



Universidad del País Vasco
Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea

FACULTY OF ARTS
UNIVERSITY OF THE BASQUE COUNTRY

her

BETWEEN UTOPIA AND DYSTOPIA



Loinaz Castro Alderete

Degree in English Studies

Academic Year 2017/2018

Tutored by Dr. Amaia Ibarraran Bigalondo

Department of English and German
Philology and Translation and Interpretation

Table of contents

Abstract	
Introduction	1
1. The concept of dystopia.....	1
1.1. Defining the terms	2
1.2. Utopian and dystopian literature	3
2. Dystopian movies and TV shows	4
2.1. Are dystopian films a subgenre of science fiction?.....	5
2.2. Dark visions of technology	6
2.3. A new trend in dystopian film	8
3. <i>Her</i> (2013) by Spike Jonze	9
3.1. Traits of dystopian fiction	9
3.2. Utopian and dystopian elements in the film	10
3.2.1. The story: a social dystopia.....	10
3.2.2. Formal characteristics.....	16
3.2.3. Space: the city of Los Angeles	19
4. Conclusion	20
Works cited.....	22

Abstract

Dystopian fiction is a literary and film genre that explores contemporary social and political issues and is, therefore, inspired by the anxieties and worries of the society that produces it. Set in a distant place and time, it is an undoubtedly valuable resource for the field of cultural studies. However, most previous work on dystopian fiction have focused on studying films such as *Blade Runner* (1982) or *The Matrix* (1999) that depict bleak, urban and highly technologized futures and fall within the scope of the cyberpunk subgenre, while little research has been devoted to recent popular dystopias such as *Ex Machina* (2014) or *Black Mirror* (2011-) that are set in aesthetically pleasing and almost utopian places. Drawing from the tradition of dystopian fiction and the evolution of the genre in both literature and film, the present study analyses Spike Jonze's film *Her* (2013) in an attempt to identify the dystopian and utopian elements in it and reveal a new turn in the visions of the future of dystopian fiction. The paper concludes by discussing the results of the analysis, which suggest that the film offers a mild social criticism and mingles both utopian and dystopian elements, findings that determine that *Her* (2013) is a film that belongs to the genre of speculative fiction.

Keywords: dystopian fiction, utopia, cyberpunk, cultural studies, film, speculative fiction.

INTRODUCTION

Across centuries, human beings have wondered and written about what the future would hold, and contemporary literature and film are no exception. The visions of times still to come have been traditionally classified either as utopian or dystopian, two concepts that draw a distinction between imaginary idealised societies and fictitious undesirable realities. In the twentieth century, prompted by the devastating consequences of two wars, the ascension of totalitarian states and the development of science and technology, Western literature encountered a rise of dystopian fiction. With the increasing popularity of the cinema as a means of entertainment, well-known dystopian fictions were adapted for the big screen, a film genre that seemed to reach its peak in the 1980s with the development of the cyberpunk trend. Yet, recent dystopian films and TV shows have subverted the traditional conception of the genre by presenting dystopian societies disguised in utopian auras.

The tradition of dystopian fiction –both in literature and film– has been studied extensively over the last thirty years. Although many recent studies have been published on the increasing popularity of the dystopian film genre, less attention has been paid to study the dystopian future depicted in recent TV shows and films such as *Black Mirror* (2011-) *Her* (2013) or *Ex Machina* (2014), which present seemingly idyllic societies that the spectator regards as undesirable. Precisely, the aim of this paper is to analyse Spike Jonze’s 2013 film *Her* as an illustrative example of the latter dystopian films, to reveal that it mingles both utopian and dystopian elements. Thus, this paper has a dual focus: on the one hand, I will begin by exploring the genre of dystopian fiction, its definition and the role it plays in both English and North-American literature. Secondly, I look at a number of dystopian films and TV shows and attempt to discover an evolution in their vision of the future and the dystopian conflict depicted in them. Together, these sections provide a knowledge that will serve as a base to analyse Spike Jonze’s film both in terms of utopia and dystopia.

1. The concept of dystopia

In order to address the utopian and dystopian elements in Spike Jonze’s *Her* (2013), it is essential to explore the origin of these terms and the role that this type of fiction has historically played in English and North American literature. According to the *Online*

Etymology Dictionary, the word *dystopia* results from a combination of the Greek prefix *dys-* ‘bad’ ‘abnormal’ and *outopos* ‘not place’ and is attributed to the nineteenth century English philosopher John Stuart Mill¹. Traditionally regarded as the antonym of *utopia*, it refers to an imagined non-desirable “society in which people do not work well with each other and are not happy” (*Cambridge Dictionary*). The semantic relation between *dystopia* and *utopia* contributes to the dualism in the vision of reality and defines the concepts as elements that cannot coexist together; yet both utopian and dystopian literature have historically explored the grey area between these presumably stable oppositions –*Her*, for example, combines both utopian and dystopian elements–.

1.1. Defining the terms

In *Critical Insights: Dystopia*, M. Keith Booker² acknowledges Lyman Tower Sargent’s distinction between the concepts of *utopia*, *eutopia*, *dystopia* and *anti-utopia*, who adopts the term of Greek origin to define “a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space.” Following this definition of *utopia*, Sargent distinguishes three realities: the *eutopia*, a fictitious better society; the *dystopia* or *negative utopia*, an undesirable non-existent society; and the *anti-utopia*, an imagined society regarded as a criticism of utopianism (6).

On the other hand, and although conventionally the literary genre that depicts these fictitious realities has been categorised as a subgenre of science fiction, some authors and scholars prefer the umbrella term *speculative fiction* that encompasses both dystopian and utopian fiction. Margaret Atwood, author of the lately acclaimed novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) among others, subscribes to the use of this term but argues its application as a substitute of the concept *dystopic utopia*. Thus, she proposes it not only as a means of encompassing both utopian and dystopian fiction –often combined in a single literary work–, but as a way of distinguishing it from the idea of science fiction which has

¹ As Derek Thiess notes in the chapter “Critical Reception” of *Critical Insights*, it is likely that the term *dystopia* entered the English language after “John Stuart Mill’s speech before the House of Commons in 1868” (20), although the concept was probably in use prior to 1868.

