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CREATIVE WRITING

LEVELS OF REALITY IN STEVEN SPIELBERG'S *READY PLAYER ONE:* UTOPIA, DYSTOPIA, AND RETROTOPIA

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I would like to address the way in which the three levels of reality (utopian, dystopian, and retrotopian) in Steven Spielberg's movie *Ready Player One* catalyse the plot and allow for a reflection on the role of nostalgia in our contemporaneity.
Following Zygmunt Bauman's definition of retrotopia as a leaning towards the past in search of the ideal society, I argue that the metafictional references scattered throughout the movie represent well the contemporary need to evoke the past and seek refuge in it through the assimilation of pop culture of the 80s and 90s. Moreover, I argue that the movie allows for a critique of the categories of utopia and dystopia, highlighting their intricate relationship and their nuanced meaning, and advocating for a shift of our attention towards the issues of the present.
Keywords: utopian fiction; dystopian fiction; nostalgia; geek culture.

INTRODUCTION

In this essay, I would like to address the way in which *Ready Player One*, the latest movie by director Steven Spielberg (2018), presents and builds upon three levels of reality whose interactions catalyse its plot and allow for a reflection on the role of nostalgia in our contemporaneity. In what follows, I will attempt to describe the features of the utopian, dystopian, and retrotopian planes of reality featured in the movie, arguing that their interconnected nature builds up a unique narrative in the field of utopian studies and supports Zygmunt Bauman's perspective on nostalgia as the contemporary locus of the utopian impulse, as he explains in his *Retrotopia* (2017).

Ready Player One is based on Ernest Cline's 2011 namesake novel, from which it draws its dystopian setting and main themes and characters, while tweaking the plot to make it suitable for a 140-minute, action-packed blockbuster. Due to the heavy alterations to the plot in adapting it for the big screen, this essay will mainly focus on Spielberg's movie. Nonetheless, the general remarks on the layers of reality in *Ready*

Player One apply to the novel as well, and there will be a few passing references to Cline's work when discussing the 'actual world' setting.

SETTING THE SCENE

The action begins in 2045 Columbus, Ohio, where the teenage protagonist, Wade Watts, lives with his aunt and her abusive partner. Their neighbourhood is known as the Stacks, a run-down district made of trailer homes piled on top of each other. The aerial shot at the very beginning of the movie introduces us to the misery of a poverty-stricken metropolis struggling to house all the people flocking to it after it became the most attractive city to live in.

Class difference driven by uncontrolled capitalism still exists and is evident, although no neighbourhood seems to escape the filthy, unkempt look we first witness in the Stacks, and the economic and social system seems to have somewhat survived the "Corn Syrup drought" and the "Bandwidth Riots," just to name two of the many violent events of the early 2020s. The setting is introduced at the beginning of the movie by the offscreen voice of Wade, who quickly mentions the misery and turmoil that characterised the years before he was born.[1] In 2045, he reports, "people [have long] stopped trying to fix problems and just [try] to outlive them."

This is the reason why most people turn to the OASIS to escape reality. The OASIS is a virtual reality simulator born as an MMORPG[2] that quickly evolved into a

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[1] Cline's novel, the source material for the movie, is similarly vague in referring to the real causes of the social decay we witness in 2045, but offers a somewhat clearer glimpse into what has happened and what they are still dealing with: [T]he people of Planet Earth had other concerns. The ongoing energy crisis. Catastrophic climate change. Widespread famine, poverty, and disease. Half a dozen wars. You know: "dogs and cats living together … mass hysteria!" Normally, the newsfeeds didn't interrupt everyone's interactive sitcoms and soap operas unless something really major had happened. Like the outbreak of some new killer virus, or another major city vanishing in a mushroom cloud. (Cline 2011, 1)

[2] MMORPG is the acronym for 'Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game.' In this type of video game, players control an avatar which is highly customisable, with unique features that are defined by the skills of the player. The game takes place in a 'persistent state world' (PSW): the story continues even when the user is logged off. Whereas for most other types of video games the aim is to complete the game, MMORPGs do not have a linear progression, nor a set ending. Most of the gameplay revolves around 'leveling up' one's avatar by interacting with other users, taking up challenges, and trading with NPCs (Non-Playing Character—the avatars controlled by the game, rather than by a real user). Famous MMORPGs are, just to name two, *World of Warcraft* and *Aion.* More on

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complex virtual world, in which transactions are real and class status is determined by the skills of the users—a hymn to the myth of the self-made man so dear to the American Dream. People can access the OASIS using visors and haptic technology such as gloves or a full-body suit, and everyone begins at the same level, so it is up to each user to find their way into the many possibilities offered by the virtual platform, whose limits "are your own imagination," to borrow Wade's words. The audience quickly catches up with the fact that the OASIS has virtually substituted actual reality in all but the purely bodily functions. In it you can earn and lose money by taking part in races and challenges, but you can also get an education, a proper job, and married or divorced. The avatars can be customized according to how much coin you have; weapons, clothes, features, and even real-world products can be bought in the virtual stores, since the currency of the OASIS is fully recognized and accepted by the markets.

