THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY IN THE DYSTOPIAN LITERATURE

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Abstract: *The dystopian literature can be characterized as a particular background for alienation, revolution, psychological and scientific experiments, totalitarianism, anxiety, and so on. Similar to the utopian literature, the dystopian fiction can be characterized by fact that its main purpose is to express the antonymic binarity between the old and the new, between the present and the future, but also to introduce a new opposition between the normal and the abnormal, between the individual and the others. In order to develop these oppositions, dystopian literature uses mainly two literary strategies: de-familiarization and the cognitive estrangement. Focusing on these strategies, the study tries to analyze the effects of the dystopian types of control over the human mind. Because any form of control may generate all the possible forms of conflict and, further on, all the possible forms of violence, the study intends to show that in a dystopian world the human beings are mere subjects of psychological analysis, of controlled games, of obedience and slavery. The individual is asked not to create his personal identity but to adopt the given one, changing entirely the perception of him, of the others and of the world.*

Keywords: *dystopia, de-familiarization, cognitive estrangement.*

Utopia and the Negative Utopia

Far from being a simple fantasy, utopia represents a critical reiteration of most of the dilemmas that a modern society could generate and, at the same time, a prescriptive promise that a solution will be found. Utopia is an individualized description of an imagined society which was organized on the basis that implies a critical approach to the real society (Kumar, 1991: 49). The utopian mentality tends to configure a new universe using a modified reality by abstract speculations. The process of creating new utopian universes is based on the extrapolation of the real into the fictive; thus the utopian world is very similar and also different from the real world that generated it (Trousson, 1975: 13). From the philosophical point of view, utopia is both a place which does not exist (outopia) and a place where everything is governed by the good deeds (eutopia)[1]. When referring to utopia or to the utopian thinking there must be taken into consideration, at least, two critical perspectives. One of these perspectives stands for a theoretical strategy that uses criteria based on reason. Their usage is made in order to sustain the political actions of the utopian political programs. The other perspective represents an amendment to the fallacious structure of the utopia and it criticizes the achievable character of the utopian ideas. From this point of view, utopia may represent a new system of thinking made of fantasies which sooner or later will become ideologies.[2] The latter perspective also refers to the literary domain. Most of the utopias written after 1900 are more or less hangovers from the old versions of the ideal

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[1] The terms represent a combination of the Greek words: *ou* means *no, eu* means *good, well, topos* means *place* and *-ia* is a suffix which is used in expressing the names of the countries or regions.

[2] According to this theory, utopia becomes an unconscious expression of the new system of thinking that anticipates the new reality and which serves as resource for the historical and political achievement of that particular utopian society.

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commonwealth. Unfortunately they bring very little that is really new and were first created by Bellamy or Morris in their times. One of the starting points concerning the literary concept of utopia in general is represented by Aristophanes' description of the ancient castle given in his play *The Birds.* Here the author uses the parody as a literary technique in order to describe the perfect castle imagined by Hippodamus, presenting it as a wonderful place for the birds and calling it "the cuckoo's nest" (Nephelakakkiougas). The replay for the utopian castle was Plato's *Republic* which could be interpreted as a satire to the model itself.[1] Both, Plato as well as Aristophanes kept a permanent distance between the model and its parody or satire in order to make the irony possible and thus showing the critical value of the model. An elaborate counterpoint was *Utopia* created by Thomas More. The book was written in a style that resembles the ancient Dialogues. It is entirely a philosophical and abstract discourse which seems to be idealized. The main themes that it brings into discussion are the abolition of private property with the argument that pride is the great source of many crimes, and the perfection of such a utopian society. But the perfection of such a society is expressed only in its uniformity. Later, the scientific utopias replaced the philosophical ones. It is the case of Campanella's and Bacon's writings which became the central points during the Enlightenment period. Because of their liberal manner, they also inspired other literary utopias such as Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, written in 1726. After an interruption during the 19th century, the utopian form went back to its old pattern: challenge and answer. The best example was the socialist utopia as it was described by Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backwards* from 1888 which was criticized by William Morris' alternative vision from *News from Nowhere* from 1890. H. G. Wells' *A Modern Utopia* from 1905 takes a step further into the analysis of the utopian society which, according to him, was not brought in by a sudden revolution but by a gradual increase of light, of new ideas. In both his writings, *A Modern Utopia* and *Men like Gods*, he broke with the utopian tradition by refusing to describe a perfect society. For him, in a modern utopia there must be no perfection but frictions, conflicts and waste. Wells' utopia is represented by a state of affairs at once possible and more desirable than the real world but, at the same time, it is distinctly impracticable by every scale that reaches only between and tomorrow.[2] With his writings, Wells returned to the old utopian society proposed by Plato, More and Bacon. To the classical utopias, freedom seems very trivial while any virtue or happiness is considered different from liberty. In the modern society the free will represents the subjective triumph of existence as the survival in the utopian world becomes the objective triumph. Wells deprecated the suppression of individualities to a common pattern as he stated in *A Modern Utopia*:

> We were free to have our untrammeled desire I suppose we should follow Morris to his Nowhere, we should change the nature of man and the nature of things together; we should make the whole race wise, tolerant, noble, perfect – wave our hands to a splendid anarchy, every man doing as it pleases him, and none pleased to do evil, in a world as good as its essential nature, as ripe and sunny as the world before the Fall. (Wells, 2009: 43)

[1] In this case, the model was satirized deliberately but it was not rejected. Its inner structure was kept as its formal aspects became variable.

[2] The utopian state described by Wells is powerful enough to keep isolated under modern conditions but also powerful enough to rule the world. It is more like a world-state to which the inhabitants are transported by an effort of imagination.

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In the history of utopia, Wells represented a model as well as a reference inspiring several other utopias but, this time, the model of utopia is questioning the essence of the model itself, de-structuring it, negating it, and transforming it into its opposite. This is the moment when utopia became anti-utopia as the critical and/or satirical version of the utopia. Being the opposed version of the utopia, "en prenant le contre-pied", anti-utopia does not propose new formulas or a new anti-voyage whose negative consequences discredit and compromise utopia itself (Baczko, 1971: 48). Most of the times, anti-utopia presents a radical critical analysis of utopia. That aspect turns anti-utopia into a negative version of any utopian model. Paradoxically, anti-utopia becomes the negation of utopia in the very domain in which it opens towards itself.[1] Being put into practice, utopia compromised itself by proposing a new type of society and a new type of man. Inside anti-utopia, the process of idealistic and philosophical changing continues. A new form of anti-utopia came into being and it is dystopia which tends to transform any determinant that was related to the ideal of the utopian vision into its counterpoint and thus, the model itself is destroyed. Dystopia is a warning. Destroying its own model, dystopia becomes another form of negation. As the hope in a better future is growing, inevitably the fear of disappointment is growing too showing that any vision of the future utopias must contain the negation of the same vision. The consequences of any utopia are not utopian as well but horrible or dystopian (Stableford, 1993: 360). Dystopia was meant a separation from the applied utopia and not from utopia itself. Anyway, dystopia owes utopia at least the form and the content. Dystopia was intended to be released not as a negation of utopia but as an attempt to suppress the tendency of changing the virtual domain with the possible one. The dystopian vision does not intend to become a model itself neither does it need to become a virtual model, remaining only a warning.

Considered as a literary gender, utopia may have a totalitarian aspect in its structure. Most of the techniques that are used have the insight purpose of describing a perfect society which does not approve the existence of change or revolt. From this point there is only a little step towards an imminent dictatorship or even tyranny if it is approached too seriously. That is why the main characteristic of the literary utopia may be considered the satire, the negative analysis of the modern real society which has the aim of proposing a new world-state. In doing so, the utopian society is opposed to the real one, because "the utopian republic is par excellence static and it does not allow its citizens to fight or to dream of a better utopia" (Berneri, 1950: 7). Thus, the satirical utopia ends in distorting its own model which, later, is definitely negated by dystopia. Paradoxically the classical utopia develops its model using positive categories and determiners but the same model stands for a bizarre perfection which intrinsically includes the treads of self-destruction. Apparently, the negative utopia does not build but demolish a virtual perfect world-state. Going even further, the utopian world could be interpreted as the expression of faith sustained by the mystic beliefs. Most of the utopias have their resources in mythology, as well as most of the utopian social projects represent nothing but revised editions of the ancient texts (Koestler, 1965: 13). Mythological or not, utopia proves that the best type of society is the inferno. The solution that the same utopia proposes is unfortunately dystopia which intervenes as a warning in case of achieving the utopian reality. Dystopia does not represent an alter-ego of utopia. The two genders are entirely different. On one hand, utopia projects a

[1] The great danger for utopia was represented by its fulfilment as it was noticed by Berdiaev. Unfortunately, utopia became its own abomination and that made dystopia possible.

