

AN ARGUMENT FOR POPULARITY OF DYSTOPIA

By

Veronika Fajbíková

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Supervisor: Professor Alexander Astrov, PhD.

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Abstract

Dystopias, whether in the form of film or literature, are favored by many. However, not often enough, an adequate thought is given to the roots of their appreciation. The present thesis stands on the theoretical discussion of utopia and subsequently dystopia, and then connects two major films of the genre – *District 9* and *Equilibrium* – with the work of Hannah Arendt. In particular, the thesis deals with the issues of prejudices and the experience with totalitarianism. Films are not usually considered to be the basis of our understanding of international relations, but they can inspire further inquiry and open our minds to different perspectives on the issues at stake. Furthermore, films personalize ideas, and thus make the problems more accessible to the public. Both of the films analyzed in this thesis go beyond the horizons of science-fiction and their character of cautionary tales can help us to improve our understanding of human nature.

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Introduction

Dystopias are popular these days, whether it is in the form of a novel, or a film. A single look at the current box office sales of the movie theaters and book sales will confirm that this genre indeed is extremely favored, and not only among teenagers, as it is often claimed, although they do constitute a significant part of the audience.

Under the cover of perhaps on the first glance somewhat unimportant fiction, dystopias are actually dealing with such fundamental thought-provoking questions as what it means to be human and through fiction they reveal real characteristics of human nature as such. Moreover, they discuss the influence of power structures (e.g. state power – governments, but also private enterprises and interests) on average citizen's life.

All that said, at first it might seem that this topic belongs to literature or film studies, and it sure has its important place there. Nevertheless, what people read and watch is influencing how they perceive the world around them, including the political situation on both domestic and international fronts. And this works also vice-versa, because whether consciously or subconsciously, we tend to pick what reflects or complements our views. Moreover, given the way the market works, what we purchase implicates future offers, and logically, we can only read or watch what is 'on the shelves'. This is to say that not only does literature and film influence us, but it could be said that in we are given what we ask for. So why do we find dystopias so appealing? Maybe we could add a few sub-questions to this one later.

Admittedly, films cannot serve as a primary source in the study of international relations, but there is a number of ways they prove to be helpful. First, they can „stretch our minds or at least fill in a few of the blanks in our body of knowledge, even as it entertains us“¹

¹ Gregg, Robert W. *International Relations on Film*. (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers Inc., 1998), 3

and they can inspire further debates about the issues at stake². Second, „films demonstrate over and over again the old axiom that a picture is worth a thousand words“³. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, „films dramatize abstract ideas“ and they do so by personalizing⁴. Individuals then represent larger groups of people or governments. „Ideas are personified and conflicts between ideologies and interests take the form of conflicts between individual protagonists“⁵. Sometimes the message of the film is clear, sometimes it is not: „In some instances the films‘ relevance [for an understanding of international relations] may be impossible to miss; in other cases it may be tucked away in a clever bit of dialogue or in a secondary plot. But if approached with an open mind, a healthy skepticism, and a certain affection for the movies, knowledge even of a subject as large and complex as international relations can be enhanced by films and the process of acquiring that knowledge can be fun“⁶.

I will start by defining utopia, from which dystopia ultimately grows. Then I will explain dystopia as such in more detail. I will provide some - more or less famous - examples of the genre, specifically examining the films *District 9* and *Equilibrium*. I will also mention other films and books with similar themes and motives –either for an illustration, or to support my main hypothesis.

Building mainly on the work of Hannah Arendt, I will then argue that many of the tragedies of our age are self-inflicted and the fear of the future, as displayed in dystopian works of art, is founded on real phenomena. In connection with *District 9*, I will deal particularly with prejudices and their relationship to politics, and also with corporations, technology and war.

² Gregg, 15

³ Gregg, 3

⁴ Gregg, 4

⁵ Gregg, 4

⁶ Gregg, 260

In the part about *Equilibrium*, I will show that the film is coming from the experience with totalitarianism and also serves as a warning for the future.

Without a doubt, it would be ideal for everyone who reads this work, to be familiar with all the films mentioned. That, however, might not be the case, thus it will sometimes be necessary to familiarize with the plot a little bit. Mainly the plot lines will be used to amplify the differences between the films. Nonetheless, there is a good reason why I decided to consider there two seemingly very different films. Both of them raise the questions of human identity and of the system trying to manipulate it in a particular way. It is nonetheless critical to clarify that the system does not always equal the government but may well be an exemplar of the private sector.

Chapter 1: From Utopia to Dystopia

The concept of utopia is commonly understood as a depiction of an ideal society, ever since Sir Thomas More used this term to depict a made-up island society in his illustrious book *Utopia*. Plainly, the origins of utopian thought span back to the Antiquity, but only later, in the nineteenth century together with the industrial revolution, it has become a subject of study in the larger measure.

Utopias are appealing, because they portray an ideal and – perhaps most importantly – a peaceful society, whose patterns can be applied universally. Subsequently, however, the meaning of the word utopia gained a connotation which is negative, because it often implies the impossibility of this ideal world. Arguably, striving to achieve something (in this case this something being a certain kind of organization of the society), can lead to a catastrophe.

Fátima Vieira explains that utopias can be seen as strategies for a specific way of questioning of reality (present), through envisaging another reality – whether in a virtual present, or in a hypothetical future. Utopia might also serve as a motivation for improvement, or transformation of the society.⁷ Thus, if we look at utopia as a process, and leave the label of the so-called impossible dream, it is then rather a program for change and gradual improvement of the present – and can function in different spheres of the society (towards a change of an ethical, economic, social and of course political direction)⁸. As Vieira observed⁹, the reason why utopias have the gained the pessimistic meaning, and are spilling over to dystopias (as sort of a ‘utopia gone wrong’, which I will explain later), is that the idea of

⁷ Gregory Claeys, presentation at the workshop „*Utopia and Ideology: The Interaction of Political and Utopian Thought*“, held by Centre for Advanced Studies at Central European University, March 21, 2014

⁸ Vieira, Fátima. “The Concept of Utopia”. *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*. (Cambridge University Press, 2010, 23

⁹ Vieira, 18

progress which is central to utopia, can sometimes be instrumental in the establishment of dictatorships, instead of impelling humanity to prosper. This is also very closely connected to totalitarianism.

In the twentieth century, Vieira contends, utopia was usually associated either with socialist-communist designs, or with totalitarianism. This happened, because in essence, the goal of all utopias is to some extent to eliminate real people, even if that is not their conscious or real aim, so to speak. Real people cannot exist in a utopia, but the world as we know it – and which utopia aims to transform and replace – is constituted of real people. Here comes the problem: if real people cannot live in utopias, then the effort to design an ideal society where human beings can live happily is evidently jeopardized, John Carey argues.¹⁰ He understands utopias as based on human desires and fears – the desire for a better life, and the fear of failing while trying to reach this goal. Precisely because of their rootedness in our innermost wishes and concerns, utopias are successful at getting our attention, even though they are sometimes ridiculously impractical or improbable. If there was something people could agree upon, it would probably be their common desire to live their life free – free of pain, unfairness, and despair. This is the main reason why utopias are popular – this desire is their foundation. Alas, everything has both positive and negative side, and while the aim of a utopian thought may be virtuous in theory, what utopias build in practice may contain within its own potential for restricting or even destroying human life. Their chief message is change – they want to build the new world, but for this to happen, the old one shall be put down first. How and what to change in order to achieve the ideal society, is contentious¹¹.

However, one might express the view that the aim to eliminate some people might not be as bad as it sounds in the first place, because if we take a closer look, usually the individuals

¹⁰ Carey, John. *The Faber Book of Utopias*. (London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1999), xi

¹¹ Carey, xi

who have disappeared from utopias are criminals. Either way, this way of conduct is certainly not the most humanistic. This is the so-called ‘paradox of utopia’: we see a supposedly perfect future society, but the road to this goal is paved by the totalitarian domination¹².