The plot revolves around the race to the Easter Egg prompted by the death of James Halliday, the creator and majority shareholder of Gregarious Games, the software house that produced the OASIS. An Easter Egg is generally described as "a hidden feature present in a video game that is intentionally put in by the game's creator and is often made difficult to discover . . . Easter eggs can be writings, pictures, sounds, videos, minigames, or even more complicated productions" (Bonenfant 2012, 177). In his taped will, Halliday informs all the users that the first to find the Easter Egg he has planted in the game and protected with three challenges will inherit his money and shares, consequently becoming the owner of the OASIS.

The key to win the challenges is in the user's deep knowledge of pop culture of the 80s and 90s, with particular reference to what Halliday liked and played as a child. Wade, just like many other users, spends his free time learning about cult movies and books, studying Halliday's life, and retrogaming, which is understood as "a hobby of playing older console-based games, computer games, and arcade games. Although there are no universally accepted criteria for inclusion in the 'retro' category, the label is

MMORPGs can be found at https://www.techopedia.com/definition/1919/massively-multiplayer-online-role-playing-game-mmorpg (last accessed 09/02/2020).

typically used in reference to discontinued platforms and software developed for such" (Budziszewski 2012, 534).

After successfully deciphering the riddle of the first challenge Wade wins it and gains the first place in the race. He subsequently teams up with a small group of virtual friends to solve the rest of the riddles. However, his achievement is noticed by IOI, a corporation trying to gain control of the OASIS, which tries to bribe him into working for them. After Wade's refusal, IOI locates him in real life and bombs the Stack in which he lives, killing his aunt and her partner and prompting him to hide in the old van in which he normally plays. While progressing in their quest for the Easter Egg, Wade and his team also meet in real life as they try to avoid IOI's manhunt. Wade becomes aware of the fact that IOI is actually exploiting indentured servants to track down the egg and, as the final confrontation approaches, turns to every other user in the OASIS for support against the IOI. Having survived IOI attempts to kill him both virtually and in real life, Wade finally obtains the Easter Egg and becomes the owner of Gregarious Games, a role he decides to share with his team and use to improve the too often ignored real world.

FIRST AND SECOND LEVEL OF REALITY: UTOPIA AND DYSTOPIA

Ready Player One is quite a unique story within the field of utopian studies: the movie is set in a bleak, gloomy future and the actual world of 2045 hits all the marks to be considered dystopian due to its exploitation of the masses, derelict metropolises, totalitarian-looking corporations, and constant feeling of danger. However, a large part of the action takes place in the utopian world of the OASIS, which is so starkly different from actual reality that it is almost instinctive to think of it as a completely separate reality.

According to Lyman Tower Sargent, a dystopia is "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" (1994, 9), while a critical dystopia adds to that definition that "it normally includes at least one eutopian enclave or holds out hope that the dystopia

can be overcome and replaced with a eutopia" (2001, 222).[3] *Ready Player One* does depict a society that is worse than ours, located in the future, and described if not in detail, at least enough that we can understand what is going on in the actual Columbus. At the same time, Sargent's definitions of eutopia and critical eutopia fit the OASIS quite well, the former being 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," and the latter adding that such a positive society has "difficult problems that the described society may or may not be able to solve and . . . takes a critical view of the utopian genre" (1994, 9).

The two levels of reality in *Ready Player One* fit well into the critical utopia and critical dystopia definitions respectively, yet the movie as a whole struggles to find a category that suits it. As Justin Nordstrom remarks about the novel, "*Ready Player One* features overlapping paradoxes—a utopia within a dystopia, a futuristic setting obsessed with the past, and characters playing elaborate games within the broader gaming environment of the OASIS itself" (Nordstrom 2016, 244).

The OASIS was originally created as a form of escapism, a video game that allowed people to hide from the real world for a while. During his final appearance in the movie, Halliday himself recounts this: "I created the OASIS because I never felt at home in the real world. I just didn't know how to connect with people there. I was afraid for all of my life, right up until the day I knew it was ending. Now that, that was when I realized that as terrifying and painful as reality can be, it's also the only place that you can get a decent meal. Because reality is real."

