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## Phenomenological Insights into Cinematographic Dystopia as It Unfolds in *Divergent* and *Insurgent*

### ABSTRACT

In the present paper we will attempt a phenomenological investigation of dystopia in two cinematic productions (*Divergent* and *Insurgent*), while using as a conceptual apparatus Maurice Merleau-Ponty's notions of flesh (*la chair*), perception, dehiscence (*écart* / divergence) and thickness. The choice for this type of approach is supported by the documented assumption that there are few phenomenological incursions into film analysis and interpretation. We will discuss that specific role of imagination that may generate, in the visual experience, a preference towards dystopia, and how embodied-subjectivity influences the viewer's fascination with dystopian scenarios. A parallel will be drawn between the city described by Socrates in Plato's *Republic* and the futuristic city of Chicago – the milieu where the plot of the films *Divergent* and *Insurgent* develops – with a focus on the aspirations, beliefs and ambitions that lead to the construction of a society divided in factions.

### KEYWORDS

Film; Dystopia; *Divergent*; *Insurgent*; Maurice Merleau-Ponty; Flesh (*la chair*); Dehiscence; Thickness; Apotropaion.

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The analysis and interpretation of cinematic productions have entered the focus of the academic world from film theory to aesthetics and philosophy. Insofar as the latter is concerned, one may notice that phenomenological approaches to film are less common and books following this course of inquiry are scarce. Therefore, we attempt in the present paper to discuss the phenomenological representations of dystopia in cinema, while appealing to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's concepts of appearance, perception, dehiscence and thickness.

Film theorists are still disputing the matters of authorship, narrative, perspectives and the role of imagination in the viewer's act of perception and visual experience. Regarding the issue of imagination, on one side of the debate, theorists infer that when watching a movie the viewer falls under a perceptual illusion, becoming in this way a fictional character himself, without breaching the reality-fantasy wall and without constructing false beliefs; on the other side, theorists state that viewers exercise their imagination, but remain observers involved in the filmic narrative only to a certain emotional degree. Should we agree with either part of this ongoing debate, we may note that imagination is the faculty which processes external perception and



internalizes it through the filter of one's own subjectivity. Directing one's imaginative fascination is a matter of preference, and recently it has become more noticeable that cinematic dystopia has grown increasingly popular, to the detriment of utopias. The reason for this shift resides, we believe, in the structural changes of the phenomenal thickness of the flesh.

The phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty constructs his philosophical inquiry around concepts such as "flesh" (*la chair*), "thickness" and "divergence" (dehiscence, *fr< écart*). The notion of "flesh" replaces the Husserlian "lived-experience" and refers to the intertwining of different dimensions. It can signify the world and the body sharing themselves to each other, overlapping continuously. The subject of perception is the body. It does not represent a mere connection with the world but, because it is immersed in the world, it becomes, as Merleau-Ponty names it, an "exemplar sensible" which pertains to the lived experience, sees it and incorporates it. "Thickness" appertains to the flesh (which, as we have already stated, can mean both body and world) and contains the actual act or perception, memory, image-consciousness and general knowledge of things. Karel Novotny explains that "thickness" is:

a universal characteristic of phenomenality [...] closely related to the animate organism and indeed the body. [...] If every act of appearance happens with the realm of sensibility, then the light of appearance is always bound up with the dense shadows of bodily organs. [...] [*author's note*: and that] every phenomenon is in its facticity and factual experience apprehended with the organic body. Its nature is constituted by the dense shadow of the body and the temporality proper to the factual bodily condition of experience.<sup>1</sup>

One of Merleau-Ponty's most important contributions to phenomenology is the shift he establishes in the method of gaining access to appearance. Starting from the assumption that one cannot attain the pure phenomenon, Merleau-Ponty brings forth the theory of creating a divergence (*l' écart*) that opens the possibility for subjectivity:

[...] the thought and the body intertwine: the thought presupposes the body, and the body presupposes the thought. Neither of them can be the only foundation, but the relation between them is foundational for both. This relation is a chiasm, a common tissue of the different dimensions. The flesh is the connection that comes out of the difference.<sup>2</sup>

