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Utopia between Science-Fiction and Ideology

ABSTRACT

The present study provides an insight into the utopian writing from the end of the nineteenth century and beginning to the twentieth, identifying the functions it fulfils and the processes through which it is able to solidify within the collective unconscious a new perspective regarding the functioning and governing rules of society or a new ideology. After identifying, classifying and defining the functions fulfilled by the literary construct emerging from utopia alongside SF, the research aims at organising the concepts of utopia, ideology and anti-utopia on an ascending ladder, thus marking the process through which utopia degenerates into ideology, as well as the anti-utopia's ability to deconstruct utopia and ideology.

KEYWORDS

Utopia; Science-Fiction; Ideology; Anti-Utopia; Possible Worlds.

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Introduction

The following research started from the livresque encounter with Valerius Maximus who, in *Factorum et dictorum memorabilium*¹, uses a brilliant parable regarding the fictional worlds, parable which proved to be significant for the issues discussed in this article. In a conversation he once had with the philosopher, Alexander the Great stated that his plan was that of conquering the entire world. The philosopher offered him an answer which I consider to be fundamental for the cultural and human appropriation of any fictional text; he reclaims the nonsense of conquering the entire real world, visible in the existential context of so many parallel worlds. However, I cannot help but feeling something more within this parable than a game of language and imagination, namely an ontological legitimation of the worlds within words. Utopia (and here I refer to the utopian genre, which includes all the positive or negative versions found closer or further from the understanding of what is real), the main interest of the present study, broadly establishes itself for the reader as the projection of an *alter-world*, ready to be conquered step by step, in a monopolising gesture of being taken into possession. Utopia and its subgenres actually represent positive or negative versions of the so-called “real world”, or, to be clearer, of the “understanding of reality”.



Utopia

First of all, utopia is the literature of hope. In other words, utopia is the product of fictional projections: some of them come from articulating the hopes and fears of the time in which it was conceived and written, while others from their denial. The parallel world, imagined by the writer, always comes as an answer to the world in which he lives and writes. Apart from the real world, that belonging to the author, which functions as a landmark for other genres of fictional writing as well, any utopia contains within itself, through definition, two worlds: one is the landmark-world, the world of the author, the one from which the miraculous journey starts (which can be temporal or spatial), while the second is the world being discovered and subjected to a careful process of observation and comparison with the first. To paraphrase Arrigo Colombo, utopia represents the project and process of constructing a righteous and *fraternal* society.² The project of this world unwinds within an archetype structured in four main directions: virtue (namely justice, and more than that, brotherly love), communion (of goods, labour, life), prosperity (understood as the fair access to goods, as the right and liberty of having needs, respectively to work), and last but not least peace and happiness. The process, which is continuous and universal and which comprises within itself the project of this society, is centred upon the means of achieving, of constructing a society superior to the already existing one, by accomplishing and validating it.³

Nineteenth-Century Utopia

Secondly, the nineteenth-century utopia is the subject of change. In other words, “the West initiates new and problematic relations with History. The nineteenth century takes into account the results of the industrial revolution, thus exploiting, at a narrative level, the mythical dimension of progress, often related to the unilateral scientific and technological development.”⁴ From this period forth, the journeys to heaven-like spaces tend to be replaced by time travells. The terrestrial paradise becomes incorporated into the image of a society which has distinct forms of organisation and governance. All these changes are possible and are being reclaimed since the technological and scientific progress. The future is mythicised, thus playing the role of the parallel world, of a utopian nature, and providing the necessary space for the unfolding of socialist projections. Jerome K. Jerome’s *The New Utopia*, H. G. Wells’ *The Time Machine* and *When the Sleeper Wakes* or *Looking Backward* by Edward Bellamy, as well as *The Year 3000* by Paolo Mantegazza are just a few examples of utopias (I am referring here to utopia in a broad sense) in which the protagonists are capable of transgressing the limits of time, thus entering a world different from their own, a world intensely engaged politically and ideologically. From the socialist utopia to the anarchic visions, from the legislative projects belonging to the beginning of the century (those of Saint-Simon, Owen, Cabet, Fourier) to the re-writing and reinterpretation of journeys to heaven-like islands (*Erewhon* by Samuel Butler and *The Island of Dr. Moreau* by H.G. Wells), the nineteenth century has stored all types of utopian projections. Also, from a bicycle-like machine, but with an engine thoroughly described and engaged in scientific and technical explanations (*The*



Time Machine) to a improvised balloon based on ancient science (*Erewhon*), or machines which mediate all human interactions (*The Machine Stops*), the period discussed here is highly populated and rendered by mechanisms and machines which, in the end, robotise and alienate.

