



## Tiempos de ninguna edad: Distopía y cine

Antonio Santos

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Picking up where the earlier work *Tierras de ningún lugar. Utopía y cine* (Cátedra, 2017) leaves off, in the present volume Antonio Santos once again offers readers an encyclopedic knowledge, complete with theoretical analysis and cinematic review, on this occasion of the increasingly popular genre of dystopian film. As Santos deftly points out, the genre is not new, extending back to 1924 with Yakov Protazanov's *Aelita*, though the last thirty years have certainly seen a greater presence of this type of film in both Hollywood and beyond. With this volume, Santos offers both experts and novices alike a handbook for approaching dystopian film studies.

Each of the ten chapters comprising the volume opens with a theoretical context that frames the way in which the films mentioned will be read, and offers a more profound understanding of both the films and the general discourse for dystopian studies. Through profound academic ruminations on philosophical ideas surrounding freedom, dehumanisation, the past, present, and future, the role of language and sex, among others, the terms for understanding and recognising the different ways of conceptualising dystopia emerge.

As Santos highlights throughout the volume, there is a fine line between utopia and dystopia, and quite often (perhaps more often than we would like to admit) the only difference between the two is one of perspective. As such, the author considers how many of the films analysed here unpack the myth of the utopia, demon-

strating the way in which, within the confines of the seemingly perfect world, there lies a much more sinister and unpleasant one. The question to ask of any utopia, then, is “perfect for whom”? This same question can, and should, be applied to any analysis of the dystopia as well, as quite often the latter emerges through the attempt to create the former.

This is the case, as the author deftly notes, for films such as *Elysium* (Blomkamp, 2013), *Jerusalem* (August, 1996), *Gattaca* (Niccol, 1997), *The Island* (Bay, 2005), and many others. Indeed, even in films such as *The Handmaid's Tale* (Schlöndorf, 1989), or *The Hunger Games* (Ross, Lawrence, 2012-2015), where the protagonist, and thus the focaliser, is well aware that they are located in a dystopia, thereby identifying it from the beginning, the utopia, the world that for some is so perfect, is also clearly depicted. Through this, the films go beyond merely suggesting that utopias are unrealistic toward the suggestion that all utopias rely, to some extent, on the existence of the dystopia: the conditions for the one require the subjugation and enslavement of others.

As Santos discusses in great depth, especially in the Chapter 3 “Hombres y Máquinas” (“Men and Machines”), the question of who is more human, the human or the machine, (especially in *Blade Runner*, 1982 and *Blade Runner 2049*, 2017), also draws attention to how the conditions of power and privilege for the few are supported through the exploitation of the many. Indeed,

while the films discussed are, for the most part, fiction (the exception would be Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph des Willens*, 1935, though its status as non-fiction could be debated), the links between what viewers see on screen and the world we live in are highlighted. In Chapter 5 "Demodistopías: la bomba demográfica" ("Demodystopias: The demographic bomb"), the introduction could not be clearer: there is a close relationship between the dystopia and the alarming demographic evolution and environmental collapse that the planet has seen in the past century. The fears of the present, the author convincingly demonstrates, are the fodder for the dystopia, and tomorrow's dystopia is being built, if it does not already exist, today.

Divided into sections, each of which includes an in-depth introduction to the theoretical framework that will be used to analyse the films, Santos offers a clear-cut means of identifying the types of dystopias to be found across the filmic landscape. The multiple cross references and comparative analyses that occur throughout the volume indicate the extent to which, while the discrete sections help understand the broader fields under which each dystopia can be considered, they are hardly rigid paradigms, and both the intertextuality and layers of meaning that accrue to the films and their interpretations are multiple.

Unsurprisingly, one of the most cited of the films in Santos' work is *1984*, with two dedicated sections for this seminal work of dystopian fiction, and the text considers both Michael Redford's film and Ridley Scott's short for Apple Macintosh, both from the year 1984, as well as Orwell's novel. *1984*, in Santos' text, is included in Chapter 2 "Distopía: en futuro imperfecto" ("Dystopia: In the Future Imperfect") along with other classics like *Brave New World* (both Brinckerhoff's 1980 and Libman and Williams' 1998 films), *Fahrenheit 451* (Truffaut, 1966) and *A Clockwork Orange* (Kubrick, 1971), to name but a few. This chapter looks at the dystopian future and, among other things, control over knowledge and the past. From a rumination on INGSOC, and governmental restrictions over thoughts through language manipulation, to the literal elimination of knowledge through book burning, Santos treats readers to a prolific engagement with the ways in which dystopias result from increasingly strict restraints over not just the population's actions but also its thinking. No coincidentally, however, many of the texts (filmic and

literary) mentioned in this section recur in later chapters. For example, the technological surveillance so ubiquitous to *1984* emerges as a theme in films such as *The Hunger Games* (Ross; Lawrence, 2012-2015), *Rollerball* (Jewison, 1975), and *Battle Royale* (Fukasaku, 2000). Indeed, Santos' particular gift in this volume is the ability to draw parallels and comparisons between disparate texts, offering readers a far richer understanding of the material.