As we have stated above, we believe that changes in the structural thickness of the flesh ("flesh" to be understood in this study, which uses a Merleau-Pontian perspective, as an assembly of bodily organs, acts of perception and the state-of-affairs of the world in which it is actively immersed) may generate preferences in the exercising of the imagination. The impressions we construct in cinema are profoundly impacted by the transgression of things into us (the body both sees and is being seen at the same time by the outer world) as reflected by the world and by our propensity to share ourselves to the world. The predilection towards dystopia in films is given by the need to create an Apotropaion<sup>3</sup> for humankind at the level of the social conscience. All too infused with the flesh of the world, we construct dystopian productions with the intention of offering warnings for what may become of the future. This type of films represents the symbol meant to avert misfortune and distractions by depicting possible dire scenarios. The latter usually render the ruins of our



crushed world, destroyed by environmental hazards and by humanity's greedy ambition. The scenarios overtly display the repercussions, the prices to pay and what mankind forfeited. Frequently, the remaining inhabitants construct for themselves a simulacrum of a perfect society, which permits social stratification and generates social and political struggles and violent confrontations.

These apotropaic scenarios are enacted by appealing to both individual and collective imagination. The experience of viewing a film could be individual or influenced by the medium in which it unfolds, as well as by the people one regards the production with. Either way, the movement of images on the screen opens possibilities, describing and re-describing contexts, facts and characters while encouraging the subject of perception, the viewer, to make use of the phenomenological dehiscence (*l'écart*) in order to grasp the phenomenon in the lived-experience. In the following quotation from the subchapter "Futures Beyond Dystopia" of the book *Futures Beyond Dystopia: Creating Social Foresight*, Slaughter dwells on the role of speculative imagination inquiring:

What, then, is the role of the speculative imagination? (...) it complements and extends reason and rationality. In so doing, it gives us other, often divergent, images, options, arenas of possibility that lie beyond reason and instrumental analysis. These sources provide access to an entire "grammar" of future possibility. (...) these imaginative constructions take the human mind out beyond the boundaries of currently constituted reality – beyond trends, forecasts and the like – and feed our capacities for speculation, imagination and social innovation. (...) A key to their mainstream emergence is an advanced futures discourse that can

critique and re-shape existing agendas. Beyond it are several other "layers of capability" that need to be understood and applied. (...) Overall, the goal is to work toward the creation of social foresight and the steady emergence of societies and cultures that are not merely past-driven, but responsive to the merging near-term future context.<sup>4</sup>

Imagination appears here to utilize its therapeutic force to both give an escape valve from reality *and* to support social innovation through the advancement of constructive criticism of the state of affairs of societies.

In the present work we will direct our inquiry towards the two productions *Divergent* and *Insurgent*, released in 2014 and 2015, enjoying success and receiving mixed-reviews. *Divergent* and its sequel are based on Veronica Roth's novel trilogy which recounts the social artifice, machinations and political traps of the fragmented futuristic Chicago.

While viewing the two films one cannot refrain from making a parallel with Plato's *Republic*, an association which we will strive to investigate further below.

The plot is relatively simple and even predictable at certain points. There is the main line of development and an auxiliary, hidden one, which proves to be the key of the entire story: the world falls to pieces due to human actions and all that remains after the decay and destruction of humankind is the future city of Chicago, in ruins, enclosed by a defense wall meant to protect the utopian world that the remaining people inherited from their forefathers. Their world is an embodiment of Socrates's city that he depicts in Plato's *Republic*. Chicago survives based on myths (that of the privilege of living in a just, disciplined and organized



enclosure under the guarding legacy of the ancestors) and lies of the factions fighting over political power.