² M. Keith Booker has contributed to the fields of literary and dystopian studies with numerous works, where he dismisses other critics’ distinction between *utopia* and *eutopia* and uses the term *dystopia* in a wide sense. As he states, dystopia is “a general term encompassing any imaginative view of society that is oriented toward highlighting in a critical way negative or problematic features of that society’s vision of the ideal” (*Critical Insights* 33).

“monsters and spaceships,” while “speculative fiction could really happen” (qtd. in Potts). In this paper, I will use the terms *utopia* and *dystopia* to encompass all these tendencies both in literature and film, although these distinctions will be useful to understand the final result of my analysis of *Her*, as I will later explain.

1.2. Utopian and dystopian literature

The term *utopia* was first used by the Renaissance author Thomas More in his fiction work *De optimo rei publicae statu deque nova insula Utopia* ‘Of a republic's best state and of the new island Utopia,’ published in 1516. Although the idea of a fictional improved society that is fairer and more egalitarian traces back to 380 BC with Plato’s *Res Publica*, it is remarkable that More proposed his utopian Island against the dystopian reality of his contemporary era (Salvador 17). Likewise, from Sir Francis Bacon’s 1617 utopian novel *New Atlantis*, written as a pronouncement of the Enlightenment’s discoveries; and Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726), a satire of the English Renaissance’s social codes, politics and emphasis on rationalism; through Edward Bellamy’s American novel *Looking Backward* (1888), published after a turmoil period marked by the consequences of Industrialisation and the Long Depression, “the different kinds of utopia writings [including dystopia] share the fact that they are products of history and of the times in which they have been created” (Baccolini 38).

Undoubtedly, dystopian literature is deeply rooted in history and could be considered a direct result of the events unfolding in the author’s contemporary society. As Krishan Kumar concurs:

From the earliest days therefore the targets of the dystopia have been some of the most cherished shibboleths, what others have called the “grand narratives”, of modernity: reason and revolution, science and socialism, the idea of progress and the faith in the future. Since most of these elements of modernity only really spread on a significant scale in the latter part of the nineteenth century, it is not surprising that it is mainly in the twentieth century that dystopia truly comes into its own. (19)

In fact, it is at the end of the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century when, once rare, numerous dystopian writings were published, including the acclaimed works of H. G. Wells and the novels that scholars consider the trinity of dystopian fiction:

We (1924), *Brave New World* (1932) and *Nineteenth Eighty-Four* (1949). Following Jack London's *The Iron Heel* (1907) –traditionally acknowledged as the first major dystopian novel–, Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* satirises the utopian thought of a perfect planned and collective society, while Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* reflects the anxieties of the beginning of the twentieth century concerning the unsustainability of a consumer capitalism. By the time George Orwell published his novel *Nineteenth Eighty-Four*, the twentieth century Western world had suffered two wars, a severe economic depression, the Holocaust and was experiencing the consolidation of the URSS and the beginning of the Cold War. This work, thereupon, manifests the increasing concern of totalitarianism of socialist nations like the Soviet Union.

A possible reason for the continued presence of this literary trend throughout history is found in the realm of dystopian criticism, in the works of one of the most prolific philosophers of the nineteenth century, as “for Nietzsche, both science and religion impose simplistic interpretations on an infinitely complex world, confining the individual within a ‘limited sphere’ that shuts out alternative possibilities” (*Dystopian Impulse* 8). Meanwhile, dystopian fiction fights against this confinement and imagines infinite possibilities within a universal and incomprehensible framework often built on, but not necessarily consistent with science. In other words, dystopian fiction creates narratives beyond what has been scientifically argued or discovered, because it is in that grey area where the authors find infinite resources for their imagination.

2. Dystopian movies and TV shows

In view of what has been shown, literature both expresses and defines culture, generating and iterative process with feedback loops. With the development and popularity of cinematography in the twentieth century, it is no wonder that dystopian fiction also became a key genre of film and television industries. Often releasing adaptations of well-known dystopian novels, an analysis of twentieth century films shown in cinemas throughout Europe and the United States would determine a pessimistic turn in Western visions of the future. Moreover, the good reception of the 1982 *Blade Runner* sequel directed by Denis Villeneuve and released in 2017, or the popularity of the TV series *Black Mirror* (2011-) throw light upon the affirmation that dystopias are still on-demand nowadays. In fact, as Lincoln Geraghty concurs, the vogue of a film genre serves as evidence of the ideological and cultural preoccupations of the society producing it and

“helps us to recognise that notwithstanding the specific medium (film or TV) genre works in the same way so as to highlight cycles of production and their particular cultural contexts” (3).

2.1. Are dystopian films a subgenre of science fiction?

The pessimistic turn of our society, the popularity of this kind of fiction and the diversity of opinions regarding the relation between science fiction and dystopia, arouse the misconception or misuse concerning the idea of dystopia itself in the second half of the twentieth century. M. Keith Booker emphasises that:

The mere fact that a novel or film features a grim future does not make the work dystopian. To be dystopian, a work needs to foreground the oppressive society in which it is set, using the setting as an opportunity to comment in a critical way on some other society, typically that of the author or audience. (*Critical Insights* 5)

This definition could be applied both to the perception that all dystopias are science fiction, and the idea that any science fiction film or TV series are dystopian by nature. For example, Ridley Scott’s *The Martian* (2015), which presents a near future where humankind has reached Mars, sets the events in a fictional reality. The film, however, does not highlight any negative aspects of the current society and, in terms of M. Keith Bookers’ definition, it should not be considered dystopian.

