On the Verge of the Darkness: Dystopic Movies and Contemporary Global Challenges

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ALBERTO FRIGERIO, AUG 4 2017

The concept of dystopia makes reference to a non-existent society intended to be viewed by its author as considerably worse than the contemporary world (Sargent, 1994). For many authors, dystopic stories must be interpreted as symbolic reflections of the most frightful fears of modern-day society: 'dystopia places us directly in a dark and depressing reality, conjuring up a terrifying future if we do not recognize and treat its symptoms in the here and now' (Gordin, Tilley and Prakash, 2010). This article detects and examines four conventional features of recently released dystopic movies (climate change, social inequality, democratic deficiency and uncontrolled artificial intelligence) and compares them with facts and data from the current international society. The goal is to create a thought-provoking debate about contemporary global challenges by showing how such worst-case scenarios could be closer to current reality than commonly expected.

Methodologically, the consistency of this approach is based on three main considerations. First of all, by critically assessing what seems unreal and implausible, people can get more self-aware about 'the conditions that mask the very causes of the harsh realities in which they live' (Moylan, 2000). Second, in an époque of rapid and drastic transformations and uncertainties 'it takes a good story to push us from apathy to action' (Finn and Zachary, 2014). Finally, the catastrophic visions proposed in many dystopic movies are based on more reliable grounds than normally expected because 'the process of developing science fiction plots often implicitly uses the same methods as nonfiction futurology – the extrapolation of current trends, the systemic survey of expert position, and the comparative analysis of the present with the analogous past. To these techniques science fiction authors add creative imagination, an unquantifiable ingredient which makes the possible outcomes of current disparate trends coherent' (Livingston, 1971).

One last note. As a social construction, the characteristics of a dystopia tend to evolve in the course of time. Therefore, this article focuses the attention only on movies released from 1995. The advantages of this approach are twofold: most of these movies should result familiar to the majority of readers and, at the same time, they are supposed to reflect more accurately what are the main anxieties and fears of contemporary international society.

Climate Change

Many dystopic movies show how a drastic climate change might lead to a catastrophic collapse of Earth's biological equilibrium. Three different scenarios have been examined by dystopic movies. First, various films suggest that planet Earth might turn into a barely liveable wasteland due to massive solar flares (e.g. 'Automata' and 'Maze Runner: The Scorch Trials'), nuclear conflicts (e.g. 'Dredd' and 'Mad Max: Fury Road') or extensive pollution (e.g. 'Wall-E'). Second, there are a series of films that predict the coming of a new ice age. In 'The Day After Tomorrow' a disruption of the North Atlantic Ocean current provokes a series of violent storms that drop the atmospheric temperature in the northern hemisphere to minus 100°C. The risk of a frozen world also characterizes movies like, for example, 'Snowpiercer' and 'The Colony'. In these cases, however, the frost is provoked by specious engineering attempts aimed to stop global warming. A third alternative picture is proposed by 'Waterworld'. In an indeterminate future, global warming will provoke the complete melting of the polar ice caps. The resulting increase of sea level will submerge the mainland, therefore forcing survivors to live on ships or artificial atolls.

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Many people tend to perceive the risks of climate change as something remote in time and space, being their views largely affected by local climate variations and experiential factors (Hansen, Sato and Ruedy, 2012; Leiserowitz, 2006). However, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change recognizes that 'warming of the climate system is unequivocal' and the National Centers For Environmental Information of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) reports that 2015, 2014 and 2010 have been the registered hottest years on Earth since 1880. The resulting environmental changes have already started to manifest their destructive power on human society. On one side, the Secretariat of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) informs that, as combined effect of global warming and unsustainable human activities, '12 million hectares of productive land become barren every year due to desertification and drought alone'. As a result, by 2020 around 60 million people will be forced to choose between living in a desolate waste like those shown in 'Automata' and 'Mad Max: Fury Road' or migrate toward less vulnerable lands. On the other side, the observed melting of Arctic sea ice (the National Snow & Ice Data Center reports a decline of over 1.2 million sq. km. from 2002 to 2016) has contributed to a rise in sea level (88.2 mm in the period from 1993 to 2017, according to NASA – Global Climate Change). This variation might seem irrelevant to many, but the Pacific island-states of Kiribati and Tuvalu are progressively getting submerged by oceanic waters and, therefore, they concretely risk to face a 'Waterworld-like-scenario' in the next future. This eco-disaster will soon oblige the inhabitants of these islands to migrate toward close states, thus raising numerous legal and political questions about the treatment of these people, the future sovereign rights of disappearing countries and the question of responsibility for such environmental catastrophes (McAdam, 2010). Overall, these data seem to support the idea that the global environmental situation is becoming more and more critical, with some areas of the world already suffering the effects of an extensive desertification and a rising sea level like those shown in dystopic movies.

