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## The Death of Individual Freedom and its Mass Effects over the Young Generation in Roberto Faenza's *H2S*

### ABSTRACT

This article studies some aspects of fiction making in the Roberto Faenza's futuristic dystopia *H2S*. We tackle mainly the concept of individual freedom and its dissolution as it appears represented in the movie, along with the severe consequences this process bears. The satire against Italian bourgeoisie becomes a manifesto against any kind of repression, mainly the repression that hits young generations. In fact, Faenza warns about the dangers hidden beneath the surface of a vitiated educational system. Posing social problems such as order, legality, identity, freedom, happiness, collective welfare and so on, he tries to capture a panoramic view on the critical points that drive civilization to a future break-down. We undertake an inquiry into these prospects within a philosophical and anthropological framework.

### KEYWORDS

Roberto Faenza; Dystopia; Utopia; Drama; Surrealism; Science; Education; Science-Fiction; Technocracy; Young Generations; Absurd; Identity; Individual Freedom; Repression; Collective Freedom.

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Un esperimento condotto da alcuni scienziati su di totti cavia ha messo in evidenza que in una civiltà sopra-popolata la repressione e la supremazia portano a una spietata lotta per la sopravvivenza, lotta che conduce ad aberazioni sociali di natura patologica e mostruosa: pansessualità, violenza, follia, cannibalismo. Dopo pochi mesi di osservazione, si comincia a determinare in anzi tutto che lo tritramento sociale investiva tanto i maschi che le femmine. Nei maschi se stabiliva una guerra sanguinaria per la presa del potere che durava ininterrottamente, e con singolare ferocia, fino al prevalere del più forte. Divenuto capo, il più forte se isolava con le femmine e le costringeva d'attendere lui in una specie di harem, mentre la sua vigilanza dominava dall'altro la vita de le su di te. Privati de le femmine, i maschi se accoppiavano tra loro senza alternativa di sesso. Uscivano solo per mangiare. In una pena incontravano il capo, cercavano di contarlo lui consenziente, secondo cui proceso che vene chiamato omosessualità de identificazione. Più grave il aberazione di comportamento materno: le femmine rimaste gravide, forze advertendo l'atmosfera di tensione e di pericolo, rifiutavano di partorire e la maternità. Preferivano un



dolore fino a scoppiare una lenta, esasperata agonia. Pochissime accettavano di sgravarsi, ma subito dopo si disinteressavano de la plove. Così, incapace di allevare loro nati, si vedevano costretti ad abbandonarli, assistendo impotente a loro richiami di aiuto. Quando non venivano divorati dagli adulti, i sopravvissuti, isolati e privati de le cure materne, no riuscivano a svelire uno sviluppo regolare, e crescevano anormali e diformi. Dopo qualche tempo, la nevrosi generale esso seguirsi de tali fenomeni aumentavano con improvviso e violenza l'indice de la patologia sociale, portando a un unico risultato: l'estinzione della popolazione. Grazie!

The fragment quoted in Italian reproduces the monologue opening Roberto Faenza 1969's *H2S*, a little-known Italian futuristic dystopian masterpiece, according to one of its viewers.<sup>1</sup> Roberto Faenza is well known for his crusades against social inequity, dictatorship, and corruption. This movie particularly raises a full frontal attack against the repression persistently pursued by inefficient educational systems in order to render students docile. It is however imperative to notice that a utopian ideal of equity is clearly discarded. Faenza resorts to satire, allegorical structures and philosophical insights to focus the absurdity of such an enterprise and, at the same time, the moral issues that students have to deal with in the process of their emancipation. The monologue is more than eloquent for the issue raised: it mirrors the social distress and ultimate dissolution among the guinea pigs, only to anticipate the complete disaster in a distorted human society ruled by a pack of technocrats, mad scientists, and amoral corrupt barons.

Before we analyze the movie more closely, let us take a short inquiry into the

concepts of utopia and dystopia. Utopia is perceived as a cultural construct almost entirely generated out of mixture. Its conventional form makes the reader delve into a non-space and a non-time. Northrop Frye, in his *Anatomy of Criticism*,<sup>2</sup> lists some features that any utopian work encompasses:

- ritualized description of a human community or society;
- the ritual is meaningful;
- the social behavior is artificial;
- any utopian society can be understood in terms of logic, numbers, transparency, technology;
- the individual behaves like a robot, hence the impression of a cosmic mechanism that any utopia shows;
- each utopian society runs a program, a typical way of life at the surface of society.