Nevertheless, there is still considerable debate concerning the classification of dystopian fiction as a subgenre of science fiction and, although I do not wish to offer my own personal definition of the genre, I believe it is necessary to consider the origin of this tendency in the film industry, which can be traced back to the German expressionist film *Metropolis*. Directed by Fritz Lang, it is a silent work released in 1927 that sets its story in a vast twenty-first century city divided between underground-dwelling workers and a ruling class that lives in skyscrapers built in the surface. It is considered one of the first dystopian films and a pioneer work of the science fiction genre, nourishing the misconception of the dystopian genre since the beginning of the twentieth century.

Likewise, Michael Anderson’s 1956 screenplay adaptation of the novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was also contemplated as a science fiction film, because both genres share many characteristics and repeatedly overlap, and prevail “in a constant state of flux as the

mechanisms through which media are produced, consumed and evaluated are themselves always changing” (Geraghty 1). In fact, from François Truffaut’s *Fahrenheit 451* (1966) to the Wachowski sister’s *The Matrix* (1999) or the TV series *The Twilight Zone* (1959-1964), and *Black Mirror* (2011-) there is not only almost half a century of difference, but also a change in aesthetics and the dystopian conflict depicted in them.

2.2. Dark visions of technology

Developments in science and technology altered the Western vision of the world. Once symbols of human capability, they soon became a representation of our limitations not only as human beings, but also of our knowledge and understanding of the world. Two decades after the Lumière Brothers presented the first projected moving pictures, remnant of the present film industry, an international war unleashed. The Great War (1914-1918) was the most defining event of the twentieth century, which shaped modern society’s anxieties and worries, and proved that technology was not a fictitious dystopian element anymore, but real, evil and deathly. This prompted society’s imagination to perceive technological advancements as grotesque, doomed and damned.

Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818), traditionally considered the first science fiction novel, was brought to the big screen in 1931. Already portraying the fear for an unknown future and the negative outcomes of the scientific endeavour, the film was a great success and several sequels followed. Yet, Mary Shelley’s work was never considered a dystopian fiction, because it portrays technology as an independent concern, as opposed to dystopias in which it “always advances the underlying societal philosophy that the author ... critiques” (Horan 56). Considered the first of its kind, as I have pointed out above, Fritz Lang’s 1927 *Metropolis* is regarded as the pioneer of dystopian film, in which technology acts as a principal theme, depicted as a medium of dominating the working class, impersonating individuals and instilling havoc in the city.

By the end of the Second World War, cinema had become a popular medium of mass entertainment, but the unceasing advancements in science and the post-war economic growth resulted in the inception of a new means of audio-visual communication, the television. In the 1950s, Western life and culture drastically changed and an emerging industry began producing TV series such as Rod Serling’s American show *The Twilight Zone* (1959-1964), considered the predecessor of nowadays’ running

dystopian series *Black Mirror* (2011-). Albeit the growing excitement and fascination with technology, its apprehensive vision and the fact that it was progressively entering our everyday lives ultimately resulted in a conflict already anticipated in *Metropolis*: the idea of transhumanism³ and the potential domination of humanity by its machines. Common themes in dystopian films, this contradictory reality illustrated “the simple fact that what one person considers an ideal dream might to another person seem a nightmare” (*Dystopian Impulse* 3), and that the human-machine relationship and likely enhancement of our intellect and physiology through technology was dreaded.

However, the evolution of the dystopian conflict was not the only change that the increasing participation of technology in our everyday life brought to the genre. From the 1980s onwards, film technology and cinematic techniques progressively developed, and the use of computer-generated images (CGI) enabled the creation or adaptation of imaginary realities that were constrained to available resources such as film props or puppetry –including animatronics–. A new trend of dystopian film emerged, known as *cyberpunk* and characterised by futuristic, hostile and dark urban settings and the presence of mistrustful advanced technology (see fig. 1). This predominant turn in film concerning the aesthetics of the future began, as W. A. Senior argues, with Ridley Scott’s 1982 dystopia *Blade Runner* (1). Based on Philip K. Dick’s novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*⁴, both the change in conflict and aesthetics can be perceived in it: set in Los Angeles in the year 2019, “all is smoky, blurred, shadowy so that the street scenes depict crowds with scarcely any individual characteristics” and “characters move beneath huge neon signs” (Senior 3); while the plot focuses on the issue of the existence of *replicants*, human-created robots recognised by the lack of emotional response, that have evolved and reached a similar intelligence level to their creators. This cyberpunk aesthetic trend that depicts future societies living in overcrowded urban spaces synonymous of technology, darkness and despair, was followed by other influential films such as the

³ As explained by Jasanoff, transhumanism is a global movement which seeks to blur “the boundaries between technology and the human ... blood, bones, and nerves mixing with steel, wire, and circuitry” (73).

⁴ I believe it is important to note that when a novel is adapted into a film, the dystopian reality depicted in it is simplified and portrayed in a very specific way, following an aesthetic pattern, and consequently constraining the multiple possibilities of the receiver’s imagination. If the film adaptation becomes successful, many others will follow its established set of imagery, mimicking the reality depicted in it and, ultimately, developing a new trend in dystopian film –such as the cyberpunk trend–.

Wachowski sisters' *The Matrix* (1999) and persists today in, for example, Netflix's recent TV series *Altered Carbon* (2017).

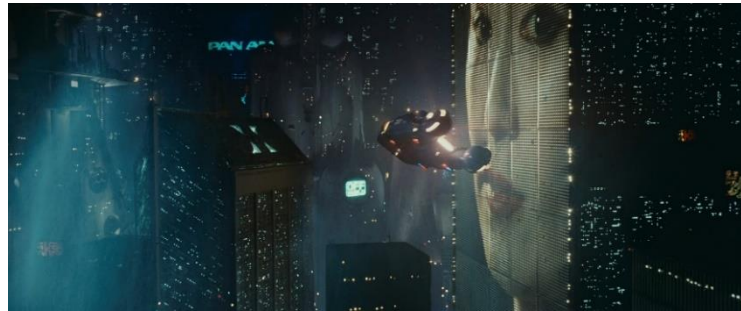


Fig. 1. The cyberpunk aesthetic is noticeable in this frame. *Blade Runner* (1982)

2.3. A new trend in dystopian film

At the turn of the century, dystopian films were still on-demand and the technological pessimism in the visions of the future suggested a growing scepticism or disenchantment towards new scientific developments. Recurrent dystopian themes such as the development of artificial intelligence, its role in society and its limits were addressed in many twenty-first century films. Sturken and Thomas note that “the meanings that are attributed to new technologies are some of the most important evidence we can find of the visions, both optimistic and anxious, through which modern societies cohere” (1). Therefore, the good reception of dystopian films would suggest a persisting social discomfort towards technology which, for Jasanoff, may be understood on the basis that, ultimately, they are human-made creations and, as such, manifest our own flaws and limitations (74).