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model of a perfect society and, on the other hand, dystopia introduces a model of a perverted society. According to Arrigo Colombo, the destructive impulses of a society mostly belong to the concept of power understood as a type of control over the individual and function as a means of total degradation (Colombo, 1990: 12).

Dystopia and the Dystopian Literature

Considering Trousson's point of view, a particular feature of the 20th century utopian literature is to multiply the negative perspectives of utopia and also most of the anti-utopias. Even if anti-utopia started as a means of continuation of the utopian tradition, its intentions are totally different, developing itself as a place of despair and abjection (Trousson, *op. cit*.: 245). Generally speaking, literature may also function as a *social criticism* for the utopian alternatives, trying to find better solutions, but the disclosure of the contradictions between the premises and the finalities that may appear in the utopian projects belong to dystopia. By definition, the dystopian literature is not a separate literary gender but a particular form of expression very similar to the utopian literature. Being more a specific kind of critical energy in spirit, the dystopian literature is placed in direct opposition to the utopian thought, warning against the potential negative consequences of the arrant utopianism (Booker, 1994: 3). Most of the dystopian literary themes represent an opposition to the utopian perfect society described in the utopian literary works. The individual is not put in a perfect relationship with society but rejected and/or isolated.

One of the most important themes of the dystopian literature is the lack of privacy. It is considered that the personal facts are not private to anyone. All the individual facts must be private only between the citizen and the governmental organization to which he entrusts and are available for statistical uses but not as individual personal facts. Another theme is represented by the lack of free movement. An individual is not free to go without permission or explanation to any part of the country or region. Dystopian literature uses new literary themes such as the un/limited knowledge or the impossibility of lying. All the knowledge in the dystopian world is recorded and available as a series of indices; there is nothing that an individual knows that is not reported and included in the universal knowledge. Nothing is personal, not even a thought. The worst crime in the dystopian world is lying. The inexact statement of facts or the suppression of any piece of information is considered a crime. No one is free to discuss or criticize anything in the whole dystopian world because any free discussion may be considered an act of subversive aggression. Most of the literary dystopian works present the individual versus the state or versus the machine. In opposition to the utopian world, where the interests of the citizens coincide with those of the state and a conflict between the two is unthinkable, the dystopian one is in permanent conflict with the individuals. In the dystopian universe, the individual may be one of the "cafoni" described by Ignazio Silone or one of the starving peasants presented by Carlo Levi, or a poet committing suicide rather than becoming a clog in the propaganda, or one of Kafka's characters fighting against authority. As Zamyantin described in his dystopian novel entitled *We*, which was written in 1921, in the new state no member of the society is one, but one amongst, one of the others. In such a dystopian state, called the Unique State, the individual life is regulated with a

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mathematical precision.[1] The same state is ruled by the Benefactor and his Guardians who are considered as angels because they know every moment all the thoughts of each individual, fulfilling two roles at the same time: that of the confessor and that of the police spy. In the Unique State there is no such a thing as private life of the individual. All of the dystopian literary themes are to be found is Zamyantin's novel. For example, the lack of free movement is sustained by the Green Wall which was built around each city allowing no one to leave the city. Longing for the past, when the Unique State did not exist, the citizens of the dystopian society started to manifest a desire for such a lost world. When the desire became an attempt to revolt, the State applied a long overdue reform: the compulsory destruction of man's imagination.[2] The violence from Zamyantin's novel is not to be found in Huxley's *Brave New World* from 1932, but here the stability of the state is obtained by even more dramatic means, such as the introducing the new Pavlov's conditioning of reflexes in infants and the use of the drug, soma, which cures all discontent, ill-humor, resentment or bitterness. The result stands in all the corrective methods that could be much milder than in the Unique State because here there are no instruments of torture or executioners but the offenders against the State are dispatched to a far-away island where life is suppressed continuously. Both Zamyantin and Huxley proved that the idea that suffering and frustration are necessary to creation lies at the bottom of any dystopian world (Berneri, *op. cit.*: 317). In their dystopian novels, instead of demanding the right to free discussion and movement, to free will and happiness, they asked for the right to suffer.[3] Considering these two dystopian novels as the best illustrating examples, there could be said that most of the authoritarian utopias of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century are responsible for the anti-utopian attitude generating the dystopia and its literary representations.[4]

