Article

Of Monsters and Men: Dystopian Fantasy, Ideology, and Dehumanisation in *Black Mirror*'s "Men Against Fire"

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Abstract

There are few artistic genres more intertwined with politics than dystopia. In its very essence, dystopian fantasy is a method of criticising ideology, at the same time that it serves as a tool for the dissemination of the issuer's own ideology. *Black Mirror*'s "Men Against Fire" episode provides a rich case study for considering ideology in one of its most violent formats: the creation of monsters. In the episode, deceived by a helmet that changes reality, soldiers fight and exterminate cockroaches - individuals with a genetic predisposition to diseases - while the civilian population, immersed in that bellicist ideology, dehumanises individuals even without a literal alteration of the real. This article analyses the creation of monsters, putting into dialogue theories on ideology, dystopian fantasy, and dehumanisation to construct a framework of how this dehumanisation process and its relationship with ideology works.

Keywords

Political fantasy, dystopia, *Black Mirror*, ideology, dehumanisation

The Political Fantasy of Dystopias and its Relation to Ideology

Ideology is one of those terms that is complicated to define and that undergoes extensive debate in the social sciences given its polysemy. There is a consensus that ideology implies a worldview, a system of beliefs, but the dissent revolves around its extension: how far does ideology go? In other words: how far does this filter of the real go? Can science be ideological? And art?

If ideology is responsible for sacralising a dream in the form of utopia, it also becomes equally responsible for imagining a nightmare related to the opposite ideology. Thus,

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dystopia becomes the artistic medium par excellence for distilling political attacks. The future devastated by others, the possible impossible future, a nightmare in which the opposite ideology to that of the writer is imagined as totalitarian, dominant, hegemonic, violent. The plot of the *Black Mirror* episode "Men Against Fire" is a living example of how ideology can be captured and used to perpetrate violence in the name of utopia. In this episode, people are exterminated for the sake of a utopia in which human beings would be free from disease and deviant behaviour. Based on a purification that is not ethnic, but biological, the dominant ideology literally modifies the real through helmets that alter the user's perception.

In *Ideology and Utopia*, Paul Ricoeur follows Marx in understanding ideology as a filter of the real; that is, an anti-scientific prism through which the individual apprehends his own notions of the real in a "process of distortion or dissimulation by which an individual or group expresses their situation" (15).[1] In the opposite position, in *Poliarchy*, Robert Dahl apprehends ideology—especially political ideology—as a set of beliefs that infest any manifestation, discourse, and creation regardless of their nature (128). Even science, with its claim to absolute objectivity and legacy of positivism, is swallowed up by ideology. Cláudio Menezes corroborates Dahl when he affirms that:

> there is no neutral knowledge. The conditions of existence permeate knowledge, scientific or not. Cultural, ideological, historical and social conditions permeate all types of knowledge, which are not immune, on the other hand, to the power relations established in society as a whole. (27)

Although both utopia and ideology are intrinsically related and are ways of apprehending the real, Ricoeur differentiates them based on the level of satisfaction (12-13); while ideology would serve to maintain a tradition, utopia would seek to break it. Ricoeur undertakes a rescue and a defence of utopia, a concept considered infamous after its appropriation by the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century. According to Ricouer, utopia reveals not only discontent with reality but an attempt to improve it through the ideal. Utopia shakes power structures and questions hegemony: in the Gramscian conception, printing alternatives to reality (Ricoeur 13). The static is dematerialised according to the ideal. Utopia creates the anomaly of the ideal, ultimately with the aim of questioning the order of the real, of distorting it. As Dahl argues, however, ideology is present and influential in any current of thought, scientific or not (11). If ideology is an interpretation of the world based on ideas, any utopia and dystopia that idealises or condemns an alternative is necessarily ideological. They are ideological because they imply dissatisfaction with the real, and attempt to alter the real so that it reaches the ideal, in the case of utopias, or so that it avoids destruction, in the case of dystopias. Ideology is not only the strength of the oppressor, but also the resistance of the oppressed.

As historian Jill Lepore argues, dystopian literature has become a methodology for authors to express their political-ideological positions (n.p.). Conservatives write about a future ruined by liberals, and liberals write about a future ruined by conservatives. Dystopia proliferates in a time of global democratic recession: each political ideology starts to imagine a future in which the opposition group becomes supreme and totalitarian. This use of dystopia is not new. One can just return to the Russian Ievguêni

Zamiátin's *We*, one of the first published dystopian works, in which Zamiátin writes a totalitarian dystopia in 1920, a few years before Stalin's rise to power. Dystopia is an inherently political form of literature. The possible impossible future, the idea that the present is headed for destruction, is the driving force behind dystopia, just as the divinisation of the ideal is behind utopia.

