

**Dystopian Britain:
Critical Utopia and the Politics of the Body in P.D. James's *The Children of Men*, Alfonso Cuarón's Film Adaptation, *Children of Men*,
and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go***

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Resumo:

*There has been an interesting increase, in the last thirty years or so, in the number of dystopian novels published in English. These novels have undoubtedly forced a renewed understanding in the concepts of utopia and dystopia. This paper, part of my postdoctoral research in literary theory at Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, seeks to analyse the forms in which this new form of utopian/dystopian literature explores the contemporary political climate in Great Britain in two novels and one film set in future or alternative present times. The texts examined here are P.D. James's *The Children of Men* (1992) and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005), as well as Alfonso Cuarón's adaptation of James's novel, *Children of Men* (2006). One aspect that brings these texts together is the important element I refer to as politics of the transhuman body: social forms of dealing with or regulate corporality in a context of social and political changes in Europe where humanity is defined by a relation to technology with means to eliminate organic flaws.*

Palavras-chave: transgressive utopian dystopia, politics of the body, postmodern fiction.

Whenever scholars and students of literature think of the definition of dystopia, it becomes inevitable not to think of the three classic examples of the 20th century: Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1921), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1937), and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). What most readers are unaware of is that these dystopias are part of what scholars refer to as the second dystopian turn, being the first turn comprised of "[s]attires upon Enlightenment conceptions of a life lived according to principles of reason" (CLAEYS, 2010, p.110), following the French Revolution and whose primary goal was to expose the flaws of reason as a principle for social and political organisation.

In his essay called "The Origins of Dystopia: Wells, Huxley and Orwell" (2010), critic Gregory Claeys states that what the aforementioned authors share in their works – and what may be seen as the core of second-turn dystopias – is not simply a critique of different forms of socio-political organisation but, instead, the embracing of the modern impossibility of achievement of balance between a political system which has to attain balance and an economic system which is set to control or even eradicate social difference and, still, be able to maintain individualities intact. In two of the most important novels of such a trend, Huxley's *Brave New World* and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, despite the obvious and useless man-versus-system struggle (showing not the failure of totalitarian regimes to control all individuals but, rather, the far stronger message that resistance is futile), one of the main dystopian elements is the detachment from the historical continuum (by creating a new continuum, in Huxley; by constantly rewriting the continuum, in Orwell). If, on the one hand, classic eutopias exist regardless of history, the advent of socialist utopianism – and its Marxist critique – bring history to the equation as a vital tool in the maintenance of the system and, thus, of the revolutionary efforts behind it (technological revolution in Huxley; political in Orwell). As these are, arguably, the most well-known dystopias, it is fair to assume that the statement above sets the trend for the understanding of most classic 20th century dystopias.

However, since the last decade of that century, after the rise and fall of feminist utopian literature in the 1960s and 1970s, dystopian literature in English has staged a comeback, though

with different concerns to those central to classic 20th century dystopias, suggesting a third turn in dystopian literature. First of all, the impact caused by Francis Fukuyama's thesis on the end of history establishes that the political elements of socioeconomic critique to socialism and/or capitalism no longer stands after, according to the author, the victory of liberal democracies over communist regimes. The end of history brings the end of utopia:

We who live in stable, long-standing liberal democracies face an unusual situation. In our grandparents' time, many reasonable people could foresee a radiant socialist future in which private property and capitalism had been abolished, and in which politics itself was somehow overcome. 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. Within that framework, of course, many things could be improved: we could house the homeless, guarantee opportunity for minorities and women, improve competitiveness, and create new jobs. We can also imagine future worlds that are significantly worse than what we know now, in which national, racial, or religious intolerance makes a comeback, or in which we are overwhelmed by war or environmental collapse. But we cannot picture to ourselves a world that is essentially different from the present one, and at the same time better. Other, less reflective ages also thought of themselves as the best, but we arrive at this conclusion exhausted, as it were, from the pursuit of alternatives we felt had to be better than liberal democracy. (FUKUYAMA, 1992, p.42)

Fukuyama's thesis, that Western societies have already reached their social and economic developmental pinnacle, leads us directly to the impossibility of Utopia since it is in itself the very realisation of the utopian project and, thus, whatever might be imagined from within Utopia cannot be eutopic in nature, but dystopic. This may explain, in part, the resurgence of dystopian literature (not necessarily connected to its seemingly Siamese genre, science fiction) since the early 1990s in Anglophone countries.