De-familiarization and Cognitive Estrangement as Dystopian Literary Strategies

The main literary strategy concerning the dystopian literature is de-familiarization.

Focusing on the imagined models, the dystopian fiction may offer a new perspective over the social and political problems that a dystopian society has to face. De-familiarization, as a literary strategy of exploring new alternative perspectives, was first introduced by the Russian Formalists. They considered it as the essential constitutive of the difference between the literary and non-literary discourse. Going further, de-familiarization could also stand for alienation as a particular concept of the present world.[5] Together with the other concepts such as power, revolution, totalitarian

[1] In the Unique State everything is reduced to mathematical equations, men and women all wear a gold plate bearing their number.
[2] It was an operation on brain which eradicates any longing for freedom, any unsatisfied desire.
[3] The satire that Zamyantin and Huxley proposed is based on compulsory happiness which was decreed by the totalitarian states described in their dystopian novels and it also represents their criticism of the utopian World-State introduced by H.G. Wells.
[4] Utopias have not always described totalitarian societies or centralised states. Morris' *Nowhere* or Diderot's *Tahiti* are pure utopias that present the individual free from both physical and moral compulsion, engaged in love and work, in search of the artistic state.
[5] This meaning of the term de-familiarization was referred to with the Russian word *ostranenie*.

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practice, science, reification, hybridization, de-familiarization is one of the topic anguishes that projected the dystopian masterpieces of the 20th century. First, the term de-familiarization was coined by Viktor Shklovsky in his essay *Art as Technique* from 1917. By using it, the author meant to distinguish between the practical and poetic language. Because of its perceptibility, the poetic language is considered to be a "framed speech" as opposed to the language of prose which is the ordinary speech, more economical and easy to be understood (Shklovsky, 1998: 20). The difference between the two types of languages was made in order to prevent the process of "over-automatization" which could determine an individual to use the language like the robots (Shklovsky, 1998: 16).[1] For the Russian Formalism, de-familiarization represented the dominant artistic technique and also a form of alienation but the concept was developed by other writers who invested it with new values. One of them was Bertolt Brecht who introduced the concept of Verfremdungseffekt.[2] Brecht used the term in relation with the epic theatre in which case it stands for a technique of taking the social events to be labeled as something strange, impossible to be explained and not as something natural. This technique marks a disturbance of the daily routine and raises the everyday things above the level of the obvious and natural reality. According to Brecht's point of view, de-familiarization, in his acceptance, may be used to turn into unfamiliar the entire act of staging. Having this purpose, the plays are set in unfamiliar surroundings, all the gestures are exaggerated, the action is interrupted with songs, the placards announce the content of the scenes and the actors only exhibit the outer sings of the characters (Brecht, 1964: 94). This technique aims to denaturalize the perception of the artistic and aesthetic act of performing on stage and also to violate the audience's expectations.

A new approach to the concept of de-familiarization was given by an avant-garde group called the Situationist International Group.[3] Unlike Shklovsky or Brecht, the members of the avant-garde group invented a completely new form of de-familiarization called détournement or diversion. Their theory tends to repudiate the manner of thinking in images because they considered that the image is one of the most dangerous instruments of cultural domination. More than that, their theory specifies that the individual belonging to any form of social organization has moved from *being* to *having* and then to *appearing*. In other words, they considered that the modern conditions have pushed alienation beyond the familiar reality into a world reduced to images and representations.

> In the situations where the real world changes into simple images, the simple images become real beings and effective motivations of hypnotic behaviour. The spectacle, as a tendency to make one see the world by means of various specialized mediations, naturally finds vision to be the privileged human sense. But the spectacle is not identifiable with mere gazing tendency.