Meanwhile, M. Keith Booker offers an alternative interpretation of the increasing popularity of the dystopian fiction genre and argues “the possibility that dystopian visions are increasingly becoming mere spectacles of misery that, if anything, simply encourage audiences to feel better about the present, therefore losing the critical power that was key to the genre” (*Critical Insights* 11). In addition, it seems that in recent years a new trend has emerged concerning near-future visions which, albeit its continuity with the dystopian conflict of previous decades, sets its stories in aesthetically appealing urban spaces. Twenty-first century films such as *Her* (2013), *The Lobster* (2015) or *Ex Machina* (2014) and TV series like *Westworld* (2016-) and *Black Mirror* (2011-) –specifically the episodes “Nosedive” and “Arkangel”– have no trace of the shadowed and overcrowded

urban spaces in *Blade Runner* (1982) and offer, instead, a portrayal of a literal brighter future (see Fig. 2-3).



Fig. 2. Use of pastel tones. “Nosedive”, *Black Mirror* (2016)

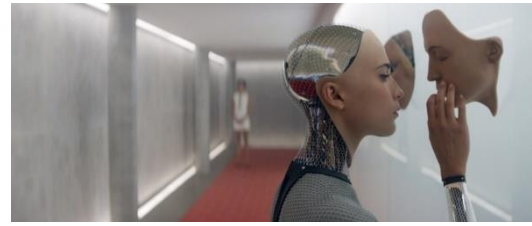


Fig. 3. Predominance of white and clear colours. *Ex Machina* (2014)

On the basis of M. Keith Booker’s statement and the increasing demand of this kind of dystopias, I believe that there is an emerging new trend in dystopian films whose primary purpose is entertaining the audience and, consequently, are set in aesthetically pleasing and almost utopian places. However, and although reduced, the social criticism aspect is not lost, but focused on an appraisal of today’s application and dependency on technology. The use of pastel and clear colours, the clean and bright urban spaces or the portrayal of highly advanced technology non-existent nowadays are common features shared by the films mentioned above.

3. *Her* (2013) by Spike Jonze

In the following lines, I will offer a close analysis of the meaning and form of Spike Jonze’s *Her* (2013) to illuminate the uncharted area of the previously mentioned new trend in dystopian film, and to examine how the current Western culture and society are mirrored in it.

3.1. Traits of dystopian fiction

Before discussing the film itself, I consider necessary to offer a brief summary of the features that distinguish dystopian fiction from other genres, which I have presented throughout the previous sections. In short, a dystopian work –either a novel or a film– has to be rooted in history and be inspired by the social, economic or political issues in vogue at the time and place in which it is produced. On the other hand, in order to provide a critical view concerning these matters, there is a suspension of time and space, a technique that is known as *defamiliarization*. As M. Keith Booker observes, “by focusing their critiques of society on spatially or temporally distant settings, dystopian fictions provide

fresh perspectives on problematic social and political practices that might otherwise be taken for granted or considered natural and inevitable” (*Dystopian Impulse* 19). Therefore, and in stark contrast with the perception of film as a form of escapism, dystopias require a level of engagement and a process of critical reflection.

As discussed above, authors have traditionally located their dystopian stories in futuristic settings, serving as cautionary tales about the future, revealing the consequences of the continuity of our present customs, or its possible negative outcomes. By contrast, M. Keith Booker addresses the fact that recent dystopias offer “more positive conclusions, raising the question of their effectiveness as cautionary tales, as does the fact that they often focus more on plot and character than on exploring the characteristics of their dystopian societies” (*Critical Insights* 14). Nonetheless, albeit the lack of a fatal outcome, the presence of high technology advancements –a trait that is shared with the science fiction genre– is a permanent feature of most modern dystopias.

3.2. Dystopian and utopian elements in the film

In 2013, Spike Jonze’s fourth feature film premiered at the New York Film Festival. After the success of *Where the Wild Things Are* (2009), an adaptation of Maurice Sendak’s eponymous children book, *Her* was his first original screenplay. Starring Joaquin Phoenix, Scarlett Johansson, Amy Adams, Rooney Mara and Chris Pratt, it was highly praised by film critics and was awarded with the Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay. Considered a romantic drama film, in this section I attempt to analyse *Her* as an illustrative example of a dystopia in disguise.

3.2.1. The story: A social dystopia

The promotional poster of *Her* (see Fig. 4) indicates that the film is, ultimately, a love story. Based on this premise, it studies the relationship between Theodore, a lonely and despondent man, and an artificial intelligence, Samantha. Set in a futuristic and idyllic Los Angeles, I believe that the film focuses on a mild social criticism, offering dystopian elements as well as looking at utopian near futures. Indeed, although there is a suspension of real time and space –as it happens in all dystopias–, the imminent future depicted in *Her* is closely related to our contemporary socio-historical context.

By narrating the development of a love relationship between Samantha and Theodore, Spike Jonze reflects one of the main anxieties of our era concerning the limitations and applications of technology, and imagines “the possible outcomes of our present society” (Baccolini 38). Moreover, the seemingly utopian reality depicted in the film offers a critical interpretation of life in contemporary Western countries, for we live under fairly satisfactory and privileged conditions, do not starve to death and have access to public healthcare and education. Yet, it is a mirage, an illusion built on a reality that is infinitely bleaker and suffers from major issues such as exploitation, poverty, corruption or even a climate change. We live, indeed, in a dystopia in disguise. From this standpoint, I believe that it is well justified to assert that *Her* is certainly inspired by our present preoccupations and anxieties and is, therefore, deeply rooted in its contemporary Western society and history.



