

DYSTOPIAN NARRATIVES IN CONTEMPORARY “YOUNG ADULT” CINEMA: HISTORY AND MEMORY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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Abstract

The anxiety of unpredictable future and the frustration about traumatic past of humankind nowadays find a way of expressing themselves through collective memory or, more specifically, through utopian and dystopian fiction. Utopian narratives have always been a therapeutic way of processing uncertainty, and today utopian and dystopian fiction is becoming more and more popular, both in the form of novels and films. This paper examines Utopias and Dystopias in contemporary culture as the symptoms of the fear of forgetting and the inability to remember in the digital age. The analysis of digital memories and their connection to Utopia is conducted on the data set of the three most popular utopian films of the last few years “The Giver”, “Divergent”, and “Maze-Runner”. The focus is set on such aspects as the critical potential of Dystopia in politics and the ahistoricism and transformations of memory in the digital age. The goal of this article is to reveal the critical potential of utopian fiction and, more specifically, the anxiety expressed in the so-called “Utopia of neglect”.

Keywords: dystopian narratives, dystopia and utopia in cinema, collective memory, digital memory, nonlinear history.

Contemporary utopian and dystopian narratives

In the era of digitalization and “cloud” data storage, the way people process the events of the past and present have changed drastically. Some scholars express a concern that soon humankind will not be able to create a coherent historical narrative at all, while others notice the opposite – an obsession with history and nostalgia. Still, both views indicate that the relations with time and memory are changing and as well as their representations in mass culture (photography, music and, most of all, cinema).

Utopian narratives have always been a therapeutic way of processing uncertainty, and today utopian and dystopian fiction is becoming more and more popular, both in the form of novels and films. A number of popular “young adult” novels, transformed into movies through the past few years are “The Giver”, “Divergent”, and “Maze-Runner”². All of them share some similar

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² Although there does not seem to be a clear definition of the Young Adult genre, the majority of critics see this genre as stories that tack-

characteristics: they are extremely popular among contemporary teenagers and they all depict a story of a conflict between the masses and the individual, the state and the rebellion.

Contemporary dystopian fiction differs a lot from the dystopias of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, drifting far away from the left-oriented criticism to some kind of right-wing libertarianism³. Surely, modern age dictates new rules of narrating and introduces new disturbing issues that, like a ghost or a bad dream, emerge in mass culture in forms of apocalyptic dystopia. This article relies on the idea that both utopian and dystopian narratives act as symptoms of anxiety of the society about specific social and political problems, therefore each symptom could be a foundation for a utopia genre classification. For example, in the context of contemporary dystopia we could talk about such sub-genres as a dystopia of control (expressing the anxiety about the electronic surveillance), a dystopia of unification (extreme deindividuation and persecution for any kind of divergence), a dystopia of neglect (erasure of the events of the painful past from memory and complete forgetting) or in some cases even a combination of all three. This paper is focused mainly on the aspect of remembering, but it also tackles the problems of control and identity.

It is also vital to understand that even the most distant and unbelievable utopian ideas always remain connected to the present, reflecting and transforming reality. The understanding of particular features of these various connections could help to reconstruct some basic collective representations of the time and history-related concerns of the society.

This paper examines Utopias and Dystopias in contemporary culture as the symptoms of the fear of forgetting and the inability to remember in the digital age. The data set for my analysis of digital memories and their connection to Utopia includes three films based on contemporary “young adult” novels: *The Giver*, *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent*. Below is a short summary of each film.

The Hunger Games is a 2012 American science fiction adventure film directed by Gary Ross and based on a novel by Suzanne Collins. The film and the book tell us a story about a dystopian futuristic country – Panem, where boys and girls between the ages of 12 and 18 must take part in the Hunger Games, a televised annual event in which the “tributes” are required to fight to the death until there is one remaining who will be crowned the victor.

