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# Remembering a Present-Oriented Future in Lois Lowry's "The Giver" (1993)

## ≈ Abstract

Futures Studies as a multidisciplinary academic field developed in the last decades has emphasized the meaningful and revealing nature of the images of the future originating in every society. In this sense, Piotr M. Szpunar and Karl K. Szpunar (2016) underline the close relationship between recalling the past and imagining the future and suggest a mutual influence and interdependence between both processes. The purpose of this article is to apply the concept of "collective future thought" coined by these authors to the analysis of *The Giver* (1993) by Lois Lowry, which depicts a future dystopian society where memories of the past, as a powerful and threatening artifact, are kept away from the members of the community. This novel has been extensively analyzed as a dystopian text from many different perspectives. However, no critical attention has been paid to the way Lowry explores the close interrelationship and interdependence between the visions of past and future created by a society and their bonds of reciprocal interaction. Starting from a consideration of *The Giver* as dystopian fiction, this research attempts to move the critical exploration of this novel one step further and claims that a more nuanced understanding of the text can be achieved by considering the contributions from the field of Futures Studies and the concepts of collective memory and collective future thinking.

Keywords:

Futures Studies; collective future; *The Giver*; Lois Lowry

## ≈ Resumen

El terreno de los *Futures Studies*, como campo de estudio multidisciplinar que se ha desarrollado en las últimas décadas, ha enfatizado significativamente el carácter revelador de las imágenes del futuro que se originan en toda sociedad. En este sentido, Piotr M. Szpunar and Karl K. Szpunar (2016) subrayan la estrecha relación existente entre recordar el pasado e imaginar el futuro y sugieren una interrelación e interdependencia mutua entre ambos procesos. El presente artículo pretende aplicar el concepto de "pensamiento futuro colectivo", acuñado por estos autores, al análisis de la novela *The Giver* (1993), que describe una futura sociedad distópica en la que la memoria del pasado, como un poderoso y peligroso artefacto, se mantiene fuera del alcance de los miembros de la comunidad. Esta novela ha sido ampliamente analizada como texto distópico desde muy variadas perspectivas. Sin embargo, desde la crítica no se le ha prestado atención al modo en que Lowry explora la estrecha interrelación e interdependencia que existe entre las visiones del pasado y del futuro que se originan en una sociedad, así como los vínculos de interacción mutua existentes entre ellas. Partiendo de la consideración de *The Giver* como texto distópico, este trabajo intenta dar un paso adelante en el análisis de la novela y sugiere cómo las aportaciones de la disciplina de *Futures Studies* y los conceptos de memoria del pasado colectiva y pensamiento futuro colectivo pueden enriquecer el análisis de *The Giver*.

Palabras clave:

estudios sobre el futuro; futuro colectivo; *The Giver*; Lois Lowry

**H**umankind has always felt a deep and constant fascination with the future. For centuries men and women have endlessly tried to predict, forecast or anticipate events with all kinds of purposes. However, although this practice is as old as civilization, it has not attracted academic interest until relatively recent times. Pioneering studies on the subject, such as those by Wendell Bell (1997) or David Wilson (2000), have emphasized the meaningful and revealing nature of the images of the future originating in every society. Futures Studies, as an incipient multidisciplinary field, is still struggling to mark off its limits, as it covers a wide range of human behavior from different approaches. One of them, perhaps the most common and popular, is related to “Futurism”, understood as the formulation of a hypothetical prediction of the future. From an academic perspective this approach has not always proved to be particularly fruitful because the exercise of divination has quite a limited interest beyond the final fulfilment or not of the forecast. However, these attempts to advance the future reveal a much more interesting dimension. As David Wilson points out, “prophecies and predictions tell us little or nothing about what will happen [...] [but] a great deal about the fears, hopes, desires and circumstances of the people who peer into their own future and imagine what it will be like” (2000, 12).

The aim of this article is to explore how Futures Studies provide interesting insights for the analysis of the images of the future in fiction.<sup>1</sup> With this purpose in mind, the present discussion will focus on the novel *The Giver* (2014 [1993]) by Lois Lowry in order to analyze how the process of developing visions of the future is intimately linked to the construction of the images from the past which makes them possible. As will be shown, the past provides the pieces which are combined, transformed and projected to create some possible images of the future, but also at the same time the visions of the future can be a driving force behind the recollection of the past.