We are always trying to improve the system our society functions in – to make it more efficient, to make it better (although what is ‘good’ for the individual/public is an everlasting debate). Sadly, even the worst totalitarian regimes are built on a dream – a dream of a better, and a safer world. Both World Wars, Hitler’s attempt at ‘purifying the human race’ and the eventual failure of communist establishments all over the world - all this shattered human dreams and instead forced them to take on a more realistic perspective¹³ and it also exemplifies what I said above. It seems that utopia is a forewarning of totalitarianism, and totalitarianism is then the unfortunate enactment of the dream that is utopia. Nonetheless, I am not claiming that utopia is the only driving force behind totalitarianism, as there are many more factors at work. Still, totalitarianism has an important utopian strand, even though it may not be the only one, nor the dominant one¹⁴.

This tendency of utopia to become a totalitarianism is a considerable one. Claeys argues¹⁵ that utopias which place coercion on the main frontier, are most likely to eventually deliver dystopias. Such an inclination then eventually leads to an emergence of „the pessimistic child of utopia“ as it is called by some – a dystopia. Dystopia usually pinpoints a specific ongoing trend in the society, or a certain aspect of reality (e.g. the totalitarian regime itself, or its elements as surveillance, censorship, or a certain kind of propaganda) and then imagines what would happen if this particular method became not the means to something, but the actual goal, and projects it into the future, thus begging questions like: What would happen if we go

¹² Carey, xi

¹³ Vieira, 22

¹⁴ Shorten, Richard. “Utopianism”. *Modernism and Totalitarianism: Rethinking the Intellectual Sources of Nazism and Stalinism, 1945 to the Present*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 110

¹⁵ Claeys, „Ideology and Utopia“

on like this and allow this tendency to fulfill its potential? Is it possible that we will end up being replaced by an artificial intelligence, or give up critical thinking, or thinking altogether, etc.? The choice of the aspect which goes wrong in a dystopia is not arbitrary; there are some of these aspects, which emerge repeatedly in the films and literature – for example genetic manipulation or war. Therefore it is apparent that these are the puzzles of our lives which stay unresolved for the time being.

Now we know what dystopia does, but what is its exact definition? Contrary to what the term itself seems to suggest, the definition of dystopia is not as simple as to say that it is merely the opposite of utopia, otherwise it would be simply called an ‚anti-utopia‘ and not a ‚dystopia‘. Richard Lederer examines the roots of the very term ‚dystopia‘, and explains that the Greek prefix *dys-* is used for antonyms¹⁶. He adds that ‚dystopian‘ is thus „the most appropriate term for literature that describes the progressive degeneration of the body politic“¹⁷. However, „dystopia is not simply the opposite of utopia. A true opposite of utopia would be a society that is either completely unplanned or is planned to be deliberately terrifying and awful. Dystopia, typically invoked, is neither of these things; rather, it is a utopia that has gone wrong, or a utopia that functions only for a particular segment of society,“¹⁸ and not for everyone, in all times and all places. A perfect opposite of utopia would be an absence of order, an anarchy, or a Hobbesian state of nature, for instance. A dystopia involves a certain kind of order, which, however, does not work well and/or justly.

Krishan Kumar contrasts utopia with what he calls ‚anti-utopia‘, in which „ordinary life becomes utopia, and a rejection of it, because it makes us live it as an experience so painful

¹⁶ Lederer, Richard. „Shaping the Dystopian Nightmare“. *The English Journal* Vol.56 No.8 (Nov. 1967), 1135

¹⁷ Lederer, 1135

¹⁸ Gordin, M.D. et al. *Utopia/Dystopia: Conditions of Historical Possibility*. (Princeton University Press, 2010),

and nightmarish that we lose all desire for it¹⁹ and „the restlessness and striving that are an essential part of the human spirit are violated“²⁰. This description fits the term ‚dystopia‘, so although opinions vary whether dystopia and anti-utopia are the same thing, for the purpose of this thesis I will use these terms interchangeably.

Concerning the relationship of utopia and dystopia, and thus also explaining dystopia as such, Kumar further argues that „utopia and anti-utopia are antithetically interdependent. They are contrast concepts, getting their meaning and significance from their mutual differences. Their relationship is not symmetrical or equal. The anti-utopia is formed by utopia, and feeds parasitically on it. It depends for its survival on the persistence of utopia. Utopia is the original and anti-utopia the copy – only, as it were, always colored black. Utopia provides the positive content to which anti-utopia makes negative response. Anti-utopia draws its material from utopia and reassembles it in a manner that denies the affirmation of utopia. It is the mirror image of utopia – but a distorted image, seen in a cracked mirror“²¹. That is a rather pessimistic view, and not by an error.

Ultimately, dystopias are born of disappointment and possibly fear; they represent the „frustrated and thwarted utopianism“²². Traditionally, utopians are understood as hopeless idealists, and anti-utopians as realists²³. The criticism anti-utopians advocated was supported by such things as Pareto’s exposure of democracy as a sham²⁴. In trying to implement the utopian visions, the very rational and supposedly progressive and democratic state, destroyed the freedom of the people and their values²⁵. (As illustrated in case of *Equilibrium* in the next chapter). Anti-utopians were not against reason, or science, or progress, etc, on the contrary.

¹⁹ Kumar, Krishan. *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times*. (Oxford, UK.: Blackwell Pub, 1991), 103

²⁰ Kumar, 102

²¹ Kumar, 100

²² Kumar, 104

²³ Kumar, 110

²⁴ Kumar, 110

²⁵ Kumar, 111

Not all of them were strict conservatives and they were doing more than simply oppose the modernity. Their main problem with all this was that „there seemed no way to make the practice fit the principles“²⁶. Thus, we enter the area of social criticism, and that is by no means the invention of the anti-utopians, they could build upon the foundations already built by someone else²⁷.

Both utopias and dystopias are inherently political. They provide us with varying views on human nature as such, and that is necessarily related to the way every government (or power/control in general) works. „All utopias and dystopias by definition seek to alter the social order on a fundamental, systemic level. They address root causes and offer revolutionary solutions. By foregrounding radical change and by considering utopia and dystopia as linked phenomena, we are able to consider how ideas, desires, constraints, and effects interact simultaneously. Utopia, dystopia, chaos: these are not just ways of imagining the future (or the past) but can also be understood as concrete practices through which historically situated actors seek to reimagine their present and transform it into a plausible future. This is not the way most historians who have engaged with the notions of utopia and dystopia have approached the issue, and it is worth taking a moment to explore the difference“²⁸.

Dystopias seem to be enjoying much more attention than utopias, because „there are many more ways for planning to go wrong than to go right, more ways to generate dystopia than utopia. And, crucially, dystopia—because it is so much more common—bears the aspect of lived experience. People perceive their environments as dystopic, and alas they do so with depressing frequency. Whereas utopia takes us into a future and serves to indict the present, dystopia places us directly in a dark and depressing reality, conjuring up a terrifying future if

²⁶ Kumar, 110

²⁷ Kumar, 111

²⁸ Gordin, 2

we do not recognize and treat its symptoms in the here and now²⁹. (And this is precisely what happens in case of *District 9*, which I will analyze in the following chapter.)

All this shows that the line between utopia and dystopia is sometimes very thin. “Whether or not a society is perceived as a dystopia is usually determined by a point of view; what one may consider to be a horrible dystopia, another may find completely acceptable”³⁰. Alternatively, “what is a serious utopia to its author, and to many of its readers, could be read as a satire by a reader whose emotional attitudes were different. The opposite is also true: anti-utopian satire can be read as utopia by those so minded”³¹. Or, to put it more simply, „One man’s dream of felicity may be another man’s nightmare“³².

1.1 Popularity of Dystopia

This genre seems to be more popular in those time periods when people are especially discontent with the path their society has taken – such was the rise of George Orwell during the general atmosphere of paranoia in the Cold War, and so are dystopias on the rise now, when the war on terrorism is still actual, and the struggle for power from the side of the United States, Russia, China, and the European Union is real. Diebel points to the research that shows “that dystopian novels tend to arise as a response to times of threat or danger” and this being a research conducted by a popular book sharing, cataloguing and reviewing site Goodreads.com. According to this research, “fear of communism and fascism in the 1930s-

²⁹ Gordin, 2

³⁰ Adams, J. J. „Introduction“. *Brave New Worlds*. (San Francisco: Night Shade Books, 2011).

