

**Valerio Alfonso Bruno**  
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# **Dystopian Worlds** **Beyond** **Storytelling**

Representations of  
Dehumanized Societies  
in Literature, Media, and  
Political Discourses

Multidisciplinary Perspectives

With a foreword by Damiano Palano  
and an afterword by Massimo Scaglioni

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# Foreword

*Damiano Palano*

Reflecting on Alfonso Cuarón's *The Children of Men* (2006), Mark Fisher wrote that the film, which brought D. James' novel to the big screen, eloquently displayed the hallmark of the new dystopian imagination. Fisher observed that "Once, dystopian films and novels were exercises in such acts of imagination—the disasters they depicted acting as narrative pretext for the emergence of different ways of living" (Fisher 2009, 9). In contrast, the world foreshadowed by Cuarón's film "seems more like an extrapolation or exacerbation of ours than an alternative to it", a scenario that reflects "the suspicion that the end has already come, the thought that it could well be the case that the future harbors only reiteration and re-permutation" (*ibidem*). Not all contemporary dystopias can be traced back to what Fisher claims is the hallmark of capitalist realism. Consider a film like James McTeigue's *V for Vendetta*, which depicts a world dominated by a ruthless despotic regime. Nevertheless, it is quite likely that the genre's fortunes are linked to a famous phrase attributed to Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek, that at the beginning of the 21st century, "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism" (*ibidem*). "From the moment the division of the world into two 'blocs' ends and the alternative between capitalism and communism falls," wrote Francesco Muzzioli fifteen years ago, "the collective imagination becomes incapable of thinking of the future, except in terms [...] of the end of the world," in the sense that triumphant capitalism "is also a capitalism left 'alone in the world,' which in its solitude cannot avoid mirroring itself in the nightmare of its own collapse" (Muzzioli 2007, 12).

Since they began to define the canon of a new genre at the end of the 19th century, 20th-century dystopian narratives assumed a critical role concerning the promises of progress, the great utopian projects of social transformation, and the utopias that materialised

in 20th-century totalitarianisms (Arciero 2005; Baccolini and Moyland 2003; Battaglia 1998; Battaglia 2006; Brooker 1994; Ceretta 2001; Claeys 2010; 2017; Guardamagna 1980; Kumar 1995; Stock 2019). The aim of 20th-century dystopia—often openly and visibly political—was therefore above all to warn against the illusions of progress and the promises of utopias, although dystopian scenarios took on a different profile depending on the specific utopian horizon toward which the polemic was directed. Instead, the fascination that dystopias exert on the world in the 21st century is probably connected to our perception of the future, one that underwent a radical reorientation after 1989 as compared to the 20th-century. In 1989, Norberto Bobbio wrote that there was not simply the crisis of a few authoritarian regimes founded on a socialist ideology, but it revealed "the total reversal of a utopia, of the greatest political utopia in history [...] into its exact opposite. [...] The first utopia that tried to enter history, to pass from the realm of 'discourses' to the realm of things, [...] not only did not come true but is being overturned, has almost been overturned, in the countries in which it has been put to the test, into something that has come increasingly to resemble the negative utopias, which have also existed so far only in discourses" (Bobbio 1989, 1). Because of the collapse of socialist regimes, even the very image of historical progress underwent a radical transformation from which any promise of future palingenesis was expunged, as well as the idea that the future could be significantly better than the present. Placed within this perception of the future, contemporary dystopias continue playing the critical role that marked the birth of this genre, starting with the classic novels of Zamjatin, Huxley, and Orwell. At the same time, they update the maps of fears and anxieties, broadening the spectrum well beyond the nightmare of a new totalitarian power.

