

EXPLORING DYSTOPIAN REALITIES AND UTOPIAN VISIONS IN SPECULATIVE NARRATIVES: A SOCIO-POLITICAL ANALYSIS OF SCIENCE FICTION LITERATURE AND FILM

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Abstract

Science fiction literature and film have long been used as a vehicle for exploring socio-political issues through dystopian and utopian concepts. In this research paper, we will examine the common characteristics of dystopian and utopian societies in speculative narratives, and how these narratives reflect and critique contemporary society. We will also explore the role of science fiction in the exploration of these concepts and the common themes that exist within this genre. Additionally, we will analyze both dystopian realities and utopian visions in speculative narratives, and how these narratives shape our understanding of socio-political issues. Finally, we will examine the potential implications of these narratives for contemporary society and consider how we can apply the lessons learned from dystopian and utopian narratives to create a better society. By delving into these topics, we hope to gain a deeper understanding of the socio-political implications of speculative narratives in science fiction literature and film.

INTRODUCTION

Defining Dystopian and Utopian Concepts in Speculative Narratives

Speculative narratives, particularly dystopian and utopian fiction, have been used to interrogate the present and project possible futures. These narratives are concerned with world-building and have inherent sociological concerns [1]. In recent years, there has been a proliferation of dystopian novels in and beyond the global north that discuss surveillance, yet much of the analysis of utopian and dystopian fiction in the field of surveillance studies has been limited to texts set in and written by authors from the global north [1]. However, these genres are not limited to discussing surveillance alone. Utopian and dystopian fiction can inspire activism and resistance, presenting ideas for how to effect positive change through collective engagement and action [1]. Such narratives can be used by sociologists and other researchers beyond the arts and humanities to analyze and diagnose issues with the present [1]. Feminist speculative fiction often uses dystopian and utopian worlds to explore gender-related issues, using time as a lens to compare and contrast different social realities [2]. The temporal displacement of dystopian and utopian concepts is explored in feminist speculative fiction, as is the concept of heterotopia, which describes non-hegemonic safe spaces within these narratives [2]. Dystopian concepts in speculative narratives can include techno-dystopian visions, while virtual spaces are used as an escapist tool in dystopian and speculative narratives [3]. Through the use of dystopian and utopian concepts in speculative narratives, authors create a space for defamiliarization, which enhances the reader's cognition and raises awareness regarding issues central to feminist philosophy and relevant to the contemporary social situation of women [2]. By setting their stories in a futuristic world and correlating it with either utopia or dystopia, authors can interrogate the present and assess the extratextual present from an imagined historical perspective [2].

Common characteristics of dystopian and utopian societies in literature and film

Dystopian and utopian literature share some common characteristics, despite being vastly different concepts. In dystopias, the state and its police apparatus play a crucial role in maintaining discipline and order, with the human body and mind appropriated for communal needs [4]. Ordinary citizens also play a part in regimenting society, resulting in the vanishing of individuality and personal life merging with the social [4]. Furthermore, dystopias often dismantle the social fabric, alienating individuals from each other and prompting disintegrating processes [4]. On the other hand, utopias depict a model of society based on ideals such as equality, friendship, and mutual trust [4]. Utopias have been explored in literature and film for centuries, with the term itself originating from ancient Greek and meaning "a place that does not exist" [4]. Despite their similarities, dystopias and utopias are often classified into different categories and given varying labels by critics [4]. Dystopian literature in contemporary Australian works delves into worrying global issues and reflects futuristic nightmares [4]. Utopia, on the other hand, offers an impossible ideal world and is often used as a vehicle to criticize society [4]. The tension between the affirmation of a possibility and the negation of its

fulfillment is a characteristic of utopia [4]. Overall, utopian and dystopian literature offer unique perspectives on societal issues, with their common characteristics serving as notable areas of comparison.