³¹ Kumar, 105

³² Kumar, 125

1960s provoked books like Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* and Orwell's *1984*³³. Each generation has its own disasters and fears of destruction³⁴.

Current events, for instance the scandal concerning the National Security Agency in the United States versus the 'whistleblower' Edward Snowden, or the scandal surrounding Wikileaks and its founder Julian Assange, point our attention in the direction that could perhaps end up somewhere similar to what George Orwell or Aldous Huxley were writing about. Sometimes we try to escape the reality, but more often than that, artwork reflects the reality in one way or another. Right now, there might not be a war on a global scale, but still there is a number of factors that support this genre once again. Moreover, „large-scale planning of utopian or dystopian futures—whether by the World Trade Organization or Al Qaeda—persists“³⁵.

With the level of scientific and technical development we are experiencing nowadays, we might be inclined to think we could actually achieve some kind of a utopia. That, however, is not the case. We do not feel safe. More often than not, people are voicing their concern over the degree of government surveillance, which should be for their own good, but whether that is the case or not, no one can confirm. As Lauren Sarner put it: „In a world where we feel watched and monitored, in a world where school shootings abound and the people who are supposed to be in charge don't seem to be doing anything to monitor gun-distribution, in a world of freakish storms where those in power still deny that climate change is a problem, where our own reality often seems like something George Orwell or Ray Bradbury would conjure — is it any wonder that our popular, sexy escapism has become nightmarish

³³ Diebel, Rachel. *The Rise of Dystopia: Popularity of Dystopian Themed Films and Novels Sky-Rockets*. Mast Media, published September 17, 2013, <http://mastmedia.plu.edu/2013/09/17/rise-of-the-dystopia/>, (accessed March 30, 2014)

³⁴ Windling, Terri. „Afterword“. *After*. (New York: Hyperion, 2012), 355

³⁵ Gordin, 3

speculations of the future?”³⁶ Sarner is not surprised that “in our world today, where people feel powerless, popular fiction has taken a darker turn” and the reason dystopia is much liked among teenagers a good reason, too, as it is precisely in the teenage years, when we usually feel the most powerless. In addition, since the majority of the books and films coming out in this genre is usually categorized as ‘young adult’ (but make no mistake, teenagers are not the only audience), this might be one of the complementary underpinnings of dystopia: “[Teenagers’] lives are constantly defined by rules, and in response they construct their identities through necessary confrontations with authority, large and small. Imagining a world in which those authorities must be destroyed by any means necessary (as per dystopian fiction) is one way of expanding that game”³⁷. Diebel also makes an important point, when she notes that “it is possible that today’s wave of dystopian literature for young adults is inspired by an event such as 9/11 or even by the vapid nature of pop culture and the fear of what that will do to our society.”³⁸

Nonetheless, reading dystopias also has some silver lining, because it can also make us feel better about our contemporary reality; through fictional dystopias we can see that it all could get worse³⁹. It is not us, fighting for our lives in an arena (like they do in *The Hunger Games*). Sometimes, it does not even seem all that bad (take Huxley’s *Brave New World*, for example). Everyone seems happy. But deep down you know that there is something horribly wrong with that society⁴⁰ and you are glad it is not real.

³⁶ Sarner, Lauren. *Dystopian fiction, and its appeal: Why Do Apocalyptic Portrayals of Existence Dominate Teen Shelves?* New York Daily News. Published June 28, 2013. <http://www.nydailynews.com/blogs/pageviews/dystopian-fiction-appeal-apocalyptic-portrayals-existence-dominate-teen-shelves-blog-entry-1.1640750#ixzz30ryPO6l8> (accessed May 5, 2014)

³⁷ Westerfield in Windling, 356

³⁸ Diebel <http://mastmedia.plu.edu/2013/09/17/rise-of-the-dystopia/>

³⁹ Astor, Dave. *Why Do We Like Dystopian Novels?* The Huffington Post. Published October 19, 2012. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/dave-astor/why-do-we-like-dystopian-novels_b_1979301.html (accessed April 15, 2014)

⁴⁰ Astor, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/dave-astor/why-do-we-like-dystopian-novels_b_1979301.html

But the connection with the reality is still there. Dystopias make us think about the politics not by coercion, but through popular literature or film. They discuss fundamental questions about the human nature itself and with their help, we can imagine more vividly what could go wrong and in what way⁴¹ or to put it differently, to see which elements of our reality – if brought to an extreme – can lead to the horrors in question. This can be a very disturbing realization.

Apart from the obvious profit their authors are getting from them and providing us with an opportunity to spend our free time on them, dystopias can be interpreted as a warning, or as something which draws the bottom line⁴². Moreover, the fact that people were always fascinated with the apocalyptic visions of the future plays an important role here. Yes, the fear of annihilation of the human race is still present, although maybe not in the form that was most actual during the Cold War, but we do have global warming and wars are still being fought, luckily not on such global scale right now, nevertheless the danger is still out there somewhere.

1.2 Different Types of Dystopia

Given the vast number of dystopias as such, some differences necessarily have to occur in them, thus creating a few types of dystopias with common characteristics.

Kramer⁴³ distinguishes between three types of dystopias. First one is titled ‘Shiny Happy Land’ and its examples could be Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* or Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*. The second one is called ‘The Cure’ (represented in the movie *Equilibrium* by Kurt Wimmer). The third one – and supposedly the worst one in terms of living there – is

⁴¹ Sargisson, Lucy. *No future? Why Dystopias Matter*. Ballots & Bullets. Published May 11, 2011. <http://nottspolitics.org/2011/05/11/no-future-why-dystopias-matter/> (accessed March 13, 2014)

⁴² Diebel <http://mastmedia.plu.edu/2013/09/17/rise-of-the-dystopia/>

⁴³ Kramer, Maria. *The Future Sucks – A Visitor’s Guide to Dystopia*. Yalsa: The Hub. Published March 9, 2013. <http://www.yalsa.ala.org/thehub/2011/03/09/the-future-sucks-a-visitors-guide-to-dystopia/#content> (accessed April 30, 2014)

‘The Gauntlet’ and some examples include George Orwell’s *1984* or Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games*. Perhaps it would be possible to merge the first two types together.

In this thesis I will focus on two different perspectives on dystopias. First, as it is the case in *District 9*, nothing significant in the world has to change for the dystopia to come to being. That is the reason why *District 9* is made to look like a documentary film. It is raw, it is life-like. The only sci-fi element in this film are really the aliens, and even their role is a metaphorical one. Second, as it is the case of *Equilibrium*, something important has to happen first, in order for a dystopia to occur. In *Equilibrium*, we see a fictional future society, as it was rebuilt or preserved after the Third World War. Here the fear of annihilation of humankind served as an impetus for introducing the emotion-suppressing drug Proziom.

However, this is not the only way to categorize dystopias, as there are many phenomena to analyze. For example, the perfect mixture of the two perspectives I set above is *The Island* (Bay, 2005). The viewer and the main characters are led to believe that they are lucky to be alive in an isolated underground complex, safe from the life-threatening contamination of the surface of the Earth. Yet the opposite is true and there is no such contamination as the authorities are claiming – they are merely using them as organ surrogates for their rich clients. Moreover, there are other phenomena, which I will not analyze in this work, but are still important, such as genetic manipulation and discrimination connected to it – as portrayed in *Gattaca* (Niccol, 1997), or the usage of human beings as energy sources – as depicted in *The Matrix* (Wachowskis, 1999), in *Fifteen Million Merits* – episode 2 of the first season of *The Black Mirror* series (Lyn, 2011), or in *Cloud Atlas* (Wachowskis & Tykwer, 2012) – the story of Sonmi-451, etc.).

