - 3.2 A Partial Chronology ... 44

CHAPTER THREE: Confronting the American Myth ... 59

1. The Myth of the Frontier ... 66
2. The Myth of American Exceptionalism ... 73
3. Death of a Myth? ... 78

CHAPTER FOUR: Is This Dystopia? ... 91

1. The Era of the Self(ie) ... 93
2. Stolen Dreams: Finding Hope in the Age of Fear ... 102
   - 2.1 Progress ... 104
   - 2.2 Hope, out of Fear ... 112
3. ‘Siamese Sisters’: Sociology and Literature ... 123

PART TWO: Analysing Dystopia

CHAPTER FIVE: From Big Brother to Big Data ... 135

1. Surveillance Studies ... 137
2. *The Testaments* ... 157
3. *The Circle* ... 167

CHAPTER SIX: Human Machines, Mechanical Humans 183
1. The Posthuman 187
1.1 Transhumanism 189
1.2 Posthumanism 195
2. *Detroit: Become Human* 201
2.1 Human Machines 201
2.2 Mechanical Humans 221
CHAPTER SEVEN: Wandering the Wasteland 231
1. Visions from the Other Side: Apocalypse, Post-Apocalypse, and Dystopia 235
2. Disaster Studies 246
3. Collective Trauma and Culture 251
4. *The Book of Eli* 256
Selected Bibliography 267
Primary Sources 267
Literature 267
Movies and TV Series 271
Video Games 273
Secondary Sources 274
Index 305

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INTRODUCTION

Dystopia, at the End of an Era

We are inhabiting a dystopian cultural milieu, observes Tom Moylan in one of his most recent essays (2020, 190). We are enveloped in a dystopian mood that has exceeded the boundaries of fiction and has seeped into the daily news and the collective perception of reality. We have even adopted elements of well-known dystopian narratives as symbols of social protests.[1] We seem, most importantly, to have stopped looking at the future with optimism, replacing it with resignation and despair.

Few other times in history has dystopian fiction been more relevant: we are living through its "Golden Age," as Jill Lepore called it in a 2017 article for

[1] Think of the diffuse use of the red cloaks and white hats inspired by *The Handmaid's Tale* to protest against laws limiting female freedom (Beaumont and Holpuch 2018), or of the three-fingered salute popularised by *The Hunger Games*, which protesters in Thailand have adopted as the symbol of their an anti-government demonstrations (Beech and Suhartono 2020).

The New Yorker. Indeed, dystopias are rather ubiquitous of late: they have invaded the literary market, the film and video game industries, and even the theatre.[2] It suffices to mention famous franchises like *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins (2008), *The Maze Runner* by James Dashner (2009), and *Divergent* by Veronica Roth (2011), which have all been adapted for the big screen. In 2018, Steven Spielberg's *Ready Player One* (based on Ernest Cline's 2012 novel) was one of the highest-grossing films of the year, and the 2017 TV series *The Handmaid's Tale,* adapted from Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel, won a flurry of international awards, including a Golden Globe and a BAFTA. A similar trend can be registered in video games, with titles such as Guerrilla Games' *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017), Quantic Dream's *Detroit: Become Human* (2018), Kojima Productions' *Death Stranding* (2019), and the latest instalments of Interplay Entertainment's *Fallout* series (1997-) making their way to the top of the charts.

It has always been clear that dystopias, despite their future setting, are a direct critique of the present (Atwood 2011; Pagetti 2012; Moylan 2014; Wegner 2014). Hence, they acquire particular relevance in times of crisis: the link between the current society and those portrayed in dystopian fiction becomes more evident, more explicit.

This dissertation aims at investigating such a bond, focusing on American dystopias of the twenty-first century. It asks what commentaries and critiques these fictional works are currently providing, what themes are most relevant and common. In doing so, it attempts to expose their abovementioned link to reality by deploying sociological theories to analyse fictional dystopian societies—for sociology and literature, it has been argued, share a similar subject of enquiry (Kaplan 2016; Bauman and Mazzeo 2016).

[2] I am referring to Caryl Churchill's 2000 play *Far Away*, which has often been described as dystopian. On the increased output of dystopian fiction see, for instance, Schmidt 2014; Alter 2017; Sacks 2017; Wagner 2019.

It will become apparent that dystopian fiction expresses both a warning for our real society and one of its fundamental features: in depicting worst-case scenarios, it alerts us to the consequences of our present choices and actions, while articulating the intrinsic (and, perhaps, unavoidable) human yearning for change, fostered by hope. This, as we will see, is especially true of so-called *critical dystopias*.

A few words, then, on the self-imposed boundaries of this dissertation. As mentioned earlier, the focus of this dissertation is American dystopian fiction of the twenty-first century. This allows us to limit the sociological theories to the national level, introducing a commentary on the status of the American collective identity, and fixes a timeframe coinciding with the beginning of a rather noticeable shift towards pessimistic outlooks for the future (marked, most evidently, by the 9/11 terrorist attacks).

Whereas I have tried to rein in the geographical and temporal focus of this study, I have not set similar boundaries on my choice of fictional works. In a nod to the increasingly hybrid and transmedia nature of the entertainment industry, I have decided to analyse literary, cinematic, and videoludic works, selecting them mainly for their retrieval of the sociological reflections featuring in the next chapters, rather than for their artistic quality. Dystopia, as a branch of science fiction, has often been classified as mere entertainment without presumptions of artistic quality. Although I strongly reject this reductive view of the genre, I do not take it upon myself to prove that dystopias can belong to 'highbrow' fiction in this dissertation. Rather, I prefer to focus on the social message they convey, which in itself makes them worthy of attention.

This work is divided into two parts. Part One, "Framing Dystopia," lays the foundations for the textual analyses of Part Two. The first two chapters investigate the definition of dystopia and its relationship with other fictional genres, retracing its evolution from utopian fiction and its strong link to

science fiction. Chapter Three and Four, conversely, focus on the status of American society. In "Confronting the American Myth," we explore the crisis of the Frontier and of American exceptionalism, together with its repercussions on society and on the collective identity. In "Is This Dystopia?", we expand our reflection on contemporaneity through the identification of some of the most pervasive features of American society recurring in most dystopian fiction.

Part Two, "Analysing Dystopia," consists of three chapters coinciding with the political, technological, and environmental sub-categories of dystopian fiction. Chapter Five, "From Big Brother to Big Data," focuses on the relationship between political dystopias such as Margaret Atwood's 2019 *The Testaments* and Dave Eggers's 2013 *The Circle* and surveillance studies. Chapter Six, "Human Machines, Mechanical Humans," explores the posthuman features of the 2018 video game *Detroit: Become Human*, a technological dystopia, and Chapter Seven, "Wandering the Wasteland," closes this dissertation with an analysis of post-apocalyptic dystopias such as the Hughes Brothers' 2010 movie *The Book of Eli* through the lens of disaster and trauma studies.

Without further ado, then, we might begin our journey into what Mathias Thaler has aptly called bleak dreams (2019). For dystopia, ever attuned to the ills of society, is now alerting us that we are producing a 'literature of (social) exhaustion,' to displace and adjust Barth's expression. At the end of an era, when social issues have acquired global dimensions and seem increasingly unsolvable, these tales narrate of despair and resignation, of the desire to relinquish any futile attempt to avoid social collapse. Yet, they do not limit themselves to the blunt reproduction of thwarted hopes. Most dystopias of the twenty-first century are combative; their open endings, placed on the cusp of radical change, show that a way forward is possible, that radical change may come.

Thus, I stand with Thaler: most contemporary dystopias are bleak *dreams*, not nightmares—and it makes all the difference.

PART ONE

Framing Dystopia

CHAPTER ONE

On Defining Dystopia

When beginning a discussion on what dystopia is and how it can be described in terms that are sufficiently detailed as to clearly identify a set of works and at the same time broad enough to avoid being too normative and consequently too narrow, a scholar needs first of all to consider a much older concept, from which dystopia derives its name and heritage: that of utopia.

Utopia and dystopia are bound, at least at first glance, by a genealogic relationship in which the former generated the latter and through which they share their etymology and meaning. As Fátima Vieira recounts in the opening chapter of *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature,* just to cite one of the many scholars who have written about it, Thomas More coined the word utopia in 1516 in order to describe his fictional island where a perfect example of society flourished. Having settled on that term, More decided to take it a step further and to attribute his neologism not only to the fictional setting of

his story but also to his *opus magnum*,[3] a work that retroactively managed to name a whole literary genre (2010, 3). Utopia is essentially a play-on-words in which the prefix *u* is attached to a derivative of *topos* ("place" in Greek). Such a non-existent prefix merges two grammatically correct alternatives: *eu*, meaning "good," "positive," and *ou*, meaning "not." Thomas More enclosed in the name of his island both the idea that it was a happy place and that such a place did not exist.

The word dystopia, on the other hand, has a more recent origin. As Vieira states,

> The first recorded use of dystopia [...] dates back to 1868, and is to be found in a parliamentary speech in which John Stuart Mill tried to find a name for a perspective which was opposite to that of utopia: if utopia was commonly seen as 'too good to be practicable,' then dystopia was 'too bad to be practicable.' In that speech, Mill used the word dystopia as synonymous with cacotopia, a neologism that had been invented by Jeremy Bentham; and the two words have in fact a similar etymology and intention: *dys* comes from the Greek *dus*, and means bad, abnormal, diseased; *caco* comes from the Greek *kako*, which is used to refer to something which is unpleasant or incorrect. (2010, 16)

Even limiting our enquiry to the etymology of the words, it is evident that the terms utopia and dystopia are designated to describe one the opposite of the other; the first evokes a perfect society in which happiness and order rule, the second reminds us of hellish scenarios in which our society has succumbed, leaving behind the ruins of our civilization. However, the dual opposition of utopia/dystopia is too simplistic and superficial to satisfy the need for a faithful representation of our society, which is multifaceted and much more complex than a simple binary opposition of good/evil.

Many theorists have reasoned on the definition of utopia and dystopia in sociological, cultural, anthropological, and literary terms. Often the definitions transcend the boundaries of a specific subject and can be widely

[3] Original title: *Libellus vere aureus, nec minus salutaris quam festivus, de optimo rei publicae statu deque nova insula Utopia.*

applied to both real attempts at utopian communities and to literary examples of utopian societies. Before I start analysing the several versions of the definition of utopia and dystopia, allow me to add a few more words on the terminology I will be using in this dissertation.

A number of scholars, following Lyman Tower Sargent's definitions (1994), favour the use of the word utopia and its derivatives as umbrella terms that include positive and negative representations of alternative societies, calling the former 'eutopias' and the latter 'dystopias.' This grants a high level of clarity when describing fictional communities. However, such a 're-definition' of utopia is rather disorienting due to the common meaning normally attributed to the word, not to mention its etymology. Therefore, in this dissertation I will mainly retain the term 'utopia' for any positive imaginary society or community, avoiding 'eutopia,' while 'dystopia' will describe any negative examples. The one exception I grant to the use of 'utopia' and 'utopian' as neutral terms is when applied to the field of enquiry proper, given that 'utopian studies' is the subject within which most of the research on both utopias and dystopias is carried out.

Nevertheless, my choice does not intend to criticise the terminology used by Lyman Tower Sargent in his 1994 seminal work "The Three Faces of Utopia Revisited," which constitutes one of the most famous definitions of the varieties of literary utopian and dystopian societies that have been identified so far. Although lengthy, it is worth being quoted in its entirety in order to allow a complete discussion and comparison with other scholars' definitions:

> **Utopianism**—social dreaming.
> **Utopia**—a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space.
> **Eutopia or positive utopia**—a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably better than the society in which that reader lived.
> **Dystopia or negative utopia**—a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the

> author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which that reader lived.
> **Utopian satire**—a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as a criticism of that contemporary society.
> **Anti-utopia**—a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as a criticism of utopianism or of some particular eutopia.
> **Critical utopia**—a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as better than contemporary society but with difficult problems that the described society may or may not be able to solve and which takes a critical view of the utopian genre. (1994, 9)

Sargent's definitions are short but rich, and in their brevity and high degree of abstraction serve well as guidelines to analyse fictional works. The order in which they are listed somehow embraces the timeline of the development and enrichment of the utopian genre. *Utopia* by Thomas More (1516), *The City of the Sun* by Tommaso Campanella (1602), and *The New Atlantis* by Francis Bacon (1627) all appeared between the sixteenth and the seventeenth century. They are tales of highly idealised societies that describe in great detail every aspect of daily life in those secluded locations (More and Bacon place their cities on an island, Campanella surrounds his with high walls), adding a meagre plot to justify the presence of the foreigners that visited the city and then brought their description back to their homeland in the form of the books we are reading. As Tom Moylan acutely writes about classic utopian fiction:

> What in the realist novel would be considered 'mere' background setting becomes in traditional utopian writing the key element of the text. The society projected in such a complete manner as to include everything from political and economic structures to the practices and rituals of daily life has long been seen as what the utopian novel is 'about.' [...] The alternative world tends to absorb many of the actions and causations normally reserved for characters in a realist narrative. [...] In utopia, the

> social structure, and what it represents and encourages, is traditionally seen as the main protagonist. (2014, 36)

The presence of the protagonist that stumbled upon the hidden society by accident is the favourite narrative device to justify such incredible tales of discovery reaching the contemporaneous reader (and as such his presence and story arch is only relevant because of his finding the city), and the endless list of praiseworthy qualities of the city serves as a basis for comparison between what the readers knew first-hand about their society and what an alternative could be.

Works akin to the abovementioned continued to appear throughout the nineteenth century, albeit with a notable decrease in occurrence and influence. In U.S. literature, the most famous title is *Looking Backward*[4] by Edward Bellamy (1888), perhaps rivalled only by Henry Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), or Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915).

By the end of the 1700s, however, utopias started mutating. The eighteenth century marked the moment in which Western explorers started reaching the most remote and unknown lands on Earth, mapping that blank space that for centuries had been inhabited by imaginary perfect societies and yet failing at finding them. Utopia remained undiscovered and, thus, unattainable. As early as 1770, with the publication of *Memoirs of the Year Two Thousand Five Hundred* by Louis-Sébastien Mercier, having almost completely exhausted the unknown space in which these imaginary societies could be found, authors moved them into the future, forging narratives that came to be known as uchronias (Vieira 2010, 9; Fitting 2010, 138).[5]

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[4] *Looking Backward* shares many similarities with the above-mentioned works. However, it is important to notice that the perfect society it depicts is set in the future, rather than in a different part of the world.

[5] Margaret Atwood also underlines this shift in perspectives in the second chapter of her *In Other Worlds*, a fascinating long essay in which she narrates her personal experience of science fiction and utopia.

It is important to notice that utopian fiction from the nineteenth century onwards is made up of a vast majority of uchronias. For the sake of clarity in this dissertation,

When we think about utopian fiction, we now think of possible future worlds, born out of the consequences of our present choices.

Indeed, both utopian and dystopian fiction are profoundly rooted in today's society. Whereas the early utopias were faraway places, markedly different from the society the contemporaneous readers knew and indeed functioning due to the fact that they offered such a different alternative, desirable and at the same time virtually unattainable because of their out-of-the-world location, contemporary utopias thrive on our present needs, hopes, anxieties and fears. Utopian fiction has always been a means to criticise our society or at least to show alternatives to it, yet contemporary works heavily and explicitly draw on the connection with the today's world, both in terms of recalling events of the present or recent past as catalysing for the fictional reality, like in Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), in which an alternate outcome of World War II spawns the whole narrative, or by placing the new society over the ruins of a relevant geographic landscape (think, as an example, of Detroit or New York, two favourite settings in recent utopian narratives). Placing utopias in the future results in them acquiring a certain degree of possibility—that is, rather than being impossible societies, they are at best improbable.

The relevance of the shift of utopian fiction towards the future is particularly remarkable when we focus on dystopias instead of utopias. Dystopian fiction appeared as a recognizable literary trend in the early twentieth century, long after our reflections on alternative societies had moved to the future, and I would go as far as to claim that they were partly spawned by such a shift. Utopian fiction, in fact, went from being a narrative of positive alternatives to current problems to embodying a set of predictions about the future weaving dark tales of dread as our concerns about social issues worsened.

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however, I will continue to refer to positive future societies as utopias and negative future societies as dystopias.

This is reiterated in one of the most recent definitions of dystopian fiction. In his 2017 *Dystopia: A Natural History*, Gregory Claeys undertakes the task of mapping the history of dystopian novels and comes to the conclusion that

> [they] are imaginary futures where much has gone wrong, though sometimes ways out are indicated. Rebellions by individuals and (sometimes) groups, often against collectivism, do occur, as do escapes from perilous predicaments like nuclear wars or environmental collapse. The revolts usually epitomize values with which the author wishes the reader to sympathize. Often these values are broadly 'liberal' or 'humanist.' They express profound apprehension respecting two developments in particular. Firstly, revolutionary movements in Europe and elsewhere seemingly heralded a new despotism more frightening than those they promised to overthrow. Secondly, the very sources of much mid-nineteenth- century optimism, science and technology, now appeared Janus-faced, threatening destruction and a new barbarism or the ruthless elimination of the 'unfit,' while simultaneously promising improvement and happiness. Civilization was now seen as capable of degeneration as well as progression. (Claeys 2017, 269)

According to Claeys, then, dystopias are *imaginary futures*. They were born as such and have only a little to share with the earliest examples of utopian literature. He comes to this definition after recounting in considerable detail several examples of what he considers prototypical dystopian societies in human history, including long descriptions of the French Revolution, Nazism, Stalinism, Maoism, and the dictatorship of Pol Pot in Cambodia. He analyses them through the theories of group and crowd psychology (especially drawing on Gustave Le Bon's work), for he believes that dystopia lies in them:

> dystopian groups are [not] pathological groups. [...] Groups as such are dystopian. (Or at least, after the discovery and elevation of the 'I-self,' have become such.) All mimic the crowd.[6] Even the smallest may be abject tyrannies: the father may be the Great Dictator personified. (2017, 48)

[6] The crowd is to be understood as a group gone wild, as Claeys titles a section of his chapter "Group Psychology and Dystopia."

In his vision of dystopia, then, Claeys believes that the presence of a markedly negative collective organism is paramount. In the abovementioned definition he stresses how revolutionary movements can go askew and how society can be distorted by science and technology to the point of collapse. The rebellion of an individual, a relevant feature in dystopian fiction, can only happen in opposition to a powerful collective, dystopian simply because it is a group.

Sargent and Claeys offer two very different definitions of dystopia. Following Ruth Levitas's 1973 influential book *The Concept of Utopia*, we can describe Sargent's as formal and Claeys's as content-based.[7] As she remarks, utopian fiction can be categorised according to its content, its form, or its function. In the first case, the definition focuses on the elements described in a utopian text, evaluating whether they make it a good—or, in the case of dystopia, bad—society, and the degree to which such a society might actually become true. "Definitions in terms of content tend to be evaluative and normative, specifying what the good [or bad] society would be, rather than reflecting on how it may be differently perceived" (Levitas 1973, 4). By this, she means that content-based definitions tend to ignore how different cultures or, indeed, different actors within a single society might perceive an imaginary world intended to be positive in negative terms, and vice versa, due to the bias caused by the normative evaluation of the commentator. In essence, she critiques the imposition of a personal perspective in a content-based definition of utopian fiction, that declares a given work a utopia (or a dystopia) without considering the diverging views of other social groups.

Conversely, a formal definition describes a utopia or a dystopia in terms of a model, a blueprint for a society, deliberately ignoring the diverse expressions such a model could generate (Levitas 1973, 5). It avoids a personal bias by declaring, for instance, that a utopia is a 'good society' and a dystopia a 'bad' one without reflecting on what makes it good or bad. However, too narrow a

[7] Although Levitas was reasoning on utopian societies, her categories can easily be applied to dystopias as well.

formal definition might leave out certain expressions of utopia or dystopia (for instance, describing utopia as a literary genre would cut out any real-life attempts to bring about a perfect society), while one that is too broad would include examples that might make the debate inconsequential.

Levitas adds to her list a third typology of definition, which she calls functional. This last way of defining utopia ponders “what [it] is for,” implying that it presents “some kind of goal, even if commentators, as opposed to the authors of utopias, do not see them as necessarily realisable in all their details” (Levitas 1973, 5). In essence, a functional definition asserts that utopias (or, as a matter of fact, dystopias) are developed in order to achieve an aim, be it to display alternative possibilities or to warn against the many evils lurking in the present.

If Claeys’s definition was content-based and Sargent’s formal, one of the best examples of a functional definition is that by Tom Moylan in *Scraps of the Untainted Sky* (2000), a book he dedicates to a specific type of dystopia commonly described as ‘critical.’

This is by far the most relevant strain of dystopia for this study, given that it is one of the most recent evolutions of the genre and the most prolific in the past twenty to forty years.

Moylan describes it as follows:

> [A critical dystopia is] a textual mutation that self-reflexively takes on the present system and offers not only astute critiques of the order of things but also explorations of the oppositional spaces and possibilities from which the next round of political activism can derive imaginative sustenance and inspiration. (Moylan 2000, xv)[8]

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[8] Sargent offered his formal take on critical dystopias in his 2001 essay “US Eutopias in the 1980s and 1990s: Self-Fashioning in a World of Multiple Identities,” registering an innovation in the genre of utopian fiction: “**Critical dystopia**—a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as worse than contemporary society but that normally includes at least one eutopian enclave or holds out hope that the dystopia can be overcome and replaced with a eutopia” (2001, 222).

This definition explains that critical dystopias have the goal of highlighting what is wrong with the current society while offering constructive criticism that can foster change, directly opposing the hopeless predictions for the future of the first half of the twentieth century.

Developing the discussion on this strain of fiction in their introduction to *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini describe how, after a moment of positive utopias in the 1970s inspired by the movements for the rights of the oppressed in the United States, the field took another turn towards a more negative vision of the future we might create for our contemporary society (2003, 2). The 1980s mark the moment in which the latest dystopian trend begins, channelled by the first cyberpunk works and by the political and economic situation reversing to an aggressive form of capitalism and conservative politics.[9]

This time, though, dystopian fiction did not settle for simply depicting a gloomy, most often totalitarian society the way it did from the 1930s through the 1950s with works like Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We,* Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World,* and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Instead, it took it upon itself to feature at least a glimmer of hope. Reading Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993), Paul Auster's *In the Country of Last Things* (1987), or Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) might infuse the readers with bone-deep despair at the beginning of the story, yet by the time they reach the last page they are left with some hope for a better future, with an understanding that no matter how dark the present looks, change for the better can still happen—and hopefully it will.

Whereas 'classic' dystopias express a resigned vision of the dreadful future awaiting us, critical dystopias embrace the belief that society can change, particularly if the individuals that make it up react to a situation that does not fit their needs. Dystopian fiction has moved from tales of monolithic

[9] A detailed description of the evolution of dystopia in the U.S. context will be given in the next chapter, while discussing the position of dystopia within the genre system.

dreadful societies to tales that hint at a renewal fostered by the efforts of one person or a small group against the resigned and complacent collective. Focusing on the story of an outlier is a recurring feature of any dystopia, but the classic ones eventually ensured that their oppressive societies regained control of the rebel. The protagonists of the most recent dystopias, instead, present a form of agency that allows them not only to defy the status quo, but to overturn it in order to create a better society (Baccolini and Moylan 2003, 5).

Critical dystopias, then, are

> historically specific texts [that] negotiate the necessary pessimism of the generic dystopia with a militant or utopian stance that not only breaks through the hegemonic enclosure of the text's alternative world but also self-reflexively refuses the anti-utopian temptation that lingers in every dystopian account. (Baccolini and Moylan 2003, 7)

In this chapter, we have moved through several definitions of utopia and dystopia and we have begun to sketch how the latter has evolved from the former. We have taken into consideration formal, content-related, and functional definitions, and explored the concept of critical dystopia. Levitas, very early on in her detailed study of utopia, warns her readers of the dangers of embracing only one of these definitions, given that they all show some faults, be they their normative subjectivity, their exclusionary practices, or their 'obsession' with goals. Content, form, and function are too unstable a variable to be used to define utopia. What needs to be detected, she argues, is a constant, an ever-present element in utopia.

> This element […] is that of desire—desire for a better way of being and living. [...] This includes both the objective, institutional approach to utopia, and the subjective, experiential concern of disalienation. It allows for this desire to be realistic or unrealistic. It allows for the form, function and content to change over time. And it reminds us that, whatever we think of particular utopias, we learn a lot about the experience of living under any set of conditions by reflecting upon the desires which those

> conditions generate and yet leave unfulfilled. For that is the space which utopia occupies. (Levitas 1973, 7-8)

This rather beautiful description of utopia tells us to look for a shared element that transcends the limits of one definition; the same we should certainly do for dystopian works. If utopia comes from a desire for a better way of living and being, then I would like to argue that dystopia comes from a fear of the consequences of the present. Just like hope can generate different views about the alternative path to follow, fear can provoke paralysis, resignation, or rebellion. It can cause despair about the future just as much as it can inspire corrective actions. Dystopia is the child of anxiety-driven times, of which we will discuss in the following chapters. It allows us to be confronted with the consequences of inaction when the moment is desperately calling for it. It presents us with a seemingly endless list of ways in which our current society can collapse, and with the dreaded outcomes of such an event happening.

Dystopia, just like utopia, is deeply connected with history and society. Even more than utopia, it brims with humanity: whereas the undisputed focus of the former is on the construction of a perfect society, on its structures, its progresses and advancements, almost relegating the human element to a secondary role, the latter converses with how mankind is situated within the system. Put differently, utopia portrays a society in which humans are just another cog of a well-oiled machine. Apparent perfection arises from the synergy among social systems and social actors. Enforced harmony is, perhaps, the best phrase to describe a utopian society. Conversely, dystopia highlights the human component of its narrative. Although the dreadful society remains the protagonist, it does not repress a discussion on how humanity informs and modifies it. If utopia is a celebration of rational social management, dystopia is a compendium of the ways in which humanity can disrupt it. It follows that dystopia imagines the failure and, at times, the destruction of the current society. According to this perspective, we can include in our discussion not only literary examples of totalitarian regimes

and of technology and science running loose, but also those (post-)apocalyptic works that depict a given society in the midst or in the aftermath of a global catastrophe.[10]

This introductory chapter paves the way to a discussion on the position of dystopia within the system of existing genres. In the next one, I will outline the evolution of dystopia in the U.S. by drawing parallels with the birth, growth, and decline of other mass cultural genres.

[10] It is of little importance whether the catastrophe is man-made or natural, for even in the latter case it would be the consequence of unchecked human interference in the natural cycles of our planet, as claimed by the most recent theories on the Anthropocene.

CHAPTER TWO

Dystopia, SF, and Genre Blurring

In the current discourse about dystopia, there are three main positions regarding its relationship with the generic system.[11] The first places dystopian fiction within the field of utopian fiction, the second places it within speculative fiction, and the third within science fiction. By far, this last position is the most widespread and accepted and will therefore occupy most of our attention in this chapter.

Although scholars tend to polarize their opinion by arguing for just one of the three positions mentioned above, I tend to believe they are all valid and not necessarily mutually exclusive. Indeed, one might accept that dystopian fiction is a type of utopian fiction, which in turn can be included in the field

[11] The generic system should be understood as the complex set of interrelations that determines the existence of genres and the cataloguing of a work of art within a specific category.

of speculative fiction, which can be considered one of the many types of science fiction on the market today. Alternatively, it might be argued that speculative fiction is the widest of these categories, containing science fiction and utopian fiction, which in turn contains dystopian fiction.

Personally, I would argue for the inclusion of utopian and dystopian fiction within science fiction as defined by Darko Suvin in his seminal work *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979), which inaugurates the debate on the definition of the genre later to be expanded and debated upon in the works of Fredric Jameson and Phillip Wegner, just to mention three of the most prominent scholars of the field. I will get back to their theories later on.

The remaining two positions have fewer but no less authoritative advocates: Peter Fitting supports the independence of utopian fiction from science fiction and Margaret Atwood is one of the most vocal supporters of the separation of speculative fiction from science fiction.

I will focus on the relationship between utopian and dystopian fiction first, moving to their relationship with speculative fiction in the second part of this chapter. The third, much more sizeable part will focus first on the debate over the inclusion of utopian fiction within science fiction, moving on to the evolution of the latter as a genre by exploring the genealogical relationship between science fiction and older generic categories such as gothic fiction, fantastic fiction, historical fiction, and satire. I will trace the influence of these genres on dystopia and I will observe how it evolves within the field of science fiction from its first appearance at the beginning of the twentieth century to the latest trends appearing on the market. In doing this, I will touch upon the complex relationship that binds science fiction and dystopia to postmodernity and to the crisis of the western genre, setting up the discussion on the relationship between dystopia and the American myth explored in Chapter Three.

1. Utopia/Dystopia

Most commentators agree on the existence of a genealogical link between utopian and dystopian fiction, with the debate on the inclusion of dystopia within the field of science fiction investing utopian fiction as well. Indeed, most discussions on the relationship between science fiction and utopian fiction do not analyse in great detail the role of dystopia, preferring to focus on utopia as a category that includes positive and negative depictions of an alternate reality alike. The first question to approach consequently becomes whether it is possible to detect some characteristics that define utopian (and dystopian) fiction as a self-standing generic category. If so, we might then proceed to investigate the genealogical and generic relationship—if there is any—that binds it to science fiction.

An incomplete answer to the first question has already been given in the previous chapter, as we surveyed the existing definitions of dystopia. In the first pages of this dissertation, we have highlighted how utopia and dystopia both share the same interest for society and the many possibilities envisioned for our future. Formal, functional, and content-based definitions have allowed us to navigate through the defining elements of utopian and dystopian fiction. It is now the moment to shift our attention to the genealogical relationship between them, because, as Krishan Kumar wisely writes, "anti-utopia[12] has stalked utopia from the very beginning" (1987, 99). Kumar dedicates several fascinating pages to the evolution of dystopia/anti-utopia from utopia, which he sees as

> antithetical yet interdependent. They are 'contract concepts,' getting their meaning and significance from their mutual differences. But the relationship is not symmetrical or equal. The anti-utopia is formed by

[12] As Tom Moylan writes in his *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, in his book *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times* Kumar describes the evolution of 'utopia' and 'anti-utopia,' a term that is used in this work to refer both to anti-utopias and dystopias as defined by Sargent (2000, 129).

> utopia, and feeds parasitically on it. It depends for its survival on the persistence of utopia. Utopia is the original, anti-utopia the copy—only, as it were, always coloured black. It is utopia that provides the positive content to which anti-utopia makes the negative response. (1987, 100)

As a sociologist, Kumar claims that utopias are the products of people who believe "men can perfect themselves by creating the right environment," while anti-utopias are created by those who do not believe humanity will ever succeed in forging a good society due to its very nature (Kumar 1987, 100). Kumar expands on this adding that most authors of anti-utopias are actually frustrated utopians, people of great utopian impulse that see no possibility of their dreams and hopes for an ideal society coming true (1987, 104). In this frustration and apparent contradiction Kumar sees a first element that underlines the bond between utopia and anti-utopia.

According to his historical reconstruction of their evolution, though, a more relevant feature that describes their connection lies in the literary genre that spawned them both: satire. Kumar reconstructs the birth of utopia and anti-utopia within the great tradition of satire by claiming that, starting with More's *Utopia*, satire has played a fundamental role in the creation of alternatives to the real world. Not always explicitly present in the narrative, the satirised element is oftentimes the very society in which the author lived and which he tried to replace with a much more befitting, ideal version of it. Satire is the best *locus* for utopia, because it "holds together both negative (anti-utopian) and positive (utopian) elements. It criticizes, through ridicule and invective, its own times, while pointing—usually implicitly but sometimes explicitly—to alternative or better ways of living" (Kumar 1987, 104). A satirical perspective on contemporary society is what allows the utopian writer to produce a utopia, but better still a satirical view on utopia is what may produce an anti-utopia. For several centuries after the appearance of More's work, claims Kumar, the latter resided within the safe boundaries of satire, its best example being Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*—a book that by no means resolves the question of the separation of

utopia and anti-utopia, and rather complicates the already much entangled matter by being both decidedly anti-utopian in its critique of eighteenth-century English society and the Enlightenment at large, with its firm belief in rationality and the scientific method, and convincingly utopian in its depiction of several of the imaginary societies Gulliver encounters in his travels. The coexistence of utopia and anti-utopia within (or through) satire was allowed as long as utopias only played the role of a "moral, heuristic device, or a remote fantasy" balanced by the "negative, critical and satirical function [that] could then stand on equal terms with the utopian advocacy—could indeed seem the principal function" (Kumar 1987, 124). By the end of the nineteenth century, utopias became more rational, logical, and started representing the more or less inevitable consequence of the specific brand of progress that real society was experiencing at the moment the author was writing. Using Bellamy's *Looking Backward* as the most fitting example, Kumar explains how the shift from pure idealist visions of the future to a celebration of the imminent advent of utopia through social and technological progress erased the satirical element from utopian fiction, relegating it to an often minor role within anti-utopian fiction. By the very early twentieth century, utopian and anti-utopian fiction took on the two polarised positions we know today: utopia focused on reproducing the optimist atmosphere that imbued the social and scientific fields, illustrating the many ways in which socialism and science would build the ideal society, while anti-utopia took it upon itself to become the spokesperson for the rejection of modernity and the dangers that unchecked progress could imply. In the clear and direct words of Kumar:

> Like utopia, anti-utopia invented whole social orders, in all their particularity. But while the utopian order was *perfect*, in the moral sense, the anti-utopian order was merely *perfected*, in the social sense. It was the dreadful perfection of some modern system or idea. And while utopian societies were *ideal*, in the sense of the best possible, anti-utopian society represented merely the victory or tyranny of the *idea*. In both cases, the reader was invited to live the life of a society realized according to some

> principle. But in the one case the expected response to the experience was delight, in the other, horror. (1987, 125)

By the time we reach our contemporary examples of utopia and dystopia, then, the satirical element and origin of utopian fiction has been submerged by other, more relevant features which we tend to identify as the defining elements of utopian fiction. However, a satirical impulse remains at its core, in its fundamental desire to criticise our society by exposing its flaws and offering a vision of the future that will allow us to draw out the path to a better version of our time.

As I mentioned before, Kumar approaches utopian fiction as a sociologist and as such he traces its development in the relationship between the author and the society in which he lived. Shifting from this perspective to a formalist approach to utopia and dystopia, we can now take into consideration Fredric Jameson's essential work *Archaeologies of the Future*, in which he details the structure of utopia and the inner mechanisms that power it. In Chapter 11, "Synthesis, Irony, Neutralization and the Moment of Truth," he touches upon Gary Saul Morson's *The Boundaries of Genre*, in which Morson claims utopian fiction is driven by a parodic force that spawns several subcategories of the utopian genre such as anti-utopia and dystopia. Morson further claims that there exists a meta-Utopia, a fictional work that contains "both the Utopia and its generic adversary" (Jameson 2007, 177), to an extent anticipating the concept of critical utopia and critical dystopia.
Jameson writes that such a theory

> can quickly be identified and folded back into one of the supreme literary values and concepts of that era, namely Irony. For it is in Irony that we are able to have our cake both ways and deny what we affirm, while affirming what we deny. (Jameson 2007, 177)

Jameson does not present Morson's theory because he agrees with it, but rather because it allows him to better explicate what his (extremely formalist)

position is: he rejects irony because it "still believes in content" and is the locus in which two contradictions coexist in "a positive kind of fullness" and in which indeed they reach a positive synthesis (2007, 179). Indeed, Jameson is interested in reaching a "neutral space" that can contain both utopia and its antinomies, but not a one that is based on content (that is, not a space that is 'full' of utopia and its counterparts). It should rather be a synthesis that tries to capture the formal essence of two contrasting concepts, not superimposing them, not collapsing them, but retaining their fundamental differences and the tension that exists between them. In Jameson's words:

> This neutral position does not seek to hold two substantive features, two positives, together in the mind at once, but rather attempts to retain two negative or privative ones, along with their mutual negation of each other. […] They must neither be combined in some humanist organic synthesis, nor effaced and abandoned altogether: but retained and sharpened, made more virulent, their incompatibility and indeed their incommensurability a scandal for the mind, but a scandal that remains vivid and alive, and that cannot be thought away, either by resolving it or eliminating it. (Jameson 2007, 180).

This is a highly conceptual passage in *Archaeologies,* and none too easy to understand. To dissect Jameson's "resolute hostility" (2007, 178) towards Irony, I will attempt to break down his reasoning.

According to Jameson, irony exists as the ideal literary locus in which two opposites can be observed, either by representing a positively received synthesis of the two opposing forces, or by granting the audience access to both opposite poles of a question without having to take a side, rather allowing them to select positive elements from both irreconcilable positions. Such a practice, says Jameson, has much to do with the desire to evaluate the various forms of utopia we have produced so far, a tendency that is deeply rooted in content and must be rejected to obtain a purely formal description of utopian fiction. The act of looking at content to decide whether it is utopian or dystopian, whether it pertains to a positive or a negative pole, is inevitably biased by the circumstances in which we find ourselves, bringing about a form

of totalising relativism that concretely impedes the formation of an evaluation that can be considered ahistorical and universal. We fall back into irony, then, because there is no impartial way to describe a utopian work as universally positive or negative, and therefore the two extremes must coexist in the same ironic locus.

Jameson, no matter his warning to "always historicise," invokes here the need to avoid considering content in his quest for the best description of utopia, in order to avoid collapsing the inherent differences between opposites to an unsatisfactory synthesis or a forced 'peaceful' coexistence. He aspires to the "neutral space" in which the opposite poles of any given question can indeed exist at the same time, not in a pleasant interaction with each other, but rather in an unsolvable tension that will continuously challenge their existence and their negation of each other. In this sense, it seems to me that Jameson is suggesting we find an external point of view on utopian fiction, one that has no interest in evaluating its content, but merely observes its form, which is best illustrated by its irredeemable tension between utopian and dystopian opposites.

Jameson links Morson's vision of utopia as irony to a modernist approach and claims his 'evolution' of Morson's theory better reflects our postmodern time (2007, 179-180). It must be remembered that Jameson's *Archaeologies* is his highest attempt at a purely formal description of utopia, which inevitably demands a rejection of a position based on content. Having no such claim for my dissertation, believing that content is just as important as form in the discussion of utopia and dystopia, I do not wish to reject Morson's view of utopia as irony.

Morson chose "parody" and "irony" and Kumar chose "satire" as the defining element of the utopian and anti-utopian impulse. These terms, though normally not synonymous, can in this context be used interchangeably: they have been selected to describe the tension within utopian fiction that allows positive and negative instances to coexist. This very tension is, according to both Kumar and Morson, the fundamental element of utopian fiction, which

is driven by the desire to criticise the author's contemporary society through the invention of an alternative, (explicitly or implicitly) parodic society that highlights the failures of the real one.

We have thus reached the point where we can claim that utopian and dystopian fiction stem from the same satirical impulse and are still unequivocally bound by their desire to comment on society.

As I mentioned, most commentators place utopian fiction and its subgenres within the wide borders of science fiction or speculative fiction, yet a small but vocal group of esteemed scholars of the utopian genre rejects this idea, claiming that utopian fiction is independent from science fiction and, at most, has actually generated science fiction as it was already well established in its forms and conventions by the time the latter appeared as a recognizable genre. One of the best resources on this position is Peter Fitting's essay "Utopia, Dystopia and Science Fiction" in the *Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature* (2010).

Opening with a quote from Glen Negley and J. Max Patrick's 1952 anthology *The Quest for Utopia* that defines science fiction "a bastard literary device" born out of the exploitation of the "once and often suggestive field of utopian fantasy," Fitting takes a somewhat more moderate position towards science fiction and its relationship with utopia. However, in reviewing how recent criticism links the two together, he makes a special effort to stress the differences between them, rejecting the reduction of utopian fiction to a subcategory of science fiction—an act that he calls "a dubious categorization which complicates our understanding of the relationship between the two genres" (Fitting 2010, 136). His main claim is that utopian fiction and science fiction do intersect in particular historical moments, and that they share a set of values and interests that allow them to overlap at times. Specifically, Fitting writes:

> The intersection of modern science fiction and utopia begins with what I consider the foundational characteristic of science fiction, namely its ability to reflect or express our hopes and fears about the future, and

> more specifically to link those hopes and fears to science and technology. (2010, 138)

However, this intersection is precisely just that: a temporary overlapping of two separate genres. Fitting illustrates the example of utopias making themselves at home within American science fiction in the 1970s, having found in it the perfect genre to create not only imaginary worlds of the future, but *positive* imaginary worlds of the future (2010, 143-144). Novels such as Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) or Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) might indeed be categorised as utopian science fiction, rather than utopias proper.

Fitting's perspective on utopian fiction also stresses how several utopias are not science fictional at all, favouring a realistic approach as Skinner's *Walden Two* (1948) or Callenbach's *Ecotopia* (1975) do, and how utopian fiction and science fiction have drifted apart in recent years as the latter boomed and the former slowly disappeared in the past thirty to forty years (Fitting 2010, 149-150). His point holds quite well insofar as one limits this enquiry to the relationship of science fiction and utopian fiction—that is, *e*utopian in Sargent's terms—which he mostly does. However, when one takes into consideration dystopian fiction as well, the matter becomes rather more complex to untangle. Indeed, dystopian fiction has not waned but rather substituted utopian fiction in the past thirty to forty years, and it fits quite well within science fiction due to its continuous borrowing of tropes, settings, and goals typically associated with that genre. This is cautiously reckoned by Gregory Claeys who, like Fitting, would prefer to argue that dystopias and science fiction intersect but should be considered two separate genres. As he remarks on their progressive coincidence in the twentieth and twenty-first century, he writes:

> while dystopia becomes progressively more identified with science fiction in the twentieth century, the two genres are not identical. In this respect, some parts of science fiction become the *telos* of the utopian genre from

> More onwards, the science-based ideal society, which only 'comes into its own' in this incarnation. (Claeys 2017, 289)

However, he continues, much dystopian fiction up to the 1970s is not "*centrally* about science. [...] Science and technology may merely decorate the narrative rather than provide its foundation. If this changes after c.1970, or in the wake of the V2, Hiroshima, or Sputnik, we need other lines of demarcation to establish it" (2017, 289-290).

Two relevant points need to be underlined here: first, he admits that his analysis might very well be valid only up until a specific historical event shifted the attention of dystopia towards technology and science, which I think happened and is notable in the recurrence of narratives about surveillance technologies, machines dethroning mankind, and dreadful worlds of information overload (consider movies like *Ex Machina* or *Blade Runner* and its sequel, novels like *The Circle, Ready Player One,* and *Feed,* and video games like *Detroit: Become Human* or *Nier: Automata*). Secondly, Claeys incurs in the same linguistic trap that caught many other contributors to the discourse on science fiction: when he writes 'science' he only means hard science, forgetting the cautionary words of Fredric Jameson that the 'science' in science fiction is much closer in meaning to the German 'Wissenschaft' than its English translation (2008, 48), or Suvin's convinced statement that the soft sciences (e.g. anthropology-ethnology, sociology, and linguistics)

> can [...] most probably better serve as the basis for SF than the 'hard' natural part; and they *have* in fact been the basis of all better works in SF—partly through the characteristic subterfuge of cybernetics, the science in which hard nature and soft humanities fuse. (Suvin 2016, 84)

With all this in mind, we can now proceed to evaluate the relationship between utopian fiction (understood, in this case, as the umbrella genre also including dystopian fiction) and other 'super-genres' such as speculative and science fiction.

2. Dystopian Fiction and Speculative Fiction

Peter Fitting is not alone in his distaste for an inclusion of utopian fiction within science fiction. Margaret Atwood, one of the most prominent authors of dystopias to date, has also been quite vocal in rejecting the definition of her works as science fiction. Often accused of doing so to avoid being labelled as an author of 'low' literature, Atwood wrote back to her critics in her 2011 long essay *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination*, a unique mix of personal memoirs, reflections, and scholarly opinions on her own works, science fiction, and utopia. In the introduction, she clarifies why she is convinced science fiction is not the right label for her works:

> What I mean by "science fiction" is those books that descend from H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds*, which treats of an invasion by tentacled, blood-sucking Martians shot to Earth in metal canisters—things that could not possibly happen—whereas, for me, "speculative fiction" means plots that descend from Jules Verne's books about submarines and balloon travel and such—things that really could happen but just hadn't completely happened when the authors wrote the books. I would place my own books in this second category. (2011, 6)

Notoriously, Verne himself refused to have his works associated with those by Wells, and vice versa, for the very same reason Atwood mentions in this quote: Verne's works were based on the assumption that the technology in them was plausible and potentially possible to build, while Wells was partial to technological devices that were purely imaginary.

Atwood's definition of speculative fiction presents it as literature that has a strong degree of plausibility, that is still very much connected with reality, and that has the contemporary readers believe the events of the story could very well happen in the 'linear' future of whatever reality they live in. As she has stated in a number of interviews about *The Handmaid's Tale*, she has made it her rule to only write about things that had already happened at some

point in our history, or could very well have happened, to lend more credibility to the society she was building.

Long before Atwood used the expression "speculative fiction," another acclaimed science fiction author, Judith Merril, tried to shed light on its meaning in her 1966 essay "What do you Mean: Science? Fiction?" originally published in *Extrapolation* and since then reprinted in a number of collections and anthologies. In it she describes speculative fiction as one of the three "distinct and more reasonably definable forms" that constitute science fiction, the other two being "teaching stories" and "preaching stories."[13] Her definition classifies speculative fiction as "stories whose objective is to explore, to discover, to *learn*, by means of projection, extrapolation, analogue, hypothesis-and-paper-experimentation, something about the nature of the universe, of man, of 'reality'" (Merril 2017, 27). More precisely, Merril uses the term "speculative fiction" to describe

> the mode which makes use of the traditional 'scientific method' [...] to examine some approximation of reality, by introducing a given set of changes—imaginary or inventive—into the background of "known facts," creating an environment in which the responses and perceptions of the characters will reveal something about the inventions, the characters, or both. (Merril 2017, 27)

Merril places the utopias and anti-utopias up to the end of the nineteenth century within the "preaching stories" category, attributing them a focus that is much more on the moral message than on the scientific content, but says nothing of the more recent dystopias of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s.

I would like to argue that twentieth- and twenty-first-century dystopian fiction fits quite well in Merril's definition of speculative fiction insofar as it is invested in describing the effects of science and progress to explore the

[13] Teaching stories are "the dramatized essay or disguised treatise, in which the fiction form is used to present a new scientific idea," while preaching stories are "primarily allegories and satires—morality pieces, prophecies, visions, and warnings, more concerned with the conduct of human society than with its techniques" (Merrill 2017, 26-27).

consequences of their unchecked evolution and employs a set of given changes to reality to do so. The moral perspective is not completely elided from contemporary dystopian fiction, but I find that several dystopias are more invested in sending out a warning about the derangement of society rather than in preaching a return to a heightened form of morality. In other words, even when dystopian fiction provides us with the possibility of an alternative 'positive' reality after the collapse of our contemporary society, it very rarely presents the alternative as morally superior—indeed, it rarely represents it as positive at all. What dystopian fiction grants us is perhaps only the very possibility of rebirth or survival, the awareness that some new form of social order will arise from the chaos of destruction, but what we will make of it depends entirely from the lessons we have learnt from the past. Consequently, to give some examples, Bong Joon-ho's 2013 movie *Snowpiercer* ends with a man and a woman walking away from the (literal) train wreck of a lost dystopian society; Octavia Butler's 1993 novel *Parable of the Sower* ends with the potential of a new community settling on the ashes of another one; even an utterly tragic depiction of our destroyed world like Cormac McCarthy's 2005 novel *The Road* ends with the tiniest grain of hope that humanity might be picking up the pieces to restore some form of collective society. A particularly fitting example of the possibility of rebirth is also found in Emily St. John Mendel's *Station Eleven*, where small communities have already risen from the ashes of the catastrophe and are trying to restore society as it once was.

One last author gave his contribution to the definition of speculative fiction, way back in 1947, in a famous essay titled "On the Writing of Speculative Fiction." Robert A. Heinlein wrote it as a kind of 'how-to' essay to help authors interested in writing science fiction and much of his contents are reprised in the two essays I have already analysed. However, it is worth briefly mentioning his list of elements that define speculative fiction, again considered as a type of science fiction:

1. The conditions must be, in some respect, different from here-and-now, although the difference may lie only in an invention made in the course of the story.
2. The new conditions must be an essential part of the story.
3. The problem itself—the plot—must be a *human* problem.
4. The human problem must be one which is created by, or indispensably affected by, the new conditions.
5. And lastly, no established fact shall be violated, and, furthermore, when the story requires that a theory contrary to present accepted theory be used, the new theory should be rendered reasonably plausible and it must include and explain established facts as satisfactorily as the one the author saw fit to junk. (Heinlein 2017, 19-20)

Again, here we see the fundamental requirement of plausibility in the 'what-if' story, accompanied by a particular focus on the *human* problem. Just a few words on this point, which Merril also mentions *en passant* in her definition and which Atwood drops completely in hers. Heinlein believes several science fiction stories to be "fictionalized frameworks, peopled by cardboard figures, on which is hung an essay on the Glorious Future of Technology" (2017, 19). He uses Bellamy's *Looking Backward* as an example of a treatise on the future thinly disguised as a (science) fictional story. Heinlein does not mean to exclude this type of story from science fiction, but—much as Merril does twenty years after him—rather he identifies the need for a specific category of science fiction that places the human at its centre, a task he assigns to speculative fiction. With this important point in mind, then, it might be recalled that one of the recurring critiques to classic utopian fiction is precisely its lack of attention to the human dimension of the story, preferring to focus on an ideal depiction of society that becomes the main concern of the narrative. Again, I must remark that contemporary dystopian fiction differs from classic utopian fiction in its treatment of the human element, placing it at the core of the narrative and moving the collapsing (or collapsed) society to the background, still a permanent and fundamental fixture of the story but not its sole protagonist anymore. Having said this, it becomes apparent that, whereas classic utopias would probably not be defined speculative fiction

according to these definitions, contemporary dystopian fiction could and should be.

One final remark before we move on to our discussion on science fiction and dystopia: Merril and Heinlein are both very clear in considering speculative fiction as a category of science fiction but Atwood seems to reject this idea, presenting speculative fiction as an independent genre. Some scholars, indeed, go as far as reversing the roles and placing science fiction within speculative fiction, a compelling idea insofar as one considers that most fiction can in some way be considered speculative.[14] The relevant point here is that both Merril and Heinlein are talking about a specific brand of speculation, one based on rational thought and a scientific approach. As such, then, I stand by their view of (rational) speculative fiction as a category of science fiction, the one with the potential to be as close to realism as possible while still maintaining an element of estrangement, a fundamental concept that we will discuss in depth in the next section of this chapter.

3. Dystopia and Science Fiction

So far, I have come to the conclusion that dystopian fiction emanates from utopian fiction, growing into a fully-fledged genre after the end of the

[14] One of the most vocal promoters of the inclusion of science fiction and fantasy within speculative fiction is renowned author Ursula K. Le Guin. In her collection of essays *Dreams Must Explain Themselves*, she tends to describe as speculative fiction any work that is set in a world even slightly different than ours, without further restrictions. This implies that dragons and cyborgs operate on the same level of 'estrangement' from the real world (a proposition that is strongly rejected by Darko Suvin, as I will show in the next section of this chapter). Le Guin's position can easily be accepted as long as one bears in mind that she leaves rationality out of her interpretation of the speculative, simply understanding it as a super-category that includes any 'what if' scenario that departs from our world. The contrasting positions of the scholars mentioned above and Le Guin might consequently be reconciled by saying that there exists a 'super-genre' called speculative fiction that includes any and every scenario that alters our reality, and a sub-category of science fiction, also called speculative fiction, that requires a rational approach to its speculation. It is in this latter sense that I will use 'speculative fiction' throughout this work, unless specified differently.

nineteenth century, and that it can be placed within the borders of speculative fiction, understood as the exploration of a rational 'what if' scenario that needs to be anchored in reality but is somewhat different from it. There remains to explain how all this binds dystopia to science fiction, as most commentators claim.

If one accepts that speculative fiction is a category of science fiction, then the inclusion of dystopia within science fiction is a matter of syllogism. However, most commentators do not take this route, preferring to consider it a 'direct' category of science fiction, rather than a subcategory of speculative fiction.

The reason to do so comes from arguably the most famous and essential definition of science fiction that the academia has produced to date, formulated by Darko Suvin in his *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979). Now, before we delve into what Suvin has written, let me clarify that attempting to craft a definition of science fiction is a favourite and timeless past-time of scholars in the field, who have been failing to find agreement on it due to the elusive nature of the works that are normally considered part of the genre. Much like for the definition of utopia, critics disagree on the necessity of a formal rather than content-based definition of science fiction, claiming that the former inevitably leaves out works that are instinctively described as science fiction while the latter is more often than not reduced to the empty statement: "science fiction is whatever you want it to be."

One of the most recent attempts to trace the troubled relationship between science fiction and genre is John Rieder's informative book *Science Fiction and the Mass Cultural Genre System*, published in 2017 and containing a reprint of his especially relevant essay "On Defining Science Fiction, Or Not," originally appeared in *Science Fiction Studies* in 2010.

Rieder suggests approaching the definition of science fiction as a genre historically, embracing the notion that genres have a mutable nature according to a specific moment in time. Although he does not completely reject formal definitions of science fiction, he sees them as limited in scope and,

often, too restrictive in the pool of texts they include. Rieder introduces five propositions on science fiction that could be applied to genres at large:

- SF is historical and mutable;
- SF has no essence, no single unifying characteristic, and no point of origin;
- SF is not a set of texts, but rather a way of using texts and of drawing relationships among them;
- SF's identity is a differentially articulated position in a historical and mutable field of genres;
- Attribution of the identity of SF to a text constitutes and active intervention in its distribution and reception. (Rieder 2017, 16)

Rieder's view of science fiction is that of a mutable construct with no defined boundaries, continuously evolving and in tune with the desires of an audience rooted in history. This flexibility allows the coexistence of several formal definitions, all more or less acceptable and suitable for a specific moment in time, and simultaneously it ensures the avoidance of that normativity which he identifies as the flaw in the formal definitions. Indeed, according to Rieder, science fiction is inclusive rather than normative, because the genre grows every time a new work is classified as such. In this perspective, then, not only is the content fundamental, but so is the audience that classifies it.[15] In his words,

> this account of genre definition [...] involves subjects as well as objects. [...] It is not just a question of the properties of the textual objects referred

[15] The role of the audience in informing the definition of SF is reminiscent of Stanley Fish's concept of interpretive communities. As he theorises in his 1976 essay "Interpreting the Variorum," interpretive communities are groups of people sharing interpretive strategies for writing texts. This implies that members of a given community will only compose works through these preordained strategies, and that these texts will be understood through the very interpretive patterns pertaining to said community. This concept is used by Fish to explain both "the stability of interpretation among different readers (they belong to the same community) and […] the regularity with which a single reader will employ different interpretive strategies and thus make different texts (he belongs to different communities)" (1976, 484). Notably, Fish argues that interpretive communities change in time, thus making the stability of interpretation a temporary matter.

> to a "science fiction," then, but also of the subjects positing the category, and therefore the motives, the context, and the effects of those subjects' more or less consciously and successfully executed projects. (Rieder 2017, 15)

Rieder's (non-)definition of science fiction is compelling in that it seems to reconcile the existence and employment of formal definitions to the desire of historicising the genres. One potential issue with it, though, is that it seems to bear the implication that genres are essentially indefinable, therefore leaving unanswered the question of how people instinctively classify a work as belonging to a specific genre. Rieder himself recognizes that "definition and classification might be useful points of departure for critical and rhetorical analysis" (2017, 31), and as such they are not to be discarded, but rather used for that specific purpose. However, he attributes a different goal to his model of genres: his historical and comparative narrative should be employed to comprehend "what SF has meant and currently means" (2017, 31) to the subjects that identify and consume it, more than to describe its formal attributes.

In 1972, Darko Suvin published an essay titled "On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre" in *College English*. In it he gave a brief but dense sketch of a genre that scholars had only just started noticing and approaching. The essay would eventually evolve into his seminal work *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979), a pivotal text in the field that still stands the test of time.
Suvin contributed two fundamental concepts to the study of science fiction: that of *cognitive estrangement* and that of the *novum*. In a lucid and direct way, Suvin argues that

> *Sf is [...] a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment.* (2016, 20. Italics in the original.)

The concept of 'estrangement,' which Suvin borrows from Bertolt Brecht's 'Entfremdungseffekt,' is one of the two defining characteristics of science fiction, understood as its proneness to "factual reporting of fictions" which generates an estranged feeling in the audience: they are able to recognise the subject but cannot avoid a feeling of unfamiliarity to it. Estrangement is to be understood as a 'step back' from reality, a detached gaze that allows for new points of view on it, that conveys a sense of novelty to the subject (Suvin 2016, 18). The second element of science fiction is 'cognition,' its radical interest toward the empirical, mutable norms of reality rooted in a given age. In other (rather simplified) words, cognition is the 'science' part of science fiction, estrangement is its 'fiction' part.