How the Literature of Hope Is Achieved during the Nineteenth Century

The discussion regarding the nineteenth-century utopia and the hyper-technologising tendencies of this period would not be complete without reflecting upon the strategies and forms which construct these fictional projections on one hand, and on the functions that this type of writing fulfils, on the other. The more schematic premise which represents the basis of my thesis is the one according to which one of the techniques used in creating utopian, hyper-technologized, parallel worlds (in balance with the trends of that given time), legitimising them afterwards, is the use of science fiction. Thus, science fiction creates mental projections which originate from reality, validating them through scientific explanations and delivering them to the reader with the assertion of verisimilitude. In other words, “SF deals with objects, characters, places, means of action, with a *xeno*-encyclopaedia that is not part of the encyclopaedia that compiles the representation of the reader’s world. A new imaginary universe can arise from the interactions between different added signifiers, which are given, in the eyes of the reader while reading, a certain verisimilitude by referring, either closely or distantly, to science, or at least its vocabulary, to fictional-words, which occur within a techno-culture.”⁵ This approach to the SF genre (as a manner or, in other words, integrating part of utopia through which the latter delivers more

easily to the reader certain world, forms of government, ideology etc. proposals) allows a more clear delineation of the functions met by the two concepts discussed here. Being often overlapping (for example K. Amis talks in the same paragraph about the history of science fiction, but also about the discovery of unknown lands, remote islands inhabited by a legendary gladiator and discovered by the explorers from utopias, without delineating the two concepts⁶), science fiction and utopia were in turn generated, as well as generating elements. According to Darko Suvin, “Strictly and precisely speaking, utopia is not a genre but the socio-political subgenre of science fiction. Paradoxically, it can be seen as such only now that SF has expanded into its modern phase, “looking backward” from its englobing of utopia. Further, that expansion was in some not always direct ways a continuation of classical and nineteenth century utopian literature. Thus, conversely, SF is at the same time wider than and at least collaterally descended from utopia; it is, if not a daughter, yet a niece of utopia – a niece usually ashamed of the family inheritance but unable to escape her genetic destiny”.⁷ Somehow deriving from Suvin’s vision which places science fiction and utopia within the same family, I choose, for the porpoise of the following study, the option according to which the two concepts (utopia and SF) work together as processes, as narrative strategies in the creation of parallel worlds. However, the fact that the two concepts do not need each other in order to exist (there are utopias which lack SF, as well as excellent science fiction works from which utopianism is absent) has to be mentioned. Yet, the context within which the two intertwine creates, as I shall prove in what follows, both a tempting type of writing due to the pleasure it offers by reading about parallel worlds, as well as a



convincing bridge towards ideology. I believe that by interconnecting their functions, the resulting parallel world has all the advantages needed in order to solidify within the collective unconscious new rules for the functioning or governing of societies or new ideologies. According to the same author mentioned earlier, "SF is distinguished by the narrative dominance or hegemony of a fictional 'novum' (novelty, innovation) validated by cognitive logic."⁸ Or, following the same line of thought "what differentiates SF from the 'supernatural' literary genres (mythical tales, fairy tales, and so on, as well as horror and/ or heroic fantasy in the narrow sense) is the presence of scientific cognition as the sign or correlative of a method (way, approach, atmosphere, sensibility) identical to that of a modern philosophy of science."⁹ Thus, in this hyper-technologized world, SF establishes itself as a technique, as the most compatible genre with the prototypical mental structures, beliefs, programs and means of relating to history and otherness of the great mass. While the SF style creates and introduces within fiction an *alter*-reality, explaining it by appealing to scientific cognition, other types of fictional writing are not based on this condition of verisimilitude, which is vital for an age where science and technology become, step by step, triumphant over all areas of culture and life. Thus, "*The world of fantasy fiction doesn't pretend to be a real reality, so it doesn't arouse the same expectations as most other fiction; it doesn't seem to insist that readers should behave in a certain way. The fantasy world is just there, to understand, to love – to enter.*"¹⁰ Unlike fantasy, the world into which the reader of scientific utopia enters – where the presence of SF established itself as a way of raising the narrative meaning, as I will show in what follows – offers an ideological load that corresponds to his/ her known reality.