When Francis Fukuyama, over three decades ago, saw the end of the Cold War as a sign of the "end of History," he was not referring to the end of history as a succession of events, conflicts, crises, and scientific discoveries, but, more specifically, to history as a "single, coherent, evolutionary process, when taking into account the experience of all peoples in all times" (Fukuyama 1992, xii). The endpoint of History, in this perspective, is therefore not the end of

events, but the achievement of that condition in which the fundamental principles and institutions, capable of solving humanity's problems, have finally been conquered. It was precisely in this sense that Fukuyama was able to claim that History had come to a halt during the months in which the Soviet bloc had dissolved, collapsing the last great antagonist of the liberal democratic project. Hegel had argued that History had ended in 1806, on the day of the Battle of Jena, because with that battle, the ideals of the American and French revolutions had defeated the old aristocratic world and, above all, had made a new social model triumph — one based on a universal and reciprocal recognition, according to which each citizen recognises the dignity as a human being of all other citizens, and this dignity is in turn recognised by the state through the granting of rights (Fukuyama 1992). Fukuyama merely updated the Hegelian formula, shifting the date of the conclusion of History to 1989, because it was at that very moment that Western liberal democracy was indeed revealed as the "end point of mankind's ideological evolution" and the "final form of human government" (Fukuyama 1992, xi). The defeat of authoritarian regimes — based on nationalist ideologies or variants of Marxist-Leninist ideology — signified something more than the mere attrition of the conditions of existence of strong states — i.e., centralised states endowed with a sizeable bureaucracy and capable of exercising strict control over society. That defeat effectively meant the victory of liberal democracy over every other contender. "As mankind approaches the end of the millennium, the twin crises of authoritarianism and socialist central planning," Fukuyama wrote, "have left only one competitor standing in the ring as an ideology of potentially universal validity: liberal democracy, the doctrine of individual freedom and popular sovereignty" (ivi, 63). It was not simply a political victory because Western liberal democracy had won the ideological contest that had marked the 20th century, clearing the field of all ideologies that had portrayed the future in different terms. After that victory, liberal democracy — in the form established by Western experience — could become the only alternative in which the future of humanity was conceivable, as well as desirable. "In our grandparents' time, many reasonable people could foresee a radiant socialist future in which

private property and capitalism had been abolished," Fukuyama observed, whereas today, "by contrast, we have trouble imagining a world that is radically better than our own, or a future that is not essentially democratic and capitalist" (Fukuyama, 1992, 67). "We can also imagine future worlds that are significantly worse than what we know now," but "we cannot picture to ourselves a world that is *essentially* different from the present one, and at the same time better" (Fukuyama 1992, 68).

In the more than thirty years since it was first formulated, Fukuyama's thesis – often reduced by critics to a caricature – has been challenged and refuted dozens, perhaps even hundreds of times, and on several occasions – after 11 September, 2001, after the outbreak of the global financial crisis of 2008 or the Covid-19 pandemic, or more recently, on the occasion of Russia's military aggression against Ukraine – the "return of History" has been hailed. On the other hand, the first two decades of the 21st century have seriously undermined the optimism of the 1990s, because the difficulties encountered by the democratisation process have revealed how the planetary victory of Western liberal democracy was much less solid than was hoped for at the time, since a veritable global democratic recession has taken shape, and autocratic powers old and new have once again come to play a leading role on the world stage (Palano 2019a). In spite of such striking signs, which seem to testify that History has begun once again, it is indeed difficult to deny that the West has not continued to live, or at least to perceive itself, within a post-historical – and, for this reason, a largely post-political – world. In the thirty years since the Cold War ended, the West has never really ceased to live at the "end of history." In our eyes as Westerners, the ideological evolution of mankind is really over, while progress seems to have found its definitive political form in liberal democracy. Politically, the West can only think of progress in terms of preservation of the present institutional form. That is, it can conceive of it as a kind of expansion of the present conditions of well-being, an extension of the potential for consumption, or in terms of a lengthening of the average lifespan. But it cannot really conceive it outside the political-institutional-cultural perimeter of liberal democracy, nor can it project in a more or less distant future

the attainment of true democracy, as the 20th-century ideological families—not only those of a socialist stamp—tended to do. Progress is in essence understood—more or less explicitly—only in terms of a preservation of present conditions, or at most as an adjustment aimed at preserving the condition we have achieved. The idea of the "end of History" thus restores, in a paradigmatic way, the ideological and emotional condition of a West able to perceive the future either as the preservation of the present in the face of growing internal and external threats, or in terms of catastrophe, of environmental and political apocalypse. Orphans of any idea of radical social transformation, of any hope of progress other than the perpetuation of the present, we Westerners are unable to conceive the future except with the contours of a difficult preservation of liberal democracy, or in those of the end of the world, cataclysm, barbarian invasions, and apocalypse. And it is probably within this post-historical horizon that one can recognise both the roots of today's fortune of dystopian narratives and the reasons that make them at least in part different from those of the past.