The Giver is a 2014 American social science fiction film directed by Phillip Noyce based on the 1993 novel of same name by Lois Lowry.

le the difficulties of coming-of-age and looking for social identification, see: S. Jonathan: *Young Adult: A Book by Any Other Name...: Defining the Genre*, *The Alan Review*, 2007, 10: 34–42.

³ E. Morrison: YA dystopias teach children to submit to the free market, not fight authority, *The Guardian*, 2004, 1 Sept, [online] Retrieved from: <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/sep/01/ya-dystopias-children-free-market-hunger-games-the-giver-divergent>.

In the year 2048, after a war, the community has decided to get rid of different races and feelings. All the citizens have had their memories erased; except for the Receiver of Memory (the main character of the story).

Divergent is a 2014 American science fiction action film directed by Neil Burger, based on the novel of the same name by Veronica Roth. The story takes place in a dystopian post-apocalyptic version of Chicago where people are divided into distinct factions based on human virtues. The main character is a girl who is Divergent, which means she does not fit into any of the factions.

Political representations and the Critical Potential of Utopia: Mannheim, Foucault, Jameson

In his work *Ideology and Utopia*, Karl Mannheim suggests a differentiation between Utopia and Ideology, saying that ideology is always aimed at legitimating the existing social order, while Utopia represents difference and shows possibilities to transform this order.⁴

Michel Foucault adheres to the same distinction, saying that the core of utopia is its heterogeneity or “otherness”. In his text *Of Other Spaces*, Foucault states that heterotopia is “a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found with the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted”⁵. This proves that utopian worlds created in the cinema have various and complex connections with the “real world”. In other words, Utopia could be described as a mirror that reflects reality and, therefore, depends on it.

Another point of view belongs to Fredric Jameson, who sees the critical potential of Utopia in reflecting the “otherness” or the alternatives to late capitalism in the form of different “what if” worlds. According to F. Jameson⁶ the main issue of late capitalism society lies in the absence of its alternatives in the public awareness. Thus, the issue is not only that capitalism does not have any equal competitors, but also that there is a strong belief shared by the absolute majority of people, that capitalism is the only possible system of the political and economic organization.

It seems that the only possible solution that could break this hegemony is, thus, an invention of new utopias. Utopia as a genre is itself a quintessence of Change, the utmost difference from the existing world. Thanks to this quality, utopia becomes the only possible “antagonist” or, as Jameson⁷ says, ‘a critical modus of the late capitalism society’.

On the level of social production, it can be stated that one’s imagination is in some way a hostage of the mode of production prevalent in the society. Therefore, the images, reflected in modern utopias, are also

⁴ K. Mannheim: *Ideology and Utopia*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1991.

⁵ M. Foucault: *Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias*, in: *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, NYC: Routledge, 1997, 330–336.

⁶ F. Jameson: *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1991.

⁷ Jameson, op. cit., 156.

directly connected with the reification process and represent capitalistic laws of social existence and development.

Virtual alternative worlds open a whole new space for any imaginable kinds of the Different, creative and drastically distinguished from the present. Henri Bergson and Gilles Deleuze also describe this virtual potential as something extremely vivacious and radically new as opposed to the fixed and unchangeable present:

“The actual is in a sense dead, it can only be what it is. But the virtual is the opening of what is onto the possibility to be different in the future, to have been different in the past, and for desire and memory to impact the present so as to alter its relation to itself and the world around it”⁸.

Depiction of dystopian future in contemporary popular Hollywood storytelling seems to be a sign of the rising political awareness of teenagers. However, some film critics take notice of the ambivalence of the political component in the latest science fiction blockbusters.⁹

The Hunger Games, for instance, show a continent run by a totalitarian regime with a focus on media influence, celebrity culture and electronic surveillance. The political message of the film seems rather clear: class struggle of the impoverished Districts against the rich and powerful Capitol reinforced by the spectacle of punishment during the actual Hunger Games. Moreover, in the age of digitalization and mass culture these political images tend to transfer from media to real life movements, as the “Hunger Games” symbols of rebellion (mocking jay) as well as the whole showing of the film was canceled in Thailand due to political protests.