### **Futures Studies and the Shaping of a Collective Future**

It could be argued that the concept of “orientation” which Sara Ahmed (2006) develops and applies to Queer Studies is also relevant in discussions of dystopian fiction and in the interdisciplinary field of Futures Studies, given that the discourses about the future articulate an orientation, understood as a direction to follow (or to avoid) for the present, depending on the utopian or dystopian features of that imaginary future. But the construction of the images of the future in a community also offers some points of reference that can be used to approach the understanding of the present. As Wendell Bell rightly asserts in *Foundations of Futures Studies. Volume I: History, Purposes, and Knowledge*, one of the founding texts of the discipline,

[a] related function of the futures field is an orienting one. Futures thinking lets us know where we are in the present. Often the rapidity of change results in confusion about what is happening around us in the present and the immediate past. Unless we have some perspective on where we have been, where we are going, and *where we want to go in the future*, the present is unintelligible. (1997, 89; emphasis in the original)

Consequently, the imagined future of a particular community may help its members locate themselves by giving them a sense of destination. Apart from showing a possible path forward, the images of the future constitute a mirror where a particular society can see itself reflected and represent an invaluable tool to comprehend it better because those future images are always present-oriented. No matter how fanciful or far-fetched they may be, the revealing nature of the construction of future images always brings a better understanding of where people are now in the present (or where they were when that vision was generated). Images of the future are never neutral. On the contrary, they are highly meaningful and they may help people figure out some basic aspects of a certain community. As David Wilson affirms in *The History of the Future* transforming the famous words by Benedetto Croce (“all history is contemporary history”), all future is contemporary future “because your imagination is itself shaped by the society in which you happen to live” (2000, 13).

Interestingly, this process works in both directions since, on a different level, the present is also future-oriented inasmuch as the future always appears as the ultimate destination of time. The French sociologist Gabriel Tarde, for example, in *Fragment d'histoire future* (1896), points out that “the future, which is not yet, can influence the present as much as the past, which is no more” (quoted in Wilson 2000, 28). From this point of view, it seems clear that many human activities are deeply influenced by people’s expectations and hopes about their future: the farmer who sows the seeds in the spring operates on the assumption that there will be a crop to harvest in the late summer (Wilson 2000, 29). In the same way, the situation of the future pensions may determine some present financial actions and, similarly, the pessimistic predictions from environmental movements are another example of the way gloomy visions of the future can or should push people to modify their present behaviors.

But the visions of the future are not only closely related to the present. They also share important features with the perspective of the past. Collective memory as an artificial reconstruction of the past in the light of the present has been extensively analyzed by many scholars who have shown how every society tries to give shape to its shared past in order to accommodate it to its particular necessities with the purpose of strengthening its collective identity.<sup>1</sup> However, not much attention has been paid to the process by which communities also create images of the future with the same purpose. In this sense, Piotr M. Szpunar and Karl K. Szpunar propose the concept of “collective future thought” to refer to “how groups imagine and conceptualize the(ir) future” (2016, 379) in order to reaffirm the community bonds among individuals who share the same common destination. In this regard, Kourken Michaelian and John Sutton have particularly emphasized the paramount importance of this collective future by underlining its prevalent role. Accordingly, they claim that

collective memory [...] functions to shape and reinforce collective identity. But the contribution of collective future thought to collective identity may be just as vital as that of collective memory. For example, a group’s failure to imagine an attractive future (or any future at all) for itself may lead its members to disidentify with the group, contributing

to the group's eventual disintegration; conversely, a group that succeeds in imagining an attractive future for itself may strengthen feelings of group membership, prolonging its own existence. In other words, collective future thought contributes to collective identity not only indirectly, by triggering collective remembering or reshaping the contents of collective memory, but also directly, by increasing or decreasing the strength of group ties. (2017, 9)

Szpunar and Szpunar underline the close relationship and similarities between recalling the past and imagining the future and suggest a mutual influence and interdependence between both processes. According to them, the imaginative process which the collective future involves is deeply rooted in the memories from the past which make it possible. The remembrance of the past supplies the raw material which, duly transformed, enables humans to develop a vision of the future. But at the same time "the notion of a collective future serves as a driving force of collective memory and can affect the ways in which a past is reconstructed" (Szpunar and Szpunar 2016, 382=3). As Bell suggests, different images of the future may tend to invite different images of the past, even when they appear in the same social and cultural setting and even in describing the same period of past time (1997, 88). In other words, memories of the past contribute to give shape to the visions of the future while simultaneously the images of the future may also reshape the past.

