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The Future of Dystopia

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Summary

Dystopia, just as utopia, has always been immersed in political visions: utopia as an ideal society and dystopia as its opposite: 'bad place' – a futuristic, usually very near future, an imagined universe in which oppressive social control rules. However, utopia and dystopia cannot be absolutely separated, there is a constant threat of replacing good place by bad place, very often leading to the conclusion that every utopia either leads to dystopia or already is dystopia. Today, it often seems that the dystopian future has already arrived, the reality itself evokes dystopian imagination: the global warming and the catastrophes, the monstrous underside of various technologies that would ultimately overpower us – humans. Furthermore, both utopia and dystopia are narratives about how to govern the commons. Whereas in the past the commons appeared in different utopian visions of good governing, today most often the commons fleshes out in disfigured forms of dystopian narratives. In this essay I analyze dystopian imagination as a traumatic symptom of the commons, expressed in different narratives of the crisis of capitalism (the Anthropocene, the global monsters, the uncanny weather, metaverse, neo- or techno-feudalism).

Keywords: Dystopia, Commons, Anthropocene, Neo- or Techno-Feudalism, Trauma

The Future of Dystopia

What is the future of dystopia? This is a very awkward question: what comes after dystopia is either its negation, with the possibility that out of the dystopian seed something new will emerge, perhaps even utopian, or alternatively, catastrophe, the end of the world – a world without humans, that is neither dystopian nor utopian. This ambiguity of 'after' can be situated in contemplating the end of time, that is, the end of human species as a real possibility, or the very paradox of 'after-dystopian-time' into the time of the end of time, the end of temporality itself (Anders, 2019). Since the destruction of Hiroshima with an atomic bomb and the systematic,

industrial murder of humans in Auschwitz in the middle of the twentieth century as a tremendous concentration of biopower, we tend to think about the future as a dystopia, as what Gunther Anders calls the naked apocalypse, the annihilation of the world without apocalyptic redemption (*ibid*., p. 2). In the context of contemporary trends in 'the society of spectacle' (Debord, 2005) the various possibilities of the end of time have multiplied, even become a precious entertaining commodity – contemporary dystopias prosper and multiply in the time of the end of time.

So, what is our predicament today? What do we think of the time paradox of eternal delay? The very temporal gap between the now and the very soon seems to have been fading away: dystopia is not something coming but is taking place right now. In other words, it often seems that the future has already arrived, that reality itself is already dystopian: global warming and catastrophes, the monstrous underside of various technologies (artificial intelligence, robots, replicants) that could ultimately overpower us – humans, narratives about terrorism, the fear of 'hordes' of climate refugees, natural catastrophes, the virus. Nonetheless, almost all of dystopian narratives imply that we are losing or have already lost something that we all share, that we all need to share to survive: water, air, food – in short, what we all have in common. This is the important utopian theme in the inaugural text of Thomas More (1517) – the term utopian corporeality (non-place) was coined when the commons (the land) had been fenced off. But what the commons represents is difficult, if not impossible, to define, as Linebaugh (2014) argues. The term 'commons' evokes a wide range of meanings and concepts: communal land ownership and natural resources, water, air, fertile ground; the contemporary commons such as the genome, the Internet, the AI, and the constant struggle against the corporate drive to privatize them. This utopian corporeality, this phantasmatic essence – the commons in dystopian narratives has been either suppressed or controlled or annihilated. Thus, utopian and dystopian texts are not utterly separated or opposed, they both in different ways deal with the commons; furthermore, they both originate in a traumatic event, a certain lack affecting the individual but also common humanity, a lack which they both strive to fill with a narrative either of hope, a blueprint for a better future, or pessimism, bad governing, an utter loss or suppression of different commons. This loss of the commons is something they both – only retroactively – strive to narrate.

So, the question about the future of dystopia should include the commons and trauma in the temporal perspective of the near future. In this essay, I follow a number of variations around this question, starting with something that has not usually been considered dystopian – the weather. How can weather, more specifically climate change, be entangled in the troubled creation of a new global monster like Frankenstein's creature? How is the commons related not just to humans, but to nonhumans as well, especially to the emergence of global monsters like the vam-

pire and Frankenstein's monster in the nineteenth century? What do the monsters have to do with the emergence of the Anthropocene, at first a vague premonition and then the terrifying discovery of catastrophic consequences of human intervention in geology (beginning with burning fossil fuels 250 years ago). In the second part of the essay, I ask whether one of the riddles of capital lies in the traumatic core of dystopian narratives, such as cyberpunk films and fiction. How can a dystopian traumatic core that overlaps with utopia point to the final meditation on the 'riddle of capitalism' and the future of dystopia, that is, the potentiality of the utopian impulse to create a new praxis of the commons?

