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The Role of Mythical Dystopias in the Age of Fear

Abstract: The general state of anxiety and anguish that currently prevails in contemporary societies is a breeding ground for all kinds of proposals – such as dystopias – that seek to unravel, question, or simply make sense of the increasingly incomprehensible and indecipherable world in which humanity feels confined. Of all of them, it is probably those who, like the ancient myths of antiquity, use novels and stories to exorcise and conjure up their ghosts, reflecting on and symbolically expressing all that shocks and frightens them as individuals and as members of a society, that contribute most to reappropriating and coming to terms with their fears. This article proposes an in-depth analysis of a type of dystopia that could be described as mythical and whose extremely overwhelming presence in the contemporary political and cultural landscape is clearly indicative of the prevailing climate of fear and mistrust in our societies.

Keywords: Dystopia; Myth; Narrative; Modernity; Fear; Late Capitalism.

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1. Introduction: New Approaches to a Changing Dystopia

If there has been one genre in recent years that has experienced an extraordinary boom, it has undoubtedly been the dystopian one. This opinion is so widespread that some authors are already describing this singular boom as *dystofilia*[1].

It may seem paradoxical to speak of a general climate of pessimism in a world like today's when all the data point to global levels of growth and human development that have never been reached before. For authors such as Pinker, the success of this formidable progress can be explained by the triumph of the forces of reason, science and humanism over the obscurantism and misery of the past[2]. However, there are those who nowadays question these assertions. Despair has taken hold in Western societies and that unrestrained faith in the future has turned into scepticism and fear. This malaise has undoubtedly spread to the culture.

One of the best explanations for the current success of dystopia tends to locate the reasons in the general state of anxiety and anguish prevailing in contemporary societies, faced with a series of problems

and challenges hitherto unheard of. And it is true that the conditions and framework of relations imposed by economic globalisation and late capitalism since the end of the twentieth century have led to the emergence of a series of urgent and highly complex challenges (environmental deterioration, energy depletion, worsening political and social conflicts, growing imbalances in governance and political representation, etc.). But what is truly decisive is the fact that this whole situation must be framed in the context of a new ethos and new rules of the game, the logic of which is that the task of resolving these difficulties and obstacles will no longer rest so much on the level of collective action (societies, states) but rather on the individual initiative taken by the subjects, conceived from now on as agents potentially capable of achieving their ends, including happiness, through the non-transferable and exclusive exercise of their freedom, autonomy and responsibility[3].

The growing influence that these formulas associated with the privatisation of hope exerted on society brought with them a false sense of emancipation. Indeed, although the starting point of this fantasy devised by neoliberalism endowed all individuals with a total capacity for self-determination, presenting them as potential successful entrepreneurs of their lives and destinies, it ended up making them solely responsible for both their successes and their failures[4]. It is at this point that we can situate the origin of the feeling of anxiety that contemporary humanity experiences in the face of the constant risk of suffering future losses, as well as the frequent sensations of alienation, rootlessness and generalised fatigue resulting from the state of dissatisfaction and constant helplessness generated by a horizon of prosperity and well-being that has never been achieved[5].

Contemporary dystopian narrative has abundantly reflected this order of internal conflicts, highlighting the flaws and contradictions of modern societies apparently devoted to the well-being and happiness of their members, but increasingly perceived as oppressive and alienating structures and systems. Throughout its history, the genre has addressed, from the points of view of its authors, the different causes of this dissatisfaction (technology, totalitarianism, overpopulation, ecological disaster, etc.), warning of its hypothetical future consequences if we do not intervene in the present moment.

Today, however, this classical reading of dystopias seems to be clearly insufficient. The wave of dizzying and revolutionary changes that the world has undergone over the last fifty years has also affected the way in which people experience and contemplate the transformed reality they face, to such an extent that many of the traditional tools used to analyse these narrative imaginaries no longer seem sufficient to interpret and assess their present importance and significance.

In our opinion, it is no longer possible, for example, to restrict the study of dystopias to their exclusively critical aspect. Beyond the characterisation that these works undoubtedly offer of these fictional scenarios and the undeniable burden of reflection on the existing reality that they try to transmit to the public in the face of the dangerous drifts experienced by their societies, warning of the danger, like the canaries in the mines of yesteryear[6], we believe it might be appropriate to consider the existence of

another series of factors and motivations that might allow us to explain the phenomenon from a broader and more complex dimension. Above all, if we consider the current situation in which the extraordinary strength and popularity of the dystopian does not seem to correspond precisely with a more critical, rigorous, and aware public opinion, but rather with the opposite.