### The Utopian/Dystopian Discourse of *The Giver*

Published in 1993, the dystopian novel *The Giver* by Lois Lowry soon became a phenomenal popular success. Although the novel was originally intended for children and young adults, this work transcended those age groups, something that the author considered really surprising and unexpected, as she herself acknowledged in the "Note from the Author" included in subsequent editions (Lowry 2014, 226). Nowadays, *The Giver* is considered a modern classic, having won a number of very prestigious prizes, such as the Margaret Edwards Award, the "Best Book of the Year" by the *School Library Journal* or the Newberry Medal, awarded by the American Library Association to the most distinguished contribution to American literature for children. As Angela E. Hubler points out, all these honors have assured the novel "a best-seller status and a semipermanent position in the classroom" (2014, 228). In this sense, the novel holds a unique position in American teen literature and has been included in school curricula in the United States for almost thirty years, with the subsequent cultural impact on generations of students which this implies.

Dystopian fiction describes non-existent societies intended to be read as considerably worse than the reader's own (Sargent 1994, 9). If utopias describe ideal perfect communities and the ways to reach them, in other words, models to imitate, dystopias often function in the opposite way, that is, as cautionary tales which present models to avoid. While utopias attempt to solve the current problems of contemporary societies, dystopias usually warn about the potential terrible consequences of not solving them. In this sense, Richard A. Slaughter in *Futures beyond Dystopias: Creating Social Foresight* (2004) makes evident

the close connection between dystopias and Futures Studies. He highlights the relevance of dystopian discourses, either in fiction or nonfiction works, in order to shape the image of a better future and its eventual realization. Slaughter considers the necessity of taking an active role in the design and construction of the future while emphasizing the primal role of speculative imagination for this task. In his opinion, this speculative imagination at work in dystopias complements and extends reason and rationality and in so doing, "it gives us other, often divergent, images, options, arenas of possibility that lie beyond reason and instrumental analysis. These sources provide access to an entire 'grammar' of future possibility" (Slaughter 2004, 28).

Over the years the utopian/dystopian genre has evolved and expanded and critics have developed many typologies in order to analyze and classify the different possibilities. In their introduction to *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination* (2003), Baccolini and Moylan mention several subgenres in the field, such as "utopia", "critical utopia", "anti-utopia", "dystopia" or "critical dystopia", among others. Even within those categories Antonis Balasopoulos (2011), for example, reconsiders the field and distinguishes five specific subtypes of anti-utopias and five kinds of dystopias. As can be seen, the field has been widely enriched in the last decades.

One of these innovations of the genre is related to the "explosion of dystopian fiction for young adults" (Green 2008), which starts off in 2007. Together with Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time* (1962) and William Sleator's *House of Stairs* (1974), *The Giver* is traditionally considered as the starting point of this literary subgenre. However, unlike *A Wrinkle in Time*, which is closer to science-fiction adventures, and *House of Stairs*, which focuses on the portrait of a claustrophobic psychological experiment with teenagers, Lowry in her novel is particularly interested in providing a detailed depiction of the dystopian society in which the action takes place. In this regard, *The Giver* is the novel that most clearly relates to the later trend of Young Adult dystopias and represents an early source for this subgenre.

The influence of *The Giver* on this subtype of dystopias can also be seen in the particular fusion of narrative elements which Lowry offers in her novel. Balaka Basu et al. (2013, 6) suggest that Young Adults dystopias belong to the wider traditions of utopian/dystopian literature, but at the same time also represent a hybrid genre which incorporates elements from a number of familiar, enduring, and popular plots and narrative forms, including the Bildungsroman, the adventure story, the romance, children's literature or science-fiction. Significantly enough, all these elements mentioned by Basu et al. clearly appear in *The Giver*, which, as has been said, represents the seed of this growing trend of Young Adult dystopias in the early 2000s.