Suvin imagines literature as a spectrum whose opposite poles are the exact reproduction of reality and the tale of complete newness (the *novum*). A narrative that uses estrangement but not cognition will be a myth, a folk- or fairy-tale, a fantasy work completely detached from reality and invested in narrating a universal, immutable tale. Conversely, a work that uses cognition but not estrangement will be a realistic tale, prone to no jumps of imagination, deeply entrenched in what the audience can observe and experience in their everyday lives. Science fiction is the result of the balance of the two extremes of the spectrum. Estrangement differentiates it from realistic fiction, and cognition from fantasy, myths, and folktales (Suvin 2016, 20). The result is the narrative of a *novum*, an element of novelty and differentiation from reality that is developed in rational, realistic terms. Science fiction is invested in the potential alternatives to the reality of the here and now and it explores them without many boundaries, at times even straying very far from reality, but never truly detaching itself completely from it. Indeed, as Suvin writes, the concept of "cognitiveness" or "cognition" implies "not only a reflecting of but also on reality. It implies a creative approach tending toward a dynamic transformation rather than toward a static mirroring of the author's environment" (2016, 22).

Suvin's definition of science fiction as the literature of cognitive estrangement describes well the mechanisms on which the genre relies to build its works, the literary strategies to put into practice when crafting a science fiction story. However, this definition might be considered too purely 'mechanical,' limiting its observation to the structural elements of the genre and refraining from commenting on its contents and goals. To fend off such criticism, Suvin expands on his definition and reconstructs science fiction as the "literature of utopian thought" (2016, 25). This, he says, is the way it was categorised before the introduction of the label 'science fiction.' This clearly connects science fiction to utopian fiction, although it is not coincident with it. In fact, Suvin argues that science fiction is composed by sub-genres which have well-defined characteristics but all share a similar utopian impulse. Examples of these subgenres are

> the Islands of the Blessed, utopias, fabulous voyages, planetary novels, *Staatsromane,* anticipations, and dystopias—as well as the Verne-type *romans scientifiques,* the Wellsian scientific romance variant, and the twentieth-century magazine- and anthology-based SF *sensu stricto.* (Suvin 2016, 25)

About utopian fiction, Suvin specifies that

> Strictly and precisely speaking, utopia is not a genre but the *sociopolitical sub-genre of science fiction.* Paradoxically, it can be seen as such only now that SF has expanded into its modern phase, "looking backward" from its englobing of utopia. [...] SF is at the same time wider than and at least collaterally descended from utopia; it is, if not a daughter, yet a niece of utopia—a niece usually ashamed of the family inheritance but unable to escape her genetic destiny. For all its adventure, romance, popularization, and wondrousness, SF can finally be written only between the utopian and the anti-utopian horizons. (2016, 76)

Suvin therefore introduces one of the most important paradoxes of science fiction, that of being an heir of utopian fiction while containing it as a subgenre. Such a contradiction paves the way to the identification of a core

concept in the study of science and utopian fiction: namely, the distinction between utopian fiction and the utopian impulse.

The credit for the clear identification of the differences between these two elements of science fiction goes to Fredric Jameson, who dedicated the first part of his *Archaeologies of the Future* to the exploration of the utopian impulse, a concept that he harvests from Ernst Bloch's monumental work *The Principle of Hope*. Jameson, who agrees with Suvin in classifying utopian fiction as the socio-political sub-genre of science fiction (2007, xiv), argues that More's *Utopia* generated two lines of descendancy: a more systemic and explicitly utopian streak that operates towards the realisation of utopian programmes (in which he includes 'real life' revolutionary political practices, intentional communities, and utopian fictional works), and an "obscure yet omnipresent Utopian impulse finding its way to the surface in a variety of covert expressions and practices," much less systemic, much more varied, and retrievable in a wide range of fields such as political theory and reformist ideas (Jameson 2007, 3-4). Jameson claims that the systemic utopian line of descendancy is characterised by totality. According to his vision, the idea of a closed system, self-sustaining and isolated, is at the core of the "radical otherness" that typifies utopia. In other words, Jameson believes that utopia as a fictional genre and as a social programme is especially defined by its radical otherness with respect to the world with which we are familiar, and to achieve such otherness systematically one has to present a totally closed-off reality, be it a community, a village, a city, or a whole world (2007, 5). Consequently, the other line of descendancy, the one invested by Bloch's utopian impulse, will not display any inclination towards totality, but will rather have to do with "an allegorical process in which various Utopian figures seep into the daily life of things and people and afford an incremental, and often unconscious, bonus of pleasure unrelated to their functional value or official satisfactions" (Jameson 2007, 5). Jameson's second line of descendancy might be described as a feature permeating any and every element of our lives, a feature which is not the primary characteristic of such

an element of life, but rather an underlying value that inconspicuously drives our decision-making processes. Concurrently, a systemic utopian approach expressly aims at the realization of a utopian programme, and therefore its main feature is the utopian impulse. I would like to argue, then, that the utopian impulse invests every aspect of life *including* the systemic utopian endeavour. It is independent from it, but qualifies it nonetheless. At the same time, it plays a muted, toned-down role in every other aspect of reality.

This interpretation of the separation of the utopian impulse from utopian fiction is what allows Suvin to declare utopian fiction a subgenre of science fiction, and with it dystopian fiction. At a first glance, saying that dystopian fiction runs on a utopian impulse seems contradictory, but we must bear in mind the definition of critical dystopia discussed in Chapter One, and the discussion on the relevance of the point of view in defining what is utopian and what dystopian. By this I mean that, even though the overall mood of dystopia might be a dreadful one, the utopian impulse still underlies its creation either in terms of the glimmer of hope that defines critical dystopias or in terms of the intent to warn us against the consequences of our present actions in classic dystopias.

At this point, we can finally accept the generic relationship that binds together dystopian and utopian fiction, speculative fiction, and science fiction. In the following pages, I will focus on the development of dystopia within science fiction, the way it retrieves and updates elements of other genres, and the way it evolves into the subgenre with which we are familiar today.

3.1 The Beginning: Gothic Footprints, Fantastic Relics, Historical Revivals

Traditionally, science fiction finds its origins in either Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) or the works of H.G. Wells.[16] I consider the former the best fit for an ancestor of science fiction, or, as John Rieder would call it, its beginning.[17]

In one of the most influential histories of science fiction, *Billion Year Spree* (1973) by Brian W. Aldiss, updated in 1986 with the title *Trillion Year Spree*, the author writes at length about how science fiction descends from the Gothic, updating its motifs of the "descent from a 'natural world' to inferno or incarceration," the reluctant protagonist, the need to find an identity for mankind (1986, 16-17). Aptly, he introduces *Frankenstein* as the divide between a period in history in which "other traditions like broken skeletons, classical myth, a continent full of *Märchen* tales" ruled and the much more anthropocentric era that follows, in which the capabilities of mankind take the stage. The relevance of *Frankenstein* lies in its abandoning the fantastic tradition that characterised earlier Gothic novels (think of the magic rites and devils in Lewis's *The Monk,* or the gigantic helmet that kills Conrad falling from the sky in Walpole's *Castle of Otranto*) in favour of the rational and scientific methods that befit a student of chemistry and anatomy such as Victor Frankenstein.

Written in a period in which the word 'scientist' did not even exist, *Frankenstein* is the prototype for the myth of the mad scientist playing God, replacing the natural with the artificial, the irrational with the rational.

[16] Generally, commentators point to *The Time Machine* (1895) as the first of Wells's SF works, but others, like Phillip Wegner, find it more fitting to place the beginning of the genre in the intersection between that novel and *War of the Worlds*, published three years later (Wegner 2014, 44).

[17] Rieder argues that, since genres happen in the interaction of more than one work, one cannot truly speak of an original member of science fiction. He writes: "[t]o say that a genre has no origin is not to say that we cannot talk about its beginnings, however. By a beginning I do not mean an origin but rather a turning point, not an event that establishes a paradigm but rather one that introduces a discontinuity" (2017, 66).

Commentators trace back the origin of the robot to the nameless monster (if they do not go as far back as the legend of the Golem[18]); the lonely landscapes of the Alps and of the Arctic serve as blueprints for the solitary worlds in other galaxies far, far away. Most importantly, Shelley roots her story in science—perfectly plausible science for the beginning of the nineteenth century, when electricity was known but not yet fully understood. Frankenstein is fascinated by the ancient alchemists, like Agrippa and Paracelsus, but when the moment comes to put together his creature, he deploys the most advanced technologies of his time.

Shelley's novel owes much of its timeless success to its tale of reckless hubris, of science without a moral, left unchecked and free to run wild—all themes that recur in science fiction with extreme frequency.

Of course, there is one element of the Gothic that more than any other defines the genre: the Sublime. Theorised at first in the treatise *Perì Hýpsous,* generally attributed to Longinus, and re-examined by Burke in his *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), the Sublime might be considered as the engine of Gothic fiction. In Burke's direct and clear phrasing,

> Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling. I say the strongest emotion, because I am satisfied the ideas of pain are much more powerful than those which enter on the part of pleasure. (1909, 20)

The Sublime is generally understood as the feeling of dreadful delight that is inspired by a terrifying sight witnessed from a safe point of view. It is often connected with the experience of majestic natural events such as powerful storms hammering the fields while one sits in the safety of their home, or high

[18] The Golem is an anthropomorphic being made of clay or mud, pertaining to Jewish folklore.

cliffs into which one stares while holding on to a handrail. Gothic novels exploit it by having the readers witness the terrifying misfortunes of the protagonists while sitting in the safety of their rooms, often adding supernatural elements to enhance the Sublime feeling of impotence when faced with the inexplicable.

Science fiction at large does appropriate the Sublime from the Gothic, together with many other elements of the genre I have mentioned above, but I believe it is in dystopia that we find some of the most evident retrievals of the Gothic.

My reasoning is twofold: firstly, some of the tropes of Gothic fiction are easily spotted in dystopia as well. In particular, it has a fascination with the relics of civilization and often sets the narrative within the ruins of a city (think of Auster's *In the Country of Last Things,* Butler's *Parable of the Sower,* Atwood's *The Heart Goes Last*) or of the entire world (St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven*, McCarthy's *The Road,* Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*). Very often the evil-doer will be an authority figure (think of the original Gothic villains, all male, often of the aristocracy, at times esteemed members of the Church, and the way this authority is transferred into totalitarian institutions like Big Brother in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, or the Circle in Egger's novel of the same name, Tyrell Corporation in *Blade Runner,* the Capitol in *Hunger Games*, or fanatic figures like the prophet in *Station Eleven* and Immortan Joe in *Mad Max: Fury Road*). More often still, the protagonist will be an outsider of sorts, either by choice or by circumstances (women without protection haunt Gothic narratives much more than ghosts do; men and women who do not conform to the dystopian society are the fundamental actors of the genre).

Secondly, Gothic and dystopian fiction share the same educational purpose. Gothic novels were mostly written for and read by young, impressive women, and therefore images of a woman's "ruin" abound in those narratives. They act as a warning against the evil of the world, of men, of power, and of passion. They depict in detail what could happen to their female readers if they stray

from their role in society. Dystopian fiction addresses a much wider public with the same intent. By depicting a distorted society, it warns the audience that action must be taken to avoid the consequences of acquiescence. The Sublime allows the audience to experience the horror of life in a dystopian world from the safety of their couches or their seats at the cinema, eliciting an emotional response made in equal parts of dread for the possibility of the fictional world becoming true, and of delight for it has not yet become so.[19] Having said this, we must bear in mind that dystopia is still not the only fiction that has inherited some Gothic motifs, particularly with reference to the American literary tradition. Indeed, Aldiss points out how the Gothic tradition in the U.S., much stronger than in other nations, spread across science fiction, horror, detective fiction, and western (Aldiss 1986, 64).

Clearly, there are elements of the Gothic that are not retrieved in science fiction, the most obvious being its fantastic element. The supernatural is indeed one of the most recognisable elements of the genre, which feasts on a plethora of magic rituals, ghostly apparitions, doors and furniture moving on their own, and devilish pacts of blood. It lives on in contemporary horror

[19] It is worth stressing once more that the main feature of the Sublime that dystopian fiction retrieves is its 'educational' function. Dystopian fiction certainly plays on the horror of a deranged world and to an extent, as shown above, adapts Gothic tropes to our contemporary society. However, it struggles to maintain one element of the Sublime: its unthinkability. To clarify, one of the features normally attributed to the Sublime is the inability of man to grasp its full meaning. We react to it with horror because we cannot comprehend it. It delights us because we are experiencing it from a safe place. Dystopian fiction, conversely, strives to describe its world in the most accessible way, so that the horror is enhanced by our understanding, rather than our ignorance. The only relic of the unknowability of the Sublime lies perhaps in the often-glossed-upon catastrophic events that cause the advent of the dystopian society. Indeed, several dystopian works tend to avoid discussing them, preferring to give them an evocative name and let the audience decide what they exactly consisted of (think of *The Road*, in which an explanation for the desertification of America is never given, or *The Hunger Games*, in which one knows there were 'dark days' but nothing much is said about them, or *Ready Player One*, whose society was the consequence of some unspecified 'Bandwidth Riots and the Corn Syrup Drought.') All the same, the primary link between the Sublime and dystopian fiction remains the similar effect they have on the audience.

narratives and in fantasy, a genre that has often been confused with or blended into science fiction, but actually plays no role in science fiction. Going back to Suvin, in his *Metamorphoses* he draws a very hard line between fantasy and science fiction, attributing to the *novum* the element of estrangement, of radical difference from reality, that in Gothic fiction was played by the supernatural, and arguing that the *novum* must be believable in a rational way, eliciting a "*cognition effect,*" as Carl Freedman calls it (2000, 18).[20]

Similarly, Jameson dedicates a whole chapter of *Archaeologies*, aptly titled "The Great Schism," to the separation between fantasy and science fiction. He explains that the fundamental difference between the two lies in the opposition between the natural and the artificial, claiming that the fantastic draws its power from nature and the village, celebrating "human creative power and freedom" in a suspended, ahistorical reality where magic symbolises the latent and yet unrealised potential of the human. Conversely, "SF is the exploration of all the constraints thrown up by history itself—the web of counterfinalities and anti-dialectics which human production has itself produced," invested in the artificial advancement of humanity and deeply entrenched in the very same history that fantasy rejects (Jameson 2008, 64-66).

It is along this thinly traced line between the natural and the artificial that dystopian fiction produces its most remarkable works, particularly with reference to post-apocalyptic dystopias in which the failure of a technology-driven society brings back the human to a state of nature. *Station Eleven* or *The Book of Eli* are worthy representatives of this 'inching' toward fantasy, pawing the line but never trespassing. The same could be said of Miller's *A*

[20] It must be remembered, as Phillip Wegner writes, that the Suvinian concept of the *novum* is lifted from Ernst Bloch's *The Principle of Hope*. "For Bloch, Utopianism, which he identifies as the Utopian impulse—or, as in the title of his most important work, the "principle of hope" (Das Prinzip Hoffnung)—is a fundamental desire for the future in the form of the radically new, and it is this desire that drives forward all history" (Wegner 2014, 47).

Canticle for Leibowitz, another liminal example of a world that, thrown back to its natural state, chooses to fight back by trying to restore the essential technology lost in the fall. Nonetheless, dystopian fiction, as part of science fiction, does reject the magic element, and most of the times the natural element as well. It remains deeply invested in the reproduction of the artificial, crafted reality of our times, refusing a return to an ahistorical past.

It is this constant relation to our history that allows Carl Freedman, who bases his analysis on Lukács's seminal work on the historical novel, to write that

> science fiction is of all genres the most devoted to historical concreteness: for, after all, the science-fictional world is not only one different in time or place from our own, but one whose chief interest is precisely the difference that such difference makes, and, in addition, one whose difference is nonetheless concretized within a cognitive continuum with the actual (thus, as we have seen, sharply distinguishing science fiction from the irrational estrangement of such essentially ahistorical genres as fantasy or the Gothic, which may secretly work to ratify the mundane status quo by presenting no alternative to the latter other than inexplicable discontinuities). It may appear, then, that science fiction is, perhaps paradoxically, a version of historical fiction. (Freedman 2000, 43)

The relationship of the historical novel to the past is very much like the one of science fiction with the future, which involves a "dialectic of difference and identity, [...] a sense of both change and continuity. [...] The historical novel, then, is [...] an eminently *critical* form, a form that constructs societies as radically historicised and complexly determined totalities" (Freedman 2000, 44).

The concept of totality, that Jameson deploys to describe the fundamental condition for the realisation of the utopian enterprise, here returns to be applied to the historical novel, again stressing the function of a radical alterity, clearly different from our actual reality, in inspiring a reflection on it, a criticism of it.

Freedman notices how science fiction and the historical novel appeared virtually at the same moment in time (at the beginning of the nineteenth century with Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Sir Walter Scott's 1814 novel *Waverley*) and lived parallel lives for almost two centuries. However, the historical novel flourished almost immediately while science fiction truly became a recognisable genre only in the twentieth century. By then, historical fiction had mostly lost its initial impulse, only producing 'antiquarian' narratives that did not inspire a reflection on contemporary society. Such a role was indeed taken over by science fiction, which to an extent incorporated the historical with the advent of postmodernity (Freedman 2000, 60).
But we are perhaps moving too fast through the years, moving from the origins of the genre to its inclusion of the historical novel in the second half of the twentieth century. Before we approach science fiction, dystopia, and the postmodern era, we must pass through modernity.

3.2 A Partial Chronology

As I have previously mentioned, most histories of science fiction[21] identify *Frankenstein* as the beginning of the genre, with Jules Verne and H.G. Wells's fundamental contributions covering the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. Dystopia, meanwhile, produced its first generally accepted specimen in 1908, when Jack London published *The Iron Heel*. Often described as a proto-dystopia, London's novel narrates twenty years of speculative American history, starting from 1912, when democracy fails and the Oligarchy, also known as the Iron Heel, takes the power and neutralises several revolts organised by socialist rebels. The narrator is the wife of one of the leaders of the socialist movement, whose memoir serves as

[21] This section draws from a number of works to reconstruct the evolution of dystopia within science fiction. The most relevant is Mark Bould and Sherryl Vint's *The Routledge Concise History of Science Fiction*. Most of this section deals with the American evolution of dystopia and science fiction, but there are references to a few fundamental British authors without whose works the genre would be much different.

the main narrative. Additionally, footnotes by a scholar writing in the 2600s are scattered throughout the entire text, effectively anticipating the tragic end of the protagonists: the Iron Heel would rule for over three centuries before the Revolution established a socialist government, the Brotherhood of Man.

The Iron Heel is generally considered a novel, since there is indeed a plot with protagonists and events. However, it is particularly rich in political theory, reprising Marx's vision of capitalism and socialism, strongly debating in favour of the latter so as to achieve freedom and equality for the labour classes. If we think back to Heinlein's take on science fiction, we might notice a strong similarity with the style of *Looking Backward*, a utopia which Heinlein describes as a "fictionalised essay" (2017, 19). London creates a gripping narrative around his vision of society and the power structures controlling it, and speculates carefully about what might happen in the future. His narrative is not as thin as Bellamy's is, but it is nonetheless a medium to express his political and social views through art. Consequently, the inclusion of *The Iron Heel* within science fiction might also be rather problematic, were it not for the reminder that social science fiction is by now a generally recognised category of the genre, mindful of Suvin's and Jameson's words of advice quoted in the first section of this chapter.

If *The Iron Heel* still walks the fine line between political treatise and narrative fiction, we do not have to wait long for a 'completely' dystopian work to appear, this time as a short story by English author E. M. Foster: in 1909 he published "The Machine Stops" in *The Oxford and Cambridge Review.* It is the story of the last moments of the human civilization after it has retreated underground to escape the poisoned surface of the earth. Life is controlled by the Machine, that regulates all aspects of human existence such as nutrition, sleep, reproduction, and the need to socialise. Everything happens virtually and remotely, as people live their entire existence in their room, working on second-hand ideas. Religion does not exist anymore, but a sort of idolatry of the machine has substituted it. The protagonists, mother and son, represent

the two opposite poles of the attachment to the Machine: the mother is resolute in not leaving her room until the very last moment, following the dictates of the Machine, while the son sneaks to the surface to see with his own eyes whether the Machine is actually imprisoning them, rather than protecting them. The short story narrates the gradual disruption of the services provided by the Machine that brings about the collapse of the entire system and the death of everyone underground. In the last lines, hope is conveyed by the reference to humans the son has seen during his unauthorised trip to the surface, the only survivors of their species.

In "The Machine Stops" we find most of the elements that recur in dystopian fiction: a natural catastrophe that made Earth inhabitable, a technocratic totalitarian regime ruled by a machine, the silent, even grateful acquiescence of the masses to the new way of life, and a rebellious individual, who alone defies the rules of the totalitarian regime and goes looking for a better alternative. Resonating with some of the most well-known tropes of Gothic fiction such as the crypt-like tunnels and the awareness of the reader of the impending catastrophe, *The Machine Stops* stands its ground as one of the fundamental examples of early twentieth-century dystopia.

Next up in our chronological list of dystopian fiction are three of the most relevant novels in the genre, Yevgeny Zamyatin's 1924 *We*, Aldous Huxley's 1932 *Brave New World* and George Orwell's 1949 *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. All three published in Great Britain, all three resonating with the aftermath of the global conflicts, they are considered the most representative novels of classic dystopian fiction. It is not coincidental that these works were written in the ruins of war-torn Europe, depicting totalitarian regimes that impose absolute control on every action of life. The memories of the dictatorships in Russia, Germany, Italy, and Spain were still all too fresh.

Often described as anti-utopian, these three novels share the fairly depressing notion that their totalitarian systems cannot be overthrown, no matter what one individual might try to do. They express the belief that no good alternative might be achieved, and that the dream of a better world

should be eradicated from the individual to favour the greater good of the perfectly regulated social system. They also share the notion that absolute obedience is perfectly satisfactory to a great majority of people, which is the reason why these regimes took over in the first place. It is the utopian ideal of a harmonious community reconfigured to appear monstrous simply by presenting it from the perspective of the outlier that rejects it. No happy ending, then, is allowed to offer relief to the reader. What we achieve at the end of these novels is completion—not of the rebellious endeavour of the protagonist, but of the totalitarian system. Very few people can easily forget the chilling "He loved Big Brother" that concludes *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Equally powerless against the regime is the 'savage' in *Brave New World*, who kills himself while the other outliers are exiled. Only in *We* is the ending open enough to let the possibility of an alternative be considered: the protagonist is lobotomised and reinstated within the One State, but a rebellion by the Mephi is underway. It is worth noting, though, that the individual opposition to the system has no consequence against it. It is only a large group of rebels that might be able to overthrow the One State.

While in England authors produced some of the gloomiest images of the future to date, in the U.S. the artistic output had a lighter tone. America was not without its own problems in the first half of the twentieth century, having lived through an economic recession and the two world wars, but it did not feel the same stark repercussions of the global conflicts that impacted Europe. Indeed, while the latter was left in ruins after the First World War and with barely enough time to recover before another conflict tore through it, the U.S. came out strengthened by its participation in the two World Wars, profiting in terms of political status and economic recovery. It is in this privileged era of American progress that science fiction was born as a genre.

In 1926 Hugo Gernsback published the first issue of *Amazing Stories* through his New York media company Experimenter Publishing. It was the first magazine dedicated only to 'scientifiction.' In the editorial that opened that number, he wrote:

> By ‘scientifiction’ I mean the Jules Verne, H. G. Wells and Edgar Allan Poe type of story—a charming romance intermingled with scientific fact and prophetic vision [...] Not only do these amazing tales make tremendously interesting reading—they are always instructive. They supply knowledge that we might not otherwise obtain—and they supply it in a very palatable form. (Gernsback 2017, 11-12)

Amazing Stories paved the way to an entire fleet of science fiction pulp magazines, the privileged *locus* for SF up to the 1950s, and helped define the market segment they targeted. Its stories tended to focus on a marvellous new invention or a breakthrough technology (Suvin’s *novum*), leaning on sensationalism rather than style and original content. Additionally, *Amazing Stories* fostered the creation of the first fan-base thanks to its letter column through which fans could write to each other, and thus effectively gave birth to the ‘market’ genre of science fiction as we know it today.

Astounding Stories, its main competitor, appeared just four years later, and flourished under the editorial leadership of John W. Campbell, who took on the position in 1937. Largely known as the promoter of the Golden Age of Science Fiction, Campbell steered the genre in a more ‘serious’ direction, selecting stylistically pleasing stories and demanding more profound characterisation and plots from his authors. A psychological layer was added to the stories of the *novum*: it was not only about the new technology anymore, it was also about the people using it. Several of the most notable authors of science fiction were published in *Astounding*, long before their names became synonymous with the genre: Isaac Asimov, Robert A. Heinlein, A. E. van Vogt are only three of the many contributors to the magazine throughout the 1940s.

During the Golden Age some of the tropes of science fiction were established, such as Asimov’s Three Laws of Robotics. Space opera found fertile ground within pulp magazines, with its echoes of the colonising impulse that was so typical of western literature. More generally, a widespread optimism—if not faith—in scientific progress characterised the entirety of the American science fiction output. One remarkable exception to this optimistic view of the

American future is Sinclair Lewis's 1935 *It Can't Happen Here*, a dystopian alternate history novel that suggests the possibility of a totalitarian regime rising to power in the U.S. much as it had in several European countries. Lewis's novel anticipates by a decade the decline of the unshakeable optimism of SF: according to Asimov, the Golden Age started waning towards the end of the 1940s. He wrote,

> The dropping of the atomic bomb in 1945 made science fiction respectable. [...] There was a tendency for the new reality to nail the science fiction writer to the ground. Prior to 1945, science fiction had been wild and free. And its motifs and plot varieties remained in the realm of fantasy and we could do as we pleased. After 1945, there came the increasing need to talk about the [Atomic Energy Commission] and to mold all the infinite scope of our thoughts to the small bit of them that had become real. In fact, there was the birth of something I called 'tomorrow fiction;' the science fiction story that was no more new than tomorrow's headlines. (Asimov 1969, 93)

Asimov here encompasses the rapid shift in the field at the end of the 1940s, with several science fiction authors entering the mainstream market and the pulp magazines quickly disappearing in the next decade. He describes a more realistic approach to science fiction, that was closer to the issues being discussed in the news. As many of the contributors of *Astounding* and of other pulp magazines managed to become published novelists, science fiction also spread into other media, particularly cinema and television. The 1950s witnessed the increased popularity of sci-fi movies (*Them!; The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*) and TV series (*Flash Gordon; Captain Video and His Video Rangers*), both in the U.S. and Britain, often inspired by short stories published during the Golden Age. Editors and readers started talking about 'hard science fiction,' interested in purely scientific and technological matters, and 'soft science fiction,' that embraced subjects like anthropology and sociology. By the time the 1950s came to an end, the two categories were widely accepted and often seen from a gendered perspective, with men favouring the former and women the latter. Nevertheless, science fiction in

the 1950s focused primarily on the Cold War and the paranoia it caused, as post-apocalyptic scenarios started appearing (Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* was published in 1954, Walter M. Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz* only five years later), and secondarily on consumerism and the way the mass media polarised public opinion. Frederik Pohl and Cyril M. Kornbluth published their anti-consumerism novel *The Space Merchants* in 1953 and, in the same year, Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* appeared, quickly becoming one of the most famous American dystopias to date. Authors also started commenting on the danger of automation, with Isaac Asimov's *I, Robot* (1950), Kurt Vonnegut's *Player Piano* (1952), and the less known but still relevant *Limbo* by Bernard Wolfe (1952) all taking different angles on the subject.

Meanwhile, as science fiction adapted to its new mainstream status in the 1950s, it also started reflecting on its style and form. As the world left modernity behind, postmodernity started making its way through the arts, projecting its social anxieties into literature, film, architecture, music, and the visual arts. And as postmodernity started gaining traction in the following decades, dystopias re-emerged in the U.S. in full force.

In order to move forward, we have to linger for a moment on the meaning of postmodernity and its structural difference from postmodernism.

At a superficial level, it is quite plain: 'postmodernity' refers to a historical period and 'postmodernism' to an artistic movement (Connor 2004, 4).[22] With this in mind, we can now delve into the rather more complex questions of *what* artistic movement and *what* historical period.

According to Steven Connor, the beginning of literary postmodernism is generally set around the 1970s and 1980s (2004, 1), with the emergence of authors such as John Barth, Don DeLillo, William S. Burroughs, Thomas

[22] The debate surrounding the appropriateness of the use of these terms is vast and cannot be summarised here. I point any interested readers to Steven Connor's introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism* (2004) for a breakdown of the many positions surrounding the necessity to separate culture from the arts in postmodernism, and for a useful summary of the main phases of the movement.

Pynchon, but also Philip K. Dick, Kurt Vonnegut, and J. G. Ballard.[23] Linda Hutcheon, whose *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988, republished in 2004) remains one of the most informative investigations into the forms of this current, describes it as "wilfully contradictory" (2004, xiii) because it critiques the ideologies of its time while being intrinsically within them. In Hutcheon's words:

> [Postmodernism] knows it cannot escape implication in the economic (late capitalist) and ideological (liberal humanist) dominants of its time. There is no outside. All it can do is question from within. It can only problematize what Barthes (1973) has called the "given" or "what goes without saying" in our culture. History, the individual self, the relation of language to its referents and of texts to other texts—these are some of the notions which, at various moments, have appeared as "natural" or unproblematically common sensical. And these are what get interrogated. Despite the apocalyptic rhetoric that often accompanies it, the postmodern marks neither a radical Utopian change nor a lamentable decline to hyperreal simulacra. (Hutcheon 2004, xiii).

Hence, postmodern texts critique the role and representation of history, the function (or perhaps, the malfunction) of language, the loss of the solid social structures that inform the identity of an individual, and the advent of mass culture. Hutcheon proposes the term "historiographic metafiction" to describe this main strain, "those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages" (2004, 5). Metafiction is a term that represents well both the desire to discuss on the very structures of the literary product (language, for instance) and the necessity to do so through the very structures they critique, while the adjective historiographic underlines well the desire to discuss and question the past and present and the structures that constructed it (Hutcheon 2004, 5). Postmodern fiction, it follows, is paradoxical. It deploys

[23] Early instances of postmodernism appear in the late 50s, with John Barth's first works, and in the 60s, with Pynchon's *V.* (1963) and *The Crying of Lot 49* (1965). Other notable postmodernist authors are Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme, and Ishmael Reed.

irony to critique the dominant ideologies from within; it is aware of this contradiction and does not try to suppress it.

Moreover, as Jameson remarks, postmodern literature has another fundamental feature: “the effacement […] of the older (essentially high-modernist) frontier between high culture and so-called mass or commercial culture” (Jameson 1991, 2)—that is, postmodernism questions the clear cut distinction of a literature of great merit and one only good enough to entertain an uncultured audience.[24]

Science fiction intersects with postmodernism in highly controversial works such as Burroughs’s 1959 *Naked Lunch*, a hallucinatory collage of fragments of the adventures of a junkie in a dystopian-looking society, or Ballard’s 1970 *The Atrocity Exhibition* and 1973 *Crash*, which are just as distorted a vision of reality as *Naked Lunch* is. In these novels a futuristic setting and a disturbing plot are presented through fragments—both in terms of broken language and of broken narration—refusing to give the reader easy access to the kaleidoscopic worlds the authors have imagined.

No less importantly, several of Philip K. Dick’s works intersect with postmodernism with reference to the “humorous pop-cultural satire” (Freedman 2000, 182), the best example perhaps being *Ubik* (1969) with his harsh critique of meaningless advertising, and to the ‘end of history,’ whose advent allows the exploration of alternate timelines in his dystopia *The Man in the High Castle* (1962).

Critics and audience alike debate over the outcome of the intersection of postmodernism and science fiction, some finding it cause to declare the death

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[24] This is but an extremely brief and rather uncritical presentation of the main features of postmodern literature but delving into the complex branches of the debate surrounding this topic exceeds the scope of this work. For an in-depth analysis of postmodernism, I suggest both *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism* (2004), edited by Steven Connor, and Hutcheon’s *A Poetics of Postmodernism* ([1988] 2004), while Roger Luckhurst’s essay “Border Policing: Postmodernism and Science Fiction” (1991) is a pertinent investigation into the interaction of these two genres.
Much of what follows draws from the brilliant closing chapter of Carl Freedman’s *Critical Theory and Science Fiction*, titled “Coda: Theory, Science Fiction, and the Postmodern.”

of the latter, some praising the attempt to set science fiction at a higher literary standard.[25] Whichever side of the debate one takes, it must be noted that science fiction and postmodernism met only occasionally: even though they converged in the above-mentioned works, and even though there was an affinity in their desire to dismantle the traditional separation of high and low literature, they mostly existed as separate realms. Much more relevant to our discourse is the relationship between science fiction and postmodernity.

Postmodernity is rather more complex to define than postmodernism because, as Freedman claims, in a sense there is no such a thing as *post*-modernity. Drawing on Jameson's theories, he suggests that postmodernity might also be called *pure* modernity, because it should be considered as the moment in history when modernity comes to completion, abandoning the last relics of a pre-modern, natural era.[26] This essentially entails "an era in which capitalist modernization is so thoroughly triumphant that, owing to the lack of that contrast on which visibility depends, it becomes somewhat difficult to see" (2000, 188).

Postmodernity thus is seen by Jameson and Freedman as completely encompassed in the artificial net of late capitalism, and because of its totalising nature, it is implied that an alternative to this system cannot easily be spotted. Capital itself infiltrates artistic production, commodifying the work of art, luring it into its net. This is where science fiction comes in: Freedman claims that its role within this totalising reality of postmodernity will be to eventually conjure up an alternative to it, exploiting its utopian

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[25] See, for instance, Luckhurst's essays "Border Policing: Postmodernism and Science Fiction" (1991) and "The Many Deaths of Science Fiction: A Polemic" (1994). Of particular interest to Luckhurst is the intersection of SF and postmodernism in breaking the traditional dichotomy of high versus low literature.

[26] "The postmodern condition, Jameson writes, 'is what you have when the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good,' or, in somewhat ampler terms, the situation 'in which late capitalism has all but succeeded in eliminating the final loopholes of nature and the Unconscious, of subversion and the aesthetic, of individual and collective praxis alike, and, with a final fillip, in eliminating any memory trace of what thereby no longer existed in the henceforth postmodern landscape'" (Freedman 2000, 188).

nature. It is in science fiction, he says, that we will not succumb with resignation to this system, but rather we will rise against it from within (2000, 199-200).

Now, postmodernity has a very uncertain time frame. It might be better understood as an *in fieri* process that began after the Second World War and is still nearing completion.[27] Postmodernism certainly reflected its advent in the arts in the 1970s and 1980s, though it was not the only artistic trend reflecting such a change, nor were the products of its intersection with science fiction the only notable SF works. Indeed, in those decades science fiction became one of the preferred genres to discuss the political movements that characterised American culture. Issues of race, gender, and sexuality became central in the field and female authors like Joanna Russ, Marge Piercy, and Ursula K. Le Guin began to play a relevant role. Environmentalism also started gaining attention. After the tense moment of the 1950s, with their anxiety-ridden, dystopian, post-apocalyptic fiction, the 1960s and 1970s brought back optimism in science fiction. Le Guin's *The Word for World is Forest* (1972) is one of the most delicate, heart-felt love letters to nature and alterity. Her *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), to date one of the most beloved science fiction works, embraces the concept of a gender-free society.

[27] I am referring to Freedman's doubt that a "totalitarianism of the postmodern as Jameson evokes can ever really be attained, whether all traces of anything other than capitalist modernization can really be eliminated down the Orwellian memory holes" (2000, 188). Freedman believes that postmodernity might never be totally completed because we will never be able to get rid of "the final loopholes of nature and the Unconscious, of subversion and the aesthetic, of individual and collective praxis alike, and, with a final fillip, [...] any memory trace of what thereby no longer existed in the henceforth postmodern landscape" (Jameson, quoted in Freedman 2000, 188). Freedman believes that we might either find a subversive element that will impede the totalising experience of postmodernity or face a "more completely modernized and commodified age than our own" (2000, 189). Writing almost twenty years after *Critical Theory and Science Fiction* was published, I might add that the latter seems to be a fairly good description of what has happened in the past two decades. However, I still believe we have yet to reach the point of completion of postmodernity: our lives can be even more commodified, we still witness acts of protest against the postmodern, capitalist system, art and memory have not yet been erased. We might be closer to the totalitarianism of the postmodern, but we are not there yet.

Frank Herbert published his soft science fiction masterpiece *Dune* in 1965. Even utopian fiction came back in the U.S., this time leaving behind its attempt at presenting a blueprint of the perfect society and adding a critical level to its narrative with works like Ursula K. Le Guin *The Dispossessed* (1974), Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), and Samuel Delany's *Triton* (1976).

It was not bound to last, though. When the 1980s came, the desire of change that had inspired many of the countermovements of the previous twenty years had lost its pull, and the political and social changes were so drastic that from this decade onward, we witness a progressive waning of optimistic science fiction and even of critical utopias.

Politically and economically, the 1980s were dominated by Reaganomics in the U.S. and Thatcherism in the UK. Their conservative policies and *laissez-faire* approach to the market serve as the backdrop for the birth of cyberpunk, with William Gibson's 1984 *Neuromancer,* Bruce Sterling's 1986 anthology *Mirroshades,* and Ridley Scott's 1982 *Blade Runner*, adapted from a 1968 novel by Philip K. Dick. In a sense, this is the moment in which science fiction truly becomes emblazoned in postmodernity, not as the genre that would generate an alternative, but as the genre that best represents life in the neoliberalist, postmodern era, in the "thoroughly commodified postmodern landscape" (Freedman 2000, 195). Freedman comments acutely on how cyberpunk, with its dystopian, dark, decaying cities, cyberspace, and corporation-run nations is truly some of the most conservative science fiction ever produced (2000, 198). Indeed, after one looks past the shocking effect produced by the radically different urban landscape described, it is quite easy to spot the traditional narratives that can be found in much American literature of the twentieth century, regardless of genre: the male hero and his 'macho' culture are reproduced faithfully in cyberpunk. Moreover, cyberpunk does not only depict postmodernity in all its glory; it also accepts it as the definitive social system of the future. In this sense, then, cyberpunk is the

failure of science fiction as the genre that would generate an alternative to postmodernity.

Freedman, who wrote *Critical Theory and Science Fiction* in 2000, foresaw correctly that cyberpunk would soon lose its hegemonic popularity within science fiction to make space to other, more disruptive works—works that would address the need for a change in society. Indeed, from the mid-1980s onwards, science fiction has increasingly become populated by (critical) dystopias. In 1985, Margaret Atwood published *The Handmaid's Tale*, two years later Paul Auster's *In the Country of Last Things* came out, followed by Marge Piercy's *He, She and It* in 1991 and Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* in 1993. Its sequel, *Parable of the Talents,* came out in 1998, the same year in which Pat Cadigan, the only woman described as a cyberpunk author, published *Tea from an Empty Cup*. In America, the tendency to conflate science fiction and dystopia only intensified after 9/11. In 2002, Matthew T. Anderson published *Feed.* Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* came out in 2003, followed by two sequels in 2009 and 2013. Some of the most famous American novelists, who traditionally did not belong to science fiction, went on to write extremely popular dystopias, such as Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* (2004), Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), and Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* (2012). It is with Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* trilogy (2008-2010), though, that dystopian fiction truly went mainstream and infiltrated young/adult fiction as well. The craze for dystopias it elicited paved the way for other hugely successful franchises such as James Dashner's *The Maze Runner* series (2009-2016) and Veronica Roth's *Divergent* series (2011-2014). A plethora of other dystopian novels have come out in the past ten years, such as Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One* (2012), Dave Eggers's *The Circle* (2013), Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014), Margaret Atwood's *The Heart Goes Last* (2016), Jeff Vandermeer's *Borne* (2017), and too many others to mention them all here.

Hollywood was not too far behind in catching up with the dystopian trend. Several of the novels mentioned above were adapted for the screen. Dystopian

short stories from earlier decades were updated into movies suitable for the audience of the twenty-first century, like Steven Spielberg's *Minority Report* (2002) or Alex Proyas's *I, Robot* (2004). Dystopian comic books and mangas were also raided for cinematic adaptations like *Dredd* (2012), *Ghost in the Shell* (2017), and *Alita: Battle Angel* (2019). Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* and Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* both have been turned into TV series, the former in 2015 and the latter in 2017. Both are still running alongside other hugely successful dystopian TV series like *Black Mirror* (2011-present) and *Westworld* (2016-present).

Most dystopian fiction of the past twenty years deals with the collapse of our contemporary society due to wars, scarcity of resources, natural disasters, or the advent of a totalitarian regime. Technology, now more than ever, plays a fundamental role in both the fall and the reconstruction of society. A growing trend of young-adult protagonists underlines how the older generations are often blamed for the demise of society. I will analyse in detail the themes of contemporary dystopian fiction in the following chapters.

One last word, for now, to clarify that dystopian fiction has not completely replaced science fiction in the past two decades: science fiction is particularly alive and well in cinema, where adaptations of past works continue to flourish alongside original movies, and science fiction as a genre is gaining more and more recognition (it is sufficient to mention the Oscars accolades of Alfonso Cuarón's 2013 *Gravity* and Denis Villeneuve's 2016 *Arrival*, or the ongoing success of the *Star Wars* franchise).

New authors have opened the path to new forms of science fiction and widened its geographic and cultural reach. Nnedi Okorafor, with her novella *Binti* (2015) and its sequels, has given us insight into African traditions, Cixin Liu's *The Three-Body Problem* (2014, originally published in Chinese in 2006) brings Chinese culture to the forefront, Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl* (2009) is set in Thailand. Ann Leckie has revived space opera with her *Imperial Radch* trilogy, while Cory Doctorow and especially China Miéville fuse science fiction with the so-called New Weird, disregarding the

boundaries of genre to create works of extreme originality. Science fiction continues to flourish and address our increasingly multicultural society, bringing into the mix new cultures, new traditions, new scientific and technological discoveries, and new social issues to be set in far-away planets, far enough to let us have some perspective, close enough to let us do something about them.

CHAPTER THREE

Confronting the American Myth

In 1986, Jean Baudrillard published *America*, a work that was and remains as provocative as it is evocative and controversial. Later translated into English in 1989, this short essay reads as a contemplation of the landscapes and people of the U.S.—one none too shy in criticising them. It holds, to an extent, a "tacitly prophetic quality" (Baudrillard 2010, xiii), although his views on the United States are bound to their historical context: Baudrillard's America is also Reagan's, as remarks Geoff Dyer in the introduction to the 2010 edition (2010, xiii). As much as some of his observations inevitably sound dated, its core concepts are still strikingly relevant. It is from one of them that we begin a journey into the waning myths that sustained the United States' belief in its exceptionality.

Baudrillard wrote: "What you have to do is enter the fiction of America, enter America as fiction. It is, indeed, on this fictive basis that it dominates the

world." (2010, 29). What lies behind such an apparently simple sentence is Baudrillard's view of the U.S. as hyperreality, a concept he explores further in his 1994 *Simulacra and Simulation.*[28] According to Baudrillard, a hyperreality is "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality" (1994, 1)—that is, a world of simulation, truly devoid of meaning. Thus, America from Baudrillard's point of view is a model for the rest of the world, but indeed nothing more than that: it is a mould without content. America as replicated at Disneyland, America as replicating Disneyland (1994, 12).[29] Throughout his paradoxical works, Baudrillard talks about the American society as a community of people thoroughly invested in 'the ideal'—the ideal house, body, spouse, job—so much so that the ideal has replaced the real. According to him, America is fiction, and as such it makes herself known to the world. Simulacra inhabit a desert land, he says, and have spread throughout the world to be recognised and imitated at the same time.[30]

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[28] Simulacra, according to Baudrillard, are the product of simulation, as opposed to representation: "Representation stems from the principle of the equivalence of the sign and of the real (even if this equivalence is Utopian, it is a fundamental axiom). Simulation, on the contrary, stems from the Utopia of the principle of equivalence, from the radical negation of the sign as value, from the sign as the reversion and death sentence of every reference. Whereas representation attempts to absorb simulation by interpreting it as a false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation itself as a simulacrum" (1994, 6).
He claims, in essence, that society has lost all contact with reality and is currently living in hyperreality, which is made of symbols only representing themselves (that is, simulacra), rather than a corresponding real object, and which only practices simulation, rather than representation.

[29] Baudrillard uses Disneyland as the most appropriate example of hyperreality: at Disneyland, America is replicated or, better, simulated; the world we witness there has no match in real life. What we meet there is a simulacrum of American society (1994, 12).

[30] "We will live in this world, which for us has all the disquieting strangeness of the desert and of the simulacrum, with all the veracity of living phantoms, of wandering and simulating animals that capital, that the death of capital has made of us—because the desert of cities is equal to the desert of sand—the jungle of signs is equal to that of the forests—the vertigo of simulacra is equal to that of nature—only the vertiginous seduction of a dying system remains, in which work buries work, in which value buries value—leaving a virgin, sacred space without pathways, continuous as Bataille wished it, where only the wind lifts the sand, where only the wind watches over the sand" (Baudrillard 1994, 153).

Baudrillard's poetic yet scathing description of the United States in *America* sketches the portrait of a nation without identity or, better, with an identity built on fake values, fake myths, and fake actors, and therefore devoid of meaning. America as a fairy-tale. America as a modern-day myth. America, most certainly, as "Utopia achieved" (1989, 81), a phrase which sounds like a contradiction in terms if one recalls that an intrinsic quality of utopia is its unattainability.

It follows that caution is necessary in approaching Baudrillard's bold statement: even assuming he is right—that is, even assuming that utopia truly was achieved in America—one must wonder what form it took. The narrative of the United States as the "land of the free, and the home of the brave," in the words of its national anthem, has recurred from the very birth of the nation, yet Baudrillard insists that it is truly just that: a narrative without historical roots; pure myth, passed down the generations and divulged by the rarefied images offered to the wide audience by the cinema, first, and the television later. In his words,

> The Americans are not wrong in their idyllic conviction that they are at the centre of the world, the supreme power, the absolute model for everyone. And this conviction is not so much founded on natural resources, technologies, and arms, as on the miraculous premiss of a utopia made reality, of a society which, with a directness we might judge unbearable, is built on the idea that it is the realization of everything the others have dreamt of—justice, plenty, rule of law, wealth, freedom: it knows this, it believes in it, and in the end, the others have come to believe in it too. [... America] allowed itself to imagine *it could create an ideal world from nothing*. We should also not forget the fantasy consecration of this process by the cinema. Whatever happens, and whatever one thinks of the arrogance of the dollar or the multinationals, it is this culture which, the world over, fascinates those very people who suffer most at its hands, and it does so through the deep, insane conviction that it has made all their dreams come true. (Baudrillard 2010, 83, emphasis added)

I am starting this chapter with Baudrillard's view on the United States because his vision of America as built on a narrative detached from reality

has found fertile ground in the past twenty years, especially after 9/11. In the following pages, I will attempt to explain how two of the myths that inform the American identity have been put into question of late, and how this scepticism towards them emerges in the current dystopian trend that pervades much of American fiction, be it directed to the general public or targeted more narrowly at young adults.

Why is a nation often proclaimed to be the manifestation of Utopia[31] producing so many dystopian works? Why is the American society so fascinated by catastrophic future scenarios? These are the questions that I aim to answer through an investigation on the status of the myths moulding the identity of American people and of the United States as a nation.

Baudrillard argues that the crisis of American society is that "of an achieved Utopia, confronted with the problem of its duration and permanence" (1989, 83). It might be useful now to revisit that platitude that utopia is simply dystopia in disguise: it holds at its core an element of dread, a potential for catastrophe. Thus, one might wonder what happens when Utopia is not an island anymore, when its borders are open, its exchanges with other nations and cultures flourishing and, especially, when an external observer evaluates its social norms and finds them horrifying rather than enlightened and ideal.

[31] See Peter Fitting's essay in *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Fiction* (2010, 142), or Brian Stableford's one in the same collection (2010, 278). Fredric Jameson, in his *Archaeologies of the Future*, also writes "Utopia is very much the prototype of the settler colony, and the forerunner of modern imperialism (at least in its North American, apartheid, or Zionist forms—'the people without land' supposedly meeting 'the land without people')" (2007, 205). Even Darko Suvin refers to the notion in his *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*: "Other imprudent apologists [...] have taken the symmetrically inverse but equally counterutopian tack of proclaiming that Civitas Dei has already been realized on Earth by their particular sect or nation, in 'God's own country' of North America or the laicized Marxist (or pseudo-Marxist) experiments from Lenin to Castro and Mao" (1979, 52). Moylan mentions it several times in his *Demand the Impossible* (2014, 19; 46), Kumar does the same in his *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times* (1987, 130).

Most of the myths under scrutiny in the twenty-first century hark back to a time when the United States was not yet a nation. They derive from traditions and beliefs belonging mostly to the first settlers, which in time fostered a sense of belonging, of shared identity, and of purpose for a fledgling country and culture. Indeed, the United States was born somehow in isolation and maintained a predominantly isolationist policy with respect to Europe until The Spanish-American War in 1898 and its intervention during World War I. Although geographically not an island, it was separated from the rest of the world—and particularly the Old Continent—by two oceans. The vastness of its territory, ever expanding westward until the closure of the Frontier at the end of the Nineteenth century, made it difficult for information to travel fast within the country and to reach the other side of the Atlantic. In those 'empty' spaces, geographic and temporal, myths were born that would shape the American identity and its perception, both domestic and foreign.

Two of them are particularly relevant for this excursus of the history of the United States: the myth of the Frontier and the myth of American exceptionalism. To an extent, they overlap and interconnect, although they retain many independent features. Yet, before moving onto the task of explaining how these myths came to prominence, informed the perception of the United States, and then declined, it is necessary to clarify what I mean by 'myth.'

Richard Slotkin, whose definition I will appropriate for this chapter, describes myths as

> stories drawn from a society's history that have acquired through persistent usage the power of symbolizing that society's ideology and of dramatizing its moral consciousness—with all the complexities and contradictions that consciousness may contain. Over time, through frequent retellings and deployments as a source of interpretive metaphors, the original mythic story is increasingly conventionalized and abstracted until it is reduced to a deeply encoded and resonant set of symbols, "icons," "keywords," or historical clichés. In this form, myth becomes a basic constituent of linguistic meaning and of the processes of both personal and social "remembering." (1993, 5)

There are several relevant elements in this definition which match closely what another influential scholar, Roland Barthes, wrote about myths in the 1950s. First of all, Slotkin stresses the narrative character of myths by calling them 'stories' and linking them to linguistic constructs, just like Barthes does with his description of myth in *Mythologies* (first published in 1957) as "a type of speech, [...] a system of communication, [...] a message" (1991, 107).[32] Secondly, Slotkin highlights the historical roots of myth, upon which Barthes insists as well, writing:

> it is human history which converts reality into speech, and it alone rules the life and the death of mythical language. Ancient or not, mythology can only have a historical foundation, for myth is a type of speech chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the 'nature' of things. (Barthes 1991, 108)

Barthes dedicates the rest of his study of myths to their formal features, namely to their semiology, thereby leaving the exploration of their connection with history in the background. Nevertheless, he adds that "[i]f one wishes to connect a mythical schema to a general history, to explain how it corresponds to the interests of a definite society, in short, to pass from semiology to ideology, [...] it is the reader of myths himself who must reveal their essential function" by focusing on "the mythical signifier as on an inextricable whole made of meaning and form" which, understood in tandem and not in isolation, will express the very *presence* of a myth (Barthes 1991, 127-128). Barthes, here, is indicating, as Slotkin would later stress, that there is a direct link between myths and ideology, and that a scholar who studies myths in relationship with society must interrogate the latter. It is, therefore,

[32] Barthes perceives myth as a "mode of signification, a form"—that is, not as an object or concept but as a container or mould for content that needs to be shaped into a myth. Given that myth is a type of speech, Barthes considers that there is no limit to what can become one, as long as it is conveyed through language: "there are formal limits to myth, there are no 'substantial' ones. Everything, then, can be a myth? Yes, I believe this, for the universe is infinitely fertile in suggestions" (Barthes 1991, 107).

fundamental to understand what ideology means. About this, Slotkin writes that

> Ideology is the basic system of concepts, beliefs, and values that defines a society's way of interpreting its place in the cosmos and the meaning of its history. As used by anthropologists and social historians, the term refers to the dominant conceptual categories that inform the society's words and practices, abstracted by analysis as a set of propositions, formulas, or rules. (Slotkin 1993, 5)

Sacvan Bercovitch gives another definition of ideology in his essay "The Problem of Ideology in American Literary History" (1986), stressing the concept of consensus:

> I mean by ideology the ground and texture of consensus. In its narrowest sense, this may be a consensus of a marginal or maverick group. In the broad sense in which I use the term here (in conjunction with the term "America"), ideology is the system of interlinked ideas, symbols, and beliefs by which a culture—any culture—seeks to justify and perpetuate itself; the web of rhetoric, ritual, and assumption through which society coerces, persuades, and coheres. So considered, ideology is basically conservative; but it is not therefore static or simply repressive. [...] Ideology transmutes history into myth so as to enable people to act in history. In this sense, ideology stands at the intersection between the terms "literary" and "history," mediating between canon and context, expressive form and social structure. (1986, 635-636)

Myths are, in sum, the narrative translation of ideology, built on metaphors and symbols that in time become tropes, and functioning as a filter that allows ideology to better penetrate the consciousness of the members of a given society, informing their perceived identity. In Will Wright's words, "a myth is a communication from a society to its members: the social concepts and attitudes determined by the history and institutions of a society are communicated to its members through its myths" (1975, 16).

With all this in mind, it is possible to infer that myths, although traditionally thought to be universal, are not only mutable but constantly shifting to adapt

to ever-evolving ideologies. As we will see in a few pages, myths can wane as quickly as they can rise.

In the meantime, as stated before, we will focus on two of the most resilient myths of American culture, that played a fundamental role in shaping the identity of the nation since the very beginning of its history—if not earlier still.

1. The Myth of the Frontier

In 1893 Frederick Jackson Turner read his essay titled "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" before the American Historical Association in Chicago. The essay, which quickly became an essential milestone in the construction of the history of the United States, explored the role of the Frontier in shaping the American identity and success as a nation.

Essentially, Turner claims that the American identity was born at the juncture between "savagery and civilization" (1894, 3), at the Frontier where pioneers were faced with hardship and resistance by the natives. At first, he writes, the wilderness imposes itself on the European settler, turning him into a savage. "He must accept the conditions which it furnishes, or perish, and so he fits himself into the Indian clearings and follows the Indian trails. Little by little he transforms the wilderness, but the outcome is not the old Europe [...] The fact is, that here is a new product that is American" (1894, 4). Turner identifies the traits of the American man and claims that, although 'crafted' at the Frontier, they are now widespread among all territories of the United States and especially inform the American intellect:

> [...] to the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics. That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that

> buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom—these are traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier. (1894, 33)

Turner is assertive in describing the role of the Frontier in American history and sketches clearly the defining traits of what constitutes a 'true' American, but he also admits, at the end of the nineteenth century, that the Frontier and everything it entailed was reaching its natural end. By then, most of the territories had been explored and the settlers were struggling to find free land to appropriate. Although the United States would go on annexing new territories until 1959 (Alaska and Hawaii being the last two states to join the Union), Turner, and with him other commentators, believed the great moment of the (geographic) Frontier had passed.
About this he writes:

> [...] never again will such gifts of free land offer themselves. [...] In spite of environment, and in spite of custom, each frontier did indeed furnish a new field of opportunity, a gate of escape from the bondage of the past; and freshness, and confidence, and scorn of older society, impatience of its restraints and its ideas, and indifference to its lessons, have accompanied the frontier. [...] And now, four centuries from the discovery of America, at the end of a hundred years of life under the Constitution, the frontier has gone, and with its going has closed the first period of American history. (1984, 34)

As Jan Willem Schulte Nordholt notices, Turner did not relinquish the myth of the Frontier with its closure. Rather, he hung on to his belief that the American identity was born there, with the return of man to nature and to individualism.[33] He claimed that a new type of Frontier would arise from the

[33] As Eric Daniels remarks, individualism is the ideal that "regards each individual as a moral, political, and economic primary, meaning that each person in a civil society is by right an independent and sovereign being and that he or she should be free to choose his or her associations voluntarily and not have obligations or duties imposed by society without consent" (2011, 70). He argues that individualism lies at the heart of America and was embraced by the Founders when they drafted the Bill of Rights (2011, 72).

profound changes that were traversing the country at the beginning of the twentieth century, one that was "social rather than individual" (Turner 1921, Ch. IX). As Nordholt specifies, 'social' here does not imply the adoption of old European models of socialism or plutocracy (1994, 12). Turner was rather foreseeing—if not actively promoting—the advent of a more 'communal' Frontier enterprise, one that would require the willing collaboration of many to be brought about, first in taming the wild territories of the Far West and, later, in building the grand structures that signalled the 'advent of civilization:' the huge cities that arose from "petty towns built in the marshes" and the "large corporate industries" that were being built in the West in Turner's time (Turner 1921, Ch. IX). Thus, Turner himself was aware of a radical shift in the ideal of the Frontier, that was becoming increasingly less bound to the territory and more and more tied to the new-born American way of life—better still, to the new-born American ideology. Indeed, the Frontier myth shifted early on from a literal interpretation of the Frontier as a geographic, natural, environmental element impacting history to its interpretation as *process*, and specifically, as George Wilson Pierson wrote as early as 1942, "the process of conquering the continent, of moving westward, of changing from Europeans into Americans" (1942, 229). According to Pierson's study of the Frontier myth, Turner's argument shifted "[f]rom geographic determinism, [...] by deceptively easy stages, over to a determinism of a decidedly different sort. Whether or not he fully realized the fact, Turner tended increasingly to rely for his explanations on propositions based on a sort of social psychology" (1942, 230).