Fig. 4. Promotional poster of *Her* (2013).

Contrary to canonical dystopian cyberpunk fictions, the film mingles both past and future by intertwining a futuristic setting with traditional or contemporary elements. Action is set in spaces that the spectator recognises such as an over-crowded beach, an amusement park or an elevated train that makes use of the already-existing Los Angeles underground network. The presence of nature –the Pacific Ocean, the forest, or an evening date in the park– also rejects the extreme futuristic realities of *Blade Runner* (1982) or *The Matrix* (1999), and distinguishes Spike Jonze’s film as an example of the new trend in dystopian vision. Therefore, the film depicts a near future that shows minor differences from our present, building a familiar environment and attaining verisimilitude. As proposed by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the infuse of “human interest and a semblance of truth” (174) suspends the spectators’ disbelief and, as I will argue throughout this section, allows the focus of our attention to be on the social dimension of

Jonze’s fictitious reality, which offers a critique of nowadays’ social practices and our relationship with technology.

The opening scene of the film introduces the viewer to Theodore’s job, which consists on writing intimate letters for other couples (see Fig. 5). The traditional and romantic, but obsolete, use of correspondence is incorporated into the story as a dystopian element, and presents one of the main issues of the film: in the near-future, individuals will lose the skill of establishing genuine communication with one another. In fact, the main non-artificial character, Theodore, represents a subject fruit of an extreme individuality in society: despondent and sorrowful to the extent that he seems unable to feel joy, he is trapped into a lonely, monotonous routine that lacks excitement. Going through a divorce because he had hidden himself from Catherine –his ex-partner– “and left her alone in the relationship”, at the beginning of the film he is isolated from his friends and family and has not attended any social event for the last couple of months.

This notion seems to contradict Aristotle’s description of humans as naturally social animals that tend to create and live in society (*Politics*, Book 1, 1253a). Yet, the central issue in *Her* is the sacrifice of conventional social relationships, that is, the loss of social interaction and relationships between humans. Thus, I consider that the dystopian conflict in this film is not comprised by the individual versus the state or society; but instead it is constituted by the idea that our relationship with technology will prevent us from maintaining or establishing genuine communication between us. This lack of communication between non-artificial entities is illustrated in a remarkable set of scenes in which Theodore, once completed his working hours, appears first in a crowded elevator and later on a packed underground carriage, where all the individuals –including him– are engaged with their devices and ignore the people surrounding them (see Fig. 6).

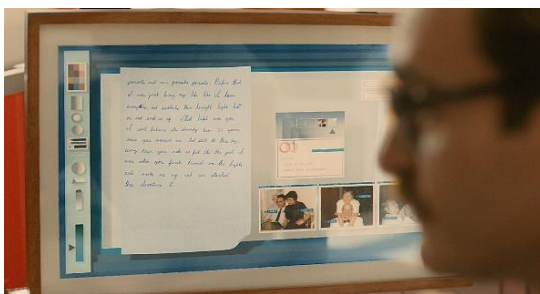


Fig. 5. Theodore writing a letter for a couple. *Her* (2013)



Fig. 6. The lack of social interaction is brilliantly portrayed here. *Her* (2013)

Conversely, *Her* depicts the development of a new model of society that is built on a close connection and dependency towards technology, a fictitious reality that mirrors the current state of contemporary Western world and its values. Throughout the story, technology is not seen as a destructive force, but rather as a fundamental element of a media-dominated society in which individuals have become less social and more lonesome. Jasanoff concurs that what is more striking about our present use of technology is “the thorough entanglement of the technological and the social, the modern and the traditional. ... High-tech living seems, if anything, to have strengthened the human desire for social connection, the need for compassion, and the reaffirmation of memory—while people continue to acquire and enjoy the playthings of modernity” (90-91). The popularity of communication tools such as Skype or WhatsApp and online dating platforms like Tinder, reveal that technology is used as a means of establishing communication with other individuals. In other words, in a world that is gradually becoming more self-centred and forlorn, we counteract the necessity of social interaction by integrating technology that allows us to connect with people—or even with artificial intelligence, as it is portrayed in *Her*—on a large scale.

Nonetheless, it could be argued whether the film ultimately depicts a non-desirable society. Jonze bases the narrative of his fictitious reality on the possibility of what would happen in a few years’ time if life goes on as it is nowadays, and he concludes by creating a society in which social interactions have evolved and human interactions have decreased significantly, while interactions with technology and, specifically, with artificially intelligent operating systems (OS) have expanded to, for example, include sexual intercourses. It is important to note, therefore, what M. Keith Booker recalls as the dual nature or dichotomy of utopian thought, because “what one person considers and ideal dream might to another person seem a nightmare” (*Dystopian Impulse* 3). Similarly, and given that *Her* speculates about future applications of technology, it can be concluded that the film is more in line with the science fiction genre, rather than with dystopian fiction. Yet, in Jonze’s film, as well as in *Blade Runner* (1982) and *The Matrix* (1999), technology plays a central role within its plot, but not an exclusive one—as it is the case in science fiction—. Although partly focused on the increasing presence and growing dependency towards technology that the Western world will experience—and is already experiencing—, I believe that the critical aspect of *Her* is ultimately social, not technological: Jonze does not seem to analyse and judge the use of operating systems or

technology in general, but the future development of our society towards an individualistic and virtually asocial state. From this standpoint, I believe that it is well justified to acknowledge that *Her* is, indeed, a dystopian fiction.