Reflection of socio-political issues in dystopian and utopian narratives

Dystopian and utopian narratives provide a window into the socio-political issues of their time. Utopian narratives represent an idealized version of society, whereas dystopian narratives offer a negative portrayal of society [4]. These narratives reflect the fears and anxieties of the time in which they were created. Societal issues such as authoritarianism, totalitarianism, and the misuse of power are often depicted in dystopian narratives, highlighting the negative consequences associated with these issues [4]. In contrast, utopian narratives offer solutions to these problems and present a positive version of society. However, the socio-political issues reflected in these narratives may vary across cultures. What is considered to be ideal or dystopian in one culture may not be the same in another [4]. Both dystopian and utopian narratives offer social commentary on the society in which they were created. They are a reflection of the political and social conditions of their time and an expression of the author's beliefs and values [4]. These narratives allow us to examine the underlying issues of our current society and provide a unique perspective on ways to address them.

The Role of Science Fiction in Speculative Narratives

Science fiction and speculative fiction offer unique contributions to the exploration of dystopian and utopian concepts. Margaret Atwood coined the term "speculative fiction" to describe her dystopian novels, which can be defined as narratives about things that have not yet happened at the time of writing. Atwood distinguishes speculative fiction from science fiction based on probability, rather than scientific accuracy [5]. While science fiction can include stories about events that cannot possibly happen, speculative fiction interrogates normative notions about reality and challenges materialist complacency, allowing it to celebrate human creative power [5]. Science fiction creates prototypes of imagined and better futures, contributing to the development and realization of future business visions. These narratives explore both dystopian and utopian concepts [6][5]. Additionally, speculative fiction offers a space for non-mimetic traditions to share and reclaim forgotten or marginalized modes of engagement with reality [5]. However, the use of the term "speculative fiction" instead of "utopia" to denote narratives that map out a possible future is unclear [5]. Regardless, science fiction and speculative fiction offer a platform to explore dystopian and utopian concepts through their imaginative and creative narratives, which offer both contributions and warnings for the future.

Science fiction has evolved over time, drawing on different intellectual movements and scientific discoveries. Fabulation, a fictional genre that addresses reality through non-mimetic devices, has developed in various forms such as dogmatic, speculative, and scientific [5]. Speculative fabulation draws on more liberal and secular reflection, but often lacks a firm grounding in modern scientific understanding [5]. Science fiction literature and film have been influenced by major scientific discoveries such as the Darwinian revolution, Einstein's theory of relativity, and the discovery of complex cultural and biochemical systems [5]. Within this genre, dystopian and utopian societies have been a common theme. Science fiction literature and film often explore the consequences of societal changes brought on by advances in technology, medicine, and politics. The exploration of dystopian societies, where the world is often characterized by chaos, oppression, and suffering, serves as a warning against the potential negative outcomes of human behavior and societal structures. In contrast, utopian societies, which are depicted as idealized worlds where everything is perfect, offer a glimpse into what could be possible if humans were to create societies that prioritize cooperation, equality and sustainability. Through these fictional worlds, science fiction allows us to imagine and reflect on different possible futures for our societies [5].

Speculative fiction, which includes science fiction, is a genre that reflects and critiques contemporary society by departing from the constraints of consensus reality [5]. Other non-mimetic genres, such as dystopia, horror, and alternative history, also offer critiques of contemporary society. Science fiction specifically is a genre that serves to critique the stifling vision of reality imposed by exploitative global capitalism [5]. It is a mode of thought-experimenting that embraces an open-ended vision of the real [5]. As a field of cultural production, speculative fiction is not limited to any specific literary techniques and cannot be traced through a linear chronology [5]. Rather, it reflects a cultural shift that includes genre hybridization, expansion of the global literary landscape, and subversion of dominant Western notions of reality [5]. By creating alternate realities, science fiction allows for a departure from current societal norms and values, providing a platform for criticism and reflection. Science fiction's ability to critique contemporary society can be seen in its portrayal of dystopias and other speculative worlds that highlight societal issues and concerns. Through this reflection and critique, science fiction offers a unique perspective on contemporary society.