The OASIS was born as a safe place for everyone who felt uneasy in actual reality, somewhere else to be, a parallel world, a pure and virtual utopia of the twenty-first

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[3] A note on Sargent's choice to use *eu*topia, *dys*topia, and *u*topia: Thomas More's neologism Utopia is built with a non-existent prefix *u-* which describes an ideal society that does not exist. It is an elaboration of two different Greek prefixes: *eu-,* meaning 'good', and *ou-,* meaning 'not, non-existent.' Due to this ambivalence, scholars in the field of utopian studies have been debating on the right terminology to describe an ideal society versus a dreadful one. Sargent, for clarity's sake, uses eutopia to describe the former, dystopia to describe the latter, and utopia as an umbrella term for imaginary societies. Although this tripartite usage is generally accepted in the field, most commentators still use the word utopia to describe the ideal society, deploying the term eutopia only when they need to stress its positive value.

century.[4] However, as a project the OASIS was flawed by its very nature: it was made by people for people. The same conflicts of the real world quickly appeared in the OASIS, and the same power relations were eventually perpetuated. 'Real' life moved to the OASIS to the point that actual reality was almost discarded. Two initially parallel worlds, a dystopian one and its utopian counterpart, come to a convergence that becomes more and more evident throughout the movie. The protagonist himself spells it out at the beginning, in rather blunt words: "since people spend most of their time in the OASIS, losing your shit means, well, losing your shit." But what can initially be interpreted as a mere deep attachment to one's avatar, soon becomes much more sinister. Early on, the partner of Wade's aunt loses all their money betting on a competition in the OASIS. Soon after, Wade is warned by his friend Art3mis, after she has helped his avatar Parzival to escape from an ambush at a club in the OASIS:

> Art3mis: this isn't a game. I'm doing this to stop IOI. I'm talking about real-world consequences. People suffering. Actual life-and-death stuff.
>
> Parzival: I know, I know.
>
> A: No, you don't know! My dad died in a loyalty centre. He borrowed gear, he built up debt. He moved in with the promise of working it off, but he never did. IOI just raised his living expenses, then he got sick and he couldn't afford to get out, and then he died!
>
> P: I'm so sorry, I—
>
> A: No, you don't live in the real world, Z. From what you've told me, I don't think you ever have. You live inside this, this illusion, and I can't afford to let you distract me.

Just a few moments later, Wade learns first-hand how virtual danger can mean danger in real life as IOI actively tries to kill him by bombing his trailer. Later in the movie, Samantha (Art3mis' real name) is imprisoned by IOI and forced into physical

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[4] Although in the movie the OASIS is never referred to as a utopia, in the novel it is labelled as such several times. See, for instance, Cline 2011, 33 and 59.

labour in the OASIS as a way to repay her father's debts toward the corporation. Of course, the most obvious real-life repercussion of competing for the Easter Egg in the OASIS is that the winner gets the fortune left behind by Halliday, together with the power to decide what happens to the OASIS.

By the end of the movie, Wade and his team have learned the many ways in which the OASIS can be a danger to actual reality and act accordingly, making decisions that definitely bring the two worlds together into one integrated, symbiotic system: they ban slavery in the OASIS, and close the platform on Tuesdays and Thursdays because, as they remark, "people need to spend more time in the real world," the only one that truly exists. Quoting Justin Nordstrom once more, "Clines's novel embodies a . . . nuanced understanding of utopianism itself—in which the seemingly idealized world of the OASIS is actually perilous and the apocalyptic conventional world is one worth saving, even celebrating. By playing with the conventions of gaming, *Ready Player One* embodies the paradoxical elements of utopian fiction itself" (2016, 254).

A THIRD LEVEL OF REALITY

To the actual reality of Columbus and the virtual reality of the OASIS we should add a third level of reality which I would like to call 'metareality.' Metareality permeates the entire movie through a continuous streak of references to 80s and 90s pop culture and acts as a key to decipher both the riddles of the Egg Hunt for the protagonists and the meaning of the movie for the audience. This level of reality brings together actual and virtual reality through a sense of nostalgia for a world that does not exist anymore. Retrogaming, which is featured in many instances and determines the entire third challenge of the Egg Hunt (where an avatar needs to play Adventure on an old Atari 2600 console until he finds the first Easter Egg ever created in a video game), is only accessible to the protagonists through the OASIS, in a fascinating Matryoshka effect that sees retro games being played within a virtual reality game that is portrayed in a movie.