Classical dystopias such as Orwell's *1984* were mostly concerned with totalitarian visions of the near future, but presumed that the ground was safe however repressive and destructive the social systems were that would remain in place. Contemporary dystopias, in contrast, focus on the very nature of ontological instability, on the ground itself. Nature (the environment) is no longer an eternal, stable, indestructible substance; the weather can frighten us like a monster; even worse, weather-related trauma could torment us from the future. For instance, as Ann Kaplan (2016) argues, the film *Take Shelter* (dir. Nichols, 2011) is about weather, but it is also a dystopian film. The main protagonist Curtis LaForche (Michael Shannon) suffers from symptoms of trauma: flashbacks, nightmares, hallucinations, depression, and paranoia, related to something that has not yet happened – future climate events that will destroy the 'natural world'. The film is almost entirely fantastic: it sustains suspense about what is real and what is not real; viewers are not sure if the violent storms and accompanying zombie figures and monstrous dogs are real or just visceral, brutal hallucinations. From the very beginning, through Curtis's eyes, we witness something strange in so-called nature: the trees begin to shake wildly, the sky is threatening, huge black clouds curl in strange ways, there is deafening thunder and lightning, there is the sound of a repeated bell. The eerie environment appears off-balance. Very soon, for instance, we discover that the very materiality, the rain that is falling on Curtis's hand, is not actually rain but brown oil, and a little later, when the hero stands in the shower, we realize that this is just a vivid hallucination. Throughout the film, similar scenes of weather maintain the sense of insecurity, which is, in my opinion, characteristic of the fantastic genre: the insecurity reflected in an uncanny and uncertain environment is just a figment of the imagination of an unsettled hero living in a typical white middle-class family. In the end the fantastic suspension resolves: Curtis is not crazy, we are crazy: his nightmares and flashbacks (actually flashforwards) are real: we learn this at the end of the film as a multitude of tornadoes ominously approach us, that is, Curtis's family and his shelter.

Curtis, the main protagonist, is traumatized by anticipatory visions before they have happened. According to Kaplan, as the very title of her book suggests, *Climate*

Trauma, Foreseeing the Future in Dystopian Film and Fiction, we suffer from climate trauma that surges not from the past but from the future, that is, a future of catastrophic events (2016). Even though these events have not yet happened, we suffer from these futuristic traumatic events. She calls this 'Pretraumatic Stress Syndrome' (PreTSS), which is mainly caused by the increasing number of futurist dystopian worlds portrayed in film and literature. So instead of the usual 'Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder' (PTSD), trauma buried deeply in the past, in the well of unconscious, it is buried in the future, as if in some meteor plummeting to the Earth. This 'innocent' change of suffix, the temporal shift from trauma to pretrauma, is caused by growing fears about the total collapse of natural and social environments, that is living in the time of ends to the very end of time. But how can we experience a traumatic event from the future without relating something traumatic to it that we have already experienced? Trauma is woven into a temporal paradox – the future, the past, and the present. Following Freud and Lacan, as Zizek (1994, pp. 30-31) argues, we could say that the traumatic event itself is devoid of presentation, and it acquires traumatic features only in retrospect, as in the case of Freud's most famous patient, the Wolf Man. There was nothing traumatic in the Wolf Man's memory of parental coitus which he witnessed at the age of two. However, this scene was the non-Symbolizable kernel around which all later successive symbolization whirled; "the scene acquired traumatic features only in retrospect, with later development of the child's infantile sexual theories, when it became impossible to integrate the scene within the newly emerged horizon of narrativization-historization-symbolization" (*ibid*., p. 31). From different angles it may appear that as a belated symptom, 'a return of the repressed', trauma actually came from the future.

The temporal paradox of trauma often evokes an uncanny feeling, something familiar that suddenly becomes unfamiliar, strange. It often arises from the confusion between life and death – we are not sure whether something is animate or inanimate and so on. In *Take Shelter*, weather becomes uncanny: it seems to be alive, and this sudden aliveness may renew awareness of the entanglement of the human species with other forms of life. On the other hand, despite their radically nonhuman nature, the catastrophic events caused by climate change are nonetheless animated by cumulative human actions. Though we have all contributed in some measure great or small to climate change, the whole human species is not responsible for the looming catastrophe; rather, it is a misrecognition or phantasmic cover for the process of dispossessing the commons. 'The human species' is an ideological veil over trauma that occurred in a specific moment of history, allegorically illustrated by the famous Gothic meeting on the shores of Lake Geneva in 1815; that is, climate change and the 'birth' of modern monsters are intrinsically connected. During the greatest volcanic eruption in recorded history, in 1815 the volcano on Mount Tambora (east of Bali) sent debris shooting kilometres in the air. The plume of dust