But what are dystopias and utopias? Etymologically speaking, the word dystopia means just the opposite of utopia; utopia comes from the junction of the Greek radicals 'not' and 'place' and means idealised or non-existent place, while dystopia means a bad place (Lepore n.p.). 'Utopia' first appeared in Thomas More's *Utopia: Of a Republic's Best State and of the New Island Utopia*. The author narrates the existence of a perfect society on the island of utopia, a place that ironically for him can only be perfect precisely because it does not exist, hence the neologism. Thus, in his work, the perfect republic is only so because, paradoxically, it is also fictitious, impossible to exist. On the other hand, dystopia was first used in a speech to British Parliament given by political scientist John Stuart Mill, in which Mill accused the members of Parliament of being the opposite of utopian, coining the term dystopian to criticise them (Fehr 230).

Both utopia and dystopia are fueled by ideology. While the former idealises a reality in which the creator's ideology is related to the creation of that ideal, the latter works on the other end of the spectrum: the ideology opposite to that of the creator tends to be responsible for the nightmare. Therefore, dystopia and utopia are explicitly engaged with the politics of the real. It is possible to trace countless examples of how political events in reality influence the creation of nightmarish fantasies: Alan Moore projected a totalitarian Thatcherism for his *V for Vendetta* in response to the rise of conservatism and the dismantling of the British welfare state at the end of the 1980s; *The New Order* by Bernardo Kucinski, which depicts a fictional return to military dictatorship in Brazil, was published during the emergence of Bolsonarism; and, as perhaps the most classic example, George Orwell wrote *1984* as a satire on Stalinism because he was disillusioned by the violence of the Soviet totalitarian regime. It is also important to note that, in the early 2020s, following over a decade of global democratic recession (Freedom House, n.p.), *1984* has returned to the bestseller list in both Brazil and the United States (Matos n.p.).

Political phenomena such as authoritarianism, fascism, and totalitarianism influence the interest in dystopias, which explains the genre boom in recent decades (Lepore). The impact of ideology on dystopia is not limited to the creator of the content, but also to the reader. Times of authoritarian flirtation drive the reception of dystopias (Lepore), as happened in 2019 in Brazil with *The New Order*, or with *1984* in both Brazil and the United States. However, despite the global democratic recession, the world has technically never been so secure and prosperous. There are more polyarchies today than there were forty years ago, and there have never been so few wars. Extreme poverty has also decreased, and the risk of nuclear destruction is smaller (Muggah n.p.). Why, then, do we continue to fear the present and the future so much?

One explanation can be found in the trauma of the twentieth century. The effects of the catastrophes of that time are still very much alive today, and any minimally similar movement invokes inevitable comparisons. For example, the democratic fragility that is

occurring worldwide is often compared to the rise of fascism in the 1920s. It is naïve to imagine that fascism died in the 1940s given that "there is sufficient historical evidence to affirm that fascism is always a virtuality present in any modern state" (Bray 16). The twentieth century has given human beings an unprecedented power of mass destruction, and this will continue to haunt us for centuries.

By itself, the rise of the dystopia genre appears as a twentieth-century consequence. The two great works responsible for popularising the genre, *1984* and *Brave New World*, are, as the authors themselves affirm, a consequence, criticism, and a parable of the totalitarianisms of the first half of the century (Orwell 391; Huxley 15). A kind of aesthetics of destruction emerges, a literature that necessarily wants to be political. There is no dystopia, just as there is no utopia, without politics. And, as discussed, Orwell and Huxley write from an ideological perspective that is opposed to what their books criticise. It is revealing, therefore, that the twentieth century, with its many genocides and wars, was responsible for the spread of dystopia.

Thus, even with the relative peace and global prosperity of the last half-century, the spectre of the twentieth century still haunts the twenty-first. The fear that the horror will be repeated grows as new and old authoritarianism emerges around the world even in nations that believed themselves immune to democratic fragilisation. Contemporary dystopia feeds on the trauma of the past, exponentially elevating certain positions generally opposed to the creator's ideology and imagining a future devastated by them. Considering that the twentieth century gave rise to genocides from all sides of the political spectrum, it is not difficult to imagine totalitarianism, authoritarianism, or fascism.

