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Dystopian Community in Lois Lowry's Novel *The Giver*

Abstract: This article analyses how, as a dystopian novel, Lois Lowry's *The Giver* depicts various kinds of abuse exercised by a totalitarian power over its citizens in order to transform them into a mass of pliable material and also how the book offers a way of liberation from oppression through the recovery of memory. In order to obtain total control over the bodies and minds of the people, the authority tries to keep the community in an eternal, colourless present, by employing different repressive techniques: reproductive control, prescribed social functions, strict routine, surveillance, indoctrination, suppression of human emotions, disruption of personal relations, manipulation of language and history, etc. The reconnection with the past allows dystopian citizens to regain their humanity and their future.

Keywords: Lois Lowry; Dystopia; Control; Memory; Community; History.

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Dystopian fiction has often been defined as a negative utopia, for it is considered that every dystopia contains in itself a utopian dream. Still, the distinction between the two concepts is not always clear, as there are works that contain both utopian and dystopian elements, *The Giver* being no exception. Some critics consider that dystopia is a genre in itself, which possesses its own strategies: hostility towards the body, loss of identity, alteration of family life, euthanasia, the repression of literature and arts, the brave who rebel against the oppressive system, etc. Dystopian fiction has also been considered a sub-genre of science fiction, with which it has much in common. But despite the obvious overlap between the two types of fiction, dystopia is different from science fiction because it pays great attention to social and political critique. Thus, a dystopia may be considered a cautionary tale which warns the reader about the possible disastrous outcomes of certain trends in contemporary society.

Despite the fact that the dystopian society is trying to offer a way out of a crisis, the solution "evolves" into a permanent system that emphasizes the importance of collectivism over individual goals. By the



annihilation of the citizen's choice and freedom, cohesion within the group becomes an aspiration. The collective mentality of the state begins to suppress any individual expression in order to increase uniformity and to transform society into an organism where each member thinks and acts alike. The authority constantly manifests its presence through a strict surveillance system that monitors people at all times. This regulatory apparatus that ensures the citizens' total submission, making them become their own observers, has been compared by some critics to Foucault's mechanism of Panopticism. As Virtanen states,

Panopticon is a model prison where the cells form a circle around the central tower that houses the prison officer. The prison officer can observe every inmate in the prison, but a system of shutters and lights prevents the inmates from seeing the officer or each other. As a result, the inmates never know when the central tower is occupied and the prison officer observing the inmates nor do they know what the other inmates are doing. The inmates are constantly visible, whereas the anonymous power remains invisible. Through this discussion, Foucault develops the concept of docile bodies that states that the individual "becomes the principle of his own subjection," playing both the roles of the observer and the object of observation. Foucault argues that those who are constantly under observation and discipline develop a self-regulating mechanism and that "the constant pressure acts even before offences,

mistakes or crimes have been committed". [...] The system of power and control then becomes an internalized, automatic and natural part of society and "it can reduce the number of those who exercise it [power], while increasing the number of those on whom it is exercised."¹

According to Virtanen, Foucault's techniques of discipline, stated in *Discipline and Punish*, apply perfectly to dystopian politics. In Foucault's view, the body of the citizen is exploited and monitored by the authority to achieve its complete subordination to the goals of the state, but also to assure its productivity. Thus, individuals can be disciplined by spatial arrangement. This implies not only that they are distributed in a monotonous place closed in upon itself, but also that, through this act of partitioning, each individual is designed a certain place in society. Dystopian collectivism subjugates individuals to collective action in the name of "common good," and in order to accomplish this goal, the authority encourages only those activities that are beneficial to society, discouraging all counterproductive or unproductive ones. While the banned actions are all those which are crucial for the self-actualization of a person, the "beneficial" activities annihilate any development of identity, any individual choice and rights. In order to become productive members of society, people are gradually trained through a system of tasks of increasing complexity. This dispersion in time has to bring a profit, and since the individual has become an element of a machine with multiple segments, all his interests and skills must be used for the benefit of the state.



