

Speculative Genre: The Gendered Dimension of Contemporary Utopia/Dystopia

With regard to speculative fiction, authors and critics tend to agree that it is a supergenre and a vast umbrella term that includes many other related subgenres. Any attempts to find a common denominator for SF texts and a definition acceptable for all its practitioners have appeared futile so far. What comes closest to such a consensus is the assertion that the speculative genre presents the sequences of imaginable, futuristic, potential but not necessarily actual events (i.e. supernatural) that could have happened if a different organising principle and the arrangement of reality had replaced/alterd the previously binding-order (as outlined by R.B. Gill in his 2013 article “The Uses of Genre and the Classification of Speculative Fiction”). Utopian and dystopian narratives perfectly fit into this pattern.

Addressing the utopian and dystopian discourse, researchers tend to have in mind thinkers and writers such as Thomas More, H.G. Wells, Aldous Huxley or George Orwell, i.e. authors whose canonical speculative texts became classics and relevant points of reference for scholars. The contemporary authority on the genre, Gregory Claeys (e.g., *Searching for Utopia: The History of An Idea* and *Dystopia: A Natural History*), emphasises the importance of exploring textual utopian realms and futuristic dystopian literary scenarios that embrace topics as varied as different forms of oppression (be it social, political or technological) and the effects of natural disasters or genetic experimentation (see his “Three Variants on the Concept of Dystopia,” 2013). As a matter of fact, the last twenty or thirty years show that the genre of utopian/dystopian fiction has become more relevant than ever, in turbulent times of political unrest, climate change and subsequent environmental crises, dramatic effects of globalisation (as proven by the recent Coronavirus pandemic), not to mention post- and trans-human challenges.

What certainly has changed is the perspective of such texts, as more and more of them employ gendered optics to paint a portrait of instability, inequality and power imbalance in the times of global crisis as the potential for dystopian or utopian speculations. As a result, the so-called “traditional” normative gendered roles and patterns, and models of subjectivity become destabilised and redefined. In *Worlds Apart?: Dualism and Transgression in Contemporary Female Dystopias* (2005), Dunja M. Mohr points at the transgressive aspect of contemporary utopias/dystopias, not only in their gendered perspective, but also at their formal and generic level.

Articles collected in this special volume of *Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich / The Problems of Literary Genres* are a case in point, discussing the transgressive aspects of modern speculative fiction/cinema and looking at them through the lens of gender studies. They seek to explore how the utopian/dystopian genre operates in a selection of futuristic, feminist and women-oriented narratives in contemporary literature and culture.

The issue opens with four texts dealing with dystopian narratives that redefine and expand the inclusiveness of the traditional, Western humanist subjectivity, each of them using a different medium as a point of reference. Tomasz Dobrogoszcz interprets *The Stone Gods*, Jeanette Winterson's 2007 novel, via Donna J. Haraway, N. Katherine Hayles and Rosi Braidotti, and their writings on post-humanism and "cyborg theory." With Haraway's definition of SF and Atwood's theory in mind, Katarzyna Ostalska compares Margaret Atwood's short story "Oursonette" with *War Bears* (2019), its graphic novel adaptation co-authored with Ken Steacy, to explore the modern genre of the comic book super-heroine, half-human, half-animal, whose defiant and subversive actions go way beyond the established gender-normativity. Sonja Georgi's article discusses *Ex Machina*, a 2015 film by Alex Garland, while Adriana Kiczowski concentrates on the TV series *Real Human* (2012), as well as real-life AI caregivers that seem to perpetuate the "traditional" divisions of gender roles. This section is completed by the corporeal identity narratives within the range of disability studies, as Kamila Ciepiał's article incorporates into the scope of her analysis not only the able-bodied, female perspectives, but also those marked by the rare neuro developmental disorder, reading such identity narratives with regard to the dystopian discourse.

What follows is a set of three articles that explore diverse critical strategies adopted in several female-authored feminist utopias/dystopias. Sławomir Kuźnicki engages with Margaret Atwood's *The Heart Goes Last* (2015), especially its connection to Jeremy Bentham's idea of Panopticon and its later reinterpretation by Michel Foucault. Then, in her examination of Naomi Alderman's *The Power* (2016), Małgorzata Warchał intersects eco-feminist and post-human perspectives to examine the ambiguity of the eponymous power. Finally, Edyta Lorek-Jezińska comments on the transgressive elements in the dramatic works of Ann Jellicoe, Bryony Lavery and Germaine Greer.

The final section forays into the cinematic ground. Tomasz Fisiak writes about a 1970 hag horror entitled *Savage Intruder*, treating the film as a metaphor of Hollywood's dystopian practices. Nelly Strehlau explores two recent television series, *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017-) and *Dietland* (2018), mentioning the equivocal role of the audience; in the author's view, the boundaries between witnessing and gazing at the onscreen violence tend to collapse. Janica Tomić also conjures up the notion of the (female) gaze, as well as the concepts of tableau and bonnet view to comment on the way speculative "herstories" are told.

As shown above, although the contributors discuss a wide range of subjects, all of them analyse various visions of gendered pasts, presents and futures created within the conventions of utopia/dystopia. They collectively prove that the speculative genre, thanks to its responsiveness to up-to-the-moment alterations, is compelling and multifaceted.

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