There existsanother explanation the proliferation of dystopias today. Even with all the post-Cold War prosperity and stability and the diminishing threat of nuclear war, another solid possibility for the apocalypse emerges: climate change. Climatic cataclysm offers a whole new imaginative range of futureless or hellish futures. And that fear has fallen into the popular imagination, with a significant number of new dystopias portraying these or similar climate apocalypses (McBriden n.p.). Thus, the fear of nuclear apocalypse has, in part, given way to a climatic hecatomb. The possible impossible future continues, only the agent of destruction has changed. Even with the end of the Cold War, the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists' apocalypse clock remains just two minutes from midnight (Borger n.p.).

The death of utopia does not only imply the death of the ideal of egalitarian reconstruction of humanity, but also the rejection of the very notion of utopia after it was the driving force behind the totalitarianisms and horrors of the last century. Utopia was used as a justification for barbarism, particularly in the case of Stalinism. The dream of ideology created monsters, and it was in the name of ideological utopia that various massacres and genocides took place. The massacres of those labelled as monsters in each regime - the deviants in the case of Nazi Germany and, in addition to the deviants, the bourgeoisie and virtually anyone in Stalinism - ended up creating the true human monsters: perpetrators immersed in inhuman (or, perhaps too human) cruelty and banality.

Cockroaches

In this scenario of the proliferation of dystopian fantasy narratives, the British series *Black Mirror* (2011–present) became a popular phenomenon after being distributed by Netflix. *Black Mirror* is an anthology television show, with episodes operating independently from one another in unique settings with new characters. All of them are interconnected, however, by the same theme: the relationship between humanity and technology, and the types of dystopias that may arise from this relationship. Diverse dystopias appear during its five seasons, all with different backgrounds: climatic, police, political, and energetic dystopias. This article focuses on the third season episode "Men Against Fire" as its case study.

"Men Against Fire" creates a militarist universe in which the imminent attack of cockroaches, monstrous beings resembling aliens or zombies, poses a constant threat. The entire society, from soldiers to civilians, lives in terror of these hideous monsters. Since the cockroaches are not human, killing them does not cause remorse or guilt. The protagonist, Stripe, is a soldier who has just joined the military division responsible for hunting cockroaches. Following an incident, Stripe's technological mask is damaged. Throughout the episode, the viewer watches what appears to be a war movie against monsters. However, in a twist towards the end, the protagonist discovers that the cockroaches are human, and that his mask was what made him see them as monsters. In an echo of the genocides of the twentieth century, the hegemonic power of that universe, a technological dystopia, facilitated the extermination of unwanted, deviant human beings. In this case, the monsters are people who are predisposed to genetic diseases like cancer, Alzheimer's, and sclerosis, and have supposed tendencies to criminality. The technology in the masks makes soldiers see these people as non-human creatures, and controls their senses so that they cannot hear or smell, thereby preventing them from having any empathy for or seeing the humanity in their victims. "It's a lot easier to pull the trigger when you're aiming at the bogeyman,"[2] reveals Arquette, a psychologist (50:33-50:39). In other words, for Arquette, the semantic field of humanity is essential to evoke feelings of empathy or remorse. The notion of humanity serves as a brake on violence.

What also drives the soldiers further is the idea that they are aiming for a desired utopia. As with the totalitarian movements of the twentieth century, among the military forces during the episode, including the protagonist, there is a feeling that the genocide they commit is a necessary evil to create a better world. The characters are driven by the desire for the future, and for it they commit atrocities. The attempt to eliminate diseases from humanity, as well as supposed tendencies towards criminality, is made to create a new human who does not suffer, does not question, does not resist, does not criticise, and does not generate economic losses with incurable diseases.

In *Os Anormais* [*The Freaks*], a compilation of a course that Michel Foucault taught at the Collège de France in the mid-1970s, the French philosopher creates an archaeology of the figure of the monster, in comparison with its legal, historical, and sociological aspects. Foucault divides the figure of the deviant into three groups: the monster, the individual to be corrected, and the masturbator (69). Throughout history, the first group in particular has been characterised as deviant. The monster was the witch, the conjoined

twins, the intersex individual. Anyone whose existence violated the regular standards of hegemonic power - particularly what was classified as normal, healthy, and adequate within the medical realm, was perceived as a monster. The monster was the Manichaean incarnation of evil, "not just a violation of the laws of society, but a violation of the laws of nature" (70).