After all, it is not so surprising that old classics of the dystopian genre, such as George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, and even Nobel Prize winner Sinclair Lewis' *It Can't Happen Here*, have returned to bookshops, sometimes reaching the top of best-seller lists. The political rise of disruptive figures such as Donald Trump, the electoral success of the far right, and the growth of political polarisation in general, have suggested to some political scientists the hypothesis that some Western democracies are deconsolidating or that they are now even threatened by collapse (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2019; Mounk 2018; Runciman, 2018). Those events, however, delivered a new fortune to those old dystopias that had imagined during the 20th century that democracy could give way to some form of despotism, or that moulded the sinister outlines of totalising powers, authoritarian regimes, and capillary control apparatuses. The interest in Orwell's old novel and in all the classics of 20th-century dystopian literature can indeed be considered an eloquent demonstration of the new attitude, which—not only in the United States—induces one to glimpse on the horizon a possible

collapse of democratic regimes, or at least to look at the future of democracy with much more disquiet than in the recent past. In the same direction, it can be argued that some great dystopian and uchronic novels, such as *The Plot Against America*, *The Man in the High Castle*, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Brave New World*, have given rise to television series with a greater impact, in some cases, on popular culture than older films produced for the big screen, such as Michael Radford's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1984) or François Truffaut's *Fahrenheit 451* (1966).

Nevertheless, the success of the dystopian genre cannot only be explained by evoking the conjuncture experienced by American politics, or by considering the pessimism with which the fate of liberal democracies has begun to be viewed. In fact, the repertoire of dystopian narratives has been considerably enriched compared to that of the 20th century, even long before the Covid-19 pandemic prompted Western governments to adopt exceptional measures in the early 2020s, making European and American metropolises resemble the sets of films such as *28 Days Later* or *I Am Legend*, thus rendering the gloomy scenarios of dystopian narratives increasingly realistic. In a recent book, the British political scientist David Runciman observed that our political imaginations of the crisis of democracy "are stuck with outdated images of what democratic failure looks like" and that we "are trapped in the landscape of the twentieth century" (Runciman 2018, 2). That is, we are stuck in a scenario shaped by the ways in which the collapse of liberal democratic institutions materialised in the years between the two world wars in Italy and Germany, or if anything, by the ways in which the armed forces seized power in Latin America, Africa, and Asia between the 1950s and 1970s. Updating such an imaginary requires relativising the 20th-century experience without forgetting history, but bearing in mind that today's societies have very different characteristics – demographic, cultural, economic, and technological – from those that Europe had a century ago. Responses to tensions are likely to take very different directions from those experienced during the twenty years between the two World Wars. Similarly, confronting dystopian imaginaries today – and also grasping their political significance at different levels – means recognising the

radical changes that have occurred in the languages with which dystopian narratives are articulated, and in the recipients to whom these productions are addressed. Although the political climate following Trump's rise in the United States has contributed to the revival of old dystopian narratives and the dystopias of the past continue to play a significant role in the contemporary imagination, it would be superficial to crush the prevalent dystopias in 21st-century popular culture into the silhouette of an Orwellian Big Brother. By relativising the weight of those old dystopian scenarios, we can succeed in recognising the political role of contemporary dystopias—their capacity to shape imaginaries and to play an implicit political role, not confined to pure entertainment but also not ascribable to the register of committed criticism, which was the hallmark of 20th-century dystopian production.

