

Self-fulfilling Prophecies—Locating Our World Amongst the Dystopias in Selected Works

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Abstract: The contemporary world as we know it today can be characterised by certain anxieties. Surveillance, privacy, refugee crises, xenophobia, skepticism towards notions of authentic ‘free will’ due to the denial of civil liberties are among issues which have surfaced as not only influential towards government policy formation but have become ideas which permeate the minutiae of everyday life. The atmosphere of distrust surrounding institutions of authority are indicative of a palpable sentiment of suspicion that hidden forces and agendas are key mobilizing agents in the functioning of society—humanity seems closer than ever to inhabiting a Lyotardian “incredulity towards metanarratives.” Works which have a dystopian setting as a central theme have seemingly shaped the contemporary world as we know it. By studying the characteristics of these creations, it may be ascertained exactly how key concepts which we are continuing to grapple with today have been cited and expanded upon—portraying and giving expression to attitudes and ideas prevalent in years past as well as in current times. This paper proposes to study selected works in this context chosen from disparate disciplines, such as Antony Burgess’ novel *A Clockwork Orange* and Ridley Scott’s science-fiction noir film *Blade Runner*—influential works which have gone far to inform the world we live in and the reflections of it in the shape of contemporary media such as the television series *Mr. Robot*.

Keywords: Dystopia, Postmodernism, Popular Culture, Antony Burgess, Inter-disciplinary

There is perhaps a degree of consensus that the typical postmodernist artefact is playful, self-ironizing and even schizoid; and that it reacts to the austere autonomy of high modernism by impudently embracing the language of commerce and the commodity. Its stance towards cultural tradition is one of irreverent pastiche, and its contrived depthlessness undermines all metaphysical solemnities, sometimes by a brutal aesthetics of squalor and shock. (Eagleton 1987)

In his book *The Condition of Postmodernity*, David Harvey opens his analysis of the nature of postmodernism with an illuminating introductory rumination on how one might define the term and all that it encompasses. He cites the definition given above from Terry Eagleton’s “Awakening from modernity” and it is significant that Harvey next cites the idea that postmodernism has risen as a reaction to the monotonous monopoly of universal modernism’s vision of the world in the first half of the Twentieth Century (Harvey 9). Indeed, this vision bears a marked character of sterility with its standardization of knowledge and production, belief in linear progress and absolute truths—contrasting sharply with postmodernisms privileging of “heterogeneity and difference as liberative forces in the redefinition of cultural discourse”. It is quite apparent that those who would identify themselves as being on the side of postmodernism would bear an intense distrust of all universal or ‘totalizing’ discourses, completely rejecting large-scale theoretical interpretations purportedly of universal application

(ibid). In fact, Eagleton completely dismisses these erstwhile visions of homogeneity by declaring the “death of such ‘metanarratives’ whose secretly terroristic function was to ground and legitimate the illusion of a ‘universal’ human history... with its manipulative reason and fetish for totality” (1987). The new world would not be one predicated on a shared history which necessitated the idea of the need to strive towards a common goal in harmony—fragmented, disjointed and pluralistic discourses would come to be its defining characteristic. This embrace of the ‘chaos’ as such engendered a spirit to question and critique the current standards and practices in all forms of art and culture. Wide-ranging changes were brought about in Literature and Art which confounded the established schools of thought and etiquette. Indeed, it was not simply these field which would undergo metamorphoses—even Science and Philosophy were warned to “jettison their grandiose metaphysical claims and view themselves more modestly as just another set of narratives” (ibid).

It is significant that Eagleton was to include science in his profound statement for it was the advancement of technology which shaped the preceding century and in turn the contemporary world as we know it. While the Atom Bomb had produced a hush across the globe as the shadow of mushroom cloud gave humanity a glimpse of what utter devastation could occur, scientific development even more substantially became a part of everyday life. Ursula K. Heise contends that the second half of the twentieth century saw certain scientific innovations which were particularly crucial towards the shaping a new era. Amongst nuclear technology, sojourns into space which included landings on the Moon and Mars, television and other landmark breakthroughs, she contends that “computer technology and biotechnology are two of the most salient areas that have given rise to utopian hopes as well as to apocalyptic fears, and that have most strikingly created the sense of an epochal break” (Heise 137). It is important here to note the distinct tendencies of the ‘postmodern moment’ towards technology and science:

On the one hand, scientific insights and technological applications are advancing at a more rapid pace than ever, and some of their more spectacular developments have changed the material environment and a vast range of values, beliefs and expectations, along with the very meaning of the words “science” and “technology” for average citizens. On the other hand, science and technology are met with ambivalence, skepticism, or resistance not only because of some undesirable “side effects” their rapid evolution has generated, but in terms of some of their most basic assumptions about nature, progress, human observation, appropriate methodologies for creating knowledge, and the role this knowledge should play in shaping public policies. (137-138)

Chaos and Purpose inside *Blade Runner*’s Dystopic Vision

David Harvey finds cinema to be the art form with “the most robust capacity to handle the intertwining of space and time” through its use of serial images and ability to cut back and forth, freed from the usual constraints of chronological narrative (Harvey 308). He explores the themes of postmodernism through an analysis of Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner*. The filmic

world is set in a future where genetically produced human beings or ‘replicants’ seek redressal upon their owners and the narrative follows the protagonist Deckard whose job it is to track down these replicants and neutralize the threat they pose. The replicants are endowed with strengths which surpass ordinary human abilities and are tasked with occupations which require the sharpest of skill sets. They are also capable of emotions which allows them to make judgements on par with human requirements. However, their enhanced nature constitutes a threat to the established order, as a result of which they are forcibly disposed of after a four-year term.

The replicants are not merely imitations but authentic reproductions of humans—they are simulacra rather than robots (309). They have been designed as the ultimate form of short-term, highly skilled and flexible labour power, yet they take up arms against the idea of their shortened lifespans and attempt to force their makers into reprogramming their genetic make-up. Tyrell, who is their designer and the face of a vast corporation under his name, argues that the replicants have adequate compensation for this condition as they live their rivals with an unmatched intensity. As Harvey observes,

‘Revel in it’, says Tyrell, ‘a flame that burns twice as intensely burns half as long.’ The replicants exist, in short, in that schizophrenic rush of time that Jameson, Deleuze and Guttari and others see as so central to postmodern living. They also move across a breadth of space with a fluidity that gains them an immense fund of experience. Their persona matches in many respects the time and space of instantaneous global communication. (ibid.)

Further, the world that director Ridley Scott creates speaks of a microcosm of the postmodern dystopia—it is a Los Angeles that is a “decrepit landscape of deindustrialization and post-industrial decay. Empty warehouses and abandoned industrial plant drip with leaking rain... Punks and scavengers roam among the garbage, stealing whatever they can” (310). The sense of the city at street-level is a postmodern pastiche dominated by Asian ethnicities and peppered with a hybrid of Japanese, German, Spanish and English to form a ‘city-speak’ language. The enormous Tyrell Corporation building, which looms massively over the city and dominates the skyline, is a chaotic mix of clashing architectural styles as it displays features of Egyptian pyramids, Greek and Roman columns, Victorian, Oriental and Mayan elements and even hints of the contemporary shopping mall. The anarchy of competing significations and messages suggests fragmentation and uncertainty in the streets—the overall aesthetic of the film is a result “of recycling, fusion of levels, discontinuous signifiers, explosion of boundaries and erosion” (311). There is however, the sense of an overwhelming, overarching organizing power which is hidden in plain sight—the Tyrell Corporation, the authorities who coerce Deckard into pursuing replicants without leaving him a choice and the swift action of law and order when necessary to establish control over the street.

Defining the Individual: The Philosophy of Anthony Burgess’ Fiction

The Tyrell Corporation is a company that specializes in genetic engineering (“...more human than human, that’s our business”)—this is quite significant since it was perhaps only

advancements in the fields of biology which could rival the proliferation of information technology in terms of influence on the Twentieth century. While the discovery of DNA by Watson and Crick in 1953 was much discussed, it was the success of in vitro fertilization which led to the birth of the first test tube baby in 1978—this in turn opened up limitless possibilities for research on embryos which could enable genetic screening of hereditary diseases or shed greater light on the complications during human reproduction. However, this was also met with outrage as the thought of human embryos forming subjects for experimentation was regarded as abhorrent by certain sections of society. It was feared that there would be an indulgence into radical interventions of human genetic make-up, an idea that conjured visions of mass-produced humans akin to Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (Heise 143). It was even feared that the availability of assisted reproduction to unmarried couples would threaten stable family structures. Thus, scientific advances were now being regarded as putting the value of human life in question and paving the way for subversion of social structures – potential gains in human health and knowledge had to be weighed against fundamental questions of the value of human life and the extent to which humans have the right to intervene in natural processes (ibid).

