BEYOND THE GREEN WALL: ECHOES OF ZAMYATIN'S ONE STATE ACROSS A CENTURY OF USTOPIA

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Abstract: *A century after the completion of Zamyatin's* We*, this paper aims to revisit the fictional universe that not only inspired some of the best-known dystopian texts of the twentieth century but still continues to influence the literary and cinematic narratives of the present. Using Margaret Atwood's introduction to the latest English translation of the Russian novel and her hybrid concept of 'ustopia' as its main starting points, the analysis will examine the intricate network of relationships between this text and its Western avatars, from literary classics (Huxley's* Brave New World*, Rand's* Anthem*, Orwell's* 1984*, Bradbury's* Fahrenheit 451 *and Atwood's own* The Handmaid's Tale *and* The Testaments*) to young adult bestsellers (Lowry's* The Giver*, Collins'* The Hunger Games*, Roth's* Divergent*, Oliver's* Delirium*), graphic novels (Moore and Lloyd's* V for Vendetta*) and cinematic blockbusters (*Gattaca*,* Equilibrium*,* Equals*). Without aspiring to touch upon all the common denominators of these apocalyptic scenarios, ranging from allusive code names to colourless and claustrophobic cityscapes, the paper simply intends to identify some of the most poignant echoes of Zamyatin's novel, permeating in equal measure subsequent narratives and the somewhat precarious reality of our own present.*

Keywords: *Atwood*; *D-503*; *dystopia*; *intertextuality*; *ustopia*; *Zamyatin's* We

Introduction: *Brave* Now *World*

Released mid-July in the United States and at the beginning of October on British television, the American adaptation of Aldous Huxley's 1932 novel could hardly have premiered at a better time than at the end of a decade rife with environmental disasters, medical crises, mediatic anxieties and political blunders that have triggered unprecedented levels of interest in dystopian and postapocalyptic fiction. Huxley's failure to foresee the exact parameters of our current predicament is more than amply vindicated by the realization that few of us had "both a global pandemic and an overdue racial reckoning on our 2020 bingo card" and the uncanny accuracy with which he anticipated the hedonistic melange of designer narcotics, perfunctory relations and near-instant gratification of contemporary existence:

> the idea of a computer in every pocket, a social media feed for every mood, entertainment on demand and life as livestream wouldn't have surprised him. Perhaps he can even imagine us now, pulling up

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> Peacock, clicking on one "Brave New World" episode and then another. Bingeing while the world burns. (Soloski 1)

The series' launch was greeted by largely scathing reviews, unimpressed with its attempts to "retain the DNA of the original while mutating it to the times" (Poniewozik 1) and even going as far as to rate it as a "much better version of *Logan's Run*" (Britt 1) than an actual adaptation of Huxley's novel. As it happens, one of this adaptation's most conspicuous departures from the literary text resides in its enhanced focus on social technology, featuring somewhat more relatable futuristic details than Huxley's Eau de Cologne taps: the optic implants the denizens of this cinematic New London are equipped with apply a digital veneer to everything they catch sight of, whilst simultaneously connecting them to a vast network; the latter ensures that their impressions are filtered through the eyes of anyone else logged on to the system and occasions the ultimate oversharing experience. While further investigation of this particular aspect would undoubtedly result in quite interesting discoveries, the actual aim of this paper is to verify the far-reaching intertextual ramifications and enduring relevance of a lesser-known dystopian classic, mainly using the series' timely release (and almost instant demise) as the contemporary landmark of a momentous anniversary.

Bridging the Gap: 1920 Revisited

While it remains to be seen whether the centenary of Huxley's novel will be accompanied by smug relief or glum recognition, 2020 happens to mark the elapse of almost exactly one hundred years since the publication and first draft respectively of two other prophetic texts, written in the grim aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution, the Great War and the 1918-1919 influenza pandemic. By now ubiquitous far beyond the realm of science fiction, the word 'robot' derives from the Slavic 'robota' – a term for slave or forced labour first printed in Karel Čapek's 1920 play *R.U.R.* (*Rossum's Universal Robots*), in which synthetic organic matter is employed to build artificial people meant to support their living counterparts in everyday tasks, and in some cases to fully or partially substitute for humans by performing work in their place (Cangelosi and Schlesinger 19). But for this one crucial lexical item, little attention seems to be paid today to Čapek's play, which has never been the case for Yevgeny Ivanovic Zamyatin's *We*, penned between 1920 and 1921, banned by the Soviet censorship board on account of its ideological undesirability in 1921, smuggled westward and first published in the United States in 1924, and since then gaining an at least honorary mention in surveys of dystopian literature.