Chapter 2: Different Perspectives with Similar Outcomes – The Relevance of Dystopia

In the following sections, I will deal with two dystopian films: *District 9* and *Equilibrium*. Building mainly on writing of Hannah Arendt (particularly her essay “Introduction into Politics” from *The Promise of Politics*, and the chapter “Ideology and Terror: The Novel Form of Government” from her *Origins of Totalitarianism*), I will show that in both of these films, it is possible to find worthwhile ideas and they both raise important questions, and they can be considered much more than divertissement.

District 9, as realistically as it gets, highlights the issue of prejudices in connection to politics. *Equilibrium*, as a futuristic totalitarian dystopia, poses the fundamental question of the meaning of human life in times when life as such is threatened by annihilation. Both of these films have foundations in real politics – whether historic or contemporary, and provide us with lessons to learn and conduct to avoid.

2.1 *District 9: Prejudices versus Politics*

District 9 (2009) can be called a dystopia, too. However, categorizing it is still complicated. It is not a typical blockbuster film, nor is it a documentary. Perhaps it is something in between these two, with a bit of drama. Based on a short film *Alive in Joburg* (2005), *District 9* is directed by Neill Blomkamp and officially it belongs to the science fiction genre, but it has a lot to say about our reality.

Actually, it is only classifiable as a sci-fi, because...there are aliens. They came to Johannesburg, involuntarily, or so it seems. Nevertheless, the role they are playing in this film

does not have much to do with outer space. In fact, the problems which are directly or indirectly discussed here are very Earthly. Plus, what is very fitting description, Cadigan summarizes what sci-fi is as follows: „Sci-fi is an area of commercial success, a hotbed of intellectual discourse, and at the same time, it is too trivial to deserve the notice of serious critics. Only human nature itself would seem to embody as many contradictions“⁴⁴.

Similarly to *Equilibrium*, the way *District 9* is filmed is not subtle, but in a different way: it is less polished, and the documentary-like character makes it raw and brutal. Its character of a documentary is important also in other sense. It shows that it could happen anytime. No great war or a global catastrophe needs to happen as a prerequisite for *District 9*. The aliens come to Earth in a fictional year 1982, but the majority of the plot takes place in the present day, after their settlement was not successful.

A lot has happened since 1982, and the prawns, as the people of Johannesburg call them, have become problematic for the every-day existence of everyone living in the city. Most of the people express the opinion that the aliens should either be exterminated or at least go back to where they came from. In the ‚documentary‘ footage at the beginning of the film, we hear an explanation of what happened:

„There was a lot of international pressure on us at the time. The world was looking at Johannesburg, so we had to do the right thing. The government then established an aid group that started to ferry the aliens to a temporary camp that was set up just beneath the ship. We didn't have a plan. There was a million of them. So, what was a temporary holding zone soon became fenced, became militarized. And before we knew it, it was a slum.“

Some of the people, however, found their own ways of dealing with the situation. The black market in District 9 flourished: whether it comes to alien-beloved catfood, inter-species prostitution, or firearms. Gradually, the conflicts between the human population of

⁴⁴ Cadigan, P. „Introduction: What is The Matrix...and Why Is It Such a Big Deal?“ *Exploring The Matrix*. Ed. Karen Haber. (Byron preiss Visual Publications Inc., 2003), 11

Johannesburg and aliens of District 9 reach the point where a government intervention seems necessary. So the government co-operates with MNU and comes up with a plan to relocate the entire population of District 9 to a new camp, District 10, which is several hundred kilometers away from the city, practically isolated. Just so it appears as a legal action, the MNU officials lead by Wikus, enter the District 9 with forms informing the aliens about their eviction and asking them to sign these.

„This is the largest operation that MNU has ever undertaken and we believe that it is going to be undertaken successfully. It is to move 1.8 million prawns from their present home in District to a safer and better location 200 kilometers outside of Johannesburg city. We've built a nice, new facility where the prawn can go. He can be comfortable. He can stay there. The people of Johannesburg and of South Africa are going to live happily and safely, knowing that that prawn is very far away. UIO protocol dictates that we give the aliens 24-hour notice of our right to evict.“

The aliens refuse to sign anything, of course. Some of them do not understand what is going on and some of them – as the character of the alien called Christopher – do know what is happening, but all of them seem to realize that what is happening is wrong on many levels. Plus, what people do not know is that the aliens are not on Earth willingly and would like to leave, but they are not able to.

Wikus: „We're from MNU.“

Christopher: „I know.“

Wikus: „We require your scrawl on this eviction notification.“

Christopher: „Why am I being evicted? It says you must give me 24 hours notice.“

Wikus: „You're going to another place, a city built for prawns. And we're not even going to charge you, okay?“

Christopher: „This isn't legal.“

Wikus: „Sign the fucking paper!“

Christopher: „No!“

Wikus: „You don't have a choice.“

The process of going ‚door-to-door‘ with the forms is not as it should be, either. There is a lot of unnecessary violence, with MNU soldiers making xenophobic and derogatory comments about the aliens, shooting and killing them for little or no reason whatsoever.

The most obvious issues are prejudices, xenophobia (an intense and/or irrational fear or dislike of strangers, or people from other countries) and intolerance in general, with a reference to the Holocaust, and/or the problems of multicultural societies nowadays. The film is set in Johannesburg, South Africa and this setting of course invokes the apartheid, starting with the very title (which is a reference to District Six in Cape Town), and even with such details as evictions and ‚temporary relocations‘. Moreover, if one replaces the word ‚prawn‘ (which is used throughout the film to describe the aliens), for virtually anything else, be it ‚black‘, ‚Hispanic‘, ‚Jew‘, the message is clear. „They [the aliens] are the bodies of every human population that has been marginalized, abused, and exterminated.“⁴⁵

This film is carrying an important message about human nature and the strength of our prejudices. People and aliens here try to live side by side, but fail at it miserably. The main character, Wikus, eventually becomes one of ‚the others‘, and ends up fighting against his own species of origin, because he does not have any other choice.

The film shows a proper reflection of reality, Kamil Zawadzki writes: „In international politics, large corporations, multinational organizations, and national governments can dominate and decide the fate of thousands and millions arbitrarily. Legal formalities, provocateurs, and excuses are employed to stoke popular opinion which may already be simmering and justify unjust acts such as a mass expulsion. Propaganda, meanwhile, promised the victims of those in power that "they are going to a much better place," a promise also heard by millions of European Jews during the Holocaust, something alluded to even by one of the main characters“⁴⁶.

⁴⁵ Nicolini, Kim. *District 9, Ugly Marvel*. The South African Civil Society Information Service. Published August 29, 2009. <http://www.sacsis.org.za/site/article/343.1> (accessed April 17, 2014)

⁴⁶ Zawadzki, Kamil. *District 9: A Sci-fi Action Movie's Commentary on Human and International Relations*. Examiner.com. Published August 15, 2009. <http://www.examiner.com/article/district-9-a-sci-fi-action-movie-s-commentary-on-human-and-international-relations> (accessed May 21, 2014)

Wikus: „You don't want to go to the tents. They're not better. They're smaller than the shacks. Actually more like a concentration camp.“

The pressing issue and the main driving force behind all trouble in this film is the corporate multinational arms industry and its influence on intra-state governing. In this particular case, the private military company called MNU (Multinational United), is trying to get hold of the alien military technology. This is however made rather difficult by the fact that alien technology only works with alien DNA, thus it is unusable for people. MNU, being the second largest weapons manufacturer in the world, in its struggle to achieve its goal does not hesitate to experiment neither on aliens, nor on humans, when the opportunity arises. These issues together create a deadly combination.

The main character of *Wikus Van de Merwe* is no superhero, but he does undergo significant changes during the events which take place in the film. At first, he is just one of many, an unimportant bureaucrat (Extraterrestrial Civilizations Worker of MNU), who does not question the authority of MNU (and thus also his father-in-law, MNU's executive). In the opening of the film, Wikus is shown innocently stating that their job at MNU is to „try to engage with the prawns on behalf of MNU and on behalf of humans“. At the time, he seems to blindly believe in the company's mission, although not being entirely familiar with it.

