

## THE HOPE(LESS) PRINCIPLE: A RE-APPRAISAL OF DYSTOPIAN LITERATURE IN RELATION TO SCIENCE FICTION STUDIES AND SPECULATIVE PHILOSOPHY

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For a start, Celeste and August's planet was not Earth: it was smaller, cuter, city-free and unpopulated . . . Pollution there had never been known – and neither had war . . . but these were the issue of desire and not orbit. This was their made place, and both within it had always found a home. (Litt 24-5)

The protagonists of Toby Litt's *Journey into Space* (2009) inhabit a craft located halfway between the now-dead Earth, and a new, unspecified planet. The two friends are fated to live out the remainder of their lives in the wholly dystopian setting of their prison-like home, replete with endless, featureless days, with the vessel's crew half-resigned to the notion that they will never reach their destination. In opposition to the utopian travelogue, all descriptions of the planet which they have abandoned are depicted throughout in idealistic terms: here it is a dystopian nightmare they hurtle towards, not leave behind. The community's collective imagination pivots between the duelling points of *hope* and *hopelessness*. Interestingly, Litt's novel asserts itself as a science-fiction experiment with overtly literary concerns whilst actually providing readers with an insight into the core tenets of effective dystopian writing. Namely, that, if a work in this genre is to succeed, it must pitch its tone somewhere along a line between nihilism, what I nominate *hopelessness*, and possible redemption, referred to throughout this essay, as *hope*. Indeed, a re-appraisal of some of the key aspects of the dystopian genre can help readers to map critical pathways to science fiction studies and speculative philosophy, which in their own ways have contributed to the genre.

It is helpful here to cite the work of Ernst Bloch at the outset of any discussion of the relevance of science fiction studies to the realm of dystopian literature. Bloch's vast and influential *magnum opus*, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (3 vols: 1954-1959), sets out his theory on *the Principle of Hope*, whereby all worthwhile human activity is underpinned by socially utopian elements: from daydreaming, as presented in Litt's novel, to the drafting and implementation of alternative social and political systems. In his study, *Science Fiction and Utopia: A Historico-Philosophical Overview* (2001), Carl Freedman chronicles Bloch's theory and agrees with Bloch's claim that utopia is "always elsewhere, always escaping our actual horizons [and] is in another and no less important sense, inscribed in the innermost core of our being" (74). Here, one can decipher science fiction's open

engagement with philosophy and the core tenets of utopian critical ideology, topics that have long been the concern of a range of notable thinkers in this field, including the aforementioned Ernst Bloch, Darko Suvin and, more recently, in the research of Krishan Kumar, Fredric Jameson and Tom Moylan. As such, these influential theorists are referenced throughout this paper, my chief claim being that dystopian fiction constitutes a major contributor to the canon of utopian literature, these “nowhere places” (Carey 1999) acting as convincing depictions of future realities that possess positive and negative attributes, thus evoking the inter-relatable emotions of *hope* and *hopelessness* among their readers, often in equal measure.

## 1. Cognitive Estrangement

The study of science fiction altered dramatically with the publication of Darko Suvin’s *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (1979). Suvin’s seminal work forges connections between the hitherto populist genre of science fiction and a more established utopian tradition in literature that pre-dates Thomas More, even reaching as far back as Plato’s meditations in *The Republic* (c. 380 BCE). Suvin considers the magnitude of Bloch’s achievement as academic and theorist, advocating Bloch’s *Principle of Hope* as integral to the functioning and evolution of the human psyche and proclaiming that Bloch’s attempt to define utopian ideologies in a modern literary context has “re-interpreted utopia as being any overstepping of the boundaries given to man, hence a quality inherent in all creative thought and action” (Suvin 39). Suvin indicates Bloch’s *Principle* as a *novum* device, a necessary ingredient in the creation of progressive or revolutionary literature, and defines it as “a radical change of a whole world,” necessarily implemented to “estrangle the empirical world of the implied reader” (Suvin 64). Here, the *novum* supplies the writer of utopian fiction with an incendiary idea that helps shape an entire universe whilst allowing the author, in the words of Edward James, to set the “fiction apart from the perceived world” (James 30). Yet, for Suvin, the *novum* foreshadows the appearance of a far more formal device, that of *cognitive estrangement* – that moment when readers reach the understanding that the fictive interior of the novel differs from their own in some way, an effect usually brought about by scientific extrapolation. For Suvin, the cognitive elements of science fiction such as plot, characterisation and setting co-determine the manner of *cognitive estrangement* in the reader and provide “a shocking and distancing mirror above the all too familiar reality” (Suvin 54). Of course, Suvin’s examination of Bertolt Brecht’s dramaturgy in *Uvod u Brechta* (1970) offers succinct deliberations on the purpose of *cognitive estrangement* in science-