Based on this approach, our study of dystopia has attempted to open other alternative and different avenues of analysis, which no longer limit its focus to the author's intentionality in the creation of his work, broadening its gaze to the key figure in the whole narrative process, the one who converts into reality and gives meaning and significance to what is imagined by others: the audience. To this end, the perspective from which we have tried to orient our research has been through the outlining of a taxonomy of the phenomenon whose basic categorisation criterion is functionality, that is, the characterisation of the possible roles and performances of the dystopian when it comes to satisfying the needs of its readers and/or spectators[7].

Such an attempt at classification, we believe, allows us to determine an open and flexible map of the dystopian whose main virtue lies in its potential capacity to inscribe the different dystopian manifestations in their corresponding spatial and historical context and to determine their greater or lesser relevance at each moment, without forgetting either that the changes and transformations experienced by society are ultimately responsible for both the decline or the emergence of the genre, by validating its success or failure in its task of responding to the needs or aspirations of society.

In any case, this proposal for a functional characterisation of dystopia cannot be contemplated without considering two factors: a) the absolute compatibility and complementarity of the different functions, even within the same work, and b) its inherent capacity for adaptation and mutation, in parallel to the evolution of individuals and material circumstances (social, political, economic) over the course of time.

Within this categorisation of dystopian functions – we are currently talking about four possible ones[8] – we would like to draw attention to one that, in our opinion, has never tended to be recognised as being properly associated with the genre, although it is not difficult to detect it from its origins, when every dystopian work was still associated with Science Fiction. We are not referring to the *mythical dystopia.*

2. The Mythical Dimension of Dystopia

As we know, all dystopias, whatever the type of cultural expression in which they manifest themselves – literary, audiovisual, etc. – are embedded in a narrative structure, in which a story is told about events that affect a series of characters and force them to undergo a process of transformation. In fact, every narrative always begins with the triggering of an unexpected incident that brings about a change. This is the trigger that becomes the activating principle that excites the interest of the reader and/or spectator who, like every human being, even on such a fictional plane as this, is always alert to any situation or scenario that, however imaginary, can potentially contribute to developing his or her capacity for control[9].

Long before, myths also took the form of grand narratives. They offered suggestive, fabulous stories about extraordinary individuals facing great dilemmas and challenges, in many cases not so different from those endured by the rest of mortals. Through them, realities were forged and explanations of the world and of life were offered, helping to construct social and psychological identities[10]. Although myths have always been associated with religion and belief, their enormous versatility and ductility in creating a vast and infinite imaginary with which to respond to fears and constant uncertainties meant that they never ceased to be present, even under a rational and secularised appearance[11].

To analyse these "non-rational" collective ghosts means to study a vast arc of deep religious needs, moral yearnings, social submissions, and practical requirements. For authors such as Malinowski, myths play an essential role in codifying social, moral, and religious knowledge and practices[12]. For others, such as Henderson, their main achievement is to diminish the sense of individual exceptionality in terms of visualising one's own pain in the experience of others, which helps to bring us closer to our fellow human beings, mitigate pain and comfort the soul[13].

To the extent that the mythical is rooted in the most intimate part of human nature, its understanding of reality and life becomes more intuitive and emotional, appealing to feelings, desires, and fears generally beyond reason, to the point of challenging science and logic. But its inherent vocation for universality makes it even more precious. For it will allow these projective realisations or, as Freud was to call them, these substitute satisfactions[14] to enjoy an extraordinary capacity to adapt and evolve over time, unfolding into an infinite variety of versions in accordance with one's specific concerns and including the contradictions between instincts, longings, and the unshakeable realities that nature and society can engender[15]. However, this protean and versatile capacity of myth will mean that it does not always use the same vocabulary, so that generally, the same message can be articulated and transmitted through different codes and frames[16].

The study of myths and their different cultural manifestations is not only relevant, then, in terms of understanding the people of the past. It is also relevant now, as we approach the knowledge of the structure of the real[17] and of the multiple modalities of being in our complex and allegedly rational world.