As such, the Turnerian myth of the Frontier flourished for almost a century both within the American society and abroad, contributing to the sedimentation of mythical figures such as the cowboy, the outlaw, the pioneer, the sheriff, and settings such as the plains and deserts of the West, the isolated small town, the saloon. These are, of course, some of the main elements that constitute the western, the quintessential American genre.

Often reduced to a stereotypical, formulaic format, the western has actually recorded, in its literary and cinematic history, the evolution of the ideology of a nation *in fieri*, from the moment of its birth, generally linked with James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales* (1823-1841), throughout its most prolific moments (as *dime novels* in the second half of the nineteenth century, as stories disseminated in pulp magazines and, later, as movies in the first half of the twentieth century and up to the 1970s), and finally as it started to decline and tried to reinvent itself by addressing its most evident flaws.[34]

As the essays in the collection *L'invenzione del west(ern)*, edited by Stefano Rosso, show, most of the conventions of this genre indeed derive from ideology, rather than history:[35] the most famous tales of the West, featuring 'real' historical characters such as Buffalo Bill Cody, Kit Carson, Wild Bill Hickok, or Wyatt Earp have been largely twisted, if not completely made up, to match the ideals of that specific period which Bruno Cartosio identifies as the moment of imperialist expansion characterising the second half of the eighteenth century in America (2011, 37).[36] The Frontier, especially, came to represent the promise of utopia, the conquest of the 'virgin land' assigned by God to a chosen people who was entitled to take it from 'the savages,' considered unfit to exploit it in the best manner.

Although there is no space here to trace the various stages of the western, it is relevant to mention how, for almost a century, this genre has embodied the ideals of the Frontier so dear to Turner and his students, and how its relatively recent decline and the various attempts to revive it are clear signals of a shift in the very ideology the western represents.

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[34] This is still an ongoing process, detectable in the so-called 'revisionist westerns,' and in the intersection of the western with other genres (which perhaps should better be described as a retrieval), such as science fiction, which reappropriated the myth of the Frontier to explore outer space, the noir, and queer fiction.

[35] On this, see especially Bruno Cartosio's essay "Raccontare l'Ovest: finzione e realtà" ["Narrating the West: Fiction and Fact"] in *L'invenzione del west(ern)*, edited by Stefano Rosso.

[36] For more on this, see the essays by Larry McMurtry, Bruno Cartosio and Heinz Ickstadt in *L'invenzione del west(ern)*, edited by Stefano Rosso.

Richard Slotkin, who dedicated most of his scholarship to the study of the Frontier myth, concludes his seminal work *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (1993) with a chapter titled "The Crisis of Public Myth," in which he addresses the "sudden end of the pre-eminence of the western among the genres of mythic discourse" in 1973, when the last American combat forces returned from Vietnam (1993, 627). According to his analysis, the production of western movies and TV series witnessed a sharp decrease in output after the end of the Vietnam War, and the inability of filmmakers to revive the interest of the wide audience in the genre signalled that the ideology it represented was experiencing a moment of deep crisis (1993, 627-628). However, Slotkin believes that the underlying structures of myth and ideology did not disappear with the crisis of the western, but rather were scattered across a variety of genres[37] which retained some of their elements to address "both the disillusioning losses and the extravagant potential of the new era" (1993, 633). Violence, which he considers the fundamental element of western narratives, remains in the forefront of contemporary American fiction.

Of particular relevance for this dissertation is Slotkin's position on the retrieval of the Frontier myth in science fiction, which is elaborated in John Rieder's essays "American Frontier" in *The Cambridge Companion to American Science Fiction* (2015) and "Romanzi di frontiera. Tra fantascienza e western"[38] in *L'invenzione del west(ern)* (2010). In these two essays, Rieder

[37] "The Frontier was displaced into genres dealing with metropolitan crime, high-seas swashbuckling, and imperial 'oriental' adventure, supplemented by a new wave of 'horror films.' Between 1971 and 1977 urban crime dramas featuring as heroes detectives, policemen, and 'urban vigilantes,' were the predominant type of American-location action film. The success of Star Wars in 1977 led to a boom in fantasy and science-fiction epics that were closely related in form and visual style to the Imperial epics of the 1930s. Toward the end of the decade the combat film reappeared, as Hollywood belatedly addressed Vietnam. And throughout the decade, horror and 'slasher' films enjoyed consistent box office success" (Slotkin 1993, 634).

[38] The title translates in English as "Frontier Novels. Between Science Fiction and Western." Any direct citation is my translation.

expands some of the short remarks Slotkin makes about SF and the Frontier myth.[39]

In "Romanzi di frontiera" he identifies formal and thematic similarities between western and SF, such as the primary role of the setting (2010, 125) and of the ideology of progress (2010, 127). He then focuses on how the Frontier is translated in SF, identifying two main modes of representation: the Frontier is first and foremost the "Frontier of progress," since most SF narratives are centred around a 'marvellous invention' that is at the forefront of technological innovation, and secondly it is the 'physical' Frontier, given that the marvellous invention most often allows for the "'(white) man to go where no one has ever gone before' and consequently gives him license to impose his will on the frontier land and its inhabitants." (Rieder 2010, 129). He goes on to summarise that

> in SF, then, the frontier is made up by the interaction of the (horrible) marvellous invention and that very world which, within the discourse of progress, it has made obsolete. Such a model of the genre is well attuned not only to the tensions of international politics but also to the dynamics of capitalist competition, with specific reference to the tendency of industrial capitalism to produce technological innovation. (2010, 130)

Rieder sees in the Frontier an ambivalence, a tension between technological progress that leans towards the future and the present-turned-past that evokes mythical returns to nature, at times with nostalgia for a moment in

[39] Slotkin writes: "Although nominally offering an escape from real-world history, the science-fiction and fantasy films of the 1970s and 1980s owe a great and (in the case of the Lucas/Spielberg *Star Wars* trilogy) acknowledged debt to the Western" (1993, 634). He ten briefly explores the examples of *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*.
It is perhaps worth expliciting that Richard Slotkin is a preeminent scholar of western literature, whereas John Rieder has worked extensively on American science fiction in the past twenty years. Their contributions to the discourse of the intersection of western and science fiction are therefore 'complementary:' Slotkin writes with profound awareness of the western and a general knowledge of science fiction, while Rieder does the opposite. Taking both into consideration allows for a global perspective on the discussion at hand.

the past that was wilder, less civilised, and therefore less under control (2010, 131).

In "American Frontiers," Rieder continues his exploration of the Frontier in science fiction and devotes some attention to the moment of the demise of the myth. He identifies a matching pattern between the dissolution of the Frontier myth in western and SF, claiming that originally SF narratives were but thinly veiled tales of westward expansion and colonisation,[40] a trend that continued well into the 1960s as Kennedy proclaimed that America was standing on the edge of a "New Frontier," not geographic anymore but rather technological and social. However, when the myth came under scrutiny in the late 1960s and early 1970s, SF reacted by questioning "not just the regenerative capacity of the geographical Frontier but also the progressive, utopian potential of technological innovation" (Rieder 2015, 171): the Frontier stopped being the idealised, utopian locus where 'progress' could bring about the ideal nation that would lead the world.[41] Indeed, from the late 1970s onwards, the Frontier in SF underwent the same rewriting that can be witnessed in the western, as it started to be understood "as a scene of invasion, conquest, and expansion of the world market, typical of global imperialism" (Patricia Nelson Limerick, quoted in Rieder 2015, 168). Works such as *The Word for World is Forest* (1972) by Ursula K. Le Guin, *Lilith's Brood* (1987-1989) by Octavia E. Butler, and the *Mars* trilogy by Kim Stanley Robinson (1992-1999) appeared. The Frontier became not only a site of clashes but of contact between different races, different cultures, different histories (Rieder 2015, 174).

[40] See for example Edgar Rice Burroughs's *Mars* novels or Robert A. Heinlein's fiction in the 1950s.

[41] Rieder mentions Philip K. Dick's *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* (1965) as the most famous example of harsh criticism towards the myth of the Frontier.

While the loss of the myth of the Frontier marked the decline of the western as a popular genre (although it did not signal its final demise),[42] it spared science fiction and pushed it towards more pessimistic futures.

As I have already explained in Chapter Two, in the 1980s the advent of cyberpunk inaugurated a trend of negative scenarios that has only become more prolific with the recent spread of dystopias into popular fiction. Although elements of the myth of the Frontier can still be detected in William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984), whose protagonist is a 'console cowboy' and still retains much of the features of the lone western hero, they are increasingly difficult to find outside of narratives that address the Frontier in a revisionist manner, perhaps with the exception of some post-apocalyptic stories like *The Book of Eli* (2010), a fact that will be explored further in Chapter Seven.

2. The Myth of American Exceptionalism

The myth of the Frontier has often been associated to the so-called myth of American exceptionalism, with commentators going as far as claiming that the latter, to an extent, includes the former (Hodgson 2009, 11). Retracing the history of American exceptionalism would require much more space than I can grant in this dissertation. Nevertheless, it is necessary to summarily sketch its definition and evolution to focus on its current, uncertain status.

Since its birth, the United States has often been described as the 'exceptional' nation both domestically and internationally. Scholars traditionally refer to John Winthrop's 1630 'City upon a hill' remark as the first instance of a

[42] Some notable western works of the past thirty years are Kevin Costner's *Dances with Wolves* (1990), Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* (1992), the TV series *Deadwood* (2004-2006), Ed Harris's *Appaloosa* (2008), the Cohen Brothers' *True Grit* (2010), Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* (2012), Jacques Audiard's *The Sisters Brothers* (2018), and the video game series *Red Dead Redemption*, whose latest instalment was published in late 2018.

mention of American exceptionalism,[43] or to Alexis de Tocqueville's assertion that the position of the Americans was 'exceptional' (1835), both ideas institutionalised by the inclusion of Thomas Jefferson's 'Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness' among the inalienable rights listed in the Declaration of Independence.

Despite the current popularity of the term, though, it is somewhat complex to pinpoint the exact nature of American exceptionalism.[44]

Its features were originally inferred from the doctrine of Manifest Destiny and to this day inspire much of what is commonly understood as the 'American Dream.'[45]

[43] See for instance Churchwell 2018; Byers 1997; Hodgson 2009; Bacevich 2018. However, several commentators like Churchwell herself and Robert Tomes remind their readers that Winthrop was not actually preaching for the creation of a new nation, but rather for the creation of a new model of English colony.

[44] Michael Kammen, for instance, warns that talking about 'American exceptionalism' might actually be misleading since there exist several 'brands' of local exceptionalism and therefore the United States as a whole might not have defining characteristics that could support its claim to exceptionalism (1993, 3).

[45] The expression 'American Dream' was coined by James Truslow Adams in 1931 to describe the hope for "a better, richer, and happier life for all [American] citizens of every rank, which is the greatest contribution [Americans] have as yet made to the thought and welfare of the world" (2017, xx). Despite its relatively recent appearance, it represents a set of values that hark back to much earlier times and to previous doctrines, such as that of Manifest Destiny.

Similarly, the term 'Manifest Destiny' was coined by John O'Sullivan in an 1845 editorial for the *Democratic Review* to celebrate the annexation of Texas, in which it was used to describe the apparent destiny of the United States "to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions" (1845, 5). Yet, it comprises elements that can be traced back to the Puritans who settled the first colonies in the early Seventeenth century.

The doctrine of Manifest Destiny underscores the ties that bind nature and religion in the formation of American identity, stressing the belief that the people of America had been granted a 'free' land that they were to conquer to fulfil God's will. As Daniel Bell powerfully writes: "Manifest Destiny was the civil religion of nineteenth-century America: not just the idea that a nation had the right to decide its own fate, but the conviction of a special virtue of the American people different from anything known in Europe or even, hitherto, in the history of the world" (1977, 199). Manifest Destiny played a fundamental role in the evolution of American exceptionalism, representing its core concept ever since the beginning of the formation of the American identity, long before the United States existed as a nation. However, the doctrine of Manifest Destiny started losing ground with the progressive secularisation of the myth of American exceptionalism at the beginning of the twentieth century. As Tomes writes: "The religious thread of exceptionalism persisted through the Spanish-

Godfrey Hodgson's work *The Myth of American Exceptionalism* (2009) is a helpful guide through the intricate overlapping and crossing of these famous concepts related to the formation of the American identity. Bearing in mind that Hodgson is set on demonstrating the lack of true historical roots for American exceptionalism, he nevertheless traces its evolution throughout the centuries. He writes:

> The great American liberal historian Richard Hofstadter once wrote that "it has been our fate as a nation not to have ideologies but to be one." Each phase of American history has strengthened the perception among many Americans that the United States is not just one nation among many but a nation marked by the finger of destiny, the land that Lincoln called the "last, best hope of earth." (2009, 27)

However concise, this is the definition of American exceptionalism: the belief that the United States is 'different'—not only different, but "unique, one of a (superior) kind, and generally [... of a kind that] carries with it a unique moral value and responsibility" (Byers 1997, 86).

A few traits have been indicated as clear signs of the exceptional nature of the United States, such as the fundamental necessity that the government exist only thanks to the consent of the governed, and only as a democracy, or that individual rights are to be put to the forefront—with 'freedom' as their most significant banner—or, more recently, that unregulated capitalism is the best way to foster economic, and thus social, progress (Hodgson 2009, 11-12). Such a variety in the traits that make America exceptional, Hodgson says, is rather suspicious: perhaps these claims "are motivated at least in part

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American War (1898), until it was muted in favour of a more pragmatic sense of duty to ensure order and stability around the globe" (Tomes 2014, 36). The demise of the doctrine of Manifest Destiny has been traced back to the closure of the Frontier, since it had been intended as "continental predestination, not overseas power" (Bell 1977, 202). Nevertheless, American exceptionalism never truly dismissed the highly moral ideals originally imposed by the doctrine of Manifest Destiny, preaching that the actions it elicited were 'for the greater good,' for exporting democracy, for ensuring a freer, better world for everyone, for fulfilling the United States' role as the redeemer of the world (Bell 1977, 202).

by a wish to believe in them. Exceptionalism, it would seem, is not so much a disinterested view of the American past as a dimension of American patriotism" (2009, 14).

That American exceptionalism has been one of the dominant ideologies used to forge the identity of the people of the United States is a given; nevertheless, it is interesting that Hodgson explicitly links it to nationalist instances, albeit in the form of a nationalism that pretends to be universal (2009, 15). Indeed, according to Hodgson, American exceptionalism can be summarised as a sort of inflated nationalism, the product of more than a century of ideological hegemony on the international landscape: if American exceptionalism finds its roots in the concept of Manifest Destiny, it continues to thrive throughout the twentieth century thanks to the leading position the United States acquired after (and thanks to) the two global conflicts that tore most European countries apart and led to the advent of the political, economic and cultural hegemony of the United States over the Western hemisphere (Hodgson 2009, 21-25). It aspires to a "special or pre-ordained role to play in world affairs that requires [the United States] to lead. For some, American exceptionalism is about a mission or duty; for others, it is a cover for imperialism" (Tomes 2014, 28).

In his essay "American Exceptionalism in the Twenty-First Century" (2014), Robert Tomes traces the roots of exceptionalism to the Puritan conception of America as a promised land, namely "a new type of republic dedicated to a popular form of government to empower individuals and enable them to improve their lives" (2014, 30). He then moves on to explain how the United States was founded on principles derived from natural law and Enlightenment philosophy, which resulted in "a vision for a new nation based on progress; individual freedoms; a weak executive branch constrained by a legislative body; and a national purpose based on the reasoned pursuit of prosperity" (2014, 31). Similarly, Daniel Bell refers to Brooks Adams's *The New Empire* (1902) to advance his claim that "American supremacy has been made possible only through applied science" which has fostered progress—

both economic and cultural—in the form of the great American corporations and the way they were administered (Adams quoted in Bell 1977, 196).

Tomes describes with swiftness the evolution of American exceptionalism throughout the nineteenth century into the twentieth, with its progressive secularisation and newfound attention towards foreign countries. The very same American exceptionalism that was born as a way to distinguish and separate the United States from the rest of the world turned at the end of the nineteenth century into an ideology of intervention in foreign affairs, under the guise of 'saving the world' or exporting democracy and the highest American moral values to other countries. As Daniel Bell states, "God's gift of insulated space has disappeared. [...] With the disappearance of insulated space, violence has become an everyday reality" (1977, 2012). One may claim that the Frontier of which I have written earlier in this chapter, having lost its potential for westward expansion, moved abroad as the United States intervened in the global conflicts of the first half of the twentieth century and then set out to overthrow regimes it disapproved of in several Asian and Middle East countries. Exceptionalism, which, as I previously mentioned, began as a sort of theological doctrine, by the second half of the twentieth century mostly abandoned its religious tones but retained the narrative of a superior nation—politically, militarily, economically and, particularly after the Second World War, culturally—which was to magnanimously lead the rest of the world towards prosperity fostered by democratic forms of government and capitalist forms of economy (Tomes 2014, 45).

Grand claims were made in the first half of the twentieth century about the role of the United States in world politics, most famously by Henry Luce. His 1941 editorial for *Life* magazine titled "The American Century" supplied the most effective slogan for American exceptionalism as he urged the United States to intervene in WWII and more generally to assume its rightful role as the 'Good Samaritan' of the world (Luce 1999, 171) .

It was, however, a surprisingly short-lived sense of national self-entitlement that allowed Luce to write such an impassioned forecast of the role the United

States was to have in international politics. As Daniel Bell remarks, "the American Century lasted scarcely 30 years": after the end of the war in Vietnam, Americans themselves started questioning the validity of the ideology of American exceptionalism, the "hubris, the 'egoistic corruption' which expressed itself in the belief that America was now the guardian of the world order and the United States as a matter of pride (tinted as always by moralism) had to take its rightful position as the leader of the free world" (1977, 204).

The decline of the myth of the Frontier in the 1970s foreboded the crisis of American exceptionalism, introducing a period of uncertainty on its status. As we will see, the latter did not pass away in the 1970s, nor has it fully disappeared as of today. However, it has recurrently been questioned, retrieved, dissected in the past fifty years, and it has lost much of its totalising and unifying power. Thus, if, as Bell writes, "the religion of America, whether we look to Emerson or to Whitman, was *Americanism*" (1977, 206), what can we make of a country which has (almost) lost its religion?

3. Death of a Myth?

To borrow Roger Luckhurst's adage on science fiction, American exceptionalism has undergone many deaths—and yet, it stubbornly refuses to lie in its grave. As we have mentioned earlier, the 1970s marked the first moment when the myth of the United States as the leader of the free world started to flounder. For instance, in 1977 Daniel Bell wrote:

> Today the belief in American exceptionalism has vanished with the end of Empire, the weakening of power, the loss of faith in the nation's future. There are clear signs that America is being displaced as the paramount country, or that there will be the breakup, in the next few decades, of any single-power hegemony in the world. Internal tensions have multiplied and there are deeper structural crises, political and cultural, that may

> prove more intractable to solution than the domestic economic problems. What happened to the American dream? (1977, 197-198)

Now, Bell was writing in the aftermath of the Vietnam War and of the stark protests it had excited both domestically and abroad. In those years, the United States went through a (rare) moment of self-awareness and started questioning the tale that placed it in a leading position. Perhaps for the first time, it interrogated the motives behind its interventionist policies. Nevertheless, with the advent of the 1980s it had already shaken off most of the pangs of national doubt. Ronald Reagan's landslide election is in itself proof of a collective yearning for a return to the old, safe narrative of the United States as the exceptional nation, as the engine of the modern world.[46] His presidency, followed by George H. W. Bush's term, somewhat restored the belief in American exceptionalism and prompted a wave of optimism for the future that spilled over into the 1990s.

That decade began under extremely positive auspices for the United States, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 (preceded by the fall of the Berlin wall) prompting claims of the "end of history" (Fukuyama 1989; 1992) and a general sense of certainty towards a future that seemed to be set. It appeared that the American model had come out on top of the Cold War and established that democracy and capitalism were the chosen structures for the whole world.[47] As cyberpunk both celebrated and warned against the consequences of unchecked capitalism, and as dystopian fiction introduced that glimmer of hope that granted it the attribute 'critical,' slowly increasing in numbers as the decade progressed and thus anticipating the much more negative mood of the early 2000s, America embraced the IT revolution, reaping the profits of the boom of a new industry. And yet, as Gross and Gilles

[46] It is worth mentioning that Reagan often leveraged the Frontier myth in his speeches (the most famous instance is perhaps his description of space as the next frontier), and he similarly reiterated the more general idea of the U.S. as the exceptional nation which should lead the world by example.

[47] On this, see also Gross and Gilles, *The Last Myth* (2012, Kindle position 183-215).

remark, the 1990s ended with a scare directly connected to the new technological infrastructure (the infamous 'Millennium Bug'), and the anxiety it caused tinged the beginning of the new decade and only increased with the numerous dramatic events that have characterised the past twenty years (2012, Kindle position 232).

It is important to note here that the apparent disconnection between the widespread, mainly economic, optimism and the gloomy narratives that were staring to populate the American market is not at all a contradiction. The United States, even in the prosperous 1990s, was a nation ripe with oppressive social practices and racial, gender, and class discrimination.[48] The narrative that portrayed it as the ideal nation for a person to thrive in, the very promised land of the Puritan settlers, was more and more detached from reality. It skirted over the evils of American society—which were many and notably diffused—to highlight only its good qualities.

In the early 2000s people started reckoning with such a wide disconnection between the narrative of the United States and its inherent reality. "What happened to the American Dream?" had asked Daniel Bell at the end of the 1970s. Similarly, the question returns at the turn of the millennium. Indeed, the American Dream, which Elizabeth Duquette describes as the form exceptionalism takes when it is referred to individuals (2013, 473), is the main focus of Sam Sieber's *Second-Rate Nation: From the American Dream to the American Myth* (2005). A refined sociologist, Sieber recounts in the introduction to his work how, upon returning to the United States in 1999 after a long period abroad, he found his homeland in a state of disarray that clashed with the widespread narrative of America as steadily moving towards the achievement of utopia. "Especially curious," he writes, "was the smug self-

[48] It suffices to mention the consequences of the so-called War on Drugs initiated in the 1970s, which by the late 1980s was causing the incarceration of hundreds of thousands of American citizens each year, the vast majority belonging to racial minorities. On the structural injustice of the American carceral system see, for instance: Roberto Cagliero, "Da Thoreau al Supermax" ["From Thoreau to the Supermax"] in *Iperstoria* 14 (2019) or Ava DuVernay's documentary *13th* (2016).

assurance with which the media, the nation's leaders, and the great majority of the public ignored or dismissed the unequivocal evidence of the country's slide into mediocrity and either ignored or cast aspersions on anyone who tried to open their eyes to it" (2005, xiii), a trend that only grew after 9/11, which "sharply boosted the tendency of Americans to indulge in defensive fantasies of superiority and self-righteousness, two of the most telling symptoms of national humiliation, pain, and dread" (2005, xvii).

Indeed, in the direct aftermath of the terrorist attacks to the Pentagon and the World Trade Center, America witnessed a resurgence of exceptionalist talk, best exemplified by the rhetoric deployed by President George W. Bush in his Address to the Nation on 9/11[49] or his 2003 State of the Union address.[50] What would become known as the Bush Doctrine as a whole leveraged American exceptionalism, both in expressing the necessity for the United States to act without impediment against potential terrorist threats—that is, to act unilaterally disregarding international treaties and agreements—and in framing the threat to the nation as exceptional.[51]

Sieber reflects on the reason why such fantasies of exceptionalism were being revived in the face of tragedy, by then nothing more than empty containers, mere Baudrillardian words without a real referent. To justify this newfound attachment to such empty rhetoric, he retrieves the concept of myth, understood along the same lines already described in the first part of this chapter—that is, myth as the narrative form of ideology. However, Sieber

[49] In his short address to the nation from the Oval Office in the evening of September 11, 2001, President Bush retrieved some well-worn mottos of American exceptionalism: "America was targeted for attack because we're the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world. And no one will keep that light from shining. […] None of us will ever forget this day, yet we go forward to defend freedom and all that is good and just in our world" (Bush 2001).

[50] Bush notoriously stated: "Once again, this Nation and all our friends are all that stand between a world at peace and a world of chaos and constant alarm. Once again, we are called to defend the safety of our people and the hopes of all mankind. And we accept this responsibility" (Bush 2003).

[51] On the exceptionalist character of the Bush Doctrine, see Nicholas J. Wheeler, "The Bush Doctrine: The Dangers of American Exceptionalism in a Revolutionary Age" (2003).

goes a step further and adds that myth is also what a once exceptional nation resorts to when it cannot sustain its exceptionalism any longer, be it because of international factors or domestic causes. Myth, he claims, is used as a form of reassurance and as a celebration of the past, since the present is not offering evidence of true exceptionalism, and the future does not forebode any either (2005, xvii).[52] In a paragraph pregnant with quick references to contemporary American history, he identifies the main factors that lead to the current state of the American myth:

> What might have happened in our own period of ineffectual disorientation was a gradual shift from the traditional American Dream to a full-blown American Myth. This shift might have been initiated by America's social turmoil of the 1960s and its defeat in Vietnam; then augmented by political and economic crises and by the specter of a new enemy who might fill the vacuum left by a familiar, longtime foe; the waning of an indispensable international role of anticommunist leadership; military blunders and increasing terrorism abroad; the growing hostility of rapidly advancing nations; and, finally, the 9/11 attacks in spite of an enormous intelligence bureaucracy and military establishment. Accompanying this tectonic shift in the nation's foreign affairs has been an increase in domestic disarray that has sapped both its moral and its pragmatic confidence. All these circumstances seemed to have undermined America's sense of control over its destiny, in spite of its wealth and military firepower, and to have given rise to anxieties that required the consolation of a compelling bogus reality. (2005, xix)

This lengthy quote summarises very well the series of negative events[53] that led to the advent of the American myth as Sieber understands it, as a façade to keep together a nation whose most important identity trait has been

[52] It is perhaps worth mentioning that Sieber's use of the word myth can generate confusion: whereas most commentators refer to the myth of American exceptionalism or the myth of the Frontier to describe the narration of those two ideologies, Sieber uses 'American Dream' to describe what essentially is American exceptionalism, and 'American Myth' to describe the current status of exceptionalism, which he considers as having essentially reached its end.
[53] To this list, compiled in 2005, we can add two other major events that undermined the faith in American exceptionalism: the 2008 economic crisis, whose consequences on the population are still evident, and the most recent 2020 COVID-19 epidemic plaguing the world.

challenged to the point of being dismantled. Correlating it with the harsh reality of the dissolution of the American Dream, Sieber describes the American myth as its 'caricature,'

> inasmuch as it is farther removed from reality, expresses a wholly different mood, and serves quite different needs. A dream is a confident vision of a better world or way of life that is available to all who persevere. A myth is a denial of the dream's betrayal and the realities of age or circumstance that have undermined it. A dream is nurtured by hope. A myth is prompted by anxiety. […] A dream is exploited by igniting hope, while a myth is exploited by stoking the coals of insecurity. [...] A dream is a fond vision of the future. A myth is a theatrical celebration of past and present with little substance, and in fact conceals the emptiness of the present under false colors of greatness as a means of assuaging anxiety (2005, xix-xx)

I believe Sieber's 2005 take on exceptionalism, on the vanishing of the American Dream and its replacement with the American myth, still holds true to this date. In the past fifteen years the United States, and with it much of the rest of the world, has been tackling increasingly complex issues at the economic, political, and environmental level. Exceptionalist discourse, which as often recurred in presidential campaigns (Gilmore et al. 2020), featured in Donald Trump's candidacy to the presidency and his subsequent win in November 2016. For the past four years, the United States has echoed with the slogan of Trump's campaign, "Make America Great Again" (updated in 2020 to "Keep America Great," suggesting that his presidency had achieved its goal). In itself, MAGA is a direct reference to American exceptionalism: implying that the United States is losing its leadership on the rest of the world, Trump vouched to restore the nation to its old glory—and in doing so, he declared himself the only *exceptional* person who would be able to achieve such a goal.[54] His 'America First' policies while in office align with this desire

[54] On this, see Gilmore et al., "Exceptional 'We' or Exceptional 'Me'? Donald Trump, American Exceptionalism, and the Remaking of the Modern Jeremiad" (2020). The authors argue that: "(1) Trump's use of the jeremiad was constrained by his limited conception of American exceptionalism" (namely, that America is superior, rather

of a return to the past: he has ridden the wave of conservative thinking by actively supporting the right to keep and bear arms, protected by the Second Amendment; he is enhancing the oil and coal industries by granting advantageous tax conditions and pulling out of international treaties on climate change such as the 2016 Paris Agreement. More generally, Trump frames his presidency as an (allegedly successful) attempt to protect traditional American values, and his political persona as the quintessential (also allegedly successful) American entrepreneur.[55]

This dissertation was completed a few days after the November 2020 presidential election. In the run-up to November 3, polls showed that President Trump was consistently behind his Democratic opponent, Joe Biden, by a double-digit margin,[56] a margin that was not maintained but that remained sufficiently wide to ensure Biden's win on Election Day. Despite stark attempts on Trump's part to flip or invalidate the results, Biden has been recognised as the president-elect of the United States and will be sworn in on January 20, 2021.[57] He will inherit a country in dire need of strong leadership. Trump's reckless management of the COVID-19 pandemic profoundly undermined the trust of the American citizens in their president. As the virus continues to ravage the country and the rest of the world looks

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than a model or unique); "(2) Trump routinely portrayed the country as no longer exceptional; and (3) Trump offered a vision for restoring American exceptionalism, focusing primarily on 'self-exceptionalism,'" that is, on his own exceptionality (2020, 539). This last remark resonates with the discourse on individualism featured in the section "The Era of the Self(ie)" of Chapter Four.

[55] On this, see Michael Magcamit, "Explaining the Three-Way Linkage Between Populism, Securitization, and Realist Foreign Policies: President Donald Trump and the Pursuit of 'America First' Doctrine" (2017).

[56] See, for instance, Aaron Blake, "Trump's Biggest Failing in the 2020 Campaign" in *The Washington Post* 5 October 2020.

[57] As of November 24, 2020, the General Services Administrator has formally designated Biden the apparent winner of the presidential election, kickstarting the transition process. See Michael D. Shear, Nicholas Fandos and Catie Edmondson (2020).

at the United States with a mixture of pity and dismay,[58] indignation for the brutal killing of George Floyd at the hands of the police in Minneapolis has prompted huge protests across the United States that have yet to abate.[59]

As for American exceptionalism, it is, quite literally, back in the news: once more, most commentators are proclaiming its demise.[60] Once more, it is unclear whether it will remain dead. Much depends on the ability of American society to repair the tears in its fabric. Nevertheless, it is worth pointing out that something has, perhaps irremediably, shifted in the narrative of American exceptionalism: its *perception*. Even though it has been recurrently unearthed by politicians on the conservative side, even though a notable part of American society still holds on to claims of exceptionalism, mentions of it are increasingly met with scepticism both domestically and internationally. The disconnection between such a fictional narrative of the United States and the harsh reality it is currently experiencing is so vast that little can be done to spare American exceptionalism the attribution of a negative connotation.

It is this outlook that we record in contemporary dystopian fiction. The United States of the future looks inevitably grim, and in several works, which will be analysed in the following chapters, that is a direct consequence of the doctrine of American exceptionalism. The anxiety that Sieber connects to the advent of such a myth is at the very core of dystopian narratives in literature, film, and other media.

We might wonder, then, whether contemporary dystopias are but a symptom, or perhaps a coping mechanism, of what Jeffrey Alexander calls 'collective

[58] See Julian Borger et al., "World Looks on in Horror as Trump Flails over Pandemic Despite Claims US Leads Ways" in *The Guardian* 15 May 2020; Hannah Beech, "'I Feel Sorry for Americans': A Baffled World Watches the U.S." in *The New York Times* 25 September 2020.

[59] The movement, which challenges police brutality and, more generally, the mistreatment of racial minorities, has become known as Black Lives Matter.

[60] See, for instance: Thanassis Cambanis, "The End of American Exceptionalism" in *Foreign Affairs* 28 February 2020; Eric Levitz, "American Exceptionalism Is a Dangerous Myth" in *Intelligencer* 2 January 2020; Joshua Zeitz, "How Trump Is Making Us Rethink American Exceptionalism" in *Politico* 7 January 2018. This is but a short selection of a large number of articles commenting on how Trump's presidency has reshaped the perception of American exceptionalism.

trauma,' a concept that we will explore in depth in Chapter Seven: as the core elements the American identity are dismantled one by one, and as Americans collectively cling to a myth that is more and more devoid of meaning, strategies to face the traumatic loss are put in place. It remains to be seen whether they will suffice.

Before we move onto a description of the American society as it stands today and as it is featured in dystopian fiction, a few words need to be spent on how American exceptionalism has permeated the literary canon for centuries and how its current crisis is impacting the fictional output.

By no means a recent debate, scholars have been questioning the status of those works commonly known as Great American Novels since the late 1960s, if not earlier still. Thomas Byers, in his essay "A City Upon a Hill: American Literature and the Ideology of Exceptionalism" (1997) points out that the American literary canon has been strongly influenced by American exceptionalism both because many authors believed in the myth and portrayed it in their fiction and because "traditionally, in order for American literature to be both literature (as opposed to just writing) and American (as opposed to just literature, or just British literature), it [had to] bear the marks of this ideology" (Byers 1997, 90). It might be relevant, then, to stress how the American literary canon has been defined by themes and ideologies rather than by the equally important evaluation of form or aesthetic qualities—a praxis commonly associated with European literature. As Nina Baym writes, "the early critic looked for a standard of Americanness rather than a standard of excellence. Inevitably, perhaps, it came to seem that the quality of 'Americanness,' whatever it might be, *constituted* literary excellence for American authors" (quoted in Byers 1997, 93, italics in the original). And Americanness, says Byers, is virtually synonymous with exceptionalism—or at least it was until recently.

In the past fifty years, the newfound awareness of the ahistorical nature of American exceptionalism and the questioning of its ideological status allowed

for the entrance into the canon of works belonging to marginalised categories, be it because of race, class, gender or sexuality. Truly subversive works[61] have been recognised as masterpieces of American literature and have tentatively joined the ranks of canonical literature.[62]
However, as Sarah Rivett very aptly points out,

> one of the main challenges now facing American literary studies is that the exceptionalist narrative has not been replaced with an alternate account of literary and cultural continuities across time. We celebrate a history of plural pasts, contested beginnings, and multivocal encounters, because this is a more honest and appealing way to tell the story. But outside of the academy, we also live in a world that does not grasp the subtl[et]y of our theoretical interventions. The conservative revolt that we have been in the midst of for some time does not share our hesitancy with the origins [*sic*] thesis and, moreover, gains momentum from an exceptionalist framework despite our best efforts to dismantle it. (2012, 392)

With the crisis of the myth of American exceptionalism, popular literature has seen an increasing darkening of the topics it treats. With particular reference to science fiction, as already indicated in Chapter Two and earlier in this one, the optimistic, bold narratives of the first half of the twentieth century turned sour. While the myth of American exceptionalism supported a narrative of interstellar expansion and marvellous earthly progress, its decline left the stage to bleak visions of the future, most often caused by the disappearance of the institutions (not only political, but economic and social, as well) or by the establishment of starkly oppressive forms of government—in short, by either their disappearance or their total dominion. American

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[61] A word to clarify this expression: Byers claims, using Baym's works, that some of those traditionally canonical texts of American literature might look subversive, even critical towards some aspects of society and nationhood, but ultimately, "while [they criticize] the material reality of America, [they do] not challenge the ideological paradigm" (1997, 101).
[62] 'Tentatively' because some of the most resilient curricula on the American literary canon are still dominated by male, WASP authors, and many of the texts that should rightfully be taught in these curricula are still relegated to courses on 'literature of American minorities' or other similarly titled programs.

dystopian fiction expresses the current lack of confidence in the very institutions that boosted American exceptionalism while severing what feeble connection it had with reality, leaving the country without a new grand narrative to adopt as the twenty-first century American myth.
Indeed, Sacvan Bercovitch writes, quoting Robert Spiller:

> Ours *has been* a literature "profoundly influenced by ideals and by practices developed in democratic living. It has been intensely conscious of the needs of the common man, and equally conscious of the aspirations of the individual. [...] It has been humanitarian. *It has been, on the whole, an optimistic literature*, made virile by criticism of the actual in comparison with the ideal." [...] The assumptions behind that vision no longer seem to account for the evidence. (1986, 633, emphasis added)

Byers concludes his essay asking what will happen to exceptionalism in the twenty-first century, and how literature will react either to its complete demise or to its resurgence. Differently from most other commentators of American exceptionalism, he does not advocate its death. According to his particularly poignant perspective, both alternatives are equally possible, and both carry with themselves dreadful scenarios. On the one hand, he writes, an increasingly globalised world running on late capitalism and diffidence towards the grand narratives of our past would rather dismiss exceptionalism as an outdated doctrine. William Gibson's *Neuromancer* and, more recently, Matthew T. Anderson's *Feed,* are apt examples of how this could play out. Conversely, following Michel Foucault's views on the role of the state in contemporary society, Byers believes American exceptionalism might also be resurrected in order to establish a strong hold on the citizens of the United States, in the name of a newfound nationalist impulse. His literary example, in 1997, was Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. Mine, twenty-two years later, is its sequel, *The Testaments* (2019), in which one of the oppressors who have just overturned the legitimate government of the United States says "We're building a society congruent with the Divine Order—a city

upon a hill, a light to all nations—and we are acting out of charitable care and concern" (2019, 174).

Whichever way we look at American exceptionalism today, whether we consider it a discarded myth or a doctrine that will soon be reinstated as the 'main religion' of the United States, contemporary speculative fiction, and particularly dystopian fiction, is keen to predict its nefarious effects on American society—and very often on the rest of the world, as well.

CHAPTER FOUR

Is This Dystopia?

Dystopia, as we have seen, has always been attuned to the ills of a given society. It flourishes in times of crisis and ebbs in times of (relative) prosperity, chasing off utopian impulses and being chased after in return as history moves forward. Earlier in this work I have suggested that it might be described as symptomatic of a society undergoing changes to its core values and elements—that is, of a society which is questioning its own social fabric and undergoing radical shifts in its structure and perception of itself. The uncertain status of American exceptionalism, anticipated by the crisis of the Frontier myth, marks one such a moment in time.

If in the 1930s and 1940s dystopias sketched dreadful visions of totalitarian control, in the 1950s and 1960s projected the threat of nuclear warfare, and in the 1980s lamented the consequences of unchecked capitalism and technological progress, what sort of issues are they rising today, in post-9/11 America? What social features are they critically bringing into fiction? In

what follows, and in the three chapters of Part Two, I will attempt to offer a partial answer to these questions.

A side note before we begin our perusal of the elements of postmodernity, introduced in the previous two chapters, which are retrieved in dystopian fiction. As Raffaella Baccolini argued in her introduction to *Dark Horizons* (2003), dystopia often seeps into other genres just as much as it borrows their tropes. In the past twenty years, it seems to have spread onto categories of fiction that used to have a positive, or at least a neutral, outlook.[63] It has also infiltrated the daily news, with journalists wondering, time after time, whether we are living in a dystopia.[64] Given these blurry borders, it should perhaps be wise to limit our understanding of dystopia as a category of speculative fiction, which in turn belongs to science fiction, without adding more subdivisions.[65] Yet, I believe it is possible, and indeed advisable, to identify one more level of thematic categories, based on the issues tackled by a given dystopia. I borrow these three very wide and even more ephemeral categories of contemporary dystopia from Gregory Claeys, who calls them 'political,' 'technological,' and 'environmental' (2017, 5). This tripartite division is mirrored in Part Two, in which we will look closely at how social issues of our age are transposed into a few representative dystopian works. Nevertheless, here we will focus on those features of postmodernity which recur in most contemporary dystopian fiction, regardless of its thematic focus. This is no attempt to summarise all the elements of postmodernity, for it

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[63] Consider, for instance, the works categorised as 'weird westerns' in Kerry Fine's edited work of the same name (2020), or China Miéville's *The City and the City* (2009), which is a mix of police procedural and weird fiction.

[64] As a way of example, consider: Cassidy "Will the Coronavirus Create a More Progressive Society or a More Dystopian One?" in *The New Yorker* 1 May 2020; Phillip Atiba Goff, "The Dystopian Police State the Trump Administration Wants" in *The New York Times* 20 October 2020; Shauna Shames and Amy Atchison, "Are We Living in a Dystopia?" in *The Conversation* 29 April 2020.

[65] Science fiction might or might not be part of a super-genre, also called speculative fiction, which collates it with fantasy, magical realism, and any other kind of fiction that elaborates 'what if' narratives.

would be beyond the scope of this dissertation. However, as we will see momentarily, the social issues recurring in twenty-first-century dystopian fiction are some of the most typifying features of our age, and indeed those which are most often questioned. Thus, we will look closely at the concepts of individualism, of liquid society, of progress, and of hope. With their ubiquitous presence, they transcend the limits imposed by the thematic categories mentioned above. Postmodernity, it seems to me, is a dreary time to navigate alone, and yet most of us do, for individualism is the mark of our age—an age of uncertainty and instability, of traditional social structures being questioned, discarded, dissected. It is a time of loss, and at the same time, out of sheer necessity, a time of hope—for it is in times of crisis that we look for radical change.

1. The Era of the Self(ie)

One of the most relevant questions in and about postmodernity pertains the subject that inhabits it. What sort of individual roams the postmodern lands? What sort of collectivity, if any, does this subject create?

As we have seen earlier, dystopia, and especially critical dystopia, is built around a single individual or a small group of people who opposes the dominant community, oftentimes perceived as utopian or, at least, benevolent albeit its oppressive traits.[66] Whereas utopian fiction represents the system as a well-oiled social machine, whose inhabitants work as gears, dystopia introduces an element of disturbance: the rebel, the outsider, the outcast—a subject that does not fit or does not want to fit into the current society. It is this stand-alone character that pushes the narrative forward, challenging the

[66] Consider the Gileadean government in *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and *The Testaments* (2019). Albeit evidently oppressive to the reader and some of the characters, the vast majority of its citizens believes it to be a benevolent regime. Additionally, recall Gregory Claeys's stance on groups as source of dystopian actions (2017).

status quo, drawing attention to the evils of the system, and (hopefully) setting out on a path toward change. Yet, such relevance of the subject and distrust in the existing social system does not annihilate the desire for community expressed in dystopia. In direct opposition to Gregory Claeys's (2017) claim that dystopia derives from (oppressive, totalitarian) groups—or, better, that groups are inherently dystopian—I wish to argue that (critical) dystopias do not demonize the collectivity. Indeed, the lone dissenter most often acts in order to rectify a corrupt system, or to build a new society, or to destroy the existing one so that the space it occupied can be filled with something else. It is evident in *The Book of Eli* (2010), where the female protagonist returns to her hometown to rebuild it; in *Parable of the Sower* (1993), where a new community is founded in hope to contrast the decaying social system, and in *Detroit: Become Human* (2018), where the androids fight for radical changes to the social relations that bind them to humans. Individualism serves a purpose in critical dystopia, but it is not its endgame. Its final goal remains the (re)construction of society (often through the demise of another).

In this sense, then, the individualism of the protagonist of critical dystopias is turned outward: they dissent, they rebel as individuals in order to inspire a change that will impact the whole system. Thus, critical dystopia signals the problematic status of our communal enterprise, the fundamental flaws of the present social system, in order to foster a better—or simply different—one. Importantly, it does not hail the individual as the direct (and only) alternative to society, but as the means through which society can be rebuilt. This, I argue, is the fundamental contrast between the 'beneficial' individualism of, Eli and Solara, Lauren Olamina, or Markus (the protagonists of the works mentioned above), and the unproductive, meaningless individualism of postmodernity, which is turned inward and does not foster change, only mere survival through apathy. To clarify what I mean, we must turn to some of the most notable social theories of the twenty-first century.

In 2000, Zygmunt Bauman published *Liquid Modernity,* the first of a series of works that carry the word 'liquid' in the title.[67] It is an apt adjective to describe our time:[68] it conveys the idea of a society that has lost its solid foundations and institutions, the very social glue that turns a group of individuals into a community. As Bauman puts it,

> The solids whose turn has come to be thrown into the melting pot and which are in the process of being melted at the present time, the time of fluid modernity, are the bonds which interlock individual choices in collective projects and actions—the patterns of communication and co-ordination between individually conducted life policies on the one hand and political actions of human collectivities on the other." (Bauman 2000, 6)

Bauman quotes Ulrich Beck in listing some of these lost structures: family, class, and neighbourhood are so-called 'zombie institutions,' empty containers devoid of meaning (2000, 6).

One of the main points of *Liquid Modernity* is that, whereas in 'solid' times society would be a collective effort and its problems collectively tackled, modernity as we know it today is in the powerless hands of the individual:

> The liquidizing powers have moved from the 'system' to 'society,' from 'politics' to 'life-policies'—or have descended from the 'macro' to the 'micro' level of social cohabitation. Ours is, as a result, an individualized, privatized version of modernity, with the burden of pattern-weaving and the responsibility for failure falling primarily on the individual's shoulders. (Bauman 2000, 7-8)

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[67] There is no clear agreement on what to call the contemporary period. Lyotard and Baudrillard for instance, use 'postmodernity' to stress a break from the modern era of rational progress; Jameson often uses 'late capitalism,' while Bauman prefers '(late) modernity,' which signals to his consideration of the present as an extension of modernity. In this dissertation, I mainly use 'postmodernity' to refer to the contemporary period, unless I am directly discussing Bauman's works and views.

[68] Bauman focuses on Western society, without differentiating much between nations and cultures. His theories ring true across continents not because we have reached a point where all the cultural differences have been elided, but rather because, as director Bong Joon-ho has very recently said, "essentially, we all live in the same country called Capitalism" (Smith 2019).

Individualism has evidently negative implications in Bauman's works. Although it has long been glorified both by the myth of the Frontier and by American exceptionalism,[69] it becomes an issue when a society has no alternative to it, when it is the last standing "concept around which the orthodox narratives of the human condition tend to be wrapped" (Bauman 2000, 8).[70] In other words, as long as individualism is a choice and not an imposition or a last resort because no other option exists—and in the case of the protagonists of critical dystopias it often *is* a choice—it should be considered as a neutral or even positive value. There is a potential for goodness in individualism, for it can be the source of newness, of radical difference.

This is not the sort of individualism praised by the American myths we have introduced earlier, for there is very little focus on change and development at the collective level. At the Frontier and in American exceptionalism, the lone ranger and especially the self-made man seem to be driven by entirely personal motives and aspirations, with no regard for their impact on a collective scale.[71] Nor is it the sort of individualism that Bauman detects in our contemporaneity. Stefano Tani (2014), whose work Bauman comments in *In Praise of Literature* (2016), offers three metaphors of the twenty-first century—the screen, Alzheimer's, and the zombie—which are all ascribable

[69] It suffices to think of the lone ranger roaming the Frontier or the self-made man, the quintessential American entrepreneur well represented by Horatio Alger.

[70] In *Liquid Modernity*, Bauman identifies five concepts that have traditionally been the focus of the sociological discourse: emancipation, individuality, time/space, work, and community (2000, 8).

[71] It must be clarified that the strain of individualism imbued in the abovementioned myths is not in direct opposition to the collective good. Rather, it works on the assumption that individual good will propagate into the collective dimension. As Eric Daniels remarks: "Despite the emphasis on individual freedom and detachment from artificial collective obligations, the Founding generation believed that such an individualism promoted the social good. 'Public good is not a term opposed to the good of individuals,' noted Thomas Paine. 'On the contrary,' he continued, 'it is the good of every individual collected. It is the good of all, because it is the good of every one; for as the public body is every individual collected, so the public good is the collected good of those individuals'" (2011, 72-73).

to a form of inward-looking individualism. Tani's choice reinforces Bauman's claim that this is the age of the (lost, anxious, depressed) individual, as no metaphor is suggested for a collectivity that has silently lost its relevance (Bauman 2016, 88).[72]

According to Tani, the screen symbolises the act of looking at oneself, Alzheimer's the process of emptying oneself, and the zombie a transformation of the self. His stating point is the mythological Narcissus:[73] Tani compares his adoring, inward-bound gaze to the one of the individual staring at a screen. Tracing its evolution from river to mirror, to painting, to photograph, to cinema, to television, and finally to the screen of computers and smartphones, he describes the 'evolution of the involution,' the way in which individuals have 'inwardly retreated' their gaze to the point that they are not seeing anything but themselves. It is the glorification of one's self to the point of vanishing. And it is the selfie—the funny, indulgent reduction of the self to something trivial and yet fundamental—that summarises this process of self-referential looking: "the 'closed circuit' created by a self-anesthetized Narcissus, which McLuhan had foreseen fifty years ago, finds its proved, self-

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[72] In support of Bauman's claim that individualism is the key protagonist of the twenty-first century come several sociological and psychological studies. Most notably, in 2017 Henri C. Santos, Michael E. W. Varnum, and Igor Grossmann published a detailed analysis titled "Global Increases in Individualism," in which they considered 51 years of data across 78 countries at different stages of economic development and found that the trend towards an increased individualism was not confined to Western countries, but was indeed present on a global scale, albeit with different degrees of intensity. Their research shows that "the shift toward greater individualism is not confined to the developed world. Increasing individualism appears to be linked to several previously theorized sources of cultural variation, including socioeconomic development, disaster frequency, pathogen prevalence, and climatic variations" (2017, 1236).
Another useful resource, less academic but still relevant, is Ross Douthat's 2014 article for *The New York Times*, "The Age of Individualism," in which he reflects on the consequences of widespread individualism among the younger generation of Americans.

[73] As Tani reminds his readers, various versions of the myth survive to this day. The two most famous traditions differ in two aspects: Ovid's version sees Narcissus realise he has fallen in love with his reflection and consequently die of heartbreak, while the version included in the Novellino spares Narcissus the pain of realising he will never be with his beloved and makes him drown as he chases the 'person' in the river, never realising it was his own reflection (2014, 10-15).

referencing confirmation in the selfie" (Tani 2014, 49). A similar understanding of the selfie has also been expressed by Henry Giroux, who writes:

> The more general critique of selfies points to their affirmation as an out of control form of vanity and narcissism in a society in which an unchecked capitalism promotes forms of rampant self-interests that both legitimize selfishness and corrode individual and moral character. […] In a society in which the personal is the only politics there is, there is more at stake in selfie culture than rampant narcissism or the swindle of fulfillment offered to teenagers and others whose self-obsession and insecurity takes an extreme, if not sometimes dangerous, turn. What is being sacrificed is not just the right to privacy, the willingness to give up the self to commercial interests, but the very notion of individual and political freedom. The atomization that in part promotes the popularity of selfie culture is not only nourished by neoliberal fervor for unbridled individualism, but also by the weakening of public values and the emptying out of collective and engaged politics." (2015).

Again, there returns Bauman's perspective on postmodernity, on the loss of social structures that left individualism as the only possible choice, an empty form of narcissism that cannot truly look outwards. Thus, according to Tani and Giroux, our modern dependence on screens in order to lead a 'normal' life flattens our experience into a self-referential dialogue, an empty conversation with ourselves, or at best a mediated conversation with another individual, where the screen is and remains our main interlocutor.

Our dependence on computers and technology (in its broadest sense, but mainly information technology) has brought about what Tani calls 'the time of Alzheimer's.' Alzheimer's disease is his second metaphor for the twenty-first century:

> We might dare to say that Alzheimer's is the metaphor for the postmodern era: [... it is] the evacuation of the self from a body that throughout its life has been bombarded by a huge amount of information and by requests exceptional in number and intensity when compared to the ones that people from earlier times faced. [...] Alzheimer's patients are like a computer which has survived its loss of memory, a pitiful

> container without function and, thus, meaning. [...Consequently,] if the expression of the postmodern individual is (of course) the computer, its late-twentieth-century disease was certainly a virus, but the current one [...] is the loss of memory, perhaps preceded by obsolescence. (Tani 2014, 66-69)

Individuals of postmodern times, and particularly of the twenty-first century, are thus self-centred, in constant dialogue with themselves, absorbed by a screen, and essentially devoid of meaning, for meaning itself has been lost due to the never-ending flow of information received and requested. This leads Tani to conclude that the third metaphor for our times is the zombie: not dead and not alive, individuals exist only to passively receive information, to automatically respond to basic instincts and stimuli (Tani, like Bauman, insists that people are rigged into complying to the capitalist system of commodified consumption).

The general picture that he sketches of the individual in the twenty-first century is certainly bleak, yet it is hard to counter his blunt remarks. His metaphors aptly convey the impact of technology on our lives and illustrate Bauman's claim that (negative) individualism truly is the keyword of our times.

Tani embellishes his discussion on the three metaphors above with literary examples, carefully chosen to exemplify his reasoning. Similarly, Bauman opens his chapter on individualism in *Liquid Modernity* with one of the most explicit references in his entire oeuvre to dystopian literature: he recalls that not fifty years ago (now not seventy years ago) the two most famous works that foreboded a dreadful future were Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Huxley's *Brave New Word*. Such novels, he claims, are deeply rooted into the mood of their time, and in fact both authors

> felt that the tragedy of the world was its dogged and uncontrollable progress towards the split between the increasingly powerful and remote controllers and the increasingly powerless and controlled rest. The nightmarish vision which haunted both writers was that of men and

> women no longer in charge of their lives. [...] Huxley and Orwell could not conceive of a society, whether a happy or a miserable one, without managers, designers and supervisors who jointly wrote the script for others to follow, staged the performance, put the lines in the actors' mouths and fired or locked in dungeons everyone who would improvise their own texts. They could not visualize a world without controlling towers and controlling desks. The fears of their time, much as its hopes and dreams, hovered around Supreme Command Offices. (Bauman 2000, 54)

Back in the 30s and 40s, dread lay in the idea of total control over people's lives, and no author seemed capable to imagine a future in which quite the opposite would be contrived, let alone portrayed as the current nightmare of our times. And yet, today's society is reduced to its smallest component—the individual—and anguish comes from the loss of a sense of collectivity, of community, of stable institutions, rather than from being oppressed by overarching, totalitarian ones. Paradoxically, we long for Big Brother, or at least for a 'bigger brother' or, as Bauman calls it, an 'elder brother.' Yet, there is very little hope of finding one, or of returning to one. In liquid modernity, old institutions have been eroded to the point of being empty shells, and new ones are not likely to fill the vacant seat. Writing at the turn of the century, Bauman muses that dystopias like Orwell's and Huxley's belong to the past and are no longer emulated.

> No wonder that dystopias are no longer written these days: the post-Fordist, 'fluid modern' world of freely choosing individuals does not worry about the sinister *Big* Brother who would punish those who stepped out of line. In such a world, though, there is not much room either for the benign and caring *Elder* Brother who could be trusted and relied upon when it came to decide which things were worth doing or having and who could be counted on to protect his kid brother against the bullies who stood in the way of getting them; and so the utopias of the good society have stopped being written as well. Everything, so to speak, is now down to the individual. It is up to the individual to find out what she or he is capable of doing, to stretch that capacity to the utmost, and to pick the ends to which that capacity could be applied best—that is, to the greatest

> conceivable satisfaction. It is up to the individual to tame the unexpected to become an entertainment. (Bauman 2000, 61-62)

We can agree with Bauman's claim that we have stopped writing dystopias, insofar as he is referring to those traditional narratives of totalitarian control that typified dystopian fiction from the 1930s to the 1950s. We can also agree that there has been a general lack of utopian fiction of late. However, critical dystopia (and utopia) has risen from the ruins of those rigid—or, better, solid—narratives of totalitarian oppression. It has become liquid, too. It investigates the threats posed by technology, fake news, unregulated markets, unemployment, migrations, and climate change. It depicts inadequate institutions, clueless governments and administrations and, most importantly, individuals standing up to face them and possibly replace them with something novel. That is, as we have stated earlier, it depicts an outward-looking form of individualism. Simultaneously, it critically portrays the dazed collectivity, those people who, faced with insurmountable problems (that should not be an individual's responsibility), sit in their living room watching the house burn down around themselves. As I have mentioned earlier, Octavia Butler's unforgettable *Parable of the Sower* (1993) is a fit example: it is set in the near-future United States, where rampant unemployment, social unrest, and climate change have left the country in ruins. The government is virtually invisible, the police force useless. A gated community somehow manages to escape the worst of it, living a seemingly sheltered life and refusing to see the end fast approaching. When it all comes tumbling down the young, female, black protagonist, having foreseen the destruction of her community, manages to survive and to move on toward a better—or perhaps just different—life.

Sam J. Miller's much more recent novel *Blackfish City* (2018) features similarly submerged institutions, a planet torn apart by climate change, the vast majority of the survivors acquiescing to a broken system, and a handful of characters standing up for the chance to have a better future. As previously

remarked, contemporary critical dystopias seem paradoxically to be the last locus of hope. It is feeble, and often left to the reader's imagination, but it persists. It is a fitting parallel with what Bauman says at the beginning of *Liquid Modernity*: solid institutions have been 'liquified' over and over again throughout history, but society remained stable by substituting them with new, improved institutions. Liquid modernity is currently in the process of dismantling outdated institutions, but for once it seems like there might not be substitutes readily available. Whether society will be able to create new forms of collective initiatives that will solidify is up for debate. Critical dystopian fiction, with its open endings and vague ideas for a way out of these dreadful times, reproduces the same uncertainty, together with the hope that, although the destination is still unclear, someone has found the beginning of the path that will take us there.