The fact that key elements of Zamyatin's text have reached the general public's "baggage of illustrative literary 'places'" (Eco ix) in a roundabout way

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is hardly surprising given the number of those merely aware of its existence via analyses of the influence it exerted on more familiar Western texts; as such, it is quite likely to be perceived as something of a genre survey or, at the very least, a crash course in dystopian landmarks. An intriguing work not only of science fiction but also of political satire and experimental prose, whose basic plot "has been repeated by Aldous Huxley (coincidentally) in *Brave New World* (1932), George Orwell (consciously) in *Nineteen Eighty Four* (1948) and dozens of writers and film-makers (unknowingly) in the fifties, sixties and seventies" without detracting from its "prophetic power and underlying philosophy" (Kern 9), *We* amounts to considerably more than a mere compendium of tropes and continues to yield valuable material for the various debates of the present.

In his 1946 review of "*We* by E.I. Zamyatin," George Orwell provided the first outline of the numerous details substantiating the at least partial indebtedness of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* to "one of the literary curiosities" of his book-burning age, pointing out their almost identical temporal setting, social vision and atmosphere, as well as their common focus on "the rebellion of the primitive human spirit against a rationalised, mechanised, painless world" (72) before going on to praise Zamyatin's keener political awareness. Rather predictably, the striking resemblance between the two texts is the most frequently cited of the many insightful points made throughout the review, more often than not invoked as a somewhat ironic preamble to various examinations of the more salient similarities between *We* and Orwell's own (at the time still unwritten) dystopia:

> the protagonist is D-503, who, like everyone else, lives in a glass apartment building that is constantly spied upon by the Bureau of Guardians (thought police). In time, he is seduced by I-330 (Julia), who takes him to the Ancient House (Mr. Charrington's store) and introduces him to the secretive Mephi (The Brotherhood). (Kay)

We's later setting and earlier publication date make it possible for the Benefactor to simultaneously function as "both the ancestor and great great grandson of Orwell's Big Brother" (Moore 2020), yet the somewhat tedious linearity of historical time also lends credibility to Kay's speculations that "Zamyatin might have called out Orwell for plagiarism if he hadn't died before *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was published". Pertinent and perceptive though such observations may be, they are likely to discourage readers from heeding Orwell's advice and dedicating additional time to the perusal of a text they might feel sufficiently acquainted with: "It is in effect a study of the Machine, the genie that man has thoughtlessly let out of its bottle and cannot put back again. This is a book to look out for when an English version appears." (Orwell

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75) Indeed, the emphasis placed on the parallelism between the two plots, sets of characters and situations has the potential to suggest that Orwell's subsequent novel obviated the need for readers to immerse themselves into any other English version of this particular scenario.

The recent publication of a radical new edition of Zamyatin's novel by Cannongate[1] reinforces the notion that, much in the same way in which the numerous English renditions that followed Gregory Zilboorg's 1924 version still leave room for stylistic and semantic tweaks, the text as a whole continues to lend itself to new interpretations. Bela Shayevich's translation was introduced by Margaret Atwood, whose *Handmaid's Tale* has not only solidified its centrality to the dystopian canon through its uncanny anticipation of United States reproductive policies but also engendered its own mainstream franchise via the massively popular Hulu serialization, the 2019 sequel *The Testaments* and the mediatic ubiquity of its iconic red garment and highly quotable slogans. In addition to reinforcing the common thread of female dissent running through dystopian literature from Jack London's 1908 *The Iron Heel* to her own novels (not to mention quite a few young adult franchises of the twenty-first century), Atwood delves into a now largely disregarded side of the intertextual continuum surrounding *We*: "soon the plot thickens, and so does D's prose. Has he been dipping into Edgar Allan Poe in his more lurid moments? Or the German Gothic Romantics? Or Baudelaire? Possibly. Or his author has." ("Introduction" 4)

A Rogue by Any Other Name

The considerably greater attention paid to echoes of Zamyatin's *We* in later dystopian texts than to the allusive richness of its own narrative is quite understandable, yet an awareness of the resemblance between the Benefactor and Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor (Hoyles 95) or of the Biblical dimensions of one of the awkward triangles connecting its protagonists can yield welcome reminders of the fact that "the antediluvian ages of all those Shakespeares and Dostoyevskys, or whatever you call them" (Zamyatin 44) can never be left behind, much as D-503 would like to believe that. The unlikely yet very apt juxtaposition of scriptural and consumerist references in S-4711's apparently arbitrary cryptonym – "who could be more ingratiating, more insinuatingly seductive than he who wears the world's most famous perfume for a name" (Gregg 687) – acquires further depth in the light of certain historical details furnished by Atwood:

[1] While this paper was in part prompted by the announcement of Bela Shayevich's English version, it was largely completed before the text in question became available and as such all the excerpts employed belong to the 1987 edition of Mirra Ginsburg's 1972 translation.