As discussed so far, and moving on to the role of technology in Jonze's imagined reality, technological devices are depicted as integral element of the everyday life of Theodore and other inhabitants of this near future. The internet has moved to every individual's pocket, citizens carry small tablets (see Fig. 7) that allow them to connect to their operating system and access any kind of information from the news to their email inbox, and they willingly purchase "the first artificially intelligent operating system" OS One, which is also described as a "consciousness". Yet, *Her*'s future is not immune to advertisement and people are persuaded to buy these devices. This can be seen prior to the introduction of Samantha into the story, when Theodore sees an advert of the OS One in which artificial intelligence represents salvation from a meaningless and chaotic future (see Fig. 8). Moreover, to initiate the new operating system that will have access and manage his personal information, Theodore is asked a few intimate questions that will create a system software that best features his needs such as "Are you social or antisocial?" or "How would you describe your relationship with your mom?". Nevertheless, Spike Jonze does not seem to criticise nor judge the dominance of technology against humanity, nor nowadays' issues such as mass consumerism, privacy and security; but portrays a plausible reality in which technology has significantly improved our lives, not only in a practical level, but also concerning social and romantic matters –as I will later discuss in detail–. It, thus, depicts a seemingly ideal or utopian society of consumer capitalism in which technology plays a central role.



Fig. 7. The OS One can be carried in a small portable device. *Her* (2013)



Fig. 8. Lonely and chaotic present depicted in the OS One advert. *Her* (2013)

In addition to the depiction of an idealised society, one may infer that *Her* also represents the utopian joint of a fairer world come true. In its improved and post-human

society, no one gets sick and there are no discriminatory nor sexist attitudes, which suggests that Jonze has opted to dismiss society's traditional values by setting the film in an overflowing multicultural city and introducing multi-ethnic couples as, for example, Tatiana and Paul. Jasanoff observes this reality as a common feature of dystopian film concerned with the impact of advanced technology in future societies, and concludes:

Transcending the human condition is partly about physical escape from death and other chafing limits on human abilities, such as forgetfulness, pain, and disability, but transcendence also has a salvatory appeal. We seek not only physical but moral improvement ... Eradication in the context of mid-century posthumanism meant the elimination of ancient, acknowledged evils—hunger, disease, aging, and manifest physical barriers to mobility. (74-78)

However, in the seemingly utopian and post human society depicted in *Her*, new kinds of bigotry arise. The non-normative love relationship that Theodore maintains with Samantha (a human-operating system relationship), although accepted by his friends Amy and Paul, is rejected by Catharine who suggests that Theodore cannot handle “real emotions” and a relationship with a *real* woman. This discriminatory attitude towards divergence does not only suggest the tendency of humans to judge others influenced by our cultural and social background, but once again reflects the current concern and rejection of technological advances (technophobia).

The divergent human-OS relationship central to the story, therefore, introduces a philosophical debate concerning the degree of humanity that artificial intelligence can possess and, ultimately, raises the question of what defines us as humans, a recurrent theme in dystopian fiction already explored in *Blade Runner* (1982). In fact, and as Jasanoff notes, “it is our understanding of what being human means that has changed along with our technological achievements –and with those changes also our imagination of what lies beyond, or after, humanness as we know it” (74). Therefore, Samantha, who is not restricted by a physical body nor is subject to the sluggish development of our intellect, could be understood as a personification of Jonze's imaginary concerning the reality beyond our limits as human beings. For him, the conscience, or “the part of you that judges how moral your own actions are and makes you feel guilty about bad things that you have done or things you feel responsible for” (*Cambridge Dictionary*) is the defining condition of human beings and, therefore, the OS One is described as a

“consciousness”. In the light of this, albeit the narration confines the viewer to what Theodore sees and knows, Samantha is given a voice and we have access to her emotions and thoughts, to the extent that she chooses her own name.

Nevertheless, the first element that suggests the humanity of Samantha –and, thus, of these new operating systems– is found in the title of the film: she is not an “it” or a *thing* anymore. Samantha evolves and changes through her experiences, has a sense of humour and understands poetic diction. She is able to create art from her emotions as, for example, when she composes a song to transmit and capture her feelings while accompanied by Theodore on the beach. However, and although she believes that humans have a “limited perspective”, Samantha is still an artificial entity, and she fears that all her experiences are, in reality, programmed. In fact, it is worth discussing that, in line with previous dystopian films, the artificial intelligence in *Her* might have been designed to satisfy the social and affective needs of its decadent and lonely society.

Similarly, and given that films are a reflection of the society that produces them, the circumstances that lead Theodore to choose a female operating system, or the election of Scarlett Johansson to give voice to Samantha are not merely a matter of chance. By the questions he is being asked prior to initiating his OS One, Theodore lacks a female figure in his life. Thus, by having a female OS, I believe he is simultaneously counteracting that absence and exerting dominance over women. In fact, the new operating system is described as “an intuitive entity that listens to you, understands you, and knows you”, which suggests that its main purpose is to serve its owner. Moreover, Johansson is an internationally acclaimed actress who has a sweet and soft tone and is considered a major sex symbol. Her voice does not only strengthen Samantha’s attractiveness, but also her humanity –as opposed to Siri or Cortana, who have synthesized voices–. Therefore, these elements contribute to the verisimilitude of Spike Jonze’s story, yet also perpetuate the social standards of what is considered beautiful or sensual and, ultimately, in the light of Samantha being created for Theodore, the film preserves existing traditional and patriarchal values.

3.2.2. Formal characteristics

As previously mentioned, the dystopian society depicted in *Her* is characterized by its forlorn state, which constitutes the principal criticism concerning the future of our society and is introduced to the viewer by means of Theodore's character and the way he interacts

with his social environment. Yet, and despite the fact that until this point my analysis has been focused on the story –argument, plot and themes–, the narrative form and the mise-en-scène offer a valuable contribution to the meaning of the film (Bordwell and Thompson 119). Interruptions in the narration of the story, the setting, costume, lighting, performance and staging form and influence the verisimilitude of a film, which bolsters them as necessary elements to achieve the goal of capturing the viewers’ attention and, ultimately, reflect upon what is being told.