On the other hand, dystopia explores all the negative consequences of such a rational ideal. For instance, religion is replaced by a higher authority / rationality seen as a supreme religious standard. Utopias are projections with an extreme rational structure and purpose. The social structure is generally a two-leveled one. Society, with all its biosocial functions, is perceived as a pack of life functions taking place in a completely inorganic reality. Utopian communities eliminate the unpredictability of nature. A society of this kind is submitted to control, either consensually accepted or driven by means of force. Individuals are well encouraged to eliminate the range of unpredictability in their lives, to such an extent that births are controlled, sexual instincts are suppressed etc. Dystopias cannot control the free, unpredictable, transformative growth in nature. That is the main reason for a self-induced isolation from the canvas of natural spaces, into a highly technical environment.



In fact, Faenza's movie is an anti-utopian one, as it embraces the absurd declining of the individual in a totalitarian society, and a dystopian one, as it depicts the danger of misused technology. The director superposes in hallucinatory cuts the brute reality of a society ruled by corrupt elite (a dystopian dimension) and the dreamy escape of the two lovers that run from an alienating world (the utopian dimension). Throughout the movie, the aggressive nature of the wealthy rulers comes across to the basic need of freedom that the young students experience. The horrors and the standardized way of life make the two lovers want to escape in a natural landscape of freshness, freedom, playfulness, poetry, and to attain a primordial state of mind that leads even to language being replaced by prelinguistic attempts.

The polemic dimension of the movie rises above any shadow of a doubt. Its reflexive criticism against modern society brings along a space filled with interrogations and inner tensions. The perfection claimed so loudly by the institute members is a totally abusive concept, designed to preserve the elite's status and its perverted ideologies. As a dystopian space, this society is transfixed in the package of moral and cultural values of the young generation, like an apparently indestructible self-sustaining matrix. It is however a society that works as an irreducible fraction between the pragmatic control with the finite use of standardization and the ideal of equity nicely packed in newspeak. It is a society that annihilates the initiative, smashes consciousnesses, claims the unconditional submissiveness of its citizens and directs their entire energies towards the needs and desires of the ruling class. The algorithm of such a society presupposes a strict rationalization of the material assets and human resources. Under no circumstances is the individual able to surpass this social frame.

All the individuals are totally caught into this mass process that eventually ends with their total reification.

On the other hand, dystopia involves a paradoxical return to the Center and, at the same time, a collapse of the social self-consciousness. The dystopian space is a place which does not guides the individual towards a higher purpose, but instead absorbs him within the matrix with the finality to perpetuate itself like an agonic organism. It is a space of almost impossible searches or liberation. Power in this kind of society reaches its outmost limits, becomes absolute guideline for the individuality lost into oblivion. At the extent that not only society acts like a global prison, but the individual mind faces on its turn the same quality of censorship. Thus the movie depicts the perfect representation of a dystopian society, reached at the inner point of its decadence. The human condition is literally smashed within the wheels of sacrifice. This society imposes an absolute concentration of power by making use of scientific propaganda, mass control, and elite supremacy over the lower classes. The horror is exposed almost everywhere in this no man's land.

Faenza explores the collective subconscious by using hypnotic sets and landscapes, hallucinatory trajectories, and rough symbolic choreography in which the characters evolve. Even the soundtrack, scored by Ennio Morricone, expands this dynamics of slowness and rapidness, static frames and rapidly changing inserts. In this exploration, there are two states of mind that influence the main characters' behavior: the first one is the exhilarating awareness of presence, and the second one is evanescence, the desire of escape the prison of society, to free oneself from the anguish of living in a standardized social environment.

