Dystopia and Science Fiction: Blade Runner, Brazil and Beyond

(or, Who’s Dystopia Is It?)

(or, Dystopia is in the Eyes of the (frightened) Beholder)

**Intro: What is Dystopia?**

First, **what is utopia?**

        Ask class to define utopia

        Utopia – term comes from novel (of sorts) by Thomas More; first English version published in 1551; offered a description of a fictive ideal society based around notions of equality, social harmony, economic prosperity and political stability

        More presents his story as an account told to him by another European who had traveled there; he tries to situate it as real

        More’s Utopia was a completely planned community based upon controlling individual impulses that could be destructive to the public good. Private property is unknown, everyone where’s the same clothes so there’s no envy of wealth or social status, and there’s no pretext for avoiding work; there are not bars or places that might corrupt people and no hiding places or any place where “secret meetings” could be held; at the same time, there’s no poverty, hunger, violence or other social problems that were common to More’s time and still are today

        The word “utopia”: although the novel was written in Latin, the word is a combination of two Greek words, and literally means “no place”; when pronounced in Latin, however, it means “good place.” The combination of these two meanings informs the way we currently view the word now: utopia is a place that is essentially fictive—that doesn’t exist in our world—and also an ideal place, that we can create

        Novel was not only descriptive, but also *prescriptive*: it didn’t just describe this ideal society, it offered a detailed blueprint of how such a society might be run

        Interestingly, for More’s Utopia to function it required the use of slave labor (gained through imperialistic excursions against neighboring cultures) as well as methods of intense social control that placed fairly severe limits on individual freedom

        It’s been an enduring but problematic idea, although the part of More’s vision that really stuck in the cultural imagination is the equality/harmony/prosperity thing

So what does dystopia mean? What is dystopian fiction?

**Definition of Dystopia, Dystopian fiction**

        In its most basic sense, you could say that dystopia is the opposite of utopia, referring to **fictional societies that are incredibly imperfect**, lacking the harmonious and egalitarian qualities of life depicted in utopias

        But it’s not exactly opposite, in that dystopias often **contain many of the same elements as utopias**—such as intense measures of social control—but these elements are taken to horrific extremes, with emphasis upon their negative effects

        The term has been around since the 19th century; it was coined by English philosopher and economist **John Stuart Mill in 1868**; but as a genre of fiction, it really took off in the 20th century and became very prevalent in the years after World War II

        Dystopian literature is a subset of the larger category of anti-Utopian literature, which generally satirizes Utopian thinking; dystopian literature stands out from other anti-utopian writing in that it doesn’t just say what’s wrong with utopian models of society, but offers an alternate view of social potentialities

        Dystopian fictions are **fundamentally concerned with problems of the political and cultural context that produces them**; For example, George Orwell’s 1984, one of the most famous dystopian novels, was written in 1949, shortly after World War II and the rise of totalitarian states on the right and the left, such as Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union under Stalin; it’s not surprising then that Orwell would depict Big Brother and the Thought Police, elements of a profoundly oppressive state bent on maintaining absolute control over individuals (including even their thoughts)

        Like utopian writing, there is often **a prescriptive element**—Dystopian fictions almost always offer some kind of warning (often implicit) of what will happen should present trends continue (example?)

**Cultural and Political Sources of Dystopian Fiction**

What were some of the cultural and political conditions that have been popular sources of dystopian fiction in the 20th century?

        State-sponsored violence and Totalitarianism on both the right and left: Nazi Germany, the Stalinist Soviet Union

        Growing awareness of environmental damage (side-effects of industry)

        Rapid advances in technology: the impact of the industrial revolution (see the flaming smokestacks in Blade Runner), television, computers and information technology (which can have the by-product of enhancing the efficiency and power of surveillance techniques)

        After WWII, the new capability through nuclear weapons for utter annhiliation of humans and human culture as we know it

Again, it’s important to remember that Dystopian fictions tend to reflect the fears and anxieties of the cultural context from which they emerge

**Examples of Dystopian Fiction**

Dystopian elements in texts from the course (ask students to offer examples)

        Metropolis (Fritz Lang)