One of the most defining features of myth, and one that can refer us back to today, is its condition as a story of emergence in primordial times, as a mechanism that formulates and explains the occurrence of a "new time" that bursts into the "time of men"[18]. In this narrative, the myth refers to how the world as it was previously known has been transformed into a radically new one with its consequent impact on the social, political, economic, and cultural life of the community and all its members. Its contribution has always been very decisive and effective, as it made it possible to respond to people's fears, expectations, and concerns by providing an origin, an explanation, and a logic to processes that could undoubtedly be extremely traumatic.

The social and historical transformations originated in Europe that gave rise first to Modernity and later to industrial society brought with them the emergence

of a new era with a consequent change of values and beliefs with a considerable level of repercussion in all spheres of human life. As many authors have already noted, the impact of the Industrial Revolution and the subsequent economic and technical take-off, especially in the West, radically altered the face of societies from agrarian and/or traditional to industrial and mass societies in a very short time. This also resulted in the abandonment of the old, more communitarian and religiously based systems of thought and belief in favour of a rationality based on logic and the scientific spirit[19].

The new scenario, increasingly focused on industrial and urban areas, was shaped by a spirit of unbridled optimism about the infinite possibilities that scientific and technological advances and the rule of rationality could bring in the future for humanity. This process, however, also led society to express all kinds of assessments and speculations, which were largely justified given the ignorance of the outcome of the transformations and the high expectations placed on them. Everything points to the fact that the emergence of the so-called literature of anticipation is inscribed in this period (late nineteenth century) in which the scientific worldview – modern science – has become a collective heritage[20].

Through a pseudo-scientific imaginary language with its codes and signs of recognition, Science Fiction became a chronicler of modern times and of social events such as revolutions, wars, changes in the bourgeoisie, the emergence of the lower classes, the new urbanism or capitalism[21]. It did not take long for it to become a mass phenomenon and reach the status of a modern myth, not always free of a certain degree of ambiguity. It is no wonder that, under the appearance of an ideal and rational imaginary, it challenges people's deepest emotions, such as fear and uncertainty in the face of this scientific and technical ideology and its possible degeneration into tragedy[22].

Despite being inscribed in a world governed by principles and criteria rigorously drawn from science and technology, or perhaps precisely because of this, the interpellation of the rational structures of human thought by modern myths is extremely effective in penetrating those unconscious layers of the imaginary associated with all that is pre-rational and archaic in myth, thus helping to stimulate the affections and inviting the reader and/or spectator to become emotionally involved. In this sense, if Science Fiction has become a modern myth it is, to a large extent, thanks to this ability to create images that are often extremely disturbing and perturbing – though at the same time fascinating –, which has allowed it to connect reason with the dramatic and the marvellous and thus transfer the spectator to an emotional plane, the affective, from which to channel all his or her fears, hopes and uncertainties.

In this context, dystopia has been considered a particular sub-genre of science fiction. For one of the main specialists on the subject, the writer and theorist Darko Suvin, the numerous similarities both thematically (imaginary construction of possible futures) and formally (presence in both of cognitive estrangement and novum) between dystopian and anticipation stories eliminated any kind of debate on their distinction[23]. However, in recent decades, other authors have argued for the

insertion of dystopia into a specific category of its own. For example, Peter Fitting[24], Margaret Atwood[25] or Judith Merrill[26], proposed integrating these works within what they would call speculative fiction. For their part, Fernando Ángel Moreno[27] or Julián Diez[28] in Spain have opted for another alternative label, that of prospective literature, given its capacity to encompass within it stories with a greater focus on cultural issues.

In any case, and beyond this discussion, what is certain is that the lines of kinship between the two are beyond doubt. Even more so if we bear in mind that both dystopia or science fiction nourishes its stories with images projected in hypothetical scenarios within a temporal context situated in a near future. Although, as mentioned above, it is worth suggesting the existence of two features of dystopia that clearly distinguish it from the genre as a whole – 1) the tomorrows presented in dystopian narrative are unfailingly characterised by their pessimism and hopelessness, and 2) the origin of the evils responsible for this terrifying future is already to be found in today's societies – both cannot be separated from the broad field of action available to the dystopian in its condition as myth, which involves: 1) the possibility of providing an intuitive, emotional and, in short, non-rational understanding of reality, 2) its consideration as a privileged vehicle for the projection and identification of the most archaic fears and the most unspeakable desires, and 3) its capacity for the creation of fantasised realities which, at certain moments, can become escape valves tolerated by society and culture.