The sets also show three realities in which the characters revolve: a futuristic



one (consisting of labs, scientific experiments, specialists engaged in research projects), a classic baroque one (the castle in which Capo and the founder of the institute live), and a natural one, which is in fact the reality into which Tommaso and Alice escape. The latter one is a reality full of light, poetry, happiness. In respect to the states of mind, the sets open an aesthetic point of transgression, as the adults (the rulers) and the young generations of students interact. The institute resembles to a factory in which pupils are taught to be obedient, to worship the new religion of social equity and to let themselves ruled by the machines. The concept of collective freedom is opposed, in Capo's teachings, to that of individual freedom, because, as Capo himself states, individual freedom is not, in fact, freedom at all. In his opinion, social order would be attained by restraining individual liberties and by shaping individuals in the form of robotized entities integrated in a mass device. Among the first scenes of the movie is one that particularly draws attention to the impact of brainwashing technologies upon individual consciousness. The Professor brings newly arrived Tommaso into the basement of the lab, only to acquaint him with the experiments he is conducting in this respect. A little girl, sitting in a glass cage, is literally controlled by a sort of device that inputs her commands prompts and induces her all the reactions the Professor desires. The girl, or better said, the marionette is well trained for the new society planned by scientists. Once started, the device controls the girl and, whenever the Professor claps his hands or clicks his fingers, she dances or lies on her back, spreading her legs while the Professor laughs hysterically. Afterwards, the girl comes in front of the glass cage, takes a small fish from a vat and simply watches it struggling, agonizing, and ultimately dying.

Another clap, and the girl starts laughing like a robot. No wonder Tommaso, arrived to study at this prestigious institution, after having seen this horrible spectacle of human degrading, says to the Professor: "Sono tutti matti!"

Technocracy is therefore the new religion for this society, being sustained through key words such as order, legality, welfare, and happiness. Anyone who disobeys Capo's guidelines and preaching is silenced. Bea, the female student who set up a fight against the oppressive education offered by Capo and his scientists, is invited to Capo's castle, drugged, strangled with a spindle, boiled, and finally eaten. The Professor informs the young rebels about this atrocity, and proposes to help them get rid of Capo. In doing so, he makes Tommaso commit a crime (he shoots a black man who played the role of Capo, in a staged rehearsal for the real attack to come). As Tommaso could not bear the consequence of his action, a female student comes and tries to comfort him. She convinces him to escape the madness they were facing, so they flee into the mountains.

As the perspective changes, the natural sets bring poetry and constitute a luminous alternative to the black and white atmosphere encountered so far in the institute and implicitly in the movie. The young couple and a dog climb the snowy mountain, and set their camp in the middle of a natural heaven. They try to live in a primordial fashion, but eventually the girl gets bored and makes Tommaso accept all sorts of weird role plays. At some point, exhausted by her demanding attitude, Tommaso leaves the natural paradise and returns to the institute, only to find out that Capo has been murdered and replaced by the Professor. Ambitious, the Professor used the students to dispose of Capo and take his place. Afterwards, he had no remorse to restore the traditional discipline and the educational



values of the institute. Considered a fugitive, Tommaso is punished in front of the other students, so they could understand that only by means of repression will be able to develop a good citizenship, and that only obedience can lead them to perfectly fit in the system.

After this degrading moment, Tommaso tries to commit suicide, but his attempt fails. The Professor, now settled in the Castle, argues with the founder of the institute, a pansexual who resembles to a satyr. They decide that Tommaso needs to be reeducated, but first of all they want to offer him the privilege of mating. Thus they organize a simulacrum of wedding, a grotesque wedding, in which Tommaso is the groom and the founder of the institute is the bride. They climb on a circular stage, being attended by two singers, while the rest of the participants, including the Professor, stand in front of the scene. All begin to sing “a, e, i, o, u / a, e, i, o, u / a, e, i, o, u”, while the bomb Tommaso previously made is ticking and the circular stage rounds and rounds with the bridegrooms. The entire movie can be interpreted, in this key, as a theater of the absurd, and all the characters are playing a choreographic role. For instance, the participants in this grotesque wedding become a choir repeating vowels, the bridegrooms become archetypes of innocence and perversion, as a reverse to the famous the *Beauty and the Beast* story.