The idea that, in order to obtain total control over human beings, both body and mind have to be subjected to the goals of the authority also appears in many dystopian novels. According to Julia Gerhard, these books may be analysed from the point of view of Louis Althusser's *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, for they address the idea of the manipulation of the human mind through ideological indoctrination, which represents a way of taming people mentally. Since the individuals' physical performance is related to their psychological conviction in the rightfulness and usefulness of their activities, mind and body have to be worked on simultaneously. Thus, the disciplined citizen's complete acceptance of the ruling ideology and blind compliance to the authority's mandates will guarantee the maximum productivity of the population and the society's overall well-being:

In addition, to ensure that bodies contribute to the economic well-being of the state and are utilized to their full potential, they need to be indoctrinated and sincerely believe in their actions. This is where ideology plays an enormous role in making humans accept their social functions and becomes a powerful tool in manipulating and controlling human minds. Thus, ideology turns people into slaves who will obey and do whatever the government assigns to them, disregarding their own personal ambitions. As Althusser contends, ideology "endows" every "subject" with a "consciousness" and "ideas" that his "consciousness inspires in him" and thus, forces him to "act according to his ideas," gratifying wholly the secret agenda of the

government. This is where the control of the body and mind as two separate branches of discipline have to be employed jointly for the ultimate effect of total human submission to the state's Machine: in order for people to act in a certain way, they have to actually believe in the ethicality of their actions.²

All these ideas are embodied in Lois Lowry's *The Giver*, which was published in 1993. Having won many awards, including the 1994 Newbery Medal, and having sold more than 10 million copies, the novel was included in many middle school reading lists and appeared on many challenged book lists. In 2014, it was also made into a film which was directed by Phillip Noyce and starred Jeff Bridges, Meryl Streep and Brenton Thwaites. The book is part of a quartet, together with *Gathering Blue*, *Messenger* and *Son*.

The Giver introduces us in a world devoid of colour and emotion where natural families have been replaced by artificial "family units" and where inhabitants are being regimented from the moment of their birth. The citizens aspire to become a unified entity, and in order to achieve "sameness," they even use genetic engineering to remove differences in physical appearances. The novel is presumably set in North America, but there is no mention of any geographical entities. The action takes place in a city that does not even have a name. The community seems to be part of a larger body that contains similar communities, while everything else is simply called "Elsewhere." As Hanson notices, this lack of geographical awareness, which adds to the lack of historical memory, leaves the citizens with a limited worldview.



As a privileged middle of dystopia, the city, designed and shaped by power, offers a spectacular representation of dictatorship. Transformed by scientific and technical developments, this space organized for the collective “happiness,” becomes the instrument of the oppressive and dehumanizing system that stifles individual freedom. In this monotonous space closed in on itself, the members live in identical houses with doors that are never locked. Every house contains standard, practical furnishing, and every piece of furniture has a clearly defined, useful function. There are no unique private spaces, only similar dwellings. Nature has also been repressed and reshaped according to the requirements of uniformity and practicality.

As Virtanen shows, the mechanism of Panopticism is evident through the excessive focussing on surveillance. In order to manipulate every aspect in the life of the community members, the authority infiltrates both private and public spaces by making use of loudspeakers and microphones that not only penetrate the households, but also cover every inch of the city. These devices cannot be turned off by the inhabitants and only the Receiver of Memory and those belonging to the elite have the privilege of having control over them. The loudspeakers are used to supervise the community and to remind its members several times a day of the rules and regulations, the inhabitants having no other source of information than this propaganda machine. Furthermore, they function as microphones, constantly recording everything that is said, incessantly gathering information on everybody in order to root out dangerous ideas. We can see why Latham considers the novel “a narrative embodiment of

the social philosophy of Michel Foucault.”³ As the French philosopher writes:

This enclosed, segmented space, observed at every point, in which the individuals are inserted in a fixed place, in which the slightest movements are supervised, in which all events are recorded, [...] in which each individual is constantly located, examined and distributed among the living beings, [...] all this constitutes a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism.⁴

According to Virtanen, the individual’s mental space is violated through the rituals of “sharing of dreams” and “telling of feelings” that take place every morning and every evening in the households. Each member of the family unit is forced to talk about his dreams or feelings, while the other members try to comfort him or offer him advice. While these short discussions prove to be superficial, not being able to deal with complex human issues or to offer any real relief, they serve the purpose of gathering information on the inhabitants, for the loudspeakers record everything.