In an analysis regarding the functions fulfilled by utopia and science fiction, the first one, applicable only to utopia, is that of *challenging* the existing reality. Raymond Trousson¹¹ believes that utopia has the dynamic role of challenging the existing reality. This feature, which Trousson brings into question, places utopia within the sphere of marginality and transforms it into a social reaction of the groups that are not in power, born precisely out of the "diagnosis given to the social and economic situation."

In the study *Fictional Strategies and Political Message in Utopias*,¹² Vita Fortunati argues that utopian literature has imposed a certain form of literary expression which deals with social institutions and political power in a critical manner; this brought alongside the advantage of free speech which the utopian writers have the possibility of using in regards to certain subversive themes. Ideas that might have been understood as heretical or assaulting, regarding the time and place in which the writer lives, can be expressed freely in utopian writings. However, the disadvantage regarding utopian literature, mentioned by Vita Fortunati, targets the message's difficulty, the decoding strategies the reader must use in finding the hidden meaning, strategies which are not always aimed at this subversive nature, critical of society. Therefore, the author places the utopian writing within a double meaning type of discourse: on the one hand a *jeu d'esprit*, a dream that offers a refreshing digression from reality, and, on the other, a subtle critique of society, hidden beyond this dream of perfection. According to the author, the decoding and usage of this side of the utopian discourse will always need the reader's willingness.

The first function fulfilled by both SF and utopia is the ontological one: these must create an *alter*-world, a parallel world. In any equation which involves the nineteenth century utopia, the world created is a



narrative that depicts fortress or a society with perfect governing techniques, proving to be a new reflection of the world in its full complexity, with organisational forms, functioning laws and saving *modus vivendi*. To paraphrase Arrigo Colombo, literary utopia is a fantastic and unreal project, a mere mental exercise, a game.¹³ According to the same author, the act of writing a utopia is, by excellence, a creative process accomplished by constantly appealing to the imaginary, the fantastic; furthermore, it can overlap the role of the game and the pleasure of playing, of fantasising and inventing.¹⁴ In its turn, science fiction is understood by scholars as a “mental experiment”, “in and through possible worlds”.¹⁵ Therefore, the genuine meaning of the two concepts discussed in the present study is, initially, that of creating fictional worlds or, in other words, fictional world matrices. Due to the fact that the two concepts embody and contain within themselves, at the same time, the uncreated potentiality, the two literary genres have the function of bringing into the world the uncreated, in its infinite variations, and of providing it to the reader, who then takes it into possession and uses it for his/ her own aesthetic delight.

This first function fulfilled by both utopia and science fiction is further continued, at the levels of ideas, by a superior one – namely the mimetic function. In both literary genres, the constructed world is *in accordance* with the known one. Thus, the authors rely upon the introduction of new concepts in the clothing of the already known and well-established ones as social structures prototypes. Utopia, and here I refer to a utopia stripped of science fiction, suggests a parallel and superior world to the existing one, constructed however by constantly referring to what is real, or more precisely the convention of what is real. Although utopia conveys, at a narrative level, a nonlocum, namely the place that

does not exist anywhere, at a conceptual and imaginary level this place is imagined starting from and referring to the same structures which make up reality. Even this “novum” contained by SF, which Suvin discusses, starts and reclaims itself from the reader’s known world by being delivered in the form of scientific, plausible explanations. In order to create this sensation of verisimilitude, SF writings, belonging to the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth, place themselves under the umbrella of science’s omnipotence, solving everything by simply appealing to it. The two genres are actually imaginary readings which create the illusion of their ability to be validated as possible, or even likely to be achieved in reality. Or, as Roger Bozzetto argued, “SF deals with objects, characters, places, means of action, with a *xeno-encyclopaedia* that is not part of the encyclopaedia that compiles the representation of the reader’s world. A new imaginary universe can arise from the interactions between different added signifiers, which are given, in the eyes of the reader while reading, a certain verisimilitude by referring, either closely or distantly, to science, or at least its vocabulary, to fictional-words, which occur within a techno-culture.”¹⁶

This function is the one facilitating, preparing and paving the way to ideology. Originating from reality and creating a fictional world which bears anchored to itself the illusion of verisimilitude, the nineteenth-century utopia and science fiction translate into literature (under the form of digestible reading) the ideologies of those times (either the official ones, which manifest themselves, or the marginal ones which, through subversive means, seek the opportunity of establishing themselves as official).

