



Starting to Hate the State: The Beginning of the Character's Dissidence in Dystopian Literature and Films

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Dystopian works took several centuries to be clearly distinguishable from utopias. If we consider Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* as an initial stage of the development of this genre, there are common traits matters that have made these novels recognizable over other moral or political works of fiction. Firstly, most of anti-utopian novels place their characters in a different age from the author's own present. This device is used to make the readers contemplate the scenery shown as a distant reality, so that we can judge its virtues unbiasedly. Secondly, it is common to find totalitarian regimes that control every aspect of their citizens' life. Sometimes there is also a semi-sacred leader heading the government, as a substitute of religious worship. In the third place, the past is a feature to be erased, depicted by the ruling power as a dark time prone to war and lacking morals. In fact, this past was, at the time in which the works were published, the author's and the readers' own time, linking the characters to the current socio-political context and creating empathy. In addition to the banning of the past, also life outside the dystopian metropolis is considered barbaric. Hence, the antithesis 'civilization versus savagery' is a constant feature in this kind of texts. A result of the junction of these devices is the total alienation of the population. Nevertheless, the totalitarian state, which has also the control over education, brings up citizens in the belief that the ruling power has always been the protective hand against savagery and, sometimes, undefined enemies. Love towards power is thus enforced as family has also vanished and the Nation becomes the only focus for any love people can feel. However, the narrative structure in the dystopian genre is built on the character's dislike for the Party or the State, which gives the



citizen two possibilities: the desire to be relieved from that ideological disease or the desire to escape from the system.

In the first half of the 20th century there are three dystopian works considered to be the most representative novels in this genre: Eugene Zamiatin's *We*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Patai: 1984:219). The second half of the century offers several ways in which the three titles influenced subsequent dystopian texts. Huxley's *Brave New World* will be analysed here as it contains a character brought up in values compatible with our own and is then taken to a futuristic society based on pleasure. Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* will be studied as an instance of later dystopias because it shows the opposite inner conflict: a citizen of a futuristic society finds remains from our own civilization. In both cases the State supplies protection, delight and plenty of nourishment. Nevertheless, the main characters in both novels rebel against power.

Furthermore, movies have taken into consideration this kind of texts to create new plots for the screen. Not only have we seen adaptations from works such *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or *Fahrenheit 451* itself, but a number of titles have taken many elements from them, giving new stories. My choice has been Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* as an example belonging to the 20th century and Kurt Wimmer's *Equilibrium*, released in the beginning of the 21st. Not only do both films show a caring State that provides, supposedly, everything their citizens need, but they also contain a main character that is a key worker for the system, someone deeply involved in the machinery of power. Nevertheless, they become dissidents, although the outcome is completely different for each movie.

This paper studies the novels *Brave New World* and *Fahrenheit 451*, and the motion pictures *Brazil* and *Equilibrium* as instances of dystopian works in both literature and movies, as my aim is to show how in these texts the main character is first fitted ideologically in his own society although, in a second moment, he feels something that makes him a dissident target for the government: passion.¹ The process to be found is the way in which passion appears and how it is perceived by the others.

Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) has been widely recognised as one of the main novels in this genre.² Mary Snodgrass (1995: 78), for instance, refers to it as "one of the Western world's most devastating dystopian tocsins". In a future London, reborn after the Nine Year War, a new civilization is built on the basis the social division into castes and the mollifying of feelings with drugs. The state takes control of every aspect in daily life and even children are produced according to material and social needs. Huxley joins two opposite characters, Bernard and Lenina. The first is an 'alpha-brained' male, unsatisfied by the culture of pleasure and empty joy. The second is a good-looking female, happy to have everything her body asks for. There is a turn in

¹ *Brave New World* shows a special situation in which the main character is moved to another society, so it is the environment what changes and not the individual.