fiction literature. For Suvin, Brecht's approach to exploring the divide between audience and content share many commonalities with science fiction, albeit Brecht consciously established alienation in order for his audiences to remain critically aware, whereas any estrangement that takes place within the reader of science fiction usually occurs naturally. However, Keith Booker is keen to indicate that many dystopian literary worlds diverge from what we know as science fiction in their "specificity of [its] attention to social and political critique" (Booker 19). Indeed, a significant proportion of these dystopian worlds are founded on what I would consider to be *the hopeless principle*, whereby a novel's characters exhibit an extreme form of nihilism amongst settings presented as post-revolution. The great early-twentieth-century anti-utopian narratives by George Orwell, Aldous Huxley and Yevgeny Zamyatin lend further credence to Booker's theory, as do the more recent dystopias of Margaret Atwood, for example. All these writers execute political critiques of topical subjects ranging from the dangers of totalitarianism to the ethical implications of genetic cloning, with many of them wholly, or in part, adhering to Suvin's theory that by imagining these "strange worlds we come to see our own conditions of life in a new and potentially revolutionary perspective" (Parrinder 2). From this angle, science fiction and dystopian narratives become critiques of the wider world and converge at the point where authors of such literatures strive to highlight deficiencies in contemporary western ideology, rather than provide a solution to the problems chronicled within the formal frameworks of their fictions. Of course, this form of projection proves useful in its own way, in that the dystopian novel helps readers map possible outcomes for the species as a whole if existing trends continue unabated or go unchallenged. Tom Moylan outlines Suvin's monumental achievement in relation to dystopian studies, in his essay "Look into the Dark: On Dystopia and the Novum," in which he addresses Suvin's shortcomings on viewing dystopian fiction as "satire one time, as anti-utopia another, and in yet another as a correlate form of science fiction" (62).

Of course, authors of both science fiction and dystopian literatures have to be mindful that the worlds they create do not produce total cognitive estrangement, which would present the reader with an "insurmountable, epistemological problem" (Myers xv). In this scenario, the reader might fail to recognise and relate to the imagined world and the issues being presented. Myers argues that the reader must still be able to relate cognitively to what is "alien" (xv), if the act of estrangement is to serve its purpose in providing the reader with a critique of what is fundamentally a fixed, knowable reality outside of the literary world under scrutiny. Total cognitive estrangement in dystopian literature directly engages the reader in that if the critique being presented bears no

particular relation to the world beyond the confines of the novel, then a moral or political message may be overlooked. If we are unable to discern the source material as a reality each of us can relate to on intellectual and emotional levels, then we are less likely to register the overt, as well as the subtle connections between our time period and those versions of the future being explored by writers. This is one of the crucial dimensions of dystopian literature. It wholly relies on a writer's ability to use a contemporary issue to model a nightmare vision of the future and to trace mankind's descent into the bleak terrain of *hopelessness* that is often a natural product of fear: fear of technological progress; of natural and man-made catastrophes; or even of man's place in a post-human society.

## 2. Speculative Philosophy

Interestingly, dystopian literature owes as much to the field of speculative philosophy as it does to science fiction studies. In "Philosophy and Science Fiction," Philip A. Pecorino (1983) considers *cognitive estrangement* in terms of its function in philosophy-oriented science fiction studies. In his words, "speculative philosophy . . . is an attempt to formulate a worldview that is consistent with both science and human experience" (9). I would argue that dystopian fiction also adheres to similar principles in so far as it constitutes a valid attempt to define a mode of knowable reality. It exists presently and it may be construed in near or distant future time. Literary dystopias have long been concerned with the role that science and technology might play as contributory influences in the development of literary *novums*. In P.D. James' *The Children of Men* (1992), science fails to rescue mankind from extinction. James' attitude towards the redundancy of science is made explicit in the text's opening pages: "The discovery in July 1994 that even the frozen sperm stored for experiment and artificial insemination had lost its potency was a peculiar horror" (9). Of course, 1994 came and went without any real consequence for Earth's human population, save for its continued expansion, and this particular literary dystopia remains in the realm of purely speculative philosophy, the author asking readers to engage with her text despite the fact that its nightmare scenario failed to materialise at a specified time. In addition, Pecorino successfully traces the development of both science fiction and the field of philosophy to a time "when evolution became a viable theory, [when] men could no longer believe a humankind, created by God at a given instant in time, would always remain the same, and the floodgates of speculation on past and future evolutions flow[ed] open" (12). Equal to imaginary science fiction landscapes, many literary dystopias are rife with speculations on

humankind's handling of actual, as well as imminent crises. Variants of spiritual belief and their figureheads are rallied against, abandoned, rejoined and resurrected, whilst a vast array of meditations on the meaning of faith and the eternally *unknowable*, effectively supplant the ailing society's over-reliance on the false-gods of science and life-enhancing technologies. Does it necessarily always follow then that out of existential *hopelessness*, there emerges some form of spiritual *hope*?