Another concept which may be helpful in order to contextualize *The Giver* is that of "flawed utopias", which Lyman Tower Sargent defines as "works that present what appears to be a good society until the reader learns of some flaw that raises questions about the basis for its claim to be a good society" (2003, 225). These "flawed utopias" share features with the different kinds of utopian and dystopian works and do not constitute a subgenre by itself. Rather, they represent a subtype that may be present in any of those groups. As Sargent points out, flawed utopias usually pose "the fundamental dilemma of what cost we are willing

to pay or require others to pay to achieve a good life. If someone must suffer to achieve that good life, is the cost worth paying?" (226). This notion of sacrifice is clearly present in *The Giver*, in which, in order to reach the state of Sameness in the conflict-free society depicted by Lowry, individuals are deprived of some of their most basic and defining human features. This is precisely the idea developed by Hubler in her analysis of the novel, contending that *The Giver* exposes how "it would be nice to eliminate racism, sexism, war, and hunger, but the cost is too high: feeling, individuality, humanity itself. So, Lowry suggests, we really do live in the best of all possible worlds" (2014, 231). This final conclusion clearly represents the reassurance of a set of conservative ideals which distrust the utopian projects for the betterment of society. Consequently, this view, according to Hubler, aligns Lowry "not with the forces of Utopia but those of Anti-Utopia" (242). The failure of the apparent utopian scenario depicted by Lowry is not but a warning against any attempt to transform radically the basic patterns of society, since they are deeply rooted in human nature, which is far from being perfect.

The complexity of the dystopian world created in this novel is demonstrated by the contradictory responses it has been able to elicit from scholars. Thus, contrary to Hubler's view, other critics such as Carter F. Hanson emphasize the optimistic ending of the novel and consider the ultimately partial utopian vision of *The Giver* since, in spite of the anti-utopian scenario described, "through the protagonist's alienation from his society and resistance to it, the novel offers hope for a better future" (2009, 45). From this perspective, the transformation and subsequent rectification of society eventually turns out to be beneficial for the community thanks to the efforts and sacrifices of the protagonist.

As has been suggested, *The Giver* has been extensively studied from the perspective of utopian and dystopian studies.<sup>2</sup> The present analysis acknowledges the central role that utopia and dystopia play in this novel, but attempts to move its critical exploration one step further to offer a new angle. This will be done by (1) incorporating key insights from the interdisciplinary field of Futures Studies into the analysis of its dystopian universe; and (2) by resorting to the concept of "collective future thinking" (Szpunar and Szpunar 2016, 377).

### The Collective Past and Future in *The Giver*

Many dystopias alert against the potential dangers hidden in current societies. However, few of them explore the intertwining relation and interaction between the remembrance of the past and the visions of the future the way *The Giver* does. Lowry uses a dystopian universe to reflect on the mechanism which generates visions of the future that are deeply rooted in the past. Undoubtedly, this is one of the features which makes this novel unique. *The Giver* is ahead of its time in the way it explores the intricacies of the interconnection between past and future, and it is in this sense that the novel, published almost thirty years ago, already offers practical examples of some notions which will be formulated and developed years later by some of the foundational works of the discipline of Futures Studies, such as those by Wendell Bell (1997) or David Wilson (2000).

*The Giver* has thus been often analyzed as a dystopian text from different points of view (social, political, religious, etc.), but most critics have paid little or no attention to the close interrelation

between past, present and future which is depicted throughout the narrative, and which this article considers by resorting to the insights of Futures Studies and the concept of collective future. *The Giver* presents a seemingly perfect future society in which people live happily in a safe environment. War, hunger and lies no longer exist. Pain, suffering and fear are eradicated and citizens have a comfortable life. Visions of the future are always the result of the time when they are generated and, consequently, any future is always a present's future. In this sense it is quite significant that, as Michael M. Levy argues, "Lowry has intentionally constructed its society to solve many contemporary problems" (1997, 52). The state of Sameness described in the novel has removed any possibility of ethnic, religious, nationalist or economic conflicts. In *The Giver* science has finally eliminated differences and, consequently, all the disagreements and wars originating from them.

However, as Alan Aldridge points out in *Consumption* (2003), apparent utopias typically conceal a grotesque secret (quoted in Morgan 2015, 110). Through the eyes of Jonas, a twelve-year-old child who is the main character of the novel, little by little this society reveals its dystopian potential. In exchange for this comfortably numb happiness, people have been deprived of freedom to choose. Everything is controlled by the Committee of Elders, which takes all the decisions in order to prevent people from making choices of their own and to protect them from the potential mistakes they can make. In this way, readers are shown a society without love or emotions, where sexual desire is controlled by pills and where knowledge and books are forbidden.