Unlike other types of dystopias, such as those we once called gratifying dystopias – whose roots and insertion have a clear individual focus, undoubtedly linked to the privatisation of utopia currently in vogue[29] – those characterised by their mythical condition have a distinctly social content and vocation. They are not produced anonymously, like traditional myths, but have an individual authorship, so that the connotations and themes addressed by many of them form a social corpus that carries meaning and is endowed with a permanent structure whose purpose – like that of the former – is the foundation and re-foundation of the whole culture[30].

As a social production, mythical dystopias are broadly defined by a) their hybrid condition, insofar as they constitute an unevenly weighted amalgam of different dichotomies (fiction/reality, reason/emotion, truth/falsehood), b) their archetypal and universal condition, which allows them to transcend other collective representations, and c) their instrumental condition – insofar as they play an anchoring role between concrete events and circumstances and dispositions, deep feelings and social sensitivities usually expressed in the form of discomfort, fear and anguish[31].

The mythical function contained in most dystopias is nourished by the infiltration of the myths of our time. Here, however, we should follow the examples of the past and evaluate them not in terms of their accuracy or veracity but in terms of their symbolic and social effectiveness. This is certainly no easy task in today's world, where the criteria of logic and rationality have been imposed in all areas, to the extent that even passions and emotions are nowadays subjected to quantitative and utilitarian standards of evaluation.

In order to illustrate this prevalence of the mythic in contemporary dystopian

production and to show the generally under-recognised and under-appreciated value of the functions it performs, which are clearly far removed from those usually assigned to it, we will now examine some very recent, one might almost say, extremely current examples, probably worthy of further analysis, where the prevalence of the mythic is evident, with the subsequent possibilities that this may allow for reinterpreting and rethinking the order of expectations and real fears of our societies today.

3. Mythical Themes in Dystopia

We are living through one of the most incredible and overwhelming periods of progress and change ever experienced by the human species. A new social-historical reality has emerged, bringing with it the highest rates of prosperity, knowledge, and peace in its entire history. But the result of all these advances in science and technology and their insertion into a global capitalist framework, omnipresent in all spheres of our lives, has not prevented the emergence of a growing sense of unease and distrust. In this general context of anxiety and anguish prevailing in contemporary societies, we consider that today's dystopias not only aim to project into the future what their fears and uncertainties suggest to them from their perception of current reality; they can also help to turn the often chaotic tumult of information offered by our fragmented and unattainable world into a coherent narrative. It is precisely this ability to reduce the overabundance of information that surrounds us to a simple narrative and, through it, to make sense of the surrounding reality through a basic and universal structure of cause and effect that, in our view, will define the mythic condition of dystopia.

Many of the disturbing imaginings depicted in recent dystopias are set in futures so familiar that they are sometimes indistinguishable from reality. They combine present-day situations and elements often taken to extremes to highlight the most important beliefs of our culture dramatically and even tragically. In fact, such narratives have appealed to the same genre of foundational plots created by humankind since the beginning of time and constantly updated throughout history up to the present day.

A detailed analysis of the dystopian production of recent times would probably show us how many of its works are based on a series of universal themes whose models allow us to explain the world and the main concerns and aspirations of mankind. But we are going to limit ourselves to just a few very limited examples as a sample of the presence of this *immortal seed*[82] in the most recent dystopia.

3.1. Destructive Intruder

One of the most recurrent mythical figures in dystopian literature is undoubtedly the image of the destructive intruder. This is usually represented by the presence of a foreign and disruptive element of the existing order, whose intrusion threatens to undermine the fundamental supports and pillars of a community or collective. In ancient and classical mythology, its appearance tended to be recurrently associated with evil as a negation of the good and order embodied by the divinity. Episodes such as those narrated in Genesis also invite us to interpret the manifestation

of this evil entity as a punishment from God for the secular weakness and inability of men to follow the divine commands.

One of the most characteristic features of mythical dystopias, and one of the driving forces that trigger the action in their plots, as a factor of change that gives meaning to the story, must do precisely with the manifestation of an external threat of unknown origin in the heart of an apparently solid and stable community, whose presence will end up bringing to light all its weaknesses and problems. In *Todo va a mejorar*, the posthumous novel by the writer Almudena Grandes, published in 2022, the author identifies the source of danger in her story with a completely imaginary evil, the seriousness of which many of her readers were all too familiar with: the coronavirus.