Still, clearly communicating political ideas, “Hunger Games” connection to real-life political parties remains vague:

“The series’ political subtext, which is present and potent, yet flexible enough to latch on to the ideology of your choice. The Hunger Games is “political” without actually having to stand for anything”¹⁰.

Certainly, when transformed into another type of media (novel to big screen cinema) the original plot is likely to undergo some changes and becomes open for ambiguous interpretations. The story of “Divergent” is not an exception, as the new visual means of storytelling touch even more culturally diverse audiences.

⁸ C. Vitale: Guide to Reading Deleuze’s Cinema II: The Time-Image, Part I: Towards a Direct Imaging of Time to Crystal-Images, *Networkologies*, [online] Retrieved from: <https://networkologies.wordpress.com/2011/04/04/the-deleuzian-notion-of-the-image-a-slice-of-the-world-or-cinema-beyond-the-human/>

⁹ J. Bailey: The Fascinatingly Flexible Political Subtext of ‘The Hunger Games: Catching Fire’, *Flavorwire*, [online] Retrieved from: <http://flavorwire.com/425916/the-fascinatingly-flexible-political-subtext-of-the-hunger-games-catching-fire/>

¹⁰ Ibid.

Possibly, the overly extended and to some extent blurred contextual meaning of the film makes it “politically divergent” as well.¹¹ As Andrew Deyoung puts it, “the story, on some level, is a Rorschach test, with interpretations that vary by the person. ... Which means that Divergent’s politics are ultimately as messy, as fractious and divided and contradictory, as our own.”

“The Giver” can be also characterized as a politically ambiguous fiction, which was actually interpreted in favor of both “left” and “right” ideological movements in the USA. Specifically, the rightwing blogosphere picked up the idea that the dystopian society depicted in the film was the future of the USA caused by the current state politics.

The writer of the novel and the producer of the film both commented on the various interpretations of “The Giver” political context, and their message clearly stated that there is no politically clear statement about any of the contemporary political parties. Moreover, they persuaded the audience and the critics to think of the plot as something uniting different sides rather than opposing them.

Thus, the political background of the three chosen dystopias brings together two major factors that can be considered typical for the contemporary pop culture: the ambiguity of political ideas and the need for consolidation.

Altogether, the fuzzy differentiation of various political ideologies in the modern culture is an indicator of the political involvement of the Millennial Generation. The audience classified as “young adults” seem to be alienated from the political life in modern western culture. Moreover, some polls and research show that their political views are incoherent: Millennials’ political views are, at best, in a stage of constant metamorphosis and, at worst, ‘totally incoherent’.¹²

Young adult movies exploit visual means in order to create simplified but easily understandable representations of this inconsistency. It seems that the easiest way to appeal to the modern audience is to provide such representations in the form of relatable concepts, such as fashion and subcultures. The concept of fashion is central for at least one of three films – “Hunger Games”, where the grotesque and pompous style of Panem is opposed to the dull and colorless uniform of the ordinary people from the Districts. Grey is the color of “normality” in its negative sense in “The Giver” and “Divergent” as well. At the same time the obsession with pretentious clothes and accessories is also a sign of decadence of the system.

Being voluntarily excluded from the conventional ideas of political activism, the Millennials seek for new ways of expressing their opinions.

¹¹ N. Gillespie: Rand Paul is Politically Divergent. And So He Must Be Stopped, *The Daily Beast*, [online] Retrieved from: <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/03/27/rand-paul-is-politically-divergent-and-so-he-must-be-stopped.html>.

¹² E. Ekins: *The Millennials: The Politically Unclaimed Generation, Real Clear Politics*, [online] Retrieved from: http://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2014/09/08/emily_elkins_millennials_-_the_politically_unclaimed_generation.html

One way is actually the implausible popularity of dystopian fiction. Thus, the Millennials articulate their concerns about the modern inflexible “black-and-white” political differentiation. In fact, dystopia where main fear is “not to fit in” (“Divergent”) or have any rebellious (“The Hunger Games”) or individualistic (“The Giver”) intentions is reflecting the anxiety of the new generation.