In her enlightening essay "Science Fiction and Emerging Values," Alexandra Aldridge offers a number of insightful comments on the complex relationship between mankind and science presented in science fiction literature. She draws attention to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) as a singularly important text in the history of science fiction: "Throughout the course of the novel, Shelley criticises the scientific world view for its lack of responsibility and absence of human-centred values" (18).<sup>1</sup> I would go so far as to assert that Shelley's novel is equally a pioneering dystopian fiction and science fiction, in that it presents a terrifying *nowhere place* of possibilities, centred on decidedly *hopeless* principles. There can be no physical and emotional release for Victor and his misshapen progeny until their mutual destruction at the novel's conclusion. Here, a speculative imagination crafts a realistic representation of an alternative Geneva, whereby various levels of authority have colluded to establish a morality that allows doctors such as Victor to practise and even flourish. This new yet familiar world is set up in opposition to the one inhabited by Shelley and her contemporaries, but "verbally existent" all the same, and allows the author to "inquire thematically about the nature of humankind" (72). Shelley's warning to all of science that blind progress incurs penalties, gains its incendiary power from the very fact that, in Shelley's time, re-animation was still mere speculation rather than achievable. Still, it seems that Shelley may have established a mode of expression which many authors have subsequently adopted across the last two centuries of dystopian writing. Thus, on analysing a range of subtly transformed representational settings, readers are being asked to critically assess the accuracy of the representation of each society in relation to their own memory of history. Additionally, these literary dystopias invite readers to test their ability to project themselves into future instances of believable, though unquantifiable, fictive experiences. Here then is the essence of any philosophical rumination on the tensions existing between the duelling figures of *hope* and *hopelessness*, whereby literary dystopias require readers not only to hypothesise on mankind's handling of extinction-event scenarios, but also to measure their own worth in relation to the often amoral behaviour of characters occupying the bleak landscape of each novel's interior.

Yet, the dystopian novel's pre-occupations with the *hopeless* nature of human potential could also be considered a cathartic act, and a wholly philosophical one at that: the folly and eventual demise of humankind, a recurring *novum* employed by writers of dystopian literature, wilfully forces readers to contemplate not only their place in this newly altered terrain, but also to appreciate the fragile nature of existence, particularly in counting ourselves among the multitudes of corpses, if not among the surviving few. What then is the current position of dystopian literature?

### 3. Contemporary Dystopian Literature

Science fiction studies are thriving precisely because the discipline affords scholars the opportunity to examine the effects of estranging creative acts alongside a world of actual science that seems daily to progress beyond the boundaries of socially acceptable behaviour, providing almost as many potential *novums* for its producers as it does headlines for newspaper stands. One might here consider the recent furore over the particle accelerator experiments currently being carried out in Geneva, ironically the setting of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Yet, attempting to assess the possibilities open to writers of dystopian fiction proves slightly more problematic. In a recent article entitled "Visions of a Perfect World" (2008), Debra Trione sketches a grim future for the utopian movement as a whole. As she stresses, "the recent past contains the most malevolent efforts . . . to manufacture ideal societies at any cost" (10). Trione remarks on a common theme running throughout recent history and utopian studies as a collective: namely, for any truly democratic – particularly socialist – society to flourish, the cult of the individual must be relegated to second place to benefit the greater, wider community. A large proportion of the noteworthy politically and socially oriented utopian experiments of the twentieth century, particularly in communist countries, were deeply flawed and short-lived. In turn, they provided a number of anti-utopian writers such as George Orwell and Yevgeny Zamyatin with enough material to offer damning critiques of such ideologies. In a collection of insightful essays *The Philosophy of Utopia* (2001), editor Barbara Goodwin collates a wide range of critical commentaries on the development and propagation of utopian sentiment in the West, and, in her introduction, she highlights an important concern for the field as a whole. Goodwin argues that "[t]he central debate about utopianism in the second half of the twentieth century concerned the relationship of utopian thinking to totalitarian practice," and yet goes on to claim that "in a period which has many dystopian features, scholarly and popular interest in projects for a better world and for the good of society is alive and