        H.G. Wells was early, prominent dystopian thinker and writer; his most famous dystopian fiction is probably The Time Machine: class divisions cause horrific evolution to extreme class structure, with aboveground “elites” serving as food for underground “workers”

        “The Stepford Wives” perhaps has dystopian elements

Other classic and contemporary dystopian fictions:

        Dystopian fiction is one of those places where line becomes blurred between what’s sci-fi and what’s not; the following mostly seem to qualify as s/f, because almost all deal with fictive future societies, although not all feature other elements of s/f, like time travel, space flight, amazing technologies, etc. Not all dystopian fiction is sci/fi (example?), and certainly not all sci/fi is dystopian (ask class for examples of non-dystopian (or utopian) sci/fi, like Star Trek, or I, Robot)

        Brave New World (Aldous Huxley, 1932)

        1984 (George Orwell, 1949)

        A Clockwork Orange (Anthony Burgess novel, 1962)/Stanley Kubrick film): amoral youth gangs completely numbed to violence roam the streets of London; reflects the post-war malaise, the sense that England had not only lost its empire but was also an increasingly hostile place to live

        The Handmaid’s Tale (Margaret Atwood): patriarchy, religious extremism and environmental damage run amok; most women are infertile, so those that aren’t are enslaved as baby machines

        Planet of the Apes

        Logan’s Run

        The Road Warrior Films

        The Terminator Films (in terms of vision of the future after a nuclear holocaust)

        The Matrix

**Blade Runner (1982)**

General Background on the film:

        Released in 1982, and although it was not initially a commercial success, it has become one of the most influential science fiction films, particularly in terms of its vision of a dystopian urban environment of the not very distant future

        It’s based upon the Philip K. Dick novel “Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep,” but the film is quite different from the original novel

        Originally, the film was considered too confusing, ambiguous and dark by the studio (particularly the ending), so at the last minute a voice-over narration and “happy ending” (in which Deckard and Rachael escape the city and retire to an idyllic rural environment; legend has it that these shots were outtakes from Kubrick’s The Shining) were added; When Ridley Scott got the chance to release a Director’s Cut in 1991, he took out the narration and the ending

        Scott has been quoted as saying that the Director’s Cut is a compromise between the original theatrical version and his original, even darker conception of the film.

        One of the best parts of the Director’s Cut is that without the narration, the ambient sounds of the city (often of advertising) and the visual elements are foregrounded, since you’re not paying attention to a voice over

The most often cited dystopian aspects of Blade Runner involve the depiction of Los Angeles—and the urban environment in general—in 2019.

Let’s take a look at a couple of clips from the film, and pay attention to elements that could be categorized as dystopian.

Clips

Show clips, set them up beforehand, ask students to comment on them afterward:

Chapter 2: Eye on the City

        sweeping shots of L.A., featuring towers belching flames

        massive skyline dominated by the Tyrell corporation pyramid

        the only traffic we see is the police)

Chapter 4: Street Scene

        “Geisha” billboard and advertising blimps

        claustrophobic, rainy street atmosphere

        all of the East Asian influences, predominance of non-English languages)

Chapter 17: Deckard chases Zhora through the streets

        again, extreme claustrophobia, oppressively dark and rainy conditions

        multiculturalism as the dominant urban condition, with punks, Hare Krishnas, Arabic-sounding music, etc.)

**Dystopian elements of Blade Runner environment:**

        multicultural street scenes, dominated by East Asian imagery and sense that this is the underclass, the economically less fortunate (everyone who could afford to has moved Offworld): an extension of the “white flight” from urban centers to the suburbs that picked up speed after World War II

        Sense of architectural chaos and disorder: this Los Angeles is not the result of careful urban planning, but instead has seemingly evolved as a mixture of time periods, international influences; vision of an irrational city, as opposed to a clean, sparkling ordered city with wide boulevards, obvious signs of affluence, etc.; here, the streets are labyrinthine and claustrophobic, presumable with the upper classes who’ve remained in the city living like Tyrell, in the upper reaches of high rises while the lower classes live close to the ground (remember the split between the upper and lower classes in the city depicted in Metropolis)—the main design technique used by the film’s creators was referred to as **“retrofitting,”** in which the city was imagined as consisting of old buildings with add-ons haphazardly slapped onto them, instead of new buildings having been built; it’s a city that has evolved over time, not according to some ordered plan.