Socrates explains how the ideal city would have people directed to work in the trade they are most skilled at, perfecting in this way their virtues. Society would, therefore, be stratified and divided into categories and the ruling class would be that of the intellectuals, more particularly, of philosophers. Similarly, in the movie *Divergent*, society has branched out into factions, also built according to abilities, human virtues and affiliations; and their government is entrusted to the faction that devotes its life for the good of others with selfless strives – Abnegation. The criterion of education is ignored in the plot (unlike in the famous dialogue), the main interest being oriented towards the qualities able to achieve and maintain equality and peace. Abnegation rules in this fashion; they administrate and safeguard the interests of all the other factions: Amity (the peaceful), Candor (the honest), Dauntless (the brave), and Erudite (the intelligent). Their structural governance seems to adhere to John Stuart Mill’s concept of utilitarianism, as all social reform and organization strived to attain the concrete needs of the people. Their future as human beings is oriented since birth towards living in the faction where one can be most useful for society. Comparing Chicago with Socrates’ city, we may observe that the inclination towards totalitarianism is more evident in the *Republic* where it is explained that:

There is to be a rigid censorship from very early years over the literature to which the young have access and the music they are allowed to hear. Mothers and nurses are to tell their children only authorized stories. Homer and Hesiod are not to be allowed, for a

number of reasons. First they represent the Gods as behaving badly on occasion, which is un-edifying; the young must be taught that evils never come from the gods, for God is not the author of all things, but only of good things.<sup>5</sup>

Nonetheless, in a dystopian tone, the movie also presents from the beginning two basic stances of the fissure of their alleged utopian world: the factionless and the divergents. The former were misfits who were unable to be a part of either faction, therefore they were excluded and forced to seek shelter among the ruins of the old city (they were denied their right of being in the city); the latter ones, the divergents were complex people who possessed all the virtues necessary to function in any of the factions (they were denied their lives). Their mutability and ability to adjust to any situation and see outside the box made them a threat to the stability of the society, as they could not be controlled by the faction rulers. During the rule of Abnegation, the divergent threat was silent but, in the second movie, *Insurgent*, the faction of the Erudites attacks and destroys the entire Abnegation faction, seizing power and overtly waging war against the divergents.

Divergence signifies dehiscence from censorship (an attitude emerging from the Greek relation to the notion of faith and that of necessity) and from the belief that everybody should be compliant and eager to stick to their place. Plato gives in book IV the definition of “justice” as consisting in “everybody doing his own work and not being a busybody: the city is *just* when trader, auxiliary and guardian, each does his own job without interfering with that of other classes.”<sup>6</sup>

Beatrice Prior (Tris), the main character and heroine of the dystopian trilogy, born within Abnegation, discovers she is a



divergent and she is forced to hide her abilities in order to survive. She decides to relinquish the serene safety of her Abnegation family and lose her divergent trace and stigma within the faction of the Dauntless – which she seldom watched fascinated while they were roaming across Chicago as its fearless guardians. If we are to take a closer look at this character we may note that, unoriginally, she is the embodiment of all the qualities that make their world cripple and make it far from being perfect. Her brain is specially wired to achieve a vertical perspective on their societal particularities and to assess their flaws and the danger they generate.

In order to maintain the illusion that the people of the future Chicago possess freewill, the custom was to offer teenagers the choice of their desired faction. The teenagers take a sort of psychological test, similar to the Briggs Myers personality test often used in schools today. They enter a drug-induced dream-world where they are put in simulated situations in order to discover (by means of their responses to stimuli) which are their strongest virtues, and in this way, their best compatibility with one of the factions. The results of the test have the purpose to guide the teenagers while deciding upon their future, but in the end their decision is their own.

Tris chose Dauntless believing that they could give her a good cover-up, but at the end of her Dauntless training, she was compelled to take a final test, another simulacrum in which they were supposed to surpass their greatest fears. Being a divergent, Tris immediately comprehends the artificial dimension of the context and, in this way, she reveals her divergent abilities to her supervisor Four. Following an underlining romance in the story, Four teaches Tris how to avoid using her extraordinary skills and to pretend to respond to stimuli in the simpler way of the Dauntless.