Analysis of Dystopian Realities in Speculative Narratives

Dystopian narratives have been widely used to reflect contemporary socio-political issues, and it is through feminist critical dystopias that this genre has gained a crucial effect in the formation or consolidation of a specifically critico-feminist public readership [4]. These narratives offer hope and subversive force in an

otherwise pessimistic scenario [4]. Dystopian events and landscapes in novels are the ultimate consequences of historical injustices, and Indigenous futurism in dystopian novels reflects the consequences of abuses suffered by Indigenous peoples [4]. The Science fiction genre is used to denounce injustices and raise awareness about contemporary socio-political issues [4]. It is through dystopian narratives that personal life merges with the social, and human body and mind are appropriated according to the communal needs of the state [4]. Dystopias depict a model of society where the attempt to carry out a utopian project has proved to be disastrous in some relevant respects, dismantling the social fabric and prompting disintegrating processes [4]. Through dystopian narratives, contemporary power structures are critiqued, and the consequences of environmental degradation and resource depletion are explored [4]. All these themes have been explored in various dystopian novels by authors such as E. M. Forster, Yevgeny Zamyatin, Aldous Huxley, George Orwell, and contemporary Australian dystopias that delve into a number of worrying global issues [4].

Dystopian societies in literature and film share several common characteristics that make them easily recognizable. One of the most prominent is the portrayal of a bleak reality, often characterized by social and economic inequality and oppression [7]. Such societies are usually depicted as a warning of a possible future if we continue down a certain path. Another feature is the use of speculative fiction to challenge dominant narratives and create new realities [8]. Speculative fiction often uses alternate realities and timeless present to explore different themes and analyze the present through imagined future scenarios [5]. In contrast to science fiction, dystopian narratives tend to focus more on the negative consequences of utopian ideals, rather than offering solutions or hopeful outcomes [9]. Dystopian societies often challenge utopian narratives that promote capitalism or other forms of societal power dynamics [10]. Speculative finance and speculative fiction operate similarly in reinforcing structures that lead to dystopian realities [11]. These fictions are often grouped under the umbrella term of "speculative," and explore various aspects of dystopia [12]. Moreover, dystopian realities are often depicted as the outcome of harsh societal realities, leading to the end of the world or societal collapse [4]. Most dystopian narratives are not only about warning us of the possible dangers that lie ahead but also serve as a critique of the current socio-political system [13]. Finally, dystopian societies are often depicted as a space for comparing and contrasting different social realities, with time serving as a lens for facilitating this analysis [2].

Dystopian literature and film serve as a powerful critique of contemporary society. These works often highlight the dystopian realities of racism and poverty that exist in our world today [7]. Speculative design and storytelling are used to challenge dominant narratives and create new realities [8][9]. The alternate realities presented in dystopian works offer a nebulous tool for literary analyses based on close reading, which helps to identify the differences between post-apocalyptic dystopia and ghost fantasy [5]. Furthermore, speculative fiction is used to historicize present realities and address the impacts of utopia and dystopia [9]. This narrative choice creates the desired effect of comparing and contrasting different social realities, with time serving as a lens that facilitates this analysis [2]. The use of dystopian narratives also has a pedagogical aspect, informing readers through full-sensory virtual reality or as a means of controlling behavior in dystopian societies [14]. Dystopian literature and film are not just fantasies; they offer a deep analysis of the harsh realities of contemporary society [4]. By presenting alternative realities through allegorical and Gnostic narratives, these works advance other realities that challenge the status quo [13]. Through their powerful critique of contemporary society, dystopian works offer an opportunity to examine and address the flaws of our present-day world.