Apart from the fact that utopia and science fiction simultaneously fulfil the



ontological and mimetic (*establishing* a world in *accordance* with the entrenched mental structures, thus paving the way for the acceptance of new ideologies) functions, the *generative* is the third one achieved when the two genres act like a corpus. This function is actually understood as the capacity of the resulting structure's centripetal force, on the one hand, to make other fictional works gravitate around it, by narratively and conceptually generating and nurturing them, while on the other, to influence the grand historical design. First of all, utopia (as a society of justice) acts as a role model, as a project which the historical process pursues and constructs¹⁷, to the extent to which the real historical project becomes "less efficient" as it is placed further away from the utopian one.¹⁸ Secondly, SF writers suggest new objects, actions and processes, as a result of imagination and scientific discovery, (raising towards impossible the meanings/ elements which science has as applicable) which are in turn generating concepts and meanings matrices for other utopian projections. For example, Roger Bozzetto argues that "SF writers commit, more or less consciously, to creating a secondary encyclopaedic culture, which avoids resuming the same explanations. In the first chapter of *The Time Machine*, H.G. Wells suggests a theory of time travel based on a series of analogies. The following authors will step away from it, and the possibility of travel will be considered as an acquired good of the 'SF encyclopaedia'"¹⁹. Furthermore, "a mutual imaginary fund is therefore created, from which following writers draw their inspiration, and which readers first tame and then assimilate. Each new theme leads to others which in turn serve for new stories [...]"²⁰ "Many stories use and articulate those themes as a scientific and/ or technological substratum – at least at the level of the

vocabulary."²¹ Therefore, this formula is valid for narratives or, by extension, for all the world's narratives, from the launching of new content and up to infinity, but also for the historical reality. On the one hand, the contents introduced by the types of literary works discussed in this study (utopia with a SF nature placed at end of the nineteenth century and beginning of twentieth) become a good, functional *generator* of new meanings. The dark chaos of objects, events, possible beings originates, therefore, from a predetermined order. On the other hand, the legislative projects, forms of government and propaganda originate from and are centred upon a utopian projection.

Assuming that, just as Tzvetan Todorov argues in regards to the fantastic, "the fantastic possesses, at first glance, a tautological function: it allows the description of a fantastic universe, and this universe has, because of this, no reality outside language; the description and the described are not very different in nature"²², I would place the SF genre somewhere halfway between reality and non-reality. As argued before, if the fantastic has not got an object in reality, if it only creates a world out of words, science fiction fulfils, in its turn, the path towards this castle of words only halfway, meaning that it uses for its foundation concepts, objects, laws from the reader's own reality (science, medicine, technology etc.).

I think that this attribute of creating a new and ideologically unrestricted structure, which may comprise in its construction the threatening unknown or an "alternative understanding of the world" (expression belonging to Katherine Verdery²³), this infinite freedom and even potentiality of creating new universes, facilitates, once again, the success of inherent ideological structures suggested, consciously or unconsciously, towards their acceptance, approval and appropriation from part of the implied reader. Therefore, the *liberating* function



attributed to SF paves, alongside the issues discussed above (common to science fiction and utopia, both individually and taken together, in the creation of a unique corpus), the way to ideology.

By bringing together the five functions discussed above, it can be observed that the corpus created by the nineteenth century utopia, to which it is added, as in a magical blend, SF, not only facilitates, but also provides the right context for the implicit ideology's success: first it creates a world which disregards the dominant ideology or reality's limitation, and delivers it to the reader, tricking, confusing and giving him/her the sensation that the new which he/she is being offered is part of the prototypical mental structures, his/her cognitive logic and structures, something plausible, real.

After placing within an ascending scheme the concepts I have discussed so far, this would be the point when the corpus created by utopia and SF degenerates into ideology. Of course, the presence of science fiction is not a *sine qua non* condition for the process of transforming utopia into ideology, but it is an element that favours the emergence of the latter and facilitates its access and effect towards the reader (benefit attributed to the functions previously discussed). Thus, according to Sorin Antohi²⁴, ideology is part of a utopian project that possesses a subversive purpose, socially engaged and deliberately manipulating and mystifying. In other words, Antohi believes that ideology is nothing more than the transcription of utopia in terms of *deforming* and *concealing* the interest of a certain class. The author refers mainly to the *deformation* and *concealment* of the "real relations between classes (especially the relations of production, the main stake for the struggle between classes, according to Marx)."²⁵ Anti-utopia is placed (as Colombo argues, in the very century, which makes the object of this study, literary utopia runs