With the cloning of Dolly, the Sheep in 1996 and the mapping of the human genome, the possibility of human cloning also appeared within reach. Heise notes that this is significant in the fact that “the creation of human life through technology had a long history in the cultural imagination”—science-fiction writers were not alone in such musings as this possibility had been pursued from the conversion of Pygmalion's statue into a woman in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in the year 8 AD all the way to Victor Frankenstein's artificial creation in Mary Shelley's famous 19th century novel. Now that science seemed to be inching closer towards rendering fantasy into reality, questions regarding the ethics of such processes began to be fiercely debated. Amongst the hope for effective cures for fatal diseases there was the dystopian scenario of “designer humans” that would degrade human life to yet another commodity to be produced at will (144). The fascination of being liberated from the limits of human physiology was accompanied by deep-seated fears about what it meant to be human, to be an individual.

Anthony Burgess, whose seminal novel *A Clockwork Orange* has persevered as a brilliant example of literary dystopia, had a body of work which deeply reflected on this dichotomy in the nature of humanity—he “is skeptical of the idealistic program as a means of eliminating the conflict of opposites man senses in life. Yet, he is also attracted to the question of why man persists in seeking permanent solutions for his own and society's problems” (Moran 3). Burgess' fiction exposes humanity's feeble attempts at locating their utopias. His dissatisfaction with the utopian ideals of man and society stems from his own vision of man as “complex, contradictory, irreparably bloody-minded—not ... as political theory says he ought to be” (4). His works stress the basic concept of free will as a capacity to do good or to do evil—a concept he drew from the fifth-century theologian-philosopher Augustine. Augustine believed the full significance of human choice dwells in the dignity man retains with the capacity of choice even if he misuses it—the place of evil in the order of life is to emphasize the importance of freedom. Burgess sponsors this line of thought in his article “Clockwork

Marmalade”, essentially a tract on the importance of free choice. Both Augustine and Burgess would rather punish man’s misuse of his freedom that deprive him of that faculty for in doing so it would reduce his essence to that of a lower, non-rational level of existence (9). The latter even fears evil being rationalized out of existence because the consequence of such would deprive man of his individuality.

Alex, the violent protagonist of *A Clockwork Orange*, exists due to his author’s conviction of the reality of evil and the dirt of life. The character undertakes an evil which is “his own thing, embarked in full awareness. Alex is evil, not merely misguided” (Burgess 1972, 198). He still however recognises the criminal’s potential for goodness—“That by the time his (Alex’s) conditioning starts, he has not yet made the better choice does not mean he will never do it” (ibid). As Moran points out, a punishment that would rather chasten both sin and sinner but leaves the faculty of free choice intact reflects both justice and mercy (Moran 11). This doctrine is placed in stark contrast to what happens to Alex in the novel—betrayed by members of his own gang, he is punished by the state for his numerous crimes of violence, murder, rape by undergoing behavioral conditioning which seeks to eliminate the aggressive impulse. He is given medication and forced to watch filmed violence and perversion that by association he sickens at (164). The extent of his reconditioning is such that even the music of Beethoven—which one might consider an indication of something good within the nature of this wanton criminal—becomes repulsive to the point of physical torture upon hearing it.

Burgess clearly wishes to impress upon his readers the complexity of individual choice against a central, mechanical authority by making his protagonist an individual who chooses to kill, maim and rob his fellow man—is it ultimately better to have a world of evil chosen as an act of will than a world conditioned to be harmless and stable? (Moran 159). The ruling power in Alex’s dystopian world clearly have their priority—they wish for a ‘Clockwork’ society full of citizens “...ready to turn the other cheek, ready to be crucified rather than crucify, sick to the very heart at the thought of even killing a fly” (Burgess 131). Having come to terms with the inhumanity of a life stripped of all freedom of choice, Alex resolves towards the end of the novel to take on maturity as the escape route for his pathetic predicament. He attempts to reintegrate with social norms, seek a wife and start a family—he also recognises that he may be as helpless to prevent mistakes in the future as his parents and teachers were. The cycle of recovery and continuity of life serves as the silver lining here to the pessimism of defeat at the hands of dystopian schemes. As Moran neatly summarizes:

Like Huxley’s Savage in *Brave New World*, Alex comes to realize that what is a utopia to others – a world controlled and ordered by science—is a dystopia to him. A world which can leave out Shakespeare or music, which expels the exceptional in favour of scientific control, is not worth living in (Moran 168).

