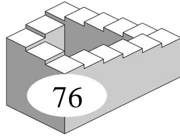

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Creating Space in Modern Dystopia Two Early Approaches

ABSTRACT
My paper focuses on the issue of creating significant narrative spaces within dystopia and the way these spatial guidelines detach themselves from literary discourses and enter the indexes of modernity's most prominent public and private space-concerned anxieties.

KEYWORDS
Space; Time; Dystopia; Architecture; E.M. Foster; Yevgheny Zamyatin.

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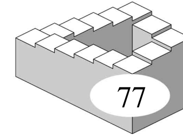
Time and space are, in the Kantian acceptation, the two main categories responsible for structuring and organizing human experience. In this respect, narratives as discourses focused on the human-experience, are defined by their attitude towards time as well as space. Yet, recent narratology approaches deploy the fact that „most definitions (of narratives), by characterizing stories as the representation of a sequence of events, foreground time at the expense of space."[1] Narrative spaces do not designate the story's setting or the characters' spatial movement *per se*: Marie-Laure Ryan distinguishes in this respect a spatial layer that involves "The Space That Serves as Context and Container for the Text". Thus, "narratives are not only inscribed on spatial objects, they are also situated within real-world space, and their relations to their environment go far beyond mimetic representation."[2]

Thus, when approaching the notion of dystopian space, one must acknowledge the context in which this type of narratives sprang up. By the end of the 20th century, the world became „increasingly urban"[3]. The utopia of perfectly organized megacities failed and was quickly replaced by a science-fictional discourse of „privatopia": fortified mediums „erected by the privileged to wall themselves off from the imagined resentment and violence of the multitude."[4]



For it is, indeed, the disappearance of this very value of privacy that which dystopian catastrophic scenarios first and foremost deploy in their warning efforts. What becomes of freedom when time consumes and space erodes its importance? “Ever-busy, ever-building, ever in motion, ever-throwing-out the old for the new, we have hardly paused to think about what we are so busy building, and what we have thrown away. Meanwhile, the everyday landscape becomes more nightmarish and unmanageable each year. For many, the word development itself has become a dirty word.” [5]

“Narratives of alienation”[6], dystopias place their reader in the middle of an ontological dilemma. Tom Moylan [7]translates this into a triad of questions arising from the uncanny effect such fictions attempt to create: “Where in the world am I? What in the world is going on? What am I going to do?” While the last two questions refer to the plot’s development, twists, turns and surprises, I aim to debate the problem of creating place and space forms in the contexts dystopian narratives. Assuming the fact that this setting is responsable for shaping not only a renewed map of a “worst possible world”, but also an ideological position, I follow the impact two early modern dystopias have on patterns that not only re-map post-traumatic badlands of the future, but also bear the very DNA that defines the genre.

In “Spatial Form in Modern Literature”, Joseph Frank[8] argued that modern literature had a tendency to shift from a preoccupation with time to one concerning space, caused by the “insecurity, instability, the feeling of loss of control over the meaning and purpose of life amidst the continuing triumphs of science and techniques” This spatial form discourse ensures a type of continuity that emerges from the idea that “architecture may be viewed as a mapping of the past, a reflection of the present, and a vision for the future”[9].

Is it possible to maintain space coherence in a world where, as compared to the author’s reference points of normality, there is none? Are dystopian cartographies means of recreating, through discursive negotiations of the space, that very sense of coherence, or do they deepen estrangement, coordinating isolation and projecting a mere sense of hopelessness?

All spaces on the map of the future are blank. Filled with anticipation, they speak of the current era’s fears, phobias and acceptation of geographical hells. As debated by James Howard Kunstler in his books concerning the man-made landscape issue, the worst spatial scenario is built around the concept of urban overgrowth leading to an „encapsulated life” that shall be, as Lewis Mumford put it, spent more and more either in a motor car or within the cabin of darkness before a television set. "

The dystopian order of space is viewed as a matter of options for arranging things, which’s “process of destruction”, claims Kunstler, “is so poorly understood that there are few words to even describe it. Suburbia. Sprawl. Overdevelopment. Conurbation (Mumford’s term). Megalopolis.”[10]