In reconstructing the trajectories followed by dystopian narratives, it is essential to identify criteria that make it possible to establish, as far as possible, the genre's distinctive characteristics (Abdelbaky 2016). In general, every dystopia describes a future society marked by an accomplished and relatively stable internal organisation, as well as various forms of oppressive control, that contribute to a strongly negative representation of such a society. According to a recent proposal, a typical dystopian narrative is characterised by the presence of a controlling power (usually an authoritarian government, but it can also be a global corporation, a church, or another entity) that oppresses citizens and intervenes in their lives in various ways, including—but not necessarily—through the exploitation of their labour (Trotta, Filipovic and Sadri 2021, 4). Apocalyptic narratives are also often intertwined with dystopian narratives but have qualifying features that clearly distinguish them: the classic apocalyptic narrative envisages that a catastrophic event—or a series of catastrophic events—causes (or has caused) the collapse of social structures to such proportions that mankind is plunged into a ruthless struggle for survival and into a world in which each individual has to cope alone with all vital needs (Trotta, Filipovic and Sadri 2021, 4-5). Moreover, there are frequent intersections between the two genres: a great catastrophe may, for instance, give rise to the construction of a new social organisation



with dystopian features, while a dystopian society may collapse, materialising an apocalyptic scenario (Giuliani 2015; Haldaway and Scaglioni 2017; Palano 2017).

In schematic terms, one can identify some major stages in the development of dystopian literature, distinguishing between three phases. First, during the season of modern dystopia (1800-1950), narratives focus on the problems triggered by industrialisation and collectivism. Second, the season of postmodern dystopia (1950-2000) is marked by the emergence of significant themes, such as the relationship between the self and others and, more generally, the disconnect between reality and perception. Finally, the season of contemporary dystopia (from 2000 to the present) defines a world often marked by apocalyptic traits in which leading female figures frequently emerge (Barton 2016). Beyond these stages, it is important to bear in mind that dystopian imaginaries, as Manuela Ceretta points out, have undergone a series of radical transformations in recent decades, making today's dystopian narratives markedly different from those of the twentieth century. First, a macroscopic transformation concerns the audience, for whom very heterogeneous media products are addressed, which include—in addition to novels—TV series, comics, manga, or video games. If the first generation of dystopian authors (Evgenij Zamjatin, Aldous Huxley, Katharine Burdekin, Karin Boye, Ayn Rand, George Orwell, and Ray Bradbury) had written for the adult world, contemporary dystopian production is aimed at a very different audience. The dystopian turn of the 21st century has opened up to young adults, creating a form of trans-generational literature (Attimonelli and Susca 2020; Carluccio and Ortoleva 2010; Ilardi 2016; 2018). Striking examples include Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* tetralogy, Veronica Roth's *Divergent* trilogy, and Lois Lowry's *The Giver*. Another change has been the emergence of critical dystopias and the increasing role of female writers in dystopian fiction, such as Ursula K. Le Guin, Octavia E. Butler, Naomi Alderman, and Christina Dalcher. Additionally, dystopian fiction aimed at young adults has incorporated themes related to the depletion of the planet's resources and the Anthropocene crisis. A more recent change has delved into the issue of power, especially the growing

role of technology and artificial intelligence in governing economic and social organisations.