² Even Thomas Reed includes Huxley's novel in his *Classic Cult Fiction* (1992: 39).



the perception of the confrontation between the characters and the ruling power after a trip made by Bernard and Lenina to New Mexico for a tour among the savages. There they find a young teenager brought up on the reserve, although he was born the son of a lost member of that dystopian London that Huxley draws. When this is known, both the boy and his mother are taken to London. However, the latter becomes insane whereas the former is incapable of understanding such a different world. He grew up feeling pain and passions, just as he read it in a Shakespeare's book he once got from oblivion. Contrary to those Shakespearean plays that John read and the living values in the reserve, in the Brave New World not only is it not possible to feel any inner sore, but it is even compulsory to relax by taking pills – called 'soma' – and having sex. In his ancient world, reminiscent of Huxley's present, mankind had to suffer to manage pleasure and success. There is not such success when Lenina seduces the 'Savage' because everyone can have as much sex as desired. In addition, the impossibility of choice is what makes him rebel against power. His most notable attack is the throwing of prescribed boxes of soma, what leads him to immediate detention. In front of one of the World Controllers, he is told why society has been cured from any pain:

Civilization has absolutely no need of nobility or heroism. These things are symptoms of political inefficiency. In a properly organized society like ours, nobody has any opportunities for being noble or heroic. (Brave New World, 243)

Mary Snodgrass (1995: 75) summarizes this explanation by pointing out that "social unrest is eradicated along with despair, passion, history, literature, religion, democracy, family and love." Still, the dissident claims the right to be unhappy:

'I don't want comfort. I want God, I want poetry, I want real danger, I want freedom, I want goodness. I want sin.'
'In fact,' said Mustapha Mond, 'you're claiming the right to be unhappy.'
'All right, then,' said the Savage defiantly, 'I'm claiming the right to be unhappy.' (Brave New World, 246)

Hence, John is eventually sent to an isolated lighthouse where, without the possibility of disturbing this painless civilization, he can punish himself following his beliefs. What the 'Savage' hasn't learnt, after all, is that the Brave New World has been established on the people's own volition,

James R. Keller (2008: 100), who studied the main topics in the dystopian genre in both movies and literature,³ indicates that in the *Brave New World* powerful sentiments for others have been systematically obliterated. Huxley draws two characters whose feelings develop in opposite directions. Firstly, Linda, John's mother, has been brought up in the new London to end up lost in the reserve. Linda knows that the only

³ Although Keller's work is a study about main features in the motion picture *V for Vendetta*, this author shows an interest analysis of the dystopian genre in general and its most important titles. I will refer to this work later, as it contains a valuable description of *Brazil*.



possibility to have a calm life is the annihilation of feelings with soma in a regulated civilization, and, consequently, finds the society in which she is obliged to stay as a painful chaos. Unable to deal with her passions, she falls into alcoholism during her stay in the reserve in order to control her spirit. However, back in London, she is ready to die as she does not have to control herself any more, and the demise is described as a delightful experience. Secondly, John has grown up in the reserve to eventually travel to London. For him life is a series of passions just in the manner he read it from Shakespeare. Nonetheless, as Thomas Reed points out (1992: 40), those passions are “disruptive forces that require social instability and occasional misery in order to thrive”. When John sees the Brave New World, which is supposed to miss any sore, he goes out of his mind becoming a dangerous citizen. The research on his behaviour indicates that part of his interest is “focused on what he calls ‘the soul,’ which he persists as regarding as an entity independent of the physical environment (Brave New World, 169).” What is more, as he refuses to consume soma and turn into an automaton, his madness cannot be controlled. Contrary to his mother, he commits suicide and has a pathetic death. By showing this contrast, Huxley highlights that there is no room for passions in the world to come, as the present society is obsessed with pleasure or pain, and morals are not a value any more.

Fahrenheit 451 (1951) by Ray Bradbury was released after World War II, when Nazi Germany was already a memory. Moreover, Bradbury did not show the European aftermath, but the new lifestyle emerging among the middle class in North America. This novel describes life in an undefined time in future America. As in *Brave New World*, technology has been highly developed providing the population a good standard of living. Drugs, fast cars and spectacular and colourful TV programmes keep citizens glad and delighted. However, culture has been reduced to a minimal expression, since it interrupts pleasure patterns and breaks social harmony. The main character, Guy Montag, works as a fireman, although firemen in this age are responsible for burning books. Possession of texts from the reader’s age is absolutely forbidden, as it involves almost a disease that turns owners away from mental welfare. Nevertheless, Montag meets a strange girl called Clarisse, apparently not very interested in the joys that the new State offers. Despite being part of the system and a ‘social supervisor’, Montag reconsiders the moral basis of his civilization after seeing a woman defending with her life her old library from flames. This event is to be added to the emptiness he can see in his wife. She seems to enjoy the life she is offered with plenty of drugs and entertainment, although as a human being she is unable of harbouring any feelings. All these facts generate in Montag the desire of checking the content of those forbidden items: books. His captain, Beatty, is aware of Montag’s doubts, so he allows him a contact with literature, though he first explains to his subordinate the aim of such a ‘narrow minded’ state:



We can't have our minorities upset and stirred. Ask yourself, What do we want in this country, above all? People want to be happy (...). Well, aren't they? (...) That's all we live for, isn't it? For pleasure, for titillation? And you must admit our culture provides plenty of these. (Fahrenheit 451, 62-63)

Anyway, it is the immersion into books what separates the main character from the system. He ends up feeling guilty for working for power, a power that keeps the population in cultural unconsciousness. In fact, he is part of the executioner's arm of that power. At this stage of the story line it is noticeable that Montag now has only two possible paths: trying to overcome those doubts or escaping from the dystopian reality.

Ray Bradbury makes Montag evolve along the text. When the reader meets this character he finds the flat minded citizen that he can recognize in his wife. Hence, Erika Gottlieb (2001: 88) stresses that it is the contrast between her and Montag's young neighbour, Clarisse, "that makes him awaken to a light buried within him". Clarisse seems happy in spite of not taking part in contemporary joys. Snodgrass (1995: 210) analyzes this contrast describing the girl as "a passionate 17-year old neighbour who rhapsodizes over roses, dandelions, butterflies, and the man in the moon", whereas Montag's wife is "vapid, emotionless and media-centered", and is not actually happy. Since he realises this, his discomfort turns gradually into an uncontrollable madness that ends in the murder of his boss as the representative of the world that he hates, a society without any inner life. The hate towards the social order is similar to John's in *Brave New World*. In addition, in *Fahrenheit 451* there are people as well who choose to erase feelings. Unable to house a citizen willing to live according to passions from a past age, arresting him is the only solution, although he manages to escape.

At the last stage of the Cold War and along the 20th century the screen took into account the warnings of dystopian literature. For some directors movies were a good medium to receive and transform the message of works such *Brave New World* and *Fahrenheit 451*. Not only have the most important dystopias in literature been adapted, but new plots have been developed for new titles that pick items and devices from representative texts.

1984, besides having the release of Michael Radford's adaptation of Orwell's year-named work, gave a chance to Terry Gilliam to create his own vision of such dystopia: *Brazil* (premiered finally in 1985). Faulstich and Korte (1999: 165), who studied the influences on this movie, point that "the director uses the pretext of Orwell's controlling state" for the building of his *Brazil*⁴ and, what is more, even *1984*^{1/2} was the working title for his movie. Again, the key is what this new civilization is like. Visually, the first impression we have is that Gilliam dehumanizes the atmosphere with a cold architecture that prevents sunlight from reaching the floor, since buildings

⁴ My translation.



seem to have been inspired by Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (ibid.: 171). But as we go further along the plot we realise that *Brazil* focuses on the system created by a state based on the extreme control of every side of its society. Gilliam was not worried about any special kind of totalitarianism, but bureaucracy and the presence of the police are further than ridiculous.

If *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was a parody of historical totalitarianism, *Brazil* is a parody of the parody: an execution order is made against the practice of plumbing without the proper and official permission of the government, what gives an example of the dystopian madness shown in this movie. Lowry, a hard working member of the administration, is offered *via* his mother's powerful influence a better job in the Ministry of Information. It is there that he realises that the absurd obstinacy of the power in controlling and executing is preventing him from reaching the girl he loves. She herself is a dissident, fed up with the government's oppressive monitoring, and along the film Lowry eventually understands her complaints, as it is impossible not to fall into rebellion. Nevertheless, it is possible. That is the way of life Lowry sees in his mother and friends, full of frivolous pleasures, from restaurants to fashion clothing. But, that is not what Lowry wants: being a mechanical good worker by classifying files for the rest of his life.