Other scene in particular sends shivers down the spine. It shows that Wikus has given little to no thought to what he was actually doing – he was indeed a thoughtless bureaucrat, not aware of the damage he is capable of. Wikus discovers that in one of the shacks, there is a number of alien eggs and orders the MNU troops to set them on fire. While they are burning, they start popping and he laughs straight into the camera and makes fun of it, saying that „it sounds like popcorn“. But it is in this very moment when Wikus becomes the dehumanized being he is making jokes about, although only later he actually becomes one of them.

The key moment of the film occurs, when Wikus accidentally sprays himself in the face with contents of a canister he took from aliens. Not conscious of its purpose, Wikus declares the canister dangerous and confiscates it and sends it to MNU labs. The canister is filled with a special fluid, not native to Earth. Christopher, one of the aliens, and his son had to collect various kinds of electronic garbage and distill the fluids they found in it, and it took them twenty years to collect the sufficient amount of this mixture. The main purpose of the canister is to reactivate the lost command module of the mothership, which is hidden under Christopher's shack, then to get to the mothership, and activate that one, too. But there is a side-effect of getting in touch with the fluid in the canister - it causes a mutation of human DNA, which turns Wikus into a prawn.

As I mentioned in the introduction, I will now connect the occurrences of *District 9* with the work of Hannah Arendt, more specifically with her essay *Introduction into Politics*, where she discusses the issue of prejudices on a large scale.

Arendt asserts that people are unable to live without prejudices for various reasons. First, no one can possibly be that intelligent to develop their own judgment about everything. Moreover, a superhuman forces would be prerequisite for such an absence of prejudice. For these two reasons, Arendt claims, the task of politics is to clarify and disperse prejudices.⁴⁷ Additionally, prejudices are rooted in history – in fact their foundations are so deep that they effectively influence judgment and render genuine experience impossible.⁴⁸

People use the derogatory term "prawn" for the aliens, with an implication that they are bottom feeders. "You can't say they don't look like that. They look like prawns." While that might be true, their conception of what is normal and what is not can (and probably is) very

⁴⁷ Arendt, Hannah, . "Introduction to Politics". *The Promise of Politics*. Ed. J. Kohn. (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), 99

⁴⁸ Arendt, „Introduction into Politics“, 101

different from ours. They eat cat food and goat meat, because those are accessible to them in the slum they are detained in. They go through garbage, because they are searching for something in particular, not because they enjoy the filth.

Moreover, people hold an unsubstantiated view that the aliens do not understand the concept of ownership and property. The aliens might not own the property they built their shacks on, but then again, they were never allowed to buy the land they are limited to live on. During the eviction process, MNU agent tells to one of the aliens: “But it's not your house, so we'll give it to someone else,” to which the alien responds “Yes! It is my house!”

The people of Johannesburg are angry at the aliens for not complying with their rules, but at the same time, they do not allow them to adjust to the environment by building a fence around them. One of the quotes from the fictional documentary goes as follows: “If they were from another country, we might understand...but they are not even from this planet at all.” It is not their fault they are different, they just are. Some of them are violent, some of them are not. Some others might have transmittable diseases, some of them do not. And while the fear people experience is justified and understandable, their prejudices are exaggerated. If one person gets robbed by an alien, all aliens are automatically considered thieves, just because somebody said so, and it is not a question of experience. “Prejudices are not personal idiosyncrasies, which, however immune to proof, always have a basis in personal experience, within which context they lay claim to the evidence of sensory perception. Because they exist outside of experience, however, prejudices can never provide such evidence, not even for those who are subject to them. But precisely because they are not tied to personal experience they can count on the ready assent of others, without ever making an effort to convince them.”⁴⁹ Also Friedrich Nietzsche was critical of people who would “take their prejudices and

⁴⁹ Arendt, „Introduction into Politics“, 100

baptize them ‘truths’⁵⁰, instead of thinking them through and sometimes even admitting that they were, in fact, unsubstantiated and incorrect.

However, it is not simple or even possible to get rid of prejudices, because “they play a major role in the social arena. There really is no social structure which is not based more or less on prejudices that include certain people while excluding others. The freer a person is of prejudices of any kind, the less suitable he will be for the purely social realm.”⁵¹

When Wikus finds himself on the other side of the fence, both figuratively and literally, he is hurt, shocked, horrified, and eventually riots against those who were once his authorities. These represent the oppressive system, even though one might object that MNU does not equal or act as the government, but the truth is that MNU did cooperate with the state power, although admittedly, it is not clear why the South African government decided to do so – whether they did not see any other option, or if there was some background, perhaps corruption-driven motive.

Since after he sprayed himself with the strange fluid, Wikus’ DNA is mutating into an alien one, creating a unique mixture of both for a limited time, the officials decide to try whether the weapons work in Wikus’ hands. When they find out that these indeed do work function, they decide to make use of this unique opportunity and plan to vivisect Wikus.

„What happens to him isn't important. What's important is that we harvest from him what we can right now. This body represents hundreds of millions maybe billions of dollars worth of biotechnology. There are people out there, governments, corporations who would kill for this chance. He won't survive the procedure. We need everything. Tissue, bone marrow, blood. The procedure's gonna basically strip him down to nothing.“

⁵⁰ Nietzsche, Friedrich. „On the Prejudices of Philosophers“. Part One, § 5. *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. (New York: Random House Inc, 1966), 13

⁵¹ Arendt, „Introduction into Politics“, 100

Shockingly, all this is said while Wikus can actually hear everything and he even begs them not to do it, and asks for an explanation, all this being futile. Seeing no other choice, he overpowers them and runs away.

And while the conduct of MNU, i.e. the experiments they were doing in order to profit from the alien technology, is explainable, it is still seen as unacceptable. As Noel-Baker states, “The private manufacture of armaments involves an element which shocks the mind of the average citizen, and the moral values of the system are in contradiction with the conceptions of public ethics and national defense which most people accept. But it is wrong to blame the private manufacturers of armaments for the results to which the present system leads, since the system has always had the active approval and support of the governments of almost all arms-producing nations in the world. Ultimately, therefore, governments are responsible for the ‘evil effects’ to which system leads.”⁵² Moreover, while individuals may express their discontent with the way business is done, those who are in charge usually “think of their business as similar to other businesses and this colors their thinking on the problems of armament and defense.”⁵³

Arendt acknowledges that it is typical of ends to justify the means which are required to achieve them. Nonetheless, she asks, “But what ends can justify means that, under certain circumstances, could destroy humanity and organic life on earth?”⁵⁴ The primary goal of the business MNU is doing is of course profit. But whoever would get their hands on the most powerful weapons (which seems to be the case with the superior alien technology), would indeed represent a serious threat to everyone else.

⁵² Noel-Baker, Phillip. *The Private Manufacture of Armaments*. (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1972), 15

⁵³ Noel-Baker, 15

⁵⁴ Arendt, “*Introduction into Politics*”, 196

It could be speculated that if the MNU would not be as keen on getting the alien technology ‘through the dead bodies’, maybe there would be a room for debate between humans and aliens. But no one had a clue that the aliens actually wanted to get out of Johannesburg and Earth altogether. Perhaps if people would have known about it, they could have helped the aliens to get their much needed special liquid faster, in exchange for the patents on the weaponry. This, however, seems very unlikely. It is always the people who are shooting their guns at creatures they do not understand, and feel threatened by the unknown.

At the end, we are left with the scenes of people of Johannesburg celebrating in the streets, as the alien spacecraft with Christopher on board leaves Earth. Wikus’ wife Tania says that she found a flower made from garbage metal on her doorstep, hesitantly believing that it was Wikus who made it. In the closing scene, we see what seems to be Wikus fully transformed, making a flower like that in what seems to be a junkyard or possibly the remains of District 9. In essence, nothing has changed, except for Wikus. No one knows, if Christopher will come back to save his kin, or even to avenge them. MNU’s genetic program was exposed and District 9 was demolished after the resettlement was completed. „District 10 now houses 2.5 million aliens and continues to grow.“

2.2 *Equilibrium: The Salvation of Humankind or Totalitarian Terror?*

The film *Equilibrium* (2002) belongs to dystopias as well. Actually, it is perhaps a little bit too obvious a dystopia. The director Kurt Wimmer admittedly borrows heavily from *1984*, *Fahrenheit 451*, *THX-1138*, *Brave New World*, and others. Nonetheless, it is still a worthwhile piece to watch and think about. *Equilibrium* is not very subtle in execution of its ideas, but still sends out a message. Arguably, many topics and questions remain omitted in the film, but there is only so much that can be said and done in a little under two hours.