Obviously, the inconsistent political views or apathy of some representatives of the next generation are an object of concern and criticism. However, simply labeling a whole generation as “unclaimed” or “politically clueless” doesn’t seem to be an effective strategy. Quite the contrary, it is possible that establishing a dialogue between generations would be helpful for the both sides. Moreover, with the constant globalization it becomes evident that the problems of the US teenagers and the youngsters of other Western and European countries are similar and could be seen as a unifying factor.

Ahistoricism and historical nonlinearity in the digital era

Certain professional criticism and anxiety seems natural for classic historians that believe in absolutism of History. The major complaint concerns the fact that the privilege of the historians to be the “gatekeepers” of the past is now mostly taken away by the visual media whose productions are blurred, simplified and misleading:

“If, in telling a story, we find it impossible to adhere to historical accuracy in order to the necessary dramatic effect, we do change it and we do feel it is the right thing to do”¹³.

Criticism goes even further as modern audience tends to receive historical facts from popular visual culture artifacts rather than from books and that, potentially, leads to an uncritical perception and lack of reflection about history.

Jameson criticizes that as well, since he believes that late capitalism society lacks the ability to obtain any historical memory at all:

“It is safest to grasp the concept of the postmodern as an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place”¹⁴.

Actually, the fact that this new way of remembering the past and constructing the future is fragmented, heterogeneous and not centered reflects a new organization of human personal everyday time experience. As life changes, there is a need for new ways of processing time and time-related issues.

¹³ Quoted in D. Leab: *The Moving Image as Interpreter of History: Telling the Dancer from the Dance*, in J.E. O’Connor (ed.): *Image as Artifact: The Historical Analysis of Film and Television*, Malabar, FL.: Robert E. Krieger, 1990, 83.

¹⁴ Jameson, op. cit.

Michel Foucault expressed his concern about the Orwellian empowered and centralized notion of history: “if one controls people’s memory, one controls their dynamism. And one also controls their experience, their knowledge of previous struggles”¹⁵.

Not surprisingly, modern dystopias reflect the fear of control over one’s memory in the form of totalitarian political communities, where personal emotions and visions of the past are constantly managed by the norms of community.

The so feared inability to process time and recall history that was expressed in many of the contemporary utopian narratives, turns out to be the opposite – an urge to have the ability to refer to any moment of the past, present or future at any time. The ultimately fragmented narrative seems to be both the reflection and a mode of dealing with the new historical imagination – the emergence of public memory as a substitute for history.

Though, both history and memory are the spheres of discursive reflection of time-related issues, memory “suggests a more dialogic relationship between the temporal constituencies of ‘now’ and ‘then.’¹⁶ Being a reflection of a more personal attitude, memory is a more fluid and reversible way to see the past and foresee the future.

Dialogism of memory works as a way to understand time and evolution and, therefore, to escape the limitations of history: as memory is always connected to the present, and, what is more, is being reflected through the lens of today. As Paul Grainge puts it, “memory studies draws attention to the activations and eruptions of the past as they are experienced in and constituted by the present”¹⁷. Thus, ultimate totalitarian society of dystopia deprives its citizens of any possibility to escape their duties, norms and identities, visualizing the society as a mosaic of disconnected events in the past, future, present and in alternative realities.

Indeed, the lack of historical perspective and total elimination of social and cultural context make the dystopian worlds frightening, exposing the everlasting fear of humanity to forget and be forgotten.

In all three stories history is gone and this is for the better, as the events that lead to the destruction of our world were catastrophic and painful. The escapism of forgetting is used by the government to manipulate their people: there is something so traumatic and disturbing in the past that it is better to not recall it ever again.