Analysis of Utopian Visions in Speculative Narratives

Utopian narratives have long been recognized as powerful tools for reflecting the contemporary socio-political issues of their time. Feminist utopian literature, in particular, is a necessary component of feminist consciousness because it facilitates visions of a more equitable future for all citizens [15]. Works in this genre often use narrative devices such as nonlinear structure, avoidance of closure, altered states of consciousness, and exile to explore contemporary socio-political issues [15]. These works interrogate Western models of citizenship and suggest alternate models, confronting current social inequities and projecting longing for political change [15]. In examining three seminal utopian novels, *The Republic*, *Brave New World*, and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the paper allows the novels to inform and critique each other, revealing what may or may not have changed in utopian thinking since Plato wrote his seminal work [16]. Darko Suvin considers utopian fiction as the socio-political subgenre of science fiction and treats the thought experimentation involved in creating fictional utopian worlds as inherently political [17]. Eutopias and dystopias are forms of social dreaming, representing pleasant dreams and nightmares respectively [17]. Utopian narratives reflect contemporary socio-political issues by creating alternate worlds to explore the social and political lives of their inhabitants. They can reveal anxieties and hopes about the future of humanity and society, such as the idea of artificial wombs reflecting contemporary issues surrounding reproductive rights and technology [17]. Ultimately, the study of utopian fiction should begin with an exploration of collective psychology and end with the discussion of the politics of the human species [17].

Speculative fiction has been a popular genre for exploring utopian visions, and it has received significant attention from scholars and literary critics alike. Adeline Johns-Putra and Adam Trexler are among the scholars who have analyzed the value of these narratives, highlighting their performative power in shaping our understanding of the world [18]. The prevalence of utopian visions in literature and film is not a passing trend, as these narratives continue to offer insight into our societal values and hopes for the future. Heuristic utopianism, a focus on visions of a transformed world that is attainable through technological advancements, is a common theme in speculative fiction [19]. This genre also explores themes of oppression and resistance in dystopian narratives, offering a critique of existing societal structures and power dynamics. In analyzing feminist speculative fiction, researchers have found a new vision for utopian and dystopian imaginaries that offer unique perspectives on gender, identity, and social justice [20]. Utopian narratives are distinct from other speculative fictions in that they offer a unique perspective on the potential for societal change, and can serve as a pedagogical tool for exploring political theory in the Anthropocene [17][21]. However, some early-twentieth century speculative narratives were designed to covertly promote ideological agendas, leading some to classify them as utopias in disguise [16]. Despite this, the enduring popularity of utopian and dystopian narratives in speculative fiction underscores their significance as a mode of exploring our collective hopes and fears for the future.

Utopian literature and film have been the subject of much critical analysis, with scholars like Adeline Johns-Putra and Adam Trexler providing insightful perspectives on the value of these speculative narratives [18]. These narratives offer imaginative solutions to contemporary socio-political challenges [22]. As Nordmann notes, utopian visions have performative power, and their influence is here to stay [22]. Speculative fiction offers a means to explore utopian and dystopian futures and build upon personal narratives [7]. In feminist speculative fiction, scholars have found new visions of utopian/dystopian possibilities [20]. Suvin contends that the study of utopian fiction must begin with an understanding of its political theory, but also recognizes that speculative fiction has the potential to bridge gaps in exploring socio-political issues [17]. Despite the potential for covertly promoting ideology in speculative narratives, early twentieth-century speculative fiction aimed to create a utopia in disguise [16]. The study of utopias in the Anthropocene requires an approach that considers both storytelling and theory-building [21]. While feminist dystopian works have been excluded from this analysis, the pedagogical potential of utopian narratives remains an important area of study [15]. Overall, the value of utopian literature and film lies in their ability to offer creative solutions to contemporary issues, while also providing a means for exploring political theory and personal narratives.

Socio-Political Implications of Speculative Narratives

The concept of fabulation, or the act of creating fiction, has evolved over time and has been shaped by different historical and ideological contexts. As identified by Scholes, there are three distinct forms of fabulation: dogmatic, speculative and structural [5]. Structural fabulation emerged in the early 20th century as a result of scientific revolutions and discoveries that exposed complex structures underlying human life [5]. Within this broad category, there are several subgenres of fiction that address reality indirectly through fictional or non-mimetic devices, such as fantasy, horror, science fiction, and non-mimetic genres [5]. Margaret Atwood distinguishes speculative fiction from science fiction based on probability, where speculative fiction refers to narratives about things that can potentially take place. Dystopian narratives, a form of speculative fiction, explore potential future scenarios where society has taken a turn for the worse. These narratives can shape our understanding of socio-political issues by providing a cautionary tale and highlighting the consequences of certain political decisions or societal attitudes [5]. Atwood's dystopian novels use speculative fiction to describe potential future events and reveal the dangers of authoritarian governments and environmental degradation [5]. Through these narratives, readers can gain a better understanding of current social and political issues by examining their potential outcomes in a fictionalized future.