The spread of this unknown virus in 2019 and its pandemic status in a very short time was not only to claim a tragic toll of millions of fatalities. Its impact brought with it an unexpected collapse of the system that spilled over into all spheres of human life. In addition to triggering a deep global economic crisis, it subjected different populations to unprecedented situations, such as the establishment of compulsory confinement regimes, or – forgotten – the restriction of fundamental rights. In this sense, the author's use of this resource is extremely effective, both in terms of emotionally involving the audience in her story, and in terms of triggering events which, a priori, would seem unimaginable. The first sentence of the book is, in this respect, highly expressive of these objectives: *el Gran Capitán comprendió antes que nadie que el coronavirus iba a cambiarlo todo*[33]

For his part, Jorge Carrión, in his novel *Todos los museos son novelas de ciencia ficción* (2022), presents himself as the protagonist of a story in which he narrates in the first person his relationship with an unknown entity that suddenly bursts into his existence and ends up driving him to despair. It is an intelligent entity called Mare, with a conscience capable of entering his computer and all his electronic devices and aware of all the details of the author/narrator's life, both past and future. The dialogue between the two is at times reminiscent of the dialogue between divine or evil envoys and humans throughout history. In fact, one could say that the appearance of this omnipotent and all-powerful force that so intimidates and frightens the protagonist is not far removed from those primordial fears and ghosts that rendered individuals and communities weak and vulnerable, although in this case the agents responsible for these feelings of anxiety and insecurity are associated with artificial intelligence and the technological singularity. Indeed, everything here seems to revolve around the existence of a general state of concern and suspicion, to which the protagonist is no stranger, based on the belief that in the not-too-distant future intelligent machines could possess the capacity to improve themselves without the help of human action, to the point of managing to design and build generations of ever more powerful machines. Jorge's attitudes and reactions in this respect are highly significant: after the logical initial moment of surprise, his feeling is one of helplessness and impotence faced with a scenario in which he will feel completely alienated, dispossessed of all capacity for freedom and decision-making, subjected to the scrutiny and monitoring of omniscient and all-powerful entities whose role is very reminiscent of that of the traditional gods.

However, the most threatening and disturbing aspect of Mare and the future world from which she comes does not derive from the violation of man's private sphere and his sense of control, but from the fact that this intelligent entity also shows signs of possessing a series of qualities, these intrinsically human qualities, always considered proper and exclusive to this species, such as curiosity, a critical spirit, the capacity to pose and formulate essential questions and, above all, sensitivity. A sensitivity so fascinating and tempting, like the serpent in Eden, that even Jorge himself at times will not be able to resist it.

In *The Wall* (2019), John Lanchester shows us a future England where the threat of immigration has led the authorities to erect a solid wall around the entire island, heavily fortified and guarded by the defenders, young men recruited from all over the country for two years to contain the threat of the Others, that destructive intruder that seeks to reach the country by sea, although it also has hidden allies within England: *It is hard to imagine such wickedness. Hard to imagine being so wrong, so morally lost, so ethically destitute*[34].

3.2. The Old and the New

The mythical theme offers a second variant very closely linked to the previous one, which is also very present in many dystopias. This is the confrontation between the old and the new, which has been the subject of innumerable narratives and stories, always revealing the universal human dilemma as to where to establish the foundations of man's control action, whether on the conservation and persistence of the existing, or on evolution and change.

The new context created by modernity and the scientific and technical revolutions brought with it a new climate in which the notion of progress and change became increasingly important. The traditional and the ancient became associated with a dark and unfortunate period in human history that had to be definitively overcome, in which humanity had been permanently dominated and subjugated. The cult of progress and the rule of instrumental rationality soon led to the sacralisation of the notions of change and evolution. However, this did not prevent others, using emotional rather than rational means, from idealising the past and presenting it as the ultimate embodiment of a higher order and of values that were clearly more essential and authentic[35].

This illusion of seeing a splendid past restored, which is recognised as essential and immutable, is what moves the *Gran Capitán,* one of the main characters in Almudena Grandes's novel, to promote a great political operation – in reality, a tacit coup d'état – aimed at restoring order. An order that appears to be defined by its promoter for its simplicity (*lo único que quiero es un gobierno honrado y eficaz, que tome decisiones sin tener en cuenta la ideología (…) ¡pues las cosas que me gustan son buenas, sensatas y de sentido común*![36], and in which ideology or politics no longer have a place because they represent conflict, agitation, and insecurity *Habría sido feliz si hubiera nacido en un mundo sin política*[37].