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> S-4711 is a secret service operative, but his number gives away his alter ego. 4711 is the name of a cologne that originated in the German city of Cologne, which in the year 1288 staged a succesful democratic revolt against Church and State authorities, and became a Free Imperial City. ("Introduction" 6)

Apart from helping readers make sense of an inside joke that would otherwise be lost on many of them, this casually mentioned detail also sheds additional light on the intricate intertextual humour embedded in the seemingly surreal name-choosing scene from Agnes Jemima's account of her life in Gilead, or *Transcript of Witness Testimony 369A* to use the document's official title:

> There was an approved list of names, put together by Aunt Lydia and the other senior Aunts. Becka said the names were made from the names of products women had liked once and would be reassured by, but she herself did not know what those products were. Nobody our age knew, she said. […] "What about Maybelline?" she said. "That sounds pretty. Aunt Maybelline."
> "No," I said. "It's too frilly."
> "How about Aunt Ivory?" (Atwood, *Testaments* 290)

The irony of Aunt Lydia's decision to allow females called to higher service to rebrand themselves by means of names borrowed from the defunct beauty and fashion industries of the decadent past is difficult to miss, given the status of mere commodities most women have in this Abrahamic dystopia. Indeed, by the time the dialogue above takes place, readers should be familiar enough with Aunt Lydia's true motivations (not to mention dark sense of humour) to fully understand why the very women expected to lead all others down the path of righteousness can choose to bear the questionable names of companies targeting the painted Jezebels that Gilead ostensibly aims to eradicate. One can moreover speculate that the names of the older Aunts, ranging from the homely Sara Lee to the sumptuous (albeit somewhat ludicrous) Gabbana, were selected out of a sense of nostalgia or in an attempt to preserve at least a fragment of their past selves.

The name eventually chosen by Agnes Jemima (easily recognizable as Hannah, the little girl taken away from her real mother June together with the latter's name and other markers of identity) might initially seem devoid of any subversive nuances, apart from its subtle reminder of times when it was still possible for a woman to occupy positions of supreme authority: "I think there was a Queen Victoria." (Atwood, *Testaments* 290) Its likely origin in lingerie retail rather than royal family trees reinforces both Agnes Jemima's status as diffident yet nonetheless dangerous rebel and the layers of secrecy surrounding

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her origins and various families (real, adoptive, spiritual, extended). Like the number born by Zamyatin's insidious tempter, this naming game reinforces the deeply intertextual ties connecting all forms of human endeavour, far beyond the confines of the printed text, yet the true scope of Atwood's (deliberate, unconscious or accidental) allusiveness may only be revealed when (or indeed if) the reader recalls the name of her alma mater and the most ubiquitous word of Orwell's Oceania. Obsessively reiterated in state propaganda and liberally scattered in every corner of Winston's habitat, from his dilapidated block of flats to the plain labels of the filthy-tasting coffee, insufficient cigarettes and synthetic gin, the only "cheap and plentiful" (Orwell 59) mass-product on the market, the 'Victory' label appears to have been aptly enough derived "from the low-quality 'Victory' cigarettes (also known as Vs) made in India and smoked in Britain during World War II" (Caponi 25), alluding via the dominant V printed on the thin packet to the infamous V-sign sported by Winston's exalted historical namesake.

In addition to authoring her own notes from the post-apocalyptic underground in the form of a secret diary – an audio version of Winston's illicit notebook, tempting Offred with the possibility of sharing her predicament with an unknown posterity – Atwood also coined the ideal term for the essentially dual nature of most fictional versions of the future. Albeit comparatively unknown, her portmanteau successfully captures the frequently iterated fact that every single utopia "always comes with its implied dystopia" (Gordin, Tilley and Prakash 2) in one suggestive label: "*Ustopia* is a word I made up by combining utopia and dystopia – the imagined perfect society and its opposite […] each contains a latent version of the other." (Atwood, *Dire Cartographies* 66) In another recent response to the forgotten text that inspired George Orwell and herself, Atwood glosses over her academic expertise by admitting to being "a science fiction reader but not a science fiction scholar" and avoiding all mentions of her contribution to dystopian terminology before highlighting the extent to which Zamyatin's fictional universe illustrates this very overlap:

> *We* can be viewed in part as a utopia: the goal of the One State is universal happiness, and it argues that since you can't be both happy and free, freedom has to go. The 'rights' over which people were making such a fuss in the 19th century (and over which they continue to make such a fuss now) are viewed as ridiculous: if the One State has everything under control and is acting for the greatest possible happiness of everyone, who needs rights? (Atwood, "Forgotten Dystopia")

The same *Telegraph* article succinctly enumerates *We*'s most conspicuously prophetic elements, ranging from the endeavour to "abolish the

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individual by merging all citizens with the state" and by replacing names with ciphers, the intent "surveillance of almost every act and thought" and the almost casual "liquidation of dissenters" to the construction of an impenetrable border wall meant to simultaneously prevent invasion and trap citizens inside. Together with the "larger-than-life, all-knowing, all-wise Big Brotherish Benefactor who may be simply an image or a simulacrum" (Atwood, "Forgotten Dystopia"), these details foreshadowed not only the patterns of a key literary category but, more disquietingly so, aspects of a none too distant future:

> So did the use of letters and numbers rather than names: Hitler's extermination camps had not yet engraved numbers on their inhabitants, and we of this age had not yet become the fodder for algorithms. Stalin had yet to forge the cult of his own personality, the Berlin Wall was decades in the future, electronic bugging had not been developed, Stalin's show trials and mass purges would not take place for a decade – yet here is the general plan of later dictatorships and surveillance capitalisms, laid out in *We* as if in a blueprint. (Atwood, "Forgotten Dystopia")

While more sanguine readers might invoke the decades separating us from such grim landmarks (not to mentioned the lessons posterity presumably learned from each of them) in support of the notion that Zamyatin's text has largely exhausted its cautionary potential, Atwood points out the "fertile grounds for dictators" created by the intensely polarized political climate, civil unrest, health crisis and environmental concerns of the present: "Women's rights, the health of the planet, inequality of wealth – I remember these themes from my own youth in the 60s and 70s. For a time they appeared to vanish, but they just went underground. And now, it seems, they are back." (Atwood, "Qualified Optimism")

Straight out of the One State

D-503's rambling and fragmentary journal entries make for an interesting reading experience at the current juncture, so uncannily do they mirror the generalised state of confusion, disorientation and sudden mood swings experienced by many of those navigating the strange pandemic tides of 2020. Much in the same way in which the petroleum-derived food fuelling the One State (Zamyatin 21) prophesised the *ersatz* butter Arthur Imhausen synthesised from "the compressed remains of fossilized Carboniferous plants" (Sumner 125) and the ubiquitous trans-fatty acids thwarting our clean eating endeavours, D-503's sterile glass haven anticipated with painful accuracy the unreality of life under lockdown. The now highly relatable details of the

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narrator's experience can in fact add an element of dark irony to his assumption that "such elementary things as the Table of Hours, the Personal Hour, the Maternity Norm, the Green Wall, and the Benefactor" might make limited sense to the unknown recipients who "have reached only that page in the great book of civilization that our ancestors read some nine hundred years ago" (Zamyatin 10). The notion of allocated time slots for daily walks, the dangers of engaging in certain forms of personal interaction without the bureaucratic protection of various slips of paper – in his case a pink coupon and a certificate (Zamyatin 18) – not to mention D-503's panicked race against the clock, are quite likely to resonate with readers subject to strict social distancing rules and curfews:

> I turned cold. I knew what it meant to be seen in the street after twenty-two and a half. […] Without a good-by, without a backward glance, I rushed out of the room. […] And I raced, gasping, not to be late. […] I rushed on at full speed, the air whistling in my ears. At the entrance I stopped: the watch showed one minute before twenty-two and a half. (Zamyatin 57-58)

By the same logic, a more sceptical (or more adventurous) contingent might find a relatable response to regimented safety in Lauren Oliver's young adult dystopia, whose protagonists have the questionable justification of a youth spent respecting the "mandated curfew for uncureds" (Oliver 61) and hearing about it on a daily basis:

> In recent years Hana and I have made it a kind of game to stay out until the last possible second, cutting it closer and closer every year. Last year I stepped into the house at 10:58 exactly, heart hammering in my chest, shaking with exhaustion—I'd had to sprint home. But as I lay in bed I couldn't stop grinning. I felt like I'd gotten away with something. (Oliver 79)

When it comes to the frequency of literary déjà vu moments occasioned by a belated journey through D-503's diary, the near-future American society outlined in *Delirium* stands out as one of *We*'s most salient contemporary avatars, so closely do its anaesthetised citizens, unyielding rules and swift punishments echo One State's dull unifs[2], strict norms and almost instantaneous reduction of transgressors to small puddles of chemically pure water (Zamyatin 48). Probably the easiest analogy to make is the one between

[2] In the futuristic society of *We*, the word *unif* – "Derived apparently from the ancient 'uniform'" (Zamyatin 5) – is used interchangeably to refer both to the pale outfits blending in with the general greyness and to their equally washed-out wearers.

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the surgical intervention used to cure the "dangerous sickness" (Oliver 8) known as "*amor deliria nervosa*" (Oliver 9) and "the newly invented operation" (Zamyatin 81) meant for those unfortunate enough to "have developed a soul" (Zamyatin 89), the peace and balance of both fictional states being seen as incompatible with the chaos of romance: "having conquered Hunger […] the One State launched its attack against the other ruler of the world – Love. And finally this elemental force was also subjugated, i.e., organized and reduced to mathematical order." (Zamyatin 21) There is no denying the fact that an even more conspicuous parallel can be drawn between the proclamation of One State's "historic Lex Sexualis" whereby "Each number has a right to any other number, as to a sexual commodity" (Zamyatin 21) and the most obsessively repeated of World State's hypnopaedic proverbs, according to which "every one belongs to every one else" (Huxley 34).