Along these lines, it is worth pointing out the rather curious reading in Chapter 9 "Bestiópolis: la utopía animal" ("Beastopolis: The Animal Utopia"), which, while offering an analysis of more expected films, like *Animal Farm* (Stephenson, 1999) and *Planet of the Apes* (Schaffner, 1968), also includes the films *Antz* (Darnell and Johnson, 1998) and *Dinotopia* (Brambilla, 2002). The latter two may at first glance, due to their animated or animatronic style, be less likely to be viewed as dystopias, yet such a strong case is made for reading them as such that it is impossible to see them otherwise. Indeed, they are powerful case studies for the way in which texts aimed at a younger audience convey ideological messages that critique the utopian vision as hiding a more insidious dystopian one.

Of especial note in a volume in which each chapter reveals an engaging facet of dystopian studies is Chapter 8 "Ucronía: en tiempos de ninguna edad" ("Uchronia: In the Times of No Age"). In this chapter, the volume's title, which is referenced throughout the work, is here the focus: the times of no age. Perhaps for English readers a less literal translation of the title is more apt, in that Uchronia, as Santos points out, is literally *the time that never existed*. Through an analysis of films that posit alternative futures that emerge from histories that never happened, this chapter is most attentive to the spirit of the dystopian genre, whose main question is "and what if?". If the utopia imagines an optimistic answer to this question, the dystopia, of course, responds from a place of pain and trauma. Thus, in his readings of *It Happened Here* (Brownlow and Mollo, 1964), *Fatherland* (Menaud, 1994), and *The Man in the High Castle* (Spotnitz, 2015-2016), the alternative history in which Nazi Germany triumphed over the Allied Powers after World War II is imagined, and we are asked to consider what we, as a society, *could have* become. Even though this dystopian genre would appear to be less anchored than others in a critique of the present, dealing as it does with a speculative past, Santos' skillful analysis rightly shows how

contemporary fears and anxieties are made manifest here as well.

Chapter 4 “Noticias de la sociedad biónica” (“News From the Bionic Society”) discusses how the mechanical or bionic city, so often touted as the utopic solution to humanity’s urban decay, is predicated on the relinquishing of our humanity (our freedom, our material being) to technological order and control. Further, in Chapter 6 “Utopías del milenio” (“Millennial Utopias”), a comparatively shorter chapter, the author samples the films *Jerusalem* (August, 1996) and *El evangelio de las maravillas* (Ripstein, 1998) as examples of the apocalyptic dystopia related to Millennialism and messianic predictions. Chapter 7 “Germania, año cero” (“Germania, Year Zero”), offers a preview of the above-mentioned Chapter 8, on alternative histories, by interrogating the dystopian imaginings underpinning the Thousand Year Empire and the Third Reich, passing to the perverse world of *Saló o le 120 giornate de sodoma* by Pier Paolo Pasolini (1975) and the more recent *Vulcania* (Scaf, 2016). Finally, Chapter 10 “La humanidad desterrada” (“Humanity Unearthed”), looks to space and the potential for the evils of humanity to move beyond the confines of the planet Earth and to stretch into the universe. All told, the volume convincingly demonstrates that the dystopia is not some far-off speculative world

that could come to pass but, rather, is a reflection of our contemporary moment.

Covering a broad range of themes and an impressive number of films, this volume represents an invaluable resource for scholars and those with a more general interest in dystopian studies and film studies. It offers an extensive bibliography that includes not only the primary sources but also their literary roots, where these exist, and, perhaps even more valuable, the accompanying bibliography of secondary and theoretical sources for many of the filmic texts mentioned. Indeed, Santos’ incorporation of theoretical material as wide-ranging as Michel Foucault, Zygmunt Baumann, or Thomas Hobbes in discussions of films that might often be discounted because of their status as more ‘popular’ film fare, like *Divergent* (Burger, 2014), *Starship Troopers* (Verhoeven, 1997), or *Ready Player One* (Spielberg, 2018), speaks to the very real need for, and wide-ranging appeal of, *Tiempos de ninguna edad. Distopía y cine*. Equally useful as both a text for consultation on individual topics or films as it is for more prolonged reading as a rumination on the dystopian film genre, Antonio Santos offers yet another essential contribution to cinema studies research.