



PRESENTATION

Dystopia in Contemporary Literature and Art: Aesthetics of Resistance or of Submission?

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One of the most pervasive vectors of contemporary creation these days consists in a dystopia that is perceived not just as a projection of dire perspectives into the future, but rather as an aesthetic recreation of the present in a time that is problematic and wrought with affliction and impending danger, both internationally and in the everyday life of the common man and woman.

So it is that a procession of evils parades by, shaped by technological saturation or by the evolutionary drift of technology, which the philosopher Jean-François Lyotard sees as increasingly inhuman or else radically disengaged from the wellbeing of humans in the world: food shortages, population growth, increased urban violence, exacerbated inequality, excessive consumerism and standardization, the spread of authoritarian political tendencies, and to make things worse, an environmental crisis affecting the whole planet.

As this dispiriting state of affairs intensifies, the domination of a global market capable of orchestrating transnational corporations is impairing the capacity of nations to intervene in the economic reality and restricting their participation to a globalized value-producing machine

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that is impassive to any other injunction. Taking this diagnosis further, Mark Featherstone (2017) argues that the 2008 financial crisis showed just how deeply the global economic system is rooted in class-based interests. Which is why, he argues, the main characteristics of the globalized neoliberal system are defence and efforts to control the threats emerging at the margins, leading him to regard opposition to others as the defining trait of capitalist racism and its inherent “black cynicism” in the face of the irreducibility of the violence it is marked by. In demonstrating this conflictive potential, he goes on to suggest that the precariat – a term coined by Standing¹ to refer to the status of much of the petite bourgeoisie, immersed in the capitalist game – has emerged as the dystopian future of today’s globalized economy.

¹ Featherstone cites this author, whose work on the precariat, published in Portuguese, is included in the list of references.

Completely in tune with this adverse actuality, Featherstone sees in today’s societies the emergence of a “thanatological tendency” among those who are excluded from the society of plenty, with the rise of shootings in schools and other group settings (Featherstone, 2017, p. 300). In this world of competition and unrelenting speed, violence and inequality are morally justified by the winners, while fear of the other is sublimated into an obsession with security and defence (Featherstone, 2017, p. 322). The abnormality of anomalies has become the paradigm of social coexistence; much in keeping with what Loyola Brandão recognizes in the words of Euclides da Cunha he cites in an epigraph to his latest novel: “The rare bullets that were shot [...] No-one noticed them any more [...] just as they were unmoved by the shoot-outs that still took place [...] Life had become normal in that abnormality” (Cunha, cited in Brandão, 2018).

As Featherstone (2017, p. 432) notes, the irony of the contemporary obsession with security is its tendency to degenerate into totalitarianism and regression to a womb state in insular, nihilistic societies. At the core of this perverse state of affairs, socio-political and cultural formations lose their *raison d’être* and the creative urge vanishes from a future horizon ripe for decline.

This scepticism leads to particularist and localist stances against the production-based trends and techno-scientific models prevailing in the spread of globalization. In this

reactive context, Peter Sloterdijk (1999, p.67) espies the emergence of “age-old combats between globalizing-modern and resisting-conservative regions of the world”.

According to this German thinker, wars of this kind indicate “the crises of shifting forms in the world” (Sloterdijk, 1999, p. 73), which end up producing totalitarianisms as the “big state” turns into a “battlefield” (1999, p. 80). That is why, he argues, “hyper-politics”, or the “introduction of a politics for an era without empires” should make “demands on the art of belonging” (1999, p. 82) or else on “culture, understood as a task [...] to preserve the ethnic continuum” (1999, p. 74).

Elaborating on this, Sloterdijk (1999, p. 82-85) reviews two stages in human history of what he calls insularization: the first, defined as the “secession by the human-horde of Old Nature”; the second, understood as the “utilization of man by man in great civilizations, typifying the rise of the class society”. He goes on to announce a third insularization (1999, p. 86-87), understood as the production of “post-social” individualism, the exploitation of individuals resulting from islands of wealth that claim for themselves “a good measure of social privileges”. Such individuals “lead their life as the end consumer of themselves and their own opportunities”, irrespective of prospecting any future (Sloterdijk, 1999, p. 89).

In order better to characterize this current state of affairs, Sloterdijk (1999, p. 90-91) invokes the recent formulations of “progressive eco-economists”, which are symptomatic of what he regards as the greatest damage industrialism has made to social life: “the ideology of unreproductive productivity, which corresponds to an economic variant of the diagnosis of nihilism”.

