

From Utopia to Dystopia: Visions of the Future in Literature and Cinema

L. Cardoso

Abstract—Utopia and Dystopia are key concepts to understand society as a changing and complex web of relations, mixed with hope and desire of a better future, but often portrayed as the dark side of technology. From Literature to Cinema, these concepts inspired writers and directors creating visions of the future, more often connected to Dystopia, but frequently offering a metaphor for the present so that spectators could question choices and values, not from a distant horizon, but from the society we live in.

Keywords— Utopia, Dystopia, Cinema, Elysium.

I. INTRODUCTION

The concepts of Utopia and Dystopia have broad echoes in Literature and Cinema, configuring two antagonistic visions often associated with the future of Humanity. Both Literature and Cinema (and in the case of adaptations of books to the cinema) gave us opposing visions of the future. On the one hand, a utopian vision centred on progress, technological achievements, a perfect and problem-free society, with the main dilemmas and questions of humanity being eliminated, living an era of prosperity and happiness. In contrast, we find portraits of a bleak future in which technology has alienated Man's identity, progress has created divisions and fractures in society, imbalances and lack of values, fostering a discussion around the issue of science as the fruit of human creation, but that, over time, it acquired autonomy, motivated by the certainty that it carried the truth about all things, pointing out the need for Man to be aware of the dangers this entails and not allow it to become greater than his own creator.

The concept of Utopia refers to the Greek but is associated with the work of Thomas More, who becomes a precursor in this genre, which, in etymological terms, refers to a place or a good place, although the roots of this concept are much older. In any case, according to Sargent (1994), a Utopia corresponds to a society that does not exist, destined for the contemporary reader so that it can establish a comparison. Since *The Republic* of Plato, the concept of a perfect society has been the object of reflection and literary creation. But when we approach the adaptations to the movies or films created without direct literary inspiration, we find that Utopia is mostly replaced by Dystopia,

the theme with the greatest number of cinematographic approaches, as Blaim and Blaim (2011) refer, and Utopia is a

very rare theme. Taking as a starting point the film of Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1921), Zsolt Cziganyik synthesizes the main characteristics of a dystopic film:

We already includes the most important basic topics which have kept occurring in dystopian literature and cinema ever since. These include mind control, the repression of emotions and imagination, sublimation of individuality in a larger social unit, and the existence of a non-conformist revolt group, including the alienated protagonist whose sufferings highlight the impossibility of human existence within the framework of the total state. Thus, the focus of this genre (whether on the page or on the screen) becomes the limits of humanity in the context of an extremely oppressive social construct that often claims to be beneficial. The above elements are particularly important for the definition of the dystopian film genre as “the term *dystopia* seems to have become nowadays an ‘umbrella’ term for any work depicting a gloomy vision of horrible society” (Maziarczyk 47), dystopia having become an aesthetic category. Rick Altman argues that genres are groups of films which share certain semantic and syntactic elements. “By semantic Altman means the ‘building blocks’ of a genre; typical characters, props, and locations, but also stylistic features” (Spiegel 2). So we can conclude that the most important semantic elements of the dystopian genres have already appeared in Zamyatin's book, and they are oppression, mind control with the repression of emotions, a society threatening individuality, and the individual (usually in a small group or at least in a love relationship) rebelling against this threat. (2016, p. 34)

The history of cinema knew how to explore this theme in multiple dimensions, following the historical concerns of each era. The ability to align the cinema with the concerns of society has been, in fact, one of the most traveled paths by the filmmakers, who, in this way, are able to reconcile creativity and social pedagogy, often conveying values or presenting situations that lead the viewer to reflect on your world, compared to the futuristic (pseudo) vision we are seeing in the movies. Regarding the connection between cinema and society, Lacerda & Follis writes, quoting several authors:

Rafael Hagemeyer also brings the theorist Marc Ferro, with his article "The film as a counter-analysis of society," which emphasizes the importance and possibility of understanding history through film. "In it, a section of society represents history, whose