It is the year 2072 and everyone in Libria takes daily doses of Proziom. Proziom is the emotion-suppressing drug, title of which is a mixture of Prozac and Valium/Lithium, drugs commonly used in the treatment of depression. Americans are sometimes referred to as the Prozac Nation (which is also a title of Elizabeth Wurtzel's autobiography, subtitled *Young and Depressed in America*). Proziom is kind of like Soma from Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, but not quite the same. In the film, it is described as:

“[Proziom] - the great nepenthe⁵⁵. Opiate of our masses. Glue of our great society. Salve and salvation, it has delivered us from pathos, from sorrow, the deepest chasms of melancholy and hate. With it, we anesthetize grief, annihilate jealousy, and obliterate rage. That those sister impulses towards joy, love, and elation are anesthetized in stride, we accept as fair sacrifice. For we embrace Proziom in its unifying fullness and all that it has done to make us great.”

Burning of the books and art is then very much reminding of Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, and the constant surveillance and brainwashing - that can be called many things but mostly Orwellian.

In the beginning of *Equilibrium*, the faces of Iosif Vissarionovich Stalin and Saddam Hussein are shown briefly, followed by images of wars, explosion and general destruction. The main

⁵⁵ Latin nepenthes, from Greek 'nēpenthes', neuter of 'nēpentēs' = banishing pain and sorrow, from nē- = not + 'penthos' = grief, sorrow; akin to Greek 'pathos' = suffering, Merriam-Webster Dictionary (accessed May 15, 2014)

driving force behind the buildup of this totalitarian state, which Libria undoubtedly is, is supposedly the fear of annihilation of the humanity as a whole, the fear that was present during the Cold War and still is relevant today. But aside from that, there could be more motives: the classic struggle for power of the one party (or even individual) and in this case the medical/drug lobby, taking over everything, because everyone has to take this drug, and humanity's survival depends on it. Tetragrammaton clerics could change their uniforms and be agents of whichever secret or not-so-secret police or service agency. Their job is to keep the violence from the streets with ... more violence, for the greater good.

On the surface, it seems that the message of the Libria's leader – called simply 'the Father' - repeated from every audio/video device in Libria (kind of like The Big Brother was watching people) is indeed noble and that giving up our petty emotions for the greater good is an appropriate solution:

„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. So we have created a new arm of the law - the Grammaton Cleric, whose sole task it is to seek out and eradicate the true source of man's inhumanity to man: his ability to feel.“

As Arendt maintained⁵⁶ that most of the recruits to totalitarian movements belonged to the “masses”: uprooted, disoriented people who no longer had any clear sense of reality or self-interest because the world they had inhabited had been destroyed by the upheavals of unemployment, inflation, war, and revolution. So the people of Libria, exhausted of the Third World War, chose rather to accept the new totalitarian regime, than to risk total annihilation in the fourth one, which would be inevitable if something would not change.

The screens all over the city are displaying the Father, who repeats this over and over:

⁵⁶ Arendt, Hannah. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company – Meridian Books, 1962), 267-302

„Libria...I congratulate you. At last, peace reigns in the heart of man. At last, war is but a word whose meaning fades from our understanding. At last, we are whole. 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. At the cost of the dizzying highs of human emotion, we have suppressed its abysmal lows. 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. And it is this conscience that guides us to rate EC-10 for emotional content all those things that might tempt us to feel again and destroy them. Librians, you have won. Against all odds and your own natures, you have survived.“

The main character, John Preston, is a cleric of the Tetragrammaton, a council which governs in Libria. The name Tetragrammaton means ‚four letters‘ and it is one of the names of the God of Israel, used in the Hebrew Bible, commonly used as YHWH, Yahweh, or Jehovah. The main purpose of clerics of the Tetragrammaton in Libria is to find and effectively destroy every piece of art, music, literature – everything that is considered an ‚emotional content EC-10‘ and to execute everyone who hides, owns, or distributes such items. To achieve this, they have undergone special education and physical training. The symbol of Tetragrammaton is on the flag of Libria, and it is a simple combination of four T’s. And although the director in the film commentary claims it was not on purpose, the flag is very similar to the one Nazi Germany used, but instead of a swastika, there are four T’s in a white circle on a red background. Here, even if unintentionally, the totalitarian spirit of Libria shows.

Let me now summarize the plot very quickly. One day, Preston accidentally misses a dose of Prozium and attempts to get a replacement dose, but due to the circumstances (a supposed terrorist attacks at the building of the Equilibrium, where Prozium is stored), he is not able to do so. Gradually, Preston stops taking Prozium altogether, starts to experience emotions, and to question his previous acts and morality as such. When he realizes that he let the authorities kill his wife Viviana, and that he killed his co-worker Errol Partridge and is partially responsible for the incineration of Mary O’Brien, who he grew fond of, all of them accused of being ‚sense-offenders‘, he decides to overthrow the regime he was previously serving for years. Using the training he got in his job as a cleric, and with the help of ,the

underground resistance', Preston kills DuPont (the Vice-Council of the Third Conciliarly of the Tetragrammaton - Father's voice, who was misusing the Father's identity for his own personal benefit) and starts a revolution.

Here I will argue that the way of life that is advocated by the Father in *Equilibrium* can be contrasted precisely with what Hannah Arendt warns us before in her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*⁵⁷.

On the surface, it may seem that Libria is a tyranny. Tyranny is commonly understood as a lawless regime, or a regime operating against the law, in accordance with the arbitrary will of the tyrant. However, I contend that in accordance with Arendt's understanding, it is actually a totalitarian regime. Totalitarianism is indifferent to law as it is commonly understood, and works under a specific ideology. Libria is in fact a totalitarian state, with its own set of rules, which are promoted as serving the highest purpose - one of the mere survival of mankind - but are in fact destroying what is human in people. Arendt uses Marxism and Nazism as examples of ideologies, which are based on the so-called laws of nature or history. Arendt's conception of ideology⁵⁸ could be summarized as based on a single premise that explains everything and while based on its very term, it should mean 'the science of ideas', it does the exact opposite: it destructs the ideas that do not conform with the main one. That is exactly what Prozium does, in essence, because while it rids people of their emotions, it also renders all expressions of emotions meaningless. That is why all art is destroyed, whether it is literature, music, or visual arts. Everything that does not conform with the main goal of Libria is to be terminated.

⁵⁷ This part is based on my understanding of class and notes by Post, Matthew. The History of Political Thought 4: 20th Century - Final Class Notes. BISLA. December 2012.

⁵⁸ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 468-469

The *modus operandi* of Libria's totalitarianism is terror. Prozium, together with the police-equivalent in the form of Tetragrammaton Clerics, is the tool of terror through which authorities exercise it on citizens. Terror, in its typical understanding, can (and often is) used to suppress opposition. In this case, however, terror becomes the 'standard operating procedure' of the regime. Arendt explains it in a way that can be divided into four steps: the elimination of the enemies, the stabilization of men, the embodiment of the law, the fabrication of mankind. Let me now explain these consecutively.

1. The elimination of the 'enemies' of nature (the 'lesser races' for the Nazis) or of history (classes for the Soviets).

In *Equilibrium*, these enemies – or criminals - are the so-called 'sense-offenders,' who refuse to take daily doses of the emotion-suppressing Prozium and thus to conform to the totalitarian ideology of Libria. They are considered to be a threat, and are called, seen, and treated as terrorists.