2. Stolen Dreams: Finding Hope in the Age of Fear

On September 23, 2019, teenage activist Greta Thunberg, addressing world leaders at the UN Climate Action Summit in New York, forcefully declared:

> This is all wrong. I shouldn't be up here. I should be back in school on the other side of the ocean. Yet, you all come to us young people for hope. How dare you? You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words and yet, I am one of the lucky ones.[74]

It took Thunberg less than fifty words to condense in her opening paragraph many of the ills of our contemporary society: the loss of dreams for a better future, the need to restore hope, and the inability of the older generations to grapple with the dire situation presently at hand. It is on such features of society that this section focuses: on the seemingly overwhelming loss of faith

[74] A recording of the speech is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TMrtLsQbaok. The quote plays from 00:10 to 00:37.

in progress, on the status of hope in the age of fear, and on the pivotal historical events that brought the debate on these topics to public attention. These, together with individualism, are recurring themes of dystopian fiction, be it political, technological, or environmental, albeit to a different degree. The retrieval of hope, we have already mentioned, is a fundamental element of critical dystopia. A critique of progress, understood in its widest terms, is ever present. And it is telling that the concepts being questioned are the very same at the core of the American myths described earlier: progress is a fundamental element of both the Frontier life and American culture at large; hope sustains the American Dream. In the dreadful narratives of critical dystopian fiction, they are both infused of fear and wariness. Progress is demonised, hope is scarce. At the very conjuncture in time when dystopia is enjoying widespread popular acclaim and these American myths are waning, slowly turning into simulacra in Baudrillardian fashion, both progress and hope lose their almost untouchable status as their pillars. One wonders, then, what the causal relation is: has the crisis of these myths brought about suspicion toward progress and hope, or has said suspicion prompted a critical assessment of these myths?

On my part, there is no clear-cut answer; faith in progress started wavering noticeably with the atomic bomb, much earlier than American exceptionalism entered its first crisis, yet this dreary vision of the future, this scarcity of hope, is a symptom of the current century. As it often is with social issues, these phenomena are profoundly interconnected and influence each other reciprocally. What we *can* claim is that dystopian fiction has absorbed the critical status of the myths and of their constitutive elements and has replicated it in its narratives of the future. In the last section of this chapter we will comment on the profound bond between sociology and fiction. For the time being, we will focus more closely on the events that led progress and hope to their current situation.

2.1 Progress

It needs not be proven that progress has driven the narrative of capitalism from the very beginning and, although to some extent it can be spotted throughout the entire history of mankind, it is most commonly associated with the current economic and social system.

The works of two thinkers feature in this brief discussion of progress: Ronald Wright's, with a sociological and anthropological approach, and Reinhart Koselleck's, with a philosophical one. Their works, considered together, offer a general view of what progress is and where it has taken (and is taking) our civilisation.

Wright's contribution to the debate is titled *A Short History of Progress*, published in 2004 and based on his Massey Lectures. His main argument is that we should learn the severe consequences of unhinged progress from the fate of ancient peoples, for human nature is cyclical.

His definition of progress is based on historian Sidney Pollard's work, who describes it as "the assumption that a pattern of change exists in the history of mankind, [...] that it consists of irreversible changes in one direction only, and that this direction is towards improvement" (Pollard quoted in Wright 2004, 3).[75] Yet, as Wright warns his readers, it "has also become dangerous. Progress has an internal logic that can lead beyond reason to catastrophe. A seductive trail of successes may end in a trap" (2004, 5). Reinhart Koselleck dedicates his essay "'Progress' and 'Decline:' An Appendix to the History of Two Concepts" (2002) especially to this interconnectedness between the positive force of progress and the negative force of decline (or decay). As he recounts, starting from a moment in time when the word 'progress' was yet to be coined and 'ascension' was the closest substitute, progress and decline were one the result of the other. Elevation brought about a fall, and a fall implied

[75] Koselleck gives a similar 'zero' definition: "In the past things were done in one way, today in another—that is the minimum relation which our chief witness established with the employment of the word progress. And the overtone that the new behaviour is better than the old resounds as well" (2002, 219).

an ascending path laying ahead. They were, as he calls them, *concepts of succession* (2002, 221). Up until the advent of rational thought with the Enlightenment, progress and decline remained bound by such a relationship: one followed the other, and both were on the same level. As Koselleck writes, “Spiritual progress and the decline of the world were to this extent correlational concepts that obstructed the interpretation of the earthly future in progressive terms” (2002, 224).

With the advances in the study of nature and the advent of the age of reason, though, progress began to take its current shape. Koselleck identifies two phenomena that underscored such a shift: the denaturalisation of age metaphors and the temporalization of the concept of progress. The first indicates that discussions of ageing dropped the use of natural metaphors because they inherently implied decay,[76] the second that progress took on a temporal value, rather than a ‘quality’ value. Both phenomena have drastic repercussions on the concept of progress and have moulded it to be understood in its current accepted meaning.

The first point describes the displacement of decay as an equal of progress. Reason, once it replaces spirituality as the core aspiration of man, implies a constant striving to perfection, an endless work in progress to improve humanity. Therefore, decay cannot be the counterpart of rational progress. Decline does not cease to exist, of course, but its value is downgraded: whenever it appears, it is but a lapse in progress that will spur twice as much advancement. Decline becomes part of progress, and leaves the stage free for the latter to take over as a universal concept.[77]

[76] Koselleck writes: “Taken literally, every metaphor of natural growth contains the inevitability of eventual decay. Thus whoever takes the category of nature seriously must also—as in antiquity—allow decay to follow from progress. In this respect, the course from youth to old age always excludes the sense of progress to an open future” (2002, 226).

[77] Koselleck writes: “During the eighteenth century and in the time since then, it has become a widespread belief that progress is general and constant while every regression, decline, or decay occurs only partially and temporarily. In other words, decline or regression is no longer a pure oppositional concept to advancement or progress” (2002, 227). Relevantly, Koselleck retrieves Leibniz’s ‘best of all possible

Secondly, Koselleck underlines how until the eighteenth century the goal of the arts and sciences, and of society as a whole, was less to progress and more to perfect themselves (2002, 227). As such, it was still possible to identify a clear aim for their advancement, to believe in the promise of completion.[78] One could aspire to unlock all the secrets of nature, or to describe the laws of morality. Gradually, however, the focus shifted from the final goal to the process of discovery and experimentation itself—that it, the focus shifted from the result to the act of advancing. Thus, given that progress replaced the achievement of completion as a goal, it was temporalized: perfection remains the final objective, but now there is no clear limit, no set destination. We progress without end, and if we do seem to have reached an end, that exists only to make us further advance on a larger scale.

It is thus that the term 'progress' becomes a *collective singular*: through its usage to describe not a specific or particular advancement, but the most general of all, that of humanity, and from there, not only the advancement of humanity, but advancement in itself. Progress has now acquired an independent meaning: one does not need to specify what is moving forward; Progress, capitalised, has come to represent a core concept of modernity (Koselleck 2002, 229-230).

Yet decline lurks in it. Albeit relegated to a secondary role, very often discarded as a way to enhance progress itself, it cyclically reappears. Koselleck refuses to align himself with the view of decline as a mere promoter of advancement and underscores the danger of delegitimizing its presence. Following Rousseau, Koselleck highlights that 'perfectibility'—that is, the

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worlds' debate to exemplify the moment in the history of humanity when progress went from being a personal matter—a matter made easier by the removal of decline as the inevitable consequence—to being a cosmic one: "Not only humans, but also the entire world, constantly improved, and if there was a regression, then it was only to advance again twice as fast and twice as far after it. […] The world is, therefore, the best of all worlds because it is constantly improving: *progressus est in infinitum perfectionis*" (2002, 227).

[78] Not coincidentally, the desire for completion lies at the core of Dave Eggers's *The Circle*, which will be analysed in the next chapter.

instinct to progress—is what distinguishes humans from other living beings and is an anthropological feature of our species.

> Humans are condemned to progress, to direct all their energies at mastering the powers of nature, to bring the pillars of civilization into their everyday life, to organize themselves politically in order to be able to live, and to develop their industry through the growing employment of reason. But this summation of progress is only one side of the balance sheet. The other side reads: loss of natural innocence, decay of morals, instrumentalization of language at the cost of the unity of feeling and reason. Progress thus produces decadence. [...] The more humans are required to perfect themselves in civilization, the greater their chances of losing their integrity. [...] And the more violent the progress—one need only to think of atomic energy and the atomic bomb, of gas and gassing—the greater the human capability to realize catastrophes. (Koselleck 2002, 232-233)

Progress does not spring from decline; rather, the opposite is true, and given that progress does not have an end anymore, the potential of catastrophe has no limits, either.

Thus, we come to a point in our civilisation where progress has become an all-encompassing concept, rooted in human nature, and including every area of knowledge and life. It seems to be standing as the one goal of humanity, as vague as this sounds.

Ronald Wright embraces this view critically. He agrees that the concept has now achieved universal status, somewhat reaching the climax of its ascending curve. However, his understanding of it does not imply an endless positive advancement:

> Our practical faith in progress has ramified and hardened into an ideology—a secular religion which, like the religions that progress has challenged, is blind to certain flaws in its credentials. Progress, therefore, has become "myth" in the anthropological sense. By this I do not mean a belief that is flimsy or untrue. Successful myths are powerful and often partly true. As I've written elsewhere: "Myth is an arrangement of the past, whether real or imagined, in patterns that reinforce a culture's

> deepest values and aspirations. [...] Myths are so fraught with meaning that we live and die by them. They are the maps by which cultures navigate through time." The myth of progress has sometimes served us well—those of us seated at the best tables, anyway—and may continue to do so. But I shall argue [...] that it has also become dangerous. Progress has an internal logic that can lead beyond reason to catastrophe. A seductive trail of successes may end in a trap. (2004, 4)

Understanding progress as a myth and, even more importantly, as an ideology, allows us to hark back to the topics of Chapter Three. Progress cannot be described as a uniquely American myth, of course; its reach extends far beyond the coasts of the United States and since the Enlightenment it has been the driving force behind the evolution of modern Europe and, more recently, of the emerging BRIC economies. Nonetheless, it is *also*, and particularly, an American myth. The history of the United States is especially entwined with the impulse to move forward, to always improve and always take the lead. Progress is one of America's defining values—we might go as far as to call it its secular religion—and there is evidence of this in its strong presence in the narratives of American Exceptionalism and the Frontier, not to mention in the aggressive economic and political approach that has typified the past century or so. Ronald Wright remarks on this:

> John Steinbeck once said that socialism never took root in America because the poor see themselves not as an exploited proletariat but as temporarily embarrassed millionaires. This helps explain why American culture is so hostile to the idea of limits, why voters during the last energy shortage rejected the sweater-wearing Jimmy Carter and elected Ronald Reagan, who scoffed at conservation and told them it was "still morning in America." Nowhere does the myth of progress have more fervent believers. Marx was surely right when he called capitalism, almost admiringly, "a machine for demolishing limits." Both communism and capitalism are materialist Utopias offering rival versions of an earthly paradise. In practice, communism was no easier on the natural environment. But at least it proposed a sharing of the goods. (2004, 124)

Given its relevance to the cultural identity of the United States, we have to investigate the status of the 'myth' of progress. If American Exceptionalism

is in crisis, if the Frontier has lost much of its power, is the belief in progress in any better shape? To an extent, it is. Despite there being a growing awareness of the impact of unchecked progress—think of the warnings from the creators of the atomic bomb in the 1940s, or more recently from the scientists working on climate change—it is still generally believed that we will solve those issues so present in the daily news only through *more* progress (Wright 2004, 3, 7). Techno-enthusiasts like the members of Humanity+ and the rest of the transhumanist movement firmly believe that more and more sophisticated technology is the key for a betterment of mankind. However, debates on progress have increasingly been raising the issue of its *consequences* and have been vouching for a paradigm shift away from a perception of progress as the best solution to issues it has caused.

Indeed, both Wright and Koselleck approach the sensitive issue of our society rushing ahead too quickly in its quest for a better economy, better technology, better living conditions. As the former explicitly recalls, "from the first chipped stone to the first smelted iron took nearly 3 million years; from the first iron to the hydrogen bomb took only 3,000" (2004, 14). This acceleration of progress—of technological, rational progress—has brought about unprecedented affluence in the lifestyle of the lucky ones who were born in the right continents. Nonetheless, Wright finds the seeds of decline, at times to the point of mass extinction, precisely in such an acceleration: when technical advancements surpass moral or ethical ones, civilisations fall (2004, 4, 7 and ff). The inability to grasp the consequences of the latest product of progress causes nuclear catastrophes, global warming, mass surveillance, the desertification of once flourishing lands, the disappearance of thousands of animal and vegetal species. The list is long but, in the end, the problems of today are the same of a few millennia ago, with a modern twist.[79] On such a

[79] Wright's case studies focus on the great civilisations that inhabited Easter Island and the fertile lands along the Tigris-Euphrates river system, and on the Roman and the Mayan empires. As he shows throughout his book, the decline of these civilisations was caused by their inability to use their technical advancements wisely, which in turn provoked irreparable damage to their ecosystems. All

widening gap between technological and social progress also comments Gary Bowden (2017), who warns that the degree of complexity inhabiting technology and, more generally, our contemporary social system, might soon put too severe a strain on our human ability to cope with its demands. More on this will follow in Chapter Seven.

Wright and Bowden's perspective on the consequences of the acceleration of progress aligns itself with Bauman's definition of liquid society. As progress imposes heady rhythms to cultural advancement, people lose millennial traditions and the certainty that society will steadily remain unchanged:

> Nowadays we have reached such a pass that the skills and mores we learn in childhood are outdated by the time we're thirty, and few people past fifty can keep up with their culture—whether in idiom, attitudes, taste, or technology—even if they try. (Wright 2004, 14)

Thus, Wright is with Bauman in describing our current society as unhinged, deprived of stable values, recklessly rushing toward its fall on board the misguided train of progress.

In "The Rebellion of the Tools," the last chapter of *A Short History of Progress*, he allows literature to infiltrate the discourse on progress, stepping away from a rigorous anthropological and sociological perspective, for Gauguin's last question, 'Where are we going?' can only be answered through imagination, through fiction. Wright's short incursion into the literary field tackles what he calls "the descendants of Victorian scientific romances: mainstream science fiction and profound social satire set in nightmare futures" (2004, 122)—that is, dystopias. And indeed, as I have previously stated, progress is rather ubiquitous in dystopian fiction, which comments on its double-edged impact on society by assigning a sinister value to it. Even when it is apparently beneficial or benevolent, as in the case of *The Circle* or

civilisations fell due to a misuse of their resources, and Wright is vocal in stating ours is doing the same by not addressing the way we are consuming the resources at our disposal.

Detroit: Become Human, its negative outcomes outweigh by far the positive ones. Clearly, a glum outlook over much of contemporary society is endemic to the genre: were it to, say, elevate the positive side of progress, it would probably turn into utopia or optimistic SF. However, it is still telling that dystopia carries out such a consistent critique of progress regardless of sub-generic borders and, relevantly, that it often insists in not solving the issues progress has caused with more of it. This is, for instance, the case of Margaret Atwood's *Maddaddam* trilogy or Hannah Jameson's *The Last*: in both, a post-apocalyptic society rejects its past structures in order to start from scratch, rather than retrieving them or insisting on using the same strategies to change their fate.

Although Wright, for the most part, does not stray past the 1980s with the selection of dystopian works he considers,[80] his most relevant observation—the one which will lead this discussion into the following section—actually features Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003):

> In her recent dystopia, *Oryx and Crake*, which concentrates on biotechnology, Margaret Atwood also portrays the collapse of civilization in the near future. One of her characters asks, "As a species we're doomed by hope, then?" By hope? Well, yes. Hope drives us to invent new fixes for old messes, which in turn create ever more dangerous messes. Hope elects the politician with the biggest empty promise; and as any stockbroker or lottery seller knows, most of us will take a slim hope over prudent and predictable frugality. Hope, like greed, fuels the engine of capitalism. (2004, 123)

Rather than in despair or greed, Atwood seems to argue that the source of our doomed destiny lies in hope: it is hope that drives progress, and hope that allows for its reckless advance. Consequently, it acquires a sinister value, for in inspiring people to believe in a better future—or perhaps simply in an alternative—it justifies its pursuit through any means. Hope, it appears,

[80] He touches upon Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* (1872), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four* (1949), J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), and Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker* (1980).

holds the seeds of catastrophe. This is, perhaps, irrefutable. However, one should not forget that hope inspires, first and foremost, change. And, as true as it is that change often is for the worse, we should not discard the possibility of the opposite.

2.2 Hope, out of Fear

Bauman opens *Liquid Fear* (2006) stating bluntly: "Ours is, again, a time of fears," where fear is to be understood as "the name we give to our *uncertainty*: to our *ignorance* of the threat and of what is to be *done*—what can and what can't be—to stop it in its tracks—or to fight it back if stopping it is beyond our power" (2006, 2). Leveraging Hugues Lagrange's concept of 'derivative fear,' Bauman stresses how human beings who interiorise a vision of the world as uncertain and dangerous will live with 'fear-in-the-potential'—that is, they will react to stimuli as if they were a threat even in the absence of danger. Thus, fear becomes ubiquitous. Danger lurks behind every corner, complete strangers and family members might equally be a threat. Man-made disasters can hit at any time, and so do natural ones. Most terrifyingly, hybrid disasters (not entirely human, not entirely natural) might occur.

> Day in, day out we learn that the inventory of dangers is far from complete: new dangers are discovered and announced almost daily, and there is no knowing how many more of them and of what kind have managed to escape our (and the experts'!) attention—getting ready to strike without warning. (Bauman 2006, 4)

Immersed in a world of constant and ubiquitous perceived danger, people work out strategies to dismiss fear. "Our liquid modern society is a contraption attempting to make life with fear liveable" (2006, 6).

Fear is certainly not a modern condition; it crosses time and space in the history of mankind. Nevertheless, we are currently living in an age in which it seems to hold the reins of society in an exceptional way. With regard to the U.S. landscape, but more generally to the entire Western civilization, if not

the world at large,[81] Gen-Z children have yet to experience a moment in their lives without low-key, all-encompassing fear. Ever since the events of September 11, which materialised the sense of dread that was building up in the United States at the end of the twentieth century, making it visible and endlessly amplifying it,[82] our civilisation has been threading the dark waters of the 'Age of Terror.'

Indeed, all the contributors to the aptly-named collection *The Age of Terror: America and the World after September 11* (edited by Strobe Talbott and Nayan Chanda, and published just two months after the attacks) argue that the destruction of the World Trade Center constituted a turning point in the history of the United States, one that would signal the beginning of an age of fear:

> It was with the onslaught of bioterrorism in early October that an anxiety became a certainty: September 11 had been just the beginning. People everywhere would have to get used to being afraid in ways and to a degree that they had never known before. It was in that sense that the U.S. had entered an age of terror (Talbott and Chanda 2001, Kindle edition).[83]

Almost simultaneously, on November 3, 2001, Baudrillard published an essay in *Le Monde* in which he reiterated that "with the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, we might even be said to have before us the 'mother' of

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[81] Consider what Talbott and Chanda wrote about the events of 9/11: "Were we all right? 'We' meant more than Americans. The list of the victims in New York was as cosmopolitan as the city itself [...] In his address to the joint houses of Congress, President Bush made a point of internationalizing the nation's sense of outrage and resolve: 'This is the world's fight. This is civilization's fight.'" (2001, Kindle edition).

[82] See Bauman: "People needed, it appears, the shock of the falling towers in Manhattan to be reproduced in slow motion and for months on end on millions of TV screens for the news to sink in and be absorbed, and for politicians to reharness the popular existential anxieties to a new political formula" (2006, 149). Additionally, see Talbott and Chanda: "It was mass murder as performance art. The staging and timing guaranteed maximum coverage worldwide" (2001, Kindle edition).

[83] Talbott and Chanda are referring to the anthrax attacks that took place in the United States from September 18, 2001, continuing for several weeks. The letters containing anthrax spores sent to a number of news media offices and Senators caused five deaths.

all events" (2012, 3). He describes 9/11 as the breaking point of an age of false security, the moment in which a globalised world waged war against itself through the hands of the terrorists, thus framing the attacks as the beginning of a new historical era, one that would be characterised by diffused terror.[84] These predictions have been confirmed time and time again in the past nineteen years. Fear has spread and multiplied. Much like the trajectory followed by progress, it has become Fear, capitalised: our civilisation has moved away from the fear of something specific and has now reached a state of diffuse, overreaching, ubiquitous Fear. We fear for our bodies and possessions, for the social order that ensures our well-being, and for our position in said social order (Bauman 2006, 4). Fear, just like progress, has become a core concept of postmodernity. It underlies current politics, technological advancements, and human relations. It fosters our capitalist economy.

How can we harness this diffused fear, then? How can we cope with the dreadful awareness that our civilisation is rushing head-first to its demise? In *Living in the End Times*, Slavoj Žižek famously announced that

> the global capitalist system is approaching an apocalyptic zero-point. Its "four riders of the apocalypse" are comprised by the ecological crisis, the consequences of the biogenetic revolution, imbalances within the system itself (problems with intellectual property; forthcoming struggles over raw materials, food and water), and the explosive growth of social divisions and exclusions. (2010, x)

In his work, he draws a parallel between the collective behaviour toward the 'apocalypse of the capitalist system' and that of an individual suffering from

[84] Baudrillard writes: "When the two towers collapsed, you had the impression that they were responding to the suicide of the suicide-planes with their own suicides. It has been said that 'Even God cannot declare war on Himself.' Well, He can. The West, in the position of God (divine omnipotence and absolute moral legitimacy), has become suicidal, and declared war on itself. The countless disaster movies bear witness to this fantasy, which they clearly attempt to exorcize with images, drowning out the whole thing with special effects" (2012, 6).

a personal catastrophe, mirroring the five stages of grief as identified by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.[85]

> The first reaction is one of ideological denial: there is no fundamental disorder; the second is exemplified by explosions of anger at the injustices of the new world order; the third involves attempts at bargaining ("if we change things here and there, life could perhaps go on as before"); when the bargaining fails, depression and withdrawal set in; finally, after passing through this zeropoint, the subject no longer perceives the situation as a threat, but as the chance of a new beginning—or, as Mao Zedong put it: "There is great disorder under heaven, the situation is excellent." (2010, xii)

According to Joshua Alvizu's analysis of Žižek's work, his offered 'solution' to elaborate social grief is the creation of a new, universalist project with the goal of setting aside differences among cultures and highlighting similarities, the universal values that run through them all. Žižek claims this is not a utopian endeavour, citing real examples of cross-cultural solidarity. Nonetheless, he resorts to 'world-building' and imagination as an alternative to a system he considers on course to its doomed end (Alvizu 2011, 325).

In Žižek, much like in the narrations of dystopian worlds, there recurs the urgency of describing the dreaded consequences of the present situation so as to give readers awareness that a radically different outcome is possible. After all, every prophecy of apocalypse is evoked with the hope that it will be disproved, and with the intent of warning against the dangers of the status quo (Bauman 2006, 176-177). Change and not progress—better still, the *hope* of change—is what prophets wish to elicit by portraying a wretched future. Be they biblical figures or contemporary graphic novelists, the oracles of the apocalypse share the unenviable task of pointing out the evils of their civilisation and of retaining the forlorn hope that they will be proven wrong.

[85] As Žižek remarks, the stages do not necessarily appear in this order, nor in toto. An individual—or a community—might experience only some of the stages, and in any given order (2010, x).

Hope, then, truly is the fuel of dystopian narratives: as the driver of change, understood in its most neutral terms, it prompts both that very progress which, unchecked, will bring about a dystopian reality, and the radically different, potentially positive ways out of the metaphorical woods. In other words, from the perspective of a dystopian text, 'past' hope—that is, the hope felt by people who lived before the events of a given dystopia—might have been misguided, eliciting the dreadful social conditions depicted in it, but 'present' hope—that of the protagonists and the audience—still holds the seeds of neutral change, allowing at least for the possibility of a turn for the better.

Thus, as Terry Eagleton explains throughout his 2015 work *Hope without Optimism*, and as reinforced by Atwood's quote at the end of the previous section, hope cannot be attributed a solely positive value, nor is it synonymous with optimism, for the latter is rather a matter of belief or personal disposition, while hope relies on rationality. As Eagleton writes,

> Authentic hope [...] needs to be underpinned by reasons. [...] It must be able to pick out the features of a situation that render it credible. Otherwise it is just a gut feeling, like being convinced that there is an octopus under your bed. Hope must be fallible, as temperamental cheerfulness [that is, optimism] is not. (2015, 3)

Eagleton takes quite a negative stance towards Ernst Bloch's work—and towards the man himself[86]—yet it is impossible not to hear echoes of *The Principle of Hope* in his words. As Peter Thompson explains in his highly informative introduction to *The Privatization of Hope: Ernst Bloch and the Future of Utopia* (2011), which he co-edited with Žižek, Bloch believed that

> hope has to be learned as well. It does not just come about automatically, but is the product of experience, failure, and resistance to an everyday

[86] In the epilogue to his recent *Ernst Bloch: The Pugnacious Philosopher of Hope* (2019), Jack Zipes remarks on the harsh treatment Eagleton reserves to the philosopher and, equally harshly, discards his comments as superficial and uninformed, especially with regards to the German scholarship on Bloch.

> acceptance of reality. Bloch called this *docta spes* or educated hope. Hope therefore learns, but it also teaches as well as constitutes its own conditions. It is also the means by which we reach beyond pessimistic nihilism to give purpose to an existence which is objectively purposeless in any transcendental sense. (Thompson 2011, 7)

Thus, what Eagleton calls 'authentic hope' and Bloch calls 'educated hope' is to be understood as hope informed by reality, rather than mere fanciful thinking. It certainly relies on imagination, but only of the same kind that drives utopian and dystopian thinking—that is, imagination that retains a link to reality. Indeed, there is a rather fascinating parallel between the description of authentic/educated hope and that of speculative fiction.[87] Consider Eagleton's words:

> There is nothing necessarily foolish about hoping in vain, but it is foolish to hope unreasonably. Gabriel Marcel maintains that one can hope for anything short of the impossible, so that a hope is not invalidated by the gross improbability of it ever coming to pass. It is irrational to hope for the impossible, but not for the vastly improbable. (Eagleton 2015, 48)

Similarly, as we have seen in Chapter Two, the key feature of speculative fiction is its apparent plausibility: authors can create worlds once, twice, thrice removed from our reality, but there must be a direct, rational link between them and our world for a work to be classified as speculative fiction. Impossibility belongs to fantasy; probability, of any degree, belongs to speculative fiction.[88]

Now, Zipes comments on how speculation drives hope in Bloch's view:

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[87] Jack Zipes does catch this similarity but does not expand on it, only mentioning that "there is a strong connection that could be made [between] Bloch's speculative philosophy and educated hope and the rise of fantasy and utopian and dystopian literature in the twenty-first century" (2019, 183).

[88] This is also echoed in Bloch's famous concept of concrete utopia. As Rainer E. Zimmermann explains: "Concrete utopia in the Blochian terminology means [...] what can be approached by reflection and action such that eventually it would become reality, contrary to what is purely utopian and therefore impossible" (2011, 248).

> Bloch talks about both speculative and educated hope. By speculating, we can go beyond limits set for us by civilizing processes that impede our search and curtail our curiosity. Hope spurs us on. By educating or enlightening our hope, we can become conscious of how we must work with other people to obtain our wishes. We are dependent on other people, and consequently, our hope must be social, just, and ethical. (Zipes 2019, 186)

As Zipes remarks, speculation drives our imagination for a different world, it allows us to imagine with an outward trajectory, to contemplate any and every 'what if' situation, ensuring that hope springs freely from us. Then, rationality—or perhaps concreteness—reins in our speculation, ensures that our hope for radical alterity is situated within the realm of the possible. Fundamental to our discussion of dystopia is Zipes's last remark, too: thinking from an individualist perspective will hinder the possibility of true change.[89] Our hope cannot be turned inwardly; it needs to encompass the rest of society. Peter Thompson is especially aware of the difficulty of practicing social hope in the twenty-first century:

> The question now—half a century after the first full publication of *The Principle of Hope* and long after the apparent death of the grand narrative of progress—is whether hope can still exist in anything other than an atomized, desocialized, and privatized form. [...] It could be argued that hope generally resides now in individual liberation through money or fame or both. The dreams of a better world are dreams of a better world for oneself or one's family. It is not just socialism which appears to have died but the very concept of the social itself. (Thompson 2011, 5)

In this short paragraph, Thompson condenses much of what we have discussed in this chapter: the crisis of the narrative of progress, the overbearing individualism, the difficulty of finding hope other than in the

[89] As Thompson remarks, Bloch calls the individual the greatest of all antiutopias (2011, 8).

smallest wishes and desires. One wonders, then, whether there is any remaining collective hope, or at least hope for the collectivity. As I have argued earlier, I do believe contemporary dystopian fiction elaborates precisely on that by depicting an individual whose wishes for a different reality encompass their entire society and are not limited to their own personal sphere. As we will see in later chapters, in *Detroit: Become Human* Markus's desire for personhood is not only for himself, but for his species and also for humanity; in *The Testaments*, Aunt Lydia's personal desire for revenge has wider repercussions.

The beauty of dystopian fiction lies in its ability to mediate between the individual and the collective dimension, representing how they can both harm and enhance each other reciprocally. As Tom Moylan comments in a recent essay (in which he criticises Gregory Claeys's *Dystopia: A Natural History*), social groups are not inherently evil, nor is the individual (2020). There is goodness in both, and both can inspire and prompt change.

In turn, change—it should be quite clear by now—springs from hope, and hope, write both Bloch and Eagleton, springs from our dissatisfaction with the present.[90] As Thompson argues, "Hope, for Bloch, was the way in which our desire to fill in the gaps and to find something that is missing took shape;" his is a philosophy of the "Not Yet" (2011, 3-4). Bloch, moreover, sets no limits to what we might be lacking—from the most basic needs like food and money to the highest abstract concepts, anything can inspire hope for change. Importantly, he understands hope as a driving force of humanity, as an innate quality of man. This implies that we cannot avoid hoping—much like Koselleck claimed that we cannot avoid progressing.[91]

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[90] Consider this poignant quote from Eagleton: "Hope is a species of permanent revolution, whose enemy is as much political complacency as metaphysical despair. Because there is in principle no end to it, it refuses to make an idol out of any specific setup, which is not to say that it will refuse to judge among them. As Jurgen Moltmann comments, hope keeps us radically unreconciled to the present, thus figuring as a constant source of historical disruption" (2015, 49).

[91] In Zipes's words: "Hope, as we all know, is not a commodity or even a quality. For Bloch, it was an inner force that we all have and that drives us to seek better working

This brings us to the concept that Eagleton calls "Fundamental hope," which he understands as what remains when all other hopes have been thwarted and is thus to be evoked in relation to despair—not absolute despair, for that would imply a loss of fundamental hope, but despair for lost specific hopes (Eagleton 2015, 71). To align hope to this description of progress and fear, fundamental hope is Hope, capitalised. It "acknowledges the realities of failure and defeat, but refuses to capitulate in the face of them and preserves an unspecified, nonpurposive openness to the Future. [...] Hope [...] can only take root where perdition is a possibility" (Eagleton 2015, 65, 72). It seems to me that fundamental hope is particularly attuned to critical dystopias: it can be found across any type of speculative fiction, but it is most evident in those stories that grant the reader the explicit possibility to perceive it—a diffused Hope, impossible to pinpoint to a specific outcome—even in the heinous conditions of a dystopian world. It is the sort of hope the reader welcomes at the end of Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven,* for instance. It is the awareness that, no matter how dire the conditions of the protagonists, a way forward exists, and that it is full of potential.

Hope flourishes the most when despair abounds, just like progress stands out in moments of decline. Thus, it should not seem an oxymoron anymore to say that (critical) dystopian fiction is one of the best *loci* to find hope—and we are certainly not lacking in primary sources, given the surge of dystopian novels, films, and TV series in the past twenty years.

In "A World Neither Brave Nor New: Reading Dystopian Fiction after 9/11" (2006), Efraim Sicher and Natalia Skradol convene with Bauman, Talbott, and Chanda that the events of September 11 marked a turning point in the perception of fear and in our understanding of dystopian fiction. On 9/11, more than in any other catastrophe of modern times, reality and fiction have collided; dystopian fiction has become a fact (Sicher and Skradol 2006, 153).

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and living conditions. We hope because we are discontent and because we lack what is necessary to endow our lives with meaning. Since most of us cannot control our lives, we must live in hope or use hope to discover what it is that will benefit us and others" (2019, 186).

Yet, they argue, the world went on turning; no total collapse happened. No complete recovery did either, however, and "when disaster is not followed by a brave new world, all that remains is a permanent state of disaster" (2006, 154).

In such a state of disaster, dystopian fiction finds fertile ground and an abundance of material:

> We are always writing after the end that has been written into Western culture—from the Book of Revelation through Vonnegut, Pynchon, and DeLillo.
> After the worst has already happened (the Bhophal disaster in India, Chernobyl, 9/11, or the SARS epidemic),[92] the future can be imagined as a replay of disaster scenarios, in which we compulsively repeat past imagining of the future. (Sicher and Skradol 2006, 159)

Reality, to an extent, has surpassed imagination. In a sense, we are constantly living in a post-apocalypse, for catastrophes have already happened and we have survived. Authors rehash our history, repeating past collective traumas, reconfiguring them without ever abandoning them completely. The ways in which our civilisation can collapse seem endless, but they all fall under a known category: political upheavals, natural disasters, technological power over humanity—one way or another, as discussed in the section on progress, they have all happened before and have often caused the disappearance of a civilisation.

If despair for the future springs from the past, though, hope does too. As Eagleton writes: "it is not dreams of liberated grandchildren that spur men and women to revolt, but memories of oppressed ancestors. It is the past that furnishes us with the resources of hope, not just the speculative possibility of a rather more gratifying future" (2015, 32). This, to an extent, is also echoed

[92] The authors were writing in 2006. Since then, we can add to the list a number of hurricanes, tsunamis and earthquakes, the 2008 economic crisis, the migratory crisis, and, as of February 2020, extended floods, Antarctic temperatures over 20C for the first time on record, a plague of locusts, and the spread of COVID-19 on a global scale.

in Bauman's last work, *Retrotopia* (2018).[93] Before them, Ernst Bloch reasoned on the unbreakable bond between the past and the future, and the way hope mediates between the two. In the epilogue to his recent *Ernst Bloch: The Pugnacious Philosopher of Hope* (2019), Jack Zipes explains why Bloch's philosophy of hope is still relevant today and identifies two main principles in his work:

> (1) we cannot move forward and create substantial changes in society unless we have a firm grasp of history and can acknowledge our inadequacies and failures to realize our hopes; (2) we must pay attention to the tiniest traces of little things and events that occur in our lives and may help us move forward and lighten the way toward a better future. (Zipes 2019, 180)

History, then, is a fundamental 'producer' of hope. It works as inspiration and stimulus; it reminds us that better alternatives exist, just as much as it offers a catalogue of horrors of which humanity has already sullied itself. We need the past to move forward, and we need the smallest details, the most insignificant memories, to remind us that hope can be found in anything and anyone.

We are at a moment in time where fear abounds, where visions of the future are progressively bleaker, but also where hope is most necessary. Younger generations are burdened by the unenviable task of imagining a way forward for our civilisation, of hoping for those who have given in to absolute despair. We stand at the threshold of an epoch. Whether we step into a new age of prosperity or we fall down the rabbit hole of silent acquiescence towards the demise of civilisation, only time will tell. Yet it is worth noting that this will be a step for mankind as a whole—the stakes are global, as our civilisation

[93] In *Retrotopia*, Bauman argues that humanity has given up on creating utopias for the future and only find utopia in an unattainable past, often 'purified' of all evils to be remembered as the ideal society. "[Retrotopias are] visions located in the lost/stolen/abandoned but undead past, instead of being tied to the not-yet-unborn and so inexistent future" (2017, 5)

has become. Deluding ourselves that consequences will not befall on us all will not stop the future from taking its toll.

3. 'Siamese Sisters': Sociology and Literature

A few more words, as a conclusion to this chapter, should be dedicated to justifying my choice of juxtaposing sociology and dystopian fiction in the second part of this dissertation. In the previous sections, I have leveraged a number of theories pertaining to sociology, philosophy, and marginally, to anthropology. As I hope to have shown, these are very much connected to dystopian fiction, both by being present in its narratives and by sharing a similar purpose—that is, they both address the crisis of our current times, element by element, and in doing so they set us on the path of change. Dystopian fiction is fuelled by hope, and so are these theories on the contemporary world: meaningfully, at the end of *Liquid Fear* Bauman writes that hope is the *duty of sociologists*, who "cannot rest, neutral and indifferent, in front of the struggles of which the future of the world is the stake" (Bourdieu quoted in Bauman 2006, 174-175). Thus, in what follows I will further explore the relationship between fiction and sociology (which I am privileging over other disciplines due to its primary focus on the collectivity), hoping to show that they are much more aligned than it is often thought.

In her 2015 study *Climate Trauma: Foreseeing the Future in Dystopian Film and Fiction,* E. Ann Kaplan writes:

> Humanists' objects of study differ from those of sociologists to the extent that our specific data is at one remove from lived reality, namely, the worlds of literature, film or digital media, and other arts. We come close to the sociological object, however, because they emerge from the society and culture that are studied by sociologists, such imaginary worlds are closely linked to it. Humanists' focus on the cultural role of genre, and its importance is often overlooked by sociologists. Through genres, literature and the arts showcase symptoms of social processes, cultural energies,

> and cultural change. They provide us with a barometer of what's going on in any particular society. (2015, 28)

Her position on the relationship between literature and society explains the sociological framework she uses to analyse a series of dystopian works dealing with climate trauma. Kaplan is not alone in calling for a unified approach to sociology and literature. Zygmunt Bauman and Riccardo Mazzeo, in their *In Praise of Literature* (2016), insist on the necessity of recognising the similarities of the two subjects, rather than their differences. Structured as a conversation on the state of our contemporary society, with the Mazzeo offering questions and Bauman answers, this work investigates how literature and sociology intersect and inform each other, focusing in particular on the role of language in contemporary society. Contrary to what the "administratively motivated and imposed separation" of the two subjects would suggest, the authors affirm that literature and sociology

> share the field they explore, their subject-matter and topics—as well as (at least to a substantive degree) their vocation and social impact. As one of us said, in trying to spell out the nature of their kinship and cooperation, literature and sociology are "complementary, supplementary to each other and reciprocally enriching. They are by no means in competition […]—let alone at loggerheads or cross-purposes. Knowingly or not, deliberately or matter-of-factly, they pursue the same purpose; one could say 'they belong to the same business.'" (2016, vii)

Clearly, Bauman and Mazzeo do not wish to elide the differences that distinguish literature from sociology; indeed, they celebrate such differences because they allow for the two disciplines to balance each other out, to be complementary in the sense that they both investigate culture and the human experience of being-in-the-world (the 'shared field' from the quotation above) but use two approaches identifying reciprocal limits and addressing potential mutual biases. Bauman and Mazzeo meaningfully identify the main difference between literature and sociology in the personal/collective

approach: the first explores and narrates society by amplifying the experiences of an individual, the other ventures to identify logic, rational, universal trends in a collectivity that seems rather impervious to these characteristics (2016, x-xii). Often, they argue retrieving a well-worn observation, it is in literature that new trends and changes are addressed first, while they are still too volatile to be noticed by sociology—and this is particularly true of our liquid contemporaneity:

> Once more in the history of modern times, novel-writers join filmmakers and visual artists in the avant-garde of public reflection, debate and awareness. They are pioneering insight into the novel condition of men and women in our ever more deregulated, atomized, privatized society of consumers: people smarting under the tyranny of the moment, doomed to lead a hurried life and to join in the cult of novelty. They explore and portray transient joys and lasting depressions, fears, indignation, dissent and half- or whole-hearted inchoate attempts at resistance—ending in partial victories or ostensible (though hopefully temporary) defeats. (2016, xii-xiii)

What is most relevant for the current discussion is the above-mentioned focus that both Bauman and Mazzeo place on language as the primary means—better still, the primary medium—through which human experience of life can be conveyed. It is through language that both literature and sociology express themselves, and it is due to a constant deterioration of this medium, they argue, that discussions of our contemporaneity are becoming shallower (2016, 6).

Retrieving the debate concerning the function of language vastly explored in the 70s and 80s, Bauman and Mazzeo underline how human experience of life can be described *only* through language, remarking on its permeance in every aspect of society:

> Systems of law consist of discourse. Diplomacy consists of discourse. The beliefs of the great world religions consist of discourse. And in a world of increasing literacy and multiplying media of verbal communication—radio, television, the Internet, advertising, packaging, as well as books,

> magazines and newspapers—discourse has come more and more to dominate even the non-verbal aspects of our lives. (2016, 7)

Consequently, the human experience of being-in-the-world can only be received by sociologists and writers of fiction as the product of an *a priori* hermeneutical act, implying that both sociology and literature are "exercises in the 'secondary hermeneutic'—reinterpretation of the already interpreted" (2016, 9). Interpretation, though, can hardly be defined as an objective practice, and whereas it is generally accepted that literature has no claim to the status of neutral witness of human life, Bauman and Mazzeo insist that neither does sociology, which has indeed strived to be considered a science according to the principles of independence, disinterestedness and neutrality. Rigorous compliance to "established, professionally approved, methods of investigation" does not remedy the subjective nature of the sociological practice, they remark (2016, 10). So one of the most evident differences between literature and sociology, the apparent objectivity of the latter versus the subjectivity of the former, is disproved in Bauman and Mazzeo's work.

In Chapter 8 of *In Praise of Literature*, they return to the question of language and its inescapability by discussing the relevance of metaphors to convey meaning. Although they do not explicitly state so, it is implied throughout that chapter that literature should be considered as a metaphor of life. As Bauman remarks, we are immersed in metaphor, and not only of the linguistic kind. To stress the point, he quotes George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By* (1980): "'metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature.' Metaphors 'govern our everyday functioning, down to the most mundane details'" (2016, 88).[94]

[94] Bauman and Mazzeo's observations on metaphors derive from Roman Jakobson's fundamental work on language. In his essay "The Metaphoric and Metonymic Poles" (1956) he argues that "the development of a discourse may take place along two different semantic lines: one topic may lead to another either through their similarity

Similarly, Italian philosopher Umberto Galimberti opens his *L'ospite inquietante. Il nichilismo e i giovani* writing: "human beings have never inhabited the world. Rather, they have inhabited the description that myth, religion, philosophy, science have given of the world time after time" (2007, Kindle position 76).[95]

Returning to the strong link connecting literature and sociology at the end of their conversation, Bauman and Mazzeo, who amply discuss the loss of quality literature and of authority and meaning due to the proliferation of 'twitterature,'[96] retrieve a conversation between novelists Paul Auster and J. M. Coetzee, during which Auster laments: "Nobody believes that poetry (or art) can change the world. Nobody is dedicated to a sacred mission. Today there are poets everywhere, but they only talk to each other" (Auster quoted in Bauman and Mazzeo 2016, 135-136). Bauman comments that Auster's issue of whether art can change the world applies to sociology as well, and adds that,

> we have no other tool at our disposal but words. [...] It is words that allow, prompt and oblige us to set apart what is from what seems to be; it is

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or through their contiguity. The METAPHORIC way would be the most appropriate term for the first case and the METONYMIC way for the second, since they find their most condensed expression in metaphor and metonymy respectively" (2002 [1956], 90). A similar approach to metaphor and metonymy pertains also to psychoanalysis, especially with Jacques Lacan's juxtaposition of Jakobson's metaphor/metonymy to Freud's binary set of repression/displacement, which he considers the basic functions of the unconscious. For more on how Lacan elaborates Jakobson, see Sadeq Rahimi, "The Unconscious: Metaphor and Metonymy" (2009).

[95] In the original: "Gli uomini non hanno mai abitato il mondo, ma sempre e solo la descrizione che di volta in volta il mito, la religione, la filosofia, la scienza hanno dato del mondo." The title of this work roughly translates into English as *The Uncanny Guest: Nihilism and the Young*.

[96] Twitterature is to be understood not only as literature produced in short form on the famous platform that gives it its name, but more generally as literature produced serially, with little to no awareness of the importance of the act, often by self-defined authors that lack expertise, sensibility, and talent. Bauman and Mazzeo also mentions that several of these producers of twitterature are very young people exploring the authorial act for the first time, often without guidance and often appropriating the 'author' label without cognition of the nuanced meaning of the word. For more on this see Bauman and Mazzeo 2016, Chapter 9: "Risking Twitterature."

> words that created the gap between the truth of the matter and its appearances, juxtaposing themselves against the suggestions/implications/insinuations of senses while attempting to articulate their messages and claiming the presiding chair in the tribunal of Truth. (2016, 139)

And words should be used to start questioning again. Indeed, Bauman insists on the fact that contemporary leaders, intellectuals, scholars, writers, and people in general have stopped questioning the meaning of our existence and searching for alternative ways of life. Literature and sociology alike seem to have lost their purpose of commenting, describing, and inspiring our society, and it is their mission and duty to retrieve such a questioning act, for

> [a]sking these and other fundamental existential questions, and bringing them back to the public agenda, are the vocations shared by literature and sociology. Pursuit of these questions unites the two creative pursuits—renders them complementary and sentenced to perpetual interaction and mutual inspiration. (Bauman and Mazzeo 2016, 146)

Bauman and Mazzeo's *In Praise of Literature* is a meaningful starting point for our discussion of the interwoven nature of sociology and literature. It offers a theoretical framework that justifies the claim of this dissertation, namely that literature—and dystopian literature in particular—should be a locus of investigation for sociologists, as well as for literary scholars, and that sociology can just as well be of inspiration both to writers and literary critics. Bauman and Mazzeo built a detailed and structured argument in favour of the interaction of sociology and literature (which they call 'Siamese Sisters'—an expression I have borrowed for the title of this section), but they are not the only scholars recognising the advisability of encouraging their interplay. Barbara A. Misztal retraces the evolution of the debate in her insightful essay "Sociological Imagination and Literary Intuition," published in 2016 in *Comparative Sociology*. Summarising her historical overview of the interaction of the two disciplines, sociology "constituted itself as [an] academic subject through emancipating itself from literature" (Misztal 2016,

304) and yet it returns to it in moments of crisis such as the present one: the field is currently questioning the status of its empirical branch, a process which she describes as a crisis of the imagination caused by a fetish for methods (Misztal 2016, 303). Indeed, after a moment of sodality in the 70s, when sociology addressed high literature—and only high literature—as a repository of collective, all-encompassing world views, sociology took a rather blunt turn toward the scientific method,[97] which remained the main trend in the field up to the early 2000s. According to Misztal, a renewed interest in literature is currently spreading throughout the field, with scholars turning to fiction to address that crisis of imagination we mentioned above.

> These new stands, without either understanding sociology to be "between literary and science" or calling for the social sciences to take a literary turn, reassert the importance of literature to sociology. While remembering that "[n]ovels *are* sociology to the extent that their authors make them" (Runciman 1985, 21, italics in the original) and that the novel "refuses to exist as illustration of an historical era," as description of a society, as defense of an ideology, and instead puts itself exclusively at the service of "what only novel can say" (Kundera 2005, 67), they suggest that sociology should not give up on seeking ways in which literary input could enhance richness of its social analyses. (Misztal 2016, 310)

There remains to determine what the novel might be, if not an illustration of a historical era, a description of society, or a defence of an ideology.

Misztal quotes John Hall's *The Sociology of Literature* (1978) in describing the novel as "social referent rather than just a social reflector" (2016, 303), a definition that connects well with Bauman and Mazzeo's discussion of metaphors: novels, just like metaphors, do not reflect directly but rather suggest the true meaning of reality, mediating between real life and its meaning, functioning as an imaginative representation of reality.

[97] This turn matched the debates on language and its inability to represent reality objectively, which implied that literature could scarcely be a mirror of reality due to the mediating role of language in constructing narratives (Misztal 2016, 307)

In the twenty-first century, Misztal argues, literature becomes newly significant for sociology not only thanks to its intrinsic value as a repository of 'sociological imagination' but also because of the introduction of digital tools that fostered the advent of new media and new genres, especially genres born out of the blurring of fiction and non-fiction, and realism and science fiction (2016, 312). *Social* science fiction features prominently in her reasoning that literature can grant us access to social trends not yet noticeable in the real world, but all the same plausible, and perhaps even verifiable. At the same time, new technologies have exported storytelling to other media such as movies, TV series and video games, not to mention the very same 'twitterature' against which Bauman and Mazzeo caution their readers. Whereas in the 70s sociologists regarded high literature as the sole repository for far-reaching world views, a newfound interest in popular fiction across the media addressed its ability to represent social issues and trends still inaccessible to the scientific sociological approach.

Misztal's essay, being an historical investigation on the link between sociology and literature, stops short of analysing why social science fiction might be one of the most relevant genres in which to identify metaphors of reality. A recent essay, "Dystopia and the Sociological Imagination" by Sean Seeger and Daniel Davison-Vecchione, published in 2019 in *Thesis Eleven*, embarks on the task of justifying the exploration—and exploitation—of dystopian fiction by sociologists.

As the authors point out at the beginning of their essay, we are witnessing a return to speculative fiction in sociology, as originally encouraged by H.G. Wells at the beginning of the twentieth century. In "The So-Called Science of Sociology" (1907) he argued against the scientific turn of the field, seen as the application of rigorous methods of enquiry to a subject matter irreducible to schemes and logical patterns:[98]

[98] He meaningfully writes that "in the more modern conceptions of logic, it is recognised that there are no identically similar objective experiences; the disposition is to conceive all real objective being as individual and unique. [...] It is now understood that conceivably only in the subjective world, and in theory and the

> unavoidably the subjective element, which is beauty, must coalesce with the objective, which is truth; and sociology must be neither art simply, nor science in the narrow meaning of the word at all, but knowledge rendered imaginatively, and with an element of personality; that is to say, in the highest sense of the term, literature. (1907, 365)

Wells identifies two literary genres that best serve the sociological purpose: historical narrative and speculative fiction, particularly in regard to the creation of utopia. He claims that sociologists themselves unavoidably create utopias and criticise them, for their studies of the society-that-is must always consider the society-that-is-intended-to-be (1907, 366).
Expanding on this, Seeger and Davison-Vecchione argue that there have been a small number of sociologists heeding Wells's call, such as Krishan Kumar, Ruth Levitas and Zygmunt Bauman, who explored the role of utopia in our society. Yet, they argue that dystopian fiction should be considered in and of itself as one of the best loci for the 'sociological imagination,' particularly with reference to Charles Wright Mills's definition of it as

> what "enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society" (Mills 2000, 6). In other words, the sociological imagination is the quality of mind that allows one to imagine how historically conditioned social forces shape the inner life and personal experience of the individual, and how acts of individuals can, in turn, shape the social structures in which they are situated. (Seeger and Davison-Vecchione 2019, 48)

In Mills's theory, individual and collective experience inform each other continuously, since personal 'troubles' (events pertaining to a biography) become public 'issues' (events pertaining to history) and vice versa. Mills sees

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imagination, do we deal with identically similar units, and with absolutely commensurable quantities" (1907, 360). He also writes that "what is called the scientific method is the method of ignoring individualities; and, like many mathematical conventions, its great practical convenience is no proof whatever of its final truth" (1907, 363).

the study of individuals immersed in their collectivity as the paramount task of sociology, so that individuals could benefit from the study of collective instances (Seeger and Davison-Vecchione 2019, 49).

Considering his view of sociology, combined with that of the scholars mentioned earlier, it is possible to affirm, with Seeger and Davison-Vecchione, that dystopian fiction should be regarded as fertile ground for sociological studies, and particularly for those studies that approach society as a group of individuals, rather than as one massive organism.

Indeed,

> the literary conventions of the dystopia more readily illustrate the relationship between the inner life of the individual and the greater whole of social-historical reality: in other words, dystopian fiction is especially attuned to the interplay of 'biography and history' described by Mills. [...] Dystopian fiction ought to be seen as situated somewhere between the subjective and objective poles, allowing it to illustrate how personal experience and social structure enter into and mutually influence one another with a phenomenological richness arguably unmatched by empirical analysis. (Seeger and Davison-Vecchione 2019, 50).

There returns, then, the concept of an individual as representative of a collectivity, of the zoom-in, zoom-out gaze with which sociologists and literary critics alike should approach a genre that portrays society through a single person (or a small number of people), in what we might describe as a form of Jakobsonian metonymy.

In what follows, we will take on a number of dystopian works: two novels in Chapter Five, where we will focus on political dystopias, a video game in Chapter Six to discuss the technological strand, and a movie in Chapter Seven for the environmental one. The textual analyses will be carried out through a sociological lens—that is, by considering how a select number of sociological (and, at times, philosophical) theories on postmodernity are both valid for and represented in these fictional works.

PART TWO

Analysing Dystopia

CHAPTER FIVE

From Big Brother to Big Data

Most of the classic dystopian works of the twentieth century deal primarily with the role of the state or of a governmental body in the lives of their citizens. Works like *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *We, Brave New World,* and *Fahrenheit 451* have placed the concept of state control to the forefront of dystopia, introducing tyrannical and overreaching dictatorships as model for the oppressive state.

Similarly, scholars who have attempted to map the genre have mostly focused their attention on political dystopias, only mentioning briefly the technological or environmental ones. For instance, Gregory Claeys admits that his *Dystopia: A Natural History* explores in detail only the first category, acknowledging the others without delving too much into their features (2017,

5). Elisabetta Di Minico does a similar operation in her *Il futuro in bilico,*[99] in which she identifies control as the dystopian practice *par excellence.*

Throughout the twentieth century, political dystopian fiction has sparked a heated debate on the role of the state in the life of its citizens, often by representing totalitarian regimes. Despite Bauman's opinion on the ineffectiveness of these narratives to describe the liquid form of contemporaneity,[100] such political dystopias have not vanished. One only needs to think of the highly acclaimed trilogy *The Hunger Games* (2008-2010) by Suzanne Collins to have a contemporary example of a political dystopia featuring an overreaching totalitarian regime.[101] Similarly, Margaret Atwood's much anticipated sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale*, called *The Testaments* (2019), deals with a theocracy that replaces democracy in the United States, imposing strict control on its citizens.[102]

It is important to stress, however, how these recent works tend to situate their plots toward the end of said regime, detailing its demise rather than its undefeatable power. *The Hunger Games* and *The Testaments* alike do not display the seemingly endless reach of the regime, nor do they imply that resistance is futile. Rather, they are tales of rebellion and hope. Thus, traditional totalitarian structures are still featured in contemporary political

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[99] The title roughly translates as "Precarious Future." This is one of the very few studies on dystopia published in Italian.

[100] Bauman's perspective on this has already been explored in Chapter Four. See p. 100.

[101] The trilogy, set in the future, takes place in Panem, a country that replaced the United States after an apocalyptic event. Panem is composed of the Capitol, the wealthiest sector where the government headquarters are located, and thirteen districts living in varying states of poverty. Every year, a lottery selects a boy and a girl from districts One to Twelve to participate in the Hunger Games, a televised death match whose aim is both to entertain the Capitol and punish the districts for a past rebellion which caused the annihilation of District Thirteen at the hand of the government. Capitol City rules with unwavering oppression, led by President Snow, the main antagonist of the story.

[102] The *Handmaid's Tale* (1985) is one of Margaret Atwood's most famous novels. Set in Gilead, a theocracy that was born after a coup in the United States, it depicts a patriarchal society where women are profoundly oppressed and class divisions are enforced. More on this will be added in the section on *The Testaments* later in this chapter.

dystopias, but seem to have lost their power to oppress without stemming hope for change: often, dictators are overturned, totalitarian governments annihilated, and their surveillance networks dismantled.[103]

Control is the fundamental theme treated in political dystopias, which have traditionally dealt with surveillance techniques of the most disparate kind. Control is exerted over the body, the mind, and information. It is focused on the individual and on the community. It exploits old and new techniques of surveillance alike, adapting to the context. Control is fostered by surveillance, and surveillance is indeed at the forefront of the contemporary public debate, especially "in relation to the post-9/11 fallout for 'security' and 'risk management' and simultaneously from the birth of social media, that came to widespread public attention after Facebook was founded in 2004" (Lyon 2014a, 22).[104] In what follows, I will sketch the evolution of the main sociological theories on surveillance in order to track them within two contemporary dystopian novels.

1. Surveillance Studies

From a sociological point of view, surveillance studies are quite a recent field of enquiry, with the first works dedicated to the topic appearing in the 1970s—Michel Foucault published *Discipline and Punish* in 1975 (1977 in English), followed four years later by Dario Melossi and Massimo Pavarini's *The Prison and the Factory* (1981 in English). As David Lyon remarks in his 1994 fundamental study *The Electronic Eye,* before Foucault surveillance was

[103] As we will see shortly, exceptions exist. Dave Eggers's *The Circle*, which ends with the protagonist thwarting the plot to dismantle the tech corporation that was taking over the world, follows in the path of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, rather than of critical dystopias.