Tris becomes Dauntless and together with Four she escapes the city and the rule of the Erudites controlled by Jeanine. The second movie, *Insurgent* depicts their flight outside the city seeking shelter from faction to faction, while a war bursts between people and ideologies. The film mostly revolves around action and love scenes, depicting Tris and Four's love on the background of their fight against the dictatorship of Jeanine, who applies *à-la-lettre* (we may say) Plato's words "Let our city be accounted neither large nor small, but one and self-sufficing"<sup>7</sup>. The stress falls here on the word "self-sufficient", and Jeanine relishes on the city's enclosure that gives her a better control on who is allowed to live there and who should be eradicated. For her, what is outside the wall is irrelevant.

The plot develops quickly only to reveal in the end of the movie the truth that generated the state of affairs of Chicago. Jeanine has in her possession an artifact, their legacy – the words of their forefathers. The curios box, once opened through the effort of the pure (100 percent) divergent Tris, displays a hologram of the ancients which explains how they inhabit an artificial world, the result of an intended experiment. The forefathers fenced the city of Chicago sheltering it from the influence of the outer lands and put the basis of the faction-divided society, gave them rules to abide to and let them to believe that they were the last survivors of a defeated Earth with the hope to recover the humanity they themselves have lost. The goal of the experiment was to observe how a world given the perfect premises for evolution and leading a perfect life, could use its resources to develop towards a true utopian world, or to crumble and waste away under moral perversion and turpitude. The forefathers may have anticipated the faith of their experiment due to knowledge of the human drives,



so they offered Chicago the tool for salvation: *the divergents*. The moral and social implications of this Apotropaion become obvious: diversity should and needs to surpass categorizing and that one should support and sustain the mixture of idiosyncrasies and variations.

In the following part of our paper we would like to approach another aspect depicted in the two films: when the rulers can no longer apply satisfactory constraint on the inhabitants, they resort to chemical distortions of perception. The narcotics affect their central nervous system and cause changes in their behavior or in their relation with the world. In terms of appearance and of interpreting what appears as a result of what one sees, the films depict how only divergents can escape the imposed framework for apprehension, by being able to distinguish between what is real and what is hallucination. During the drug-induced episode Tris, due to her divergent nature, manages to maintain the difference between her and the flesh of the world (or what seemingly is the world) and to remain an observer of the events and not an incorporated participant. Karel Novotny affirms that:

[...] the phenomenon is not merely a correlate between meaning-bestowal through intentional consciousness. This act of bestowing meaning is no longer apprehended in the sense of the ineluctable spontaneity of the intentional act of an “I experience”, of an act of noesis which would be absolutely transparent to itself via the noema [...] the origin of the phenomena is to be sought at a deeper level than that of intentional consciousness...<sup>8</sup>

Tris maintains her perspective and reaches out for the possibility of the imagined object and internalizes it according

to her perceptual rules. The drug-induced test builds its illusions so strongly that it induces physical pain, and strenuous efforts are made to conclude the violent parts of the hallucination. The subject of the test perceives with his/hers sensory apparatus, but for Tris her perception remains “contact from a distance.”<sup>9</sup> She does not only perceive but, by putting a distance, she can also reflect and remain aware of herself. She conveys and restores information through the thickness of her flesh, and her gaze (what she sees in the induced dream) on the fictional world does not hinder her in any way, but supports her in merging with the dimensions she moves in:

[...] my body is “made” out of the very same flesh, so to speak, as the world, and as Merleau-Ponty writes in the very same working note, “this flesh of my body is shared with the world, the world *reflects* it, and encroaches upon it and it encroaches upon the world (the *felt* (senti) at the same time the culmination of subjectivity and the culmination of materiality), they are in relation of transgression or of overlapping.

Viewed from this perspective, dehiscence comes into the world thanks to the bodiliness pertaining to the lived experience, and thanks to the flesh, in which the world *qua* perceived and sensed in lived experience participates. Thus one could understand the flesh of the world, on hand, as an articulation based on the concept of dehiscence, in which dehiscence is a property of lived experience thanks to the bodiliness that pertains to it.<sup>10</sup>

In the same matter, when one watches a film, one makes the distinction between fact and fiction. Our subjectivity, reacting from the dehiscence we put between us and phenomena, analyzes and interprets the



narrative line of the plot and the acting of the performers. Similarly, we comprehend reality by both observing and living it according to personal criteria. Since a utopia embodies the ideal of its creator<sup>11</sup> it becomes unachievable, due to the controversy sparked by human beings' difference of opinion. A dystopian filming approach would obtain, in our opinion, a more authentic experience for the viewers. Regardless of the label attached to the production, the spectatorship will nevertheless imply a horizon of expectation which may or may not be fulfilled during the experience at the cinema (divided into portions some perceptions may be supported by the director's eye, others are doomed to being underlooked).