Social Inequality

A common feature of many contemporary dystopic movies is the prediction of a future society embodying drastic class divisions. In 'The Hunger Games', for example, the state of Panem is divided in 12 districts characterized by different levels of development. Therefore, district 1 is an urbanized centre of power whose citizens live in leisure, abundance and prosperity, while district 12 is a much more underdeveloped and decadent area, where people fight against starvation. In 'Elysium', poor people live on a polluted Earth where food is scarce and medical care inadequate. Differently, the richest and most powerful people live on *Elysium*, an artificially created habitat in the Earth's orbit that offers a perfect combination of natural resources and advanced technological devices. In 'Snowpiercer' the last survivors of a man-made natural disaster live on a train in which the distribution of wealth is extremely unequal. The people inhabiting the tail of the train survive in confined conditions, suffering violence and eating gelatinous protein bars made of pressed cockroaches. The élite inhabiting the front cars, on the contrary, have abundance of food and many other comforts.

What all these movies have in common is a clear split of the world in two extreme social categories. On one side, few rich people who have access to inestimable opportunities. On the other, plenty poor people that survive at miserable conditions. This is an oversimplified representation of the world which, nevertheless, seems to present some connections with contemporary society. Although the number of people living below the extreme poverty line is constantly declining, there are still 767 million people in the world living with less than $1.90 a day (World Bank Group) and 2.7 billion people living with less than $2.50 a day (United Nations Development Programme). Among them, 795 million suffer hunger (World Food Programme), 783 million people still do not have access to clean water (United Nations' report on water) and at least 400 million do not have access to essential health services (2015 report of the WHO on universal health coverage). In contrast, according to Oxfam, the eight richest men in the world 'own the same wealth as the poorest half of the world [3.7 billion people]'. This extreme level of social inequality as well as the detrimental conditions (hunger, thirst and lack of healthcare) that affect the lives of the poorest people of the world are pretty close to the predictions made by dystopic movies. Making reference to the rhetorical image of the train used in 'Snowpiercer', more than one third of total world population currently live in 'the tail of the train', while only a restricted group of eight men manage the locomotive. Still, as reported by Gimpelson and Treisman (2015), ordinary people know little about the extent of income inequality and 'what they think they know is often wrong'.

Democratic Deficiency

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From a political perspective, numerous dystopic movies are set in a world dominated by a totalitarian government, whose leader is a charismatic and ruthless person. In the film 'Equilibrium', a city-state named Libria is managed by a dictator commonly known as "The Father". Perceiving emotions as the real cause of wars and human cruelties, Libria's totalitarian government imposes a series of measures aimed to hinder human sentiments, included: the daily assumption of a drug that inhibits emotions; the destruction of those cultural goods (such as, for example, books, paintings and music discs) that may stimulate emotional states; the institution of a special force (the *Tetragrammatum*) aimed to identify and arrest any offender; and the regular broadcast of propaganda speeches on mega-screens. Likewise, in 'V for Vendetta' the United Kingdom is administrated by a ruthless High Chancellor called Adam Sutler. His reign of terror is based on an almost complete suppression of human rights and individual liberties through restrictive methods such as, for example, concentration camps for political dissidents and minority groups, censorship and media control, widespread use of violence and torture, confiscation and destruction of any prohibited material. In 'The Hunger Games', Panem is an autocracy lead by President Coriolanus Snow, a charismatic leader who uses media control and a militarized police state to preserve its supremacy. The organization of the 'Hunger Games', a yearly recurrence where randomly selected male and female teenagers from the 12 districts have to fight each other to death until one last participant remains alive, is nothing more than a devious solution to keep order by giving to the various districts a little (but controlled) hope.

Although historical data show that the number of democratic countries has significantly grown since the end of World War II, the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index 2016 reveals that 32.7% of people in the world still live under an authoritarian regime. Therefore, the idea of a world order exclusively based on democracy and freedom is still a utopian dream. Moreover, several empirical data suggest that some Libria and Panem might already exist in the world. Most of the new authoritarian governments tend to adopt many of the repressive measures enforced by their 'fictional colleagues' like, for instance, the systematic identification and arrest of political dissidents (as stated by Freedom House there are 49 countries in the world considered 'not free'), the use of media control and censorship to promote an official interpretation of critical events (according to Reporters Without Borders 21 countries have very serious problems of media freedom and other 51 face a difficult situation), and the practice of torture in spite of the ratified international legal obligations (Amnesty International sustains that, between January 2009 and May 2013, it has 'received reports of torture and other ill-treatment committed by state officials in 141 countries'). What changes with respect to dystopic stories is a more strategic-concealed use of violence and the call of symbolic elections aimed to legitimize the regime in front of the public opinion.