        Advertising as a constant background (even to a greater degree than we’re all already used to): building-sized billboards, advertising blimps, etc.—somewhat reminiscent of Times Square or downtown Tokyo

        Pollution and other environmental damage: it’s always dark and raining in L.A. of 2019; no seeming differentiation between night and day, good weather and bad

        Lack of anything organic: no trees in sight, all animals are replicants (real animals are rare and thus expensive, as we see with the Tyrell’s owl, and Zhora’s (the stripper) snake

        No sign of government or any authority (except the local police) exerting any control over this landscape; absence of a sense of the “rule of law”; anarchic; different from visions of oppressive totalitarianism (Big Brother) in 1984 or Brave New World

Social Cultural and Political contexts in the 1980s that are reflected in Blade Runner:

        Fear of growing economic power of Japan, general expansion in Asia: wide media coverage of Japanese buying landmark real estate in New York (ironic considering that by the mid 90s the Japanese economy entered a fairly severe recession which it’s still in)

        Anxiety over globalization, immigration; fears of foreign threats to an “American way of life;” led to notion that mainstream American culture would be lost amidst foreign influence (also ironic considering how much we export our own culture and are accused of cultural imperialism, especially in the digital era

        Fears of social disorder, particularly based in the working classes: that central government would eventually become impotent in exerting control over urban centers

        Still emerging environmental consciousness; in the late 70s and through the1980s, it finally began to hit mainstream culture after still being more of a concern of the progressive fringe through the 60s and early 70s

        Emergence over the past few decades of the mega-city, like Los Angeles or Rio de Janeiro; cities characterized by huge populations and urban sprawl with no sense of centrality, planning or defined borders

One thing we must remain aware of when looking at dystopian fictions like Blade Runner is that not everyone is going to agree as to what is dystopian; Dystopian fiction tends to reflect the anxieties of specific social groups in specific times and places; **Dystopia is in the eye of the beholder.**

**So who’s dystopia is it?**

        Blade Runner’s dystopian cityscape generally reflects the anxieties of an affluent, suburban, white middle class; people who view the city environment as dangerous, chaotic, unstable, lawless, dominated by “the Other”; considering the massive movement to the suburbs over the last half century, this characterizes an awful lot of us

        But not everyone will necessarily find this environment oppressive or frightening:

        it seemingly offers a lot of personal freedom

        it’s generally exciting; sort of like continual nightlife; it’s dive-bar heaven, or a particularly seedy club district

        it allows for individual anonymity; it’s a place to go to lose yourself (as the replicants try, although ultimately unsuccessfully)

This notion of a dystopian reflecting the fears not only of a particular time and place but social group goes along with other concerns of the film, such as the idea of enforced slavery for a marginalized segment of society (in this case, very sophisticated cyborgs)

**Brazil (1985)**

**General Background on the Film:**

        Brazil and Blade Runner were released within 3 years of each other, and were often compared, despite the very different looks of the films

        Terry Gilliam was the film’s director who also directed 12 Monkeys and did the animation for Monty Python

        Gilliam claims he got the idea for the film after reading about the practice in the Middle Ages of charging prisoners for the costs of their torture and imprisonment; this shows up directly in Brazil

        Like Ridley Scott, Gilliam also had trouble releasing the version he wanted to release because the studio considered it too dark, depressing and uncommercial; after many very public battles with Universal, he finally was able to release a version that was only somewhat compromised from his original vision for the film (supposedly there is a “happy ending” version out there somewhere, but I’ve never seen it)

        Film was a huge critical success and did pretty good box office business as well

**Brazil is a little more like the dystopias of the early and mid-20th century that were more concerned with totalitarian governments, faceless bureaucracy, surveillance and control issues than Blade Runner, although it combines these concerns with a dark view of the dehumanizing excesses of corporate culture.**

**Clips**

Set-up for clips (brief summary of plot):