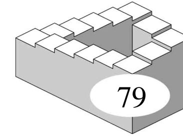
In the context of dystopian literature, however, this „shifting experience of time-space” is subordinated to a regimen of a memory failure: where remembrance of past events is censored, space, rather than building coherence, contributes in annihilating a built-in-time identity. Set in spaces that allegedly generate a type of discourse based on the comparison with a ‘better’ world of the past (that became, officially, forbidden, inaccessible) and the deteriorated, corrupted, undesirable world of the present time, modern dystopias encompass the panic and distress that spatially define human experiences within the geographies of the 20th century. M. Keith Booker[11] saw this type of literature as a form of skeptical dialogue

with most utopian dispositions the modern world focused on developing, technology and urban expansion being two of the most frightening factors threatening the world's benign order. M. Keith Booker thus claimed that „The tendency of investing the world before with the acceptations, possibilities and never fulfilled promises of a lost paradise thus becomes a constant".

Moreover, John Hunington[12] argues that this utopian-dystopian opposition involves the imaginative attempt to put together, to compose and endorse a world". Such a text, thus, consists of „an exercise in thinking a coherent world". Spatial reference points are the first ones to be challenged within the framework of a „memory and identity loss" type of narrative. Most dystopias do not insist upon how the badlands of their stories have geographically seen themselves turned into monstrous shadows of what they once were (we are only suggested that some apocalyptical destructtion had occurred, since, in such post-apocalyptical debates, „the end does not come as a predictable consequence of historical forces or personal actions, but as rupture, shock, and unexpected intervention—a traumatic event that can only be explained after the fact").

Modernism both glorified and demonized the quality of urban spaces. Gyan Prakash argues that "the rhythm of daily urban life might suggest a symphony, but it also spelled the boredom of routinization", while "the awesome promise of technology and planned futures was also terrifying". Urban dystopia was a natural result of such contrasting attitudes, since "its dark visions of mass society forged by capitalism and technology" contained a subtle "critique of the betrayal of its utopian promise" in the sense that "the dystopian form functioned as a critical discourse that embraced urban modernity rather than reject it". (p. 3) At a more specific level, when the space one assumes as "home" is emptied of the very attributes that built its significance as such, it is, instead, invested with the potential of becoming a "bad place", thus, a dystopian one. The word itself calls for it: a dystopia is a bad place, a bad land or a land governed according to negative norms. Moreover, not only is it bad or unadjusted to the subject's expectations of comfort and security, it also becomes the depositary of unsettling phantasms that threaten to become parts of reality. Both destructive and horrifying, the images of a defamiliarized place give birth to speculative questions concerning the dystopian path such a present might, eventually, follow. Consequently, they suscite a nostalgic perspective on the author's present, transformed, in the context of his narrative, into a remote and desired past.

According to Mark Hillegas[13], the most revealing indexes of the anxieties of the modern world were works such as Evgeny Zamyatin's *We*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and George Orwell's *1984*. What these books share is the fact that they all describe nightmare states giving birth to nightmarish environments, mapping a new acceptation of the concept of inferno. The dystopian hell is one that isolates man from nature while exposing him to spatial factors that diminish his deepest values of intimacy. Furthermore, technology enslaves human beings and deforms their vision upon their politics of selfhood, subjectivity and placement awareness. Under these circumstances, the narrative space employed in tracing the highways to the modern hell is a prominent element when it comes to analyzing the patterns of modern dystopias. In this respect, we should trace several guidelines in understanding the preponderance of certain motifs that develop in creating spatial perspectives within modern dystopian worlds, serving as further examples to texts that approach pessimistic accounts of a totalitarian future.



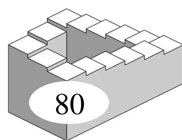
When I speak of creating space in modern dystopia, I think of diegetic elements that give coherence to our spatial experience within such fictions. According to Hilary Dannenberg's perspective on spatial plotting, "the bodily experience of negotiating and perceiving space underlies sensemaking operations" since "the negotiation of space is one of the first orientational steps in any human being's existence. This knowledge is claimed to be crucial in terms of metaphorically mapping any other experiences."[14]

The human experience that a dystopian narrative focuses on is conceived in such a manner that its reader would describe it as a traumatizing one. According to Tom Moylan, these narratives operate a type of inversion that focuses on the terrors rather than the hopes of history. Moylan speaks about dystopian maps of social hells that invite their readers to strange, nightmarish worlds which's structures generate a fictionally shaped critique against the modern progress utopias. These spatial negotiations are discussed in terms of an iconic construction of an alternative world.