This does not mean that contemporary dystopias are not critical of capitalism but they do so in a different way. In the introduction to his collection of essays on utopia and science fiction, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (2005), Fredric Jameson traces the connections between utopia and politics – especially in the 20th century – as that mode of thought was once thought to answer the questions of any possible alternative to the capitalist mode of organisation. If any anti-capitalist mode of thought required an understanding of the possibility of a better life (meaning, obviously, a general sense of disenchantment with whatever is meant to be “real life”), the practical constructions of such utopias have proven to be actual dystopias, in “a will to uniformity and the ideal purity of a perfect system that always had to be imposed by force on its imperfect and reluctant subjects” (JAMESON, 2005, p.xi), thus connecting the communist experiments with totalitarianism. Thus, one can easily see the complex connections between utopia and dystopia. The u/dys-topian dynamics is, thus, oriented towards a new, postmodern understanding of Utopia as a project that rejects the universalities of blueprint Utopianism but acknowledges its position in the Utopian continuum. A similar understanding of the connections between Utopia and dystopia in postmodernism can be found in Margaret Atwood's critical study, *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination* (2011), in which she discusses what she refers to as “ustopia (ATWOOD, 2011, p.66), a genre which blends, even in its very name, the notions of utopia and dystopia.

Reading extensively through modern philosophy, particularly the ideas of the German Marxist thinker Ernst Bloch about utopia, Jameson identifies two major axes in utopianism, considering More's work as its actual starting point: namely those of the utopian program and utopian impulse (JAMESON, 2005, pp.3-4). Reducing these axes to their simplest drives, the utopian program is present-oriented, and connected – albeit tangentially – to what most utopian thinkers refer to as *blueprint* (usually connected to pre-20th century literary utopias, although the idea of a readymade

plan for a working utopian society has since been denounced by Marx and his successors). Bloch's (and Jameson's) utopian program should be seen, thus, as a work in progress, one which would involve, as shown in the diagram below, a rearrangement of the urban locus around the ideas of a revolution sustained by, among other things, praxis and literature.

The utopian impulse, on the other hand, is present-to-future-oriented and is concerned in crystallising the utopia not only by maintaining the revolutionary ideals presented in the program but, mainly, preventing the appearance of counterrevolutionary ideas which might jeopardise the utopia. Interestingly, in contrast to "the city itself as a fundamental form of the Utopian image (along with the shape of the village as it reflects the cosmos)", Jameson points out the role of "the individual building as a space of Utopian investment, that monumental part which cannot be the whole and yet attempts to express it" (ibidem, p.4). However, the most important element in the analysis of the utopian impulse is undoubtedly the hermeneutical one, involving corporeality, chronology, and collectivity, being the first the most important.

The material body becomes central in understanding contemporary utopias. Jameson states that

[m]aterialism is already omnipresent in an attention to the body which seeks to correct any idealism or spiritualism lingering in this system. Utopian corporeality is however also a haunting, which invests even the most subordinate and shamefaced products of everyday life, such as aspirins, laxatives and deodorants, organ transplants and plastic surgery, all harboring muted promised of a transfigured body. (ibidem, p.6)

Modern utopias (not unlike their contemporary, 20th and 21st century counterparts) have, then, drawn heavily on scientific developments in order to guarantee the utopian promise of the mutability (towards perfection) of the utopian body, a trend perhaps inaugurated by Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818), establishing the known approximation between utopian fiction and the genre Shelley initiated: science fiction (FREEDMAN, 2000, p.62).