As a dystopia, Gilliam's *Brazil* is both a parody and a warning, so there is no room for true love or a rich inner life in a society like that. Lowry, eventually, finds himself caught by the state agents and forced to be brainwashed. If Huxley in *Brave New World* gave to his 'Savage' the worst and most painful death, Gilliam's conclusion is the same as Orwell's in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: a social death, so the main character is defeated, brainwashed, and forced to sink into obscurity. Keller (2008: 99) points out that Lowry, "against the increasingly inhumane establishment, creates a forbidden romantic interest from a simple truck driver." Passion is, then, used as a weapon against the machine-like state. By falling in love with the dissident Lowry starts being moved by something unknown by this society: sentiments. However, this feeling is incompatible with the socially widespread goals of promotion and the joys of fashion. Passion is also an impossible idea to be recorded by a totalitarian state that insists on filing everything. Hence, Lowry's love must face both the social and the state opposition as, again, feelings do not fit in a dystopian civilization.

Screenplays have also considered having a different end for the dissident after escaping from an undesirable society and Kurt Wimmer's *Equilibrium* (2002) is an example of it. Once again the story is set in a near future and a totalitarian government has accumulated power over the whole life of every citizen. The main character in *Equilibrium*, John Preston, is a member of the system core. As what they call 'a cleric', he is in charge of leading operations against those facing state rules and willing to act for themselves. The cleric also orders the destruction of all items stored by dissidents like paintings, books or recordings. The most important rule given by this all-powerful government is the prohibition of feeling. For this purpose power provides prescribed pills –called 'prozium'– to eradicate passions, what reminds us of that drug, 'soma', used in Huxley's *Brave New World*.



This clockwork civilization breaks down for John Preston when he drops his daily ration of prozium, so his passions start filling his actions. What is more, he has to deal with a female dissident in an interview. Without the protection of drugs, he is now permeable to this woman's attacks. From now on, the process that Preston follows, leaving his preeminent position as a high member of the ruling power, is very similar to that of Montag in *Fahrenheit 451*. Like him, Preston can now properly perceive the reasons that dissidents like his interviewed have for risking their lives. The main character is now ready to explore that underground society and ends up finding what is called the 'Resistance'. Unlike *Brave New World* and *Brazil*, the end of *Equilibrium* is Preston's victory over the Party, not only in strength, but also in convictions. Moreover, there is a difference with Ray Bradbury's conclusion in *Fahrenheit 451*: whereas Montag's society falls by itself, in *Equilibrium* John Preston, helped by the Resistance, defeats the ruling power. Despite of this, Wimmer's message in this movie is similar to those in the three works analysed previously: *Equilibrium* warns the viewers against the risk of letting power control them, and also reminds them to focus on having a rich inner life, better than the empty culture of drugs and mass media.

Not only is it, according to Mark Bould (2009: 477), a "notable instance of dystopian filming", but it also shows best the importance of controlling passions in a totalitarian state. There is an important parallelism between Wimmer's movie and Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, as Robert Ebert stresses (2003: 197). The similarity is better highlighted by Kristen Bowers (2007: 71) who, in her reading guide for Bradbury's book, encourages the reader to compare it to *Equilibrium*. Hence, like Montag, Preston 'vaporizes' those who dare to feel, but by losing his prozium, he can realise the kind of nightmare built by the ruling power. Therefore, after refusing to continue working for the state his main goal is to help the Resistance make people feel again. Then, this confrontation is, in fact, the fight between passion and reason, facing our weaknesses as human beings or losing our social features in favour of a painless metropolis. However, contrary to the three works analyzed previously, in *Equilibrium* people have been forced by the state to stop feeling, and there is nobody left to convince, only the system and the power to be defeated.

The four works that have been studied show an undesirable society to be avoided by the reader or the viewer. If a dystopian world is unwelcome even for a well-off person like the 'Savage', Montag, Lowry or Preston, it must be terrifying for us. Dystopian authors call us to avoid the consequences that can happen if social vices of the present are not left and use literature to send their warning. Now films, reachable by the middle class at a low price, can be the ideal tool for these calls about the system and from the system itself. The first and most important consequence of anti-utopian power is alienation. It entails not only free personal development, but also the repression of any behaviour opposed to the aims of the state. Between those behaviours, passions are to be highlighted as they represent the uncontrollability of the self also and especially for the government. In conclusion, human society in *Brave New World*, *Fahrenheit 451*, *Brazil* and *Equilibrium* has lost its will and even the ability to feel. It occurs that passion is not a useful tool for totalitarian states but, however, it



should be us who must protect our human aptitude for feelings now that there are no such political menaces.

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