The dystopian imagination continues to emphasise fear, showing how it is the lever through which despotic power can impose control over individuals. This is evident in classic dystopias like Zamiatin's, Orwell's, and Bradbury's, as well as in Burdekin's *The Night of the Swastika*, Rand's *Anthem*, Boye's *Kallocain*, Moore's *V for Vendetta*, Collins' *The Hunger Games*, and Sansal's *2084*. Examining the serial production of the early 21st century from a geopolitical perspective, Dominique Moïsi has highlighted how fear—more specifically, a multifaceted fear—serves as the central theme in many of the most well-known TV series, including non-dystopian ones. This encompasses "the fear of chaos and a return to barbarism, [...] the fear of decline linked to the crisis of democracy, [...] the fear of terrorism and the question of the nature of the threat and the identity of the enemy, [...] the fear of descending into another world order, accompanied by nostalgia for a bygone order, [...] [and] the fear of Russian occupation" (Moïsi 2017, 44-45). Alongside this predominant theme, there is also a minority thread that traces its origins to *Brave New World* and extends to novels such as Michel Houellebecq's *Submission*. It is characterised by dystopias that "imagine and represent the process of individualization, atomization, and infantilization of society," encompassing "materialistic, hedonistic dystopias of opulence, satiety, tedium, boredom, and anxiety rather than fear" (Ceretta 2018b, 185). In any case, due to this complex set of transformations in audiences, registers, and themes, contemporary dystopias "investigate not only the 'who' but the 'what,' focusing on the mechanisms accompanying the process as well as the decision-makers" (Ceretta 2022b, 83). In engaging with social contexts where the mechanisms of exercising power take on unprecedented forms compared to the past, the new dystopias, as Ceretta observes, strive to "give a face to the threats looming over democracies, centering their imaginaries on the commitment to rethink power beyond the dichotomies of violence-fear, dominators-dominated, culprits-victims, masters-servants, in order to look beyond the specter of totalitarianism that haunted much of 20th-century dystopian literature" (Ceretta 2022b, 83).

Although political scholars have rarely focused on these aspects, such an investigation could likely provide valuable insights into key phenomena of contemporary politics, particularly the dynamics of public opinion polarisation and the methods of mobilisation within the context of the "bubble democracy," wherein the audience fragments into largely separate and self-referential niches (Palano 2020; 2022). Despite the long-recognised deep interpenetration between entertainment and political information, the discourse has only partially expanded to consider the role of fictional narratives in shaping political behaviours during an era marked by the weakening of traditional ideological coordinates and the emergence of more flexible representations of society and its conflicts compared to those provided by 20th-century ideologies. The success experienced by neopopulist movements over the past decade has led many scholars to acknowledge that ideologies tend to re-emerge as thin-centered: loosely structured narratives with a thin conceptual core, yet still capable of delineating lines of conflict and often closely connected to portrayals of future scenarios. Various studies have shown, for instance, that the ability to politically mobilise perceptions of risk (economic, cultural, social) plays a crucial role in determining the success of outsider candidates and formations. However, contemporary reflection has not yet adequately considered how representations of the future—optimistic, pessimistic, utopian, or dystopian—influence contemporary thin ideologies, nor has it sufficiently explored the channels that help direct risk perception, shape expectations, and define models of society.

By intersecting the paths of political science reflection on neopopulism and drawing from Cultural Studies, it may be possible to focus on the clash of narratives in popular culture and political communication. This approach could identify continuities and discontinuities with Western modernity and develop comparative elements with non-European contexts. Several studies have shown that many users tend to treat fictional narratives and non-fictional information similarly, incorporating information from both into their cognitive structure of the real world and resulting behaviour. Precisely because they are so widespread in the contemporary imagination, dystopian narratives—while not performing the

function that more structured ideologies fulfilled in the past – provide a stylised representation of society and its distortions. In this sense, they can play a political role and feed contemporary ideologies, even if configured as thin-centered ideologies. Adopting a minimalist conception, one can conceive of ideology as "a more or less coherent set of ideas that provides the basis for organized political action, whether this is intended to preserve, modify or overthrow the existing system of power" (Heywood 2007, 11). Furthermore, ideologies typically exhibit three main characteristics: "a) They offer an account of the existing order, usually in the form of a 'world view'; b) They advance a model of a desired future, a vision of the 'good society'; c) They explain how political change can and should be brought about – how to move from a) to b)" (Heywood 2007, 11-12). Of course, dystopias cannot fulfill all these tasks, but by depicting a sinister world, they help identify present enemies. Some 20th-century dystopias – starting with 1984 – contributed significantly to redefining the democratic imagination, sculpting the silhouette of a totalitarianism capable of nullifying individual autonomy. Today, that role becomes even more significant, as contemporary dystopias help shape political visions of the present and future.