L. Cardoso is with the Polytechnic Institute of Portalegre (Portugal) with the Department of Languages and Communication

characters and dramatic conflicts can be read as an allegory of their own time. [...] A film can thus be read as an ideological expression of society, according to the narrative choices made by its authors, according to the desire of its producers" (HAGEMEYER, 2012, page 48). Even if it is not denied interference from the point of view of the creator of the narrative, the screenwriter and the producers, the very choice in the making of the film and the identification (or lack thereof) of the audience with the film is already a response that shows us something about society or a segment of it. "We can understand that since then the film [...] has come to be seen as an important, if not preponderant, part in the reproduction of the social imaginary. Cinema can be considered a privileged source for understanding the emotions, fears and hopes of an era" (HAGEMEYER, 2012, page 48). (Lacerda & Follis, 2016, p.4)

An example of this worried look at the future is the film *Elysium* (2013) by Neill Blomkamp..

II. ELYSIUM, A FRACTURED DYSTOPIA

Having as central perspective the interpretation of cinema as one of the diverse forms of cultural expression of the contemporary society, as well as a way for the human reflection, this study will analyze some aspects of the cinematographic production *Elysium*, trying to relate the film to theoretical guidelines that are conjugated in the film to create a dystopia of strong social nature. As Silva and Marcon write, the director has focused his work on social concerns, namely the exclusion and division of classes, which are well evident in his most recent creations:

In addressing emerging issues on film screens, South African Neil Blomkamp has been singled out as an icon of modern cinema after producing the film *District 9*, a box-office hit, released in 2005, in which he won themes such as xenophobia and social segregation, inspired by the events that took place in the District Six in Cape Town during apartheid. And again, this time in 2013, the producer surprised the audience with the strong social criticism present in the plot of his controversial film production *Elysium* (2015, page 3)

The title of the film begins by reminding us of Greek mythology, with its Champs Elysees, a place of paradisiacal character, where the virtuous people lived, with the permission of the gods. Strangely enough, in the film, people living in *Elysium* are not chosen by virtue, but by financial conditions, but there remains a governing personality, in this case, the security secretary Rhodes Delacourt (Jodie Foster). From this point, a border begins to be drawn. On the one hand, the inhabitants of *Elysium*, with a high financial standard, power and influence living outside the planet, in a huge space station, orbiting around the Earth, and on the surface of the planet live the marginalized, the segregated, the ones without resources. The separation of space is clear evidence of social and financial segregation, and the narrative highlights that

technological advances have been increasing social exclusion, since not everyone can have access to the advances of medicine, which are being discovered and maintained under the power of who governs *Elysium*, being made available only to a certain class: the one that has the resources to pay. Yorulmaz synthesizes the film as follows:

Elysium (paradise) is yet another science fiction story about the future of the earth. In 2154, the earth has become almost uninhabitable, so those with wealth have built a space station called *Elysium* – a place of ideal happiness - that provides a luxurious living for those who can afford it. One of the most important features of *Elysium* is something called Med-Bay, a medical device that heals all kinds of sickness and infirmity, but which is available only to citizens of *Elysium*. Those without money continue to live on Earth: Earth that has been physically devastated, is overpopulated, and where people can scrounge out a meagre existence at best. The lucky ones work for the Armadyne Corporation, a company that provides arms and weapons to the people of *Elysium*. But, even those who have a job at Armadyne are treated like slaves by the managers of the company. Max Da Costa (Matt Damon) is one of the “lucky” ones who are employed by Armadyne. An accident at the plant, however, exposes Max to a lethal dose of radiation and his only hope is to use the Med-Bay facilities to be found on *Elysium*. But, Max is not a citizen of *Elysium* and so he is not eligible to use their Med-Bay facilities. Yorulmaz (2014, p. 4)

In the film, specifically in the year 2159, the scenario is that of a planet with unbearable levels of pollution, overpopulation, poverty, disease, decay and environmental degradation, so we can truly say that the film is a portrait of our present, shown by a director of deep social and environmental awareness, who shows us a decimated planet, in Martial Law state, controlled by police robots, who do the dirty work of eliminating threats.