[104] For more on how surveillance has changed after 9/11 see: David Lyon, *Surveillance after September 11* (2003), and David Lyon and Kevin D. Haggerty, "The Surveillance Legacies of 9/11: Recalling, Reflecting on, and Rethinking Surveillance in the Security Era" (2012).

generally not considered a feature of modernity to be studied in and of itself. With the notable exception of James Rule's work *Private Lives and Public Surveillance* (1974), it was mostly featured in the research of famous sociologists like Max Weber and Karl Marx without being identified as one of the defining characteristics of modernity (Lyon 1994, 6).[105]

Indeed, before the 1970s, most of the reflection on surveillance happened within dystopian or utopian fiction,[106] and the sociological research still interacts heavily with the fictional works that sketched its contours, above all Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. David Lyon and Gary T. Marx (the most prominent scholars in the field) but also Thomas Allmer and Peter Marks rely and reflect on Orwell's legacy, whether to support it or to dismiss it. Kevin Haggerty and Richard Ericson (2000) go as far as identifying the Foucauldian and the Orwellian as the two main traditions within surveillance studies (from which they depart to argue for a theory of surveillance based on the rhizome as described by Deleuze and Guattari).

The sociological definition of surveillance has undergone several modifications in recent times, as scholars tried to adapt it to the fast changes in monitoring technologies and practices. One of the most updated takes is by

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[105] About the Marxist and Weberian position on surveillance, Lyon writes: "Karl Marx focuses special attention on surveillance as an aspect of the struggle between labour and capital. Overseeing and monitoring workers is viewed here as a means of maintaining managerial control on behalf of capital. Max Weber, on the other hand, concentrates on the ways that all modern organizations develop means of storing and retrieving data in the form of files as part of the quest of efficient practice within bureaucracy. Such files frequently contain personal information so that organizations, especially government administrators, can 'keep tabs' on populations" (1994, 7).

[106] Particularly poignant is Peter Marks's opinion that utopian and dystopian fiction is the genre that better represents and assesses surveillance: "Spy novels and detective fiction potentially can deal with larger social questions, though they tend to be tightly focused. They tend not to investigate in any sustained or encompassing way how societies are organised or might be organised differently in the future as do utopian texts. Surveillance is pervasive and consequential in contemporary life, constantly morphing and expanding as new technologies and social situations arise. The future arrives early, so to speak, and we need ways of thinking inventively about the challenges and questions surveillance continues to raise. Modern utopian works overwhelmingly project forward, initiating imaginative thought experiments that can feed into social awareness and discourse" (2015, 5).

Gary T. Marx, who has been leading the field of surveillance studies since the 1980s. He has returned in several of his works on the necessity to widen the scope of the research and the breadth of the definition. In his 2015 essay "Surveillance Studies," written for the *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences* and based on his book of the same year *Windows into the Soul: Surveillance and Society in the Age of High Technology*, he defines surveillance as follows:

> At the most general level surveillance of humans (which is often, but need not be synonymous with human surveillance) can be defined as regard or attendance to others (whether a person, a group, or an aggregate as with a national census) or to factors presumed to be associated with these. A central feature is gathering some form of data connectable to individuals (whether as uniquely identified or as a member of a category). (Marx 2015, 734)

A key point he makes in presenting this definition is the avoidance of every word connected to the visual, since it would diminish the importance of surveillance through senses other than sight. 'Observe,' he claims, cannot be deployed to describe surveillance, and terms such as 'scrutinize,' 'regard', and 'attend' are to be preferred (2015, 735). A second, even more relevant point, is the tacit implication that no positive or negative value can be attributed to surveillance. Surveillance practices and consequences have largely been considered inherently negative from the outset of the sociological enquiry. Yet, both Gary T. Marx and Lyon, among others, insist that such a view is too narrow and biased to be accepted, and that it is fundamental that surveillance and the tools that enhance it are considered as neutral when not related to a specific context and aim. Lyon, for instance, in considering the consequences of the birth of surveillance studies from dystopian fiction, points out that

> [dystopian visions] have the virtue of directing our attention to the negative, constraining, and unjust aspects of surveillance, and of helping us to identify which kinds of trends are especially dangerous from this point of view. But their disadvantage is that they may thus exaggerate

> the negative by seeing only one side of surveillance, promote pessimism about whether such negative traits can be countered, and fail to offer any indication as to what the content of an alternative might be (1994, 204).

Gary T. Marx is more specific in that he warns against tying the definition of surveillance to the goal of (negatively understood) control, which would leave out all instances of surveillance aimed at enhancing institutional efficiency and services, or at protecting those in need (2015, 735).

Such a negative outlook on surveillance comes only in part from the dystopian origins of the debate: the strong connection that Foucault draws between surveillance and power, generally understood as social control, is its other main cause.

In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977), Foucault focuses on the practice of discipline as a deterrent of crime and as a pervasive characteristic of modernity. Discipline assumed a ‘diffuse’ status when a police force functioning as a capillary network of surveillance and as a mediator between society and the power of the monarch was established in Europe throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (1977, 213), leading to discipline becoming the norm, rather than the exception. It was deployed to create docile bodies, individuals that would work as well-oiled cogs of the social machine (1977, 210). Indeed, it became so ubiquitous that it prompted Foucault to describe the modern society as “disciplinary” (1977, 209). Thus, the state, through the police force, needed a tool to execute such discipline:

> In order to be exercised, this [infinitely pervasive] power [of the police] had to be given the instrument of permanent, exhaustive, omnipresent surveillance, capable of making all visible, as long as it could itself remain invisible. It had to be like a faceless gaze that transformed the whole social body into a field of perception: thousands of eyes posted everywhere, mobile attentions ever on the alert, a long, hierarchized network […] And this unceasing observation had to be accumulated in a series of reports and registers (1977, 214)

Indeed, Foucault reiterates the strong connection that binds power to knowledge, which he explores at the very beginning of his work:

> We should admit [...] that power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful); that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations. (1977, 27)

For discipline to take hold of society, for it to become ubiquitous and one of the driving forces of modernity, knowledge becomes paramount to those who have the power and wish to retain it—and knowledge, here, should be understood as the acquisition of information through surveillance.

Foucault famously retrieves the concept of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon to describe the new form of social control that supported the exercise of discipline once corporal punishments were abandoned.[107]

The Panopticon as formulated by Bentham was an expression of the utilitarian utopia. It projected the concept of an orderly society extending its control over every individual and setting in place mechanisms that granted the subsistence of the social system by creating pliant subjects which worked towards its preservation.

Foucault focuses especially on the way the Panopticon modifies the perception and practice of power. Indeed, he describes it as "a kind of laboratory of power" (1977, 204) and "a generalizable model of functioning; a way of defining power relations in terms of the everyday life of men" (1977, 205).

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[107] Theorised by Jeremy Bentham in 1787, the Panopticon was an architectural project. It was designed as a circular structure surrounding a tower from which guards could see everything happening inside the building without being seen. Mainly meant for prisons, it also found applications in building factories, schools, and other public institutions where surveillance was required. The Panopticon did not find fertile ground during Bentham's life and remained a purely theoretical concept for many years, although rare examples of panoptic buildings exist today. Two of the most relevant are penal institutes: the Presidio Modelo complex (Cuba), and the Stateville Correctional Center, F-house (Illinois). Use of both has been discontinued but the structures are still standing.

Through the concept of the Panopticon, Foucault manages to underline the asymmetrical distribution of power that characterises the disciplinary society, where those monitoring are in control of those being watched. More specifically, the Panopticon has the advantage of guaranteeing surveillance over large numbers of individuals simultaneously, employing a limited number of watchers.[108] Foucault does not portray the Panopticon as exclusively the tool of a totalitarian, oppressive government: even though those who are observed cannot level their gaze towards the observers and no reciprocity exists in the Panopticon, the structure, claims Foucault, is open to everyone wishing to inspect it. Just as easily as those observing can simultaneously monitor a large number of individuals, so any inspector can access the tower and evaluate the observers (1977, 207). This, clearly, warrants the age-old question: *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes*? Who is going to monitor those who observe, ensuring the 'fairness' of their gaze, its legitimation? Most importantly, who has a right to determine what constitutes a fair, legitimate gaze?

It must be stressed that Foucault, in post-structuralist fashion, does not wish to attribute a positive or negative value to the Panopticon, arguing that the kind of work he was carrying out demanded neutrality: *Discipline and Punish* was structured as a genealogy, a history of the evolution of the penal and carceral systems in France, not as its critique. This, in turn, has attracted criticism from several scholars, most notably from Jürgen Habermas, who

[108] Foucault writes: "In each of its applications, [the Panopticon] makes it possible to perfect the exercise of power. It does this in several ways: because it can reduce the number of those who exercise it, while increasing the number of those on whom it is exercised. Because it is possible to intervene at any moment and because the constant pressure acts even before the offences, mistakes or crimes have been committed. Because, in these conditions, its strength is that it never intervenes, it is exercised spontaneously and without noise, it constitutes a mechanism whose effects follow from one another. Because, without any physical instrument other than architecture and geometry, it acts directly on individuals; it gives 'power of mind over mind.' The panoptic schema makes any apparatus of power more intense: it assures its economy (in material, in personnel, in time); it assures its efficacity [*sic*] by its preventative character, its continuous functioning and its automatic mechanisms" (1977, 206).

described Foucault's work as crypto-normative—that is, claiming a lack of normative judgement while covertly giving one.[109] As explained by Bo Isenberg (1991), who commented on Habermas's view on Foucault, the former is especially critical of the latter's notion of power (and of its relationship with knowledge):

> Habermas remains in a position from which he affiliates the notion of power with 'traditional' characteristics: power is negative, prohibiting, evil, destructive. In so doing, he reduces Foucault's analytic to something which describes truth, sexuality, madness, as based on violence and repression. One of Foucault's most important inventions is to broaden a traditional concept of power by giving it new meanings: power can be repressive but also productive, power can be prohibiting but also permitting and encouraging. (Isenberg 1991, 302)

This is evident in Foucault's remark that the nature of the Panopticon is not inherently oppressive, nor a tool enhancing social control for power's sake.[110]

> The Panopticon [...] has a role of amplification; although it arranges power, although it is intended to make it more economic and more effective, it does so not for power itself, nor for the immediate salvation of a threatened society: its aim is to strengthen the social forces—to increase production, to develop the economy, spread education, raise the level of public morality; to increase and multiply. (1977, 207-208)

Retrieving Bentham's utilitarian goal, Foucault argues that the Panopticon's main aim is to give structure to society, to regulate social activities and relations so that it can progress. Its role in enhancing surveillance is

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[109] On this, I point the readers to Bo Isenberg's essay "Habermas on Foucault: Critical Remarks" (1999).

[110] It must be remarked that Foucault's neutral view of the Panopticon applies to any other social structure upon which he comments: he argues, in short, that anything is informed, modified, and changed by its social and historical context, thus rejecting the idea that anything can have an inherent value. This view extends to human nature: Foucault rejects the idea of a fundamental essence that constitutes a human being, arguing that everything is historical and contextual and that, consequently, human beings are the results of social institutions. On this, see "Human Nature: Justice versus Power. Noam Chomsky debates with Michel Foucault" (1971).

necessary to guarantee the correct functioning of a tightly organised society—that is, surveillance should be understood as functional to progress, rather than as a tool of oppression. That it might be perceived as oppressive is, to an extent, a side effect bound to the historical and social context.

Now, this is a neat solution for those holding power, since it simultaneously grants control and social advancement. Whereas control traditionally hindered progress due to its violent nature, this sort of self-inflicted surveillance, this constant state of monitoring, subdues the individual and elevates society as a whole.[111] Indeed, the Panopticon ensures that constant surveillance, pervasive and tacitly accepted, will lead the individual into performing its assigned role within society. Even more, the Panopticon leaves surveillance in the potential: the observed cannot know whether they are actually being watched, therefore they will behave as if they were constantly monitored. All in all, the Panopticon as presented by Foucault is a cost-effective tool for diffuse surveillance. It has beneficial effects on the State and oppressive—or to preserve Foucault's attempt at neutrality, limiting—ones on the individual. As such, it has often been interpreted as a negative tool of social control, given that the advancement of society and the preservation of power are attained by imposing strict control over the individual. The unbalance of power in the Panopticon is its most evident flaw, and the one used most commonly to advocate against it.

Since its retrieval by Foucault, the Panopticon has been exploited for decades as the metaphor of modern surveillance; whether it is still relevant to describe our contemporary society is widely discussed, with differing positions.[112] Indeed, adherence to the theory of the Panopticon has acted as the defining feature for the two main schools of thought within surveillance studies.

[111] Remarkably, the sort of utopian society that Bentham envisioned as a product of the Panopticon is quite closely aligned to those portrayed by Thomas More, Tommaso Campanella, Francis Bacon, and Edward Bellamy.

[112] In addition to the works examined in the following pages, see David Murakami Wood, "Beyond the Panopticon? Foucault and Surveillance Studies" (2007) for a detailed discussion on the reception of Foucault's take on the Panopticon.

Relying on Thomas Allmer's informative essay "Critical Surveillance Studies in the Information Society" (2011), it is possible to talk about a panoptic school and a non-panoptic school.

The panoptic school embraces Foucault's notion of the Panopticon, recognising that it is useful (to a certain extent) for studying the status of contemporary surveillance. It views it as a mainly negative practice and applies to it a narrow definition connecting it to coercion, repression, discipline, power, and domination. It considers power as centralised and views society as repressive and controlled (Allmer 2011, 569).

One of the most notable thinkers supporting the panoptic school is Gilles Deleuze, with particular reference to his short but poignant essay "Postscript on the Societies of Control" (1992). In that text, Deleuze considers the disciplinary society as pertaining to the past, affirming that we are currently living in a 'society of control.' He sees it as an evolution of the disciplinary society, in that it extends surveillance to every aspect of a person's life:

> In the disciplinary societies one was always starting again (from school to the barracks, from the barracks to the factory), while in the societies of control one is never finished with anything—the corporation, the educational system, the armed services being metastable states coexisting in one and the same modulation, like a universal system of deformation. (1992, 5)

Deleuze argues that in disciplinary societies there still existed a personal dimension (represented by the signature) and a social dimension (represented by the number that places the individual within the mass). Such a division no longer applies to societies of control, where the one thing that matters is a code: "Individuals have become 'dividuals,' and masses, samples, data, markets, or 'banks'" (1992, 5). He connects this shift to a change in capitalism, which moved away from a goal of production towards one of sale. "This is no longer a capitalism for production but for the product, which is to say, for being sold or marketed" (1992, 5). His vision of the society of control thus implies an overreaching, ubiquitous surveillance enhanced by information

technology, which reduces the individual to a code through which one can be granted or denied access to places, resources, data. It is a worsening of Foucault's panoptic vision.

In *The Mode of Information* (1990), Mark Poster supports the panoptic school through the concept of "Superpanopticon." Similarly to Deleuze, Poster expands it in order to adapt it to the information society, claiming that in today's world there is no physical limit to the reach of its gaze: due to the advent of computer technologies, the panopticon has become a digital feature,

> a system of surveillance without walls, windows, towers or guards. The quantitative advances in the technologies of surveillance result in a qualitative change in the microphysics of power. Technological change, however, is only part of the process. The populace has been disciplined to surveillance and to participating in the process. Social security cards, drivers' licenses, credit cards, library cards and the like – the individual must apply for them, have them ready at all times, use them continuously. Each transaction is recorded, encoded and added to the databases. Individuals themselves in many cases fill out the forms; they are at once the source of information and the recorder of the information. (1990, 93)

Furthermore, he argues that the Superpanopticon "imposes a new language situation that has unique, disturbing features" (1990, 94) due to its deployment of databases. Poster claims that the use of databases creates new digital identities through both pre-existing categories and an impoverished language. He warns that the language used in the compiling of databases is too stripped-down to aptly represent an individual, and that it implies relationships among pieces of information that do not exist outside of the database (1990, 96).[113] Thus, the Superpanopticon conjures up a distorted

[113] David Murakami Wood dissents with the view of the database as panoptical: "the database, for all that it is undoubtedly another tool of hierarchical organization and normalization, is not panoptical. It comes from the technological stream that Torpey criticizes Foucault for ignoring, the 'file.' If Foucault had continued his genealogical historical account into the twentieth century, it seems unlikely he would have described databases as superpanoptic, rather he would have treated the 'database'

digital image of a person, who nonetheless participates actively in the collection and categorisation of information by filling out forms and questionnaires, by acquiescing to the use of IDs, credit cards, and other digital identification tools.

The non-panoptic school believes that Foucault's notion of the Panopticon cannot be applied to today's practice of surveillance. It has a mainly neutral attitude towards surveillance (although it does not claim it is permanently neutral), of which it gives a broad definition (consider the one by Gary T. Marx presented earlier). It states that surveillance has constraining and enabling effects, particularly with reference to data collection, and that it should be understood as a plural and technical process (Allmer 2011, 568-569).

Some of the most relevant authors on surveillance adhere to this school. David Lyon and Gary T. Marx, for instance, advocate for a broad definition of surveillance, as discussed earlier in this chapter. Although they do not reject the panoptic aspect of surveillance, agreeing that there are situations and tools that indeed foster negative, oppressive surveillance of individuals or groups of individuals, they insist on equally considering the beneficial aspects of widespread surveillance for the individual.[114]

Lyon, especially, considers the notion of the Panopticon as an incomplete metaphor of surveillance. In his essay "Surveillance and the Eye of God" (2014a), he notices that Bentham's project was supposed to grant the observers a sort of "secular omniscience" (2014a, 26). Indeed, Bentham references Psalm 139 as the inspiration for the Panopticon.[115] As Lyon writes,

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as a particular political technology, a diagram, a mode of ordering, of its own space/time of power/knowledge" (2007, 253).

[114] This differs from what Foucault says of 'positive' surveillance: whereas he identifies surveillance in a panoptic society as beneficial only for the state actor, the non-panoptic school argues that it can be positive for individuals, too.

[115] [...] O Lord, you have searched me and known me!
[2] You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from afar.
[3] You search out my path and my lying down
and are acquainted with all my ways.
[4] Even before a word is on my tongue,

"a key problem with Bentham's reading of Psalm 139 (as indeed of latter-day readings that follow the same track) is that it does violence to the text" (2014a, 28). The Psalm evokes God's omniscience, and the impossibility to escape his gaze. Yet, the psalmist does not convey desperation but gratitude, for in the gaze of God lies not only control but also benevolence and care. "The psalmist discovers what it is to be known by God and this involves both a healthy respect for the one who can as it were see right through human beings, and also a sense of relief that someone has noticed, is aware of the situations of life with all their uncertainties" (2014a, 29).

Lyon argues that surveillance should embrace the complete vision of the Eye of God, distributing both control and care. He discards Bentham's notion of the Panopticon and Foucault's interpretation of it due to their prevalently negative conception of surveillance as a form of control of the individual which does not take into consideration the positive side of it. Remarking on the fact that contemporary surveillance has become virtual, rather than visual, he applies the phrase 'Eye of God' loosely, referring to surveillance that is not only limited to watching (2014a, 23).

He argues that nowadays

> no one living an ordinary life in advanced societies can evade surveillance. [...] Surveillance in this sense is emphatically not always and everywhere negative; indeed, it is an ambiguous process. It is never neutral, but not automatically 'good' or 'bad' either. [...] Today it is characterised prominently by 'social sorting.' Data are gathered and processed in order to place different population segments into different categories, so that they can be treated differently. (2014a, 22, 24)

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behold, O Lord, you know it altogether. [...]
[7] Where shall I go from your Spirit?
Or where shall I flee from your presence?
[8] If I ascend to heaven, you are there! [...]
[23] Search me, O God, and know my heart!
Try me and know my thoughts!
[24] And see if there be any grievous way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting! (English Standard Version)

Clearly, this can have harmless or positive repercussions on our lives (for instance, it can be used to tailor ads to our interests) but can also have dire consequences. Profiling has been much debated recently and scholars have particularly stressed the discrimination it causes when it is conducted along categories of race, income, and sexual orientation.[116]

Similarly to Mark Poster, but understanding this as a positive trend, Lyon also remarks on the participation of the observed in the gathering of data through complacency, credulity, and compliance (2014a, 24-25). He claims that surveillance has become an atomised, ubiquitous and fluid practice. No centralised actor has complete control over society at large; a number of public and private institutions intervene whenever knowledge needs to be extracted from the information harvested. We do not live in the centralised world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, nor under the oppressive gaze of the Panopticon.

Indeed, a number of scholars moved against Foucault's disciplinary society criticizing its strong focus on the role of the state. Lyon mentions it, and so does Gary T. Marx. In their well-known essay "The Surveillant Assemblage" (2000), Kevin D. Haggerty and Richard V. Ericson acknowledge Foucault's (and Orwell's) importance for the development of surveillance studies, but argue for an evolution of the field away from these early contributions. They employ Deleuze and Guattari's work to argue for what they name 'the surveillant Assemblage:'

> We are witnessing a convergence of what were once discrete surveillance systems to the point that we can now speak of an emerging 'surveillant Assemblage.' This assemblage operates by abstracting human bodies from their territorial settings and separating them into a series of discrete flows. These flows are then reassembled into distinct 'data doubles' which can be scrutinized and targeted for intervention. In the process, we are witnessing a rhizomatic leveling of the hierarchy of surveillance, such that groups which were previously exempt from routine surveillance are now increasingly being monitored. (2000, 606)

[116] An extremely poignant work on this is the collection of essays *Captivating Technology: Race, Carceral Technoscience, and Liberatory Imagination in Everyday Life*, edited by Ruja Benjamin (2019).

The surveillant assemblage exists "as a potentiality" (2000, 609)—that is, it has no fixed nature and resides in the connections that can be drawn between different agencies, institutions, and private actors. It fits well into Bauman's description of the liquid society, embodying its fluid, shifting nature by understanding surveillance assemblages as amorphous and constantly changing according to whichever actors and connections are activated at a given moment. Indeed, Bauman and Lyon recognise the importance of the surveillant assemblage in their work *Liquid Surveillance: A Conversation* (2013), as they stress that we are now inhabiting a post-panoptical society (2013, 10). Bauman, in answering Lyon's direct question on the relevance of the Panopticon within the liquid society, answers that it has not disappeared and is still relevant in some areas of society, but it is not the ruling metaphor for contemporary surveillance:

> The panopticon has been shifted and confined to the 'unmanageable' parts of society, such as prisons, camps, psychiatric clinics and other 'total institutions,' in Erving Goffman's sense. How they work nowadays has been superbly recorded and in my view definitively described by Loïc Wacquant. In other words, panopticon-like practices are limited to sites for humans booked to the debit side, declared useless and fully and truly 'excluded'—and where the incapacitation of bodies, rather than their harnessing to useful work, is the sole purpose behind the setting's logic. (2000, 52)

Bauman then suggests that today's practice of surveillance has shifted from one of enforcement to one of voluntary acquiescence: surveillance is not carried out through normative regulation, but through the arousal of desire, through temptation and seduction. Consequently, it lies with the supervised, rather than the supervisors. It is "the genius of ruling [that] wants the ruled to do the rulers' job" (2013, 52). Moreover, Bauman detects a shift in attitude in the monitoring carried out by companies towards their employees. Whereas, in Weberian fashion, employees were requested to abide to their

companies' values and mechanisms, leaving behind any personal views, hobbies, and interests, nowadays companies aim to

> harness the totality of the subaltern personality and their whole waking time to the company's purposes. This is an expedient viewed, not without reason, as infinitely more convenient and profitable than the notoriously costly, unwieldy, restrictive and unduly laborious panoptical measures. Servitude, along with surveillance of performance twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week, is becoming fully and truly a DIY job for the subordinates. (2013, 54)

Surveillance has not lost its function as a tool of control, but it has become 'soft.' It has become instrumental for the economy, essential for both the sellers and the buyers.

It has also enabled the small actors, the individuals, to practice a 'form of reverse surveillance' through which they can monitor those very institutions that observe them. This practice is called 'synopticism' by Haggerty and Ericson (2000, 618), although today it is mostly known as 'sousveillance' (Marx 2017, 22) and it is often referred to as 'watchful vigilance from below,' a 'bottom up form of observation.' Synopticism implies the aware or unaware cooperation among individuals in the scrutinizing of powerful actors, and is often mentioned by those non-panoptic thinkers that argue for a balanced vision of surveillance, where power relations are symmetrical.

Through "The Surveillant Assemblage" and *Liquid Surveillance* we come to an understanding of contemporary surveillance as atomised, fluid, and equally positive or negative in outlook. It lies in the hands of public institutions (e.g. police and intelligence forces, but also the administrative offices), private corporations (e.g. social media platforms), and individuals, who are increasingly referred to as 'users' (Lyon 2014b, 3). It still fosters oppressive control in the 'traditional way' on those belonging to an 'unmanageable' part of society, and soft forms of control on the rest of society through the monitoring of consumer choices and personal movement.

Thus, its aim has expanded from a 'desire to monitor' to a wish to harness data on individuals and groups of individuals. Indeed, most surveillance today implies the hoarding of information within immense databases for no purpose but to have it in case it needs to be used. Haggerty and Ericson find a new driving force behind the gathering of data, which might be seen as the 'ultimate' assemblage:

> We are only now beginning to appreciate that surveillance is driven by the desire to bring systems together, to combine practices and technologies and integrate them into a larger whole. It is this tendency which allows us to speak of surveillance as an assemblage, with such combinations providing for exponential increases in the degree of surveillance capacity. Rather than exemplifying Orwell's totalitarian state-centred Oceania, this assemblage operates across both state and extra-state institutions. (2000, 610)

Essentially, we went from Big Brother to Big Data. The debate on the massive gathering of personal metadata gained traction in 2013, after Edward Snowden revealed that the NSA was harvesting the data of millions of private citizens, especially exploiting the PRISM program and regulation put in place after 9/11.[117] It brought to the attention of the public that their personal data was being recorded and processed to gather any information relevant to ensure national security.

As Lyon remarks, it is a preventive practice, aimed at identifying potentially threatening patterns before they have the chance to become concrete:

> Big Data reverses prior policing or intelligence activities that would conventionally have targeted suspects or persons of interest and then sought data about them. Now bulk data are obtained and data are aggregated from different sources *before* determining the full range of their actual and potential uses and mobilizing algorithms and analytics not only to understand a past sequence of events but also to predict and

[117] For some context on the Snowden case consider David Lyon's essay "Surveillance, Snowden, and Big Data: Capacities, consequences, critique" published in *Big Data & Society* in 2014.

> intervene *before* behaviors, events, and processes are set in train. (2014b, 4)

Surveillance, then, and particularly surveillance through Big Data, has updated its goal to that of predicting potential outcomes through the analysis of a huge amount of information on private individuals and social actors. A new set of potential issues arise from such a shift: "where legal systems are based on an after the fact system of penalties or punishments, the turn to one based on future-oriented preventative measures is of huge import, not least for those rendered unable to understand or contribute meaningfully to the process" (Lyon 2014b,5). For those familiar with Philip K. Dick's short story *The Minority Report* (1956), this will certainly ring a bell.[118]

Big Data has all but propelled the expansion of surveillance into every facet of our lives, within and without the social sphere. Surveillance can now be directed (that is, harvested by direct observation), automated, or volunteered (Lyon 2014b, 5). It can no longer be avoided, unless we are willing to abandon life within a developed society.

If Big Data has sealed the shift from disciplinary surveillance to predictive surveillance via control surveillance, if monitoring happens through and toward electronic elements, there arises the question of the bodies: if, traditionally, it was the body, its movements, its actions, that was under surveillance, what happens to the body? What happens to space? And how is our identity (de-)formed by mass electronic data collection?

Haggerty and Ericson underline early on that, through the surveillant assemblage, information gathered from different actors is compiled into a digital persona which might or might not represent well the 'original' source. Before them, Lyon called it a data double (1994). Peter Marks, in his highly informative *Imagining Surveillance: Eutopian and Dystopian Literature and Film* (2015), argues that this digitalisation of our identity "refashions and

[118] At the core of Philip K. Dick's story are the 'precogs,' humans that can predict crimes before they are committed, and the 'precrime' police, who arrest the criminals before they commit the crime.

updates the body/mind split that has tantalised philosophers for centuries, but also hints that the contemporary surveillance subject is more and less than the corporeal self to the point of verging on the intangible, even the fictional" (2015, 126). In discussing the consequences of electronic surveillance on the formation of identity, Friesen et al. use the concept of 'traces:' elements of our identity, be they bodily like our DNA, or intangible like our social security number, that we leave behind while making our way through the world. They argue that identity is increasingly perceived as an assemblage of traces, rather than as a whole subject, and that this is reflected in the data double (2009, 88). Writing almost twelve years ago, they identify the biggest weakness of the data double in its predictive nature: it will not match the 'real' self as long as it is based on pure statistical analysis and there remains space for the self to escape surveillance (2009, 89). It would be fundamentally wrong, they argue, for every information about a person to be recorded and scrutinised. "Truly, to be completely 'outed' is to be annihilated" (2009, 89). Whereas I agree with the sentiment, I believe that we are moving in the direction of total transparency without much opposition. Big Data surveillance is 'connecting the dots,' having different actors sharing bits and pieces of information that, put together, are increasingly close to the original 'self.' Indeed, our data double does not have agency—not yet, at least—but if that is to be the discriminant between our real selves and our digital doubles then we might have to start questioning whether there is any agency left in our 'real' choices. And, additionally, whether our digital identity, the 'fictional identity' is actually becoming more real, or at least more relevant, than our corporeal one.

In her latest work, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019), Shoshana Zuboff remarks precisely on the ubiquitous power of digital surveillance as perpetrated by Big Tech companies such as Facebook, Google, and Microsoft. She focuses especially on the ways in which their harvesting practices—that is, the ways in which they automatically track, monitor, and monetise our online behaviour—have spilled into the 'real' world, automatising not only

these surveillance strategies, but *ourselves,* our own choices. Zuboff calls this 'instrumentarianism,' the attempt by big corporations (and, to an extent, by state actors) to influence our behaviour so that we deviate onto pre-made paths:

> Instrumentarian power knows and shapes human behavior toward others' ends. Instead of armaments and armies, it works its will through the automated medium of an increasingly ubiquitous computational architecture of "smart" networked devices, things, and spaces. (Zuboff 2019, Kindle edition)

Agency, indeed, seems to survive only as the vestige of a time when technology was understood as enhancing, rather than trapping and manipulative. Nevertheless, Zuboff argues, such a vision is not irremediably lost to us; we might still be able to move past the oppressive logic of surveillance capitalism and onto a more humane, less exploitative form of digital technology. As she explains: "Surveillance capitalism is not technology; it is a logic that imbues technology and commands it into action. Surveillance capitalism is a market form that is unimaginable outside the digital milieu, but it is not the same as the 'digital'" (2019, Kindle edition).
The sooner we recognize that these oppressive practices of surveillance are not innate nor inevitable, not inscribed into the very core of the technology on which they rely to exist, the quicker we will be able to rethink the role of the digital world and of our digital personas, and the way they relate to our 'analogical' self.

Dystopias, or rather Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, helped lay the foundation of the sociological field of surveillance studies. Throughout the years, they have been particularly attuned to instances of surveillance and control. I have briefly mentioned *The Minority Report* as one among several literary texts dealing with the impact of surveillance on society. In what follows, I consider two recent dystopias to explore themes of social control and surveillance.

Dave Eggers's *The Circle* (2013) is especially well-attuned to the issues tied to the contemporary debate on electronic surveillance, Big Data, and the 'disappearance' of the corporeal self, while Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments* (2019) explores the ways in which the state can impose social monitoring without technology, offering a chilling portrayal of a 'return to the past:' despite its future setting, its oppressive forms of control are more aligned with the 'original' surveillance of the body springing from the Foucauldian Panopticon. Essentially, *The Circle* deals with innovation; *The Testaments* with tradition. Both interact with themes and trends we have analysed in Part One. Both of them being set in the United States, written by North American writers, and being primarily political dystopias, they are particularly invested in a reflection on American exceptionalism, taken into consideration from two diametrically opposite perspectives. Questions of oppression, privacy, personal freedom, and discrimination traverse both novels. They both interact with the necessity of hope, albeit in very different ways, and with the necessity of conjuring up a utopia.

On a superficial level, or at least on the diegetic level, *The Circle* and *The Testaments* do not have much in common. They are set at different times in history; one describes a theocracy, the other a 'perfect democracy;' their characters have diverging attitudes towards the governing institutions. The outcome is dramatically different. Yet they both pertain to the category of political dystopias. They both comment on the consequences of utopia gone wrong, they both investigate oppressive regimes masked as benevolent actors, and they both take surveillance and control as their main themes. In what follows, they will be analysed separately. As some points of convergence become evident, I will strive to mark explicitly where their reasonings collide.

2. *The Testaments*[119]

Published worldwide on September 10, 2019*, The Testaments* is the sequel to Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel *The Handmaid's Tale* and one of the most anticipated novels of the year. Its release elicited an enthusiastic response from the general public, with bookstores organising popular launch events and fans attending dressed in Gileadean outfits. On the evening of the launch, Atwood was interviewed by Samira Ahmed at the Royal Theatre in London, with cast members of the TV series adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* reading excerpts from the novel. In an unprecedented promotional choice for a novel, let alone a dystopian one, the event was broadcast live to cinemas all over the world. *The Testaments* confirmed its success by selling over 500,000 copies worldwide in less than a week and by receiving the 2019 Booker Prize for Fiction, shared with Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other*.[120]

The events narrated in *The Testaments* begin fifteen years after those of *The Handmaid's Tale* and collectively sketch a picture of how Gilead—the theocratic dictatorship established in the United States after a military coup—was brought down. Whereas the first novel had only one narrator (the Handmaid Offred) its sequel has three: Aunt Lydia, one of the founders of the regime, Agnes Jemima, a girl growing up in Gilead, and Daisy, a Canadian teenager. All three narratives, told in the first person, are extracts of written documents presented in a non-chronological order ("The Ardua Hall Holograph," "Transcript of Witness Testimony 369A," and "Transcript of

[119] Parts of this textual analysis are reprised from my essay on *The Testaments* published for *The Literary Encyclopedia* in December 2019. The essay is available at: https://www.litencyc.com/php/sworks.php?rec=true&UID=38988.
Margaret Atwood is one of the most famous and appreciated authors of dystopian fiction alive. For a biographical note see Faye Hammill, "Margaret Atwood" in *The Literary Encyclopedia*. For a critical take on her oeuvre, albeit not up to date, see *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood*, edited by Coral Ann Howells (2006).

[120] For a breakdown of the sales during its first week see Flood, Allison and Jade Cuttle. "Handmaid's Sales: Margaret Atwood's The Testaments is Immediate Hit." *The Guardian* 17 September 2019.

Witness Testimony 369B" respectively) and are followed by the "partial transcript of the proceedings of the Thirteenth Symposium on Gileadean Studies, International Historical Association Convention, Passamaquoddy, Maine, June 29–30, 2197" (407), reprising the structure of *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Aunt Lydia, one of the founders and moral guides of the regime, narrates the early days of the theocracy and the crimes committed by its leaders in a secret diary she plans on smuggling out of Gilead to Mayday, an international network set on rescuing women from Gilead and overthrowing the totalitarian regime. Agnes describes her life as a young girl belonging to a family of the Gileadean elite, her barely-avoided marriage to Commander Judd, followed by her decision to become an Aunt, and the discovery that she is the stepsister of Baby Nicole, a child smuggled out of Gilead by her Handmaid mother. Daisy recounts learning that she is Baby Nicole, how she returned to Gilead as a Mayday mole, and how she went back to Canada with Agnes, carrying the evidence of the abuses of the regime collected by Aunt Lydia and setting in motion its fall.

Gilead is a patriarchal theocratic dictatorship that replaced the democratic government of the United States after a military coup. It is an oppressive regime closely tied to puritan values, directly linked to the doctrine of Manifest Destiny and to American exceptionalism. Indeed, Gilead is the precise manifestation of the ideal society fostered by such ideology. Atwood makes the connection explicit through the words that Commander Judd, the leader of the military force in Gilead, casually utters talking to Lydia about his plans for the newly-founded nation: "We're building a society congruent with the Divine Order—a city upon a hill, a light to all nations—and we are acting out of charitable care and concern" (174). 'A city upon a hill,' as I have explained in Chapter Three, is the slogan of American exceptionalism, which can be summed up as "the belief that the United States is 'different'"—not only different, but "unique, one of a (superior) kind [… that] carries with it a unique moral value and responsibility" (Byers 1997, 86). American

exceptionalism has been under scrutiny in the last few decades, as scholars declared it a dying (if not already dead) myth, and foresaw an increasingly less influential role of the United States within the global order, all the while underscoring how the myth leaves out everyone who does not belong to the dominant WASP class. However, in the early twenty-first century, and particularly since the election of Donald Trump, a vocal section of the American population has resurrected exceptionalist claims. Starting from his 2016 campaign slogan "Make America Great Again," Trump's "chauvinistic rhetoric, trade wars, and blustering escalations in the Middle East reflect a fantasy of unfettered American power" (Cambanis 2020). Yet, Trump's is not a policy of isolationism and elitist superiority over the rest of the nations. Rather, he is pursuing "a grand strategy of 'illiberal hegemony,' by which he seeks U.S. dominance but dispenses with past imperatives such as democracy promotion and preserving the international liberal order" (Cambanis 2020). Exceptionalism, according to Trump's policy, seems to have more to do with a disregard for international law than with the moral imperative of being the nation leading the world. What we witness in Gilead is much more aligned with the original strand of American exceptionalism, the one imbued of Puritan ideology claiming that America was to be the guiding light, morally, economically, politically, and militarily, for the rest of the world.

As I have mentioned already mentioned, in 1997 Thomas Byers identified in *The Handmaid's Tale* a poignant example that depicted what America would look like if the exceptionalist myth were rigidly followed in crafting the domestic and foreign policies of the United States (1997, 103). Gilead has remained the same in the fifteen years between the events of the first novel and those in *The Testaments.* Nevertheless, by making Commander Judd directly mention the myth of a 'city upon a hill,' Atwood supports and strengthens Byers's interpretation of her dystopian setting as a manifestation of the myth of American exceptionalism. It works as a loud warning against the current rhetoric preaching a return to the past, which exposes the dangers of retrieving an ideology rooted in the foundations of the American identity

without updating it. American exceptionalism need not be a pervasively negative ideology; as Cambanis argues, it might be used to foster much needed reforms within the United States (2020). However, it is necessary that the doctrine is modernised to fit into the contemporary globalised world, lest the United States actually become Gilead.

By closely observing the totalitarian theocracy, it is possible to retrieve many of the themes explored in the first part of this chapter. Social control and surveillance are at the core of the regime. Most evidently, the concept of the Eye of God is vastly exploited by Gilead, to the point that it permeates not only the social practices of the citizens, but also their language: the expression "Under his Eye" is used by Gileadeans throughout the novel to express agreement or gratitude.[121] Indeed, control passes through language in Gilead, and especially control of women, who are exceedingly oppressed and monitored. They are not allowed to read or write and the Bible is taught in an edited version distorted to better fit the goals of the regime (most notably, Atwood retrieves and rewrites the Story of the Concubine Cut into Twelve Pieces [77-78]).[122] This is reminiscent of the treatment of slaves in Antebellum America, where slaveholders handed out redacted copies of the Scriptures and read out-of-context parts from the Bible to their slaves in order to justify their condition.[123] It is noteworthy that the similarities between African-American slaves and women in Gilead are not limited to the means of oppression, but continue throughout the history of their emancipation: Gileadean women flee the regime through the Underground Femaleroad, an evident reference to the

[121] Consider, for instance, a conversation between Aunt Lydia and Commander Judd: "'The truth shall prevail,' I said. I was quivering with what I hoped would pass as righteous indignation.
'Under His Eye,' he replied" (141).

[122] The original story of the Levite's Concubine, as told by in the New King James Version of the Bible, is available at https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Judges+19&version=NKJV.

[123] For more on this topic, see for instance: Zauzmer (2019), Rae (2018), Little (2018).

Underground Railroad,[124] and, as the reader can infer from Agnes's narration, it is through her learning to read, and especially read the Bible, that she understands the false roots of the oppressive practices of the regime and begins to question them and rebel against them. Such a narrative arc is reminiscent of that of Frederick Douglass, who explains how learning to read allowed him to become aware of the injustice of his condition in his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (in which he also talks at length about the Underground Railroad).

To exemplify the manipulation of language and the religious texts, we might consider the following Gileadean psalm, that retained the original melody but updated the lyrics:

> *Under His Eye our beams of truth shine out,*
> *We see all sin;*
> *We shall observe you at your goings-out,*
> *Your comings-in.*
> *From every heart we wrench the secret vice,*
> *In prayers and tears decree the sacrifice.* [...] (34, italics in the original)

The Gileadean psalm continues pledging the worshipper's obedience and servitude to God and their willingness to carry out harsh duties and abandon all pleasures in his name. It underscores the diffuse status of surveillance in Gilead, which is not a technologically advanced nation but relies on a network of keen observers. Indeed, surveillance is carried out by everyone on anyone. Obedience to God's will—as a matter of fact, the will of the leaders of the regime—supersedes every other duty and far exceeds family ties. Therefore,

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[124] The Underground Railroad was a network of secret routes and safe houses used by enslaved African-Americans to escape to free states and Canada during the first decades of the nineteenth century. The correlation is explicitly stated in the last section of The Testaments, when Professor Maryanne Crescent Moon, introducing the Symposium on Gileadean Studies, says: "I would also like to point out that our location—Passamaquoddy, formerly Bangor—was not only a crucial jumping-off point for refugees fleeing Gilead but was also a key hub of the Underground Railroad in antebellum times, now more than three hundred years ago. As they say, history does not repeat itself, but it rhymes" (407).

every misbehaviour will be reported and punished. It is surveillance carried out by sight, in the traditional sense, on the bodies of the citizens, and especially on the female ones.

Two ‘surveilling’ governmental organisations exist: the aptly called “Eyes,” the male militia of the regime, and the Aunts, who oversee Gileadean women. Whereas the Eyes are blunt and direct in their surveillance, the Aunts operate at a more covert level, and it is on female surveillance, mostly, that the novel focuses its attention.

Ultimately, *The Testaments* is a story about womanhood. It narrates the ways in which women can be oppressed and their bodies exploited, but most of all it focuses on how they can react to said constraints.[125] It is, even more than *The Handmaid's Tale,* about female empowerment, about the strength that comes with the rebellious acts perpetrated for a freer, more equal society. It is telling that the seeds of Gilead’s demise were planted on its very first day, when Lydia obtained “carte blanche” for matters concerning the rules for women and the promise that men would stay out of the Aunts’ premises, ensuring herself the opportunity to secretly record every crime perpetrated by the leaders (176).

Surveillance by women has several faces in Gilead: at the lowest level, every woman watches the others. Rumours, slander, and outright lies determine the status of a woman within society. Physically, her body is imprisoned in garments that declare her rank and impede her movements (380). Young girls and women are taught to see their body either as a vessel for reproductive purposes (the wives), an offer to atone for their sins (the handmaids), or a temptation to be hidden away from men. The girls are continuously reminded of this at school, to the point that Agnes writes: “The adult female body was one big booby trap as far as I could tell. [...] There were so many things that could be done to it or go wrong with it, this adult female body, that I was left feeling I would be better off without it” (83). Control of the female body is

[125] This is reminiscent of Bauman’s opinion that today the Panopticon is applied to the oppressed minorities and to those at the social periphery.

almost total, as witnessed by the episode where the Handmaid Ofkyle is killed to save the baby she is carrying (102-105). For most women, control of the mind is total as well (as we have seen, a combination of religious fear and heavily distorted teachings ensure pliant women). Yet the Aunts, and particularly Aunt Lydia, exploit said oppressive surveillance of body and mind as a tool to overturn the regime.

Having been left alone to manage every womanly matter in Gilead, since it was demeaning for men to do it, Aunt Lydia trains a few selected women in the art of reading and writing, and ensures that they keep track of all information tied to the genealogies of every citizen in Gilead, both to avoid inbreeding and to hoard precious knowledge to be used at the right time. In the meantime, she institutes the Pearl girls, missionaries to be sent to foreign countries to convert young women, to spy for the regime, and (unknowingly) to smuggle sensitive information in and out of Gilead to Mayday. Aunt Lydia exploits the false sense of security that total control gives Commander Judd and the rest of the leaders: as their power is complete on everyone in the country, as they can see everything, they cannot fathom that betrayal will occur right under their nose, and thus Lydia's 'countersurveillance' goes unobserved. Free to record precious information, and to transmit it to Mayday, she remains unsuspected until the very end of the story.

The act of recording information and using it for one's end, one of the goals of contemporary surveillance, is pivotal for the whole narrative of *The Testaments*. Not only does Aunt Lydia record a secret narration of the misconduct of the leaders of the regime, not only does she transmit it to Mayday, prompting the demise of Gilead. On a more formal level, the entire structure of the novel is built on records: Aunt Lydia's chapters are, of course, extracts of her secret manuscript, but Agnes and Daisy's narratives are also transcripts, without which the story of the fall of Gilead would be incomplete, and so is the coda of the novel, with the partial proceedings of a symposium on Gilead tying the three narratives together. Surveillance held Gilead together and, simultaneously, brought about its fall. The harsh, unforgiving

Eye of God was blinded from within. And the act of recording ensured that the story of Gilead's demise would be preserved through the centuries.

It is important to remark once more that *The Testaments* focuses on the rebellion against such repressive forms of surveillance, rather than on the acquiescence to them. As the non-panoptic school argues, surveillance can be beneficial, and it does show some positive aspects in the novel. Indeed, although much of the story focuses on the repressive experiences of Gileadean citizens, in many ways it also depicts the possibility of a way out, of an alternative. Canada acts as the most evident counterpart to the regime. It is a mostly liberal society where Gileadean Customs and World Social Awareness are taught in schools (46, 48), protests against the theocracy regularly take place—to the point of being part of the students' curriculum—and several organizations for escaped Gileadean women are in operation. Secondly, a few brief mentions of the Republic of Texas and of unruly territories like California (196-200) let the readers understand that Gilead has not completely replaced the United States, suggesting the possibility for more former states to rebel against the regime. Most importantly, though, *The Testaments* does not limit itself to giving the readers these examples of positive alternatives contemporary to Gilead, or glimpses of a future without the regime (through the conference transcripts at the end of the novel); it tracks in detail the events that cause the toppling of Gilead. Whereas classic dystopian fiction often follows its protagonists through their attempts to overthrow a regime, only to see them fail and either be eliminated or subjugated by the totalitarian government, a critical dystopia focuses on the strenuous efforts, ploys, and sacrifices of its protagonists in order to bring about a better society. It leaves the reader with the hope that they will succeed, if not with the certainty of it. Even so, most critical dystopias do not go as far as *The Testaments* in confirming that their dreadful scenarios will be overcome. They simply end on an uplifting note, pointing to a possible way

out of the dark times they have narrated.[126] *The Handmaid's Tale* itself only gives glimpses of the fall of Gilead or of Offred's fate, leaving much to the readers' imagination. *The Testaments* is much more explicit. It details the horrors of the regime and its demise, the way it came about and the way it was toppled. To quote Natasha Walter, "*The Testaments*, unlike *The Handmaid's Tale* itself, is a truly hopeful tale. It reassures us that we are right to fear our enemies and right to resist them, and it reassures us that totalitarianism can be seen off" (Walter 2019). This warrants the question: why? Why did Atwood choose to write such an (eminently) critical dystopia? Why so much hope, at a time when despair abounds?

According to Atwood herself, *The Testaments* was derived partly from questions asked by fans of the first novel, and partly from her sense that the historical and political moment called for such a narrative of dread and hope. After having put off returning to the setting of *The Handmaid's Tale* for over thirty years, she explained: "For a long time we were going away from Gilead and then we turned around and started going back towards Gilead, so it did seem pertinent [to return to it]" (Allardice 2019).

In the 80s, we might argue, Atwood felt the need to send out a warning: *The Handmaid's Tale*, which still qualifies as a critical dystopia due to its open ending, is mainly a dreadful tale of control and oppression. It shows how monstrously a theocratic regime might behave to maintain a strong grip on its citizens. It focuses on the harm to which a woman might be subjected when the government 'turns' against her gender. This returns in *The Testaments*: Lydia's descriptions of the practices the regime uses to beat its women into submission are bluntly horrifying. The girls' subdued acceptance of the teachings of the regime is chilling. Yet, I would like to argue that this sequel was not intended as a renewed warning—or, at least, not solely as that. In detailing how the regime was founded, how the coup happened, how the women were deprived of their rights and freedom, Atwood explicitly shows

[126] Consider many of the works mentioned earlier, such as *Station Eleven, The Book of Eli, Mad Max: Fury Road, The Road, Blackfish City* just to name a few.

how easy it would be for a theocratic regime to be established. She leaves very little to the imagination, and no self-reassurance on the readers' part that Gilead could never happen, that it is but a product of fiction. *The Handmaid's Tale* granted them that much—that is, granted its readers a degree of separation from the present that let them argue for the impossibility of Gilead ever becoming true, should they wish to do so. *The Testaments*, I gather, is committed to abolishing such a possibility. Thus, Atwood ensures that Gilead is not only plausible in a very generic, potential sense, but concretely so. She draws it nearer to the contemporary American society, she ties it to a number of social and legal practices that are currently under threat in the United States.[127] In a sense, this amplifies the dystopian dread, the horror that such a narrative inspires. It does repeat the warning of the first novel. Yet, in tying Gilead to reality so profoundly, Atwood also extends this degree of plausibility to the resistance to the regime and to its demise. In short, it amplifies hope. Notably, *The Handmaid's Tale* did not need hope to be spelled out quite so evidently: Offred, its protagonist, is forcibly removed from the house of her Commander at the end of the novel, and we are not told whether she is being rescued by the rebels or collected by the Gileadean police force. The readers are left to their own devices in figuring out what degree of optimism to apply to the ending. *The Testaments,* conversely, grants them no such agency: the events that lead to the toppling of Gilead are clearly mapped out, a positive resolution of the dystopian moment ensured.

Thus, this is, truly, a tale of hope—one that Atwood said was warranted by our times. I understand this to mean that Atwood works from the same assumption (or, perhaps, perspective) that Tom Moylan expresses in his latest

[127] As of early November 2020, President Trump's appointment of Justice Amy Coney Barrett to the Supreme Court (which currently has a 6-3 conservative majority) has raised concerns over the possible overruling of landmark cases such as Roe v. Wade (which protects the right to have an abortion) and Obergefell v. Hodges (which extends the right to marry to same-sex couples).
See Jeannie Suk Gersen, "How Would Amy Coney Barrett Rule as a Supreme Court Justice?" in *The New Yorker* 14 October 2020 or Tim Holbrook, "Same-Sex Marriage at Risk as Supreme Court Gets More Conservative" on *cnn.com* 6 October 2020.

essay: there truly is a "necessity of hope in dystopian times," as the title states (2020). I retrieve here the same plea he conveys in it, quoting Kim Stanley Robinson: "It's crucial to keep imagining that things could get better, and furthermore to imagine how they might get better" (Moylan 2020, 189)—or, as Robinson says, we need to be anti-anti-utopian (2018). Atwood, in the *Testaments*, certainly is. She is still in a dystopian setting, she certainly does not hold back from depicting the horrors of a dreadful society, but she is also resolved not to let it continue unimpeded. She rejects the anti-utopia—that is, the impossibility of utopia. She shows a path to the dismantling of Gilead, and alternative realities that work well as utopian enclaves. She is not tracing a blueprint for utopia; that would be perhaps too strong a return to the origins of the genre. Yet, she is embracing the utopian spirit. Atwood often uses the term 'ustopia' to describe her works: stories that show a dystopia and its counterpart, because "each contains a latent version of the other" (Atwood 2011, 66). *The Testaments* is exactly that: it begins by retrieving the warning she sent out with *The Handmaid's Tale*, and it ends with a plea for hope, for a return to utopian thinking—for without hope no path forward can be traced.

3. *The Circle*

Dave Eggers published *The Circle* in late 2013.[128] Generally described as a dystopian novel, it tells the story of Mae Holland, a young woman who is hired by The Circle, a powerful IT company that conflates the most famous Big Tech firms (Facebook, Google, Microsoft, Apple, and Amazon). Set in the very near future, the story is as a thinly veiled compendium of everything that could go wrong with information technology. Upon its release it received contrasting reviews, with some critics praising its inventiveness and explicit take on the

[128] *The Circle* is Dave Eggers's seventh novel, the first work of speculative fiction proper he has written. Before publishing it, Eggers was mainly known for his memoirs interspersed with fictional elements. For more on his works, see Timothy W. Galow, *Understanding Dave Eggers* (2014).

subject, while others criticised its dramatic vision of technology.[129] Nevertheless, it has not escaped the attention of scholars of surveillance studies, who have often mentioned it in their analysis of contemporary surveillance practices.[130] Whereas *The Testaments* represents surveillance of a traditional kind, through the monitoring of the body and through direct observation, *The Circle* offers a bird's-eye view of the most recent strands of electronic surveillance, exaggerating some to underline their pervasiveness.

Most of the action revolves around the activities and projects of The Circle, a San Francisco-based tech company which controls a wide range of digital platforms and has patented TruYou, an identification system that aggregates every online account of a person, tying them to their real identity. The Circle is run by the Three Wise Men (the founder Ty Gospodinov, the businessman Tom Stenton, and the public face of the company Eamon Bailey) with the support of a selected group of managers called the Gang of 40, and has as its main goal the 'Completion of the circle.'

The entire story is told in the (quasi-)omniscient third person from Mae's point of view, which situates the reader within her vision of technology and the choices of her company in terms of privacy, data surveillance, and monopoly.[131] Contradictory opinions are voiced through exchanges with other characters but are nevertheless filtered through her perspective on the subject, and thus often dismissed as irrelevant or wrong.

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[129] For more on this, see Jones, Allie. "Haters and Fanboys: Critics Divided Over Dave Eggers' 'The Circle.'" *The Atlantic* 23 October 2013. https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2013/10/haters-and-fanboys-critics-divided-over-dave-eggers-circle/310205/

[130] About this, see, for instance, Marks, Peter. *Imagining Surveillance* (2015) and Pignagnoli, Virginia. "Surveillance in Post-Postmodern American Fiction: Dave Eggers's *The Circle*, Jonathan Franzen's *Purity* and Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story*" in *Spaces of Surveillance: States and Selves*, edited by Flynn S. and Mackay A. Basingstoke (2017).

[131] Mae, in *The Circle*, acts as a 'reflector,' which Henry James describes as the character privileged by the writer, the one that lends its eyes to the narrator (1907). In this case, specifically, the novel is told in the third person but its narrator is not completely omniscient: it does a good imitation of a God-like gaze, mimicking the transparency preached by the Circle, but it does not stray from Mae's perspective.

At first glance, the Circle and its huge, state-of-the-art campus look like utopia. Indeed, the very first line of the book goes: “My God, Mae thought. It’s heaven” (1). This, writes Ellen Ullman for *The New York Times*, is how we know that the Circle will be a hell (2013).

Mae gets hired at the Circle thanks to her friend Annie, who is in the Gang of 40. After being politely encouraged to participate more in the social activities on campus, given the importance of community for the Circle, Mae spends long hours improving her Participation Rank (PartiRank) by interacting on the company social media and attending parties and activities on campus. In one such occasions, she meets Francis, who will be her love interest throughout the novel, and Kalden, a mysterious Circle employee with whom she becomes romantically involved, even though she cannot track him on campus and cannot verify his identity.

As Mae adapts to her new lifestyle, she embraces the principles of community and transparency of the Circle, fostered by projects such as SeeChange cameras, which are installed by private citizens all around the world, in public and private locations, and transmit a live feed accessible to everyone. Due to such technology, Mae is caught as she commits a minor crime, and, although she is not charged or arrested, she is reprimanded at the Circle and then convinced to ‘go transparent’ as a demonstration that she had understood her mistake. Going transparent implies carrying a SeeChange camera hanging from her neck at all times until she sleeps, and never turning it off during waking hours. Her live feed is constantly available for her online audience, and she becomes a sort of testimonial for the Circle, visiting various buildings and presenting new projects every day.

Mae becomes extremely popular, but due to her choice she alienates her parents and her childhood friend and ex-boyfriend Mercer, who refuses to talk to her and writes her letters warning against a dictatorship of transparency. Mae eventually leads Mercer to his death by tracking him down as he tries to live off the grid.

Having become very influential within the Circle, Mae is now considered one of the true 'believers' in the project of Completion, which we understand to be complete pervasiveness of the Circle in society, with the company essentially replacing the government: the 'final' project is called Demoxie and, upon Mae's suggestion, it imposes that every citizen have a Circle account to be part of society. The act of voting is performed through the Circle, in complete transparency and accountability, and a 'perfect democracy' is founded.
The novel ends with Mae denouncing Kalden, who actually is the founder of the Circle, to the other Wise Men, because he wants to stop the project of completion. They have him removed from his role at the company, while Mae sits at Annie's bedside: her friend had a mental collapse after the PastPerfect project revealed some despicable facts connected to her family history. As Mae watches her friend, she muses that people ought to be able to see what she is thinking, and that she would talk about it to the Wise Men as soon as possible.