It is quite interesting to note at this juncture that while *Delirium* echoes both the reasoning and Latin terminology of its Russian precursor, the latter wisely does away with monogamy and family relationships as well as with love and eventually takes the crusade against the vagaries of human nature beyond the unrealistic eradication of a single emotion: "we must cut out imagination. In everyone… Extirpate imagination. Nothing but surgery, nothing but surgery will do." (Zamyatin 90) A similar awareness of the incompatibility between social balance and the free rein of emotion prompts the Librian government of *Equilibrium* to sacrifice the "dizzying highs of human emotion" in order to suppress its abysmal lows:

> In the first years of the 21st century... a third World War broke out. Those of us who survived knew mankind could never survive... a fourth... that our own volatile natures could simply no longer be risked. […] Librians... there is a disease in the heart of man. Its symptom is hate. Its symptom... is anger. Its symptom is rage. Its symptom... is war. The disease... is human emotion. But Libria... I congratulate you. For there is a cure for this disease. […] And you as a society have embraced this cure. Prozium. Now we are at peace with ourselves, and humankind is one. War is gone. Hate, a memory. We are our own conscience now. (Wimmer)

In addition to the intricate intertextual melange of elements lifted from *Brave New World*, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Fahrenheit 451* that most viewers are likely to recognize, the cinematic narrative features equally poignant if perhaps less obvious reverberations of the "Two Hundred Years' War" (Zamyatin 11), the certainty that "individual consciousness is merely a sickness" (Zamyatin 128) and the Mephi resistance plotting to bring down the state.

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Given the audience's repeated exposure to the Western dystopias built on the foundations of the One State, neither these elements nor the awakening of John Preston's conscience under the influence of a female rebel are as readily traceable back to the Russian source as the "vision of a loveless future" in Drake Doremus' 2015 *Equals*, whose post-apocalyptic society known as 'the Collective' features "seemingly interchangeable […] identities pared down to a bland minimum by medical regulation, individuals all living alone, and by day striding blank-facedly to work in immaculate white uniforms" (Romney 1). Much in the same way in which the Vulcans of the *Star Trek* universe – and, indeed, Wimmer's Librians – reconfigured their societies so as to suppress emotional manifestations after nearly wiping themselves out through warfare (Zoller Seitz 1), the few survivors of the 28-day bomb attack which "obliterated 99.6% of usable arid land on the earth's surface" and "changed the course of human kind forever" (Doremus) attempt to ward off a second such disaster by radically rerouting human development. The Collective thus set up on one "of the two tracts of land that survived the great war" runs quite smoothly "by everybody doing their part," which might entail such professional and civic duties as perfecting space exploration, responding to the occasional conception summons, reporting "suspicious activity to health and safety" and constantly waging war against "emotion and base desires" (Doremus).

The main calamity threatening the Collective's placid existence is the resurgence of "an ancient vestige" in the form of "S.O.S. Switched on syndrome," awakening the protagonists to sensory temptations akin to those assaulting D-503 and John Preston and prompting the urgent development of a "cure that restores the health and systematic order to the individual" (Doremus). The "terribly déjà vu feel" accompanying the various "echoes of bad futures" harking back "not just to *1984* but to Evgeny Zamyatin's 1920s *We*" has elicited relatively harsh responses to what was ultimately dismissed as a "dustily archaic" variation on scenarios inspired by very specific 20th-century political concerns, essentially unattuned to "contemporary anxieties about social control and exclusion" (Romney 1). Ironically enough, while the premise of a devastating war has been endlessly reiterated in literary and cinematic narratives over the last century, D-503's refreshingly cynical reaction to the demise of 99.8 percent of the earth's population – "cleansed of its millennial filth, how radiant the face of the earth has become!" (Zamyatin 21) – is more likely than ever to strike a chord with at least some of the jaded denizens of our slowly suffocating planet.

Circling back to the literary sphere, it has to be observed that while few other examples of young adult fiction provide as close equivalents to Zamyatin's fictional universe as *Delirium*, reverberations of key details can be identified in almost all of the bestselling such narratives of the last few

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decades, ranging from the "monochrome collectivist necessity" counterpoised to "the 'natural' incandescence of individual liberty" (Smith and Korsnack 196) in Lois Lowry's 1993 *The Giver* to the drab "government-issued clothes" (Collins, *Mockingjay* 32) and "oppressively regimented" societies of *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent*, "where individual liberties are sacrificed to the ideals of equity and security" (Smith and Korsnack 196). Given the relentlessly accelerating hands of the Climate Clock, eco-anxious readers might be tempted to regard the tedium of Sameness as a reasonable price to pay for the environmental control relegating snow to the status of "a very distant memory" tugged "forward from many generations back" (Lowry 83). Most likely inspired by the "Accumulator Towers" (Zamyatin 142) ensuring that the tamed sky above D-503's head never rages with the wild storms extolled in ancient poetry, such a level of weather manipulation would needless to say amount to considerably more than a source of thermal comfort in our current planetary predicament. As regards the *Hunger Games* universe, leaving aside the mainstream appeal of the gladiatorial dimension of Panem, District 13 stands out as a particularly comprehensive contemporary rehearsal of "stereotypical images of collectivist political culture" derived from Zamyatin's classic anti-Stalinist dystopia and its "anti-utopian recasting" in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Smith and Korsnack 196).