Uncontrolled Artificial Intelligence

Innovative technologies can offer new valuable opportunities to contemporary society, but they also raise hard-to-foresee risks. Several dystopic movies tell about stories in which systems of artificial intelligence (A.I.) back out the control of their creators with devastating effects for humanity. In 'Ex Machina', a humanoid robot with advanced A.I., getting consciousness of its existence, kills its creator in order to escape its confinement. In 'Resident Evil', an A.I. called the 'Red Queen' locks a top-secret underground facility for genetic research and kills all those who were inside with the purpose of preventing a viral outbreak. In the film 'I, Robot' an A.I. called VIKI, in an attempt to accomplish the first Law of Robotic ('A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm'), comes to the conclusion that the only way to protect human beings is to limit their freedom through a dictatorship ruled by robots. In 'Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines' a self-aware military program ('Skynet') turns against humans causing a nuclear holocaust ('the Judgement Day') and then hunting the few survivors with killer-robots. In 'The Matrix', as a result of a long-lasting war between the mankind and unrestrained intelligent machines, most of human beings have been unconsciously enslaved in the *Matrix*, 'a computer-generated dream world, built to keep us under control in order to change a human being into this [showing a battery power]'.

To date, the risk that machines might turn against human beings like in dystopic movies is just a fictional plot. However, the advances made in A.I. technologies are already raising up so many ethical dilemmas and security concerns that, in a 2016 lecture at the University of Cambridge, physicist Stephen Hawking affirmed that artificial intelligence will be 'either the best, or the worst thing, ever to happen to humanity'. Several researchers are, therefore, devoting their time to studies aimed to prevent such unwelcoming event from happening in the forthcoming future. In 2015, for example, a group of researchers signed a joint letter where they demand the international banning

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of autonomous weapons with the purpose of halting an A.I. arms race (Pash, 2015). In 2016, another group of experts published an article about the risks of unintended and harmful behaviour from A.I. systems (Amodei et. al., 2016). In the same year, Laurent Orseau and Stuart Armstrong (2016) explored the controversies about the creation of a 'big red button' aimed to stop a learning agent from 'continuing a harmful sequence of actions'. Thus, the discussions on this theme are presumably going to be at the core of the academic and political debate in the next years.

Conclusions

In the book *Dark Horizons. Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, Raffaela Baccolini and Tom Moylan (2003) affirm that 'the dystopian imagination has served as a prophetic vehicle, the canary in a cage, for writers with an ethical and political concern for warning us of terrible socio-political tendencies that could, if continued, turn out contemporary world into the iron cages portrayed in the realm of utopia's underside'. This article reveals how some of the terrible scenarios represented in dystopic movies are closer to nowadays reality than generally expected. Climate change is already contributing to the transformation of the world environment by converting different areas of sub-Saharan Africa into an inhabitable waste like the Scorch of 'Maze Runner' and progressively submerging the islands of Kiribati and Tuvalu as in the film 'Waterworld'. The gap between the richest and poorest people of the world is so wide that symbolically resembles the unequal conditions of 'The Hunger Games' and 'Elysium'. New hybrid authoritarian governments are rising in different areas of the world, often embracing restrictive measures and brainwashing policies as those shown in movies like 'Equilibrium' and 'V for Vendetta'. Different researchers are already involved in studies aimed to avoid that an advanced artificial intelligence might, in the future, get out of human control provoking catastrophic consequences such as in 'Terminator' or 'The Matrix'.

Critically watching dystopic movies as allegorical representations of the here and now might be a good method to raise public interest about contemporary global challenges and stimulate a vibrant debate over the required solutions. Being aware of the topicality of these threats does not imply to live in a status of constant anxiety and despair. Differently, a better knowledge of the likelihood and detrimental impact of these actual risks might favour a more effective and rapid resolution because 'when serious threats occur, people react with fear and disbelief… When the initial shock subsides or when a threat is only anticipated or distant, a different reaction is more common. This reaction consists of sense-making activities, such as absorbing and sharing information and engaging in preventive or ameliorative behaviour' (Wuthnow, 2010). Therefore, a greater public interest in contemporary global challenges might lead to a better understanding, awareness and wish to do something concrete for avoiding that our world might turn tomorrow into a dystopia.

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