What happens with crime as such in totalitarianism is that the usual laws are ignored and supposedly higher standards (such as law of nature, history, or as it is the case in *Equilibrium*, the very survival of mankind) are transformed into laws of movement embodied by the regime. A criminal is then the one who opposes this 'movement' or the regime.

2. The 'stabilization' of men.

The main goal of stabilizing men is to create the ideal (or the so-called 'utopian') society by influencing and gradually changing the human nature. This according to Arendt happens through the three stages of isolation, loneliness, and solitude.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 474-479

Isolation makes it impossible for people to organize politically. No other political parties, no special interest groups, no unions, etc. are allowed - apart from the one ruling party. This isolation is in fact the destruction of the public side of human beings.

Loneliness concerns the whole of our life, but, in particular, it concerns the private life of people. In practice it means the destruction of the private side of human beings. With these two (i.e. isolation and loneliness) enforced, one's humanity is nearly absolutely eradicated.

Solitude is in this context considered to be a good thing. In short, solitude is when one can be alone with their thoughts. Obviously this is important for all of the people, because everyone sometimes needs some 'alone time,' so to speak. This is also important for critics, thinkers, philosophers, etc. However, too much solitude can lead to worries, sadness and overthinking.

It is important not to confuse solitude with isolation and loneliness. Isolation and loneliness destroy people as human beings, while solitude actually helps us be free under the condition of being able to interact with others both personally and politically. Isolation and loneliness are present in *Equilibrium*, while solitude not so much, because if the first two are realized, there is nothing to think about when one is alone.

Gradually, by destroying both public and private interaction through terror, totalitarianism destroys action⁶⁰. It does so, because it removes the 'space' between people: "Wherever human beings come together—be it in private or socially, be it in public or politically—a space is generated that simultaneously gathers them into it and separates them from one another. Every such space has its own structure that changes over time and reveals itself in a private context as custom, in a social context as convention, and in a public context as laws, constitutions, statutes, and the like. Wherever people come together, the world thrusts itself

⁶⁰ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 466

between them, and it is in this inbetween space that all human affairs are conducted”⁶¹. This ‘space’ is the freedom to evaluate or reevaluate how you think about things and how you will live. It also presses everyone close together, but at the same time makes it impossible for them to interact meaningfully and sincerely with each other. Finally, by destroying this evaluation of everyone’s life, totalitarianism destroys all independence on the part of individuals and effectively makes them its playthings.

Then, the next step with the transition to ‘total terror’ is:

3. The embodiment of the law of movement (a continuous state of emergency).

Libria exists in a continuous state of emergency. Everyone is obliged to take emotion-suppressant Prozium, otherwise people constitute a deadly threat to themselves. Prozium prevents the war of annihilation from happening. Tetragrammaton clerics are the representatives of the regime and a police, trained to reveal sense-offenders and destroy anything that can be classified as “emotional content EC-10,” thus serving the noble purpose of protecting the humankind.

This state of emergency seems to be endless, because the emotional content (EC-10) keeps appearing whatever the effort of Tetragrammaton might be. When returning from a mission in the outskirts of Libria, called the Nethers, Preston’s colleague Errol Partridge asks: “How long, Preston, till all this is gone? Till we’ve burned every last bit of it?” Preston responds that they are planning to do exactly that: get rid of all the EC-10 content. Throughout the film we see, however, that this is not possible. The clerics are continuously trying to enact Father’s words and by burning everything that could trigger or express emotions, they want to save the humanity.

⁶¹ Arendt, „Introduction into Politics“, 106

There is a clear connection between one of Father's speeches and Arendt's explanation of the outcome of terror. Arendt explains terror as "the execution of a law of movement whose ultimate goal is not the welfare of men or the interest of one man but the fabrication of mankind, eliminates individuals for the sake of the species, sacrifices the 'parts' for the sake of the 'whole'."⁶² Father says what is correspondent to her understanding:

"...intrinsically, humans, as creatures of the Earth were drawn inherently always back to one thing - war. And thus we seek to correct not the symptom but the disease itself. We have sought to shrug off individuality, replacing it with conformity. Replacing it with sameness, with unity, allowing each man, woman, and child in this great society to lead identical lives. The concept of identical environment construction allows each of us to head confidently into each moment with all the secure knowledge it has been lived before".

So we are already alone, isolated, and are not allowed to wear whatever clothes we would like to, or a haircut we would like to have, or to be in control of the way the working tools are organized on the desk in the office, let alone to have something more meaningful than that, such as unique thoughts.

However, the most important question then is, if that what remains of people after this procedure, will still be human. Moreover, what will then be the whole point of our existence?

In a scene in which John Preston is interrogating the sense-offender Mary O'Brian, trying to find out who are her accomplices, Mary inquires clearly:

Mary: "Let me ask you something. Why are you alive?"

Preston: "I'm alive...I live...to safeguard the continuity of this great society. To serve Libria."

Mary: "It's circular. You exist to continue your existence. What's the point?"

Preston: [with a hesitation] "What's the point of your existence?"

Mary: "To feel. Because you've never done it, you can never know it. But it's as vital as breath. And without it - without love, without anger, without sorrow - breath is just a clock ticking."

Mary points out that argument Preston uses in his answer is tautological and narrow. She makes it clear that she finds life without emotions pointless. Preston did not question the

⁶² Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 465

authority of the Father until he stopped taking Prozium, and it shows that not only was Preston not feeling anger or sympathy, but he was not even thinking critically of his own or other peoples' actions.

But is having all this wide range of feelings really worth all the suffering and wars? Why would anyone want to bother with feelings of anger, sadness, or love, if they directly or indirectly threaten our very existence? Why resist systematic manipulation of emotions, or genetic manipulations, or some such thing, if controlling these would enable us to live in a peaceful society? On the one hand, it sounds only logical to say, yes, why not do it, if it would guarantee peace and stability. On the other hand, as I mentioned in the beginning, this is a very utopian vision that nobody was yet able to achieve without resorting to war-like or totalitarian methods. And that kind of defeats the purpose of it. The utilitarian logic of means justifying ends is everything but sensitive, and especially in this case it would be more than a hypocritical way of achieving the desired goals. Moreover, if we would strip people off their emotions, would we still be able to call ourselves 'human'? What is it that makes us 'human'? These are very basic questions of human identity, but also very difficult ones to answer.

4. The fabrication of mankind.

This is the final stage, the utopian vision of a perfect world in accordance with the ideology of the totalitarian government. In Equilibrium, the goal is to abolish human emotions through terror (Prozium and clerics) in order to save the humankind from itself and the threat of total war. No one ever reached this stage. For "we can no more change a world by changing the people in it—quite apart from the practical impossibility of such an enterprise—than we can

change an organization or a club by attempting to influence its members in one way or another”⁶³.

All of the above shows that Libria is, in fact, functioning under a totalitarian regime. These are especially infamous for curtailing people’s freedom in various aspects of their lives. Ideally, they limit every aspect of human life that could possibly threaten the sustainability of the regime. A totalitarian state then necessarily decreases freedom of its citizens, usually under the claim of security. And people are willing to accept it, because “most people want security in this world, not liberty.”⁶⁴

In her other text, Arendt contends that the meaning of politics is freedom⁶⁵. (Although later she admits that “in the modern world, both theoretically and practically, politics has been seen as a means for protecting both society’s life-sustaining resources and the productivity of its open and free development”⁶⁶, thus ascribing lower priority to freedom as such, which is a legitimate point.). She also claims that „Politics is based on the fact of human plurality, because it deals with the coexistence and association of different men”⁶⁷. However, people as such are apolitical: “Politics arises between men, and so quite outside of man. There is therefore no real political substance. Politics arises in what lies between men and is established as relationships”⁶⁸. Furthermore, “Man exists—or is realized—in politics only in the equal rights that those who are most different guarantee for each other. This is a voluntary guarantee of, and concession to, a claim of legal equality that recognizes the plurality of men, who can thank themselves for their plurality”⁶⁹. All this would mean there is no politics in

⁶³ Arendt, „Introduction into Politics“, 106

⁶⁴ Mencken, H.L. *Minority Report*, Green, Jonathon. *Cassell Dictionary of Cynical Quotations*. (London: Cassell, 1994), 96

⁶⁵ Arendt, „Introduction into Politics“, 108

⁶⁶ Arendt, „Introduction into Politics“, 110

⁶⁷ Arendt, „Introduction into Politics“, 93

⁶⁸ Arendt, „Introduction into Politics“, 95

⁶⁹ Arendt, „Introduction into Politics“, 94

Equilibrium, because for that to exist there would need to be more than one powerful actor apart from the totalitarian state. From that follows that there is no freedom at all, because there are no real relationships between people - these are made impossible, as a result of people being forced to be not only equal, but the same in every possible way. People in Libria have been cured of a life-threatening disease (i.e. emotions), but now it is not clear what is there left to live for.