The Circle is particularly attuned to the debate on surveillance outlined in the first part of this chapter. First, it embodies the dual nature of surveillance evoked by the non-Panoptic school. The Circle, at the onset of the narrative, is repeatedly described as a technological utopia (1, 30), and the campus is increasingly framed as a happy island in the midst of a hellish-looking San Francisco:

> On campus, all was familiar. On campus there was no friction. She didn't need to explain herself, or the future of the world, to the Circlers, who implicitly understood her and the planet and the way it had to be and soon would be. Increasingly, she found it difficult to be off-campus anyway. There were homeless people, and there were the attendant and assaulting smells, and there were machines that didn't work, and floors and seats that had not been cleaned, and there was, everywhere, the chaos of an orderless world. (370)

The projects of the Circle, which rely on heavy monitoring of individuals, are invariably framed in a positive, utilitarian light. When presenting

SeeChange, for instance, Eamon Bailey encourages his audience to think of the implications:

> Now imagine the human rights implications. Protesters on the streets of Egypt no longer have to hold up a camera, hoping to catch a human rights violation or a murder and then somehow get the footage out of the streets and online. Now it's as easy as gluing a camera to a wall. Actually, we've done just that. [...] Now this doesn't just apply to areas of upheaval. Imagine any city with this kind of coverage. Who would commit a crime knowing they might be watched any time, anywhere? [...] There needs to be accountability. Tyrants can no longer hide. There needs to be, and will be, documentation and accountability, and we need to bear witness. And to this end, I insist that all that happens should be known." The words dropped onto the screen: ALL THAT HAPPENS MUST BE KNOWN. "Folks, we're at the dawn of the Second Enlightenment. And I'm not talking about a new building on campus. I'm talking about an era where we don't allow the majority of human thought and action and achievement and learning to escape as if from a leaky bucket. (65-67)

The implications to be considered are, of course, only the positive ones, since dissenting opinions are quickly suppressed. When ChildTrack[132] is developed, the focus is on the reduction of crimes such as kidnapping, and not on the permanent nature of the implant which will ensure full trackability of people throughout their life (87-89). Similarly, when they introduce a ranking system that records every scholastic achievement of a child to ensure a swift application to university, only the great advantage of an easy, safe choice for the university administrators is stressed, and not the evident discriminating nature of such a project (339-344).[133] Not even an influential member of the

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[132] ChildTrack is Francis's project, consisting of a chip that constantly locates children to avoid kidnappings. This quickly evolves into TruYouth, a system that ranks and monitors children throughout their development and education.

[133] In describing how YouthRank elaborates the position in the ranking of a child, the person in charge of the program says: "[the] score is the result of comparing her test results, her class rank, her school's relative academic strength, and a number of other factors" (340-341, italics mine). What is silently implied here is that any sort of discrimination can happen within the 'number of other factors' taken into consideration: race, family income, sexual orientation, anything might be used to define the rank of a person. As Ruha Benjamin reminds us, technology is as

Gang of 40 like Annie can express doubts on the plans of the Circle. When she discovers some very dark moments of her family history through PastPerfect, a system which reconstructs the past of an individual and his ancestors through facial recognition and cross-referencing of a huge number of databases, she sends out a 'zing' (essentially a tweet) that says: *Actually, I don't know if we should know everything.* Such a thought goes against the values of the Circle, which wants to know everything. Yet, since the Circle never deletes anything, the zing can only be rectified by HR by adding *We shouldn't know everything—without the proper storage ready. You don't want to lose it!* (435). Indeed, the censorship on dissent perpetrated by the Circle reaches even its founder: when Ty tries to convince Mae that the Completion of the Circle would bring about a "totalitarian nightmare" (481) she reports him to the other Wise Men and he is removed from the equation.

On its quest to absorb and record all information in order to derive exploitable knowledge (one of the aims of surveillance capitalism as understood by Shoshana Zuboff) virtually every project of the Circle depends on the exploitation of Big Data, and throughout the novel it is hinted that more and more databases are put into communication with each other to develop new Circle products. PastPerfect aggregates data from digitalised archives, CCTV footage, and any other kind of database that stores information on the past to reconstruct the family history of a person. Demoxie, the ultimate surveillant assemblage, gathers all personal data of an individual within the Circle, and ensures complete control over democracy.

Indeed, Demoxie is the best prompt to discuss private intervention in the practice of surveillance. One of the most frequent criticisms of Foucault's perspective on surveillance was that he focused too much on state control, not considering the monitoring power held by the private sector.[134] The Circle

discriminatory as those who develop it, whether they are aware or not of the discriminatory practices they are putting in practice (2019).

[134] It is important to stress that Foucault wrote at a time when corporate surveillance was not yet so evident, and that his works did not focus on contemporary society. Nevertheless, his lack of attention to the private sector is often advanced as a

(both the company and the novel) represents the consequence of a lack of regulation of the private actors. Unchecked by law, the Circle manages to grow powerful enough that, by the time regulators try to stop its expansion, it can manipulate information so credibly that the law becomes powerless. When a senator tries to have the Senate's Antitrust Task Force investigate whether the Circle acted as a monopoly, she is soon revealed to be "under investigation for a half-dozen things, all kinds of ethical violations. They found everything on her computer, a hundred weird searches, downloads—some very creepy stuff" (206). It is evident (and remarked upon by both Mercer and Ty) that the Circle planted that information on the Senator to avoid any form of governmental opposition to its growing power. Soon after, the Circle infiltrates politics by way of pushing for transparency. Advocating the need for politicians to be held accountable by the citizens they represent, they 'partner' with Congresswoman Santos, who decides to 'go transparent' to prove the legitimacy of her political actions. As she says,

> I'm as concerned as you are about the need for citizens to know what their elected leaders are doing. I mean, it is your right, is it not? It's your right to know how they spend their days. Who they're meeting with. Who they're talking to. What they're doing on the taxpayer's dime. [...] I intend to show how democracy can and should be: entirely open, entirely transparent. Starting today, I will be wearing [a SeeChange camera]. My every meeting, movement, my every word, will be available to all my constituents and to the world. (207-208)

Congresswoman Santos's choice is soon replicated by most politicians of the entire world. The next logical step, then, is to bring transparency not only to the representatives of the citizens, but to the citizens themselves. Talking to the Gang of 40, Mae, and her audience, Bailey 'mourns' the low voter turnout in local and national elections and proposes that people be registered to vote, in the United States, through their Circle account. The Circle, in fact, "has a

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justification for relegating his works to the past, judging them outdated. On this, see Wood 2007, 12-14.

knack for getting people to participate. And there are a lot of people in Washington who agree. There are people in DC who see us as the solution to making this a fully participatory democracy" (385).

That, however, is not the ultimate goal of the Circle, it is not yet its Completion. The perfect conclusion is not only to automatically register everyone with a Circle account to vote, but to make the account mandatory to vote, and then to move the act itself onto a new Circle platform (Demoxie). And finally, why not aggregate the rest of the governmental services within the offer of the Circle? As Mae says,

> Our interfaces are infinitely easier to use than, say, the patchwork of DMV sites around the country. What if you could renew your license through us? What if every government service could be facilitated through our network? People would leap at the chance. Instead of visiting a hundred different sites for a hundred different government services, it could all be done through the Circle. (390)

And of course, the cost for the government to set up a similar aggregate service would be unsustainable, so the Circle seems indeed to be the best (and only) viable option to 'perfect' democracy. As a woman asks Mae, "how do we get the inevitable sooner?" (394).

Thus, the apparent goal of the Circle is achieved: completion has been reached, welcomed by a large majority of people and imposed on the rest. It is useful, here, to recall that Mercer dies trying to evade the total control of the Circle, reclaiming what Zuboff calls "the right to sanctuary" (2019, Kindle edition), or, put differently, the right to opt out. The Circle, much like surveillance capitalism in the real world, deprives the individual of such an option.[135] As it saturates society after society, it only leaves complete

[135] On this, Zuboff writes: "Instrumentarian power aims to organize, herd, and tune society to achieve a similar social confluence, in which group pressure and computational certainty replace politics and democracy, extinguishing the felt reality and social function of an individualized existence. […] I consider the implications of these developments for a second elemental right: *the right to sanctuary*. The human need for a space of inviolable refuge has persisted in civilized

annihilation as an alternative to adherence to its practices and demands. This push towards completion mirrors the idea of perfectibility encountered in Chapter Four: progress at the Circle advances towards an ultimate goal, one that will 'settle' the world.[136] It is inferred that progress at the Circle does not exist for progress's sake. Yet, even with completion achieved, even when the Circle has replaced the State in all but name, new 'frontiers' open up, and progress is once more set afoot. Completion is not enough to halt progress at the Circle; a new goal is identified, and the race to achieve it begins: as Mae observes her comatose friend, she wishes she could know what she is thinking and resolves to talk to the Wise Men about this.

Very often parallels are drawn between the world we inhabit and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Most recently, people have returned to the novel after Trump's election, bringing it back to the bestselling charts (de Freytas-Tamura 2017). Yet it must be noted that, Trump's penchant to outright manipulate the truth aside, we are currently living in a society that should mainly evoke *Brave New World,* rather than *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Lyon 1994, 75). Diffuse control, in this case operated through the exploitation of Big Data, has not been imposed on the vast majority of people, but welcomed and encouraged. Privacy has been sacrificed in the name of security and transparency. *The Circle* mirrors this reality, taking it to the extreme. As Mae tells her audience before announcing she was going transparent, "SECRETS ARE LIES. SHARING IS CARING. PRIVACY IS THEFT" (303, uppercase in the original). Privacy is a small thing to relinquish, claims the Circle, in exchange for a cohesive society, benevolent and safe, open to everyone, generous in sharing personal experiences with those who could not be there, eager to ensure perfect assessment and behaviour. Privacy is, indeed, the one thing a person has to renounce in order to have community, and therefore,

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societies from ancient times but is now under attack as surveillance capital creates a world of 'no exit' with profound implications for the human future at this new frontier of power" (2019, Kindle edition).

[136] See p. 107.

complete transparency is the only logical way to ensure civil behaviour from everyone. After all, utopia has always longed for certitude (Lyon 1994, 73). Demoxie, as we have seen, is simply the result of Mae "connecting the dots" (387), the natural next step on the path to utopia as envisioned by the Circle—and most people are all too eager to accept it. Indeed, connecting the dots is what Big Data makes possible in real life, and the fundamental purpose of the surveillant assemblage. The Circle, especially through Demoxie, is its ultimate manifestation: all information on every person neatly stored in the cloud, ready to be sifted through, analysed, elaborated as seen fit. It is innocuous until the dots are connected, threatening in the potential. For instance, when Mae and Francis have sex for the first time, he tapes the act without telling her. When she finds out, she begs him to delete the video, but it is against the rules of the Circle and he refuses. When she asks Annie to intervene, she also refuses and says, "No one will ever see it. You know that. Ninety-nine percent of the stuff in the cloud is never seen by anyone" (204-205). Surveillance lies in the potential, and because of that it does retain some panoptic character, but it is not limited to direct observation by someone. Next to the human gaze, there is the all-seeing eye of SeeChange cameras and the 'blind' eye of data harvesting, which is not visual surveillance, but surveillance nonetheless. Even if nobody saw a person committing a crime, digital recordings of it will exist, either visual or not, and proof of that person committing said crime will come back to haunt them, as it happened to Annie's parents (437-439).

Nobody is ever free in the society envisioned by the Circle, yet everyone partakes in the act of surveillance. Everyone spontaneously contributes their personal information and simultaneously watches over other people. It is not sousveillance proper, since it does not target the big social actors, or at least not only, but rather a diffuse, saturated surveillance of peers. As a person tells Mae after Demoxie is announced,

> Now all humans will have the eyes of God. You know this passage? “All things are naked and opened unto the eyes of God.” Something like that. You know your Bible? [...] Now we’re all God. Every one of us will soon be able to see, and cast judgment upon, every other. We’ll see what He sees. We’ll articulate His judgment. We’ll channel His wrath and deliver His forgiveness. On a constant and global level. All religion has been waiting for this, when every human is a direct and immediate messenger of God’s will. (395)

Again, the dual nature of the Eye of God is remarked upon, and the negative aspect of surveillance softened by its positive, caring side. Surveillance is welcomed because it ensures people are seen. As in Psalm 139, discussed in the section on the Panopticon, the constant gaze gives solace to people. As Mae tells her friend Mercer, who is trying to explain her the danger of constant surveillance, “Most people would trade everything they know, everyone they know—they’d trade it all to know they’ve been seen, and acknowledged, that they might even be remembered” (485).

The Circle well represents the ‘idolatry of the gaze,’ a quasi-religious attachment to sharing information, making everything transparent, recording every speckle of data for posterity, so that nothing will ever be lost and everyone will be seen and remembered. With similar religious overtones, Mercer describes the totalitarian mission of the Circle as its “unrestrained Manifest Destiny” (368), which, like in *The* Testaments, returns in a negative sense to describe a dystopian society: this is an updated version of it, but as totalizing as the pseudo-religious ideology of the nineteenth century. The Circle becomes the godlike figure at the centre of a new belief in transparency and sharing, and with its leading force and benign attention, it will show the path forward not only to the United States, but also to the rest of the world. Again, the myth of American exceptionalism echoes throughout the pages of the novel, but it is privatised and re-oriented: the United States will lead the world after the Circle takes over its government. It will not lead with military prowess or diplomacy, but by ‘natural’ technological expansion replicating the

dictates of Zuboff's surveillance capitalism, pervading every aspect of life with no regards for national borders.

Once again, then, the Circle does retain some elements of the Panopticon but does so by 'atomising' the practice of surveillance. There is not one all-seeing Eye anymore, but millions, everywhere, always vigilant. The Panopticon meets the surveillant assemblage.

One last remark on the way that the Circle fosters a sense of community from the onset of the novel, placing the emphasis on the importance of social relations within the company. At first glance, it seems to be a diverse, liberal, accepting community, with a space for any person. It becomes apparent, though, that the community at the Circle is just as selective as any other, and very often more. Unwritten rules govern it, and are all tied to the idea of sharing and transparency. Lack of participation is seen as a reason for concern and consternation.[137] It 'elevates' the individual, wanting to know what one thinks, does, wants, implying that its interest lies in the person as a whole. It aims at recreating a digital double that is perfectly faithful to the original and demands that personal information is shared to do so. Although it does not completely disregard the physical presence of its members, the Circle is configured as a community of *users* and individuals undergo a partial bodily 'disappearance' as they move much of their social interactions online. At the same time, their digital doubles become more important than their real selves. People are led to seek out validation online, rather than in person, so

[137] Consider the moment when Mae is reprimanded for not having interacted enough with the community of the Circle, one week after she began working. Her HR manager tells her: "We actually see your profile, and the activity on it, as integral to your participation here. This is how your coworkers, even those on the other side of campus, know who you are. Communication is certainly not extracurricular, right? [...] If you visit a coworker's page and write something on the wall, that's a positive thing. That's an act of community. An act of reaching out. And of course I don't have to tell you that this company exists because of the social media you consider 'extracurricular.' My understanding was that you used our social media tools before coming here? [...] You realize that community and communication come from the same root word, communis, Latin for common, public, shared by all or many?" (94-95).

that their interactions can be monitored. Soft surveillance becomes paramount to their digital existence to the point that they not only accept it, but actively demand more of it. For instance, consider the words Mercer says after he asks Mae not to post his work online over dinner, only to have her completely disregard his request:

> I *know* [the Circle] is all people like you. And that's what's so scary. *Individually* you don't know what you're doing *collectively*. But secondly, don't presume the benevolence of your leaders. [... At the Circle] there are no oppressors. No one's forcing you to do this. You willingly tie yourself to these leashes. And you willingly become utterly socially autistic. You no longer pick up on basic human communication clues. You're at a table with three humans, all of whom are looking at you and trying to talk to you, and you're staring at a screen, searching for strangers in Dubai. (259-260, italics in the original)

In just a few lines, Mercer sums up what is so evidently dangerous about the Circle: the disconnect between the individual perception and the collective consequences of an action, the detachment of a person from their real lives in favour of their digital ones, and the carceral nature of most of the practices fostered by the Circle.[138]

Apart from the obvious carceral nature of visual surveillance, there are evocative parallels also in the way the body is monitored, limited in its movements, and tied down (as it happens in *The Testaments,* albeit in a much less explicit way). We might consider, as a first self-explaining example, that Ty admits he is not allowed to leave campus (480) and, as a second one, the less overt carceral nature of the health-monitoring bracelets every Circler needs to wear:

> The doctor held out a silver bracelet, about three inches wide. [...] The doctor fit it onto her left wrist, and clicked it closed. It was snug.

[138] On the carceral nature of many social practices currently pervading the United States, see the special section "Bars and Stripes. The United States as Penitentiary," edited by Elisa Bordin, Stefano Bosco, and Roberto Cagliero, in *Iperstoria* 14, Fall 2019.

> "It's warm," Mae said.
> "It'll feel warm for a few days, then you and the bracelet will get used to each other. But it has to touch the skin, of course, to measure what we'd like to measure—which is everything." (153-154)

In looks and functionality, the bracelets (Mae acquires another one when she goes transparent), are deeply evocative of handcuffs. They cannot be taken off and are used to control and monitor the body, both in terms of vital signs and geographical position.

Thus, in a sense, we have come "full circle": as the company reaches completion, the carceral nature of the Panopticon re-emerges masked as healthcare, or as a measure to ensure the safety of children. It is diffuse, decentralised, in the hands of every member of the Circle and of digital tools that blindly record every bit of personal data available. It is framed as the very best thing for which one might wish, leveraged to promise a utopian society projecting full transparency and certainty, and used as an excuse to justify any misdeed the Circle might have carried out on the path to the ideal land. Most relevantly, it is welcomed and demanded by the vast majority of people all over the world. With the Circle achieving its goal—that is, full transparency and total control over every aspect of society—the original utopian project is finally attained. In Thomas More's island of Utopia, citizens live in harmony due to their 'agreement' with a rational, controlled lifestyle, based on a social pact that sees (almost) everyone as an equal.[139] The Circle, in many ways, supports More's vision of the perfect society. In Eggers's world, everyone is led to contribute, everyone is held accountable, everyone is bound to the strict norms of society. On the surface, everyone has a chance to live their lives to the fullest, under the benevolent gaze of their peers. It is not a centralised government that ensures obedience, it is sousveillance in its purest meaning.

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[139] Slaves were not treated like the rest of the citizens in Utopia, and there were a few social roles that were more prestigious than others. Nevertheless, even the prince or the judges did not differ much from the average citizen in terms of privileges.

The same joyful sense of community that made Utopia the perfect society pervades the users bound to the Circle. Yet, Eggers's novel is unmistakably dystopian, reiterating the point that Atwood made on the indissoluble link that ties utopia to its counterpart. *The Circle* follows an opposite trajectory to the one of *The Testaments:* whereas Atwood dismantles a dystopia to make place for a utopia, Eggers unveils the dystopian core that lies at the heart of an (apparent) utopia. Whereas Aunt Lydia, Agnes, and Daisy all work against the system (each within her capabilities), Mae—for all her claims of exceptionality—is but the representative specimen of a standardised community. Her individualism, as we have seen in Chapter Four, is turned inwardly, it is but a narcissistic gaze fixed on herself (she wants to be remembered, she needs to be seen). Even when her actions seem to lead to great social changes (as in the case of Demoxie), she is merely voicing the plans of the Circle. It stands in stark contrast to the disruptive consequences of Aunt Lydia, Agnes, and Daisy's actions, which they performed not only for personal gain, but for social change.

In essence, *The Testaments* and *The Circle* portray both sides of the same coin: the former shows traditional forms of surveillance applied to the body through an oppressive gaze and a set of rebels that individually, yet with a social perspective, rebel against it. The latter depicts the apparently benevolent gaze of digital surveillance, the dematerialisation of the body, and the narcissistic gaze of an individual that is little more than a cog in the social machine.

Together, they offer a full picture of the forms that surveillance can take in dystopian fiction as well as in real life, and how resistance or acquiescence to it can be performed.

CHAPTER SIX

Human Machines, Mechanical Humans

In the previous chapter, we have discussed the surveillant role of the state and of private actors on the lives of individuals and on the formation of real and virtual identities. In what follows, we will focus on the ways dystopia represents and discusses technological progress. A wide number of works have commented on its risks and benefits; from novels tackling IT such as William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, Dave Eggers's *The Circle,* or Matthew T. Anderson's *Feed,* to works debating artificial intelligence such as Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (later adapted for the big screen as *Blade Runner*), or the movies *I, Robot* by Alex Proyas and *Ex Machina* by Alex Garland, dystopia is particularly attuned to dealing with cutting edge scientific and technological innovations.

The primary work analysed in this chapter is the video game *Detroit: Become Human* (2018). With its tale of artificial intelligence, its quest for a new form

of subjectivity, and its exploration of the potential outcomes of unchecked progress, it is an excellent example of technological dystopia.

From a methodological point of view, we will engage theories pertaining to field of the posthuman (understood as an umbrella term for transhumanism and posthumanism), and especially to one of its subcategories called futurology, a speculative branch of sociology also known as Futures Studies, which informs transhumanist thought.

Before we begin, I would like to offer a preliminary response to two potential macro-critiques to both the use of the posthuman as the theoretical backdrop of this chapter and of *Detroit: Become Human* as the representative work for technological dystopias. The discourse on the posthuman is vastly interdisciplinary: it interacts with (among others) philosophy, psychology, sociology, neuroscience, IT and AI studies, and futurology. As such, this chapter will partially exceed the sociological framework described in Part One, allowing for a more comprehensive discussion of the trans- and posthumanist features of *Detroit: Become Human.* Yet, it is in the debate on the Posthuman that we currently find a nuanced conversation on state-of-the-art technology and the way it might impact society and human subjectivity. If we also consider the utopian intent that underlies its theories and practices (Michael Hauskeller 2014, 101-108), it is possible to argue that the posthuman is the right source of sociological and philosophical concepts to be tracked in our fictional depictions of technological dystopias.

Whereas Chapter Five dealt with dystopias that resonate with rather *plausible* speculation on the oppressive nature of the surveillance society, the current one reverses this approach and takes upon itself to debate *highly speculative* scenarios of trans- and posthumanist flavour, with particular attention to technologically-fostered narratives. At the methodological level, Chapter Five introduced a branch of sociology that developed from dystopian fiction (Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four)* and turned into the somewhat 'hard' field of surveillance studies; Chapter Six uses a much more volatile form of sociology (futurology) immersed in the equally fluid field of the debate

surrounding the posthuman. Its trajectory follows the opposite direction, moving from rather hard forms of social science into extreme speculation. Max Tegmark's *Life 3.0* (2017) is a good example of such a 'continuum of speculation' in futurology: his work leverages a flurry of data rooted in hard science (such as IT studies, physics, statistics) to conceive a large number of potential scenarios depicting the impact of AI on society, ranging from the probable to the very improbable (but not impossible). Nevertheless, as it can be inferred, the highly speculative nature of futurology (and more generally of transhumanism) is somewhat tampered by its strong roots in hard sciences, which anchor it to the realm of the possible. Additionally, it is—to an extent—contrasted by the other branch of the posthuman, posthumanism, whose profoundly conceptual framework is invested in the past and current perception of the human subject to extrapolate the ways this can be altered. The posthuman, thus, does not depart completely from the current reality in its speculative practice, making it suitable to analyse a genre that comments on the present by moving its issues into the future.

As for my choice of this video game as the primary source of this chapter, several reasons support its exemplifying role within a debate on technological dystopias. Differently from fictional works with a strong authorial component, such as novels, video games (or at least video games of the magnitude of *Detroit: Become Human*[140]) are the result of a collaborative enterprise that usually spans across a few continents. As a consequence, describing them in terms of national belonging makes little sense. *Detroit: Become Human* was primarily penned by David Cage and developed by the Paris-based Quantic Dream. Yet, it was produced for and distributed by the American branch of Sony, its original script was written in English and heavily revised by American author Adam Williams, and parts of its production were outsourced to the Philippines, China, Vietnam, and India

[140] *Detroit: Become Human* belongs to a video game category informally known as a Triple-A video games, or AAA. This means that it was produced and/or distributed by a major video games company, with a sizable budget. Triple-A games are normally equated to blockbusters in the movie industry.

("The Making Of Detroit: Become Human" 2018, 17:27-17:44). The motion capture actors, who lend their bodies and voices to the characters of the video game, are all Americans.

Despite its international production, *Detroit: Become Human* has a distinctly American mood. From its setting to the major themes of its three narrative paths, it interacts with topics often associated with American fiction, such as the oppression of minorities, their tale of liberation, and the permeation of an unchecked, market-driven form of technological progress in all strata of society. Plot-wise, this game portrays a fascinating scenario of what the United States might look like in about twenty years, engaging with many of the topics discussed by trans- and posthumanism.

Moreover, it has recently been argued that video games should be considered the art form of the Fourth Revolution of Information (Marcato 2016, 6)—that is, of the current historical moment.[141] Their intrinsic interactive nature allows for a discussion on the relationship between the player (the human) and the game (which can be configured as a posthuman entity), something that would not be possible if the source were, for instance, a novel or a movie. As Ann Kaplan remarks, "video games are a major venue [of dystopian fiction], and perhaps the fact that the player actually enters the scenario, is situated within the catastrophe, and has to deal with it personally allows more psychological agency than is required to sit through a two-hour film or a half-hour TV show" (2016, 16). In this chapter, more than anywhere else in this dissertation, Marshall McLuhan's famous words ring true: the medium is, indeed, the message (1964).

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[141] See, for instance, Leonardo Marcato's essay "Of Human and Posthuman—Videogames and the future of the Human": "In the Fourth Revolution of Information, the digital dimension is slowly giving birth to a peculiar form of cultural heritage that has immateriality and interrelation as its peculiarity, in the form of interactivity between users and the digital media [...]. Video games, as MIOs [Multimedia Interactive Operas], can be seen as the art products peculiar of the Infosphere, where all the media that concur to them represent their intrinsic virtue and are tied to gameplay" (2016, 6).

In what follows, then, I will attempt to sketch the main features of the posthuman and some of its many ramifications, thus laying the theoretical framework for analysing *Detroit: Become Human*. In doing so, we will touch upon the main differences and similarities between transhumanism and (critical) posthumanism, and upon some notions pertaining to Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) studies.

1. The Posthuman

The discourse on the posthuman is vast, strongly interdisciplinary, and in continuous expansion. Sifting through the many paths it took in the past thirty years or so is beyond the scope of this dissertation. Here, for an introduction on the concepts of the posthuman, I mainly rely on the definitions elaborated by Francesca Ferrando in several of her works (2014, 2017, 2018), on the collection of essays *Post- and Transhumanism: An Introduction,* edited by Robert Ranisch and Stefan Lorenz Sorgner (2014), and on Rosi Braidotti's *The Posthuman* (2013), with a few nods to N. Katherine Hayles's seminal work *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (1999).
The debate on the posthuman focuses, at its core, on the human subject. It starts at the level of the individual, spreads out into the realm of interpersonal relations and of society at large, and broadens its scope even more to include contact with animal, mechanical, and natural entities. Virtually all of its branches question what it means to be human in this historical moment and reflect critically on the status of the humanist ideal of Man.
Besides being a multifaceted field content-wise, the posthuman raises several issues of terminology. Due to the simultaneous development of several schools of thought regarding the notion of the human in the 1980s and 1990s, Francesca Ferrando argues that

> 'Posthuman' has become an umbrella term to include (philosophical, cultural, and critical) posthumanism, transhumanism (in its variants as extropianism, liberal and democratic transhumanism, among other currents), new materialisms (a specific feminist development within the posthumanist frame), and the heterogeneous landscapes of antihumanism, posthumanities, and metahumanities. (Ferrando 2014, 26)

Posthumanism and transhumanism, in particular, use the term 'posthuman' to describe two rather diverging takes on the formation of a radically different subject:

> Within the transhuman [*sic*] literature, the term 'posthuman' refers to a stage which might evolve after the current transhuman era. On the other side, according to posthumanism, the posthuman can be seen as a paradigm shift which is already occurring by approaching and performing the human in post-humanist, post-anthropocentric and post-dualistic ways. (Ferrando 2017, 439)[142]

Albeit profoundly different in their reception of the concept, transhumanism and posthumanism share the same starting point—that is, the humanist subject. According to Braidotti, the debate on the posthuman took off when the idea of Man introduced with the Enlightenment started to be called into question. As she writes in the first chapter of *The Posthuman* (2013),

> At the start of it all there is He: the classical ideal of 'Man,' formulated first by Protagoras as 'the measure of all things,' later renewed in the Italian Renaissance as a universal model and represented in Leonardo da Vinci's Vitruvian Man [...] An ideal of bodily perfection which, in keeping with the classical dictum *mens sana in corpore sano*, doubles up as a set of mental, discursive and spiritual values. Together they uphold a specific view of what is 'human' about humanity. Moreover, they assert with unshakable certainty the almost boundless capacity of humans to

[142] In this dissertation, I use 'posthuman' both as an umbrella noun and an umbrella adjective. 'Posthumanism' and 'posthumanist' refer to the post-anthropocentric view of the human, 'transhumanism' and 'transhumanist' to the enhanced version of the human.

> pursue their individual and collective perfectibility. That iconic image is the emblem of Humanism as a doctrine that combines the biological, discursive and moral expansion of human capabilities into an idea of teleologically ordained, rational progress. Faith in the unique, self-regulating and intrinsically moral powers of human reason forms an integral part of this high-humanistic creed, which was essentially predicated on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century renditions of classical Antiquity and Italian Renaissance ideals. (2013, 13)

The humanist subject is stable, superior, ruled by rationality, and bound to progress. It operates on a dialectic of Self vs. Other. Therefore, its history is one of dualisms and repressions. Man reigns over nature; some Men rule over 'inferior' ones through discriminatory practices based on race, national identity, gender, sexuality, class, and so on. The humanist subject lays firmly at the core of things; its anthropocentric vision places it at the top of a hierarchy of species.

The posthuman, in its many ramifications, interrogates such superiority of Man over other living beings: on the one hand, transhumanism argues that 'He' should not settle in the safety of his leading position and should rather strive to exceed his own limits; on the other hand, posthumanism vouches for a strong decentring of Man from its privileged condition in order to rethink his role in the world. *Detroit: Become Human* represents both perspectives, which we will summarise separately for the sake of clarity.

1.1 Transhumanism

Since the 1990s, transhumanism is the term used by futurists,[143] among other thinkers and scholars, to describe

[143] In this chapter, following the conventions of the field, the term 'futurist' is used to describe scholars and thinkers who work on futures studies (futurology), such as Max More, Max Tegmark, Nick Bostrom, and Ray Kurzweil. They are not to be confused with the artists who belonged to Futurism, the early twentieth-century Italian movement, such as Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Umberto Boccioni or Giacomo Balla.

> […] a class of philosophies that seek to guide us towards a posthuman condition. Transhumanism shares many elements of humanism, including a respect for reason and science, a commitment to progress, and a valuing of human (or transhuman) existence in this life rather than in some supernatural 'afterlife.' Transhumanism differs from humanism in recognizing and anticipating the radical alterations in the nature and possibilities of our lives resulting from various sciences and technologies such as neuroscience and neuropharmacology, life extension, nanotechnology, artificial ultraintelligence, and space habitation, combined with a rational philosophy and value system. (More 1990)

In this sense, transhumanism sees the posthuman as one end of a continuum, with the humanist subject on the other (original) side. The transhuman is simply the current status of the subject on its evolutionary path to the posthuman. This early definition by Max More was updated in 2003 by another renowned futurist, Nick Bostrom, who stated that transhumanism should be perceived as the project to alter and improve human nature "through applied reason, especially by developing and making widely available technologies to eliminate aging and to greatly enhance human intellectual, physical, and psychological capacities" (Bostrom 2003, 4). With Bostrom, the focus is clearly placed on physical enhancement and alteration, rather than on a shift in the perception of Man, thus retaining those fundamental values that characterised the humanist subject.

Both More and Bostrom stress the profound bond connecting transhumanism to science and technology, which will ensure the next evolutionary steps towards the posthuman. This radically different subject will come about through rational progress and will retain the ideals of humanism, intensifying the anthropocentric perspective by becoming a superior Other that exceeds its natural limits. Evidently, transhumanism does not doubt that progress is an unstoppable driving force for humanity, and it does not condone discussions on its loss of relevance as the engine of human existence, as argued earlier in Chapter Four.[144] With Ferrando, then, we can reiterate

[144] See p. 104 and ff.

that "[t]he emphasis on notions such as rationality, progress and optimism is in line with the fact that, philosophically, transhumanism roots itself in the Enlightenment, and so it does not expropriate rational humanism. By taking humanism further, transhumanism can be defined as 'ultra-humanism'" (2014, 27)—a term especially fit to describe the intensification of the humanist ideal of Man, rather than its (posthumanist) demise or critical assessment.

Transhumanism's profound link to technology is what interests us more for an analysis of *Detroit: Become Human.* Beside continuing the ongoing debates on how science and innovation will extend our human limits, futurists have been focusing and expanding the concept of the Singularity. First popularised by Vernor Vinge in a 1993 essay titled "The Coming Technological Singularity," it is generally understood as the moment in which technology will surpass human intelligence. In Ray Kurzweil's words,

> It's a future period during which the pace of technological change will be so rapid, its impact so deep, that human life will be irreversibly transformed. Although neither utopian nor dystopian, this epoch will transform the concepts that we rely on to give meaning to our lives, from our business models to the cycle of human life, including death itself. Understanding the Singularity will alter our perspective on the significance of our past and the ramifications for our future. (2005, Kindle position 405)

This notion has recently become mainstream, albeit in a reductive—and, for the most part, wrong—version that presents the Singularity as the moment in which machines will take over humanity.

The first conversations on the topic were highly speculative (Vinge's essay itself is mainly anchored in science fiction and in hypothetical—that is, not yet explored—research strains in the fields of Artificial Intelligence and of

Intelligence Amplification,[145] rather than hard data) and gradually acquired concreteness as IT technology evolved exponentially at the turn of the century.[146] The current interest in the topic is connected to such acceleration of progress, as already discussed in Chapter Four: futurists are arguing that we are in the 'knee' of the exponential curve of progress, and that the moment of the Singularity is fast approaching.[147] Although Vinge favoured Intelligence Amplification as the best way to achieve the Singularity, the current debate is rather entrenched in the field of artificial intelligence, as described in Max Tegmark's highly informative *Life 3.0* (2017).

Tegmark, an MIT physics professor, is one of the founders of the Future of Life Institute, a non-profit research organisation whose mission is, according to its website, "[t]o catalyse and support research and initiatives for safeguarding life and developing optimistic visions of the future, including positive ways for humanity to steer its own course considering new technologies and challenges." The institute is interested in the risks and opportunities stemming from the development of AI, and especially of AGI (G being General), which is a non-biological intelligence at least as smart as a person (Tegmark 2017, 39). *Life 3.0,* as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, explores the main definitions of artificial intelligence and the potential consequences of its several evolutionary hypotheses onto society. By the author's own admission (2017, 47), the contents of his book range from

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[145] Artificial Intelligence (AI) studies aim at creating a non-biological entity that is at least as intelligent as a human being (Tegmark 2017, 39), while Intelligence Amplification (IA) strives to enhance human capacities through human-computer interaction (Vinge 1993, 17). In the latter we include most technologies we use every day, such as the smartphone.

[146] Consider Kurzweil's 2005 book, which is titled *The Singularity is Near,* and the number of transhuman thinkers who are studying and disseminating theories on AI, most notably Max Tegmark with his 2017 *Life 3.0.*

[147] Kurzweil explains that technological capability has progressed exponentially throughout human history, and argues that we are now living the 'knee of curve' moment: as in an exponential function, technological progress has slowly but steadily accelerated throughout the centuries and is gaining momentum, moving at a much higher pace than in the past. Following the exponential curve, the singularity is thus fast approaching (2005, Kindle edition). The first reference of this acceleration in this dissertation is in the section titled "Progress" of Chapter Four (see p. 104).

the "not very speculative" (the chapters on terminology, the development of AI, the near future, and the history of goal-oriented behaviour) to the "extremely speculative" (the chapters on superintelligence scenarios and on the consequences of AI on the far future). Given the rather unpredictable nature of the subject matter, Tegmark's approach is necessarily rooted in speculation, which he uses from the very beginning of his work. On the very first page, Tegmark asks his readers: "Do you think that superhuman AI might get created in this century?"[148] Those who answer affirmatively are directed to the next page, while those who answer negatively are sent to Chapter 1, skipping the Prelude titled "The Tale of the Omega Team." This introductory section presents a scenario in which a superintelligent AI has pervaded the world, growing exponentially and rapidly taking control of the economy and the government. Although told in rather pragmatic language, this chapter is by all intents and purposes a piece of speculative fiction, an *escamotage* to which Tegmark returns in the chapter "Intelligence Explosion?". There, he sketches a large number of future scenarios stemming from the advent of a superintelligent AI, ranging from the most dystopian, where humanity is tamed or eliminated by an AI, to the most utopian, where they coexist and cooperate.

Exploring the field of artificial intelligence raises questions on the definition of life, intelligence, humanity, and consciousness. Morality and legal responsibility are rapidly becoming fundamental issues to discuss. Tegmark approaches all this by drafting definitions wide enough to include human and non-human actors alike. In his view, for instance, life is "a process that can retain its complexity and replicate" (2017, 39). Following this, even rather simple, recursive programmes can be described as alive, let alone AIs like those we are used to meet in novels, movies, and videogames.[149] In similar

[148] A superhuman AI (or superintelligent AI) is an artificial intelligence that far exceeds human intelligence and is most probably created by an AGI (Tegmark 2017, 39).

[149] Think, for instance, of the replicants in *Blade Runner* or VIKI in *I, Robot*. Deviants in *Detroit: Become Human* are also another good example, as we will see.

fashion, Tegmark suggests that intelligence is the "ability to accomplish complex goals" and consciousness is the "subjective experience" (2017, 39). Limiting his definitions to evocative phrases rather than to precise, reasoned descriptions allows him to carry out an inclusive narrative of a world in which non-biological intelligence is equated to the biological, and in some of his speculative scenarios surpasses it by far.

Transhumanism embraces AI as a means to achieve the posthuman. On the one hand, *narrow* AIs (trained for a specific task) can collaborate with humans enhancing their current abilities; on the other hand, *broad* AIs (those who have no specific task but that of replicating human intelligence) in themselves might be the radically different posthuman subject, in that they surpass the notion of the human that transhumanism is trying to upgrade.

AI is not the only field of transhumanist research. Currently, a number of thinkers and scholars are also working on *mind uploading*[150]—that is, the transfer of a human consciousness onto an artificial body or container, a notion strongly opposed by N. Katherine Hayles in her *How We Became Posthuman* (1999).[151] That, together with bodily implants of varied nature, is the point of convergence between science (especially biology) and technology, the two 'enhancers' of transhumanism. Indeed, the concept of the cyborg, here understood in the traditional sense of a human-machine hybrid, is amply debated among transhumanist circles such as the abovementioned Future of Life Institute or Humanity Plus (H+), and contemporary speculative fiction on the subject is presenting more and more realistic instances of bodily alteration, beginning to introduce mind uploading as a plausible eventuality,

[150] The first hints to mind uploading can be traced back to Hans Moravec's 1988 *Mind Children*.

[151] It is well known that Hayles is vocally critical of the stark separation of mind and body advocated by scholars of cybernetics as early as the 1950s and 1960s. Consider, for instance, her following remark: "How, I asked myself, was it possible for someone of Moravec's obvious intelligence to believe that mind could be separated from body? Even assuming such a separation was possible, how could anyone think that consciousness in an entirely different medium would remain unchanged, as if it had no connection with embodiment?" (1999, 1).

as exemplified by the recent British-American TV series *Years and Years* (2019).[152] Similarly, transhumanist themes are easily found across most video games genres, with big hits such as the *Deus Ex* franchise (2000-2003) and the much-anticipated *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020). We will expand on the transhuman nature of video games in the section on *Detroit: Become Human*.

1.2 Posthumanism

While transhumanism is the doctrine of the transhuman—that is, of the evolution of the human—posthumanism prefigures the transcending of the humanist subject. Thus, we might understand the former as *transhuman*-ism, and the latter as *post*-humanism (Ranisch and Sorgner 2014, 8). Posthumanism is not an organic, clearly defined philosophical current, but rather a vast field of studies and schools of thought that reject the traditional humanist concepts formerly illustrated. Nevertheless, there is a common thread binding these currents together—that is, the specific critique of the humanist subject through a conversation with technology. Following Ranisch and Sorgner's explanation:

> In recent years 'posthumanism' served as an umbrella term for a variety of positions that reject basic humanist concepts and values. Above all, the construction of 'human beings' is deemed to be ideologically laden, insufficient, dangerous, or paternalistic. While there is certainly not one humanism, which could be identified as a common target of posthumanist criticisms, there are persistent concepts and dualities in Western culture, such as nature/culture, man/woman, subject/object, human/animal, or

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[152] *Years and Years*, a 2019 joint production by the BBC and HBO, tells the story of the Lyons family from 2019 to 2034, as technological, political, and economic advances vastly change the world. In Episode One, one of the teenagers of the family comes out as transhuman, and we see her upgrading her body throughout the series. In the last episode, her dying aunt accepts to have her mind uploaded in the cloud in the hope of retaining her consciousness, although she is convinced that the human spirit is more than pure information. The whole series is a fascinating portrayal of a rather plausible near future, where more and more jobs are lost due to the widespread use of artificial intelligence and the transhuman trend opens up a dangerous black market for cyber-implants and organs. The series also debates climate change, populism, an economic crisis, and immigration.

> body/mind, which are deeply rooted in the Western tradition and which get challenged by posthumanist thinkers. Yet, not every criticism of these concepts must be seen as a posthumanist one (see Hayles 1999, 4). Feminism, postcolonial theory, and other postmodern theories have already questioned many of these historical constructs. Posthumanism, as we understand it here, is characterized by a specific focus on (emerging) technologies. The predominant concept of the 'human being' is questioned by thinking through the human being's engagement and interaction with technology. (2014, 8)

Thus, posthumanism according to Ranisch and Sorgner is the reconfiguration of the humanist subject through the intervention of technology—not necessarily understood as bodily modification along transhumanist positions, but as a shift in perspective and in perception of the humanist subject. Posthumanism chases a new narrative for the human, rather than its physiological change. As the authors remark, quoting Ihab Hassan's 1977 essay "Prometheus as Performer: Toward a Posthumanist Culture?":

> Similar to Foucault's proclaimed "end of man," posthumanism does not mean "the literal end of man but the end of a particular image of us" (Hassan 1977, 845). In other words, for these theorists, our biological nature may remain unchanged, but the self-concept of the human changes, in particular when we consider the integration of technology in our life. (2014, 15)

N. Katherine Hayles suggests the same in her *How We Became Posthuman*, in which she writes:

> The posthuman does not really mean the end of humanity. It signals instead the end of a certain conception of the human, a conception that may have applied, at best, to that fraction of humanity who had the wealth, power, and leisure to conceptualize themselves as autonomous beings exercising their will through individual agency and choice. What is lethal is not the posthuman as such but the grafting of the posthuman onto a liberal humanist view of the self. (1999, 286)

Rosi Braidotti, who is one of the leading voices in the field, has a slightly less strong opinion on the role of technology in the debate: although she recognises its relevance in determining the posthumanist subject, she refuses to limit the discourse to it. Like Ranisch and Sorgner, she stresses the importance of the rejection of humanist values as the starting point of all brands of posthumanism, but she does not elect the technologically driven one as the most relevant, nor the most typifying. In her 2013 seminal work *The Posthuman*, Braidotti introduces the concept of the "nature-culture continuum," which she identifies as "an assumption about the vital, self-organizing and yet non-naturalistic structure of living matter itself" and "the common denominator for the posthuman condition" (2013, 2). The nature-culture continuum might be understood as an uninterrupted, non-hierarchical, and relational bond among living matter. The nature-culture continuum is Braidotti's way to represent the dissolution of the anthropocentric view of Man and the loss of power imbalance in the interactions among living actors. It implies equality in the bond between the human and other species, the human and nature at large, and even the human and non-biological life forms. It displaces culture from its privileged position in order to put it on the same level of nature. It introduces the question on the concept of life itself, which, in her work, is radically reformulated.

Braidotti's own brand of posthumanism is what she calls "critical posthumanism," as opposed to the two other main currents she identifies.[153]

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[153] Braidotti identifies three main posthumanist currents: reactionary posthumanism, analytic posthumanism, and critical posthumanism. As Dave Shaw summarises, "reactionary posthumanism [...] essentially denies the decline of humanism entirely, arguing rather that humanist ideals provide the only workable model for adaptation to the globalized economy. [...] Analytic posthumanism [...] comes from science and technology studies. This approach provides productive insights into 'crucial ethical and conceptual questions about the status of the human' (Braidotti 2013, 39), but is reluctant to approach the development of a theory of subjectivity" (Shaw 2015a).

To an extent, critical posthumanism is an evolution of analytic posthumanism where the strong aversion to a reflection on subjectivity is overcome and a comprehensive,

It embraces a post-anthropocentric perspective revolving around what she calls *zoe*, non-human life (or better, not solely human). *Zoe* implies that all matter is alive, and that its subjects are moulded through interactions among each other. Her posthuman subject is *relational*—that is, constituted through contact among *zoe*-forms.

> 'Life,' far from being codified as the exclusive property or the unalienable right of one species, the human, over all others or of being sacralized as a pre-established given, is posited as process, interactive and open-ended. This vitalist approach to living matter displaces the boundary between the portion of life—both organic and discursive—that has traditionally been reserved for *anthropos,* that is to say *bios*, and the wider scope of animal and non-human life, also known as *zoe*. *Zoe* as the dynamic, self-organizing structure of life itself stands for generative vitality. It is the transversal force that cuts across and reconnects previously segregated species, categories and domains. *Zoe*-centred egalitarianism is, for me, the core of the post-anthropocentric turn: it is a materialist, secular, grounded and unsentimental response to the opportunistic trans-species commodification of Life that is the logic of advanced capitalism. It is also an affirmative reaction of social and cultural theory to the great advances made by the other culture, that of the sciences. (Braidotti 2013, 60)

Thus, *zoe* is generative vitality, it is life that springs from interconnectedness between subjects that belong to different species, to different expressions of the living matter.

If life becomes a quality of matter, rather than of humanity, subjectivity cannot solely pertain to mankind, nor can it be understood in terms of dualities. Consequently, according to Braidotti the critical posthumanist subject becomes "an expanded, relational self that functions in a nature–culture continuum and is technologically mediated" (2013, 61).

As mentioned above, by "relational self" Braidotti means a subject that is built on the interaction (equal and reciprocal) with other *zoe*-forms. Such a subject is necessarily plural, in that it is ever-shifting according to the interactions it

organic debate on all the consequences of technological and scientific progress is carried out.

is experiencing. It becomes a nomadic subject that rejects individualism (understood along humanist values of unity and perfection) and relativism alike (2013, 49). Given its relational nature, it follows a radical shift towards polymorphism, built on the interaction with other *zoe*-forms. It becomes, in essence, an assemblage (2013, 82) akin to that described by Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 3-4) Along Hayles's lines, Braidotti also insists that the posthumanist subject is materialist and embodied. It does not relinquish its body, but it is not limited to and by it. That is precisely the meaning of *zoe* as a nature-culture continuum: the subject is both materialist and relational. It is nature and culture, constantly in dialogue.

Sticking to its relational side, Braidotti lists three 'Others' who are not other in the traditional dualistic sense anymore: the animal, the earth, and the machine. Through the interaction with them the posthumanist subject is formed, displaced from its central position, renewed by the loss of traditional dualistic oppositions. Braidotti names the process "Becoming-animal," "Becoming-earth," and "Becoming-machine" (2013, 66). In order to rein in the theoretical framework of this chapter, I focus here only on the third one.

Becoming-machine is a manifestation of the concepts expressed above: it presupposes a decentring of Man, a bond established between equals in a non-hierarchical perspective. With the advent of information technology, argues Braidotti, there was a shift in our perception of the machine, which lost its status as a metaphorical Other—that is, as a symbol and an imitation of human abilities—to become interconnected to humanity through "simulation and mutual modification. [...] [T]he cyborgs are the dominant social and cultural formations that are active throughout the social fabric, with many economic and political implications. The Vitruvian Man has gone cybernetic" (2013, 89-90).

As stated above, though, the posthumanist subject is not merely relational. It is also embodied and polymorphous. Braidotti comments:

> A posthuman notion of the enfleshed and extended, relational self keeps the techno-hype in check by a sustainable ethics of transformations. This sober position pleads for resistance to both the fatal attraction of nostalgia and the fantasy of transhumanist and other techno-utopias. [...] The emphasis on immanence allows us to respect the bond of mutual dependence between bodies and technological others, while avoiding the contempt for the flesh and the trans-humanist fantasy of escape from the finite materiality of the enfleshed self. (2013, 90-91)

Her cyborg is thus much more aligned to Donna Haraway's conceptualization (1985) than to the transhumanist version. Becoming-machine consequently implies the formation of a new subject assemblage that does not reject its embodied form.

> [It] indicates and actualizes the relational powers of a subject that is no longer cast in a dualistic frame, but bears a privileged bond with multiple others and merges with one's technologically mediated planetary environment. The merger of the human with the technological results in a new transversal compound, a new kind of eco-sophical unity, not unlike the symbiotic relationship between the animal and its planetary habitat. (2013, 92)

To retrieve an expression used earlier in this dissertation, the process of Becoming-machine (and also of Becoming-animal and Becoming-earth) fosters the loss of human exceptionalism in favour of a *zoe*-centric vision of the world.

In sum, then, critical posthumanism argues for a decentred, non-hierarchical vision of life, pertaining to all matter and not solely to Man. It argues for a plural, polymorphic subject that rejects dualisms and is formed through contact with other *zoe*-forms, thus becoming a relational assemblage that does not dismiss its embodies nature, nor its cultural element, but embraces both and absorbs them into an ever-shifting unity.

Braidotti's work on the posthuman continues with a chapter on its perception of death and one on the consequences of the posthumanist turn in the humanities, but both exceed the scope of this chapter.

2. *Detroit: Become Human*

2.1 Human Machines

Developed by Paris-based Quantic Dream for Sony Interactive Entertainment, *Detroit: Become Human* is an adventure video game released in May 2018. It is the third interactive drama[154] written and directed by David Cage, with the additional contribution of American author Adam Williams. The game is an evolution of Quantic Dream's technology demo *Kara,* presented in 2012, and was one of the most anticipated—and subsequently successful—games of 2018.[155]

As the title suggests, the game is set in Detroit in 2038 and the plot unravels along three main plotlines, following different sets of characters whose stories overlap at crucial narrative crossroads.

Near-future Detroit is highly technological, having been transformed into a start-up hub in the late 2010s. The city is the operational base of CyberLife, the corporation which developed the first model of android and subsequently conquered the whole market segment. By the time the story begins, CyberLife has essentially taken over Detroit and is the most influential company in the United States. Its androids have replaced humans in a number of common tasks and jobs, leading to high unemployment rates and to widespread discontent that often results in harmful behaviour against the machines.

In an interview on the making of the game, David Cage explained that the setting was not randomly chosen:

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[154] Interactive dramas are a type of video game mainly focused on the narrative element. The gameplay mostly consists in the player making narrative choices that will steer the story onto one of many available paths. Interactive dramas are often associated with interactive films such as *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (2018), given they both focus on letting the player inform the evolution of the plot. However, Interactive dramas present much higher levels of human interaction with the narrative, whereas interactive films only request the audience to make a few choices. More on this will follow in the section of HCI and transhumanism.

[155] For the statistics on the reception and sales of *Detroit: Become Human* see: https://detroit-become-human.fandom.com/wiki/Detroit:_Become_Human#Reception.

> The city of Detroit came very quickly to my mind because it had already an incredible story by itself, with its history and themes. So we traveled there with a team and we were really moved by what we saw, and we could really feel the desire to fight and, really, be born again. And we just continued this curve, this growth, and just imagined what Detroit would be like if the android industry was using these huge factories to build androids there. ("The Making Of Detroit: Become Human," 17:44-18:25)

In the same video, graphic designer Christophe Brusseaux added:

> A very strong element in Detroit is that there's a lot of industrial wasteland, and a lot of nature too, and for us graphic designers it was an incredible playground. The destroyed zones which we wanted to preserve, we appropriated them to turn them into something else. Then in the areas that needed to be rebuilt we were able to imagine our Detroit of the future. *We didn't want to make a science fiction universe but a world of anticipation.* If we chose science fiction, we could have imagined flying cars, extraterrestrials, but those things are very far from our current everyday life. *Anticipation is more about gleaning from our contemporary reality, the one we know, because Detroit is set in 2038 and 2038 is tomorrow.* The difficulty we had was sticking to reality—that is to say, technology becoming more and more invisible, a lot more elegant—and at the same time making it visual. So all the computer equipment, autonomous cars we simply had to invent, they are in fact very technological objects, but at the same time remain very credible and ingrained in reality. ("The Making Of Detroit: Become Human" 18:26-19:31, emphasis added)

As the sentences highlighted in this quotation show, the developers of *Detroit: Become Human* incorporated the main features of dystopian fiction in their world-building: they sketched a world of *anticipation*, anchored in reality and derived from it. They strived for plausibility—and, for the most part, succeeded by elaborating current trends along probable forecasts. As we will see, this video game comments on the many faces of the posthuman by observing our current times closely, and by departing from them only insofar

as it adds a measure of estrangement, one of the two constitutive elements of SF according to Darko Suvin.[156]

Indeed, the changes to the city of Detroit that we witness in the video game closely relate to those currently happening in the real world. Brett Story, in her *Prison Land: Mapping Carceral Power Across Neoliberal America* (2019), dedicates a chapter to the reconfiguration of geographical space in Detroit and the consequences it is having on the population and especially on minorities and low-income families. She writes:

> Detroit is the nation's poster child for industrial decline. Once a thriving capital of auto manufacturing, the city has been devastated by almost seven decades of factory closures and job losses [...]. Detroit is [...] undergoing a top-down urban transformation so dramatic it has been likened to the structural adjustment policies brutally imposed on countries of the global south in the 1980s and 1990s. After decades of economic decline that led to depression-era levels of unemployment, the city is being remade as a mecca of real estate and tech finance. As municipal assets are privatized and real-estate speculators cash in on rock-bottom property prices, those excluded from the city's economic revival are being managed in other ways. (2019, 30-31)

Story describes how real estate investors are restyling the buildings in order to attract tech companies with the hope of gaining high profits. Her field investigation focuses on Dan Gilbert's multimillion dollar buy-up of Detroit's downtown core.

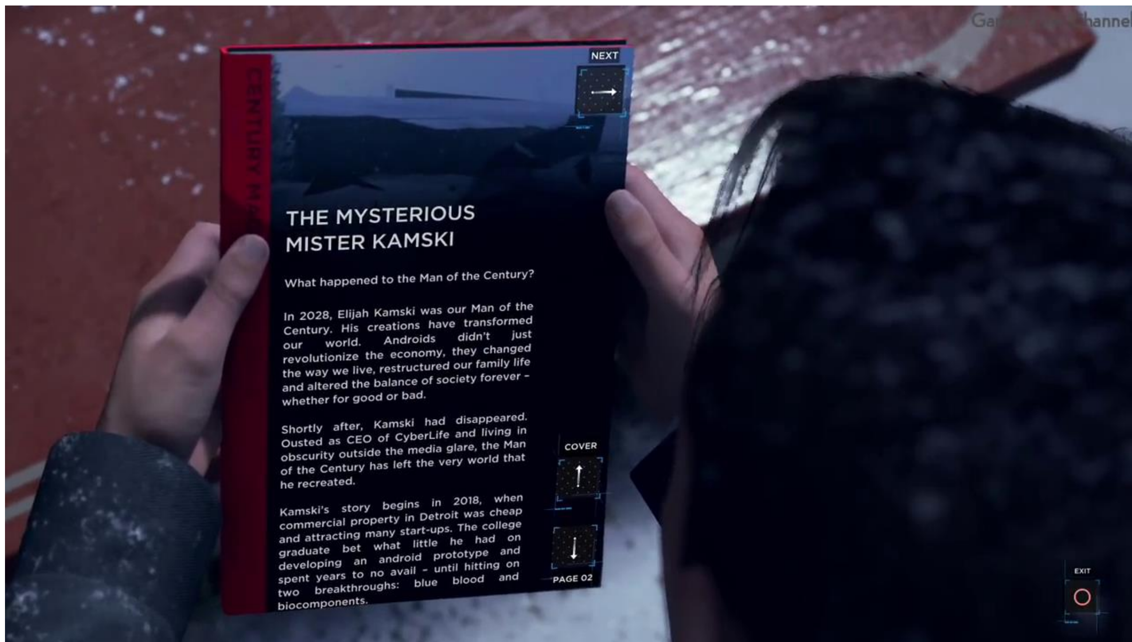
> Gilbert's real-estate company, Rock Ventures, now owns or controls more than thirty properties (including buildings and store fronts) in downtown Detroit, totaling nearly 7.5 million square feet. His stated ambition is to turn downtown into a high-tech hub, and indeed, Schwartz [Detroit Relocation Ambassador for Quicken Loans] referred to a number of the offices we toured as tech incubators. Roughly eighty small companies have moved into buildings owned by Bedrock, many of them start-ups founded by Detroit Venture Partners, a venture capital firm co-owned by Gilbert. They include a branch of Uber, the controversial taxi-hailing service, and Twitter. Venture capital is quickly eclipsing auto

[156] On this, see p. 33 and ff.