The Illusion of Choice: *Mr. Robot* and the Grand Metanarrative

The questions of individual choice and freedom were quite keenly regarded by the likes of Huxley and Burgess, almost in anticipation of the technological boom which was to become a driving force of the Twentieth century. As the influence of scientific advancement began to

take over even the minutiae of our lives, the idea of trust becomes very relevant as we slowly become part of the system. The Lyotardian ‘incredulity towards metanarratives’ became a significant philosophy around which one could organize one’s life as layer upon layer in the fabric of the everyday aroused suspicion as to whether individual action was still a valid concept or whether it was in fact merely a step in the grand orchestrations of some overarching authority.

This fear of losing individuality, which Burgess had so brilliantly problematized in his fiction, has been taken up as a significant motif in popular culture. Take for instance the following lines from the opening episode of the television series *Mr. Robot*:

What I’m about to tell you is top secret. A conspiracy bigger than all of us. There’s a powerful group of people out there that are secretly running the world. I’m talking about the guys no one knows about, the ones that are invisible. The top 1 percent of the top 1 percent, the guys that play God without permission. And now I think they’re following me. (Esmail: “esp1.0_hellofriend.mov”).

The lines above are spoken by the protagonist Elliot Alderson, a brilliant hacker and cybersecurity engineer who suffers from social anxiety disorder and clinical depression. Elliot is recruited by the insurrectionary anarchist known as ‘Mr. Robot’ to join a group of hacker-activists known as ‘fsociety’. The group aims to destroy all debt records by encrypting the financial data of the largest conglomerate in the world, E Corp. Once more, some of the parallels to dystopias past are quite uncanny—a story told from the perspective of an individual who does not conform to societal norms, the vice-grip of a single organizing commercial enterprise which exerts unchecked power, the narrative which follows a group of individuals who seek redressal by holding those responsible for creating their dystopia. What makes a series like *Mr. Robot* all the more impactful apart from its contemporary nature is the fact that unlike the far-removed dystopias of Burgess and Scott which are quite distinguishable from the world as we know it, the television series strives to retain every ounce of realism that it can so that it provides a mirror image to our current times with only a few altered events. The writers for the series have shown their savvy in adapting to real world events—a memorable scene suggests the possible influence of corporate overlords in the election of Donald Trump to the Presidency of the United States—which readily conveys to viewers that we are perhaps only a few moves away from this fiction transcending into reality.

The overwhelming nature of the anxiety often takes the shape of Elliot’s furious venting: “How do we know if we’re in control? That we’re not just making the best of what comes at us, and that’s it?... It’s all part of the same blur, right? Just out of focus enough. It’s the illusion of choice. Half of us can’t even pick our own cable, gas, electric. The water we drink, our health insurance. Even if we did, would it matter?... our choices are prepaid for us, long time ago” (Esmail “esp1.1_ones-and-zeroes.mpeg”). Ideas such as these bring us uncomfortably face to face with concepts such as the surveillance state and the lack of true individual will—we appear to inhabit a technological dystopia where the images of Orwell’s Big Brother have been

replaced by those of shadows; we are not aware of who is surveying us nor the true extent of their influence.

Another common thread which binds together the various dystopias discussed in this paper is the sense of dichotomy which sheds light on the human condition—there is after all no utopia without a few seeds of dystopia present. Just as science had to contend with balancing progress with ethics, so too shall humanity have to contend with the desire to find lasting solutions to their problems while possessing a nature which inherently consists of constantly overcoming contradictory passions. It is a line of thought which has been passed on through the realms of science-fiction and has even seen some concepts coming to pass in our reality; indeed, many of these ideas have come to shape the very world we live in. It is thus at times a question of observing which impulse of ours we allow to be our guiding power. Such are the two sides of the coin, between delight and despair:

Every day we change the world. But to change the world in a way that means anything, that takes more time than most people have. It never happens all at once. It's slow. It's methodical. It's exhausting. We don't all have the stomach for it. (Esmail "esp1.4_3xpl0its.wmv").

Notes

Originally cited from 'The culture of fragments', *PRECIS* 6

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