The family is considered to be one of the building blocks of society and we learn the basics of social interactions from it. We learn how to act in relationships, whether it is between parents, siblings, neighbors, and toward strangers too. According to Arendt, even “political bodies are based on the family”⁷⁰ and this is important, because our world functions in such a manner that an individual has no place in it – and this applies to whoever who differs from the majority, too. “Families are founded as shelters and mighty fortresses in an inhospitable, alien world, into which we want to introduce kinship. This desire leads to the fundamental perversion of politics, because it abolishes the basic quality of plurality, or rather forfeits it by introducing the concept of kinship.”⁷¹ Perhaps this contradiction leads us to corruption and cronyism which seem inescapable as if they were inherent in us.

It is one of the shortcomings of the film that we do not see any families in *Equilibrium* except for Preston’s, and even that is incomplete – we only encounter his two children, and his wife/their mother is mentioned, but no other family ties are alluded to. Plus, it is not clear how the actual concept of family is understood in Libria. It could easily be the case that since people do not experience no such thing as love, they are assigned their life partners based on whatever principles there are in the state, and the only purpose of the family is procreation of orderly citizenry. Preston cannot really be understood as an example of a common citizen,

⁷⁰ Arendt, „Introduction into Politics“, 94

⁷¹ Arendt, „Introduction into Politics“, 94

because as DuPont hints in the beginning, Preston was always able to understand sense-offenders, even when he was under the influence of Prozium. This might suggest the possibility that maybe the drug was not affecting him as it should in the first place, and that he really did love his wife and children in an unacceptable way for Libria, although he might not have been completely aware of it.

As far back as Socrates in Plato's *Apology*⁷², curiosity and contemplation were favored atop of ignorance. This is not to say that the one who chooses not to question his surroundings is to be considered less of a valuable person, but our time is limited – and so we might as well make use of it. Shirley exposes the core message of the now legendary sci-fi/action/dystopia *The Matrix*, (a film from which *Equilibrium* doubtlessly borrowed) which he claims is very simple: „Know thyself and question what you see around you“⁷³. He also quotes Lana Wachowski, one of the creators of *The Matrix*, who in one of the interviews said that „...it is very easy to live in an unexamined life. It is very easy to not be aware of what's going on out there in the world“⁷⁴. Alternatively to Arendt's understanding, taking Prozium could then be also seen as an equivalent of choosing the blue pill, allowing people to live in a blissful ignorance of their surroundings and consequences of their (non-) actions.

⁷² „On the other hand, if I say that it is the greatest good for a man to discuss virtue every day and those other things about which you hear me conversing and testing myself and others, for the unexamined life is not worth living for men, you will believe me even less.” – Plato. *Apology. Complete Works*. Translated by G. M. A. Grube, Edited by J.M Cooper. (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub Co., 1977), 38a 33

⁷³ Shirley, J. „The Matrix: Know Thyself ?“ *Exploring The Matrix*. Ed. Karen Haber. (Byron Preiss Visual Publications, Inc., 2003), 62

⁷⁴ Shirley, 62

Conclusion

In this thesis, I argued that the popularity of dystopia is based on more profound reasons than it being merely a fun pastime. Dystopias examine such fundamental questions as what it means to be human, or how do we improve the system our society works under in such a way that we prevent repeating our mistakes from the past.

This work started with defining the concept of utopia as a display of an ideal peaceful society. However, the noble utopian ideal seems to be quite an impossible goal to achieve, often incidentally leading to totalitarianism. From this results a failed utopia, or to call it differently a ‘utopia that has gone wrong’, or simply a ‘dystopia’.

The words ‘fear’, ‘frustration’ and ‘disappointment’ have their fair place in this context. Dystopias represent our fear of the future of politics and humankind as such, in addition to an attempt to learn our lesson from the past. Via projecting the possible outcomes of our current actions into the future, dystopias show us what could possibly happen. Whether they are using a catastrophe of environmental or self-inflicted character, or they are trying to be as close to the present as possible, in each case we are being warned; because dystopias never depict a positive image of the world.

As the genre of dystopia is very prominent, it developed several subcategories. Each of these focuses on different aspect of society that “went wrong”, e.g. the surveillance of citizens by the authorities got out of hand, genetic manipulation became the basis for prejudices among people, etc.

In this thesis, I contrasted Arendt’s analysis of the phenomenon of prejudices and her viewpoint coming from her essay “Introduction into Politics” with their depiction in *District*

9, particularly in human conduct toward the aliens. Furthermore, building on her discussion of terror and totalitarianism, I drew a parallel with the society of *Equilibrium*. In both cases, it is clear that the subject matter of these films extends beyond the boundaries of banal fiction, and instead its connection with real life problems and thus its importance, surfaces.

The two films I analyzed in this work are different and similar at the same time, of course in particular ways.

In both of them, the main protagonist ends up revolting against the oppressive system, which he previously blindly supported. In each case, this happens for a different reason and with a different outcome, but in essence these are the same. In *Equilibrium*, the Tetragrammaton cleric John Preston riots against the totalitarian authority, because it is ultimately suppressing human nature as such, with all its positive and negative attributes, although with the seemingly noble motive of the mere survival of humankind. In *District 9*, an insignificant bureaucrat Wikus Van de Merwe fights against the supposedly democratic contemporary system which cooperates with his home private military company Multinational United (MNU), and he does so mainly for self-preservation, but his disagreement with MNU's conduct is clear later on.

Both of the films contain love stories, but these serve diverse purposes. While in *District 9*, it could be said that Wikus' love for his wife convinces him to fight the genetic mutation and wait for the cure even if it takes years instead of simply giving up or sacrificing himself in a battle, in *Equilibrium*, love is only one of the many emotions Preston experiences and thus decides that is the human thing to feel and that the system got it wrong, although it can be said it was his main motivation to revolt against the drug-based dystopia he was living in.

In both of these films, we can see human selfishness. In case of *District 9* MNU this is represented in their standpoint, where everything possible is done for profit, even if the means

to this profit are condemnable to say the least. In case of the leader of *Equilibrium*'s Libria, DuPont, it is sacrificing the essence of humanity in everyday people for the sake of his own interest as the leader, while claiming it is for the greater good of everyone, mankind even. He uses the threat of another world war that would supposedly destroy humanity to convince citizens to give up their emotions "for the sake of survival".

Finally, as I already mentioned, both of these films talk about human fears. Whether it is war, or aliens from another planet. We are afraid of the unknown and we are afraid of ourselves as well, because we have seen what we are and what we are not capable of doing. We are terrified that we will bomb each other with irreversible consequences both for us and the whole planet. We are unable to come to an agreement among ourselves, so we cannot possibly imagine debating important issues with another species from outer space. We are afraid that the multinational corporations will take over the world, but we are supporting them anyway, because we kind of do not have a choice.

The Multinational United was testing and experimenting with the aliens, the Nazis were experimenting on human beings, contemporary companies nowadays are making use of live rabbits or rats, but how is that really different from each other? And is it, really? Libria was in fact a totalitarianism, with Tetragrammaton enforcing the twisted ideology through 1984-like methods, so eerily related to the current surveillance debate. As it was once said, "The human race never solves any of its problems. It merely outlives them."⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Gerrold, David. (Starlog magazine: 1978), in Green, 130

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