Facing the turbulences of that contingent world, the *Gran Capitán* had modelled a new Spain converted into a *gigantesco, disciplinado y fecundo hormiguero* (…) *donde todos los demás, lo que en otra época se habría llamado el pueblo español, tenían*

la sensación de vivir mejor, felizmente encadenados al consumo perpetuo, (…) *en una España feliz donde no existía el desempleo, el Estado cubría todas las necesidades y no tenía sentido ahorrar*[38].

The obsession with this order leads the single party driven by the *Gran Capitán Movimiento ilimitada para elegir* ", subjects the population to a situation of apparent stability – "*la nueva normalidad"* – in which surveillance and control of the population through technology, manipulation and propaganda are combined with the establishment of a calm and peaceful environment designed to create a false sense of freedom and fulfilment for the individual. This is the case of the so-called "*encuentros para mejorar",* created to satisfy sexual and romantic impulses, and to combat loneliness and feelings of exclusion, and framed in a general context of the commodification of affections and a mass society founded on the universalisation of consumption.

As Luis García Montero points out in the book's final note, the author's aim was to speculate on a future society that is extremely close to home, in which the threat of Covid and its devastating effects on the stability and order of the system only constitutes an alibi at the service of its ruling classes to articulate another kind of defensive strategy, apparently based on the defence of universal rights and values – freedom, cooperation and solidarity – whose only objective, beyond conjuring up the risks of collapse, is the establishment of a more effective structure of social control in the face of the drift of continuous changes and transformations that will inevitably always keep happening[39].

A similar horizon seems to be drawn in the Paris of the mid-21st century that Katixa Agirre presents in her novel *De nuevo centauro* (2022). There, as in the rest of the Western world, technology has shaped a new society in which virtual reality has invaded everyday life and individuals have renounced their corporeality as a way of achieving all their desires. Global warming has created a new scenario in which spatial mobility has been restricted to wealthy tourists and the growing number of climate refugees. In this hypothetical future time, virtual reality is an extension of life, *como una forma de acceder a lo que nunca habríamos tenido o de recuperar las cosas que habíamos perdidos para siempre*[40], and where the processes of digitalisation – even of consciousness – aim to lead humanity to an infinite space in which the existence of death is no longer possible. A panorama that is undoubtedly very close to that currently proposed by posthumanism and its postulates on the obsolescence and decadence of our current world, although its alternative is nothing more than a pure reproduction – albeit a digital and technological one – of the very reality it seeks to change.

In the course of the story, the protagonist, Paula, a designer working for the metaverse, notices how this new future, based on the recreation of illusions and aspirations of the past, although technologically evolved, ends up referring *a un presente cerrado y precintado, un presente eterno*[41], far removed from reality whose fictional condition never ceases to remind her of the dissatisfaction of an existence far removed from real life and the experiences associated with contingency and change.

Jorge, the central character in Carrion's novel, also shows a similar feeling of unease in the face of a scenario that, although still non-existent, has already

manifested itself to him, posing a series of dilemmas for him regarding the relationship between the present lived and a future that questions itself through the figure of Mare about a meaning that does not come from his own time but from that given by men in the past and which is the result of the fear accumulated by humanity in the face of the risks of a threatening time. In the end, she ends up discovering that it is this fear that has contributed to creating this hopeless future that is so close and so real, and where Artificial Intelligence platforms and companies no longer think about well-being and progress but about order and control, putting all kinds of *algoritmos racistas, misóginos, manipuladores, violentos*[42].

In *The Wall*, Lanchester places Kavanagh, the protagonist, in a new time, which is not necessarily better than our time. As a result of climate and ecological catastrophe, which everyone refers to as the Great Turning, much of the world has been flooded and ruined. While some desperate people seek to enter England to survive, and others strive to prevent their entry, for the character the world remains substantially the same as old times. And the reason is because he feeds on the same evils and guilt that came before and led to this dramatic scenario: *The olds feel they irretrievably fucked up the world, then allowed us to be born into it*[43].