In other words, these scientists work with evidence that the unfettered productivism of capitalism will be unable to recoup the natural and human reserves and resources it expends. Which means that unless the course we are taking changes radically, this foretells nothing less than the exhaustion of the riches and potentialities of nature and man to survive with dignity.

Set against the “last man” or the “individual with no return”, Sloterdijk (1999, p. 92) proposes that “hyper-politics” should have the mission of “making the mass of the last men into a society of individuals who are willing to continue

performing the role of intermediaries between those on the rise and those in decline”.

In another appraisal, Featherstone (2017, p. 51) draws on Antonio Negri’s rendering of the Sponizian concept of multitude to address humankind’s potential to exceed all organized structures against its future prospects. And in order to define the objectives of his book *Planet Utopia: Utopia, Dystopia and Globalisation*, Featherstone scrutinizes contemporary global politics through the psychoanalytical lens of Winnicott, who, drawing on Tagore, sees the liminal space of the seashore as a position of creativity and security, thence considering the possibility of our privileged place for reflection in the face of the social and economic insecurity experienced by most of the world’s population.

In the face of this adverse scenario, Featherstone proposes a left-wing model of what he calls *minor utopia*, whereby human labour and productivity are understood in terms of the satisfaction of needs rather than abstract profit-making and the correlated destruction of the planet’s biosphere. Certainly, such a *minor utopia* could be approached by means of Sloterdijk’s *hyper-politics*.

At the end of the day, these are hypotheses that seek out a utopian fracture at the heart of the deepest dystopia. But not everyone still pins their hopes on such an opening, since at this very time, many of the signs of inhospitable positivity are gaining ground.

For example, when Terry Eagleton (1994, p. 54) considers post-modernism a “grisly parody of socialist utopia”, he tends to reconsider the concept of utopia no longer as “some remote *telos* but, amazingly, as nothing less than the present itself, replete as it is in its own brute positivity and scarred through with not the slightest trace of lack”. For, as he believes, the future, “in the shape of technology, is already here, exactly synchronous with the present” (1985, p.54).

As such, for this British thinker, in post-modern aesthetics, “art” and “life” interbreed, interacting viscerally in late capitalism, with art modelling itself upon “a commodity form which is already invested with aesthetic allure, in a sealed circle” (Eagleton, 1994, p.55).

It is precisely the vicious, intransitive nature of the current state of affairs—irremediable for having no eschaton—

that leads Franco Berardi, like Sloterdijk, to conjecture “a crisis in the transmission of the cultural and political inheritance of the twentieth century to the generations who have grown up in an utterly different communicative and technological setting”. This is not, Berardi posits, a generational conflict, but a “crisis of cultural transmission in the passage from the critical-alphabetic generations to the post-alpha, configurational, simultaneous generations” (Berardi, 2019, p.149).

This intergenerational link within a present that is expanding and inflating into a ceaseless future, where technology engulfs all shared spaces, becomes problematic in view of the paradigm shift, because what matters in this transition is “the passage from a conjunctive mind to a connective mind”, given that “connection is the interface of compatible entities” and “conjunction is contact between bodies [...] that exchange ambiguous signs incrustated with emotional and visual phonic matter” (Berardi, 2019, p.148).

Arguably, this difficulty in achieving cultural continuity, for which bonds must be forged, can be seen on the horizon because of a certain diffuse malaise in contemporary times, where everybody feels somewhat cut-off and at the same time held hostage to a substanceless, exhibitionist, communication-filled sociability whose ultimate appeal is to be ever in evidence. In this hybrid space, where the public is made private and the private is held up to constant scrutiny, narcissistic temptation arises, and faces, stripped of self-consciousness, are revealed in the urge to be seen, inebriated by the glossy fluidity of media showcases.

A statement made by José Castello in the preface to Jurandir Freire Costas’s *A Ética e o Espelho da Cultura* (Ethics and the Mirror of Culture) fits aptly here as a kind of watchword for social life in the globalized world of today: “Narcissus’s mirror is the present turned into destiny” (Castello, 1995, p.13).

Staying on the topic of dystopia, in 2017 Jill Lepore published an article in *The New Yorker* in which, aside from offering a good overview of the great works of fiction of the twentieth century, without failing to mention the founders of the genre, she raises some key questions about this kind of viewpoint and artistic creation. First, she addresses the dialectic link between dystopias and utopias, arguing that the former are like the thunder that follows a flash of lightning.