well” (1-2). Indeed, if contemporary society has begun to mirror some of the dystopian visions set out by Orwell and his contemporaries, then it should perhaps come as no surprise that science fiction has come to flourish as a genre. If we consider our daily lives as merely existing within the parameters of a *hopeless* dystopian nightmare, including the state’s surveillance of its citizens, then utopian flights of escape to new and unfettered regions of space are bound to be produced and consumed with due eagerness. Of course, cognitive estrangements detailed in science fiction, in both television shows and in popular fiction, are constructed on utopian principles of progress and of passing beyond the existing frontiers of scientific and technological knowledge, as canonically exemplified by Sir Francis Bacon in *The New Atlantis* (1626). Here, Salomon’s House within the interior of the island of Bensalem, in which science’s conquering of nature is done for the betterment of society, is regarded as a fully realised utopian construct.

Tom Moylan, a leading author and critic in the field of utopian literary studies and its many sub-divisions, offers a number of interesting ideas in his far-reaching study on the current state of the genre: *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia* (2000). He re-visits and re-evaluates the work of both Bloch and Suvin, insightfully relating the latter’s theory to literary dystopias and concluding that in this genre estrangement “is at first forestalled by the immediacy, the normality of the location” (148). Moylan, like Suvin and Bloch before him, identifies those methods open to writers for constructing meaningful *novums* for their readers, arguing that readers are not passive at all within the framework of dystopian fiction. Also, for Moylan, critical analysis of the *novum* operates through an established motif of the genre, that of the “alienated protagonist” who, along with its readers, engages in developing an awareness of their surroundings until they eventually are able to recognise “the situation for what it really is” (xiii). Moylan also categorises dystopian fiction in terms of its propensity to carry messages of *hope*, whilst containing plots driven by a sense of *hopelessness*. He writes “in some form, a utopian horizon, or at the very least a scrap of hope, appears within the militant dystopia” (xiii). Here, Moylan develops a theory which he had published in a shorter essay, “Look into the Dark: on Dystopia and the Novum” (2001) in which he charts the postmodern dystopian writer’s capacity to “reconcile the principle of hope and the principle of reality by leaving formal closures cognitively open-ended” (65). This aspect of Moylan’s theory alone deserves further extensive critical study. Suffice it to say here that there is an abundance of literary dystopias containing symbols of *hope* in their final pages, usually in the form of open endings that allow writers to underline those explicit connections between dystopian and utopian genres, each denouement

made all the more powerful for its inclusion against a dark backdrop of misery. For instance, in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) the boy is taken into the care of a family which, we might safely assume, will adopt him as one of their own and attempt to nurture him to full adulthood. Like many literary critics in his field, Moylan calls for the establishment of a formal critical framework for studying the dystopian narrative in order to "enable a better understanding of its textual mechanics and socio-political potential" (*Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, 148): something which the discipline of science fiction studies has enjoyed since the appearance of Suvin's incendiary set of papers published some three decades ago.

What then are the pointers to the current state of a dystopian literary sensibility in literature? Critic Krishan Kumar claims the dystopian novel "has retreated to private worlds" and "like contemporary science fiction, it is more interested in the 'inner space' of the mind and the emotions than in the outer world of society and politics" (421). However, I would add that, by centring narratives on the subjective and personal, a writer can willfully encourage readers to consider the ethical and moral aspects of this newly constructed universe from an individual standpoint, the act of *cognitive estrangement* engaging the reader's emotions first, but with an equally powerful political message underpinning its *novum*. It remains to be seen though if this fragmentation, or "narrowing of focus" (422), as Kumar formulates it, is the reason why the present literary landscape abounds in examples of the genre, but seems bereft of narratives to rival the great anti-utopian texts that were published in the first half of the twentieth century. Of course, it could be argued that *hopelessness* merely requires *hope* to help frame its dark-centred tones. In the meantime, the reader appears stranded, like the two protagonists of Litt's *Journey into Space*, quoted at the outset of this essay, floating between two points of gravity; and also groundless and lacking true meaning, like the vacuous *nowhere* which they have been forced to regard as home.

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<sup>1</sup> *Frankenstein* (1818) and *The Last Man* (1826) have constituted inter-textual counterparts in *Never Let Me Go* (2005) by Kazuo Ishiguro and *Oryx and Crake* (2003) by Margaret Atwood, respectively.