Supporting the nightmarish verosimility, spatial patterns that will inspire the entire context of modern dystopias originate in two particular texts that are, due to their early and insular emergences, the pioneers this type of imagery: E.M. Foster's *The Machine Stops*[15] and Zamyatin's *We*[16].

The Machine Stops, E.M. Foster's 1909 short-story, is among the first pieces of fiction to portray what Tom Moylan describes as a totalizing administration that mechanizes every dimension of daily life. Its developing a critical account of the new social space-time of the 20th century aside, Foster's offers a pattern that sustains a sense of dystopian space, featuring a cronotopic perception of claustrophobia and devaluation of intimacy.

The story opens in a bee-hive like room buried deep in the Earth, supporting the life of a sole, technology dependent woman named Vashti, engaged in a Machine mediated conversation with her son, Kuno. The society that they belong to strongly promotes a programmatic agoraphobia, and the people living under the Machine's jurisdiction are entrapped in hexagonal shaped cells that provide them with means of occupying their time in such a manner that their bodies never have to move. Everyone in the world was physically isolated in standardized rooms linked in permanent, constant, consequent communication with one another, thus, in Foster's words, "few travelled in these days for, thanks to the advance of science, the earth was exactly alike all over''. The outer world's atmosphere is poisonous and visiting the surface of the Earth is possible only with the Machine's permission. Still, this activity is believed to be contrary to the spirit of the age, useless and disadvantageous. Vashti fears the terrors of direct experience. However, she enrolls in an unpleasant trip to her son's private room (that shall be described as identical to her own, fully equipped in terms of providing the necessary conditions for living a life outside any human interaction). Travelling to the other side of the world is a traumatizing direct experience, since it exposes one to the habits of a time when air-ships invoked "the desire to look direct at things still lingered in the world". Hence, the uncomfortable number of skylights and windows. This travel bears the wounded memory of places which once stood in open air. However, the language used by these people has lost the habit of naming natural phenomena. A notable example is the scene of the air-ship passing over the Himalayas. The passengers and the flight attendant admit to the fact that they have forgotten the name of the white stuff in the cracks and are shocked by the usage of traditional names for the ruins of cities long ago.



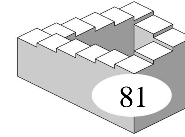
This fear of the open air is a contrastive element when it comes to comparing E.M. Foster's story with another early modern dystopian space approach, meaning Yevgheni Zamyatin's spatial descriptions in *We* (1921). The setting here is described in a rather solar, aseptycal regime. While the greatest fear in the world of the Machine concerned the sun light (Science could prolong the night, but only for a little, and those high hopes of neutralizing the earth's diurnal revolution had passed, together with hopes that were possibly higher. To "keep pace with the sun," or even to outstrip it, had been the aim of the civilization preceding this), in Zamyatin's 1921 novel, it is the full light virtues that are primarily praised, while space prioritizes the public area, privileging complete exposure: "On days like this the whole world is cast of the same impregnable, eternal glass as the Green Wall, as all our buildings. On days like this you see the bluest depth of things, their hitherto unknown, astonishing equations—you see them even in the most familiar everyday objects"[17] While, in *The Machine Stops*, beauty was seen as a barbarian concept, here it is rather to be found in the uniform movement of the Integral, in the glass walled city and in the perfect order emerging from this deprived of intimacy space. The narrator, D-503 cannot imagine a city that is not dad in a Green Wall; or a life that is not regulated by the figures of the Table. Yet, once he discovers the ancient house (as a chronotope) he will understand what Gaston Bachelard described in *The Poetics of Space* as the intimate values of inside space, capable of challenging an entire world-view.

The glass walled apartments and the hive bee cells contrast from the point of view of their design solely. At a deeper, diegetic level, they both articulate a discourse based on symptoms that define the ill core of dystopian worlds: alienation, estrangement, identity loss. The role played by uncharted, wild surface of the earth in the society built around the machine is successfully meets the conditions of the Green Wall, with its ancient building's opaque mass (in the narrator's terms).

E.M. Foster's *Kuno*, is portrayed as a misfit whose discursive presence gives birth to a prototype, formulates an impacting sentence, one that, in my opinion, encompasses the principle of spatially building and conceiving an evil endorsed world: "You know that we have lost the sense of space. We say space is annihilated, but we have annihilated not space, but the sense thereof" (p. 19). Kuno, thus, believes that this loss was an identitary one, and by means of recovering it, he would, eventually, recover a whole psychological configuration the technologized society had been deprived of. In his exploratory context, the first one to be recaptured is the meaning of the near and far dichotomy. This notional discovery further allows Kuno to understand the geography of his underground city and to find alternative eloping paths.