It is significant that the main aim of the control strategies used by the Committee is to prevent the development of both individual and collective identities in the members of the group. For example, children are never given a date of birth. Consequently, there are no individual birthday celebrations but just a brief allusion to the anniversary of the birth of all children in the impersonal speech of the annual Ceremony of December. Similarly, the Committee assigns to every individual his/her name, job, spouse, children, etc. Moreover, personal privacy, an aspect which contributes to the development of personal identity, has also disappeared in this world. As Jonas shows in the novel, keeping his personal feelings to himself goes against the rules and in this way he is obliged to share his feelings and dreams every day with his parents and sister. The privation of these individual identity markers makes each child subordinated to the communal interest of the group in this society.

Even more interestingly, these strategies to prevent the development of individual identity coexist with other strategies which attempt to erase the collective identity of the group through the concealment of the past. Collective memory is used in any society to assert collective identity or, using Szpunar and Szpunar's words, "to construct a historical continuity from which to give a present grouping meaning" (2016, 383). This process, as Barbie Zelizer points out in *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory through the Camera's Eye* (1998), is always partial and requires answering the questions "which memory?" and "who remembers?" (quoted in Szpunar and Szpunar 2016, 383). In the case of *The Giver* Lowry offers an extreme example by depicting a society in which collective memories do not exist and the community is deprived of this identity-making tool. History is not taught in schools, books are forbidden and citizens have no access to the knowledge of the past of the community beyond their own limited personal



memories. As young Jonas significantly acknowledges when he learns about the existence of the past, “I thought there was only us, I thought there was only now” (Lowry 2014, 103). These words perfectly reflect the perception of time of this amnesia-induced society. In this sense Lowry provides meaningful metaphors of this suppression of the past such as the significant absence of family ties with older generations. As soon as children assume their adult responsibilities, parents leave their homes to move to a House of the Old where they are not part of their children’s lives anymore. Even the concept of “grandparent” does not exist for the individuals of this community, in which any link to the past has been conveniently removed, given the potential of history to enable individuals to contemplate the present from a different perspective that makes it intelligible. In the same way, it is also quite revealing that in this society without a past, mirrors are said to be an unnecessary rarity since people do not need to look at themselves (35). The suppression of mirrors in the life of citizens, like the concealment of the past, represents an insightful metaphor for the community’s effacement of self-reflection.

As Carter F. Hanson points out, Lowry attempts to emphasize how memory is “a source of considerable individual and emancipating power” (2009, 45-6). The past represents the key for the future and the basis for any potential transformative change. Without the remembrance of the past, visions of different possible futures are not even conceivable and, consequently, the removal of the past represents a wise strategy of control. It is highly significant that from the very origin of the dystopian genre, writers have almost always considered the possession of the past and the memories as a top-rated weapon for the ruling classes in order to subjugate and manipulate the population. In Lowry’s novel, the erasure of the collective memory of the past is justified by the Committee as a way to keep citizens safe from the painful burden of the suffering, cruelty and guilt of human history. There is just one special member of the community, the Receiver of Memory, who has access to all the memories from the past. His task is to hold them and to transmit them in due time at the end of his life to the next Receiver. Jonas, a twelve-year-old boy, is designated by the Committee as the new Receiver of Memory. Throughout the novel readers are shown how Jonas goes through this sometimes painful process of learning the past and how this new knowledge will have an awakening effect on him when he faces a new unknown dimension of reality.

For example, one revealing control strategy in this community is related to the use of colors. In order to achieve the egalitarian state of “Sameness”, citizens are deprived of their ability to perceive colors. Curiously enough, what has been eliminated is not the differences among individuals but just the perception of these differences. Reality has not been modified and still keeps its rich variety. However, it is not accessible to people, whose capacity of perception has been limited. Apart from the individuals’ reduced access to reality, this control of perception also implies a limitation of freedom. As Jonas points out, he misses the opportunity of choosing red clothes or blue clothes: “I know it’s not important what you wear. It doesn’t matter. But it’s the choosing that’s important” (Lowry 2014, 127). It is very significant that as Jonas is receiving the memories of the past, he also spontaneously develops his ability to recognize colors in an evident metaphor of how the knowledge of the past enlarges his mind and brings a new perception of the real nature of his present reality.