The interesting thing is that Panem in “The Hunger Games” is deprived of any history prior to its establishment: even though we know that Panem was created in a post-apocalyptic world, there is no certain information about the cause of the “end of the world”. The closest thing to history that the citizens of Panem get is the story about the “Dark Days” when a rebellion against the state was suppressed. The very idea of a past that is so painful that it has to be covered with darkness seems central

¹⁵ M. Foucault: *Foucault Live*, New York: Semiotext(e), 1996, 92.

¹⁶ P. Grainge: *Memory and Popular Film (Inside Popular Film)*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003.

¹⁷ Ibid.

to dystopian fiction. However, the government of Panem believed that people must be given hope in order to continue working for the welfare of the regime. That is why Hunger Games emerge to commemorate the past and, at the same time, punish the citizens of the Districts for the rebellion that had happened long time ago.

In the *Divergent*, audience and characters never learn what actually happened to the world and what lead to the apocalypses. Instead, we see the aftermath of something terrible and the totalitarian ways to deal with it. Forgetting is not even a topic here, as there is no past and nothing to actually remember.

The forgetting and memory loss theme develops in a greater degree in “The Giver”, where memories are completely removed from the collective consciousness. “Sameness” is a rule of eliminating any difference, but memory appears to be the ultimate embodiment of “otherness” as it consists of essentially different emotions.

Remembering in the form of spectacle (*Hunger Games* as an equivalent of contemporary reality TV show) becomes a symbol of the actual emptiness of the past. Only the visual, external side of the past is revealed in a meaningless, but luxurious and dramatic spectacle, while any historical facts or particular details remain hidden. Spectacle actually appears as an ultimate means of concealing the past and, at the same time, manipulating the present. In both “*Divergent*” and “*The Giver*” the most important event of coming of age is transformed into a public show, where everyone gathers to find out the future mission of the youngest members of their community.

Control over collective memory is the most powerful weapon in dystopia: without their past, people are lost and their community is inconsistent. Showing the anxieties of modern society, dystopian fiction emphasizes once again the symptoms of a noncontiguous, differentiated, scattered nature of late capitalism ideology. It is possible that it is the further estrangement from the past that fragmented society fears the most.

History as a coherent narrative does not seem to be convincing anymore. There are multiple variations and alternatives of “what if” worlds, existing in forms of personal stories, ideologies and cultural narratives. The linear essence of History as well as the very existence of a single common background is no longer a certainty.

Dystopian fiction undertakes a combination of therapeutic (healing) and symptomatic (identifying) functions, expressing the anxiety about the “loss of history” and providing a possible alternative. It seems that imaginative substitutes for dystopia base on ultimate diversity and acceptance of both positive and negative historical experience.

Memory and dystopia in the digital age

As it was already said, the critical potential of dystopian and utopian fiction is based on its ability to reflect reality and show the darkest and most terrifying sides of it. The fear of forgetting the past and not being

able to remember it seems to be central for contemporary utopian cinematic narratives. This may be the result of fast technology development, rapid change of memory storage and growing consumerism which requires an extremely fast pace of production. The acceleration of time and fragmentation of the temporal experience influences both historical theory and quotidian social practices. The dramatic changes that history and time notions undergo these days are explored in the following section of this paper in order to establish a connection between dystopian fiction and memories in the digital era.

Traumatic experience of the historical events in the recent past (the terrorist attacks of the 2001, the Vietnam War, the assassinations of Kennedy and Martin Luther King) result in traumatic fantasies about apocalyptic future and the inability to reach the Utopia. Hayden White, for instance, has described the twentieth-century historical events as 'modernist', characterized by lack of closure, fragmentation and dissociation of one event from another.¹⁸

As a response to that, visual media create a new mode of memory – prosthetic memory (a notion by Alison Landsberg). Prosthetic memory is a completely new, yet artificial way to perceive reality and to obtain memories about certain events without actually experiencing them:

“Thanks to these new technologies of memory on the one hand and commodification on the other, the kinds of memories that one has ‘intimate’, even experiential, access to would no longer be limited to the memories of events through which one actually lived. ‘Prosthetic memories’ are indeed ‘personal’ memories, as they derive from engaged and experientially oriented encounters with the mass media’s various technologies”¹⁹.