Matt Damon is a leading actor who well represents the class of workers who work for Armadyne, a factory that produces robots for *Elysium*, and who one day suffers an accident, being exposed to a deadly dose of radiation, and then receives the prognosis that you have only five days to live. As today, despite the evolution of science, many people die every day because of the lack of access to its benefits. This privilege is denied them due to political, economic and social factors, being restricted to a group, as it is well shown in the film and that illustrates one of the examples of the social exclusion that the technological and scientific advances can reproduce, at the present time.

Thus, the protagonist's salvation lies in the advanced medical technology that exists in *Elysium*, just as for Matilde, a girl suffering from leukaemia. The technology at *Elysium* is so advanced that we are close to immortality, as Tucker writes:

The human bodies of *Elysium* are potentially immortal: there are “Lazarus beds” on the space station that can cure any illness and mend any physical wound near instantaneously; the villain

Kruger is brought back to full health after having his face blown off by using one of the beds. The climax of the film actually celebrates the eradication of death and illness in which the human body becomes disposable and without stakes, rendered as machine-like and replaceable as the robot army tasked with patrolling Earth. (Tucker, 2015, p. 10)

The actors of the film are of various nationalities, including Brazil and Mexico, which gives greater credibility to the multicultural environment of Earth. An interesting fact is that the languages spoken on Earth are most English and Spanish, whereas *Elysium* there is a certain tendency for French, the linguistic detail that the director used to highlight the border between the two worlds.

This issue of social division has been feeding numerous films, notably science fiction, and is already present in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), laying the groundwork for a discussion of technological progress and its social impact. Recently, this issue was also associated with the Occupy movement, about which Grandinetti (2015) wrote, as Silva et al. claim:

In a rhetorical and theoretical film analysis conducted by Grandinetti, relating Science Fiction (FC) *Hunger Games* (first film of the saga, 2012), *Batman: the dark knight* (2012) and *Elysium* (2013), it was verified that these were strongly influenced by the Occupy Movement, better known in Brazil as an occupation, due to the themes that call attention to dystopian power relations between small marginalized groups and the oppressive "super-rich" oppressors represented in both plots. In addition, the same author analyzed the message of each film to better illuminate his rhetorical goals and methodology. Ultimately, the application of rhetoric to such films allows an analysis of how contemporary fears about the rise of unequal global financial relations are manifested in popular culture through films of speculative dystopian fiction. The Occupy movement was inspired by the capitalist system, as was corruption and abuse in the US government. Although it gained a foothold on September 17, 2011, at Zuccotti Park in Manhattan's New York City financial district, the movement continues, denouncing the impunity of those responsible and beneficiaries of the global financial crisis.²¹ In a critical essay on *Elysium*, Quintana sees as a film that represents the aspirations of a community, somehow indoctrinated by a belief, as a cult for the project promises towards modernity and its progress, with little capacity to reflect on the validity of the means to his leadership and achievement (2017, p.8)

The film further reminds us of the concept of sustainable development leads us to think about the broader dimension that encompasses the sustainability of the Earth, natural resources and health. We are sensitized to the risks and ethical dilemmas related to the progress of science to question more critically our reality and even to make decisions to face socio-environmental problems from preventive interventions, that is, the cinema manifests considerable proximity with the world that tends to portray and question. As Lacerda et Follis write:

Considering cinema as a very participatory element of social everyday life, as well as a media, that is, a product of the technique, and taking into account this producing and re-producing relationship between society and the media, we are led to think about the relevance to understand the environment in which it was produced. Morin (1970, pp. 107-109) considers cinema one of the clearest ways of visualizing the human imaginary because it is there that intentions are projected, it is there that the spectator identifies with what he sees and transfers to other media what a movie transmitted to him. Likewise, whoever produces the film passes to him the projections-identifications he possesses of the thinking world. (Lacerda & Follis, 2016, p.7).

