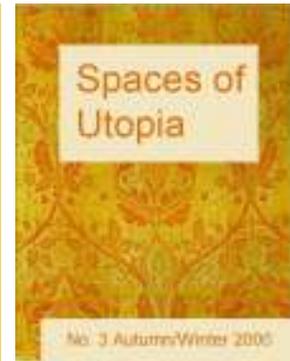


Dystopia Matters: On the Use of Dystopia and Utopia

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My first "significant" encounter with utopia was really one with dystopia, and with Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* in particular. I had read and studied, as part of my training in Foreign Languages and Literature at the University in Italy, Thomas More's *Utopia*, Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis*, and William Morris's *News from Nowhere* among others, but these, I have to admit, had left me lukewarm. I had also come across Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, the work of George Orwell, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, and Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*. The dystopian aspects of these novels and the political concerns of the twentieth-century texts in particular attracted my interest and I resolved that I would one day return to these works. I continued my education in the United States, where I re-encountered these texts and many more. Again, the utopias did not particularly stir me; dystopias, on the other hand, were speaking to me. And yet, I was completely absorbed by my research on H.D.'s late poetry and her re-visions of genres and literary traditions – her "dialogue" with poets like William Shakespeare, Ezra Pound, Dante, and St. John Perse – and again, dystopias would have to wait. It wasn't until 1986, when a friend gave me Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* for a present and a temporary distraction from my work on the dissertation, that my time for dystopia had come.

At that time, after reading Atwood's novel and having seen some negative reviews she had received – mostly accusing her of having written a novel that did not fit the dystopian genre – I went back to the conventions of

utopian and dystopian literature. What most reviewers seemed to imply was that since Atwood's novel bears in mind Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* but does not follow entirely the traditional conventions of the dystopian genre, it cannot be regarded as a proper, successful dystopia and needs to be labelled differently. This led some critics to consider Atwood's novel a failure, rather than an experiment with the dystopian genre. My experience was exactly the opposite: I found the novel refreshing, engaging, and intriguing. What others perceived as a failure, was to me – steeped as I was in the feminist notion of re-vision – one of the novel's strengths: a conscious intervention on genre writing. I started working on dystopia and its conventions, largely encouraged – once I was back in Italy – by the people and the work carried out at the Centro Interdipartimentale di Ricerca sull'Utopia at the University of Bologna.

My engagement with utopia has then come through dystopia. In my work I have time and again returned to issues of genre writing as they intersect with gender and the deconstruction of high and low culture. My work has been informed by feminist theory and criticism, but also by the political, geographical, and cultural circumstances that shape myself and the times in which I live. My encounters with the communities of utopian studies – the Centro Interdipartimentale di Ricerca sull'Utopia as well as the Society for Utopian Studies (U.S.) and the Utopian Studies Society (Europe) – have left me wondering why dystopia and not utopia. Most of my colleagues and friends were there because of utopia, because some of them *were* utopian. I was there because of dystopia. What did it say about me? A friend from SUS once half-jokingly told me it was because I had no use for imagination and dreams. Was it really so?

The question, and the remark about dreams and imagination, nagged me for quite some time, but it also urged me to think about the importance and the use of dystopia. Over the years I have worked on women's revisions of dystopia and science fiction conventions. It was immediately clear that women's condition placed them in a different relationship vis-à-vis the utopian tradition. The utopias envisioned by male authors had not been radically different places for women, and through history women had and still have often been citizens of dystopia. The collapse of western, patriarchal tradition was no big loss for

women writers, who at times would even employ irony and detachment to distance themselves from the more regressive and nostalgic views of male writers and to welcome catastrophic scenarios of destruction as a possibility for a clean start. But more often, women's dystopian visions exacerbated precisely those critical issues – for example, women's reproduction and the control of their sexualities and bodies – that lie at the basis of gender inequality, demonstrating to what extent gendered identities are not “natural” but are instead the products of an androcentric, totalitarian discourse.

So to return to the bothersome question of “why dystopia”, I think I started finding an answer in the specificity of women's critical dystopias. Their work showed me the importance of dystopia as one of the preferred forms of resistance for our times, one that maintained utopia on the horizon and *within* the pages of the text with a series of different strategies. Utopia has been for long under attack. When it is not questioned as a dangerous dream that can turn into a nightmare, it is devalued by its conflation with materialist satisfaction. Utopia is therefore often rejected or tamed. Our times need utopia more than ever, but they seem to be able to recover utopia mostly through dystopia.

But their work also provided me with the answer to my interest in dystopia. As I said, my work has been informed by feminist theory and criticism, but also by the political, geographical, and cultural circumstances that shape myself and the times in which I live. Being born in 1960, I have come of age, so to speak, in 1970s Italy. I have no direct recollection of the “mythical” 1968, whereas the “leaden years” (*anni di piombo*) of 1970s Italy are very much with me. I remember the bombs in the squares in Milan and Brescia; I remember the hundreds of people killed in terrorist attacks; I remember the bombs on the trains and in the Bologna train station. I have felt what it is like to live in dystopia.

This is not to say that we can only know what we have experienced, or there would be no use for imagination and dreams. But these political and geographical circumstances account, I think, for some of the reasons why the recent production of dystopian science fiction, in particular, speaks to me more than the utopias of the 1960s and early 1970s do. And, to a certain extent, this is also one of the elements that shape my approach to utopian literature. I find

in the recent sf production, in its content as well as in its formal features, a new oppositional and resisting form of writing, one that maintains a utopian horizon within the pages of dystopian sf and in these anti-utopian times.

Whether recovered through dystopia or not, however, what is important is the use of utopia, and dystopia, today – a use that perhaps utopia shares with literature and the imagination. We need utopia, as we need literature, because we still need to imagine better or worse worlds, and through those to think critically about and act upon our own world to change it. Eduardo Galeano's "Ventana sobre la utopía" aptly synthesizes why utopia still matters to us today:

"Ella está en el horizonte" – dice Fernando Birri – "Me acerco dos pasos, ella se aleja dos pasos. Camino diez pasos y el horizonte se corre diez pasos más allá. Por mucho que yo camine, nunca la alcanzaré. ¿Para que sirve la utopía? Para eso sirve: para caminar." (Galeano, 2006: n.pag. online)¹

Note

¹ "It is on the horizon" – says Fernando Birri – "I advance two steps, it goes two steps backward. I take ten steps and the horizon moves ten steps forward. No matter how far I walk, I will never reach it. What is the use of utopia? That's its use: to help us walk" (my translation).

Work Cited

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