Precisely because utopian and progressive promises, embedded in planned societies, obscure the threat to liberty hidden in the appearance of perfection, dystopias have come to be seen as fictions of resistance. However, as Lepore points out, in the sombre reality of the twenty-first century, expressions of dystopia do nothing but feed into fears for the future, inducing submission and hopelessness. The prolonging of this controversial crossroads is precisely what this edition of *Gragoatá* hopes to investigate.

If controversy cannot be avoided, its legacy is succinctly expressed in the reflection in Lepore's article. Up to what point, she wonders, can the literature of "political desperation" and/or ecological destruction be seen as resistance and criticism of what exists, or does it, rather, operate as a symptom of conformism and acceptance of the inevitable?

This special issue focuses on these hypotheses and presents, as widely as possible, different ideas in a pluralistic perspective.

To this end, articles that take different angles on our cultural and artistic world are brought into alignment: some that draw on an interart approach, others that cast an eye on foreign literatures, and others still that prefer literatures and other writings in Portuguese, in their variants from Brazil, Portugal and Angola.

In "Outros espaços nas artes visuais" (Other Spaces in the Visual Arts), Ricardo Fabbrini sets about examining the dystopian dimension, depicted as a society of control, in the visual arts, specifically in the work of the German artist Harun Farocki, the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, and the Spanish artist Antoni Muntadas. He ends by borrowing Michel Foucault's notion of heterotopia to characterize the power of negativity seen in some contemporary art, focusing on installations by the Argentinean artist Rirkrit Tiravanija.

In the next article, "Utopia e distopia na obra de David Simon" ("Utopia and Dystopia in the Work of David Simon"), André Carvalho discusses utopian and dystopian elements in television series written or produced by Simon, especially *The Plot Against America*, an adaptation of Philip Roth's novel of the same name. In his discussion, Carvalho adopts an approach to utopia that links it to the values of work, family

and social democracy, compatible with the conventions of the contemporary televised drama series.

Gontijo Rosa and Beth Brait's article, "Variações materiais, manutenções de forma e conteúdo: distopias infanto-juvenis" (Material Variations, Maintenances of Form and Content: Child and Youth Dystopias), envisages a legitimization of dystopia as a genre that puts creators and audience in profound dialogue about the social conditions in which they live. In this sense, they examine content, material and form, as proposed by Bakhtin, to conclude that in a dystopian text, the aesthetic object reverberates in the ethical and cognitive ambits of its reality.

In "Distopia no Antropoceno ou re(a)presentando o interregno" (Dystopia in the Anthropocene, or Re-presenting the Interlude), Sonia Torres examines a corpus of English-language fiction with a view to discussing different dystopian scenarios and the ways they represent the expansion of the mechanisms of capitalism and how they have penetrated the fabric of society. For this very reason, Torres concludes that in the ambit of dystopia, few are the creators who dare depict a post-capitalist society, ending the essay with a discussion of *Walkaway*, by the Canadian author Cory Doctorow, where the counterplot to the hegemonic order stems from a new way of organizing work and communication.

Next, in "Não aconteceu assim: o papel das inconsistências narrativas na distopia *The handmaid's tale* de Margaret Atwood" ("That's Not How it Happened": the role of narrative inconsistencies in Margaret Atwood's Dystopia *The Handmaid's Tale*), Nunes Menegotto takes a perspective of narrative (un)reliability to explore the way the novel engages simultaneously with the notions of despair and hope, which are interwoven in dystopian writing.

With his article "Sobrevivência por promessa: ficção distópica como denúncia do Capitaloceno" ("Survival through Promise: Dystopian Fiction as a Denouncement of the Capitalocene), Eduardo Marks de Marques focuses on the debate about dystopian fiction in the past forty years as revealing the socio-political angsts of the present as a consequence of the way capitalism is organised. Drawing on a variety of modern and contemporary dystopian novels written in English, Marques discusses how this type of work can be considered a genre in its own right, as well as a diagnosis of the

perversion inherent to the socioeconomic dynamics prevailing in the world today.

In the following article, “Distopias políticas em modo antrozo-zoomórfico: universos sombrios do pós-humano em textos ficcionais de Orwell e Ionesco” (Political Dystopias in Anthrozo-zoomorphic Mode: Dark Post-Human Worlds in the Fiction of Orwell and Ionesco), Rosário Neto Mariano reflects on the political variant of the world of dystopia and its figuration in literature of an anthrozo-zoomorphic nature, which calls out the phony nature of post-human paradises.