out and by denying itself takes the form of an almost total dystopia²⁶) at the very top of the scheme, as the image which embodies the first two and deconstructs them. More precisely, by conveying the meaning of negative projection upon the convention of reality, embodied as a form of asocial organization which causes the worlds to self-destruct, anti-utopia relates to the ideology and utopia already existing within itself, presenting them with the image of their own self-destruction. For example, in *The Iron Heel*, London offers a utopian image of perfection and balance, which socialism might be able to bring into the world. This utopian structure which almost presents itself as a socialist manifesto (by assuming the ideological layer, and thus the subversive, manipulative substratum) is discussed and deconstructed, for example, in one of H.G. Wells (anti-)utopian writings, *When the Sleeper Wakes*, where the utopian world, carrier of the socialist ideology, fails in an annihilating war.

Therefore, in order to achieve a sense of continuity in what the analysis and interpretation are concerned, I shall point out that ideology's main function is that of manipulating, while in the case of anti-utopia this role is fulfilled by the critical function. As shown in this study, utopia (individually and independently from the SF genre) has the function of challenging the existing reality, namely the *ontological*, *mimetic* and *generative* functions, common for science fiction as well; ideology represents distorted and concealed utopia due to persuasive proposes, while anti-utopia, placed in a permanent relation with utopia and ideology, firstly re-discusses, in a reflexive and critical manner works of fiction about a perfectly organised world, while, secondly it fulfils the function of cleansing the collective psyche from the fantasies of perfection.



Conclusions

Following the analysis conducted in the present article, I will summarise the approach that underpins it, as well as its main findings. The general conclusions regarding the utopian space belonging to the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth are due to the literary critics and theorists quoted along the study. I choose to follow, for the purpose of my article, Arrigo Colombo's idea of utopia (utopia as the project of a righteous/ just and fraternal society) and I identified and supported the demonstration regarding the SF genre by referring to studies belonging to Darko Suvin and Roger Bozzetto.

Starting from Suvin's premise, according to which science fiction and utopia belong to the same family, I focused my attention on scientific utopia, defined by hyper-technologized visions, which also embody techniques and strategies belonging to SF; in addition I chose the possibility of achieving parallel worlds as the result of the collaboration between the two concepts. I have proved that due to the functions identified during the course of the study (*challenging* reality in the case of utopia, the *ontological*, *mimetic*, *generative*, functions for the corpus consisting of utopia and SF, and, last but not least, the *liberating* function in the case of SF), the emerging parallel world has all the advantages needed in order to solidify within the collective unconscious new rules for the functioning or governing of societies or new ideologies. In other words, in this hyper-technologised world, SF establishes itself as a technique, as the most compatible genre with the prototypical mental structures, beliefs, programs and means of relating to history and otherness of the great mass.

Therefore, utopia challenges, on the one hand, reality, but establishes from the combination of utopia and SF an *alter-world* which disregards the dominant ideology or reality's limitation, and delivers it to the reader, tricking, confusing and giving him/her the sensation that the new which he/she is being offered is part of the prototypical mental structures, his/her cognitive logic and structures, something plausible, real. These discursive strategies degenerate into ideology which deforms and conceals reality, in order to manipulate. As I have shown, anti-utopia establishes itself as the image of a superior literary form which embodies both utopia and ideology (or depending on the case, the corpus formed by utopia and SF), deconstructing them.

The conclusions presented here are actually the result of an introspection underwent through the end of the nineteenth century, beginning of the twentieth century utopia (Jerome K. Jerome, *The New Utopia*; H. G. Wells, *The Time Machine*, *When the Sleeper Wakes*, *The Island of Doctor Moreau*; Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward*; Samuel Butler, *Erewhon*; E. M. Forster, *The Machine Stops*; Jack London, *The Iron Heel*) and, more precisely, through the strategies and forms that construct these fictional projections.

The creation of an ascending axis which organises the concepts according to the functions they fulfil, turns the present study not only into a relevant interpretation, but also a passionate one.

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This work was supported by the Romanian National Authority for Scientific Research within the Exploratory Research Project PN-II-ID-PCE-2011-3-0061.

Notes

- ¹ Valerius Maximus, *Factorum et dictorum memorabilium libri*, in <http://www.hs-augsburg.de/~harsch/augustana.html>, visiting date: 20 ianuarie 2014.
- ² Arrigo Colombo, *L'utopia. Rifondazione di un'idea e di una storia*, Bari, Edizioni Dedalo, 1997, p. 16.
- ³ *Ibidem*.
- ⁴ Roger Bozzetto, *Genul science-fiction*, trans. Livia Iacob, Iași, Institutul european, 2010, p. 26.
- ⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 77.
- ⁶ K. Amis, *L'univers de la science-fiction*, Petite Bibliothèque Payot, Paris, 1962, p. 10.
- ⁷ Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction On the Poetics an History of a Literary Genre*, London, Yale University Press, 1979, p. 61.



⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 63.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 65.

¹⁰ Deborah O'Keefe, *Readers In Wonderland. The Liberating Worlds Of Fantasy Fiction*, New York, The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc, 2004, p. 12.

¹¹ Raymond Trousson, "Utopie et utopisme" in *Per una definizione dell'utopia: Metodologie e discipline a confronto*. Ed. Nadia Minerva, Ravenna, Longo, 1992, p. 32.

¹² Vita Fortunati, "Fictional Strategies and Political Message in Utopias", in *Per una definizione dell'utopia: Metodologie e discipline a confronto*, Ed. Nadia Minerva, Ravenna, Longo, 1992, p. 18.

¹³ Arrigo Colombo, *L'utopia. Rifondazione di un'idea e di una storia*, Bari, Edizioni Dedalo, 1997, p. 428.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 428.

¹⁵ Roger Bozzetto, *Genul science-fiction*, trans. Livia Iacob, Iași, Institutul european, 2010, p. 16.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 77.

¹⁷ Arrigo Colombo, *L'utopia. Rifondazione di un'idea e di una storia*, Bari, Edizioni Dedalo, 1997, p. p 427

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ Roger Bozzetto, *Genul science-fiction*, trans. Livia Iacob, Iași, Institutul european, 2010, p 78.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 79.

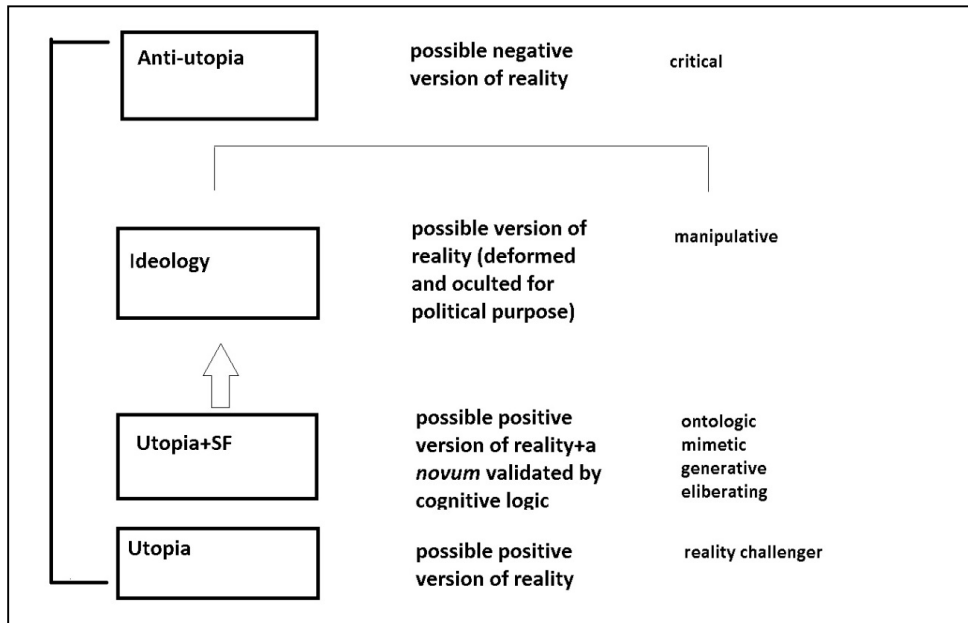
²² Tzvetan Todorov, *Introducere în literatura fantastică*, trans. Virgil Tănase, Editura Univers, Buc, 1973, p. 114.

²³ Katherine Verdery, *Compromis și rezistență*, trans. Mona and Sorin Antohi, ed. Humanitas, București, 1994, p.28.

²⁴ Sorin Antohi, *Civitas Imaginalis*, Iași, Polirom, 1999, p. 85.

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

²⁶ Arrigo Colombo, *L'utopia. Rifondazione di un'idea e di una storia*, Bari, Edizioni Dedalo, 1997, p. 299.



The scheme of the utopic genres shows the relation between the concepts discussed in this paper, arranging them in an ascendent order which marks the way from utopia to antiutopia, identifying as well their functions.