In a similar way, having access to the memories of the past also opens the door to a perception of the future for Jonas. When explaining his task to his young apprentice, The Giver of Memory links the past and the future: “I re-experience them [memories] again and again. It is how wisdom comes. And how we shape our future” (103). With these words the novel explicitly articulates in a simple and practical way the ideas formulated by the French anthropologist Marc Augé in his book *The Future*, in which he claims that “the key to the future always depends on the past” (2014, 8). Lowry makes this connection explicit by attributing the ability to create the visions of the future to the person who takes care of the past. Neuropsychological studies have offered much evidence for the close link between the memories of the past and the images of the future the human mind can create. Memory plays an important role in future thinking. In fact, one of the most important functions of human memory is precisely to provide the building blocks that make up the contents of future-oriented cognition (Michaelian et al. 2016, 2). Many studies have shown how healthy groups of population that possess underdeveloped episodic memory systems (such as younger children or older adults) exhibit an impoverished ability to engage in future-oriented activities (2). What these studies come to prove is how imagining the future is ultimately shaped by remembering the past since the capacity to fashion the future is directly related to the capacity to develop memories. In this way, in *The Giver* it can clearly be seen how the privation of the past represents the right strategy to limit, or even preclude, the possibility of an imagined shared future. As Jonas himself exemplifies in the novel, a vision of the future is only possible by unlocking the past.

It is thus significant that Jonas, whose task as the new Receiver of Memory is to keep the legacy from older times, is the only character who really cares about Gabriel, a baby temporarily adopted by Jonas’s family. In the same way that Jonas and The Giver symbolize the inheritance of the past, this newly-born baby clearly represents a new hopeful vision of the future. Consequently, the image of Jonas saving the baby Gabriel (the potentiality of the future) from eugenic killing (euphemistically called “release” in this fictional society) is a powerful metaphor for the indebtedness of the future to the past. From this perspective it can be concluded that in the same way that the future is always present-oriented, the future is also past-oriented, as Lowry suggests in her novel.

After the epiphanic moment of watching his father euthanizing a newborn baby (another metaphorical image of the destruction of the future in this society), Jonas decides to leave the community in order to release all the memories from the past he has acquired. All those memories will go back to his people while The Giver stays with them to help them cope with this new and frightening experience of the memories of the past. Jonas takes this decision of giving collective memories back to the people because this will offer them the possibility of choice and, consequently, the possibility of having different visions of the future. The visions of the future are only possible, then, by redistributing and sharing the memories of the past. As Rocío G. Davis points out, “Jonas’ received memory of ‘choice and unregulated experience’ [...] and his decision to give historical and cultural memory back to his community become a subversive act” (2014, 60). Consequently, at the end of the novel the new revolutionary hopeful vision of the future will be built precisely on the collective memories of the past.

But the interaction between past and future is bidirectional. In the same way that the images of the future are the result of the ideological constructions about the past, the visions of the future may be, as Szpunar and Szpunar assert, a driving force behind the recollection of the past and can have a directive function in shaping it (2016, 378, 383). In this sense, psychological studies such as those by Alea L. Devitt and Donna Rose Addis have recently provided evidence of the impact that imagining the future may have on remembering the past (2016, 5). *The Giver* also perfectly illustrates this process in the character of Jonas. Once he is able to envision the bleak gloomy future time ahead, his perception of both personal and communal past is transformed dramatically. What Jonas always considered an idyllic safe milieu is visualized now by him as an oppressive and meaningless prison which his community has unconsciously inhabited for generations, depriving its members from vital human elements.