It becomes evident that people’s acquisition of “correct” language represents one of the main goals of the totalitarian system, which intends to keep its citizens in a manipulated, blind and impoverished atemporal reality. As Eike Kühl notices, dystopian societies try to “shape discourse according to their present standards, and only to the present ones.”⁵ In *The Giver*, the censoring of vocabulary has led to a very restricted, defective and factual usage of it. Many concepts have lost their meaning for the inhabitants and language is too deficient to express real emotions and experiences. Despite the demand



for preciseness, words that are connected to the authority and its control system are deceptive. Thus, those that denominate harsh, taboo issues are replaced by euphemisms in order to maintain a clean image of society: “release” actually means “death penalty,” the “stirrings” conceal the reality of sexual desire, “*Elsewhere*”⁶ makes reference to the unknown “other.” This shows how, instead of being a means of liberation, language reinforces the power of the Committee, benefiting its totalitarian agenda of creating numb, robot-like citizens, with childlike levels of awareness, which never think for themselves or question authority.

The state’s monitoring of all human thoughts and emotions and its rejection of a deeper human nature corresponds to its aim of reaching Sameness also in psychical aspects. In fact, the power does everything to disrupt any natural connections between the members of the community and to obstruct any formation of emotional strings, directing their capacity of loyalty towards the supporting of the system. The lack of personal attachments can be seen in the way a child can be easily replaced in a family unit, but also in the fact that, after the children grow up, there is no contact between them and their parents. Since the individual is interchangeable, his value lies uniquely in his adaptation and loyalty to the system, in his “accomplishments.” When Jonas asks his parents if they love him, he is admonished for his choice of word:

“Your father means that you used a very generalized word, so meaningless that it’s become almost obsolete,” his mother explained carefully...

“You could ask, ‘Do you enjoy me?’ The answer is ‘Yes,’ his mother said.

“Or,” his father suggested, “Do you take pride in my accomplishments?” And the answer is wholeheartedly “Yes.”

“Do you understand why it’s inappropriate to use a word like ‘love?’” Mother asked.⁷

The totalitarian regime is not only afraid of the strength of feelings, but also of the instinctiveness of sexuality, seen as an unproductive activity that cannot contribute in any way to the common good promoted by the system. Procreation is conducted through the act of artificial insemination, which is connected to genetic engineering. Thus, the surrogate mothers are selected from among those females who are endowed with the traits and qualities valued by the authority. In order to create the ideal citizen, the power manipulates people even before they are born. However, since the act of giving birth is not considered an honourable one, the position of Birthmother, which is temporary, is followed by that of Laborer, which is considered disadvantageous.

As Virtanen notices, the members of the community are distributed in space according to their stage of life (the elderly in the House of Old, the newborns in the Nurturing Center), but also according to their social function (Nurturer, Birthmother, etc), which they fulfil during all their active lives. Even their marital status is decided by the Committee. Children are beginning to be trained in order to accomplish their social role within the community at the age of twelve. Since they are assigned their careers according to their aptitudes, they are incessantly monitored by those who assign their functions as adults. The Elders are rarely seen, but all the actions of the children are observed, influencing the



decision of their assigned careers. Thus, in order to avoid an unwanted position, the children have become their own observers.

Although progress and technological discoveries are embraced by the community to create a perfect world, everything is rigid and static. Since innovation could disrupt the totalitarian power structures, it is rejected by the authority. The constantly static nature of the system can be seen in the eternal present which reigns over the community, for the ruling elite is not only afraid of the uncontrollable, unknown future, but also of the past, which may represent a term of comparison. It is the repression of history that keeps the system unexamined, consolidating the totalitarian power. With a denied future and without the knowledge of the past, people cannot differentiate between the sequences of time, living in a paralysing present. In order to eradicate memory and to prevent “dangerous” thoughts from surfacing, the regime uses a complex juridical system that justifies the authority’s eternal surveillance and censoring of its citizens. Through laws and regulations, fear of punishment, violence and even death are imposed on the people. Kept in ignorance, the inhabitants do not understand the abusiveness, having a blind faith in the ruling elite. The Community’s Elders aren’t even aware themselves of how terribly they are oppressing the people.

