

Editorial

What future awaits us? Film and “dystopia”

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Despite certain persistent remnants, a cycle that has lasted several centuries seems to have come to an end. It is the one that over several centuries has attributed the role of “saviour” to technical-scientific development: i.e., the promise of greater individual happiness and collective welfare from the introduction of technology and science in the course of History. However, the unfailing optimism related to progress and all the mystique surrounding it already seems evanescent. The naïve and enthusiastic positivism of the original rationalists currently has given way, in the best of cases, to a patronizing smile. And the fact is that the pitiless increase in the number of accelerated natural disasters, if not deliberately (or at least unwittingly) induced, caused by human activity; the proliferation of universal pandemics (avian, swine or any other zoological designation); the alarm aroused in the face of real or assumed dangers, by genetic manipulation or information control do nothing but demonstrate the fragility, if not the perversity, of technical-scientific development itself.

Where are we headed? This is not only a question of establishing a diagnosis of what is already happening, but rather of our being able to imagine what might possibly happen in the future. So, what kind of future awaits us?

So we see that although human beings have always resorted to fictitious tales with the aim, among other things, of offering a meaning to existence, they have also been capable of creating anticipatory fiction,

of thinking up possible worlds and realities in which dreams of emancipation and justice can take shape. That is, literary narratives, which not by chance were born at the dawn of science and foreshadow ideal, perfect social organizations. This refers to utopias in the double sense of the equivocal origin of the word, since utopia can be both “eu-topos”, a good place, and “ou-topos”, nowhere. So that is what a utopia is: an ideal place that, at least for the time being, cannot be found anywhere. Because of this the first Utopians located this kingdom of harmony and perfection in isolated or remote places; on the Island of Utopia described by Thomas More, who is also attributed for having been responsible for the coining of the term (*De Optimo Rēpublicae Statu deque Nova Insula Ūtopia*); in *The City of the Sun (La Città del Sole)* by Tommaso Campanella, or in the *New Atlantis* by Francis Bacon.

However, as time passed progress began to show its downside, feeding the sinister sceneries of technological and scientific transgression: *dystopias*, negative or corrupted *utopias*. If longings and hopes are the matters of utopia, dystopia represents fears and worries. If the former promised a kingdom of freedom and self-fulfilment through the use of reason, in the latter the dreams of reason will give birth to the monsters of oppression and alienation. And there is no better example than the 20th century, a symbiosis -although not only, of cruelty and scientific rationality, if we wish to gain insight into variegated visions of the Apocalypses that we may inevitably have to confront. The most famous written examples

are undoubtedly *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley, *1984 (Nineteen Eighty-Four)* by George Orwell, *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury and *A Clockwork Orange* by Anthony Burgess. All of them, with greater or lesser expertise, have their corresponding audiovisual correlate, since only film (with its ability to create horrific atmospheres and portray the darkest of nightmares) could effectively take up the task of denouncing blind faith in progress.

In fact, the disturbing view that the cinema of recent years suggests of the future -of what is to come- is undeniable. To cite some of the best-known films: *Mad Max* (1979) by George Miller, *Blade Runner* (1982) by Ridley Scott, *Brazil* (1985) by Terry Gilliam, *Total Recall* (1990) by Paul Verhoeven, *Twelve monkeys* (1995) by Terry Gilliam, *Gattaca* (1997) by Andrew Niccol, *The Postman* (1997), *Dark City* (1998) by Alex Proyas, *The Matrix* (1999) by Andy and Larry Wachowski, *The 6th Day* (2000) by Roger Spottiswoode, *Minority Report* (2002) by Steven Spielberg, *I, Robot* (2004) by Alex Proyas, *The Island* (2005) by Michael Bay, *V for Vendetta* (2005) by James McTeigue, *Children of Men* (2006) by Alfonso Cuarón or *I Am Legend* (2007) by Francis Lawrence.

The fact is that one cannot fail to see dystopia as an exacerbated projection of contemporary fears. In one way or another, to a greater or lesser extent, the same fears are present in all these accounts: the fear of a world devastated by a universal disaster or subjugated by the omnivorous power of huge industrial, financial and technological transnational companies; of devastating environmental pollution, a result of human beings' greed, or cultural pollution, due to the massive migration of “the other”, the foreigner; of the dissolution of the fabric of society into an amorphous amalgam of anonymous and unconnected monads or of its control and standardization through military, informative, psychic or pharmacological means; of the different being that lives within or is alike one, be it cyborgs, clones or replicants.

And it is important to pay special attention to this latter type of fear, because if one fantasy occupies an outstanding place in our current imagination it is the power of biotechnology. It is now time to state the following: within every utopia lives the germ of its own dystopia! When the veil of illusion falls, only doom remains. Thus, biotechnological utopia seems to offer ideal health; the elimination of illness and the suffering it involves and the extension of life to unsuspected limits. So shall we be immortal? Through the decoding of the human genome and its qualitative manipulation, by means of cloning and the creation of genetically modified organisms, by screening and “pre-implant” diagnosis we are promised that genetic anomalies can be eradicated, that bodily and mental capacities can be improved, that damaged organs can be repaired indefinitely, and even that the individual can be perpetuated in another identical one. However, the fears and uncertainties on which nightmare feeds emerge almost simultaneously: identitarian (who or what is a being thus conceived?), social (is a society made up by pre-designed individuals desirable?), economic (who is in control of the biotechnology industry?, who has access to it?), legal (what kind of legislation can be applied in this case?, what can be done when the rules fly in the face research itself?) and, above all and fundamentally, moral (we know how to do it and it is feasible, but is it desirable to do it?; where should the threshold of caution be set?, and that of dignity?; do we human beings have a fixed value or price? Are we ends in ourselves or only means for the others?).

Many of these issues are to be found in Michael Bay's film *The Island* (2005), commented in one of the articles in this issue by Antonio Blanco Mercadé, a physician and “bioethicist”. It is, kindly put, a lesser film, although as the author makes clear it does address those questions that seem most important to us.

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