This mutual relation and interaction between past and future is particularly emphasized in the meaningful ending of the novel. After escaping the community Jonas and Gabriel start an extremely hard journey. At the end Jonas is lost, exhausted, starved and almost frozen in the middle of a snowstorm when he suddenly recognizes the hill and the sledge which he had in one of his memories. Repeating the actions of one of the first memories offered to him by The Giver, he slides down the hill on the sledge and arrives at the Christmas-decorated house he recognizes, a house that represents love, happiness, family and a new hopeful vision of the future. This ending can be perceived as ambiguous, as many critics and readers have argued, and it is open to quite different interpretations. Most readers prefer the literal happy ending interpretation, that is, Jonas has arrived at this new place where he will start a new joyful life and, for example, Carter F. Hanson understands this vision as real and attributes it to Jonas's special ability for precognition (Hanson 2009, 58). Other critics, such as Michael M. Levy, consider that these images of happiness are just Jonas's hallucinations as a result of starvation and hypothermia (Levy 1997, 56). Some reviewers, as Susan Louise Stewart points out, see clearly in that ending the possibility of death and the arrival of Jonas at "some kind of metaphysical space, the ultimate utopia: heaven" (2007, 29). Another interesting possibility is considering the circular nature of his journey so that the eventual destination of Jonas is back to his own community once it has been transformed into a better place by his release of memories and his sacrifice (metaphorically represented in the journey). As Stewart mentions, "all of the conclusions can be supported in some way or another" (29). Such a deep ambiguous ending seems particularly appropriate for a novel like *The Giver*, in which Jonas makes a strong effort to give back the possibility of choice to his community. When asked many times about this issue, Lois Lowry herself has declared in the "Reader's Guide" (2002) which some editions of the novel include that she did not want to ruin the different endings that people created in their minds (quoted in Stewart 2007, 30), although years later she did it by showing Jonas as an adult in *Messenger* (2004), one of the sequels of *The Giver*, in which he relates what happened.

Leaving aside the validity and implications of the different endings, what I find particularly revealing for my analysis (and it is implied in all the interpretations) is that the final images of the Christmas house which represent the future of Jonas come directly from his memories. Jonas himself acknowledges "I remember this place, Gabe" (Lowry 2014, 222) while the narrator of the novel corroborates "and it was true. [...] It was a memory of

his own" (222). The intimate link between the remembrance of the past and the images of the future is made explicit at the end of the novel when readers are told how Jonas's destination is in fact an image which he can remember: "the final destination, the place that he had always felt was waiting, the Elsewhere that held their future and their past" (223). Future and past intermingle making explicit their deep connections at the end of the novel. When contemplating his destination, Jonas is literally remembering his future. This future has been made possible only by the projection of the fragments of his memory, a memory which at the same time, as I have mentioned, is being constantly remolded by the visions of the future as well.

## Conclusion

The most disturbing aspect of the dystopia described in *The Giver* is that it offers a universe which is neither past- nor future-oriented but exclusively focused on the present. It is a world fixed in its own immobility, a world which attempts to self-replicate by renouncing to change. As Levy points out, "utopias are static, virtually by definition. Having worked so hard to achieve a society in which there are no serious problems, the citizens of utopia want things to stay pretty much the way they are. Change essentially becomes the enemy" (1997, 53). These words also perfectly describe the dystopian society described in *The Giver*, a society which has developed some control strategies to perpetuate itself indefinitely by repeating the same patterns. This community tries to neutralize the potential for future collective development by removing the memories of the past. The erasure of past and future leaves the present as the only option and priority. As Wilson sees it, the present is essentially a state of transition, "where we move from somewhere to somewhere else [...] from what we were to what we will be" (Wilson 2000, 89). In this case, therefore, the present becomes meaningless without a proper past ("what we were") and a possible future ("what we will be"). A dystopia like *The Giver* projects the fears of the present to the future and warns readers not against facts but against possibilities. As happens in most dystopian visions,

the future can also function as a source of fear [...] [but] beneath the surface of pessimism [...] lies an undercurrent of hope because through the act of publicizing such dark potentialities, the writers hope to prevent the future they are describing. (Wilson 2000, 26–27)

In dystopias readers can catch a glimpse of the gloomy society they may become but, fortunately, they are not there yet. In a way these apocalyptic visions of the future reaffirm the value of an imperfect but still valid present. As *The Giver* clearly demonstrates and recent developments in the Futures Studies field have extensively shown, without a common past and a shared vision of the future the historical continuity of a society is broken and, consequently, the present becomes meaningless. In this way, the novel alerts about the dangers of contemporary cultural amnesia and its potential consequences by reaffirming the necessary ties and interconnections between past, present and future. But, more importantly, Lowry's novel offers a pioneering exploration of the way the remembrance of the past and the visions of the future are interdependent in any society, advancing some notions and processes which years later have been described and analyzed in the field of Futures Studies.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed analysis of this aspect see Zelizer (1995), Olick and Robbins (1998) or Erll and Nünning (2010).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the works by Levy (1997), Stewart (2007), Hanson (2009) or Hubler (2014).

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