Inside the Glasshouse

Given One State's propensity for eugenics, one might speculate that if its own scientists were ever to borrow any of the techological innovations of Panem the genetically altered avian spies bred by the Capitol would represent a tempting alternative to the "gracefully camouflaged" membranes "installed on every street, recording all conversations for the Office of the Guardians" (Zamyatin 53):

> One was a special bird called a jabberjay that had the ability to memorize and repeat whole human conversations. They were homing birds, exclusively male, that were released into regions where the Capitol's enemies were known to be hiding. After the birds gathered words, they'd fly back to centers to be recorded. (Collins, *Hunger Games* 43)

Such natural elements however, even tampered with by science, do not seem to belong in the entirely urban single state constructed of glass, "cocooned from nature by the Green Wall" and in no particular need to avail itself of any additional spying mechanisms given its citizens' willingness "to surrender upon the altar of the One State their loved ones, their friends, themselves" (Zamyatin 40) and the architecture of their dormitory-style dwellings. D-503

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unabashedly declares himself incapable of seeing beauty in flowers or in "anything belonging to the primitive world long exiled beyond the Green Wall" (Zamyatin 48) and the only glass houses in this petroleum-fed future are (literally) meant for people to live in, "with all of their actions transparent" (Atwood, "Introduction" 4). The "tiny one-person, transparent cubicles" may be seen to anticipate the micro-apartments and pod hotel rooms of contemporary Japan, yet their main purpose resides in the denial of privacy and personal identity (Cooke 389) rather than space maximization.

Traceable back to Jeremy Bentham's 18th-century Panopticon penitentiary concept (Moore 2019) Zamyatin's architecture feels at once familiar and eerie to twenty-first century readers; many of them are quite likely to inhabit small-space apartments with floor to ceiling windows, yet one-way glass and shades that can be lowered without a certificate generally ensure that the privacy breaches they might worry about are of a rather different nature. While none of the other fictional universes referenced in this paper feature cities built entirely of "the same impregnable, eternal" (Zamyatin 3) material, from "the divine parallelepipeds of the transparent houses" to "the straight, immutable streets" and glittering pavements (Zamyatin 5), a distant echo of D-503's aesthetic raptures could be identified in Katniss Everdeen's awed reaction to the "magnificence of the glistening buildings in a rainbow of hues that tower into the air" (Collins, *Hunger Games* 59). Readers familiar with the cinematic dystopias of the turn of the century are however quite likely to conjure up a visual representation of Zamyatin's urban geography based on the clean lines and sleek minimalism of the retro-futuristic cityscapes of *Gattaca*, *Equilibrium* or *Equals*.

The deep social stratification and democratic police force of *Gattaca* may be a far cry from the egalitarian principles and totalitarian practices the other two productions share with Zamyatin's text, yet its civilization relies on the same eugenics that dictate O-90 is ten centimetres too short to be allowed to breed. While not illegal as such, Vincent's conception leaves too much to chance for him to be considered a valid member of society and he can only purse his dream career in space travel by eliminating all traces of his real identity as "a faith birth or a degenerate or whatever you wanna call it" (Nicol). Ironically enough, for all his disgust towards the borderline criminal negligence allowing his ancestors to breed and bear their young blindly and unscientifically (Zamyatin 13), the very Builder of the Integral turns out to be almost as much of "a God-child" (Nicol) as the Invalid aspiring to board such a vessel in an alternate ustopian universe: "You don't know—few know it—that there were women here, women of the city, who loved the others. You, too, must have some drops of sunny forest blood." (Zamyatin 163)

However familiar the towering monoliths partitioned into identical cells might feel to contemporary readers, the most salient landmark within D-

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503's habitat is neither his home nor any of the ominous public spaces (the Office of the Guardians, the Cube Plaza) dominating the rigid infrastructure of the One State, but a "strange, fragile, blind structure […] completely enclosed in a glass shell" (Zamyatin 25). Regarded as "the center of the axial lines of all the X's, Y's and Z's" (Zamyatin 92) on which D-503's whole world has been built of late, it constitutes a crumbling tribute to the chaotic lifestyle of bygone days:

> I opened a heavy, creaking, opaque door, and we stepped into a gloomy, disorderly place (they called it an 'apartment'). […] a jumble of colors and forms. A white flat area above; dark blue walls; red, green, and orange bindings of ancient books; yellow bronze – chandeliers, a statue of Buddha; furniture built along lines convulsed in epilepsy, incapable of being fitted into an equation. (Zamyatin 26)

Far from simply functioning as a sanctuary in which I-330 can conduct her secret assignations away from prying eyes, the Ancient House provides the Mephi with a gateway to their underground headquarters and thence to the wilderness, but above all with a reminder of the extinct world of colour, emotion and individuality they are trying to recreate. It moreover constitutes one of the most intertextually resonant elements of *We*, with avatars ranging from the "flaking three-storey house in the ancient part of the city" (Bradbury 48) inside which Montag experiences his first intimations of the value of the printed word to V's "Shadow Gallery" of paintings, books, records, films and other vestiges of "eradicated culture… tossed […] away like a fistful of dead roses" (Moore and Lloyd 18) and Mary O'Brien treasure hoard of lampshades, carved mirror frames, snow globes, theatre posters, perfume, ribbons and dozens of other once mundane possessions, rated EC-10 for emotional content (Wimmer) and therefore banned by the Tetragrammaton Council.

Perhaps the most readily recognizable literary equivalent of the Ancient House is to be encountered in a text which not only employs the "device of a naïve narrator in a world in which names have been replaced by numbers" (Merrill 99) but further highlights the suppression of individuality by having him deliver the bulk of his tale in the first-person plural. This narrative similarity belies the ultimate gap between D-503 and Equality 7-2521: for all their identification with the same legendary rebel (Prometheus), the former half-heartedly revolts against an "allegedly scientific and logical society in the name of love, poetry and emotion" (Merrill 99) before declaring himself cured and insisting that "Reason must prevail" (Zamyatin 232) whereas the latter steadfastly "champions reason and science" (Merrill 99) as the true enemies of totalitarianism. It therefore seems strangely appropriate that the house of the Unmentionable Times, with its defamiliarized mirrors and

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lightbulbs, tiny rooms, brightly coloured garments and countless books, should constitute such a seamless fusion of D-503's minimalist home and the archaic "starting point of all the coordinates" (Zamyatin 92) of his short-lived rebellion:

> Never had we seen rooms so full of light. The sunrays danced upon colors, colors, and more colors than we thought possible, we who had seen no houses save the white ones, the brown ones and the grey. There were great pieces of glass on the walls, but it was not glass, for when we looked upon it we saw our own bodies and all the things behind us, as on the face of a lake. […] And there were globes of glass everywhere, in each room, the globes with the metal cobwebs inside, such as we had seen in our tunnel. (Rand 80)

The same sense of similarity in difference emerges from the civil-engineering schemes the self-declared Prometheus engages in after successfully shedding all the linguistic and ideological shackles of his former identity: "I shall build a barrier of wires around my home, and across the paths which lead to my home; a barrier light as a cobweb, more impassable than a wall of granite; a barrier my brothers will never be able to cross." (Rand 91)

Another Brick in the Wall

Whether dauntingly solid or inconspicuously lethal, boundaries represent an equally prominent feature of real and fictional topographies, from the barbed wire loops of no man's land and concentration camps, the physical and ideological barrier splitting Cold-War Berlin and the monumental reminder of Trump's xenophobic agenda to the "instant death" (Huxley 87) jolts delivered by the high-tension wire fences surrounding the Savage Reservation and the unregulated land of the Wilds: "I imagine I can feel it, can sense the electricity buzzing through the air […] a current so strong the air seems to hum with it; you can get a shock just from standing four feet away." (Oliver 96) Such barriers can moreover simultaneously perpetuate distance and bridge gaps; for instance, the "plain but handsome" red brick wall with sentried gates that no one goes through willingly, enhanced with "ugly new floodlights mounted on metal posts above it, and barbed wire along the bottom and broken glass set in concrete along the top" (Atwood, *Handmaid's Tale* 41) and more often than not adorned with corpses, constitutes a visual reminder of the impossibility of escape and the dangers of transgression as well as a palimpsest of Harvard's Puritan and liberal layers of history. In turn, the less material but no less hazardous border featured in *The Testaments* creates an almost palpable bridge between reality and fiction, with the Americans walking through drone patrolled woods, away from their country's hopeless approach to Covid-19

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(Sawyer), unwittingly re-enacting either June's failed escape attempt or her daughter's miraculous return journey from Gilead to Canada.