In *Her*, at large, the events of the plot are presented in a chronological order. However, through a series of flashbacks that we mentally reorder into a logical sequence to create the story order (Bordwell and Thompson 85), the viewer has access to Theodore’s memories concerning his relationship with Catherine. They serve, in fact, as meaningful portions that suggest the development of his inner emotions and mental states: we see that in the past Theodore was a joyful individual that loved his partner, but we also witness their troublesome separation and how the divorce proceeding deeply affects him in the present. Then, when Samantha asks him “So, what was it like being married?” Theodore acknowledges that his marriage was hard but satisfying, and the fractions of the past that are shown on screen illustrate moments of joy and tension. This scene, in fact, creates a change in Theodore’s character, as it marks the beginning of his love relationship with Samantha and the end of his marriage and longing for the past. Interruptions in the chronological narration of events cease, yet the viewers have perceived that in Theodore’s past, the state of the city of Los Angeles is very similar to its present-day appearance, which suggests that the future of *Her* is not so distant from our current time.

Samantha and Theodore’s love relationship is, therefore, at the centre of the plot’s causal chain, because their feelings and conflicts as a couple prompt the development of the events. Gradually, while she explores her identity and discovers the unlimited possibilities of being an artificial intelligence, her relationship with Theodore begins to wane, until the development of the narrative is brought to its high point. In *Her*, the climax takes place when Theodore is unable to connect with Samantha and starts to panic, a scene that ends with Samantha’s explanation that her capabilities of communication and love – she is in love with six hundred and forty-one individuals at the same time– are beyond human understanding. This sequence of events and the later disappearance of all the OS

Ones –including Samantha– are anticipated by a series of symbols or omens such as a whistling kettle (see Fig. 9) or Theodore’s bright yellow shirt (see Fig. 10).



Fig. 9. Theodore stares at the whistling kettle while Samantha tells him about the changes she is experiencing. *Her* (2013)



Fig. 10. Theodore wearing a yellow shirt before he realises that Samantha is missing. *Her* (2013)

Indeed, colour can affect psychologically, and it can be used as a strong device to tell a story. In *Her*, the use of colour also reinforces the role of Theodore as a character living in a reclusive and strange-looking society where there is a predominance of grey and blue tones (see Fig. 11). However, unlike in other dystopian films, the noticeable use of bright colours (see Fig. 12), the predominance of white and the use of a yellowish photography suggest that Spike Jonze’s near-future is warmer and more appealing than the bleak future of *Blade Runner* (1982). Undoubtedly, it also disguises its dystopia in a utopian aura, something that the production designer of the film, K. K. Barrett, acknowledges in an interview for the *Los Angeles Times*, as he states that “We didn’t want it to seem too dystopian or foreboding” (3).

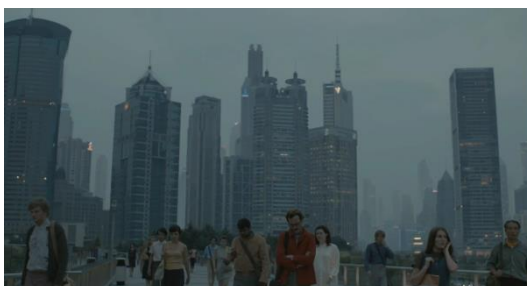


Fig. 11. The contrast between Theodore’s red shirt and the grey toned background emphasises the idea of loneliness. *Her* (2013)



Fig. 12. Colourful shot in which we can perceive red, pink, orange, white, yellow and blue. *Her* (2013)

Like the use of colour and photography, costume can also have “specific functions in the total film” and be “orchestrated with one another in their colours, their textures, and even their movements” (Bordwell and Thompson 125). Therefore, adhering to the previously mentioned established colour palette, costume designer of *Her*, Casey Storm,

brilliantly contributes to the film's aesthetics of a familiar, clean and warm near-future. Consonant with what nowadays is regarded as fashionable, characters style moustaches and retro glasses, wear high waisted trousers or colourful shirts; which, in the end, shape a future that mingles both our past and present.

3.2.3. Space: The city of Los Angeles

As discussed above, *Her* is a film that can be classified within the genre of dystopian film because it portrays an imminent desolated future that is rooted in our present, and inspired by the current anxiety concerning technology and its impact in our society. Yet, Spike Jonze's depiction of a futuristic Los Angeles builds the illusion that the film swings between contemporaneity and utopianism. Albeit Ridley Scott also set his 1982 film *Blade Runner* in this city, his portrayal of Los Angeles in the year 2019 differs greatly from Jonze's concept and its present state (see Fig. 13 and Fig. 14). While the 1982 film marked the beginning of the cyberpunk trend and depicts a dark and grim-looking urban space in which poverty, technology, rain and dirt pervade the environment, in *Her*, the city of Los Angeles offers a similar look to the one we can find nowadays and provides the spectator with a bright and clean environment inhabited by a middle class that lives in skyscrapers. As explained by K. K. Barrett, "We wanted everything to be very comfortable, and this was the way to do that. This is a story about a man fighting his own loneliness. We didn't want him fighting his world. We didn't want the world to be in opposition to him, or to an audience" (2). However, from a short analysis of Jonze's urban space, a key finding emerges: a modern city like the one depicted in the film can only be the consequence of gentrification and, thus, the near future portrayed in *Her* is not as idyllic as it seems.