[1] The concept of de-familiarization may be compared to the concept of *différance* introduced by Jacques Derrida. For the French philosopher the term has a dual meaning: to differ and to defer. His intention was to draw attention to the use of the common language in a way that it would not alter the individual perception of an object, idea, notion etc. that was supposed to be easily understood.

[2] The term Verfremdungseffekt could be translated as alienation or estrangement effect.

[3] During the late 1950's the Situationist International Group played an important role in the French student uprisings of the late Sixties, particularly during the events of May 1968, although since then they have drifted into obscurity. The group was made of European artists and theorists.

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> It is the opposite of dialogue. Wherever there is an independent representation, the spectacle reconstitutes itself. (Debord, 1983: 18)

Thus, in the "spectacle" all the objects become images, any expression is diluted into mere information and the people are turned into spectators. In this case life itself becomes lifestyle. In order to fight against the process of turning everything into images, Debord proposed the creation of new types of situations that disrupt the spectacle. All the images must be de-contextualized, *de-tourned* and then re-contextualized into both new and old contexts. All the three forms of de-familiarization, being the Russian ostranenie, the Brecht's Verfremdungseffekt or the French détournement, seek to make the familiar unfamiliar even if their formulations are different. They all present the process of alienation which Huxley called *the index of our anxiety*. Considering de-familiarization as a form of alienation, it could also be identified as one of the main literary strategy of the dystopian literature. As it was mentioned before and according to Dragan Klaić, "dystopia is a gloomy paraphrase of utopia and the last refuge of utopian hope degenerating into the threat of the science, the decadence and the catastrophe" (Klaić, 1991: 143). The dystopian literature illustrates all the dystopian features emphasizing mostly the dichotomy between old and new, past and present. This time, the dystopian literature intends to develop the dichotomy between normal and abnormal using de-familiarization as a form of installing the state of alienation. The new type of society represents a brutal form of social and political domination and/or exploitation, called *novum* by Darko Survin. A *novum* is a totalizing phenomenon or relationship deviating from the author's and addressee's norm of reality (Survin, 1988: 76). Thus the normal reality became an abnormal reality.

In a dystopian world the protagonist attempts to escape or to defeat the oppressors. In most of the dystopian novels, such as *We* by Zamyantin, *Brave New World* by Huxley or even *1984* by George Orwell from 1949, it was displayed the dystopian form of alienation and the narrative trajectory uses the *novum* to condemn the utopian desires instead of opening new alternatives for any present situation. The most important concept that is aimed to be destroyed is hope because it derived from the utopian imagination. It is both political and personal. In order to fulfill this act of destruction, the dystopian society uses the strategy of cognitive estrangement which is nothing but a form of cognitive alienation. Everything that was once familiar is de-contextualized and later re-contextualized in other contexts. The characters are on stage all the time, having as the spectator the Big-Brother. Each action of the character is labeled as something strange and thus it should be forbidden. The language as a form of expression is simplified and used automatically. There is nothing private anymore but exhibited. All the perceptions are denaturalized. The entire world is reduced to mere images and representations. In such a dystopian reality, the cognitive estrangement becomes a strategy of alienation of the individual. The relationship between one and the others is questioned, having its limit pushed into the radical alienation. The perception of the other is modified and turned into an unfamiliar image, as all the other images. Even more, the self perception suffers the same process of changing. The characters do not relate to the other characters and to themselves as before but they tend to reject everything and everyone on the basis of unfamiliarity. Each individual develops sensorial perceptions and establishes different types of cognitive connections to the world and to the others; but the life in a dystopian world de-familiarizes any type of connection. Being placed in totally unfamiliar surroundings, the individual tries to adapt to the new society but he never manages. The dystopian world reflects itself into the individual mind de-tourned. This is the point when the self de-familiarization and self

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estrangement begins. The individual does not recognize the image of the self, having no connection with the concept as such, and thus he is forced to reject himself. The linguistic representation is also destroyed because the individual does not perceive the concept of "I" as form of recognition. The lost self is now unfamiliar, only an image not to be assumed. The dystopian individual treats himself as an unfamiliar object starting a new type of relationship based on hate.