As Charli Carpenter has shown, in political debates and battles over limiting the use of fully automatic armaments, the imagery of science fiction plays a constitutive role, with arguments drawing on representations of the human-machine relationship provided by science fiction narratives (Carpenter 2012; 2014). Dystopian narratives could also direct specific political behaviour or foster specific attitudes. As Calvert W. Jones and Celia Paris have demonstrated, dystopias such as *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* do not seem to foster attitudes of political cynicism but rather orient towards legitimising protest against perceived injustices. "Dystopian fiction appears to subtly expand the political imagination of viewers and readers to encompass a range of scenarios outside the normal realm of democratic politics," they noted, "and what people then consider reasonable and thinkable appears to expand accordingly" (Jones and Paris 2018, 983). Beyond the implications dystopian imaginaries may have on democratic politics, these authors highlight an

interesting area of study. They invite consideration of how fictional representations – especially dystopian ones – feed into political imaginaries and integrate within contemporary thin-centered ideologies, even surrogating the role that 20th-century heavy ideologies no longer fulfill. As representations of the good society of the future tend to lose political grip – with the good society projected more into the past or present – the battle over the representation of the future shifts. Dystopias, while not able to say what goal to pursue positively, can define what a good society should not be, identifying present threats to avoid a hellish future.

The importance of dystopian narratives in contemporary imaginaries is reason enough to map the multiple forms this trans-media genre has taken over the past thirty years. However, it is also time to consider dystopian narratives from another perspective to grasp the relevance that dystopias have progressively gained: a relevance that is political and can no longer be circumscribed only to the critical function vis-à-vis the (imagined or realised) utopias of the 20th century. On the terrain of the politicalness of the dystopian imaginary, extraordinary possibilities for fruitful collaboration between different disciplinary fields, such as media studies and political investigation, are emerging. Based on these insights, a heterogeneous group of researchers from different disciplines launched the project titled *The Clash of Narratives. The representation of the future in popular culture and traditional media and their political use*, financed by the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore and carried out by a large group of scholars. I would particularly like to highlight the teams from the Certà Research Center, directed by Massimo Scaglioni, and Polidemos (Center for the Study of Democracy and Political Change), which I direct. This volume, edited by Valerio Alfonso Bruno, Antonio Campati, Paolo Carelli, and Anna Sfardini, is a result of our work and, in particular, the rich discussions that took place during the international conference *Dystopian Worlds Beyond Storytelling. Representations of Dehumanized Societies in Literature, Media, and Political Discourses. Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, held at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan on September 15-16, 2022.

Our objectives in developing the project were twofold: first, to investigate the dynamics through which the old models of the good society adopted by 20th-century ideological families are being replaced – or integrated – with materials mediated by popular culture; and second, to explore how representations of the future influence elites and political choices. Specifically, the project aimed to study the transformations in representations of the future in traditional media and the narratives that coalesce through digital media, focusing on mutations and negations of the relationship with the past, human-machine and interindividual relationships, transformations of power, global dynamics, and environmental conditions. In general, the focus has been on the representations of the future present in the ideological heritage of 20th-century cultures and political families (utopias, dystopias, past futurisms, declinism, etc.) and the role of popular culture (genre fiction, cinema, comics, TV series) in defining contemporary socio-political imaginaries.

The work we have initiated, which traverses an important milestone in this volume, is still in its early stages. The mapping of contemporary dystopian narratives is still in its beginning, as is the investigation into the interactions between contemporary political ideologies and dystopian imaginaries. For this reason, besides attempting to account for the pervasive penetration of dystopian narratives in the 21st-century imagination, this volume aims to encourage further investigation and to take seriously the political role that dystopias can play in the contemporary world.

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# Introduction

## **Dystopian Worlds: A Multidisciplinary Approach to Analyse Transformations in Literature, Media and Politics**

*Valerio Alfonso Bruno, Antonio Campati, Paolo Carelli,  
Anna Sfardini*

In the last several decades, political and social discourses as well as media and cultural productions have been characterized by a growing emphasis on dystopian worlds and “possible universes” (Moylan and Baccolini 2013; Trotta, Filipovic and Sadri 2020; Palano 2022) as tools to describe the fears and contradictions human beings face regarding the uncertainty of the future and the reworkings of the past and memory. The Covid-19 pandemic and climatic emergencies have accentuated this process, not only in the direction of health and epidemiological and environmental topics but, more generally, towards a reconfiguration of new imaginaries about catastrophes and other social, cultural and technological upheavals (McKenzie and Patulny 2022).