D 503, on the other hand, is culturally challenged by another way of perceiving spatial perspective when he enters the closed, opaque intimacy shell of the ancient house. "Inhabited place transcends geometry", wrote Gaston Bachelard, and the massively conceived spatial maze the ancient house is paradoxically confirms this statement. Even though abandoned, museal, the house surfaces a deeper imaginary the rigid architecture of the city had turned into an amnesia black-hole.

The concept of dystopian space has spread not only in literary works that followed these two early 20th century approaches, but it has also been acknowledged and integrated in the discourse of urban geography studies. For example Margaret Farrar's article on "Amnesia, Nostalgia and



the Politics of Place Memory" examines two different types of creating space memory, one referring to urban sprawls, the other, taking into account historical preservation. Farrar talks about urban sprawls in the context of their occurrence as amnesia places, since all the possibilities of the geographical spaces they occupy are somehow neutralized. This happens because every historical data imprinted in the sites where such urban forms are being constructed sees itself somehow invalidated by the attempt of creating an anonymous, unidentifiable place. Lacking any memory or inheritance, these places, thus, facilitate one's comfortable drowning into an a-morphous anonymity, passive towards memorable events. In these contexts of space-creating, while discussing dystopian cities, one must pay attention to their basically amnesic structure. Readers are convinced to experience these urban settings as reflecting the terror of a lobotomized society's possibility.

Placelessness is a central quality in dystopian spaces. They are stunningly forgettable, bearing an ultimate proof that memory and meaningful relationships have been canceled in order to favor uniformity and the dissolution of all individual features. Whether considering the bee-hive structure in *The Machine Stops* or the open-transparency of *We*'s Metropolis, these are the structures that define, from a spatial point of view, the politics of modern dystopias. Isolation, as well as exposure are used as means of social control. A place of one's own enables a memory-connected type of sensibility, one that repressive systems do not encourage. It is a dominant tendency, that of having a plethora of abandoned cities of the past at the periphery of the main setting in dystopian novels. This comes not only as a reference point to the unnamed catastrophe that has caused the destruction of the old world. The architecture of the past is abandoned because "a reconstructed architecture, like a reconstructed memory, will be defined here as one in which the past has been forgotten, destroyed, or otherwise lost". The un-recycled images of the past suggest that it has not been trapped in revolute spaces, but demolished, since "the image of past forms and the meanings they hold must be viewed simultaneously with the image of the world at the present moment" and "the goal of the reconstructed architecture is both to reveal or reassemble the memory of past forms and to present the new forms of a modern world." The dystopian character is socially situated outside the order of a spatial and temporal defined identity. He rediscovers these coordinates through the access of marginal areas of a life circumcised by narratives of identity. The misfit profile thus arises from the need to rearrange time, space and the de-humanized experience they are offered into a coherent discourse, to remap the world in a sense of symbolically shading that which is over-exposed while reevaluating values of symbolical investments, in the sense that „when an individual perceives his own relationship to the past and the present, that offering is one of culture and identity."[18]

As a conclusion, dystopias are placeless countries whose maps are challenged by a programmatic, ideological erasure of time-space barriers and re-humanization of their inherent relationship.

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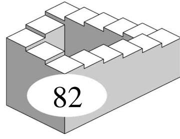

Notes

[1] Mary Lauren Ryan, *Space*, http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/space.
[2] *Ibidem.*
[3] Gyan Prakash, *Noir Urbanisms: Dystopic Images of the Modern City*, Princeton University Press, 2010, p. 1.
[4] *Ibidem.*
[5] James Howard Kunstler, *The Geography of Nowehere*, p. 10.
[6] Tom Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia*, Westview Press, 2000, p. 3.
[7] Ibidem, p.10.
[8], Joseph Frank, "Spatial Form in Modern Literature", in *The Sewanee Review,* Vol. 53, No. 4 (Autumn, 1945), p. 643-653.
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[18] Patricia Bodge Kendall, *Pure Time and Reconstructed Architecture*, http://myweb.-wit. edu/bogep/ eportfolio/writing/pure-time/puretime.html