Ostensibly meant to fulfil the same function as the barrier that Rand's protagonist hopefully managed to erect without electrocuting himself in the process, the Green Wall built in the aftermath of the Two Hundred Years' War defends "the Platonic heaven of One State" (Moore 2020) by ensuring that the wilderness without cannot encroach upon the hermetic paradise within. Not only is it the first element of the One State readers become aware of (before the narrator's own identity has been revealed) but it inspires some of D-503's most rapturous declarations:

> Oh, great, divinely bounding wisdom of walls and barriers! They are, perhaps, the greatest of man's inventions. […] Man ceased to be a savage only when we had built the Green Wall, when we had isolated our perfect mechanical world from the irrational, hideous world of trees, birds, animals. (Zamyatin 93)

A fitting literary tribute to "our seven-thousand-year love affair with cities" in the course of which walls have both "imprisoned people and helped set them free," the crystalline barrier surrounding D-503's city amounts to more than a mere guarantor of civilization:

> Like butterflies under a bell jar, he and his fellow Numbers live in an artificial bubble of rationality and mathematical order protected from the chaos of nature by the Green Wall. […] Their beloved wall, the bulwark of D-503's utopia, cuts people off from the world and from reality. Ultimately, the Green Wall does not protect Zamyatin's ideal city from a hostile world, but traps people in a ruthless authoritarian state. (Smith 60)

The same duality emerges from Katniss Everdeen's guarded comments about the "high chain-link fence topped with barbed wire loops" that separates the Meadow from the woods and in fact encloses all of District 12: "In theory, it's supposed to be electrified twenty four hours a day as a deterrent to the predators that live in the woods — packs of wild dogs, lone cougars, bears — that used to threaten our streets." (Collins, *Hunger Games* 5) Raised within the confines of "a chain-link fence with barbed wire strung along the top" that continues farther than she can see, "perpendicular to the horizon" (Roth, *Divergent* 164-165), Tris Prior realizes that this physical barrier pales in comparison with the edifice of lies constructed by the establishment: "This is what Jeanine was willing to enslave minds and murder people for—to keep us all from knowing. To keep us all ignorant and safe and *inside the fence.*" (Roth, *Insurgent* 667)

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Finally, in yet another young adult trilogy featuring an unlikely female rebel, a virtually identical fence triggers Lena Holoway's epiphany of the insidious threads of deceit woven around her entire existence:

> I've been terrified of the border fence since I was a baby. I've never gotten within five feet of the fence. We've been warned not to, had it drilled into us. They told us we would fry; told us it would make our hearts go haywire, kill us instantly. Now I reach out and lace my hand through the chain-link, run my fingers over it. Dead and cold and harmless, the same kind of fence the city uses for playgrounds and schoolyards. In that second it really hits me how deep and complex the lies are, how they run through Portland like sewers, backing up into everything, filling the city with stench: the whole city built and constructed within a perimeter of lies. (Oliver 203)

For all of his adoring gratitude towards the glass barrier containing "the illimitable green ocean" with its "wild wave of roots, flowers, branches, leaves" threatening to overwhelm and potentially corrupt "the finest and most precise of instruments," even D-503 is troubled by the occasional intimation of a different and perhaps preferable kind of existence:

> For a long time we stared into each other's eyes—those mine-wells from the surface world into another, subterranean one. And a question stirred within me: What if he, this yellow-eyed creature, in his disorderly, filthy mound of leaves, in his uncomputed life, is happier than we are? (Zamyatin 93)

Having crossed the wall and experienced the chaotic beauty of the world beyond, D-503 is however unable to overcome the incorporeal but by no means immaterial barriers trapping him inside the One State; his indoctrination (or unwillingness to fully abandon his comfort zone) ultimately proves just as insurmountable as the "impenetrable wall" raised by *soma* between "the actual universe" (Huxley 67) and the mind or the glass wall separating Guy from Mildred.

Conclusions

Atwood's introduction reinforces *We*'s deep ties with the "particular moment in history […] when the utopia promised by Communism was fading into dystopia" (7) before bridging the century-wide gap between two equally troubled turns of the decade and musing on the possibility of its cautionary potential failing once more to trigger a response:

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> *WE* was a warning to its own place and time – one that was not heeded because it was not heard: the 'dilligent and reliable officials' took care of that. The courses were not departed from. Millions and millions died. Is it also a warning to us, in our time? If it is, what sort of warning? Are we listening?" (7)

The increasingly topical questions emerging from Zamyatin's vision of an essentially dehumanizing civilization mainly target the real costs entailed by the pursuit of a comfortable life, an "environment in which we do not have to deal with the dirtiness of nature […] industrialization, air conditioning, cars, the internet, and high-rise condos […] genetic therapy" (Lorenzo 144) and ultimately by every aspect of progress one can think of. Arguably, enough has changed over the last few years to prompt at least some readers to reconsider Zamyatin's suggestion that the price to be paid (our very humanity, that is) might be too high. Given the general disinclination to examine such issues too closely, one can only hope that the well-timed publication of the Cannongate edition might encourage a wider public to (re)visit this fictional universe in a less mediated form and draw their own parallels between D-503's world and the one(s) they inhabit.

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