In *Microfísica do Poder* [*Power Microphysics*], Foucault argues that Jews were one of the preferred targets in this dehumanisation process for centuries (272). Because they are inside and outside of societies at the same time, simultaneously belonging to a nation and their own ethnic, cultural, and religious group, and out of step with the pattern and hegemonic power, Jews were seen as aberrations: monstrous beings who, in the contradictory mind of the anti-Semite, needed to be assimilated and liquidated. Nazism only took this view to the extreme, using technology to make possible what several previous movements had already tried to do.

In a mind full of fear, monstrosity is contagious. The leper of the Middle Ages is the most literal representation of the monster-disease relationship, just as it was during the 1980s with AIDS. For anti-Semites, Judaism takes on the appearance of an infectious disease. The anti-Semite is a paradoxical character because for them the assimilation of the Jew is necessary but, at the same time, they are afraid that Judaism will contaminate the 'good' people. In "The Study of Anti-Semitic Ideology of The Authoritarian Personality," Daniel J. Levinson suggests that the dehumanisation of Jews by anti-Semites is due to the fear of "*contamination*: the fear that Jews may, if permitted intimate or intensive contact with Gentiles, have a corrupting or degenerating influence" (Levinson 98).

The fear of Jews by the anti-Semites is emulated in "Men Against Fire" to draw parallels with the Holocaust. The atrocities of the twentieth century, as well as influencing the growth of the dystopian genre, inundate "Men Against Fire" with references. In the same way that the Jews are perceived by anti-Semites, cockroaches are not only seen as monstrous beings but, like literal cockroaches, as transmitters of diseases, as if one can become a cockroach by coming into contact with them. Until the twist is revealed, the viewer is led to believe that Stripe, after having his mask damaged, was becoming a cockroach. According to Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, curiosity about the monster tends to be punished with death or, worse, with the transformation of oneself into the monster (qtd. in Silva 41). At the end of the episode, Stripe is punished precisely for giving the monster the benefit of the doubt, for listening to what the monster had to say, and for questioning the hegemonic power and, therefore, for being corrupted and turned into a deviant. This is contrasted with a scene in the beginning of the episode where a group of peasants, fearing contamination, voluntarily burn their supplies after an attack by the cockroaches. To return to Foucault's concept, Stripe's 'failing' is allowing himself to become a subject to be corrected, unlike the earlier civilian characters.

This contrast raises a question about the perception of cockroaches by civilians: if they, unlike soldiers, do not wear masks that alter the perception of the real and the senses, presenting dehumanising images of people, what makes civilians believe in and perpetuate the fear of the monster? The episode reveals that the change in reality for the civilian population is less literal and more figurative: it is an ideological change. As one of the 'monsters' illustrates at the end of the episode:

> Ten years ago, it began. Post-war. First, the screening programme, the DNA checks, then the register, the emergency measures. And soon everyone calls us creatures. Filthy creatures. Every voice. The TV. The computer. Say we have… we have sickness in us. […] That we cannot go on. My name was Catarina. He was Alec. Now we're just roach. (43:44-44:28)

Dahl states that, although no ideology is static and individuals mutate throughout their lives, the tendency is for the ambient to assume a fundamental role in the perpetuation of ideologies (167-170). Thus, an individual immersed in conservative institutions tends to understand themself as conservative. Although this tendency is not a rule - the human being is not an artificial reproduction of experiences and ideologies, but a tangle of reconstructed ideas and perceptions - ideological ruptures tend to be rarer than reproductions. Therefore, the civilian population sees designated human beings as cockroaches because they have been taught, by all the institutions in which they operate, to fear the monster. Ideology, when combined with fear and the absence of reflection, turns out to be as efficient as the mask that literally alters reality.