Such impersonation of history by the means of prosthetic memories created by visual images is often seen as a dangerous outcome of commodification: endless possibilities of subdivision leads to a fragmented society, where each person is an “island”, isolated and incapable of overcoming ultimate individualization. However, commodification does not necessarily mean atomization, as well as constant references to nostalgia do not mean historical amnesia of the society.

Instead, visual media may generate the opposite to amnesia – show constant obsession with traumatic events that have to be repeated again and again in an infinite loop. In the era of digital memories it is always possible to return to any event in the past or to go to any event in the possible future by the means of visual media and, especially, cinema. Therefore, even a slight risk of losing this ability results in uneasiness and concerns expressed in dystopian narratives.

The importance of personal memories and personal relationship is central to all three films. The lately “Hunger Games” (Mocking jay part 1) film shows that the worst punishment possible under the totalitarian government is to change personal memories. One of the so called

¹⁸ Grainge, op. cit.

¹⁹ A. Landsberg: *Prosthetic Memory: The Ethics and Politics of Memory in an Age of Mass Culture*, in: Grainge, op. cit.

“tributes” (winners of the Hunger Games) Peeta was tortured by the Capitol and forced to campaign against the rebellion. As all could see from the Capitol TV shots, by the end of the first part of the story he looked physically exhausted. Still, the main torture that was perceived as the most brutal was the manipulations with his memories about the love of his life – Katniss. The fragile nature of human memory is emphasized once again, as it becomes in fact an object of manipulations with power:

“We’re in that sweet period where everyone agrees that our recent horrors should never be repeated, but collective thinking is usually short-lived. We’re fickle, stupid beings with poor memories and a great gift for self-destruction”²⁰.

The powerful government that is able to interfere into the deepest and most intimate spheres of human life is probably a reflection of the fear of the global electronic surveillance: starting from mediated manipulation with the help of television and continuing as a literal physical control of the neural associations in the human brain.

Physical control theme can also be found in the “Divergent” narrative, where the Bureau of Genetic Welfare has developed various kinds of “serums” used to control each of the factions. Serum of Abnegation or Memory serum was created to erase the memories of a particular member or a group. Such interference into personal life in favor of the social order also refers metaphorically to a fear of totalitarian controlled society, where civil rights are no longer important.

Lack of historical memory as well as insignificance of personal memories in “The Giver” is the most tragic characteristic of the dystopian society. In fact, the metaphor of a “prosthetic” memory comes to life in the form of the Receiver and the Giver characters, who are the only members of the society aware of its history and transmitting memories about the past. The idea of a mediated memory kept outside the human mind is illustrating the trends in digitalization of the modern society: human mind is no longer the only storage of memory, as it is more effective (and prone to manipulation) to store memories somewhere else. However, the idea of mediated memory is not new for dystopian science fiction: even the latest film adaptations of Orson Wells’ novel *The Time Machine* (2000) create an image of a museum, where memories of the humankind are transmitted by cyborgs.

Another sign of the fear of surveillance could be seen in the architecture design represented in all three films. Although the homes of common people are depicted as very poor and simple, the buildings of the government are all organized according to the panopticon principal. The frightening idea of a perfect prison, where everyone is being observed and controlled results in a collective fantasy, or a powerful image of an “inspection house”.

Altogether, contemporary popular dystopias tend to express a number of quite similar concerns: political conflicts and disconnection,

²⁰ S. Collins: *Mockingjay*, Scholastic Press, 2014.

electronic surveillance, loss of history as a basic uniting concept and constant fragmentation of personal memories under the influence of digital technologies in the day-to-day life.

At the same time, dystopian fiction does more than just reflecting the fears and threats of the modern society – it also provides an insight on the ideas of political and social activism of the Millennial Generation.