At the end of our short paper we may conclude that the analysis of cinematography through phenomenological notions of inquiry (such as those of Maurice Merleau-Ponty) depicts itself to be a promising academic endeavor. The body (following Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological perspective which we have applied here) signifies our earliest and first contact with the world; and our perception of everything around us is further configured by the imagination. The viewer (composed of body, mind and instants of the lived-state of affairs) is immersed in what he sees while experiencing (living) what he perceives. Therefore, the appreciation of a particular type of filmic technique or of a film genre remains, we believe, an ongoing shifting perspective of the embodied-subjectivity of the viewer.

The main goal of a cinematic work is to respond to a targeted audience, hopefully it may have a prolific reception outside it as well, nonetheless, the relativity of possibilities that our contemporary mentalities encompass, make dystopias successful and popular cinematographic stories.

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## Internet links

<https://www.wordnik.com/words/apotropion>.

<http://www.aprendendoingles.com.br/ebooks/republic.pdf>.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Karel Novotny, "From the pure phenomenon to the divergence of the flesh. On the transformation of the Husserlian concept of phenomenality in Merleau-Ponty" in Karel Novotny, Pierre Rodrigo, Jenny Slatman, Silvia Stoller (eds.), *Corporeity and Affectivity. Dedicated to Maurice Merleau-Ponty*, Boston, Leiden: Brill, 2014, p. 52.

<sup>2</sup> Juho Hotanen, "From the embodied cogito to the flesh of the cogito", in *ibidem*, p. 97.



<sup>3</sup> Apotropaion=n. In Greek antiquity, any sign, symbol, or amulet reputed to have the power of averting the evil eye or of serving in any way as a charm against bad luck. Taken from <https://www.wordnik.com/words/apotropaion>; 10.06.2015.

<sup>4</sup> Taken from the subchapter “Futures Beyond Dystopia” in Richard Slaughter, *Futures Beyond Dystopia: Creating Social Foresight*, London & New York, Routledge Falmer, 2004, p. 30.

<sup>5</sup> Bertrand Russel, *History of Western Philosophy and its connections with political and social Circumstances from the earliest times to the present day*, London, George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1946, p. 132.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p.134.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.aprendendoingles.com.br/ebooks/-republic.pdf>, p. 279.

<sup>8</sup> Karel Novotny, “From the pure phenomenon to the divergence of the flesh. On the transformation of the Husserlian concept of phenomenality in Merleau-Ponty” pp. 49-68 in Karel Novotny, Pierre Rodrigo, Jenny Slatman, Silvia Stoller (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 49.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 53.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 64.

<sup>11</sup> “A Utopia, if seriously intended, obviously must embody the ideals of its creator. Let us consider, for a moment, what we can mean by ‘ideal.’ In the first place, they are desired by those who believe in them; but they are not’ desired quite in the same way as a man desires personal comforts, such as food and shelter. What makes the difference between an ‘ideal’ and an ordinary object of desire is that the former is impersonal; it is something having (at least ostensibly) no special reference to the ego of the man who feels the desire, and therefore capable, theoretically, of being desired by everybody. Thus we might define an ‘ideal’ as something desired, not egocentric, and such that the person desiring it wishes that everyone else also desired it. I my wish that everybody had enough to eat, that everybody felt kindly towards everybody, and so on, and if I wish anything of this kind I shall also wish others to wish it. In this way, I can build up what looks like an impersonal ethic, although in fact it rests upon the personal basis of my own desires – for the desire remains mine, even when what is desired has no reference to myself.” *Ibidem*, p. 136.