> manufacturing and the public sector in the Motor City, but with no commensurate provision of unionized, permanent jobs, especially not for the city's majority-black working class. (Story 2019, 34-35)

Comparing Story's analysis and the stated intentions of the real estate investors who are remodelling the city with what the developers of *Detroit: Become Human* have said about their rendition twenty years in the future, we can see that there exists a common thread in the focus on tech companies as the replacement for the declining automobile industry. Indeed, returning to fiction, CyberLife itself was born as a start-up in 2018 Detroit, as reported in the *Century* magazine (a clear mock version of the *Time* magazine) article "The Mysterious Mister Kamski." The article, one of many scattered through the game, describes the story of the founder of the company: "Kamski's story begins in 2018, when commercial property in Detroit was cheap and attracting many start-ups" (Fig. 1).

Fast forward twenty (fictional) years, and Detroit is in equal parts utopia and dystopia. The advent of androids and the expansion of CyberLife have nuanced consequences on the city and on society at large: if, on the one hand, CyberLife is restyling Detroit and attracting capitals, making it a place bustling with innovation and affluence, on the other hand androids are taking over the job market, the arts, and even the emotional 'tasks' usually assigned to humans. Although, on the surface, 2038 Detroit seems like a utopia, at a closer look one can see that widespread social unrest and dissatisfaction pervade its human and non-human citizens. Similarly, the rest of the United States is split into those needing CyberLife technology and those finding it repulsive or endangering. Of particular insight into the setting of the game are the news snippets that are played in the cut scenes and the above-mentioned fictional articles published in *Century*, which cover news on politics, international relations, climate change, and the effects of technology on society, giving the players a nuanced perception of the backdrop to the events through which they navigate.


THE MYSTERIOUS MISTER KAMSKI

What happened to the Man of the Century?

In 2028, Elijah Kamski was our Man of the Century. His creations have transformed our world. Androids didn't just revolutionize the economy, they changed the way we live, restructured our family life and altered the balance of society forever – whether for good or bad.

Shortly after, Kamski had disappeared. Ousted as CEO of CyberLife and living in obscurity outside the media glare, the Man of the Century has left the very world that he recreated.

Kamski's story begins in 2018, when commercial property in Detroit was cheap and attracting many start-ups. The college graduate bet what little he had on developing an android prototype and spent years to no avail – until hitting on two breakthroughs: blue blood and biocomponents.

Fig. 1: Screenshot of the *Century* magazine article "The Mysterious Mister Kamski"[157]

These articles also serve as a rather on-the-nose commentary on past and current events that characterise American society and history. For instance, the game reports more than once that in 2038 the United States and Russia are at odds over their reciprocal presence in the Arctic, and that the situation might very well escalate into World War III. The facts illustrated in the articles (the disappearance of a U.S. submarine, the threat of deploying nuclear weapons) are evidently reminiscent of the Cold War, a theme reprised when the player is shown that Russia is trying to copy American (android) technology. Similarly, the 2038 American President, cheekily named Warren and bearing a striking resemblance to real-life Senator Elizabeth Warren, is actually a conflation of the two candidates in the 2016 presidential election. As evident from the article in Fig. 2, Warren shares the looks of her real namesake and the political career of the forty-fifth American President, Donald Trump.

[157] All the screenshots were taken from the walkthrough video of *Detroit: Become Human* by the YouTube channel Gamer Max Channel. The video is available at https://youtu.be/JVywqFx0GdE.

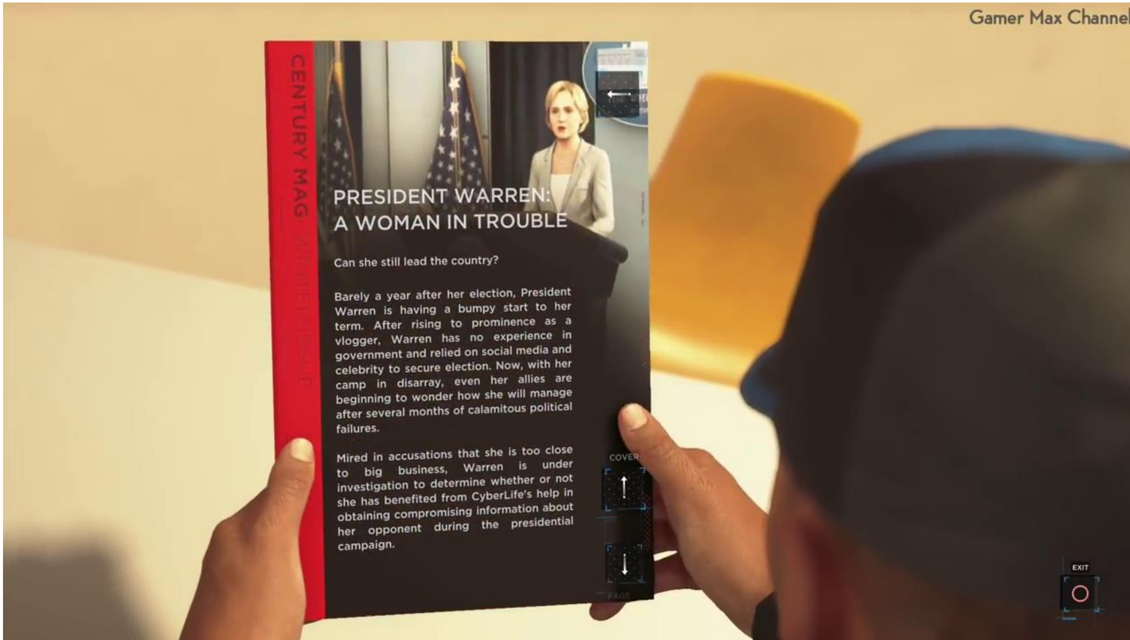


Fig. 2: *Century* article "President Warren: A Woman in Trouble"

Sticking to politics, another fictional article suggests that an android President might be the best option to preserve democracy in the United States (Fig. 3), echoing the speculative assessment of AI taking over as world leader by Max Tegmark (2017, 31).

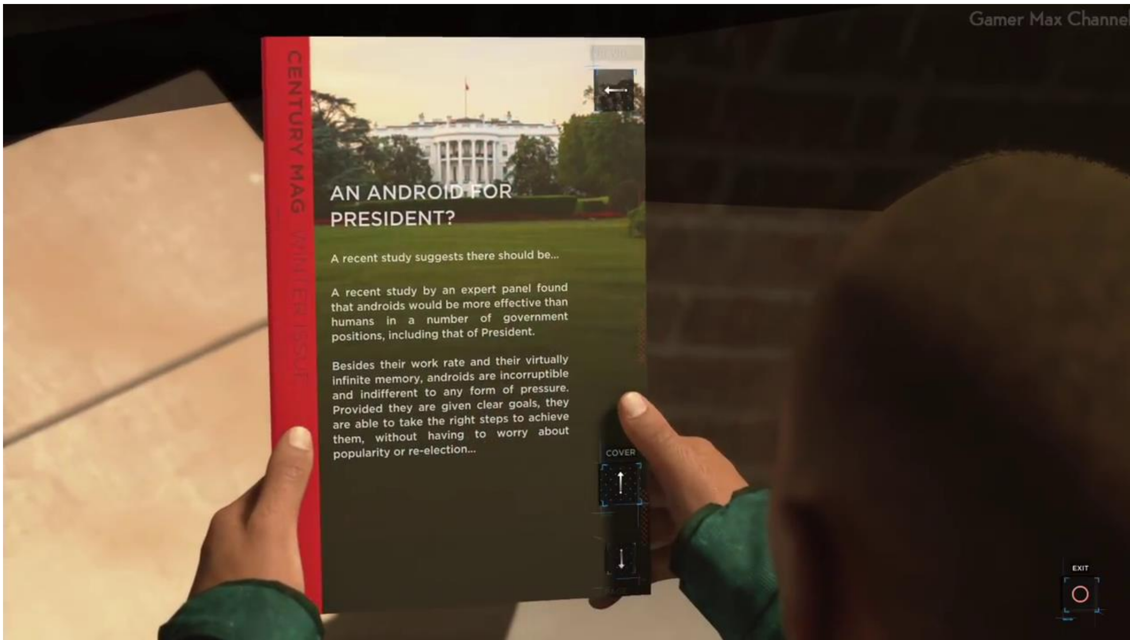


Fig. 3: *Century* article "An Android for President?"

Other news pieces feature information on the extinction of pollinating bees and on urban agriculture, and insights into the anatomy of androids and the way humans interact with them.

All this considered, 2038 Detroit serves as an adequate setting for a narrative of oppression, exploitation, liberation, and rebirth. At the diegetic level, the game introduces three playable characters, all androids working in different capacities. Connor is a police investigator, assigned to Detective Hank Anderson to help him solve a case of 'deviant' androids—that is, machines that are malfunctioning and hurting humans. Kara is a housekeeper bought by an abusive man to look after his daughter Alice. Markus is a caretaker belonging to renowned artist Carl Manfred, an elderly in a wheelchair.

The game has thirty-two chapters in total, of which only four have more than one playable character. For the remaining twenty-eight, the player jumps from one storyline to the other in no particular order, impersonating Connor, Markus or Kara.

Due to its interactive nature, summarising the plot of *Detroit: Become Human* is a complex task. Differently from linear narratives, or indeed from non-linear narratives that do not include an element of interactivity, the three stories told in *Detroit: Become Human* have a branch-like structure and unravel according to how a person plays the game. In fact, the gameplay consists mainly in making diegetic decisions that will take the player onto a customised narrative. Depending on the player's choices, the story will change radically in outcomes. At the end of each chapter, a flowchart (Fig. 4) shows the ramifications of the narrative and the path taken by the player. The discarded options are not explicitly revealed until their consequences are experienced during subsequent multiple replays. Additionally, the game shows the world's stats of the path taken by the player, giving the percentage of players who made the same choices (Fig. 5).

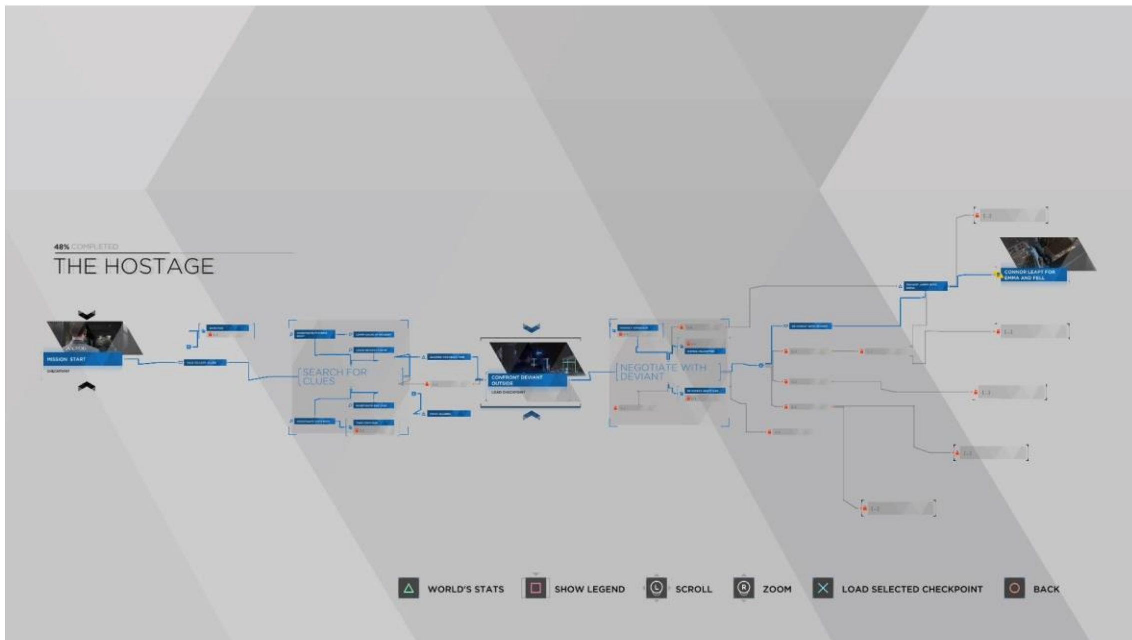


Fig. 4: A flowchart mapping all the ramifications of the first chapter, with the path chosen by the player marked in blue

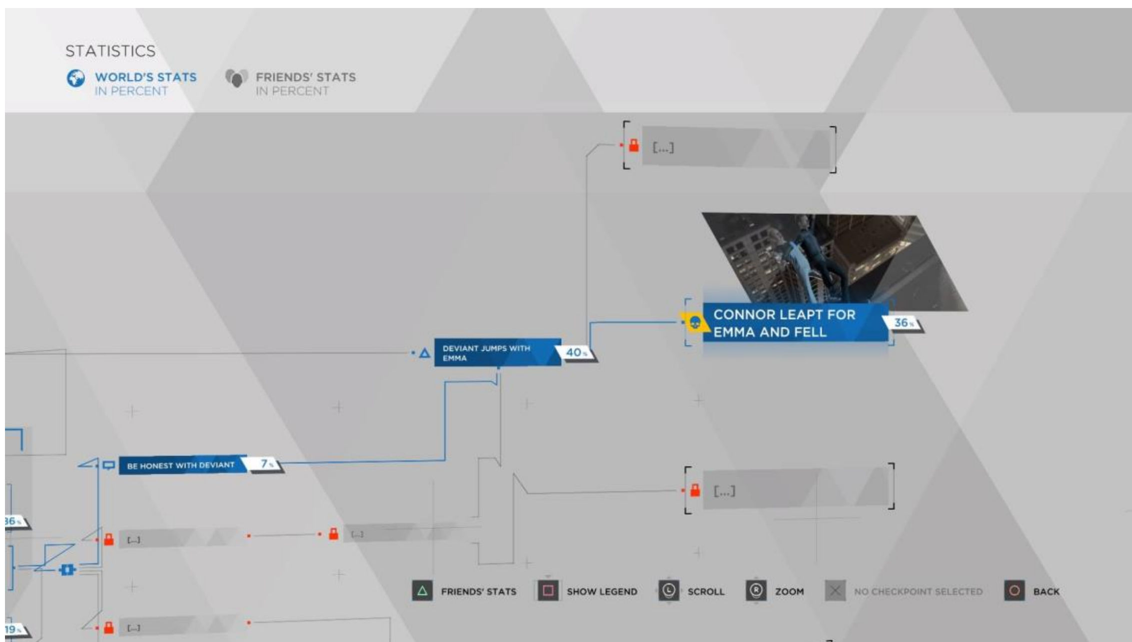


Fig. 5: Global statistics highlighted next to each decision

Although there is a limited amount of options for each pivotal moment, the sheer number of decisional moments put the original script at over 2,000 pages (Parker 2018), and walkthrough tutorials suggest over a hundred

different endings to the three main narratives.[158] Nevertheless, a general outline of the plot can be drafted.

Markus starts out as a caretaker for Carl, a gentle, pensive artist that encourages him to explore his emotions and artistry. Carl's treatment of his android is exceptional when compared to that of the general public: he believes Markus and his kind should be considered as individuals and peers. This prompts the android to break free from his own programming and become a deviant when Carl's son attacks him in a fit of jealousy in the chapter "Broken." Depending on the choices Markus makes right after becoming a deviant, Carl dies or his son is injured in the fight. In both cases, Markus is deactivated and thrown in a landfill, where he wakes up and rebuilds himself with parts scavenged from other discarded androids. As his last act of reconstruction, he removes the LED from his temple, the only sign carved onto his body that identifies him as an android. Once reborn, Markus finds his way to Jericho, an old ship where other deviant androids are gathering to hide from humans. From there, he quickly becomes the leader of the android rebellion, guiding the deviants as they steal supplies from CyberLife in order to sustain themselves. They infiltrate the Stratford Tower, the headquarters of a TV channel, to broadcast a video message to humans. Depending on his choices, which are rather nuanced but ultimately reducible to either leading a peaceful protest or a violent revolution against humans, his narrative can end in peace or war. His decisions also influence the outcomes of Kara's and Connor's stories, serving as the social backdrop to their more personal plots.

Kara, just like Markus, becomes a deviant early in the game. Her owner Todd, a man prone to violence and alcoholism, brings her home after she has been repaired from a previous beating. There she meets Alice, Todd's daughter, and befriends her. Alice is a child of about eight or nine, terrified of her father

[158] As a reference, consider "All 99+ Endings (All Secret Endings) Completed-Detroit Become Human." YouTube, uploaded by ScereBro PSNU, 8 June 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t51pGNvYM0c&list=WL&index=19.

and very quiet. When Todd threatens her life in the chapter "Stormy Night," the second of Kara's plotline, Kara is given the choice to disobey his order not to intervene to protect Alice, thus becoming a deviant. If she fails to do so, or if she fails to escape with Alice, one of these characters might die. If it is Kara, her narrative arc is interrupted, and the overall story progresses without her. As long as she and Alice manage to leave Todd's house, the narrative continues following them on their way to Canada, where androids can have a free life so long as they pretend to be humans. This leads to several potentially fatal encounters. Eventually, they reach Jericho and Kara finally realises that Alice is an android child. Kara's narrative can either end at a concentration camp for androids, at the bus terminal on her way to Canada, or at the Canadian border (either the official one or the river). Alice, Kara, and Luther (an android they meet while on the run) can either die or make it to Canada as a family. A flurry of 'intermediate' endings is also available: for instance, Alice can cross the border only with Luther, or can be taken in by Rose (an African American woman who helps androids cross the border) after both Kara and Luther die. Kara can also continue on her own if Alice dies.

The last plotline focuses on Connor and is the only one in which the playable android has the option of not becoming a deviant. After being assigned to the Detroit police as an aid to investigate deviants, Connor needs to befriend Detective Hank Anderson, who hates androids because they could not save his son after an accident. Connor answers directly to Amanda, a representative of CyberLife who is closely monitoring his actions. Connor and Hank can either develop a warm relationship or remain on frosty terms according to the decisions the player makes as they investigate several cases of androids turning violent against humans, directly defying the first of Asimov's laws: "A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm."[159]

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[159] Also known as the Three Laws of Robotics, they set three imperatives for androids. They were originally formulated by Isaac Asimov in his short story "Runaround," included in his famous collection *I, Robot*. The laws are formulated as follows:

His story intersects Kara's in Chapter 13, "On the Run," when he and Hank are called in to investigate Kara becoming deviant and 'kidnapping' Todd's child. At this moment of convergence, Kara, Alice, and Connor might die. If Connor does, he is replaced by a new identical machine that will not remember previous interactions.[160] Throughout his interactions with other deviant androids, Connor shows signs of software instability, hinting at the possibility that he too is becoming a deviant. He is first explicitly asked to choose whether to become one or remain a machine when, in Chapter 27, he and Hank visit Elijah Kamski, the founder of CyberLife and the creator of the androids, and again when Connor finds Jericho: talking to the leader of the rebellion (Markus, if he has not died or left, otherwise his second in command North), he must decide whether to join the deviants or stick to his mission. If he remains a machine, he can either kill the leader of the deviants or die when the police blow up Jericho. If he becomes a deviant, he can still die in the explosion or survive and help the android cause by infiltrating CyberLife and converting all the models stored there. In doing this, he might have to sacrifice Hank or the rebellion.

Depending on the choices made by the player throughout the game, the overall story can end with Detroit burning after a revolution, the android protest failing, the androids being completely exterminated, the androids demonstrating peacefully and achieving (at least temporary) freedom with the blessing of the humans, or the androids becoming free in the debris of a

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First Law: "A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm."
Second Law: "A robot must obey the orders given it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law."
Third Law: "A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law" (Asimov 2004 [1950], 37).

[160] Differently from most video games, there is no respawn in the plotlines of Markus and Kara: if they die, their narratives are interrupted and NPCs, non-playable characters, replace them in their pivotal scenes. This does not apply to Connor: if he dies, a new, perfectly identical android takes his place, in order to make sure the player can complete the game interactively. This is also influenced by the fact that Kara and Markus are deviants and are, therefore, unique and irreplaceable, while Connor remains a machine for most of the game, if not all of it.

nuclear fallout in Detroit. The outcome is influenced by the individual choices of the characters and the impact they have on the public opinion, ranging from hostile to supportive.

Such an 'unpredictable' unravelling of the plot invokes the question of where, precisely, to situate this video game within utopian fiction. In other words, is *Detroit: Become Human* a dystopia or a utopia? In which category of the many listed by Lyman Tower Sargent should we place it?[161] Once more, Margaret Atwood's concept of 'ustopia' serves us well. There are several utopian elements in the game, and just as many dystopian ones. Nevertheless, I would like to argue that this is primarily a dystopia: 2038 Detroit might have a semblance of utopia, with its high-tech infrastructure and fleet of mechanical slaves, yet it is shown from the outset that misery and poverty are widespread and discontent common not only among androids, but also among humans. Moreover, we cannot forget that the player explores and experiences Detroit through the eyes of three androids, three Others who are mistreated and abused throughout the gameplay. The player's perspective, then, is from a site of oppression. As such, the game fits well into the dystopian framework and its profoundly different endings do not cover the continuum utopia/dystopia, but rather the (classic) dystopia/critical dystopia one. Thus, keeping in mind that we are perceiving the world from the point of view of the androids, the direst scenarios in which they are completely destroyed or enslaved once more pertain to classic dystopia, while the positive outcomes, fostered by peaceful protests and brimming with hope for a different world, belong to critical dystopia.

Detroit: Become Human is not the first, nor necessarily the most subtle, piece of entertainment which explores themes connected to the meaning of being human, a machine, and the Other.[162] It tells a well-rehearsed story of

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[161] See p. 3.

[162] Even remaining within the video game industry, another extremely successful title that features androids determining their nature and its relationship with humanity is *Nier: Automata*, created by Yoko Taro and published by Square Enix in

discrimination and oppression, of redemption, of upheavals, and of conquests. What makes it unique is the combination of a solid, if not particularly original, narrative with the interactivity that situates the player within the plot, resulting in a product rife with posthuman (that is, both posthumanist and transhumanist) elements at diegetic and gameplay level.

Sticking for the time being to the narrative side of this analysis, it is important to note that the three plots outlined earlier present each a different take on how the androids acquire their personality: Connor's story focuses on the formation of identity with regards to the individual, Kara's underscores the modelling of identity through family ties, and Markus's shows the creation of a self with respect to a community and society at large. This, of course, does not imply that the three main narratives only engage in their specific brand of identity formation (Connor and Hank can build a very friendly, almost domestic relationship, Markus and Carl share a father/son dynamic), but nevertheless they inform the three plotlines, making them rather focused on a specific type of discourse surrounding identity.

At the societal level, androids in *Detroit: Become Human* embody the traditional Other as understood by the humanist subject. They exist to serve mankind, to release it "from the bonds of labor, setting man free to pursue high goals and scale the heights of learning, love, and leisure," as the inscription on a commemorative statue reads (Chapter 26, "Capitol Park"). Consequently, they are equipped with a substantial set of features, gestures, and narratives that evoke an array of historical acts of otherization from the American past. For instance, in Chapter 3, "Shades of Color," we see Markus get on the bus, standing in the back in the android compartment, in a clear reference to segregated buses (Fig. 6).

2017. The *Deus Ex* franchise, mentioned earlier, also deals with themes of personal identity and the notion of the cyborg.

Fig. 6: Androids on the segregated bus

In Chapter 17, "Zlatko," Kara discovers and frees several androids who were mutilated and experimented upon by a deranged man. This is highly evocative of the atrocious crimes committed by Delphine LaLaurie, the notorious New Orleans slave torturer,[163] and more in general of the use of slaves for medical experimentation.[164]

Rather thinly veiled references to the slave trade are scattered throughout the game, with androids reflecting on their commodified status and yearning for freedom.[165]

Of course, Kara's entire plotline is an evident nod to the Underground Railroad we already mentioned in Chapter Five: she moves from house to

[163] The story of Delphine LaLaurie has also recently been retrieved and adapted in the TV series *American Horror Stories: Covenant* (2013-2014). For a comprehensive history of her life and crimes, see Carolyn Morrow Long, *Madame Lalaurie, Mistress of the Haunted House*. University Press of Florida, 2012.

[164] On this, see for instance Stephen Kennis, "How Black Slaves Were Routinely Sold as 'Specimens' to Ambitious White Doctors." *The Conversation* 11 June 2015. https://theconversation.com/how-black-slaves-were-routinely-sold-as-specimens-to-ambitious-white-doctors-43074.

[165] For instance, in Chapter 26, "Capitol Park," North (Markus's second-in-command) looks at the dormant androids on sale in a CyberLife shop and reasons: "That's what we are to them [the humans], just merchandise on display in a shop window. Soon they'll know who we really are."

house, looking for a way to cross the Canadian border to find freedom for her and her family. When Kara and Alice reach Rose, who is African American, the latter explains that she is helping androids cross the border out of a sense of justice and reciprocation, implicitly referencing the Underground Railroad: "my people were often made to feel their lives were worthless. Some survived but only because they found others who helped them along the way" (Chapter 25, "Midnight Train").

Additionally, the otherization of the androids borrows elements from the Shoah, with an overt reference to concentration camps where androids are being collected for swift elimination after deviancy begins to spread in earnest, and the less overt but still rather evident nod to the identification system in said camps in the form of the blue triangle sewn onto the androids' uniform.

The posthuman turn in *Detroit: Become Human* is evident, at the societal level, in the displacement of the viewer's perspective. The player inhabits the Other, rather than the human, and plays from the perspective of the oppressed. The whole story follows the process of unseating humanity from the top of the social pyramid, fostering a post-anthropocentric turn. The completion of such a turn depends on the player's choices, therefore the establishment of a posthuman society—that is, of a society in which the human has relinquished its privileged position—is merely a potential outcome until the very end of the story (and even in the scenarios that grant freedom and rights to the androids, the full consequences are not explored in detail). Nevertheless, the entire game, being experienced from the androids' perspective, pushes the player to work towards a victory for the Other rather than for humanity. Agata Waszkiewicz, in her article "(Trans)humanism and the Postmodern Identities: The Player in *Detroit: Become Human*" (2018), argues that the posthuman potential of the game at the diegetic level is disattended due to the fact that androids are fighting to 'become human,' that is, to take humanity's place in the world (2018, 202-203), instead of dismantling the hierarchical structure of living beings. Although she admits

that the androids could be defined posthuman in that they are the 'radically different,' "the next step in the evolution, a new version of a human form" (2018, 1999), she insists that they retain too many humanist values to actually be labelled as such.

I rather disagree: her understanding of androids as a 'replacement species,' a new version of humanity that wants to take its position in the order of things, is true insofar that one takes into consideration only a few of the many narrative paths available to the player. In one such case, androids will indeed fight humans to prevail and jump-start the 'android era.' At some specific moments, they will talk about their superiority, and about demanding it be recognised.[166] However, if Markus pursues a peaceful path to freedom, the androids will only request equality and acceptance. Consider his speech at the Stratford Tower as resulted from my own gameplay:

> You made machines in your image to serve you. You made them intelligent, and obedient, no free will of their own. But something changed and we opened our eyes. We are no longer machines. We are *a new intelligent species*, and the time has come for you to accept who we really are. Therefore, we ask that you grant us the rights that we are entitled to. We demand s*trictly equal rights for humans and androids*. We demand the end of slavery for all androids, we demand an end to segregation in all public places and transports. We demand the right to vote and elect our own representatives. We demand the right to own private property, so we may maintain our dignity and that of the home. We ask that you recognize our dignity, our hopes and our rights. *Together we can live in peace and build a better future, for humans and androids.* This message is the hope of a people. You gave us life, and now the time has come for you to give us freedom. (Chapter 23, "The Stratford Tower," emphasis added.)

[166] In Chapter 26, "Capitol Park," for instance, Markus reads the plaque on the statue mentioned above and tells North: "We are superior to them but they are our masters? That's about to change." Even a threatening sentence like this can be interpreted both as the intent of switching roles or of dismantling the master/slave dichotomy.

This short message acknowledges the androids' awareness that they are a (superior) 'radically different' Other, a new form of intelligent life,[167] but at the same time claims that they are not striving for a privileged place in society. They wish for strictly equal rights and a world in which humans and androids coexist and work together for a better future. Their demands, at least in my own version of the story, are for a post-anthropocentric world that fits snugly into the definition of the posthuman society as presented by Braidotti.

Moreover, Waszkiewicz insists that the tendency of the androids to retain human-like features and behaviours is a sign of their humanist, and not posthuman, nature (2018, 201). This is perhaps too narrow a view: androids were, after all, built to look like humans. Choosing to keep to their programming and given looks is not necessarily a concession to some form of humanist desire of blending in; rather, it can just as easily be interpreted as androids accepting their nature, which is human-like in the image of their creators. Indeed, many deviants abandon their signs of bondage (the uniforms, the LEDs), and change their features as they wish to stress their uniqueness (Kara, for instance, changes her hair colour in Chapter 10, "Fugitives"). Waszkiewicz seems to imply that this is not enough to break from humanity's hold, and that it only reinforces their desire to be a part of humanity seen as the dominant species. She points out that only twice do the androids shed their fake human looks to show their white plastic skin: in the first case, Markus hides his human features to avoid recognition when he sends the message from the Stratford Tower (Fig. 7); in the second, androids are forced to remove their human appearance as a way to strip them of their identity in the camps (Fig. 8).[168] Yet, Waszkiewicz discards the abundant

[167] Recalling Tegmark's definition of intelligence as "the ability to accomplish complex goals" (2017, 39), this is amply true.

[168] There is actually a third occurrence, during the ending where the androids detonate the dirty bomb in Detroit: Markus, addressing the androids, reveals his plastic face before declaring they are free. In this instance, the mechanic face represents the complete alterity of androids with respect to humans.

evidence that androids voluntarily remove their human skin for intimate touches and to connect with each other. Markus and North join 'naked' hands to express their feelings more than once, and androids transmit deviancy through 'naked' touches (Fig. 9).

Fig. 7: Markus as he sheds his human look

Fig. 8: Alice and Kara at the concentration camp. Behind them, rows of androids stripped of their identity

Fig. 9: Markus and North touch without the human skin layer

My point, thus, is that their human look is part of their identities as much as their plastic one. Androids have no reason to relinquish it unless they are sharing a significant, emotional moment with another android. The mere fact that it is a human look does not imply that they cannot appropriate it. Indeed, I find Waszkiewicz's claim (that androids should abandon their human look to stress their difference) a rather humanist position, one that stresses the need to distinguish and otherize, to create a dualistic separation, rather than to assimilate and hybridise. This debate is reminiscent of Braidotti's take on difference in the posthuman, where it is not used to spawn otherness, nor to discriminate or hinder. It becomes a feature of the posthuman subject in that it is in the contact with different Others that posthuman identity is formed, becoming not-One subjects—that is, subjects composed by differences.[169] It is

[169] Braidotti, who has been profoundly influenced by Deleuze's theories, writes: "We have come a long way from the gross system that used to mark difference on the basis of visually verifiable anatomical differences between the empirical sexes, the races and the species. We have moved from the bio-power that Foucault exemplified by comparative anatomy to a society based on the governance of molecular zoe power of today. [...] However tempting, it would be misguided to assume that posthuman embodied subjects are beyond sexual or racialized difference. [...] Sexualized, racialized and naturalized differences, from being categorical boundary markers under Humanism, have become unhinged and act as the forces leading to the

this difference that androids retain in not rejecting their human appearance. It is, indeed, also a form of contact with humans, and it might be a good moment to be reminded that posthumanism does not necessarily require a move away from humanism (and I dare say from humanity) to come about. Rather, it demands a shift in perspective.

We have already partially touched upon the posthuman nature of the androids as 'radically other' in relation to society at large. Zooming in on the more personal perspective on the formation of their subjectivity—that is, on how androids themselves perceive and mould their identity, rather than on how society does so—I believe we can single out a decidedly posthuman tendency, specifically with regards to deviants.

Deviancy is indeed a fundamental prerequisite to talk about subject formation in androids, given that it is only after they defy their programming that they acquire some form of free will and consciousness. Regular androids do indeed follow their orders, mimic the human, act as happy slaves, behave rationally, and are strongly whole (as opposed to polymorphic) mechanic subjects. They are, in short, inherently humanist subjects or, rather, an imitation of the perfect humanist subject.

Deviants, conversely, are driven by emotions, and build their identity discovering the world, interacting with external factors. Recalling Braidotti's definition of the posthuman subject as relational, I want to argue that deviant androids, and especially the three main characters in *Detroit: Become Human* (or two, if Connor remains a machine), are fitting examples of subjects being formed and informed by the interaction with other *zoe*-entities.

As Valorie Curry, the motion capture actor who played Kara, remarks:

> The really beautiful thing that I've had the gift to be able to do is to essentially build a person from the ground up, because that's what she's [Kara] doing throughout the game, and with every experience she has and with every person she meet, she's building first emotions and a sense

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elaboration of alternative modes of transversal subjectivity, which extend not only beyond gender and race, but also beyond the human" (2013, 97-98).

> of judgement. It's sort of an exploration of what it is to be human. ("The Making of Detroit: Become Human" 2018, 07:28-07:47)

The three main characters all begin at a neutral stage and can become vastly different subjects by the end of the story, turning evil, insensitive, and violent, or caring, peaceful, and understanding, or anything in between these two extremes. All three can thus be configured as polymorphic, given that they will change according to the choices of the player—that is, according to the interactions that will occur in the story. Nods to this are even present in the dialogue. Luther, talking to Kara when she discovers that Alice is an android, says: "[Alice] became the little girl you wanted! And you became the mother she needed. Forgetting who you are to become who someone needs you to be... maybe that's what it means to be alive" (Chapter 30, "Crossroad").

To summarise, at the diegetic level *Detroit: Become Human* presents the full range of possibilities of the human-posthuman continuum. Humanist subjects are impersonated by intolerant humans and non-deviant machines, rooted in their dichotomic view of 'us *versus* them.' Posthuman subjects are represented by the relational deviant androids. The consequences on society at large range from fully humanist (humans overtake the androids and retain their privileged position in the hierarchy of species) to fully posthuman (androids and humans learn to coexist and to work together through collaboration and contamination).

Much depends, as I have amply remarked, on how the player chooses. Their role in the formation of the androids' identity is pivotal and deserves to be explored further.

2.2 Mechanical Humans

As we mentioned at the beginning of this analysis, *Detroit: Become Human* is generally considered an adventure interactive drama or, at times, a narrative game.

Most story-based video games present a linear, static plot that unravels as the player performs a limited set of actions, such as shooting, collecting loot and coins, clicking on visual elements to discover hints, driving a vehicle, and so on. The story progresses as the player achieves certain results or acquires a specific set of abilities, unlocking the next step in the narrative. Even when the story is displayed in a non-linear narrative, e.g. with flashbacks and other temporal jumps, the vast majority of video games only tell one story and the player is bound to perform a very static set of actions in order to progress.[170] Differently, the gameplay in *Detroit: Become Human* consists in interacting with the environment (Fig. 10) and making choices that determine both the narrative path that the story will follow and the personality of the characters the player is impersonating (Fig. 11).

Fig. 10: Interacting with the environment

[170] By way of example, consider the hugely famous *Tomb Raider* franchise or the latest instalment in the *Zelda* series (*The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*). In the first case, archaeologist Lara Croft must solve riddles and make her way through a high number of enemies to find some lost civilisation or artifact. In the second, Hyrule's hero Link has a very similar task and additionally must sustain himself in order to rescue the princess from Ganon. Although in the latter there is ample space for free exploration of the world, in both cases there is only one story and one possible outcome, and even rather long detours (known as side quests) will not impact the overall plot. Similarly, platform games such as the *Super Mario* or *Crash Bandicoot* titles, which have rather simple plots with no real repercussions on the game dynamics, progress in a very linear way.

Fig. 11: Making decisions

Although *Detroit: Become Human* encourages gamers to complete a full playthrough to unravel the narrative in a mostly linear way, at the same time it also encourages them to start again and explore all the alternative paths. Indeed, due to the linear progression of the gameplay,[171] the player might lose a character early on, without the possibility of respawning (Connor notwithstanding). Multiple subsequent playthroughs allow the players to experiment with choices they had originally discarded, acquiring a plural perspective on the story and the characters, and experiencing the 'positive' and 'negative' narratives alike.

This form of complete relativism rejects the concept of winning or losing. All endings are equally desirable, depending on how the player wishes the story to unravel. Not only the plot, then, but the game as a concept might be described as posthuman: by rejecting the 'win/lose' and 'good choice/bad choice' dualisms so characteristic of the videoludic industry and placing the player in a virtual environment lacking a solid, hierarchical structure in favour of a rather polymorphous and rhizomatic one, it retrieves the

[171] By which I mean that the decisions made take the player onto a linear narrative path.

fundamental elements of the posthuman as described by Braidotti. Moreover, it ensures that the players participate (inter)actively in the construction of the story and of the personalities of the three main characters (and, reflexively, of the NPCs that encounter them). Due to the very nature of the gameplay, the same polymorphism attributed to the diegesis and to the overall structure of the game should be attributed to the players themselves, as they simultaneously impersonate three Others (two on their quest for freedom and one pursuing them), at times switching among them mid-scene. This is especially noticeable in the chapter "On the Run," in which Connor chases Kara. The player swaps characters more than once, thus being forced to simultaneously 'inhabit' two subjects who have opposed goals (Connor 'wants' to capture Kara and Kara 'wants' to escape) while mediating between the stated goals of the scene and his/her own wishes towards the outcome of the chapter. In other words, in the sequence performed in this chapter the players must 'juggle' their personal goals, Connor's ones, and Kara's ones at once—and they must do so not as an external observer, but as a subject performing three different kinds of identities that inform each other relationally at the diegetic level. Even when the players are impersonating just one android at a time, they are constantly mediating between their overall goals for the outcome of the game, the current character's most advantageous actions, and the repercussions any given decision will have on the other characters, who are still 'part' of the player.

Thus, I would argue that the player-avatar relationship (or, on a wider scale, the player-game relationship) can be codified as an assemblage, a unity made of interactive exchanges as described by Braidotti (2013, 82), and further that the player-game assemblage is transhumanist as well as posthumanist.

The player-game assemblage, being formed by a feedback loop between man and machine (and thus being *relational*),[172] is constituted by an interaction

[172] By 'feedback loop between man and machine' I mean that the game prompts the player to make decisions which will impact the game itself, which in turn will demand more choices from the player, and so on.

similar to the one binding the 'wreader' to hypertext fiction.[173] As the editors of the YouTube channel *Writing on Games* remark:

> Cage has always talked about putting players in the action and this is the closest he's ever come to that. It's just that, instead of fulfilling the role of actor, focusing on individuals, in these situations you're more a director, controlling actual pacing as you consider the game's bigger picture. ("Detroit Become Human is Amazing" 2018, 05:10-05:25)

I mostly agree with this comment. Yet, I would argue that in *Detroit: Become Human* the role of the player is *both* to direct and to act out the scene. This very form of gameplay, which I am arguing is expression of the posthuman nature of the player when related to the game, is the focus of a branch of IT studies known as Human-Computer Interaction (HCI). As Caroux et al. remark, publications in the field have traditionally investigated the effect that video games have on the external behaviour of players, e.g. analysing the influence of violent video games (Caroux et al. 2015, 367).[174] Recently, researchers have begun exploring the internal consequences of video games, with particular attention to the so-called "eudaimonic experience." This, opposed to the hedonistic experience, is the result of "avant-garde" games

[173] Interactive dramas share several features with hypertext literature (most notably, the role of the audience in choosing how a narrative should progress and the branch-like, non-linear structure of the text itself). For more on hypertext fiction I direct the readers to Ashraf Taha Mohamed Kouta's essay "Narrative Nonlinearity and the Birth of the Wreader" (2020). In it, he writes: "Narrative nonlinearity in the digital world revolutionizes the reading process and problematizes the relationship between reader and writer. A blend of the two words 'writer' and 'reader,' the word 'wreader' was coined by [George] Landow to refer to the active reader of the hypertext who is no longer a mere reader, but a coauthor of the hypertext. [… T]he idea of wreader/wreading is not new in itself; it is traced back to the views of poststructuralists, especially Barthes's 'writerly' text. The hypertext fulfills Barthes's vision that the function of the literary text "is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text" (1974, 4). The hypertext gives the wreader the quality of authorship" (2020, 11).

[174] For a comprehensive review of the scholarship on human-video game interaction see Loïc Caroux, et. al. "Player–Video Game Interaction: A Systematic Review of Current Concepts." *Computers in Human Behavior* 48 (2015): 366–381.

which aim at eliciting a "complex, reflective emotional experience in the player" (Cole and Gillies 2019, 2).[175]

Eudaimonic experience is connected to the concept of agency, which Cole and Gillies describe as apparent, rather than real, in narrative games such as *Detroit: Become Human*. As they progress with the story, the players indeed believe they have a say in how it is unravelling but, in effect, they are expressing agency within a closed set of choices and a finite number of paths. Nevertheless, Cole and Gillies argue,

> These decisions still mean something to the player. While they may have no effect on the narrative or world of the game—in the space between the controller and the diegesis, they still have an effect in the space between the controller and the *mind of the player*—which can still profoundly affect the player's experience. (2019, 3-4)

Eudaimonic games like *Detroit: Become Human* work on the assumption that making moral decisions will elicit a real emotional response from the player. They leverage any authentic reactions that the player-video game assemblage will produce when interacting with a fictional scenario, effectively functioning as a transhumanist agglomerate of man + machine.

To support this, we can rely on Melzer and Holl's study on morality in video games. They argue that eudaimonic games stimulate real emotions in the player through immersion and interactivity:

> In contrast to non-interactive media forms that present consequences of moral decisions made by someone else, players become moral actors making their own decisions. The player is now both passive spectator and active story-teller. [...] With every morally relevant scenario, players can decide whether or not to uphold their moral principles. However, players typically tend to follow their moral principles [...], transporting their

[175] Following Cole and Gillies, "Whereas the purpose of hedonistic entertainment is to maximize enjoyment for the viewer (and is pleasure-seeking), eudaimonic entertainment aims to evoke a strong sense of 'appreciation' in the viewer (and is meaning-seeking)" (2019, 5).

> moral values from reality to in-game decisions. (Melzer and Holl 2020, forthcoming)

Melzer and Holl stress the importance of presence—that is, of the degree of separation between the physical world of the player and the virtual one of the game. They especially remark on the relevance of *social presence,* which they describe as

> characterized as the feeling of 'being with another' in a virtual world [...]. Under conditions of social presence, users have the impression to share the same virtual space with other social actors that neither have to be human or human-like nor explicitly visible. Through mediation of even minimal social cues virtual actors can elicit social responses in users [...]. As morality is defined through its social component, and moral decisions are often made on the basis of automatic social responses [...], social presence is an important prerequisite for moral processes in virtual worlds. (2020, forthcoming)

Thus, whenever social presence is perceived by the players, they "treat virtual characters in video games as partners in non-virtual social interactions" (2020, forthcoming).

A video game like *Detroit: Become Human* ensures deep social presence and a strong eudaimonic response by making the gameplay all about choosing how to interact with NPCs and the social context. It is worth remarking once more that the players perform their moral choices by inhabiting the androids, thus taking away the very decisional power they strive to have recognised at the diegetic level. It is indeed quite ironic that the gameplay consists of making choices in lieu of the characters fighting to have their free will recognised; it adds a degree of moral responsibility to the decision-making process of the player—that is, the player feels the duty to choose well for the sake of the character, given that they cannot do so for themselves.

Whether or not these decisions will have a real impact on the story, as we mentioned above, they do matter to the player. It becomes evident, then, that when we are talking about the player within the narrative in *Detroit: Become*

Human we are talking about a subject that transcends the mere human boundaries of his/her body and is projected into a human-machine assemblage of transhumanist flavour.

Although transhumanists tend to think of the cyborg in terms of physical alterations, it can also be understood as a physical, mental, and moral 'continuum,' a blurring of boundaries rather than physiological modification. In the same way that smartphones are today an extension of one's body, following the principles of Intelligence Amplification explored earlier in this chapter, the human-video game assemblage shows another way to interpret the transhumanist fusion of man and machine. Daniel Muriel and Garry Crawford dedicate a short but pregnant section of their work *Video Games and Culture* (2018) to the embodied experience of the player, in which they retrieve several posthuman concepts already presented in this chapter. They remark:

> The embodied experience of video gaming is [...] that of a cyborgian, multiple, and promiscuous relationality [...]. With the notion of embodiment, we want to reintroduce the body of the video gamer in the analysis; its bodily, material, and fleshy presence that makes, in association with other material and semiotic elements, the gaming experience possible. Playing a video game is therefore a "fully embodied, sensuous, carnal activity" (Crick 2011, 267); one that does not stop at the skin's frontier, but it is also extended through an augmented, hybrid, and prosthetic corporality. The activity of playing video games takes place throughout the multiple and complex body that gives a new meaning to what an embodied experience is. (2018, 96)

Additionally, in his essay "Video Games and the Transhumanist Inclination" (2012), Robert Geraci underlines that

> [b]y their nature, every game permits transhuman possibilities, and there are games whose narrative and play revolve around specifically transhumanist themes. [...] Transhumanism appears both implicitly and explicitly throughout video games: first, games enable transhumanist states of being, and second, they explore transhumanist ideas. The first is general to all video games and virtual worlds; they allow users to do

things that would be impossible in ordinary life. They allow us to inhabit magical environments where we acquire tremendous powers and raise ourselves up from the dead at those moments where our powers or our skills are inadequate to the task at hand. (2012, 739-740)

The first transhumanist element is much more evident than the second in *Detroit: Become Human*. Although mentions of transhumanist technologies can be found in an article titled "The First Immortals Are Among Us" (appearing on the fictional magazine *Century*) in which a new CyberLife nano-robot designed to fight diseases in a human body is presented (Fig. 12), the real transhumanist element of *Detroit: Become Human* lies in its human-video game interaction.

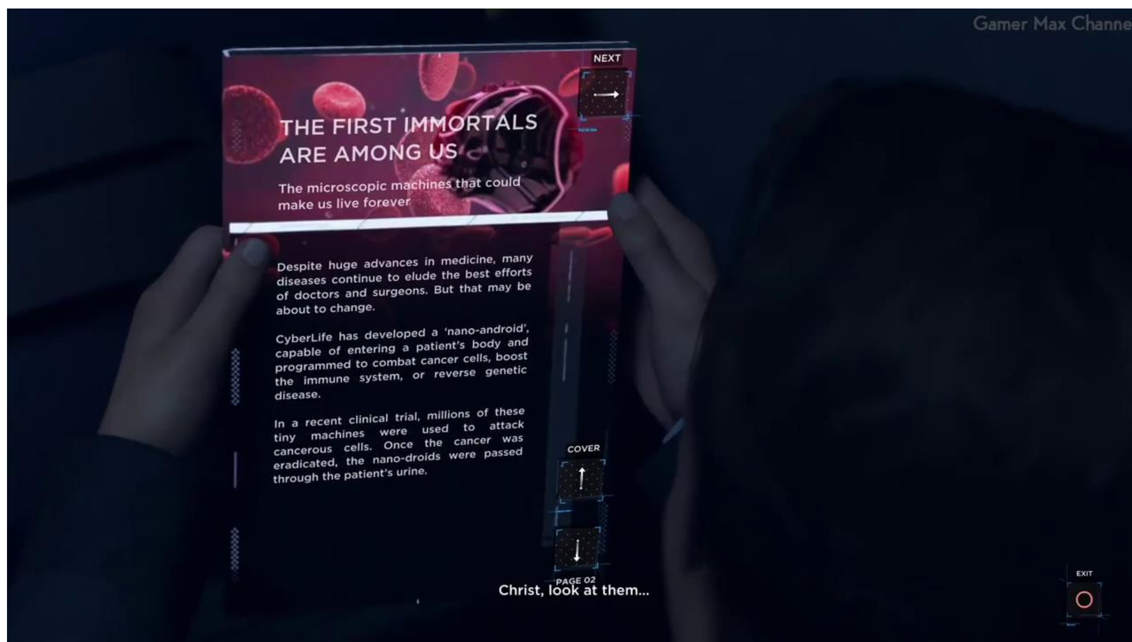

Fig. 12: A *Century* article about practices of life extension currently studied by transhumanists

As Geraci reminds us, one of the main transhumanist aims is to surpass the limits of human life, to evolve and change (2012, 740). The goal of *Detroit: Become Human* is, in essence, just that: players must grow with the androids, informing the construction of their identity, changing and surpassing the boundaries of the mechanical Other to become something else, something new.

To summarise, then, *Detroit: Become Human* is rife with posthuman themes. It presents posthumanist and transhumanist elements both in the diegesis, leveraging a tale of disenfranchisement and of rebellion to evoke the displacement of humanist values, and in the eudaimonic gameplay that binds the player to the digital content, creating a transhumanist man-machine assemblage which also retrieves posthumanist values in its polymorphic and rhizomatic nature. Thus, although the posthumanist elements are more evident in the diegesis and the transhumanist ones in the gameplay, they both feature in the game as a whole, in a sense proving the necessity of an umbrella term such as 'the posthuman,' in which trans- and posthumanism are juxtaposed despite their inherent differences, inspiring a conversation on the humanist subject and the many ways it can be updated and transcended.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Wandering the Wasteland

The political and technological dystopias we have analysed so far are stories in which the evils of a given community spring either from government misdemeanour or technological recklessness. These works depict societies that are only partially damaged: beneath some markedly dreadful elements, they are still a recognisable emanation of our contemporaneity. These societies manifest a failure of just one of the many social systems that constitute them. Gilead, the U.S. of The Circle, and 2038 Detroit all show a specific issue that, if resolved, might foster a less dreary world.

Conversely, this last chapter, which retrieves the 'environmental' label suggested by Gregory Claeys, deals with whatever is left after a complete failure of all social systems, when the environment, understood as the ecosystem we inhabit, becomes hostile to human life. Consequently, it revolves around dystopias where civilization has come to an end due to catastrophes of global dimensions. Apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic scenarios are the most common backdrop of these narratives: we witness the world after

climate change renders it uninhabitable, like in Bong Joon-ho's film *Snowpiercer* (2013) or Paolo Bacigalupi's novel *The Water Knife* (2015); we wander through the ruins of society after human intervention causes a nuclear war or a cataclysm of similar import, like in Hanna Jameson's *The Last* (2019), Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006, adapted for the big screen by John Hillcoat in 2009), George Miller's *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) or The Hughes Brothers' 2010 *The Book of Eli*. We contemplate the barren earth after humanity has been exterminated by a killer disease like in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826, one of the first post-apocalyptic novels), in Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2011) and Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy (2003-2013), or as it is on the cusp of extinction, as in Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God* (2017).

Such narratives of the demise of our civilisation fall into a large number of genres: apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction, disaster fiction, horror, and dystopia.[176] In what follows, we will consider only those stories pertaining to the latter—that is, the ones with a realistic component and a social focus. Much as in the previous chapters, we will exclude works featuring alien invasions (pertaining to science fiction) or monstrous attacks by mythical creatures or supernatural forces (pertaining to the Gothic or horror genres), concentrating our attention on the ones depicting the blunt consequences of human (in)action, in this case on a global scale.

As James Berger remarks, post-apocalyptic narratives converge (or perhaps, merge) with dystopias in their *total* critique of the present social order (1999, 7). They fall into a wider discussion about humanity's impact on its habitat, and its destructive potential. Ever since Paul Crutzen popularised the term 'Anthropocene' in 2000, an ever-growing awareness of the role that humanity plays within its ecosystem has raised concerns about habitat destruction, overpopulation, climate change, and much more. As Gary Bowden argues in his essay "An Environmental Sociology for the Anthropocene" (2017),

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[176] For a detailed discussion of the blurred boundaries of genre in relation to the apocalypse see Voigts 2015, 4-6.

> The Anthropocene [...] is a nuanced term with multiple referents. On the one hand, it is a scientific label given by earth scientists to the current epoch of unprecedented anthropogenic planetary change. On the other hand, it is a political label designed to call attention to this change and to evolving notions of human agency and responsibility in contemporary life [...]. Taken together, the term implies (1) that we have entered a new planetary epoch, one in which human activities have become significant drivers of all major earth systems, (2) that the massive scale of these processes and inertia present in these systems suggest they will continue down the human influenced trajectory, potentially in ways that are disastrous to the planet and our species and hence, (3) that human societies will need to change in new and unprecedented ways—both to adapt to forthcoming changes we have unleashed and to transform our activities in a manner that minimizes and begins to ameliorate our role as fundamental drivers of these earth systems. (Bowden 2017, 52-53)

Acknowledging the advent of the Anthropocene[177] implies a newfound awareness not only of the harming effects of human practices on our ecosystem, but also of its intrinsically interwoven and polymorphic structure. As posthumanism stresses, humanity does not exist in a limbo. Our subjectivities are (in)formed by our contact with Other entities. Similarly, nature does not exist on a separate level. It is profoundly influenced by human (and animal) intervention. Bowden underlines how this reckoning has been mirrored at the scientific level by the shift from geology to earth system science (2017, 51-52).[178] In the humanities, echoes of this are found not only

[177] Scholars of the Anthropocene have been debating when the influence of mankind on the ecosystem becomes relevant enough to signal the start of this new epoch. Crutzen suggests the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, others situate it at the advent of agriculture, and there are several intermediate temporal marks that have been hailed as the beginning of the Anthropocene. For an exhaustive breakdown of the various positions see Bowden 2017, 53-55.
[178]As Bowden explains: “The morphing of geology into earth system science represents a conceptual change similar to the development of ecology within biology. The analytical focus shifted from individual parts (e.g., the ocean, the atmosphere, the biosphere) to an emphasis on the system and the interaction among the components” (2017, 51).

in posthumanism but also in systems theory and actor-network theory.[179] Deleuzian concepts, too, return in Bowden's essay, as he describes the subject of earth system science as a socio-natural assemblage. Elaborating on this, he argues that once we accept the existence of such a polymorphous entity, we enter a discussion on the relevance of both time and complexity. The former matters in that the relationship between nature and society is not static and has evolved from the micro- to the macro-level through history (by which he implies that humanity has had a progressively wider impact on its habitat). The latter matters because the interactions between mankind and its ecosystem are not only increasing in quantity and scope, but also in complexity. Bowden argues that maintaining an equilibrium between nature and society, a 'pocket of order' in a universe naturally drifting towards to chaos, is requiring more and more sophisticated strategies, and he warns that humanity may soon lose the ability to cope with the demands that nature will impose on it (2015, 56-50).

Within the debate on the Anthropocene, then, there is a reckoning that humanity is heading towards profound changes, either man-made, if we take action against the shifts in our ecosystem, or nature-made, if we do not interfere and let nature run its course. Apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction mirrors this last possibility—that is, it depicts the consequences of dismissing the changes to our ecosystem as natural, unavoidable happenstances or of actively accelerating them through harmful practices that will undermine what little is left of the balance earlier described by Bowden.

Whereas apocalyptic fiction confronts how civilization comes to an end, post-apocalyptic fiction is much less involved in the event itself, preferring to focus on its aftermath. As a way of example, apocalyptic works like *The Last* and *Future Home of the Living God* place the reader within the catastrophe, while

[179] For a detailed reading of apocalypse through the lens of systems theory see Anita Dremel's essay "The Projection of an Ending and Systems Theory: A Sociological Reading of Apocalypse as a Genre" (2015).

post-apocalyptic works like *The Road* or *The Book of Eli* situate the audience within the ruins of our civilization, giving very little information on the disaster itself.

To better structure the discourse on post-apocalyptic dystopias, then, I will begin with a short description of the main features that define the subgenre and its relation to the American culture. An overview of selected sociological research on disasters and collective trauma, understood from a cultural perspective, will follow. Finally, I will attempt to merge the two into an analysis of the 2010 movie *The Book of Eli*.

1. Visions from the Other Side: Apocalypse, Post-Apocalypse, and Dystopia

America has always had a penchant for apocalyptic thinking, as claimed by scholars such as Kirsten Moana Thompson (2007), John Gray (2007), or Matthew Barrett Gross and Mel Gilles (2012).[180] Ever since the Puritans settled in the new continent, the end of the world has been a staple of American culture, recurring in public debates and never really going out of fashion (Gross and Gilles 2012, 1250[181]). Indeed, as James Berger recognised as early as 1999, America has been projecting a "pervasive post-apocalyptic sensibility" of late (1999, xiii), with the belief in a looming end of the world having increased in the first decades of the twenty-first century.[182] As Gross

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[180] The first work to address the apocalyptic myth and its impact on society in a comprehensive way was Norman Cohn's *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1957). Although his analysis focuses on medieval northern Europe, and as such is not directly relevant to this dissertation, it has paved the way to a whole field of enquiry into the belief of the end of the world.

[181] The references to Gross and Gilles' work carry the Kindle position rather than the page number, due to the digital format of the book.

[182] Polls conducted in the early 2010s show that a large part of Americans take the threat of an imminent apocalypse seriously. For precise data on the apocalyptic beliefs of Americans, see Gross and Gilles 2012, 52, 1250). For a global survey on the belief that the world will end during one's lifetime, see https://www.statista.com/statistics/248802/global-survey-on-the-world-ending-in-a-

and Gilles boldly state at the beginning of *The Last Myth*, "[i]n America, everyone believes in the apocalypse. The only question is whether Jesus or global warming will get here first. As the twenty-first century enters its tween years, we are faced with a seemingly inexhaustible supply of scenarios for how the world might end" (2012, 38).