Since everybody’s memories are completely erased, the only person who possesses the wisdom of history, but also the burden of its guilt, is the Receiver of Memory, who has to pass on his knowledge to the next Chosen One. Selected to be his pupil, Jonas lacks any concept of history or connectedness of people that would allow him to recognize his situation for what it really

is. This is due to the fact that family units lack any sources of group memory, while the formal practices of society are completely disconnected from the past. With a fragmented worldview, Jonas only remembers his own life. Since the community’s idea of memory is that of pain to be avoided, his apprehension of “history” is limited to a few rumours. As Hanson notices, even the event of the protagonist’s selection is unusual, for “it momentarily ruptures the community’s atemporality and even acknowledges its amnesia.”⁸ For Hanson, Lowry’s treatment of memory is quite intriguing:

The means by which Jonas receives these memories is pivotal to his transformation. The Giver is the sole person in the community allowed to possess books (apart from directories, dictionaries and the Book of Rules), but despite the Giver’s thousands of volumes, Jonas never reads as part of his training. Instead, he removes his tunic and reclines face down while the Giver places his hands on Jonas’s back and passes memories into Jonas. As Michael Levy rightly indicates, the transference of memory is the point at which Lowry’s novel moves from science fiction into fantasy, and in fact, almost nothing related to memory in *The Giver* can be explained scientifically, from the Giver’s loss of a memory once he has given it to Jonas, to the way memories apparently exist as place bound entities independent of individual consciousness (so when Jonas leaves his community, the memories remain behind and become collective memories). When the Giver transmits memories to Jonas, Jonas inhabits them; they come



to him as first-hand lived experiences, full of sensations and emotions rather than detached observations. [...] By receiving memories through a wakeful dream state as lived experience, as opposed to a more passive method, Jonas takes full possession of them. They become distinctly his memories and his past, not just a generalized historical past. [...] More importantly, the memories Jonas receives from the Giver call forth another layer of memory that is not received but created.⁹

The memory the protagonist receives engenders a type of remembrance that is beyond recollection, “a something yet-to-be experienced, a future/ past of utopian longing.”¹⁰ Hanson considers that Lowry’s idea of memory can be understood as an enactment of Ernst Bloch’s concept of anticipatory consciousness. According to this interpretation, Jonas’s experience of receiving memories is similar to an intense daydream, while its cognitive effect is akin to Bloch’s anticipation engendered by the “condensed” images of literature.¹¹ Hanson notes that Jonas’s memories are new in that they are totally different of the society’s ideology and that it is through them that the protagonist not only understands what is wrong around him, but he also “begins to actively anticipate a future with colour, choices, and collectively held memories.”¹²

Under the guidance of the Receiver, Jonas begins to understand the terrible loss that people endure by renouncing their memories and by embracing the society of sameness that the Community Elders engineered. His heart starts to ache with a desire for a life Elsewhere, and, when he hears about Gabriel’s intended release,

escape becomes the only possible solution. The novel’s open ending can be understood in the sense that Jonas not only escapes his community, saving Gabriel from being euthanized, but that he also heals it by returning its past and its future. It ultimately suggests the possibility that the protagonist not only survives regardless of his desperate situation, but that he alters society’s course, for his releasing of memories forces his community to modify its procedures. By returning to historical time and by learning to bear the memories of the past, Jonas’s fellowmen can recover their full humanity and may be able to feel love again.

To conclude, we can say that, in the dystopian community, the domineering authority seeks to take control of all spheres of life, to permeate all layers of society. The faceless, all-encompassing power attacks people in both their body and mind, annihilating their ability to live as fully dignified human beings, turning them into slaves. The power’s never-failing tool to establish supreme control is severe discipline, which is practiced on multiple levels and under various forms. The state makes use of technology in order to exploit its citizens and to manipulate their lives, it uses planned social engineering and instils routine and prescribed schedule in order to reduce people to mindless robots. Men and women are highly regimented and forced to fulfil their assigned functions without ever challenging or questioning the authority. Since individual feelings and personal relations are disregarded, people become incapable of experiencing any emotion or of thinking for themselves. The state extends its disciplinary apparatus to the reproductive process in order to also gain control over the number of births. Children’s alienation



from their natural parents and their ideological indoctrination right from birth ensures their loyalty to the authority and their industriousness. Since language is connected to thinking and inner space, the authority manipulates it by eradicating certain words or by falsifying certain meanings.