A multidisciplinary approach to the issue of dystopias and their representations in political debates and popular culture took shape in 2020 at Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore through a wide research project, “The clash of narratives. The representation of the future in popular culture and traditional media and its political use”, directed by Professor Damiano Palano as principal investigator. As part of this project, also carried out through an interesting *Atlas of dystopian storytelling* ([www.unicatt.it/atlanterdistopiemediali](http://www.unicatt.it/atlanterdistopiemediali)), this book adopts a strong multidisciplinary perspective, including media, political, literary, linguistic, sociological and cultural studies, to focus on the various ways the theme of

dystopia has become relevant and pervasive in contemporary popular culture, both in traditional and digital forms, highlighting how it has changed across different languages and formats and also in the direction of a strong transmediality (novels, comics, movies, TV series, video games, digital and social platforms, political discourses and so on).

Dystopian societies have always been present in literature, film and media studies, but they undeniably emerged in abundance in recent cultural productions as a result of deep social and political transformations that occurred in Western and non-Western societies after the collapse of twentieth-century ideologies (Moisi 2015) and traumatic events, such as the 9/11 attack and the pandemic crisis. Thus, as part of the rise of what Wojtyna (2018) called a “dystopian turn”, new narratives have emerged, often representing neopopulist or conspiracy theories on one hand and an apocalyptic future or “parallel present” on the other. The scenario of popular culture products reflects and also stokes contemporary fears and anxieties within a society characterized by the domain of the technique, migrations and nomadic processes, democratic and environmental crises and health emergencies – all aspects that underline the fragility of our societies and reconfigure the concepts of space (productions and representations of places, both real and fictional) and time (the roles of the past, present and future in dystopian media narratives) – providing a cartography of complex trajectories and hybridizations of media, genres and discourses of dystopia in popular culture and social practices.

As Lyman Tower Sargent stated, dystopian narratives represent a sort of “negative utopia” and primarily refer to “a non-existent society described in detail and normally located in time and space, which the author wants the contemporary reader sees as considerably worse than the society in which the reader lives” (Sargent 1994: 9). Therefore, the representation of dystopian worlds aims at projecting into an apocalyptic future what happened in the past and reading events through the lens of new fears of contemporary times (Giuliani 2016). On these continuous fluctuations between real and non-real on one hand and the past and the future on the other, this

book aims to answer crucial questions about the representation of contemporary societies in political and cultural theory and practice.

## **Structure of the Book**

This collected book contains the proceedings of a conference held at Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore of Milan in September 2022. The conference was an occasion of dialogue and discussion among several disciplines involved in the study of dystopias and their relevance in the contemporary scenario. The “Dystopian Worlds beyond Storytelling” project—involving political theorists, sociologists, historians, linguists, literature scholars, media, communications and performing arts researchers, and many others—was born around the convergence of multiple fields of analysis, signalling the heterogeneity and richness of the phenomena underlying the fears of contemporary societies and their representations and discourses in public debate and popular culture. The book is structured in five parts, each one expressing a particular point of view on the role of dystopias in the twenty-first century. These parts are not sectorial, since our aim is to provide a transdisciplinary focus on the issue of dystopia in reading through the lens of a wide range of perspectives and extracting a pluralistic vision of such a complex theme.