The entire world becomes a metaphor, a stage in which the characters evolve like puppets, led by an absurd sense of apathy. All the plagues stated in the prologue of the movie (pan-sexuality, violence, madness, cannibalism) become symptoms for a profoundly diseased society, turned into a symbol of a decadent age. In this manner, an allegory for any totalitarian entity that oppresses the individual is set into motion. This world makes sense, but it is a sense of the absurd, a sense of being out of joint, a

sense of aberration that sustains it from behind. Faenza manages to confuse the spectators’ expectations by refusing to delineate an immediate logic sense, i.e. an elaborate meaning and a purposeful progression. His movie resembles a surreal theater of shocking techniques, instinctive reactions, outlining a sense of catastrophe that tears apart the illusory veil of a daily, stupid, mechanical reality. Their stereotypical identities and their idiosyncrasies make the characters look like interchanging masks within a Panopticon of brute energies according to which the inland absurdity of the textual world is driven. All the characters act like familiar shadows in a deranged super dense cosmos and deploy obsession, insanity, and tendencies for the sake of entropy.

There is at work a spark of tensional relationships throughout the entire movie. If we follow the pattern of textual sense construction elaborated by Mircea Borcilă,<sup>3</sup> we will manage to identify some critical moments in the development of the semantic content. When Tommaso arrives in London, he is at first astonished by the indifference of the passengers. He feels like a stranger who fell down into a strange world, ruled by technology, indifference, and decadence. Even the journey with the high-speed train is a descending into the abyss of technology. The travelers on the train are connected to a televised network, and their brain is stimulated to react in a reaction-controlled manner.<sup>4</sup> So from the very beginning the movie shows the tension between sanity (symbolized by young Tommaso) and the insanity of a misused technological environment. The tension is further increased, to the extent that the main character delves into the spider web of the institute. Furthermore, the moments of tension raise between irreconcilable poles, such as individual creativity, freedom, and natural responses opposed to an abstract



collective freedom and controlled reactions driven by mechanically induced stimuli.

Individual creativity ought to be eliminated from this controlled environment. Only Capo and the scientists are allowed to be creators, whereas all the students need to obey, to worship the system, to let themselves being ruled by computers. In this way, the road for individual freedom is closed. Students are trained for a mass destruction of individualism. The tension increases when Bea starts a revolt against Capo and his pack of scientists. The conflict escalates to the extent that Capo retreats into his Castle, not yet aware of how to proceed next. But the conflict is postponed, as he invites Bea, the leader of the group, to the Castle. Here, he fakes compassion and reasoning for the rebels' claims, misleading Bea and making her believe all their problems would be solved. Instead, Capo, along with the founder of the institute, drug Bea, kill her and eat the corpse.

The next moment of tension appears when Tommaso is misled to kill the nigger. In order to solve this tension, Tommaso escapes with Alice, one of the female students. In time, another tension appears between the two lovers. Tommaso, trying to solve this problem, returns, but then he is taken as a rebel and treated according to his acts. Therefore, we can see that the movie expands moments of pressure (psychological distress, anxieties, revolt against oppression, sexual tension, anger), moments that are interwoven with attempts at coping with or resolving the tension. The former are diaphoric moments, whereas the latter are endophoric moments. These moments work as nuclear metaphoric devices and their extension creates the entire world of the movie. We never get to the final epiphoric moment, when all the conflicts would be actually solved. The reason is a very simple one: the world of the movie is set to

preserve tension, along with an illusory hope for salvation. The young Tommaso cannot attain redemption, but only perdition. He makes a clock bomb in order to kill all the scientists, including the Professor and the founder of the institute, but in the end we can only hear an indefinite clock ticking sound effect. The tension is preserved, the bomb does not explode and the insane world will continue to exist even after the movie ends.