At the beginning of the story, soldiers invade the house of a priest, Heidekker, accused of being a cockroach sympathiser and of sheltering them. The role that both the protagonist and the roach-sympathising priest, Heidekker, assume is more suited to the second character proposed by Foucault in *Os Anormais*: the individual to be corrected (72). As they do not have genetic tendencies to diseases, it is not appropriate for them to be taken as monsters but, even so, they need to be punished for their misconduct. As the monster is always an infectious disease, just as anti-Semites viewed tolerant or pro-Judaism gentiles as contaminated, the deviants who tolerate or help cockroaches in "Men Against Fire" supposedly had their minds controlled and infected to create tolerance. In one of the most emblematic scenes, just before breaking into the house where the priest is harbouring some monsters, the head of operations, Medina, states that "Mr Heidekker is not exactly what you call a socialite or a mingler. Seems like mental health issues. He's got some interesting views on roaches, by all accounts" (05:00-05:14). To which Stripe responds: "how can anyone be dumb enough to help a fucking roach?" (05:52-05:58). In addition to the irony that Stripe himself would help the cockroaches later, the scene sums up how the individual to be corrected is seen: mentally ill, unintelligent, and criminal, but still a person. This point is illustrated again during the invasion of Heidekker's home when, after Stripe kills two cockroaches, his teammate Hunter threatens Heidekker with a gun, stating that "Roach lover counts as a kill too, right?" (14:21-14:27). Despite having just been celebrated for killing two cockroaches, Stripe interrupts: "You shoot a civ, that's gonna stay with you the rest of your life" (14:30-14:39). Treating the individual to be corrected in the same manner as the monster would be immoral. Similarly, after having his mask damaged and discovering the horror he perpetuated, Stripe does not suffer the monsters' punishment of extermination, but the individual to be corrected's punishment of reliving his murders *ad infinitum*.

Finally, the hopeless ending of "Men Against Fire" represents yet another characteristic of totalitarianism: mind control. After being arrested as a deviant who colluded with the monsters, Stripe is given the illusion of a choice: either accept the mask's

formatting, which will erase his recent memory and make him forget his discoveries, or spend the rest of his life cyclically reliving the images of his murders. With the ultimate goal of eliminating human free will, totalitarianism seeks mental control. Terror - hence the importance of the monster - is an efficient way of achieving that control, of replacing free thought with fear. But ultimately totalitarianism aims for literal mind control (Arendt 192). Works such as *A Nova Ordem* by Bernardo Kucinski, *1984* by George Orwell, and "Men Against Fire" illustrate how fiction explores this aspect of totalitarianism: in all three examples, the deviants undergo some kind of brainwashing. They go even further, by showing totalitarianisms that, unlike the versions in our reality, did not collapse precisely because they managed to obtain mastery over literal mental control techniques, due to mind control technology that does not exist in real life. Of these, *1984* is the most terrifying dystopia because it shows precisely the absolutisation of this totalitarianism: in the end, after a series of tortures and brainwashings, the protagonist is extirpated from any individuality and his own thoughts. Orwell gave his work the grim ending that Stalinism and Nazism tried but failed to achieve: the creation of the oxymoron of total totalitarianism.

Conclusion

The relationship between ideology, dystopia, and monsters is more intrinsic than may be apprehended at first glance. According to the broader notion of ideology as a filter for interpreting the real, which is therefore present in all human productions, there is no dystopia without ideology. Due to its symbiotic relationship with politics, dystopia (and thus utopia) is an art form in explicit dialogue with ideology: each ideology imagines a dystopic world, one that has been ruined by an opposite ideology. With the boom of dystopian literature after a century like the twentieth (which was dystopian in itself), it became possible to find cultural products with diverse types of dystopias. Consumers have a wide range of choices that they might make depending on the way in which they believe that humanity will destroy itself (Lepore).

In "Men Against Fire," the objective enemy is not only fundamental for control through fear, but also to eliminate the undesirable. The enemy thus assumes a dual function: it serves as a control unit to perpetuate hegemony and directs efforts towards the creation of a utopia, in the process creating a dystopia. When soldiers eliminate monsters, they are treated like heroes and receive more intense virtual erotic dream nights as rewards. However, the hero who fights with the monster must be careful not to become one of them, to paraphrase Nietzsche's classic phrase (89). The fear of contamination helps and accelerates the process of dehumanisation. There is not only the fear of the evil that the monster can do, but the fear of becoming like the monster. The attempt to kill the monster, therefore, turns people who are afraid of the monster into monsters. At the end of George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, animals look at the farm and are no longer able to differentiate pigs from people. When looking at the violence of dystopias, as in "Men Against Fire," the viewer is no longer able to differentiate monsters from humans. No creature can be more monstrous than humanity itself.

Notes

1. All excerpts and titles of books in Portuguese were freely translated into English by the author.
2. All quotes from "Men Against Fire" were taken from the English audio of the episode.

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