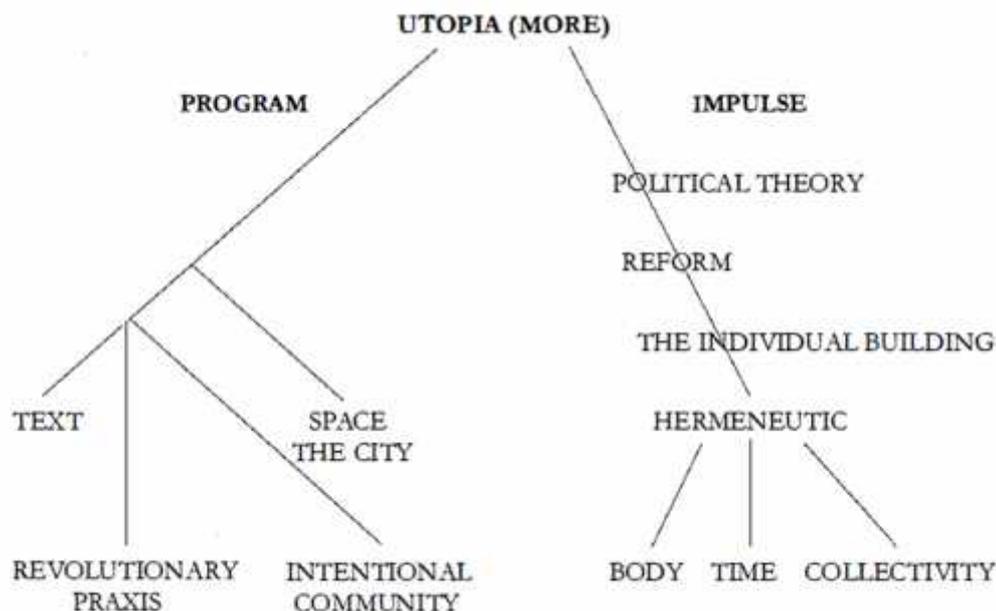


Fig. 1 – Jameson's diagram for utopian programmes and impulses (JAMESON, 2005, p.4)

If the corporeal element is important in understanding this new construction of dystopias,

what is this new body that permeates and mediates the relationship between itself and the world around it? First, following Fukuyama's thesis, it is fair to assume that this is a capitalist body, whose existence is validated in its construction around the idea of desire. Sociologist Bryan S. Turner, in his *The Body and Society: Explorations in Social Theory* (2011) identifies such a body by stating that:

Our attitudes towards sexuality, women's social roles and gender are in part the arcane legacy of feudal Christianity and the requirements of property relations in modes of production based on private appropriation. Our attitudes have also been shaped by the ancient history of family life and patriarchal household. In late capitalism these attitudes in many ways no longer conform to the actual requirements of the economy or to the social structure of a capitalist society which is organized around corporate ownership. Because property and investment are now concentrated in corporate bodies, family capitalism no longer plays a major role in industrial economies. Capitalism no longer requires the unity of the family in order to guarantee the distribution of property. Although capitalism may still require the household as a unit of consumption, it is not a requirement of capitalism that these households should be of the nuclear variety. The ascetic mode of desire is thus not pertinent to contemporary forms of capital accumulation and largely inappropriate to individual consumption. The factory floor must have social regulations to ensure continuous and efficient production, but even in the case of productive arrangements it is perfectly possible to de-skill the labour force and replace it with the dead labour of machinery. Modern capitalism tends to foster hedonistic calculation and a narcissistic personality. Consumer culture requires not the suppression of desire, but its manufacture, extension and detail. (TURNER, 2008, p.29)

The body that caves in to desire ultimately becomes transfigured by it. Capitalism requires the constant mutation of this desire and the "hedonistic calculation and narcissistic personality" which are part of this body and, on the other hand, the construction of desire is connected to technology. The human, organic body is no longer self-standing and self-defining as contemporary capitalism has transformed us in cyborgs, beings whose flawed humanity needs to be ameliorated through technology in the ultimate desire for the prolonging (indefinite, if possible) of life. Essentially, this relationship redefines the very essence of humanism and humanity, and the result of that are the categories of the transhuman and posthuman. As scholar Cary Wolfe (2010) describes,