Thoughts are also influenced through the alteration of history, which is done so that the state's ideology cannot be questioned. In this context, memory becomes the agent of change that brings the liberation of the whole community, "the primary utopian tool for opening up the future."¹³

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NOTES

1. Tiina Virtanen, *Individual and Societal Control in Lois Lowry's "The Giver"*, University of Tampere, 2012, p. 26-27.
2. Julia Gerhard, *Control and resistance in the dystopian novel: a comparative analysis*, Chico, Faculty of California State University, 2012, p. 37.
3. Don Latham, "Discipline and Its Discontents: A Foucauldian Reading of *The Giver*," *Children's Literature*, vol. 32, 2004, p. 2.
4. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. By Alan Sheridan, New York, Vintage Books, 1979, p. 197.
5. Eike Kuhl, *Newspeak, Nadsat and Láadan – The Evolution of Speech and the Role of Language in 20th Century Dystopian Fiction*, Goethe Universität, Frankfurt am Main, 2009, p. 35.
6. In *The Giver*, the term "Elsewhere" has an ambiguous meaning. It represents a promise of freedom, life and hope, but also death. It is a place that offers an escape from the rigid confinements of the city, something that lies beyond the reaches of the authority. It is a dimension that represents the community's entire past and future, something significant and welcoming that waits in the distance. The "elsewhere" represents the final destination, pregnant with expectation and future possibilities.
7. Lois Lowry, *The Giver*, New York, Random House, 1993, p. 127.
8. Carter Hanson, "The Utopian Function of Memory in Lois Lowry's *The Giver*," *Extrapolation*, vol. 50, no. 1, The University of Texas at Brownsville and Texas Southmost College, 2009, p. 51.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 52.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 53.
11. Hanson notes: "In his massive *The Principle of Hope* (written 1938-1947, revised 1953 and 1959), Bloch expands the study of utopian hope far beyond the traditional literary utopia. 'Indeed,' writes



Bloch, 'the utopian coincides so little with the novel of an ideal state that the whole totality of philosophy becomes necessary [...] to do justice to the content of that designated by utopia.' To catalogue the world's cultural repositories of hope, Bloch considers fairy-tales, music, architecture, circuses, alchemy, daydreams and many other types of 'wishful images' as viable forms of utopian desire. For Bloch, these types of desire are not merely fanciful diversions but productive instances of hope through which humans glimpse or anticipate a better future. This utopian impulse, or anticipatory consciousness, is a manifestation of what Bloch terms the Not-Yet-Conscious, an individual's pre-conscious and creative anticipation of a potentially realizable future, the Not-Yet-Become. Starting with his first book, *The Spirit of Utopia* (1918), Bloch developed a theory about the importance of daydreams and literature (and other aesthetic forms) to the Not-Yet-Conscious. Bloch argues that the 'daydream can furnish inspirations which do not require interpreting, but working out, it builds castles in the air as blueprints too, and not always just fictitious ones.' Jack Zipes, in his discussion of Bloch, points out that 'Unlike dreams, which house repressed and forgotten desires and experiences, daydreams can be productive for the formation of individuals and the world since they occur in semiconsciousness and point to real, objective possibilities.' Literature goes even further than daydreams because it provides images through which individuals can critically ascertain what is needed to transcend human alienation. Bloch writes that in literature, anticipatory consciousness can occur because objects are depicted in a 'dialectically open space' in which the object is immanently more achieved, more thoroughly formed, more essential than in the immediate-sensory or immediate-historical occurrence of this Object: '[...] everything that appears in the artistic image is sharpened or condensed to a decisiveness that the reality of experience in fact only seldom shows, but that is most definitely inherent in the subject'."

12. Carter Hanson, "The Utopian Function of Memory," p. 56.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 58.