The potential implications of dystopian and utopian narratives for contemporary society are manifold and complex. Speculative narratives, which include both dystopian and utopian stories, have become increasingly important in our society as a way of examining sociopolitical issues. Speculative narratives center on stories of our present and future and often involve cyborg reconfigurations, which are designed to take a political stance on social and political issues [23][24]. Speculation, as a type of narrative protocol, is used to link the cognitive estrangement effect of speculative fiction with social and political issues [5]. Speculative narratives often involve the intrusion of speculative, unreal elements into an otherwise mimetic context, which are closely tied with sociopolitical issues of inclusion or exclusion [25]. In the classroom, speculative stories help students identify the social and political implications of technology, highlighting that these implications are not limited to technological concerns alone [7]. However, some scholars argue that the use of speculative narratives serves a particular sociopolitical aim of maintaining stratified power relations rather than challenging them [26]. Black speculative fiction uses science and pseudoscience to interrogate social and political issues, drawing on traditional African American narratives and themes to explore new speculative stories of ourselves [27]. Finally, YA speculative fiction provides useful stories for examining questions of power, resistance, and sociopolitical transformation in contemporary society [28].

Speculative narratives, whether utopian or dystopian, can teach us valuable lessons in designing a better society. Speculative Design, a field within human-computer interaction, leverages these narratives as a means to take political stances on sociopolitical issues [24]. These narratives create cognitive estrangement, allowing readers to imagine alternative realities to the one they currently inhabit. Speculation as a narrative protocol is linked to the cognitive estrangement effect of speculative fiction [5]. By introducing speculative elements into an otherwise mimetic context, we can closely examine sociopolitical issues of inclusion and exclusion [25]. Baumann et al. found that collaborative storytelling among students encouraged them to identify the social and political implications of technology [7]. However, we must also be mindful of the sociopolitical aims that these narratives serve, as they may maintain societal stratification [26]. African American speculative fiction has been particularly impactful in interrogating social and political issues [27]. While speculative narratives often maintain canonical elements, the degree of speculation varies, with some stories portraying near-future realities [29]. These narratives provide opportunities to examine questions of power, resistance, and sociopolitical transformation [28]. As we design for everyday cyborg speculative narratives, it is important to center these stories in our present and future, with implications for creating a better society [23].

The research paper on exploring dystopian realities and utopian visions in speculative narratives brings forward an intriguing analysis of science fiction literature and film. The study highlights the importance of speculative narratives and how they provide an opportunity to examine questions of power, resistance, and sociopolitical transformation. The paper also emphasizes the role of dystopian and utopian fiction in inspiring activism and resistance, presenting ideas for how to effect positive change through collective engagement and action. The temporal displacement of dystopian and utopian concepts is explored in feminist speculative fiction, as is the concept of heterotopia, which describes non-hegemonic safe spaces within these narratives. The research also brings to light the impact of African American speculative fiction in interrogating social and political issues. However, it acknowledges that the socio-political issues reflected in these narratives may vary across cultures. The study also highlights the limitations of the analysis of utopian and dystopian fiction in the field of surveillance studies, which has been limited to texts set in and written by authors from the global north. The paper concludes by emphasizing the unique contributions of science fiction and speculative fiction to the exploration of dystopian and utopian concepts and the potential of these narratives to offer imaginative solutions to contemporary socio-political challenges. Overall, this research paper offers a significant contribution to the field of speculative fiction and its importance in providing a platform to examine contemporary societal issues.

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