[a]rguably the best-known inheritor of the "cyborg" strand of posthumanism is what is now being called "transhumanism"—a movement that is dedicated, as the journalist and writer Joel Garreau puts it, to "the enhancement of human intellectual, physical, and emotional capabilities, the elimination of disease and unnecessary suffering, and the dramatic extension of life span. What this network has in common," Garreau continues, "is a belief in the engineered evolution of 'post-humans,' defined as beings 'whose basic capacities so radically exceed those of present humans as to no longer be unambiguously human by our current standards.'" "Transhuman," he concludes, "is their description of those who are in the process of becoming posthuman." As one of the central figures associated with transhumanism, the Oxford philosopher Nick Bostrom, makes clear, this sense of posthumanism derives directly from ideals of human perfectibility, rationality, and agency inherited from Renaissance humanism and the Enlightenment. (And in this, it has little in common with Haraway's playful, ironic, and ambivalent sensibility in "A Cyborg Manifesto," which is suspicious—to put it mildly—of the capacity of reason to steer, much less optimize, what it hath wrought.) (WOLFE, 2010, p.xiii)

The third dystopian turn in literature, thus, is one where the centre of Utopia is not in a

centralised form of social, political and/or cultural control upon individuals but, rather, in the dystopian, posthuman body, which is the result of postmodern life and technological advances. Posthumanist thought is complex and multilayered and, as such, has to be limited to the scope of the argument at hand. Such a turn is, of course, connected to the rise of feminist utopias but the dismantlement of a well-defined concept of what it means to be human is, in essence, the ultimate result of liberal democracies and, also, of Capitalism. Donna J. Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto" (1989) is probably the first attempt to rethink feminism in the wake of late Capitalism by discussing the merge between the organic – once the realm of the sacred and indivisible – and the technological, which derives from the everlasting need not just to prolong life but to surrender oneself to desire. The relationship between humans (whatever the word may mean nowadays) and machines is driven by a constant reinvention of the human. The cyborg, this entity part organic, part inorganic and technological, is the ultimate capitalist commodity since desire never ceases to exist. The literary dystopias in English from the 1990s onwards question the very essences of (post/trans)humanity, together with the complex system in which they come to being.

The ultimate capitalist victory is, thus, the construction and maintenance of posthuman bodies driven by the desire to never grow old and/or perish and, in this, sex and gender differences are irrelevant as desire exists beyond these characteristics (TURNER, 2008, p.32). The posthuman body, therefore, does not allow any features that can be seen as imperfections. Whatever characteristics either culturally perceived as flaws or actual organic defects one has can only be seen as dehumanising and, as such, as something that has to be corrected and/or perfected by technological interference. The "original" human body is essentially inhuman and it has to become (post)human by embracing late Capitalism and its technologies.

This is the trend which can be found in many Anglophone novels deemed utopic, dystopic or speculative fiction since the late 1990s and it can be found in P.D. James's dystopian novel, *The Children of Men* (1992). Set within the entire year of 2021 in and around Oxford, the novel presents a dystopian Britain in a world where male humans have lost their fertility for over twenty-five years. The novel, part epistolary, opens with the protagonist, Theodore (Theo) Faron, an historian, writing on his diary about the death of the world's youngest person, Argentine Joseph Ricardo, killed in a pub brawl (JAMES, 1992, p.3). Theo sees himself as the keeper of historical knowledge which will soon become meaningless and this sets him in a mood of depressive despair. This world idolises the Omegas, members of the last generation born whose corporeal attributes are given a quasi-perfect status despite their incapacity for any sort of human sympathy (ibidem, p.11) and where the elderly are encouraged to take part in government-issued ceremonies of assisted suicide, called *Quietus*.