Fig. 13. The city of Los Angeles in 2019. *Blade Runner* (1982)

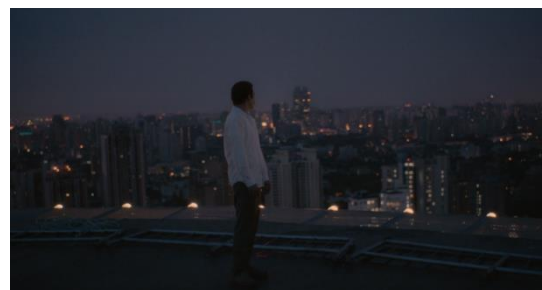


Fig. 14. Night time in a futuristic Los Angeles, as imagined by Jonze. *Her* (2013)

With regard to the different settings presented in the film as, for example, the beach, a park located in a pier or the cabin up in the mountain, these considerably differ from the canonical tendency of dystopian films. Once again, they are akin to current locations, to the point that they can be considered rustic and stale, or even suggest the surveillance of nature over technology. Likewise, Theodore resides in a modern apartment with large windows and wide, clear and luminous space. In it, technological devices suggest a slight improvement from current virtual reality video games, or the already existing home assistant Google Home, an intelligent speaker that allows us to control our household. Yet, the principle that distinguishes these futuristic spaces from our present is the fact that in the film's contemporary time those technological advances are an exception, whereas in *Her* they have become the norm.

Lastly, and taking into account that the setting of a film can “dynamically enter the narrative action” (Bordwell and Thompson 121), I consider worth discussing the connection between the space and the progression of Samantha and Theodore's love story—which is central for the development of the plot—. The opening shots of *Her* are set in a financial district, more precisely in Theodore's working place. The office, traditionally regarded as a symbol of monotony and modernity, contribute to the depiction of a forlorn society. Thus, similarly to Neo who works as a programmer in *The Matrix* (1999), Theodore is restricted to work several hours a week in front of a computer, writing personal letters for others. Yet, as opposed to Neo's, Theodore's work implies creativity and freedom to improvise, and he receives compliments from his co-worker Paul who believes that his letters are “mesmerizing stuff”. At later points in the film, when Samantha and Theodore become closer, scenes are set in open and natural spaces that transmit joy as, for example, an amusement park or the beach. Therefore, there is no doubt that in *Her*, the setting significantly contributes to the narration of the story.

4. Conclusion

The focus of this study was to reveal that Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013) conforms to the genre of dystopian fiction, yet it also offers utopian elements that restrict its classification as an exclusively dystopian film. In fact, this paper has proved that to insist on its being either dystopia or utopia is to dwell needlessly on a false dichotomy. Analysed as an illustrative example of recent dystopian films and TV shows, I believe that the new trend of dystopias in disguise falls within the scope of the speculative fiction genre, a concept that

encompasses both utopian and dystopian fiction. Nevertheless, findings of this study are restricted to the analysis of Spike Jonze's film, and future studies could fruitfully explore this issue further by conducting a comparative study of recent films that are rooted in history and offer a critic of today's application and dependency towards technology, but are set in utopian and desirable places. In fact, this paper is not a comprehensive study; rather, it opens up new opportunities for further contributions to the fields of cultural and utopian studies.

Works cited

- Aristotle. *Politics: Books I and II*. Clarendon Press, 1995.
- Baccolini, Raffaella. "Ursula K. Le Guin's Critical Dystopias." *Booker*, pp.37-53.
- Barrett, K. K. "Five days of 'Her': Building a future to feel like the present." *Los Angeles Times*, 24 December 2013, <http://articles.latimes.com/2013/dec/24/entertainment/la-et-mn-spike-jonze-her-production-future-johansson-20131224>. Accessed 18 May 2018.
- Blade Runner*. Directed by Ridley Scott, performances by Harrison Ford, Rutger Hauer, and Sean Young, Warner Bros., 1982.
- Booker, M. Keith., editor. *Critical Insights: Dystopia*. Salem, 2013.
- _____. *Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature: Fiction as Social Criticism*. Greenwood Press, 1994.
- Bordwell, David, and Kristin Thompson. *Film Art: An Introduction*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010.
- Brooker, Charlie, creator. *Black Mirror*. Endemol UK, 2011.
- "dystopia." *Cambridge Dictionary*. Cambridge University Press, 2018. www.dictionary.cambridge.org. Accessed 30 March 2018.
- "dystopia." *Online Etymology Dictionary*. 2018. www.etymonline.com/word/dystopia. Accessed 30 March 2018.
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, "Chapter XIV." *Biographia Literaria*. Leavitt, Lord & Co, 1834.
- "conscience." *Cambridge Dictionary*. Cambridge University Press, 2018. www.dictionary.cambridge.org. Accessed 18 May 2018.
- Ex Machina*. Directed by Alex Garland, performances by Domhnall Gleeson, Alicia Vikander, and Oscar Isaac, Universal Pictures, 2014.
- Geraghty, Lincoln. *American Science Fiction Film and Television*. Berg, 2009.
- Her*. Directed by Spike Jonze, performances by Joaquin Phoenix, Scarlett Johansson, and Amy Adams, Warner Bros., 2013.
- Horan, Thomas. "Totalitarian Technocracies." *Booker*, pp.54-72.
- Jasanoff, Sheila, "Perfecting the Human: Posthuman Imaginaries and Technologies of Reason." *Perfecting Human Futures: Transhuman Visions and Technological Imaginations*, edited by J. Benjamin Hurlbut and Hava Tirosh-Samuels, Springer VS, 2016, pp. 73-95.
- Krishan, Kumar, "Utopia's Shadow." *Dystopia(n) Matters*, edited by Fátima Vieira, Cambridge Scholars, 2013, pp. 19-22.
- Potts, Robert. "Light in the Wilderness." *The Guardian*, 26 April 2003, www.theguardian.com/books/2003/apr/26/fiction.margaretatwood. Accessed 29 March 2018.
- Salvador, Lucía. *La pantalla distópica: Pesadillas del sueño americano en el cine post 11-S*. University of Valladolid, 2015.
- Senior, W. A. "'Blade Runner and Cyberpunk Visions of Humanity.'" *Film Criticism*, vol. 21, no. 1, 1996, pp. 1–12. www.jstor.org/stable/44019023. Accessed 15 April 2018.
- Sturken, Marita and Douglas Thomas, "Technological Visions and the Rhetoric of the New." *Technological Visions: The Hopes and Fears that Shape New Technologies*. Temple University Press, 2004.
- Thiess, Derek. "Critical Reception." *Booker*, pp.19-36.