III. CONCLUSION

In short, *Elysium* is a true answer to the disinherited, as Quintana (2015) wrote, stressing the negative aspects that progress without rules and values can bring to humanity. This blind progress is capable of creating inequalities that can hardly be overcome if the social and financial years are combined, rebuilding society in two large plots: those who have and those who are disinherited. This is the message of *Elysium*. As Silva and Marcon tell us:

They sound like an alert to contemporary society, to contemporary man, who from the top of his individualism, egocentrism and self-objectification, has looked to his neighbour as if it were an object that can be discarded, when a system, which if it proves perverse, excluding and segregating, gives the sentence that he is no longer useful to him. In relation to technological and scientific advances, it is necessary for us researchers always to remember that science is the fruit of human creation, but that, over time, it acquired autonomy, motivated by the certainty that it carried the truth about all pointing out the need for man to be aware of the dangers this entails and not allow him to become greater than his own creator, escaping his dominion. In the light of the above, we find that scientific-technological development must always have as its main objective the service to the basic needs of the population. But if instead, it serves to promote the interests of a small fraction of the population, as a ruse of a capitalist system, notably excluding, then it will be necessary to continue searching for alternatives capable of promoting a more harmonious relationship between science and technology and society. (2015, p.15)

An apparently dystopian vision of the future, *Elysium* updates the literary heritage of the concept of Utopia and its opposite, reconfiguring our gaze through the protagonist, who may be one of us, and who symbolizes the hope of overcoming the social barriers we can often find, in our world, in our day. Once again, science fiction seemingly focused on the future, leads us, after all, to question our present.

REFERENCES

- [1] Blaim, A. And Gruszevska-Blaim, L. eds. (2011) *Imperfect Worlds and Dystopian Narratives in Contemporary Cinema*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang
- [2] Grandinetti, JJ. (2015) *Occupy the future: a rhetorical analysis of dystopian film and the occupy movement*. Madison: James Madison University
- [3] Lacerda, I. & Follis, R. (2016) *O Cinema Como Forma de Compreender a Sociedade e os Simulacros de Baudrillard*. XXI Congresso de Ciências da Comunicação na Região Sudeste. São Paulo: INTERCOM
- [4] Quintana, RAC. (2016) *Elysium, el filme como respuesta imaginativa de los desheredados*. Revista UIS Humanidades; 42(1):14-169. Santander: Universidad Industrial de Santander
- [5] Sargent, L. (1994) *The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited*. Utopian Studies 5.1. Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press
- [6] Silva, M. et alii (2017) *The socio-scientific issues in the film Elysium: connections between science and citizenship on the “school floor”*. DEMETRA. RJ: UERJ
- [7] Silva, S. and Marcon, J. (2015) *O discurso ideológico veiculado no filme elysium: uma crítica aos avanços tecnológicos como fator de segregação social*. XIII Congresso Nacional de Educação. Paraná: PUCPR
- [8] Tucker, A. (2015) *The hard technological bodies of Elysium and Edge of tomorrow in Cinema: Journal of Philosophy and the Moving Image*, n.º 7. Lisbon: Nova University
- [9] Yorulmaz, B. (2014) "Elysium," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 18: Iss. 1, Article 50. Available at: <http://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol18/iss1/50>.



L. Cardoso was born in Viseu (Portugal) in 1969. After concluding the Humanities degree at the Catholic University in 1991, he concluded a Master in Classic Literatures at Coimbra University, in 1996. In 2007 he concluded his PhD in Modern Languages and Literatures at Coimbra University (Portugal). After teaching for four years in secondary schools, he began teaching at the Polytechnic Institute of Viseu

in 1995 until 2008, when he moved to the Polytechnic Institute of Portalegre as Adjunct Professor. He was elected Dean of the School of Education and Social Sciences in 2010 until february 2018, completing the two mandates permitted by law. Since 2015 until May, 2018, he was also President of ARIPESE – the Association for Reflexion and Intervention in Higher Schools Polytics. Main interests in teaching and investigation include Science and Communication Languages, Literature and Cinema, and Management of Higher Education Universities. In 2016, he published *Literature and Cinema: the look of Janus. Vergilio Ferreira and the space of the unspeakable*. Prof. Dr. Cardoso was the national coordinator for the Bologna Process in Polytechnics in Media and Communication Sciences. He is a member of several international organizations concerning Education, Communication, Comparative Literature, Narratology, Film Studies and Higher Education Management and reviewer of several international journals. He has published several papers in national and international journals with peer review and is a member of C3i - *Interdisciplinary Research and Innovation Coordination* of the Polytechnic Institute of Portalegre and of the *Comparative Studies Center* of the University of Lisbon.