Theo sees himself involved with The Five Fishes, a small group of revolutionaries willing to overthrow the self-appointed warden of England, Xan Lyppiat, Theo's cousin. He only does so because of his feelings for Julian, a woman who reaches Theo for his help to get a message to Xan. Julian is described as follows:

Her hair, dark and luscious, a rich brown with flecks of gold, was brushed back and disciplined into a short, thick pleat. A fringe fell over a high, freckled forehead. She was light-skinned for someone so dark-haired, a honey-coloured woman, long-necked with high cheekbones, wide-set eyes whose colour [Theo] couldn't determine under strong straight brows, a long narrow nose, slightly humped, and a wide, beautifully shaped mouth. It was a pre-Raphaelite face. Rossetti would have liked to paint her. . . . She was gloveless and he could see that her left hand was deformed. The middle and forefinger were fused into a nail-less stump and the back of her hand was grossly swollen. She held it cradled in her right as if comforting or supporting it. There was no effort to hide it. She might even have been proclaiming her deformity to a world which had become increasingly intolerant of physical defects. But at least, he thought, she had one compensation. No one who was in any way physically deformed, or mentally or physically

unhealthy, was on the list of women from whom the new race would be bred if ever a fertile male was discovered. She was, at least, saved from the six-monthly, time-consuming, humiliating re-examinations to which all healthy females under forty-five were subjected. (Ibidem, p.39)

In Alfonso Cuarón's film adaptation, *Children of Men* (2005), though, the vessel for the new generation is not Julian but Kee, a young, black girl with a strong West Indian accent. Although her body is organically perfect, she represents the exact opposite of what England (and, metaphorically, Europe) should stand for. The film plays heavily with the issue of immigration, also present in the novel: whose bodies deserve the status of citizen to a nation? Certainly, there is a downplay of the natural status: imperfect and/or undesired bodies have no room in this new world order. Both Kee's and Julian's bodies are only allowed to exist in its actual state in that society because it is assumed to be sterile. Humanity, in James's dystopia, is related not only to the hope of procreation but, also, to an able-bodied existence. Superficially, at least, Julian fulfils neither requisite.

In the end of both novel and movie, the birth of Julian's/Kee's baby may or may not represent a new beginning for the human race. Accepting the child as such would mean acknowledging the return to a previous state of humanity, which allows and enables organic flaws to exist in full. Interestingly, neither book nor film present a sense of closure and new beginning. Readers and viewers alike are not certain of the baby's fate. Thus, the narrative is dubious about the fate of the very essence of dystopian, transhuman society as accepting the baby as the new beginning, a baby whose origins are essentially human (rather than posthuman) would mean reverting to a previous state where capitalist control over one's desire for immortality was more lax. However, this is the ultimate irony in both novel and film: the birth of the baby after over 20 years of worldwide infertility may save humankind from extinction but the price is a partial abandonment, at least, of capitalist policies of corporeal control (given that the baby was generated naturally).



Fig. 2 – Still from Cuarón's *Children of Men*: the moment of the epiphany

One important element of classic, 20th century utopian/dystopian novels and which helps create the existing confusion between utopian fiction and science fiction is euchronia. A direct consequence of the scientific advances of Modernity, euchronia is the move utopian narratives make from a non-existing place to a future time (VIEIRA, 2010, pp. 9-11). The motif of the time travel becomes popular after H.G. Wells, in the turn of the 19th to the 20th century and becomes somewhat an expected part of utopian/dystopian narratives. However, Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *Never Let Me Go* (2005) constructs his dystopia in the past. Set in the English countryside in the 1980s and the 1990s, this reverse euchronia – or, as I define it, retrodystopia – creates a world

where human cloning has been possible and commercially widespread since the 1960s and where clones serve as organ donors for the population in general. The novel, a *bildungsroman* of sorts, follows the lives of Kathy H., the narrator, from her childhood in Hailsham, a boarding school for clones (never referred as such but, instead, called “students”), to her adulthood as a carer, a clone who looks after other clones throughout their several organ donations.