In a different world from the previous contributions, Carmen Lúcia Tindó Ribeiro Secco writes about “Apocalipses e catástrofes: o lugar da distopia em narrativas contemporâneas da literatura e do cinema angolanos” (Apocalypses and Catastrophes: the Place of Dystopia in Contemporary Narratives in Angolan Literature and Film), reflecting on the dystopian temporalities seen in Angolan fiction of an allegorical bent in a bid to question the meanings and the place for criticism of resistance in these types of narratives.

Also focusing on Angola, Solange Evangelista offers the essay “Angola, me diz ainda a coisa falsa que é distopia” (Angola, Tell Me that False Thing that’s Dystopia), in which she analyses a book of poems by José Luis Mendonça, which involves a lyrical representation of the constellation of images that reveal the unrealized Angolan utopian dream. In doing so, she probes the poetic traces of resistance to conformity, seeing them as “sparks of hope” and revealing to readers the other side of dystopia: its promise for transformation.

In the domain of Brazilian cinema, José Wanderson Lima Torres and Wagner dos Santos Rocha offer “Crônica de uma resistência anunciada: os traços da distopia crítica em *Bacurau*, de Kléber Mendonça Filho and Juliano Dornelles” (Chronicle of a Resistance Foretold: Traces of Critical Dystopia in *Bacurau*, by Kléber Mendonça Filho and Juliano Dornelles), in which they examine its destabilizing potential, insofar as the film depicts the impact of deep-rooted resistance in an isolated community that rises up against intruders. In this sense, the authors stress the historical importance of a tradition of struggles exposed in the film’s hybrid textuality, which, in the dispersive face of dystopianism, simultaneously melds vectors of fantasy, historical drama and science fiction.

Also focusing on recent Brazilian output, Maria Conceição Monteiro offers “A revolta das mulheres sacrificadas” (The Uprising of Sacrificed Women”), an interpretation of Patrícia Melo’s 2019 novel *Mulheres Empilhadas*. Seeing the novel as a narrative inspired by gothic-dystopian poetics, Monteiro frames the concept of monstrosity in its “potential for multifaceted action”, which, rather than being embodied, drives the female body to confront what is prescribed for it. This means the gothic dystopia can be seen as “a poetic of transformation and transposition of gender divisions, to question them”.

The final offering in the section on Brazilian works is by Ana Kiffer, with “Distopia, angústia de aniquilamento e a radical poética das relações” (Dystopia, Annihilation Anxiety and the Radical Poetics of Relation). In this essay, Kiffer considers the contemporary notion of dystopia in the specific context of the formation of colonial societies. By contrasting the concepts of annihilation anxiety and poetics of relation, she adds to the mix the possibility of means of creating utopian and heterotopian literary spaces to emerge in the context of post-colonial societies. To this end, she makes a comparative analysis of two works by Carolina Maria de Jesus, *The Passion According to GH* (1964), by Clarice Lispector, and Édouard Glissant’s poetic, fictional and theoretical text *The Open Boat* (1990).

Turning now to works of Portuguese literature, Regina Zilberman offers a comparison between a poem by José Saramago (1975) and a painting by Salvador Dali in “O Ano de 1993: distopia e direitos humanos” (The Year 1993: Dystopia and Human Rights). She situates Saramago’s work as a dystopia whose prologue identifies it not with realistic, but with surrealist, dreamlike poetics, running counter the associations normally attached to this kind of creation. She attempts to show how the text contains a confluence of anti-utopian conceptual territories and the exercise of politics in the name of human rights.

The final essay in this issue of *Gragoatá* also focuses on Portuguese literature. In it, Ângela Beatriz de Carvalho Faria interprets Teolinda Gersão’s work *Paisagem com Mulher e Mar ao Fundo* (Landscape with Woman and Sea in the Background) as a lived scene in which the clash between the

dystopia of a seaside village controlled by an authoritarian government and the utopia of a sudden popular uprising is able to mobilize a redemptive praxis. It is an exercise in imagining the possible in all its potential for action in the face of intolerable circumstances. In this sense, the ebb and flow of the waves in the article's title points decisively to an obscure and unpredicted expectation of dystopia.

Concluding this issue, we offer a review by Eduardo da Silva Freitas of the book *Limite* (Limit), by Luís Costa Lima.

We hope to have surprised you positively with this controversial showcase of unexpected and expectant approaches and perspectives.

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