The gestures, the stereotypes of language, newspeak, hysterical laughter and the controlled reactions of the individuals mingle together in order to designate an absurd world, inhabited by puppet-like characters. The architecture and the costumes are futuristic, but they also restore some classic prototypical elements (the pieces of furniture inside the Castle, for instance).<sup>5</sup> Apart from the scenes in the mountain, where the immensity of space gives a sense of freedom, put somehow in the brackets of oppression, the whole movie evolves in closed areas. All the fluid contents of consciousness are trapped within the frames of a closed spatiality. It is the perfect means of representation in respect to the feeling of repression exhibited all over the movie. The amphitheater is designed in such a way that the students can see neither each other, nor the teacher. They are isolated in wooden walls that surround each of them; thus, they can only listen to the voice of the speaker, but are far from being able to see him. They live in parallel worlds with predetermined lives, as they cannot manifest their individual thoughts, feelings, or expressions. Their entire personality is fragmented so they could fit in the system, into an absolute geometric division of the collective self. The students need to reject a historical dimension of the individual self. They crave for an identity that is lost, drowned in the new era of technocracy, but their attempt to regain the paradise lost of





their individual freedom ultimately fails. They are naïve to think that the Professor, an artisan of the system, would consider animals helping them to surpass their guinea-pig condition.

Tommaso becomes more and more attached to the system, to the new order that rules the text, i.e. the absurd. He stares helplessly at the new reality, unable to free himself from the technocratic madness that took over the youngest generations. At this point, we can state that Roberto Faenza deconstructs all the system, revealing its appalling roots. Faenza warns his spectators about the dangers that lurk in corrupt ideologies and modern dictatorships. His satire is directly focused on the rich class, made of individuals who have the authority to manipulate and rule over others' destinies. Capo and the scientists stand for a dictatorship of technocracy, in which machines control individual life, and in the end it depends on who and how uses the machines. The scientists and the technicians live in an artificial paradise of a new social order. Interpersonal relationships are damaged to such an extent that the sense of individual liberty is completely lost. That is the reason why the key concepts used in Capo's preaching (freedom, collective welfare, order, stability, happiness) are labels put on empty bottles. Their original meaning is completely gone and the concepts are integrated via recontextualization into an absurd discourse that is made to elude students.

The movie can be seen as a satire of a corrupt and perverted high-class society. The elite is the eternal bourgeoisie, so even if the events are placed in a distant future, under a scientific and technological controlled environment, the rulers of this world are shown in their basic instinctual behavior.<sup>6</sup> They seem to be satyrs of eternal Middle-Ages, driven to extinction by their morbid pleasures. They are instinctual,

grotesque, insane beings, who show no difference from the animals they despise. At the

same time, Faenza knows exactly how to distillate the clashes of generations and how to recreate them by means of artistic substance. At the same time, the director is a fine observer of human flaws; therefore, he takes great care for emphasizing the dramatic effects of his film. The result is a social and anthropological drama, comparable to Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*, a movie standing as a warning device in the flow of history, a work that echoes, among others, ancient Greek mythologies, Kafka, Nietzsche, Musil, Camus, Sartre, Orwell. Strategies such as the configuration of an altered otherness (that restates from a critical perspective the relationship between subject and object); the insertion of some events which are more or less plausible and fit into a geometry that preserves little to zero footprints of Cartesian logic; paradoxes; double meaning; allusions; satire; sarcasm; ontological oppositions etc. prove Faenza's radical creativity.

The human condition as depicted in his movie suffers a great deterioration. A standardized postindustrial society that follows the roadmap to entropy and dissolution is shaken by an Avant-garde revolt that tries to deconstruct and to reconstruct a kind of anarchic split from the absurd and the collective madness that the government perpetuates. The entire movie is consists of surreal episodes, powerful symbols, and tantalizing disorder. The director makes use of antirational patterns of creation, being interested in setting free the subconscious energies that make the social surface shake. Faenza's film is a shock to any dictatorial system, be it a political one or an educational one. The young generations are invited to transcend their mechanical condition, to wake up from the impoverishing sleep of their consciousness, and to find the



inner equilibrium. It is an awakening to awareness that Faenza attempts in his film, a strong desire to free the mind from all the poisonous subliminal labels, from all the contingencies that surrounds individuals, from all the restrictions that social institutions are continually throwing over the life of the individuals. The impact on the audience is meant to be a harsh one, given that every viewer is invited to make sense in a personal manner of many surreal elements inserted throughout the entire movie and to cope with the anti-establishment.