While at Hailsham, students were encouraged to develop their artistic abilities – painting, drawing, writing poems – as part of their educational programme. Occasionally, their works were collected by a mysterious woman, the Madame. Students, then, develop the theory that Madame has an art gallery where she displays them and, through which, people can look into students’ inner souls to see and feel what they are like inside. Triggered by this belief, Kathy H. and Tommy D. go on a quest for Madame years after leaving Hailsham because they believe that, if Madame can analyse Tommy’s later works of art, she can verify that they are really in love with one another and may be able to grant them both a deferral in their organ donations so they can spend one or two years as a real couple. After a long search, they eventually find her and their conversation takes readers to the climax of the novel:

“. . . But you asked questions, dear boy. Let’s answer the simplest one, and perhaps it will answer all the rest. Why did we take your artwork? Why did we do that? When you were discussing this with Marie-Claude. You said it was because your art would reveal what you were like. What you were like inside. That’s what you said, wasn’t it? Well, you weren’t wrong about that. We took away your art because we thought it would reveal your souls. Or to put it more finely, we did it to *prove you had souls at all*. . . . When Marie-Claude [the headmistress of Hailsham] and I started out, there were no places like Hailsham in existence. We were the first, along with Glenmorgan House. Then a few years later came the Saunders Trust. Together, we became a small but very vocal movement, and we challenged the entire way the donations programme was being run. Most importantly, we demonstrated to the world that if students were reared in humane, cultivated environments, it was possible for them to grow to be as sensitive and intelligent as any ordinary human being. Before that, all clones – or *students*, as we preferred to call you – existed only to supply medical science. In the early days, after the war, that’s largely all you were to most people. Shadowy objects in test tubes. . . . So to answer your question, Tommy. That was why we collected your art. We selected the best of it and put on special exhibitions. In the late seventies, at the height of our influence, we were organising events all around the country. There’d be cabinet ministers, bishops, all sorts of famous people coming to attend. There were speeches, large funds pledged. ‘There, look!’, we could say. ‘Look at this art! How dare you claim these children are anything less than fully human?’ . . .” (ISHIGURO, 2011, p.261-62)

The obvious reading of the quote above is related to the ethical issues related to cloning humans as organ donors but the underlying issue is that of their very humanity: clones represent an interesting yet ambivalent construction in the posthuman element. If transhumanity is aimed at prolonging human life by means of technology (and, as stated above, the most obvious result of that is the cyborg), how can we understand the construction of posthumans with no cybernetic parts but whose replacement organic parts are a direct result of the uses and advances of technology? And, also, the dilemma of the clones’ humanity as a means to guarantee other individuals’ posthumanity becomes crucial here. The students, despite all effort to be seen as human by that society, could never be given full human status because they were mere commodities, created through technology, by capitalism, in order to ascertain the maintenance of the entire system.

One interesting aspect that links both novels is the fact that they are both set in a real and recognisable geographical location: England. This has several implications in the construction of these dystopias. First of all, the fact that Great Britain is an island is a clear acknowledgement to

Thomas More's Utopia, the island described in his famous eponymous work. Second, and more central to this work, is the fact that both political systems in the novels discussed rely heavily in a politics of corporeal regulation, vital to the very survival of the system. In P.D. James's novel (and in Cuarón's adaptation), all British citizens are required to undergo compulsory fertility exams, from which immigrants were excused. This clearly echoes the rise of extreme nationalist right-wing discourses in Europe, which indicated that the right to live in a given nation has to be only minimally extended to foreigners. The mother's element of imperfection metaphorically represents the ambivalence of the desire for perpetuation of an idea of nationhood (and of humanity) on the one hand and the fear for the return to a pre-transhuman state of existence on the other hand.

In Ishiguro's novel, the cybernetic element is replaced by an organic existence which is mutually desired and undesired. The parts that comprise the bodies of the students, the organs which will be harvested when the need and the time arises, are the desired element in a society longing for perpetuation. However, the wholeness of the body – which, ironically, contains the parts that are so desired – is not only undesired but disavowed as a full individual. By placing the clones in boarding schools and communal houses for most of their lives, which really makes them unable to function normally in society, the system controls their bodies – mere vessels which contain perhaps the community's most precious commodities and which can be disposed of once they have served their purpose.

Thus, it seems possible to state that the body is the key issue in these contemporary Anglophone dystopias since the mid-1990s. The epistemology of trans/posthumanism, though, brings forth a series of ethical, political, and socioeconomic issues natural to late Capitalism and these dystopian novels discuss and even question such issues in a different way to those classic dystopias of early to mid-20th century, where the socio-political aspects were superimposed upon the individual. The dystopian third turn is the ultimate offspring of technological capitalism.

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