The first part of the book, as the title suggests, presents contemporary debates about and models of political orders and technodystopias. In the first essay, Manuela Ceretta compares nineteenth-twentieth century technological dystopias and contemporary digital dystopias, arguing that we are witnessing the demise of the technological paradigm established by these nineteenth-twentieth century dystopias. In the second essay, Vassilis Galanos guides readers on a journey into artificial intelligence (AI), connecting six key arguments “concerned with the experiential interplay between expectations about exponential growth, expanding experts and expatriated researchers, most of them explorers but not exploiters”. In the third essay, Paola Dalla Torre argues that bioethics, a science that addresses the questions posed by the techno-human condition in contemporary times, finds in science fiction films a popular way to reach the public and make its questions known, and identifies the

different perspectives with which it addresses them. In the fourth essay, Romina Perni examines three contemporary dystopian works – two episodes of the *Black Mirror* series and Dave Eggers' novel *The Circle* – arguing that when transparency becomes more pervasive, the possibility of its erosion becomes more concrete, bringing out its extreme fragility, and as inner/private and public spaces become totally transparent, human freedom seems to be resized and its limits redefined. In the fifth essay, Enrico Reggiani analyses the novel *Notes from a Coma* (2005) by Irish writer Mike McCormack, showing how it can be seen as generating a twenty-first-century narrative actualization of the sub-genre of “biopolitical dystopia”. In the sixth essay, Marco Milani analyses the historical, political and economic causes of the rising inequality in South Korea and related cultural products, focusing specifically on how inequalities have been represented in films and TV shows, to grasp the origins of the conflicts and tensions of contemporary Korean society, why they have influenced cultural production so much and how they have been represented on screen.

The second part investigates how the rise of technologies on one hand and the apocalyptic societies emerging from catastrophes on the other could lead to a progressive weakening of human beings and their relationships and connotations. Dehumanization is a process that we can retrace in audiovisual representations (animated movies and series fall under this label by definition) and, in the worst imaginary, is tied to some technological shifts during the history of humanity and societies. In the first essay of this section, Ivana Mette explores a specific case of adaptation – that is, *La terra dei figli*, an Italian graphic novel that was subsequently adapted into a movie. The author underlines the difference between the two products, emphasizing how the landscapes represented in them act as narrative tools for reconfiguring identities completely dehumanized by catastrophic scenarios. Matteo Quinto and Raffaele Chiarulli, respectively, in the second and the third chapters of this part, focus on the specific language of animation. Quinto analyses how the hybridization of humans and robots takes form in some recent products, while Chiarulli provides a critical reading of the animated movie *Wall•E*, an example of a future society subjugated to

the dominance of a new techno-economic paradigm. Alessandro Dividus investigates the “coming of machines” and the connection between nineteenth-century British writer Samuel Butler and contemporary American writer George Dyson in an essay adopting a philosophical and techno-scientific approach to show that the thoughts of two writers so distant in time must be considered in a line of continuity. Then, in the fifth chapter of this second section, Ivo Stefano Germano and Massimiliano Panarari focus on the concept of “retrotopia”, as defined by Zygmunt Bauman (2017) as a sort of idealization of the past. The authors apply this concept to the genre of science fiction, highlighting some cases of film remakes as paradigmatic of this drift and striving to read this process through the cultural trend of “collapsology” to thematize the decomposition of urban spaces and its impact on human relationships in civil society and the way people cope with the uncertainty of the future.

The third part contains six essays reflecting upon the contrast between real and unreal within literary and dramatic products. Literary novels, theatre works, aesthetic representations of bodies and costumes in media and audiovisual storytelling are all ways to conceive of dystopia as a creative form of narrating the world’s contradictions. In the first essay of this section, Patricia Chiantera-Stutte provides a detailed account of the process of refoundation of individual and collective moralities in Saramago’s *Blindness*, observing the interdependence of the individual’s and the group’s regenerations of a moral world in a state of nature. In the second essay, Lorenzo Marra compares two Italian alternative history novels – *Asse Pigliatutto* (1973) by Lucio Ceva and *Contro-passato prossimo* (1975) by Guido Morselli – and argues that the two should be considered modern nexus stories as her topic reflects a postmodern point of view with the link between subtle satire and a detailed analysis of war events, which is not comparable to the works of the previous century. In his essay, Luca Gendolavigna focuses on the recent trend in Swedish literature of describing a drift and future scenarios where debates on migration, tolerance, climate change and democratic crises are taken to their extremes, analysing in depth the works of two authors: Johannes Anyuru and Jens Lapidus. The issue of body representation in a dystopian frame is introduced in