The monstrosity of the Bourgeoisie becomes a distinct image of the absolute annihilation suffered by the individuals within the frames of a post-human social environment. In fact, Roberto Faenza depicts post-humanity in all its massiveness and rough coherence. Therefore, the movie shows the peel of a reality that needs to be explored from all the possible angles and given back to fiction as to the sole existence that would ever virtually cover in its entirety.

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\*\*\*, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0178544/>.

\*\*\*, [http://irenebrination.typepad.com/-irenebrination\\_notes\\_on\\_a/2011/05/h2s-roberto-faenza.html](http://irenebrination.typepad.com/-irenebrination_notes_on_a/2011/05/h2s-roberto-faenza.html).

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> “H2S was never released outside Italy. Rarely seen since its original Cinema release in 1968 this surreal futuristic comedy drama is directed by Roberto Faenza whose inspirations from his art college days are clearly displayed here. Student revolts in a futuristic scientific university see an unusual role for the American actor Lionel Stander, who had previously been cast as the barman in Sergio Leone’s *C’era una volta il West* (1968) The story is a puzzling one – it begins in London, England where students are controlled by a dictatorship Government where sex is outlawed. The film was supposed to have been banned in Italy and destroyed, but do they really do that to films these days? Nonetheless, the set designs are truly stunning, especially the second half of the film where the runaway lovers end up living in the Italian mountains in a colorful ‘fucked-up’ igloo! But the film is so slow and bemusing blending political statements with sci-fi which was to emerge as a popular genre in the US. (...) But, for lovers of Italian 60s Cinema and particularly the Director who stunned us with great images in *Escalation* (1967) where an Italian Student comes to London England and enjoys hippy life, the film *H2S* can still be classed as a hidden Italian masterpiece. Please note this film has never been shown on TV anywhere, the film was seen in an Italian Film Archive.” (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0178544/>). In the meantime, the movie was rescued and it can be watched now on Youtube.

<sup>2</sup> Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, Princeton University Press, 1957.

<sup>3</sup> Mircea Borcilă, *Lingvistică și poetică antropologică* – lectures attended at the PhD School of Linguistic Studies, Cluj-Napoca, University of Babeș-Bolyai, Faculty of Letters,





2008. Borcilă has elaborated a metaphoric model that presupposes three distinct moments that expand a textual world: the diaphoric moment (in which different referential quanta collide, generating a tension that apparently cannot be solved); the endophoric moment (in which the subjects involved in the textual frame try to escape from the tension and to find a solution); and the epiphoric moment (in which a solution is found by transgressing the initial state and attaining a higher level in the cosmic hierarchy of sense.

<sup>4</sup> A recent short movie called *Pathos*, another Italian futuristic dystopia, directed by Dennis Cabella, Marcelo Ercole, and Fabio Prati (2010), explores the way in which individuals are literally locked in cells and sustained via the drug of virtual reality. Their brain is attached to a chain that provides them with simulacra of life, like in Philip K. Dick's novels, as long as they pay for it. The system works to perfection: whoever does not pay the fee, is disconnected from the network, the chain is removed and he dies. A short presentation of the movie:

“In an indeterminate future, huge plains of waste cover every corner of the Planet. Global warming makes the surface uninhabitable and hostile. The Earth is dead. But Mankind gave life to its greatest invention, Pathos, a mechanical system that protects human beings, controls their 5 senses and gives them a perfect life with fee. Liberal thought is not allowed. Only pay-dreams provided by the system can be done. But one day, something would change.” (<http://imaginesciencefilms.org/pathos/>)

<sup>5</sup> For further inquiries, follow the link: [http://irenebrination.typepad.com/irenebrination\\_notes\\_on\\_a/2011/05/h2s-roberto-faenza.html](http://irenebrination.typepad.com/irenebrination_notes_on_a/2011/05/h2s-roberto-faenza.html).

<sup>6</sup> According to Gino Moliterno, “a ferocious attack on bourgeois conformism, H2S, a futuristic dystopian fantasy whose name appropriately alludes to the chemical formula for sulfuric acid. The film's caustic nature provoked the ire of the censors, who delayed its release by almost two years.” (*Historical Dictionary of Italian Cinema*, The Scarecrow Press Inc., Lanham, Maryland, Toronto, Plymouth, 2008, p. 126).