        The film is set “somewhere in the 20th Century,” in an unspecified time and place that has some futuristic overtones, but is also sort of retro as well, featuring technologies that appear very out of date in our own digital age

        The nation, ruled by a seemingly all-powerful bureaucratic central government, is besieged by campaign of terrorist bombings, now in its 13th year

        Corporate entities have become somewhat indistinguishable from the government

        The story involves a depressed low-level government employee, Sam Lowry, who escapes from his grim everyday reality through an intense dream life in which he is a noble hero who fights evil to save a beautiful mystery woman; eventually, he becomes involved with the terrorists, who turn out to be an underground group fighting the government in the name of individual rights and autonomy

These clips are a little chaotic, with a lot going on in each frame, so pay attention to the details, and particularly what happens toward the end of this first one, with the terrorist attack in the restaurant

In this first extended sequence, Sam meets his mother at the clinic she goes to for plastic surgery, and then they go out to lunch.

**Chapter 4**: Sam Lowry meets his mother for lunch

        begins at plastic surgeon’s office, continues in a French restaurant

        notice the heavy security measures, the facsimile food and the screens placed around the diners after the explosion, so the terrorist attack wouldn’t upset their lunch

**Chapter 7**: Sam driving through the city in his tiny car

        bizarre cityscape

        children role-playing at interrogating a terrorist

        the government propaganda billboard slogan “Happiness: We’re All in it Together”

        the advertisement for “Mellow Fields Top Security Holiday Camps”, featuring “Luxury without fear, fun without suspicion” and an invitation to “relax in a panic-free atmosphere”

Dystopic elements:

        An oppressive, totalitarian (though intensely inefficient) central government, organized into huge inhumanly bureaucratic institutions (much like 1984, particularly in the names: the Ministry of Information, which appears to be more about security, surveillance)

        Sense of the powerlessness of the individual in the face of these oppressive institutions

        Everpresent security, fear of urban terrorism: although in this world the terrorists turn out to be the heroes, fighting against the oppressive control of the government (incl. Robert De Niro’s character, a swashbuckling freelance engineer), notice the prescience of presenting a society that has learned to normalize terrorism, live amongst it and even ignore it as just a part of the urban (and political landscape) that must be tolerated

        Like Blade Runner, advertising as continual backdrop

        Claustrophobic, chaotic street scenes

        Inefficient, but still omnipresent (and oppressive) technology: heating ducts, vacuum tubes, none of the streamlined digital technology we’re used to

        Like Blade Runner, simulations standing in for things we take for granted: for example, the food (some kind of formless mush placed next to pictures of the food it’s supposed to imitate); or, the prevalence of plastic surgery: artifice is everywhere

**A Dystopian Future?**

Although Ursula Le Guin says the role of science fiction writing is not to predict the future, I think it’s really interesting just how prescient these films are, as well as elements that have not played out as predicted.

Examples of prescience:

        Terrorism becoming a widespread means of warfare

        as a result, people getting used to its presence in our culture

        the stringent security measures enacted to combat it

        Multi-national corporations becoming as powerful as many nation-states, and the line becoming blurred between corporations and national government

        Increase in omnipresent advertising culture: look at corporate endorsement, things like the official Frito-Lay Super Bowl coin toss, or the Staples Arena in L.A., which replaced the good old Fabulous Forum (but not until after it had become the Great Western Forum)

        Increased globalization, both economic and cultural; the world has gotten a lot smaller, and there is much more mixing of diverse cultural influences than half a century ago (although it has yet to reflect any egalitarian sensibility; it’s still mostly the rich and powerful remaining rich and powerful).

On the other hand,

        Japanese culture or other global influences haven’t exactly taken over in America; on the contrary, American went into a period of intense prosperity in the 90s, and continued to export its own culture to the world in increasing amounts and utilizing new technologies like the Internet and digital media in general; meanwhile, Japan has been mired in recession for over a decade

Often, the most valuable thing we can get from dystopian fiction is not a view of what’s going to happen, but of what we fear will happen, fears we don’t always express clearly or examine as much as we should. These stories can make us think about why we fear certain things in our own culture and others, and whether those fears are valid or are in themselves destructive and dangerous.