3.3. Self-knowledge

If dystopian scenarios pose dilemmas that obsess society and individuals, it is largely because they also raise questions about the very nature of the human condition. In this respect, many of his narratives encourage the creation of spaces for reflection in which man's constant search for identity sometimes leads to the determination of a guilty past. Any revelation that refers to authentic human motivations and, therefore, alludes to that truth, always provokes a strong emotional impact on people who see in them the responsibility for their ills and their own destiny. In all dystopias there is always a turning point, where the central character has a dialogue with the leader of the nightmare world, who explains how the hellish system in which people are imprisoned and annihilated is the result of people's natural desire to end their suffering, even at the price of their own freedom. This argument, first presented in the poem "The Grand Inquisitor" from Fyodor Dostoyevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879-1880), clearly illustrates the trauma that the conflict between the realisation of their longings and the reality of their nature and the consequent feeling of anxiety arising from their inability to resolve it has permanently provoked in human beings. Any revelation that touches on authentic human motivations, and thus alludes to this truth, always provokes a strong emotional impact on people who see in it the responsibility for their misfortunes and their own destiny.

In *Todo va a mejorar*, Mónica Hernández, one of the protagonists of this choral story, carries out an exercise in introspection that leads her to draw a parallel between this new society established by the MCSY and Franco's dictatorship (1936-1975). In both cases, its success was not so much due to the establishment of coercive and violent practices as to the tacit support of a significant part of the population who, as in Dostoyevsky's poem, *prefería estar en libertad que*

sentirse verdaderamente libre[44]. The preservation of that order was not, therefore, due to the establishment of a sophisticated political engineering machinery, or the establishment of a formidable repressive machinery, but to an act of renunciation, deliberate or not, on the part of individuals when it came to intervening during their destiny. A terrible and painful realisation, very revealing of the misery of men that could explain why their inherent weakness leads them to the worst possible scenario, the one that is probably less cruel but much more depressing and discouraging, the one where there are no chains and shackles, but where their members feel more imprisoned and captive.

In *De nuevo Centauro*, Paula, the central character, goes back to the time of the revolutionary changes that had taken place in recent years, when the introduction of virtual reality and the spread of metaverses had completely blurred the boundaries of what was real and what wasn't. Here too, the protagonist, inscribed in that world, reflects on the scope and impact of such changes, which made it possible to virtually simulate *muebles, amigos, música y decoración,* but which, in turn, blurred and dissolved the limits of the individual's true reality *sin que el usuario ni siquiera se pudiera dar cuenta de la transición*, leading him, in short, to ask himself: *¿Quiénes son mis verdaderos amigos? ¿Hasta qué punto estoy solo?*[45]

Jorge Carrión in his dual role as author/narrator also undergoes an initiatory experience, in this case provoked by the appearance of an entity, Mare, whose origin from an unknown future he is unable to conceive. In his search for answers, he ends up discovering a Google-powered neural network project whose aim is to create a series of algorithms that can enable humans to understand how algorithms see and are seen by humans. The feeling that the protagonist expresses is one of fascination because for him *ese sistema tiene la capacidad de decir algo sobre nosotros que desconocíamos*[46], but it is no less one of insecurity and fear at the possibility that this reality, still hidden from mankind, may come to be known and formulated by the machines rather than by them.

In both Agirre's and Carrión's works, the expectations of a highly advanced technological future lack the dystopian bias that is so dominant today. The dialogue that their protagonists establish with the products of that technology – to which the authors give a voice of their own – serves as a profound exercise in introspection on the meaning of a world from which individuals feel increasingly excluded, but in which they nevertheless remain the central figures. In both cases, however, the result of their immersion in this highly dehumanised artificial horizon seems hopeful, not so much for the potential magnitude of the material advances achieved as for the possibilities it offers in terms of reclaiming the role of the individual and his or her expectations of fulfilment.

Throughout his story, Kavanagh also undergoes a process of introspection, moving from an initial internalised resignation to an attitude of resistance in the wake of his prosecution and conviction: *And yet, for all that, I felt sick with the injustice of it*[47]. In this case, however, he does not need another interlocutor to conclude pessimistically about the world he has had to live in and his share of responsibility for it: *Your worst fear: track it down inside yourself*[48].

In truth, there are not so many differences between the three works: Almudena

Grandes also explores the potential impact on individuals of an apparently optimal material framework, in which, as the title of the book itself points out, everything is inevitably destined to improve. But the lens through which she conducts her analysis does not dwell on what might be considered the most positive features of that *casa reluciente* – full employment, high levels of consumption and welfare, social peace[49]- which, in her opinion, are only secondary and to some extent superficial, but on those that truly constitute the basis of the human condition and its infinite desire for progress, whose value is neither material nor quantifiable, as they are inscribed within each individual and on whose existence or not depends the possibility of giving meaning to or determining one's own destiny. Such a concern connects with those historically projected by myth, as a universal sphere of human reflection that has allowed and allows humanity to exorcise those ghosts that recurrently assault man and which he imperiously needs to share.