Ready Player One is a feast of *retromania*, to borrow the title of Simon Reynolds's work. It bristles with references to vintage pop music, old movies and TV series, comic

strips and novels, and video games. It is a constant walk down memory lane for the audience. It is surprising, though, that a narrative addressed mainly to young adults is such a vessel for nostalgia. As Reynolds writes, "Pop ought to be all about the present tense, surely? It is still considered the domain of the young, and young people aren't supposed to be nostalgic" (2011, xviii).

Zygmunt Bauman similarly reflects on the topic of retromania and the advent of an age of nostalgia in his book *Retrotopia* (2017), a word he uses to describe "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). In it, he derives the concept of nostalgia as related to retrotopias from Svetlana Boym's work *The Future of Nostalgia*, in which she writes:

> The twentieth century began with a futuristic utopia and ended with nostalgia. [We are experiencing a] global epidemic of nostalgia, an affective yearning for a community with a collective memory, a longing for continuity in a fragmented world [which can be interpreted as] a defence mechanism in a time of accelerated rhythms of life and historical upheavals. [Such a defensive mechanism consists essentially in] the promise to rebuild the ideal home that lies at the core of many powerful ideologies of today, tempting us to relinquish critical thinking for emotional bonding. . . . The danger of nostalgia is that it tends to confuse the actual home and the imaginary one. (Byom quoted in Bauman 2017, 2-3)

Nostalgia has become the keyword of our time, when it comes to building ideal worlds. Young and old people alike rely on the past to find utopia, rather than on the future, which looks increasingly bleaker. Thus, nostalgia is relevant both to the audience and to the characters of the OASIS. Halliday re-created his whole childhood in the OASIS, then encouraged everyone on the platform to become familiar with the 80s and 90s culture that he was so passionate about. The Halliday Journals hold copies of every movie, song, video game, and book that Halliday loved in his life, all accessible to the Egg hunters. As Angela Maiello notes, Halliday even evokes the need to return to the past in a hint for the first challenge, when he says, "Why can't we go backwards, for once?" (2018). Wade and his friends find comfort in old games and movies, in their deep knowledge of their dynamics, and in the evocation of a simplicity of life that was unattainable in the bleak world of 2045. Moreover, it is especially by looking at the past

that they become aware of the mistakes Halliday made while running the OASIS and understand the importance of avoiding repeating them.

At the same time, the continuous nods to the 80s and 90s transport the audience into a tale of nostalgia for a time that the viewers have either lived in first person or known through references in the media, eliciting an emotional response and allowing the viewers and readers to expand the meaning of the story through their knowledge of popular culture.

As Megan Condis acutely states,

> It is possible to finish the novel, like a video game, with various levels of completion. Some will read the novel as a stand-alone text and stop there. But the most devoted fans of the text will seek out the works referenced within, thereby extending their experience in Cline's world, achieving what games would call "100% completion." These readers are engaged in a friendly competition with both the text and each other to catch all the hidden references and find all the novel's Easter eggs, thereby proving their affinity with the gamer subculture that the book claims to both define and serve. One cannot simply consume Cline's narrative. It must be played. (Condis 2016, 4)

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, *Ready Player One* seems at first glance a typical action movie set in a futuristic scenario. At a closer look, though, it is possible to identify three interconnected levels of reality that comment on our contemporary tendencies towards utopian, dystopian and 'retrotopian' thinking. Their interactions highlight the faults each of them presents, underscoring the fallacies of a starkly utopian enterprise such as the OASIS, retrieving some positive aspects of a dystopian world such as Columbus in 2045, and commenting on the current tendency to retreat to an idealised past in order to escape the gloomy reality we inhabit. The three layers of reality collide in a narrative that underscores the need not to indulge uncritically in nostalgia, stressing how utopian—that is, unattainable—a wish for a return to the past is, and how detrimental a lack of attention to the present and the future.

Masked as a sci-fi blockbuster, *Ready Player One* lays bare the necessity to turn our gaze towards the present once more, so that the dreadful future it depicts might be

avoided. At the same time, it warns us against pure utopianism, which inevitably hides the seeds of dystopia within itself, in favour of a more realistic vision of the future which, having lost its gloss, now seems darker than ever. *Ready Player One* implies that nostalgia and utopian thinking can coexist and, if approached critically, can be the key to divert the bleak future that talks about impending catastrophe have sketched in the past twenty years. At the same time, it argues for a concrete approach to the issues of our time, showing that this reality, the world we inhabit, is, after all, the one thing worth fighting for.

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