In a dystopian universe, the identity becomes a concept that no longer finds its subjects. The connection between the individual and his own representation as it is supposed to be revealed in his mind is lost. The pronouns as linguistic representations do not relate to the person, but to the unfamiliar images impossible to be recognized. From this moment on, every individual becomes subject of the Big-Brother cognitive effect. In the process of critical reflection of the dystopian world, the individual is the ultimately achievement of the cognitive estrangement strategy. Big-Brother represents a form of control of the human mind generating insight conflicts and, further on, possible forms of violence. In a dystopian society the human beings become mere subjects of psychological analysis, of controlled games, of obedience and slavery. The individual is forced not to create his personal identity but to adopt the given one, based on unfamiliar images and thus changing entirely the perception of the self. As literary strategy, cognitive estrangement is used to replace the personal pronouns for the first person with the personal pronouns for the third persons, the reflexive and possessive pronouns for the first persons with those for the third persons. Like an indirect speech, the individual speaks about himself as if he speaks about someone else, someone strange and unfamiliar. The determiners of closeness are changed too and turned into determiners of distance showing a radical alienation of the human mind. As a form of resistance, the individual first places himself somewhere outside the world that he once considered to be normal, waiting to be reaccepted, reintegrated and reintroduced, but soon he finds out that there is no normal world at all, that a new dystopian and unfamiliar world was developed and that he has no place neither here nor there. More than that, the human being is reduced to the basic de-familiarized instincts, to something less than an animal, a form of living with no history, with no past, with no representation, with no identity, with no possibility to relate to the others, to the self or to the world.

The Contemporary Dystopian Literature as a Legacy of the De-familiarization and Cognitive Estrangement Strategies

Most of the dystopian novels use the narrative techniques of the modern literature but they also develop their own literary strategies in order to achieve a better presentation of the ideas, the themes, of the whole new world which is proposed as an alternative to the utopian one. Such literary strategies are de-familiarization and cognitive estrangement. Both strategies have the purpose of making the familiar unfamiliar, of turning everything into something strange and thus putting the individual's perception into question and forcing the mind to rethink its situation in the new dystopian world. The new state of mind and the new type of perception have become a political factor for the dystopian society. Each dystopian government intends to control the individuals in all the possible forms. The strategies of de-familiarization and cognitive estrangement have been installed in a dystopian world as the active principle of producing the speculative future which, in fact, becomes as unfamiliar as all the other subjects/objects in this type of world. The dystopian future represents just

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another form of "estranging" the individual, of placing him somewhere outside Foucault's *hetero-topia* (Jameson, 2005: vii).

The contemporary dystopian literature plunges the two strategies into a gloomier and darker atmosphere. In *Hunger Games* the strategy of Big-Brother control becomes the instrument of domination against which the two protagonists, Katnis and Peeta, fought against in the annual games. Media and retail are other similar instruments in a dystopian New York where the main mission of the totalitarian government is to encourage and promote consumerism. In such a world, Lenny Abramov and Eunice Park, the protagonists of *The Super Sad True Love Story*, started a partnership hoping that it would keep them safe. The bar codes are now designed to contain the human genetic code along with other personal information and are used as instruments of control. Being tattooed on the skin, the bar code serves as an identity card providing all the information about the individuals as it happened in *The Bar Code Tattoo*. Even beauty becomes an instrument of uniformity being used in *The Uglies* to eliminate any personal will. All the citizens are turned pretty by extreme cosmetic surgery changing not only their look, but also their identity. The individual memory is deleted electronically and the subjects are used as pawns in electronic games as it occurred in *The Maze Runner*. The literary mission of the two strategies does not end here but sets up new types of narratives belonging to the dystopian literature. It is the case of *pulp fiction*, where the familiar and melodramatic framework is thrown into an unfamiliar and dystopian universe influencing the protagonists, modifying their psychological structure and identity. It might also be the case of *cyborg literature* where the total technical control turns the individuals into machines with no identity and no perception of the self or of the world.

The conclusion is rendered by the fact that what started as a fantasy, as a description of a perfect world, namely the utopia, turned into a horrifying, unfamiliar, constraining nature that, in the name of individual freedom, forces the same individual to give up his own world and identity. "La nature contraignante", in all the possible forms it exists, generates the dystopian inferno (Trousson, *op. cit.*: 23).

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