3.4. The Individual Inside a Labyrinth

One of the most paradigmatic versions of this universal mythical subject was offered by the Austro-Hungarian novelist Frank Kafka in his novel *The Castle* (1922). Here, his protagonist finds himself confronted with an opaque and irrational structure, a microcosm from which he does not understand the rules of law and behaviour, but from which he cannot escape either. Since the classical world, through the story of Theseus, the myth of the labyrinth has been associated with different human concerns, some of them linked to different ritual practices, others closer to the question of self-knowledge. However, unlike the image of the labyrinth in the Renaissance, where the human being appeared at the centre, as a reflection of his growing role in the world, its contemporary enunciation points towards a new phase defined by the miniaturisation of the individual against a general background of confusion and loss.

The regime that Almudena Grandes imagines for the New Spain that emerges from the pandemic period is built based on a solid institutional framework whose main axes are the monopoly of the country's media and social networks, supposedly brought about by the *Gran Apagón,* and the establishment of a new body of vigilantes. Despite the fact that the alma mater of the company, the *Gran Capitán*, claims to create a party and a state without any ideological inspiration – for him, *otra política es posible* – governed solely by the criteria of creativity, profitability and efficiency, the only ones that *define la gestión de las empresas excelentes*[50], what readers are presented with is an all-powerful and impenetrable political and bureaucratic apparatus with infinite ramifications and a population subjected to an alienated and frustrating existence without any prospects for the future.

The characteristics of this scenario are very reminiscent of those described by Agirre in his novel. Here, too, we witness the proclamation of an official, monolithic, and apparently emancipatory discourse according to which, thanks to the new virtual technology, anyone who wants to can achieve their desires. However, the requirement for people to participate in this new dream factory is that they assume their

condition as users, clients, or consumers that they limit their expectations of fulfilment to the restricted sphere of individual and private satisfaction, within a pre-established context – that of the market – configured in an atomised way[51].

Cavanagh, begins and ends his account with these words: *It's cold on the wall*. He already defines very explicitly the anguished and oppressive character of that future England. The unhealthy collective obsession with preserving the country from external threat leads to the establishment of a rigid and inexorable machinery that not only denies entry to immigrants, but also imposes on its young population a system aimed at making the territory impassable. Within it, its members appear as passive and impotent beings who, despite the injustice of the resolutions, assume and internalise: *On the Wall, one day is every day. There is also no hope and no future: The only things that can happen are bad things. So, you want nothing to happen*[52]; *Now I found that despair can also be something that happens to you, that it can hit you in a single moment. And then it settles down with you for the duration*[53].

A different and modernised version of the traditional labyrinths, in sum, which does not stop referring to that recurrent existential fear periodically expressed by men in the face of the loss of the values and attributes that contribute to their quest for meaning.

4. Conclusion

The current climate of unease and anxiety that governs our societies and that makes us live in a framework of unbearable pessimism is based on a kind of fear of the future that does not seem to be related, even if it seems to be, either to the rise of artificial intelligence, or to the depletion of resources, or to the climate emergency, or to the sharpening of the gap between the poor and the rich, themes that are permanently recurrent in our current dystopias. The real source of our dread is not related to any of these hypothetical futures, but to the real absence of a future.

Orwell, Huxley or Zamiatin, just to mention some of the classic authors of the genre, warned about the dangers of a threatening future. Other authors, years later, followed in the same line, whose driving force was their faith in the future, or rather in the possibilities of being intervened or altered by human action. Nowadays, however, our fear of the future is defined by its immobilizing and paralyzing condition, no longer encouraging intervention. And the cause of all this is probably because the notion of the future understood as a sphere of intervention has been gradually stripped of all meaning by making its more than obvious virtues and potentialities invisible, to the benefit of a present time that is no longer only today but also tomorrow.

The future devoured by the present prefigures a world like today's where the criteria of instantaneity and immediacy – associated with the principle of resonance[54] – that accompany the achievement of desires ends up adulterating the meaning of time, as a framework for human action and intervention on reality. The awareness of the emergence of this new scenario and its perception as a threat to the very complex and multidimensional nature of the human being explains the appearance of new needs which, although people have never ceased

to need, are now becoming more urgent. It is in this context that dystopia can play previously unconsidered roles whose value must nevertheless be recognised and studied to understand our world and the beings who inhabit it today.

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