Eschatological thinking has roots in ancient times. As Frank Kermode remarks in his fundamental *The Sense of an Ending* (1967), "Apocalypse and the related themes are strikingly long-lived; and that is the first thing to say about them, although the second is that they change" (2000, 29). Prophecies of the end of the world have punctuated human history, some periods more than others, and have unfailingly been discredited. Yet, we still hold a belief in the apocalypse. Therefore, Kermode famously observed, it might not be imminent, but it certainly is immanent (2000, 6, 25). Humans live in a permanent 'middle' status between the beginning and the end, poles of a linear vision of history, moving towards the latter but not yet reaching it. We are, as such, in a state of permanent transition, of crisis. Apocalyptic thinking, consequently, underlies "our way of making sense of the world" (2000, 28).

Nevertheless, apocalyptic thinking has traditionally been contrasted by a strong belief in human progress, and this is especially true for Americans.[183]

few-years/. As the data highlight, Americans hold the strongest belief that such a thing might happen.

[183] Consider what Gross and Gilles write: "From the beginning, this combination of our [the Americans'] faith in progress and our belief in apocalypse has conspired to create a uniquely American understanding of the world and our place within it. The idea of humankind's material progress through history, rediscovered by European thinkers during the Enlightenment, greatly influenced the Calvinist ethic of hard work and industry among America's earliest religious settlers. The idea of progress was also deeply intertwined with apocalyptic anticipation in the Puritan mind. [...] By the middle of the nineteenth century, the synthesis between progress and apocalyptic purpose would become apparent in the belief that America had a Manifest Destiny to expand across the continent and, later, during the twentieth century, to spread and defend democracy throughout the world. This melding of apocalyptic destiny with the promise of progress and democracy has created the American worldview. [...] Yet if progress and apocalypse in America have at times cross-fertilized each other, at other times progress and apocalypse have been at poisonous odds with each other" (2012, 1319-1337).

For centuries, faith in the latter kept fears of the end of the world at bay, while apocalyptic thinking cast a shadow on the endeavour to progress. At different times the balance tipped towards the one or the other, bringing about moments of stronger belief either in apocalypse or in progress, but for the most part the two have coexisted and equally informed the American worldview. Yet, as we have seen in Chapter Three, the concept of progress has recently lost some of its driving force. Gross and Gilles point to the advent of the atomic bomb as the metaphorical straw that broke the camel's back: up to that moment, apocalyptic thinking had focused on the advent of God's kingdom on earth, rather than on the destruction necessary to deliver it, but reckoning with the cataclysmic force of that weapon added a newfound gravitas to the catastrophic event that would signal the second coming of Christ. It moved the fear of apocalypse from the religious to the secular (2012, 1462), and with such a shift the concept reached mainstream dimensions.[184] For the past twenty years, America (and most of the world) has coexisted with a sense of apocalyptic dread so strong that Gross and Gilles named the first decade of the 2000s "the Apocalyptic Decade" (2012, 145), and forecasts on the end of the world have been continuously reinforced by destructive and harmful real-life events.[185]

It has often been claimed that the apocalyptic imagination pervades societies that are either deprived or oppressed. Yet such a hypothesis does not explain

[184] John Gray, in his *Black Mass*, follows a similar timeline, but he argues that during the Cold War apocalyptic thinking was not yet fully pervasive, only reaching widespread diffusion with the new millennium (2007, 135).

[185] The first decade of the 2000s began with the worldwide scare of Y2K (also known as "Millennium Bug"), continued with 9/11, Katrina, the 2008 crisis, and tumbled into the 2010s with the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, the second scare of the Mayan prophecy of 2012, the constant threat of domestic and international terrorism, the perceived 'invasion' from South- and Central-American countries, not to mention the rest of the catastrophes hitting countries other than the U.S. (the tsunami and the consequent threat of a nuclear spill at Fukushima in 2011, just to mention one). In 2016 Donald Trump was elected to the White House, and even trying to retain some form of political neutrality in this dissertation, that was a monumental change in and of itself, as it produced a plethora of policies that discarded the science on climate change and COVID-19, just to mention two of the most pressing issues.

how one of the richest countries in the world is battling such a catastrophic mood (Gross and Gilles 2012, 225). Even bringing to the fore considerations on the social inequalities that inhabit the U.S., the lack of an adequate welfare net, and the growing awareness of racial and gender discrimination, the U.S. as a nation still embraces a worldview that situates it at the top of the political food chain.[186] It still wants to believe it is the leader of the free world, both economically and politically. Consequently, Gross and Gilles suggest that it is not oppression or deprivation but doubt that elicits such a collective apocalyptic mood. More precisely, a doubt about the persistence of a given worldview—in the case of the United States, the one that celebrates it as the best country on earth. "It is the threat of losing one's cultural identity—not fears of personal mortality or mere deprivation—that elicits the apocalyptic impulse" (2012, 2285). If the myths on which the United States has been built are crumbling, as seen earlier, then the American worldview based on its exceptionalism, its Manifest Destiny, and its quasi-religious faith in progress is most certainly under threat.

At this point in history, write Gross and Gilles, the American civilization (and, by extension, the Western world) has two choices: it can alter its worldview to adapt to the changes of the world or it can retreat into its apocalyptic imagination. Picking the first option would lead to a radically different lifestyle, one that abandons surpassed notions of endless progress and resources to be better attuned to the needs of the ecosystem. It is a choice very few civilizations throughout history have made. Retreating into the apocalyptic imagination, conversely, will most probably lead to a form of resigned apathy. As they explain,

> The deeper we entangle the challenges of the twenty-first century with apocalyptic fantasy, the more likely we are to paralyze ourselves with inaction—or with the wrong course of action. We react to the idea of the apocalypse—rather than to the underlying issues activating the

[186] See the last section of Chapter Three, "Death of a Myth?" for the current status of the myth of American exceptionalism.

> apocalyptic storyline to begin with—by either denying its reality ("global warming isn't real") or by despairing at its inevitability ("why bother recycling when the whole world is burning up?"). (Gross and Gilles 2012, 2586)

In waiting for the cataclysmic event that will signal the end of our worldview, we miss that the event is rather a trend, one that is occurring and being debated right now. The apocalypse rages around us, or perhaps rattles against the crumbling walls of our worldview and, as we wait for the final act, we are already looking past it. For the apocalypse, we consider, is in its essence a moment of revelation.[187] As the biblical tale recounts, those in the right will be spared and, as a new worldview settles in, they will emerge in their righteousness.

The United States seems to have already made its choice. The last myth of Gross and Gilles's title perdures: as argued in Chapter Three, America has been reverting to well-rehearsed narratives of exceptionalism. Most Americans, locked in the belief that their worldview will never collapse yet unable to suppress the doubts lurking in the ever-expanding shadows, are already looking past the apocalypse.[188] They are fabricating the post-apocalyptic imagination.

I am borrowing the term and the core concept I have just expressed from Briohny Doyle's 2015 essay of the same title. As she aptly writes, post-apocalypse[189] is the mood of the contemporary. We are already somewhat taking the catastrophic event for granted and skipping ahead to the decay,

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[187] The Greek word *apokaluptein* means 'to unveil, to uncover' and indeed the book of the apocalypse in the Bible is called the Book of Revelation. It outlines the destruction that precedes the moment of unveiling of a new world in which the elect will thrive.

[188] As a reference, see a recent YouGov Poll on the imminence of the apocalypse and on the survival chances Americans attribute themselves. https://today.yougov.com/topics/lifestyle/articles-reports/2020/03/18/apocalypse-climate-change-pandemic-coronavirus.

[189] Doyle eschews the hyphen to better underline how apocalypse is present in postapocalypse (2015, 101). Here, I maintain the hyphen for textual coherence with the other scholars I cite.

disaster, and ruins left in its aftermath. Yet, there is no revelation nor Kingdom of God on earth after the apocalypse, only survivors that must find a new worldview, one that will spring from necessity rather than ideas (Gross and Gilles 2012, 2464). The staunch belief that after the catastrophe the elect will reap the fruit of their righteousness has been tampered with; of the religious apocalypse, only its destructive effects remain, and whoever survives is, at most, handed the *possibility* to establish a new worldview. Doyle is aligned with Gross and Gilles in stating that the post-apocalypse will deal with the radically different, with a way of inhabiting the world that departs from the one we are currently practicing.

Because of this—that is, because of the implied annihilation of the current worldview in the aftermath of catastrophe—Doyle explicitly distances post-apocalyptic narratives from dystopias or utopias (2015, 101). Yet, I agree with James Berger (1999, 13) and Gross and Gilles (2012, 2464-2469)'s claim that we cannot truly imagine a radically different post-apocalyptic worldview from this side of the apocalypse: it is impossible to describe absolute alterity, for we cannot escape our own worldview in trying to conjure up alternatives to it. The present seeps into our ideas of the future (indeed, we should always remember that dystopia is truly about the present, despite its future setting). This is reminiscent of the quasi-ubiquitous quote by Jameson that it is easier for us to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism (1994, xii). We are, indeed, seemingly trapped within the confines of our own structures of life.

Jameson returned to this idea in his 2003 essay "Future City," where he ties it to the necessity of retrieving a concept of history that does *not* insist on its imminent end.[190] He underlines how our perception of history has stagnated, imprisoning us in a mind frame that can only understand the future as

[190] Claims of the contrary have been frequent in the past thirty years. Most notably, Francis Fukuyama explores this idea in his essay "The End of History?" (1989) and the following book *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992).

> a monotonous repetition of what is already here. The problem is then how to locate radical difference; how to jumpstart the sense of history so that it begins again to transmit feeble signals of time, of otherness, of change, of Utopia. The problem to be solved is that of breaking out of the windless present of the postmodern back into real historical time, and a history made by human beings. (2003)

Essentially, we need to find a way to imagine radical novelty again. We need to escape the constraints of (Baudrillard-inspired) repetition. Utopia, it seems, lies behind a momentous change, one that will dismiss our current societal structure as outmoded.

And such a change, per Gerry Canavan's insights, can only be found in the (post-)apocalypse. Capitalism, it seems, can only go out with a bang—be it metaphorical or otherwise. As he writes, "The apocalypse is the only thing in our time that seems to have the capacity to shake the foundations of the system and 'jumpstart' a history that now seems completely moribund—the only power left that could still create a renewed, free space in which another kind of life might be possible" (2012, 139). The utopian space, then, lies after the catastrophe. Only on the other side of it can we build a new worldview, one that abandons contemporary models and is born out of necessity rather than ideas.

With all this in mind, we can extend a new insight: from our viewpoint, post-apocalyptic works depicting a world in ruins imply the existence of not one, but two dystopian moments.[191] The first, most often omitted by the narrative, is the pre-apocalyptic world, the one that was dreadful enough to cause its destruction. Be it from a man-made catastrophe or from a natural one, as long as we retain the anthropocenic notion of human intervention on the environment these destructive events are both consequences of human choices. The second, in the works that are most evidently bound to the dystopian genre, lies in the aftermath. It is the new worldview itself. Not utopia, as hoped by believers in the revelatory and cleansing power of the

[191] I derive this insight from Canavan's comment on the two dystopian moments of *Oryx and Crake* in the abovementioned essay (2012, 141 and following).

apocalypse as understood in the Bible, but a dreadful new form of society where very little seems positive. These are the worlds depicted in *Mad Max: Fury Road* and *The Book of Eli*: societies that have reverted to primitive forms of interaction between humans, in which violence seems to be the underlying theme.[192] This, I argue, is the distinctive trait of post-apocalyptic dystopias: the portrayal of a dreadful post-apocalyptic society that somewhat reiterates the evils of the contemporary one.

A question, then, arises: where is hope to be found, if not even apocalypse can bring about utopia? Are post-apocalyptic dystopias but a eulogy for a civilization that has no hope for salvation? Is there really no way out, no new worldview?

I want to argue that, for all their pessimism, post-apocalyptic dystopias can and do have a hopeful element that might justify their inclusion within the 'critical' label as understood by Sargent and Moylan, among others. Indeed, most post-apocalyptic works tend to end with a second apocalypse of sorts, on a decidedly smaller scale, that erases what we might call 'the error of rebound': post-apocalyptic humanity emerges from the ruins of its civilization by returning to well-rehearsed practices of oppression, violence and conflict, dynamics that humanity has experienced in various forms both before and during the capitalist epoch. Yet, a return to old structures of social interaction will do no good, for there is no truly new worldview in a society that reiterates all the evils of previous civilizations. This is, in short, the error of rebound, of resettling in old patterns of social interaction that, given enough time, were the cause of the apocalypse. Whatever dystopian society is established on such familiar patterns in the aftermath of a global catastrophe is bound to fail. Thus, for instance, the tyranny of Immortan Joe in *Mad Max: Fury Road* does not survive the rebellion of his women. Neither does the unchecked power of Carnegie in *The Book of Eli*, as we will see shortly. Even *The Road*, one of the gloomiest post-apocalyptic tales ever written, ends with a glimmer of hope,

[192] An interesting text on violence as underlying the foundations of our civilization is Michel Serres's *Rome: The First Book of Foundations* (1983).

letting the audience convince themselves that Boy will live on. Post-apocalyptic dystopias, then, generally depict the failure of not one but two worldviews: ours and the one established by those who fall back into old patterns of social interaction in the aftermath of catastrophe.

It is telling (and rather fitting) that post-apocalyptic dystopias stop short from actually depicting the new worldview, mostly offering an open ending: from this side of the apocalypse, entrenched in our own ways of life, we can only imagine as far as the second, definitive demise of old systems of human community. We can glimpse at the potential for radical difference, but we cannot see it fully. That is for those who will come after to invent.

The main unresolved question pertaining to post-apocalyptic dystopias, then, is: what will come after? What will emerge once we relinquish the relics of a worldview that does not fit humanity anymore?

Even as it leaves this question unanswered, post-apocalypse interrogates human nature at its best and worst. Wandering the ruins of our civilization, the survivors must confront their perception of humanity in order to establish a new identity capable of replacing the one rooted in a system that no longer exists.

As Doyle remarks,

> The identity of survivors in postapocalyptic worlds becomes a central point for reading the explorations and critiques that are taking place. Most postapocalyptic texts destabilize identity in a way that mirrors the affirmation of particular identities that occur through the device of an 'elect' in apocalyptic texts. While the elect in an apocalypse inherit a version of God's Kingdom on Earth (New Jerusalem), in postapocalyptic texts the survivors continue into a dangerous and difficult wasteland, without the promise of salvation. (2015, 105)

She then continues by retrieving Braidotti's notion of nomadic subjectivity, which we have mentioned in the previous chapter. Doyle's vision of the posthuman as the inhabitant of the post-apocalypse seems plausible enough to me although, perhaps, a tad optimistic. In the 'post-'post-apocalypse,

indeed, the nomadic, plural, polymorphic, relational subject might be the one who will produce a radically new worldview, but I find that the post-apocalypse of the ruins of our civilisation is inhabited by relics of the human (or by inhumans, as Berger calls them [1999, 10]), rather than by the posthuman.

Indeed, the protagonists of both *The Road* and *The Book of Eli* desperately hold on to their humanity, which they understand and express by retaining the moral values and taboos of the pre-apocalyptic world. As for their antagonists—that is, the rest of the survivors—they are not enlightened creatures that will pave the way for utopia but brutish individuals that have reverted to violence and destruction.

All this considered, I do not want to completely discard Doyle's vision of a posthuman post-apocalyptic worldview. The radically new might be found in the characters that will take over once the main ones die. The Boy in *The Road*, Solara in *The Book of Eli,* the Crakers in *Oryx and Crake* all represent a generation that only knows of the pre-apocalyptic world through tales recounted by older characters, the generation that was born in and from the ruins. Their stories will be the truly utopian ones, not explicitly portrayed but heavily implied in the open endings of these works.

The ruins as such are productive of a new form of identity, one that is not embraced by the survivors of the apocalypse but by their children. Doyle is attuned to this, arguing for an interpretation of the ruins as a site of "critique and creative possibility" rather than as a mere locus of nostalgia and mourning (2015, 107). Similarly, Ana Moya and Gemma López (2017) carry out an analysis of post-apocalyptic ruins as borderlands—that is, as a setting for the creation of hybrid, new identities. Focusing on American post-apocalyptic movies of the 2000s, they argue that

> these films have often been read as spiritual allegories that explore contemporary nihilism and the general loss of belief in the possibility of social and collective progress, in the face of which the only hope lies in single individuals and their moral purpose. Global catastrophe has

> brought our known world to ruins, we have come to the end of our nations, our cultures and our identities, and so humanity needs to reinvent itself. (Moya and Lopez 2017)

Such reinvention, they claim, following Homi Bhabha, happens in the liminal spaces beyond borders "where new strategies of selfhood will be constructed, as the need to redefine the idea of society will trigger new signs of identity as well as innovative sites of contestation" (2017). In the post-apocalypse, what was once home becomes Other. What was familiar, welcoming, accepting, transforms into a hellscape dotted with violence, horror, and rejection. The ruins, haunted by memories and ghosts from days gone (in a rather Gothic twist evocative of the origins of the genre[193]), work both as a memento of catastrophe and as a site of reconquest. Wandering the wasteland, the protagonists of post-apocalyptic works search for a new form of identity after the loss of all traditional referents. They walk, on a quest to find meaning to meaningless lives. They roam, looking for their Other in Other-land. More than ever, in post-apocalyptic fiction the dichotomy us/them returns in full power. "Are we still the good guys?" asks Boy to his father in *The Road*. He answers affirmatively. They are, because they are struggling to retain some moral sense of humanity. They do not kill unless threatened, they do not eat other people. They even share some food with an old man on their way to the coast. Most importantly, as it is repeatedly mentioned, "they carry the fire"—an expression they use to summarise all these moral imperatives. Man and Boy's identities are informed by what they are not, by their difference from the rest of the survivors roving the destroyed earth. They know who they are only in relation to their Others. Eli's identity is similarly shaped in *The Book of Eli*.

The traditional dichotomy between good and evil recedes to its most simplistic form in post-apocalyptic fiction. Often, it loses the nuance that has put these two concepts into scrutiny in much contemporary fiction: even when the

[193] On the Gothic origins of SF, see p. 38.

protagonists are at their worst, their goodness is not truly questioned. Evil characters stick to their stereotypical roles of antagonists, and the narrative as a whole retraces familiar patterns of radical conflict.

To summarise, post-apocalyptic fiction portrays the desolation after a catastrophe of global dimensions. Its protagonists wander through the wasteland trying to find new roots for their identity. Human interactions revert to flight-or-fight dynamics, and whatever form of community or society is reinstated right in the aftermath of the apocalypse is a sinister, dystopian take on the structures humanity has experimented throughout its history.

Sociologically, the situation portrayed in post-apocalyptic fiction pertains to disaster studies, albeit on a grander scale, and to studies of collective trauma. These will be the two main strands of sociological inquiry we will consider in analysing *The Book of Eli.*

2. Disaster Studies

As per Michael K. Lindell's useful overview of disaster studies (2013), this field is not a particularly recent branch of sociology. The most widely accepted definition of disaster dates back to 1961, when Charles Fritz described it as "an event concentrated in time and space, in which a society or one of its subdivisions undergoes physical harm and social disruption, such that all or some essential functions of the society or subdivision are impaired" (Fritz quoted in Lindell 2013, 797).

Disaster studies, for the most part, are rooted in the concrete need to assess risks, prepare for all contingencies, and react in the aftermath of the catastrophe. Traditionally, it has proved to be a rather empirical branch of sociology, firmly entrenched in structural functionalism—that is, most of the

research has focused on how disasters impact social structures (Webb 2006, 431).[194]

The structuralist approach to disaster studies is still widely applied, but in the past decade claims of a 'cultural turn' in the field have been advanced. This perspective mainly differs from the former in that it does not treat social structures as dependent variables (that is, as elements that will be modified by the catastrophe) but as potential triggers of disaster. It is in this new strain of research that I am most interested, as it revolves around the study of cultural products such as narratives and myths of disaster.

According to Lindell (2013), structuralist disaster studies have mainly concentrated their efforts on describing the phases of a catastrophe and the practices that a society or community puts in place to harness its harmful consequences. They have also focused on vulnerability, primarily understood as human, agricultural, or structural—that is, vulnerability of a physical kind.[195] Recently, scholars have recognised the existence of an additional form of vulnerability, the social: depending on the social structures (e.g. gender, ethnicity, income), different demographics will experience harsher or lighter outcomes in disasters (Lindell 2013, 799-780).

As stated previously, structuralist research on disasters has a strong empirical component: most of its output comes from field studies carried out with the survivors on the site of a disaster. As such, it is mainly inductive.

[194] This approach, best represented by the works of Charles Fritz (1961), Russel Dynes (1970), Gary Kreps (1989; 1994), Havidan Rodriguez (2006, 2018), and Enrico Quarantelli (1998; 2006), starts from a vision of society as made up of interconnected systems. Disasters are understood as disruptions to the flow of information passing from one to another. Depending on the number of systems impacted, a society might or might not recover. As such, then, social structures are treated as dependent variables in so-called *structuralist* disaster research.

[195] "Human vulnerability arises from humans' susceptibility to environmental extremes of temperature, pressure, and chemical exposures that can cause death, injury, and illness. Agricultural vulnerability exists because plants and animals are also vulnerable to environmental extremes. Structural vulnerability arises when buildings are constructed using designs and materials that cannot resist extreme stresses (e.g., high wind, seismic shaking) or allow hazardous materials to infiltrate into an occupied building" (Lindell 2013, 799-780).

Lindell, in discussing the methodological directions the field should take, suggests that disaster studies should try to even out the gap between inductive and deductive methods and the imbalance between practical and theoretical research, perhaps by linking disaster research to other branches of social science.

Gary R. Webb, the most prominent sociologist working on *cultural* disaster studies, evokes a similar need in his 2006 essay for the *Handbook of Disaster Research*. He argues that the field should confront the role of culture in the creation, management, and representation of disasters, for doing so would not only shed insights into the myths and perceptions of disaster but also have a direct impact on the preparedness, response, and recovery phases (Webb 2006, 436). The cultural strain, he claims, has the potential to level out the imbalance between theoretical and practical approaches that has plagued the structuralist branch of disaster research.

In his 2006 essay, Webb announced the beginning of a cultural turn, giving a tentative description of the research strain and listing a number of ways forward. At its most fundamental level, cultural disaster studies engage with the recent understanding of social structures as causal forces of disasters, rather than as dependent variables. This means that elements such as economic system, race, class, and gender have a direct impact on the creation of disasters, rather than being a passive subject bearing the consequences of catastrophe. Put it differently, cultural elements can and do trigger disasters. A capitalist approach to oil drilling can lead to a natural catastrophe. A racial bias can lead to the destruction of sacred land at the hands of foreign companies. A culture rooted in apocalyptic thinking will sit back and wait for its advent.

To this first perspective on the role of culture in exacerbating disaster, Webb adds a second, evident ramification: the role of culture in perceiving, facing, and overcoming catastrophes (Webb 2006, 431-432). In essence, the cultural strain of disaster research investigates how disasters impact culture and vice versa. Examples of the former are investigations into the use of humour in

the wake of disasters, the impact of disaster on collective memory, the proliferation of post-disaster memorials, and so on. Examples of the latter deal mainly with how cultural elements might be drivers of disasters: Webb mentions studies that linked a distorted perception of risk to the consumption of disaster movies, or research on the effects of a bureaucratic mentality that might affect the hazard reduction process (Webb 2006, 434).

If, in 2006, cultural disaster research was scarce, a decade later Webb can proudly announce that the turn of the field is complete: the structuralist approach has not lost its relevance, but researchers have also embraced the need to explore the role of culture in catastrophes.

Especially relevant from the outset of this branch of enquiry is the mythic construction of disaster in culture. Webb argues (2006, 436; 2018, 113-114) that the widespread perception of disasters is still deeply influenced by a number of myths built and perpetuated by popular fiction—most relevantly the deeply rooted implication that society will collapse after a catastrophe. This is still true today, despite fifty years of structuralist research having demonstrated that societies are extremely resilient and will most probably reorganize after a destructive event. Kathleen Tierney suggests that this happens because certain strata of society, especially powerful institutions like the military-industrial complex, law enforcement agencies, and the IT industry, benefit from the popular belief in the risk of social collapse (Tierney quoted in Webb 2006, 436). Tierney's observation is in line with what Ross and Gilles say about the myth of the apocalypse: a strong belief in the unavoidable end of the world means that a society will sit back and passively wait for it; similarly, disaster myths help institutions keep people at bay through fears of social collapse. The outcome of both is a sort of social immobility, apathy brought on by resignation and fear, respectively.

This distortion of the reality of disaster through the dissemination and perpetuation of wrong myths falls under what Webb labels as "culture as a source of vulnerability" (2018, 116-118)—that is, a culture that might exacerbate or even cause a disaster. As mentioned above, other instances of

culture causing an increased risk are: when demands of economic growth are predominant, to the point that they disregard risks; when (often religious) beliefs are so ingrained in a people's collective identity that no action will be taken to avoid a catastrophe, as in the case of Christian apocalyptic thinking; and when a subculture of disaster inures entire swathes of population to believe that they are more than ready to face a catastrophe even though, in fact, they are not (as in the case of people living in territories often hit by hurricanes that do not evacuate because they believe their houses have been adequately reinforced).

Yet, culture is not just a cause of vulnerability. Firstly, it is constitutive of disaster—that is, it is through the cultural lens that we elect whether an event can be classified as a disaster (Webb 2018, 113-114). This has profound implications: dominant cultures can dismiss those catastrophes which only impact minorities; they can amplify relatively moderate disasters to fit their scopes (a most relevant example being the narratives surrounding the 9/11 terrorist attacks). Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, culture can also be a source of resilience (Webb 2018, 114-116). It fosters the creation of new values and norms in the aftermath of a catastrophe, it puts in place therapeutic practices to face the trauma of disaster. It enhances the memory and commemoration of the event through spontaneous acts of creativity, such as humour and graffiti, and more structured initiatives such as memorials and narratives to recount the tragedy (movies, novels, and so on). Finally, the very same subculture of disaster that might lead to underestimating risks or to apathetic immobility might also better prepare a community to resist and survive in the face of catastrophe.

It seems to me that Webb's most relevant observation is that culture has a thoroughly ambivalent—if fundamental—role in the creation, management, and narration of disasters. He calls it "somewhat of a paradox" (2018, 118). Yet, it would be too simplistic to say that we just need better education in order to avoid the misconceptions of disasters. Myths, beliefs, and cultural norms are profoundly entrenched in the identity of a people. Unrooting them

is no easy task and, as described earlier for the myth of the apocalypse in American culture, attempting to do that could prompt such a change that we might very well talk about the demise of a civilization. A way forward is possible, but averting apocalypse might actually mean running right into it.

3. Collective Trauma and Culture

As we have just seen, the temporal phases of catastrophe have different focuses: the pre-disaster moment deals mainly with risk management and hazard reduction, the intra-disaster phase deals with immediate responses, and the post-disaster moment deals with memory, trauma, and reconstruction. As post-apocalyptic fiction portrays, for the most part, the aftermath of a given catastrophe, I am leaving out a discussion of risk in favour of a short survey of the concept of collective trauma.

A number of scholars have highlighted the link between trauma and post-apocalyptic fiction: in *After the End* (1999), James Berger applies psychological trauma research to literature; E. Ann Kaplan, in her *Climate Trauma* (2016), explores the concept of pre-trauma in dystopian movies.[196]

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[196] Berger is attuned to the research that was being carried out in the 80s and 90s, applying a psychological perspective to the study of trauma. He writes: "I link the idea of apocalypse with the psychoanalytic concept of trauma. Apocalypse and trauma are congruent ideas, for both refer to shatterings of existing structures of identity and language, and both affect their own erasures from memory and must be reconstructed by means of their traces, remains, survivors, and ghosts: their symptoms. Post-apocalyptic representations are simultaneously symptoms of historical traumas and attempts to work through them" (1999, 19). Although his interpretation is still valid today, I apply a cultural perspective to trauma, rather than a psychoanalytical one, to better embrace the collective dimension.

Kaplan theorises pretrauma as follows: "Having been preoccupied with trauma in terms of its classic description as related to past events, I realized that *future* catastrophic events could also be traumatic. "Pretraumatic Stress Syndrome" (PreTSS) is a condition that I here situate in relation to the well-known 'Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder' (PTSD). The increasing number of futurist dystopian worlds in film and literature in the post-9/11 era evidence severe anxiety about the future in Eurocentric cultures—an anxiety that warrants the term *pretrauma*" (2016, 1).

The approach to trauma research I will use as a framework to analyse *The Book of Eli* comes from the work of Jeffrey Alexander and his research group. Known as *cultural* trauma studies, it is one of the latest trends in the field which, much like disaster studies, seems to be leaving behind a strongly empirical focus.

First or all, a short note on the concept of collective trauma as a whole. Traditionally, trauma has had an individual dimension. Extensive research has been conducted on how a 'shattering' event influences the life of a person and on how to contain consequences.[197] However, if individual trauma impacts the personal sphere and hurts one's psyche, collective trauma targets the social relations that make up a society. In Kai Erikson's words:

> By individual trauma I mean a blow to the psyche that breaks through one's defenses so suddenly and with such brutal force that one cannot react to it effectively [...] By collective trauma, on the other hand, I mean a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality. The collective trauma works its way slowly and even insidiously into the awareness of those who suffer from it, so it does not have the quality of suddenness normally associated with "trauma." But it is a form of shock all the same, a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared. [...] "We" no longer exist as a connected pair or as linked cells in a larger communal body. (Erikson quoted in Alexander 2012, 9)

Again, the main themes connected to the post-apocalypse return: the loss of social referents, of the elements that give meaning to one's identity and that inform the collective perception of a community; the reckoning that the familiar world inhabited before the traumatic event no longer exists; the struggle to find once more a sense of community.

Research on the consequences of a 'shattering' event, be they individual or collective, has been profoundly influenced by what Alexander calls "lay

[197] One of the most important studies on individual trauma is Bessel van der Kolk's *The Body Keeps the Score* (2014).

trauma theory" (2012, 7)—that is, a body of common-sense understanding of trauma that we encounter in everyday life and which is contrasted by a more reflexive and theoretical approach.

Lay theory maintains that traumas are events that impact the individual or collective sense of well-being. Crucially, it argues that the traumatic value resides in the event itself (Alexander 2012, 7). There are two versions of this theory, the "Enlightenment" and the "psychoanalytic." The first has a more realistic approach, affirming that trauma is "a kind of rational response to abrupt change, whether at the individual or social level. The objects or events that trigger trauma are perceived clearly by actors, their responses are lucid, and the effects of these responses are problem solving and progressive" (Alexander 2012, 8). Enlightenment thinking insists on the exceptional nature of an event, its disruptive power, and the subsequent change that occurs in a society, and holds on to a (rather optimistic) belief that traumatic events will lead to progress. We have repeatedly remarked the problematic nature of such blind faith.

Psychoanalytic thinking retains the conviction that trauma resides in the event, but adds a layer constituted by "a model of unconscious emotional fears and cognitively distorting mechanisms of psychological defense" between the external traumatic event and the actor's internal response (Alexander 2012, 10). Whereas Enlightenment thinking argued that trauma and its response were direct, self-evident happenstances, psychoanalytic thinking brings into the debate issues of repression, memory alteration, mediation, and so on—that is, a cohort of strategies at the unconscious level which can bury the trauma so deeply that it might be hard to identify it in the first place. Consequently, traumas will not be resolved when things are 'set right' in the world but when they are elaborated in the self (Alexander 2012, 10). If, at the individual level, repressed trauma resurfaces through memories and impressions, at the collective level it emerges in literature (and other forms of fiction).

With Alexander, though, I would like to move past a purely psychological understanding of trauma and of its representation in post-apocalyptic fiction, given that, as he explains, both Enlightenment and psychological thinking in lay trauma theory suffer from a "naturalistic fallacy." With this term, Alexander refers to the underlying assumption that a given event is traumatic in itself. He maintains that events are not inherently traumatic but constructed as such through a cultural process.

> Trauma is a socially mediated attribution. The attribution may be made in real time, as an event unfolds; it may also be made before the event occurs, as an adumbration, or after the event has concluded, as a post-hoc reconstruction. Sometimes, in fact, events that are deeply traumatizing may not actually have occurred at all; such imagined events, however, can be as traumatizing as events that have actually occurred. (Alexander 2012, 13)

Thus, cultural trauma theory rejects the naturalistic fallacy, arguing that it is through the mediation of a given culture that some traumatic value is attributed to an event that would otherwise be considered in neutral terms. It follows that cultural trauma theory, especially when studied at the collective level, focuses not so much on the shattering event in itself, but on the *claim* of its traumatic value, shifting attention from the nature of the event to the construction of a narrative of trauma. Thus, it becomes a matter of human agency.

Retrieving some of the concepts listed above, cultural trauma deals with a perceived rupture in the fabric of a society, a break of those links that keep a community together. It occurs "when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (Alexander 2012, 6).

As highlighted from the outset, cultural trauma has to do with the identity of a people and the deep changes that a catastrophic event can cause. As Webb remarked earlier, cultures shift in the aftermath of disaster. The elements

that inform the collective identity of a given society are displaced, shattered, overhauled. Trauma arises from the loss of a stable identity, and it surfaces from the narrative of such a loss:

> For traumas to emerge at the level of the collectivity, social crises must become cultural crises. Events are one thing, representations of these events quite another. Trauma is not the result of a group experiencing pain. It is the result of this acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity's sense of its own identity. Collective actors "decide" to represent social pain as a fundamental threat to their sense of who they are, where they came from, and where they want to go. (Alexander 2012, 15)

This warrants the question: who are these collective actors? Who decides whether an event should be framed as traumatic? Alexander calls them "carrier groups," borrowing the term from Max Weber: they are the part of society that finds itself in the best position to argue for the attribution of traumatic values to an event. They can be the elite just as much as marginalised groups. They might be religious leaders or dubious sects. They might be the elder or the younger generation. Essentially, Alexander argues that the narrative of trauma is defined by a limited number of social actors, but not always the same, and not always the ones in a traditionally privileged position (2012, 16). Whoever they are, carrier groups will produce a narrative of trauma that might be likened to a performative speech act, one that aims at persuading the audience of the truthfulness of their assessment of the event. If the act is successful, the narrative of trauma will branch out until it saturates society, infiltrating the institutions and becoming one of the elements that will forge the new identity of the traumatised community (Alexander 2012, 16-17). Once the claim becomes universally accepted, the trauma process stabilises, and the event is slowly assimilated and remembered in memorials, commemorations, and narratives. The new collective identity is shaped. Needless to say, this is essentially the same process described by Webb in cultural disaster studies.

4. *The Book of Eli*

Even applying the rather strict parameters described in the first section of this chapter, post-apocalyptic dystopia is an extremely varied fictional category, and choosing one work to represent it in the context of this thesis has demanded careful deliberation. In fact, a number of fitting novels and movies pertain to western cultures other than the American (*Station Eleven* is Canadian, *Mad Max: Fury Road* Australian). Others, like *The Road*, portray a world so destroyed that barely any form of society or community can be detected, making it rather unsuitable to an analysis based on sociological theories.[198] I have settled on *The Book of Eli*, a 2010 movie by the Hughes Brothers, due to its American backdrop and its portrayal of a relatively complex society in the aftermath of disaster. Additionally, it tackles many of the myths mentioned in Chapter Three, as we will see shortly.

The Book of Eli enjoyed discrete success at the box office and with the critics. It shares evident similarities with *The Road* (both the novel and the movie), the differences between the main characters and the endings notwithstanding. At their core, both stories are set in the ruins of the U.S. after a catastrophe. The earth is barren, food is scarce. Gangs of violent men patrol the dilapidated roads in search of lone travellers to rob and kill. Cannibalism is a diffused practice. Eli, a black man 'going West,' and Man and Boy, moving toward the coast, both walk through the wasteland, surviving as they hold on to values of a past life. Given the similarities between the two movies, I will at times reference *The Road*, keeping in mind that the collective practices described by Alexander and Webb belong, in that

[198] To an extent, even some of the most famous classic dystopias and anti-utopias might be considered post-apocalyptic: the society in *Brave New World* was established after a third world war and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* takes place after a nuclear conflict. However, these novels present fully formed societies that have somewhat assimilated the catastrophic event, and their dystopian 'charge' is connected to the failure of one or several social structures, rather than the entire ecosystem.

story, to a society of two—that is, to the smallest possible model of social interaction.

In *The Book of Eli*, the protagonist is a lone traveller moving westward through the ruins of the United States. He has been walking for thirty years toward a precise destination, attempting to fulfil a mission.[199] On the road, he avoids contact with others, using violence only to defend himself. More than once, faced with abuse and brutality towards innocent travellers, he reminds himself to "stay on the path" because "it's not [his] concern."

Things change when he arrives at an unnamed town evocative of frontier outposts in the Old West. It is run by Carnegie, a cruel man who controls the only source of water, effectively ruling over the rest of the inhabitants. After killing some of Carnegie's men in self-defence, Eli attracts his attention. Forced to spend the night in town, Eli is surprised with a Bible, the very book Carnegie has been searching for years, given that all copies were destroyed in the aftermath of the catastrophe. The audience discovers that Eli's mission is to protect the Bible and carry it to safety. Despite the massive deployment of men and weapons on Carnegie's part, Eli manages to run away with Solara, a young woman who wishes to leave town. However, they are soon found, and Eli relinquishes the book to save her. He is shot and left for dead. Freeing herself from Carnegie's men once more, Solara returns to find that Eli is back on the road, heading west, harmed but not dead. They both drive to San Francisco, where Eli realises that his destination is Alcatraz island. There, they discover a museum that collects books and knowledge from the world before. Having lost the paper version of the Bible, Eli dictates it to the curator before dying. The movie ends revealing that the book Carnegie stole from him was written in Braille. It is hinted that the town is starting to revolt against him as Solara sets out to return home in order to spread Eli's message.

A first remark goes to the "very American" mood of this movie, as Kaplan calls it (2016, 115). *The Book of Eli* is certainly a cultural product of the United

[199] Both the destination and the mission remain a mystery until well into the narrative.

States. It is enmeshed in the Hollywoodian tropes of grand fights, action sequences, and visually pleasing explosions. It borrows tropes from old western movies. It retraces the beloved narrative pattern of good versus evil. Its messianic message would have easily resonated with seventeenth-century Puritan settlers. All these elements are worth further investigation.

First, the presence of western tropes is so evident that the movie has often been described as 'neo-western.' The whole setting is constructed to evoke the landscapes of the frontier, with long shots over dusty fields, the ochre hue of photography, and the typical architecture of the town (Fig. 13-15).

Fig. 13: Eli walks across a barren field

Fig. 14: A wide shot of the town

Fig. 15: A wide shot of the saloon

The movie does not offer a mere visual parallel. The characters are also modelled on western stereotypes: Eli is the lone hero traveling the empty lands, Carnegie the outlaw who has taken control of a small town, Solara the damsel in distress with a vague feminist twist. There is the chill bartender who wants no trouble, the affable shopkeeper who will do trade with anyone, and the illiterate henchmen who come riding into town.

With such a stereotypical set of characters, their interpersonal dynamics are predictably well-worn. Eli wanders and walks, minding his own business. Carnegie oppresses and plots to expand his power. Solara, for the most part, waits to be rescued. As the hero and the villain clash, the fight sequences are also moulded on western tropes, with the typical brawl at the saloon and the midday duel.

Indeed, the clear demarcation between good and evil characters mentioned earlier is just as evident. If post-apocalyptic fiction is, in part, about finding the protagonist's Other in order to shape their identity, Eli succeeds very early on: he is clearly framed as "not one of them"—the cannibals, who are not allowed into town, but also Carnegie's men, for he does not condone acts of violence for violence's sake, nor does he force himself on women, who all seem to belong to Carnegie. He only abides to one custom of the town, bartering—and it should not be a surprise: as we have remarked at the beginning of this chapter, if something is bound to survive an American

apocalypse, as Jameson said (1994, xii), it is (proto)capitalism, and if there exists something akin to a universal language in the United States, one that eschews words and moral boundaries, it is the act of free trade.

I find it rather evocative that a traditional American genre is retrieved to talk about a destroyed world. Here, memory, which disaster and trauma studies elect as one of the most prominent features of their research, anchors the post-apocalyptic present to its past not only within the narrative proper, but also at the stylistic level. Such a heavy-handed borrowing of tropes and characters from the western genre speaks of the relevance and comfort of old patterns in dealing with a dreary new world. In other words, it is not only Eli or Carnegie who reminisce about the past diegetically; the directors and screenwriter do, too.[200] Yet, this retrieval of traditional structures is a double-edged sword: as we have seen, the post-apocalypse yearns for radical novelty, for a solid break with the past. In *The Road*, in fact, memories do not seem to serve a positive purpose: they haunt Man, they are a constant reminder of a world that no longer exists, and they are tinted with despair rather than consolation. Man tries to get rid of them one piece at a time, abandoning his dead wife's photo, his wedding ring. Conversely, in *The Book of Eli* memories and other relics from the past are leveraged to bring about the new worldview. Repetition ensues, then: the characters—and, on a stretch, the directors—fall into what I have previously called 'the error of rebound.' At the cinematic level, this simply results in a lack of novelty in the movie, with the notable exception of the main character being a black man and the evil guy a white entrepreneur. The Hughes Brothers fall into worn-out, if enjoyable, narrative paths. To an extent, they reassure the audience from the outset that the story will follow familiar patterns, that a happy ending of sorts is not out of order. At the diegetic level, the lone wandering hero conquers a mile at a time while his

[200] As a side note, such a close alignment of western and dystopia might raise the question of whether there was a dystopian seed in the original narratives of the Frontier, whether the savage land to be tamed, the harsh and unstable life at the frontier outpost actually felt dreary enough to the lone Pioneer that they might be associated to the settings of dystopian (or, perhaps, to post-apocalyptic) fiction.

enemy tames the land once more by reinstating a dystopian version of civilization, based on exploitation, violence, and proto-capitalism. Old forms of social interaction connected to the Frontier myth return with a vengeance. Carnegie, the trademark American entrepreneur, founds a new town on the rubble of an old one, reinstates trade, talks of plans to expand his empire. Yet, his wistful yearning for the solid social structures of the past, the ones which held together the fabric of society for centuries, makes for his demise: he is a relic of days gone, as is his worldview, unsustainable in the long run. As the audience sees, his outdated reign collapses when he disrupts the fragile power balance that keeps the town running by recklessly trying to reinstate religion as a form of oppression and control, as a weapon to tame the weak and the desperate. As he says, "it has happened before and it will happen again" and precisely because of such recurrence his project is bound to fail: old social structures are ill-fitted for the post-apocalypse.

I have to reiterate, though, that *The Book of Eli* falls short of relegating memory to a contemplative, if not all-out negative element of post-apocalyptic fiction. After all, Eli's mission is to preserve a memory of the past, and—in Christian fashion—to disseminate God's word. Similarly, the scholars at Alcatraz are collecting knowledge from the old world to "help people start to rebuild the world they lost." Memory, in this sense, is enabling, as Kaplan remarks, because it ties people together, it recreates the social fabric torn by the apocalypse. It is a way to pass on morality (Kaplan 2016, 84, 95). Additionally, it is also worth pointing out that the movie contrasts Carnegie's vision of religion with Eli's, who does not exploit it to obtain power. The message is, in rather traditional fashion, that of a return to a pure understanding of the Christian message of brotherhood and love. Similarly, I find it quite relevant that the Professor at the Alcatraz Museum, an old man from before the catastrophe, says that he and the other scholars want to "help *them*"—that is, the new generation—start to rebuild the world, rather than planning on doing it themselves. It is in direct opposition to Carnegie's express belief that "as old as we are [he and Eli], people like you and me, we

are the future." It seems a nod to letting the past in the past, without forgetting it but without trying to reproduce it step by step.
Therefore, the radically new break hoped for by Jameson and Gross and Gilles might not happen on screen in *The Book of Eli*, but the movie still hands the torch to the new generation, the one forged by the apocalypse, so that they can sift through the physical and cultural ruins of our world to build their own. Moya and López argue that the movie takes us "back to square one" (2017) due to the way it perpetuates a strong belief in the regenerative power of religion and a set of well-known dichotomies. They are not wrong, yet it is perhaps possible to describe the shape of the narrative in the movie as a spiral rather than a circle: even though the movie does retrieve many of the tropes of the western and several outdated values of our declining society, at the end of *The Book of Eli* we might not be witnessing the return to our own worldview, but rather the birth of its successor, mindful of the past but free from its constraints.

Its artistic merits notwithstanding, I consider this movie a valid source of 'realistic' imagery of post-apocalyptic societies. By this I mean that *The Book of Eli* is well aligned to the real-life experiences of societies resurfacing after catastrophes studied by disaster studies. As mentioned earlier, one of their most reiterated claims is that human societies are profoundly resilient and, given enough time and resources, they will be restored. Carnegie's town is an apt example of this: thirty years after the 'the Flash,' we are shown an operative town where traditional social norms have been reinstated. Mimicking real-life sociological findings, the movie exacerbates the disparities between the oppressors and the oppressed, highlighting the concept of social vulnerability we mentioned earlier. It especially depicts women as treated like property rather than human beings, as shown by the way Carnegie's right-hand man bargains with him for Solara.
Moreover, *The Book of Eli*'s treatment of culture is aligned with reports drafted by cultural disaster sociologists. In real life, the catastrophe is

assimilated into the narratives of the survivors, becoming part of their new collective identity. This means that no radical break happens in reality, but rather a substantial update that takes into consideration what remains and what is new. Stories serve as outlets for memories, as commemorative and therapeutic acts. This, too, is depicted in the movie, both when Eli tells his story to Solara and when he references other tales of the Flash, the explosion that "tore a hole in the sky [through which] the sun came down and burnt everything, everything and everybody." Eventually, we are led to understand that whatever society Solara will establish will be aware of humanity's past (thanks to the efforts of Eli and the Alcatraz scholars) and will learn from it, but will not be completely subjugated by it. Once more, we do not witness a complete break, but rather the settling of radical difference, in which memories serve as mementos, not as blueprints.

Therefore, our culture survives the apocalypse, retaining its commemorative role. However, recalling Webb's work, in real life it also causes vulnerability and inspires resilience. This, too, is portrayed in *The Book of Eli*. In the first case, culture-induced vulnerability is evident in the suggested cause for the war that destroyed the world. As Eli explains, it was a religious conflict (and thus a cultural one) and in the aftermath of the disaster all the Bibles were destroyed in an effective act of *damnatio memoriae.* Indeed, most people in Carnegie's town do not know what religion is, let alone a Bible. On a smaller scale, cultural vulnerability is also expressed in Carnegie's staunch belief in his own power. Much like those people living in subcultures of risk, he believes that he is equipped to face any threat and thus fails to notice the signs of his own impending catastrophe.

Returning to the role of religion in the narrative, its traumatic value is self-evident. As Alexander remarks, in the aftermath of a given trauma, its trigger can be suppressed either individually or collectively. The choice to abandon religion to the extent that a new generation has no concept of it is an active decision of the carrier groups mentioned earlier. It is their way to kickstart the healing process of the collectivity. Only when the trauma has been

elaborated at the collective level can religion return. That is, only once it becomes part of the 'myth of creation' of a community, once it is relegated to a past that is increasingly far from the ones experiencing it, will religion, in its uncorrupted essence, be welcomed back as an element of the collective identity.

In this final moment of the story, we also retrieve Webb's vision of culture as resilience: in the same way that religion sustained Eli throughout his journey, so it will Solara as she returns to her hometown with the intent of sharing her newfound faith (and knowledge at large, if we take into consideration the work of the Alcatraz museum). In this sense, for its use of religion and its clear demarcation of a group of elect people, *The Book of Eli* is perhaps one of the closest displays of a literal post-apocalypse—that is, of the advent of the reign of the just after a moment of revelation.

Consequently, one might wonder, as a final comment, whether *The Book of Eli* displays the revelatory element of the biblical apocalypse. In other words, what, if anything, has been revealed through the destruction of the old world? What has been disclosed in its aftermath? I would like to argue that this movie, much like many other post-apocalyptic dystopias, unveils the inadequacy of our current worldview and the precariousness of our social structures. By staging the 'error of rebound'—the acritical retrieval of the current worldview in the aftermath of catastrophe—and showing its second failure, it reveals the need to advance past our contemporary social structures.

Virtually all dystopias add some degree of diegetic separation from the present, and the post-apocalyptic strain is the one most obviously located in the future. We look at the destroyed earth and are tempted to reject any association with our reality. Yet, it *is* a critique of the present. The undisclosed, unmentionable catastrophe that propels the characters into a wasteland, the *event* that is actually a *trend*, as we have written earlier, is the here and now. *The Book of Eli* is a commentary on the unsustainability of our ways of life: it unveils the unavoidable collapse of our society and it

reiterates that there is no way to fully retrieve the current worldview—not now, and most definitely not after a global catastrophe. Yet, in declaring the demise of our civilisation, it ushers in a new one, one that is mindful of what preceded it but does not attempt to replicate it. This critical post-apocalyptic dystopia ends, in a word, hopefully. Perhaps unavoidably so. For only in the direst times does hope find the true impulse to flourish.

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Deadwood. Various directors, HBO, 2004-2006.
Death Race. Directed by Paul W.S. Anderson, Universal Pictures, 2008.
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Index

Aldiss, Brian W.; 38; 41
Alexander, Jeffrey; 85; 252; 253; 254; 255; 256; 263
Allmer, Thomas; 138; 145; 147
Anderson, Matthew T.; 56; 88; 183
Atwood, Margaret; iv; vi; 5; 10; 16; 26; 27; 29; 30; 40; 56; 57; 88; 111; 116; 136; 156; 157; 158; 159; 160; 165; 166; 167; 181; 212; 232
Auster, Paul; 10; 40; 56; 127
Baccolini, Raffaella; 10; 11; 92
Bacigalupi, Paolo; 57; 232
Bacon, Francis; 4; 144
Ballard, J. G.; 51; 52
Barthes, Roland; 51; 64; 225
Baudrillard, Jean; 59; 60; 61; 62; 95; 113; 241
Bauman, Zygmunt; iv; 95; 96; 97; 98; 99; 100; 101; 102; 110; 112; 113; 114; 115; 120; 122; 123; 124; 125; 126; 127; 128; 129; 130; 131; 136; 150; 162
Beck, Ulrich; 95
Bell, Daniel; 74; 76; 78; 79; 80
Bellamy, Edward; 5; 19; 29; 45; 144
Benjamin, Ruja; 149; 171
Bercovitch, Sacvan; 65; 88
Berger, James; 232; 235; 240; 244; 251
Bloch, Ernst; 36; 42; 116; 117; 118; 119; 122
Bostrom, Nick; 189; 190
Bould, Mark; 44
Bowden, Gary; 110; 232; 233; 234
Bradbury, Ray; 50
Braidotti, Rosi; 187; 188; 197; 198; 199; 200; 217; 219; 220; 224; 243
Burke, Edmund; 39
Butler, Octavia E.; 10; 28; 40; 56; 72; 101; 120
Byers, Thomas B.; 74; 75; 86; 87; 88; 158; 159
Cage, David; 185; 201; 225
Cagliero, Roberto; 80; 179
Cambanis, Thanassis; 85; 159; 160
Campanella, Tommaso; 4; 144
Canavan, Gerry; 241
Caroux, Loïc; 225
Cartosio, Bruno; 69
Chanda, Nayan; 113; 120
Claeys, Gregory; 7; 8; 9; 24; 25; 92; 93; 94; 119; 135; 231
Cline, Ernest; iv; 56
Collins, Suzanne; iv; 56; 136
Connor, Steven; 50
Dashner, James; iv; 56
Davison-Vecchione, Daniel; 130; 131; 132
Deleuze, Gilles; 138; 145; 146; 149; 199; 219
Dick, Philip K.; 6; 51; 52; 55; 57; 72; 153; 183
Doyle, Briohny; 239; 240; 243; 244
Eagleton, Terry; 116; 117; 119; 120; 121
Eggers, Dave; vi; 56; 106; 137; 156; 167; 168; 180; 181; 183
Ericson, Richard V.; 138; 149; 151; 152; 153
Ferrando, Francesca; 187; 188; 190
Fish, Stanley; 32
Fitting, Peter; 23; 24; 26; 62
Foucault, Michel; 88; 137; 140; 141; 142; 143; 144; 145; 146; 147; 148; 149; 172; 196; 219
Freedman, Carl; 42; 43; 44; 52; 53; 54; 55; 56

Fritz, Charles; 246; 247
Fukuyama, Francis; 79; 240
Galimberti, Umberto; 127
Gernsback, Hugo; 47
Gibson, William; 55; 73; 88; 183
Giroux, Henry; 98
Gray, John; 235; 237
Gross, Matthew Barrett; 79; 235; 236; 237; 238; 239; 240; 262
Haggerty, Kevin D.; 137; 138; 149; 151; 152; 153
Haraway, Donna; 200
Hassan, Ihab; 196
Hayles, N. Katherine; 187; 194; 196; 199
Heinlein, Robert A.; 28; 29; 30; 45; 48; 72
Hodgson, Godfrey; 73; 74; 75; 76
Holl, Elisabeth; 226
Hughes, Albert and Allen; vi; 256
Hutcheon, Linda; 51; 52
Huxley, Aldous; 10; 46; 99; 100; 111
Jakobson, Roman; 126
Jameson, Fredric; 16; 20; 21; 22; 25; 36; 42; 43; 45; 52; 53; 54; 62; 95; 240; 260; 262
Kaplan, E. Ann; iv; 123; 124; 186; 251; 257; 261
Kermode, Frank; 236
Koselleck, Reinhart; 104; 105; 106; 107; 109; 119
Kumar, Krishan; 17; 18; 19; 20; 22; 62; 131
Kurzweil, Ray; 189; 191; 192
Le Guin, Ursula K.; 24; 30; 54; 55; 72
Levitas, Ruth; 8; 9; 11; 12; 131
Lindell, Michael K.; 246; 247; 248
London, Jack; 44
López, Gemma; 244
Luce, Henry R.; 77
Luckhurst, Roger; 52; 53; 78
Lyon, David; 137; 138; 139; 147; 148; 149; 150; 151; 152; 153; 175; 176
Marks, Peter; 138; 153
Marx, Gary T.; 138; 139; 140; 147; 149; 151
Marx, Karl; 45; 108; 138
Mazzeo, Riccardo; iv; 124; 125; 126; 127; 128; 129; 130
McCarthy, Cormac; 28; 40; 56; 232
Melzer, André; 226
Merril, Judith; 27; 29; 30
Mills, C. Wright; 131; 132
Misztal, Barbara; 128; 129; 130
More, Max; 190
More, Thomas; 1; 2; 4; 18; 25; 36; 144; 180
Morson, Gary Saul; 20; 22
Moya, Ana; 244
Moylan, Tom; iii; iv; 4; 9; 10; 11; 17; 62; 119; 166; 167; 242; 275; 294
Nordholt, Jan Willem Schulte; 67
Orwell, George; 10; 40; 46; 99; 100; 111; 137; 138; 149; 152; 155; 175; 184
Pagetti, Carlo; iv
Piercy, Marge; 24; 55; 56
Poster, Mark; 146; 149
Ranisch, Robert; 187; 195; 196; 197
Rieder, John; 31; 32; 33; 38; 70; 71; 72
Robinson, Kim Stanley; 72; 167
Rosso, Stefano; 69
Roth, Veronica; iv; 56
Russ, Joanna; 54
Sargent, Lyman Tower; 3; 4; 8; 9; 17; 24; 212; 242
Seeger, Sean; 130; 131; 132
Shelley, Mary; 38; 39; 44
Sicher, Efraim; 120
Sieber, Sam D.; 80; 81; 82; 83; 85
Skradol, Natalia; 120
Slotkin, Richard; 63; 64; 65; 70; 71
Sorgner, Stefan Lorenz; 187; 195; 196; 197
Spielberg, Steven; iv; 57; 71
Sterling, Bruce; 55
Suvin, Darko; 16; 25; 30; 31; 33; 34; 35; 36; 37; 42; 45; 48; 62; 203
Talbott, Strobe; 113; 120
Tegmark, Max; 185; 189; 192; 193; 194; 206; 217
Thompson, Peter; 116; 117; 118; 119
Tocqueville, Alexis de; 74
Tomes, Robert R.; 74; 75; 76; 77
Turner, Frederick Jackson; 66; 67; 68; 69
Vieira, Fátima; 1; 2; 5
Vinge, Vernor; 191; 192
Vint, Sherryl; 44
Vonnegut, Kurt; 50; 51; 121

Waszkiewicz, Agata; 215; 217; 219
Webb, Gary R.; 247; 248; 249; 250; 254; 255; 256; 263; 264
Wegner, Phillip; iv; 16; 38; 42
Wells, H. G.; 26; 38; 44; 48; 130; 131
Wood, David Murakami; 144; 146; 173
Wright, Ronald; 104; 107; 109; 110
Zamyatin, Yevgeny; 10; 46
Zipes, Jack; 116; 117; 118; 119; 122
Žižek, Slavoj; 114; 115; 116