spread around the globe, obscuring the sun, and causing temperatures to plunge by three or six degrees at the time the Gothics discussed their horror stories. The disastrous event caused climate disruption and famine in Europe and China. At the same time on the shores of Lake Geneva Lord Byron, his physician John Polidori, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Mary Shelley invented the most famous monsters: Polidori – the undead bloodsucker, the Vampire; Mary Shelley – a reanimated corpse, Frankenstein's monster; while Lord Byron wrote a poem about a bleak catastrophic environment, 'Darkness'.

Amitav Ghosh (2016) claims that climate change influenced the dark moods of the Gothics and hence the creation of global monsters. According to Ghosh, to question why is to confront another of the uncanny effects of global warming – the beginning of the nineteenth century was exactly the period in which human activity was changing the Earth's atmosphere and thus started the era of the Anthropocene (*ibid*., p. 116). The uncanny feeling caused by volcanic eruption and darkening of the globe, in my opinion, hinted at a suppressed link (political unconscious) between the Anthropocene and the commons.

What is this link? What do the emergence of the Anthropocene and the commons have in common? The answer, I think, lies in the creature created on the shores of Lake Geneva – Frankenstein's monster. The creature, utterly unique, singular, not belonging to the human species, yearns for freedom and the love of others. He searches for human solidarity and communion – the commons, but he is excluded, wandering outcast through the icy landscape. It is as if the creature directly embodies the political unconscious of modernity: an assemblage of dead matter, an animated corpse, suffering humanity controlled by the hidden and indifferent Creator. The Creature painfully learns about private property, the meaning of possessions:

> as a vagabond and a slave, doomed to waste his powers for the profits of the chosen few! And what was I? I know that I possessed no money, no friends, no kind of property [...] I was not even of the same nature as man. [...] Was I then the monster? (Suvin, 1979, p. 130).

The creature, like postmodern replicants in *Blade Runner*, embodies the commons, but at the same time, as the only one of its kind, singled out, persecuted, it is deprived of the commons and vaguely yearns for it. There is a paradoxical position that one is all, and at the same time the all misses the one – 'the all' being patched together from various parts yearns for the One, its creator. The intrinsic web of connection, however, like those occurring far away on the other side of the globe (the volcanic eruption) may have contributed to its creation.

Hence, the political unconscious link between the Anthropocene and the commons is directly expressed in the third creation on Lake Geneva: Byron's poem 'Darkness' focuses on the very landscape, on the Earth that the monsters will trample.

> The world was void
> The populous and powerful – was lump,
> Seasonless, herbless, treeless, manless, lifeless –
> A lump of death – a chaos of hard clay (Byron in Ghosh, 2016, p. 117).

It is the third creation on the shores of Lake Geneva that points in this direction – Byron's poem 'Darkness'. Frankenstein's monster would later develop into myriad variations of manufactured life, from automata to robots to cyborgs, to replicants in *Blade Runner*, to the vampire to Dracula and to the multiplication of all kinds of vampires – the poem 'Darkness' would generate futuristic dystopian landscapes. For instance, the dystopian landscape of Cormac McCarthy's novel *Road* resonates with Byron's poem 'Darkness' and its landscape of 'less', of something missing, and therefore something uncanny: the southwards journey of an unnamed boy and man, a father and son, through a world of black and grey – a colourless world in which they encounter subhuman creatures intent on enslaving or cannibalizing each other while all being slowly ground down by a bleak, fruitless environment. It is a hellscape in which the air itself is poisonous, mourning the loss of the natural world. In the poem 'Darkness', the Earth as a whole is becoming strange and uncanny. Hence, I propose that 'Darkness', the poem about immense geo-trauma, is the first poem on the Anthropocene.

These monsters, I claim, are dystopian symptoms coming from the future (as if the Gothics were suffering tremendous PreTSS); they embody a link between the Anthropocene and the commons. As in Byron's poem 'Darkness', in the twenty-first century the planetary breakthrough of something uncanny comes to us, belatedly, conceptually framed by the term Anthropocene, the term that

> was first coined by atmospheric scientists as a name for the geological epoch that the Earth entered with the industrial revolution, around 1800. It is characterized by the unprecedented fact that humanity has come to play a decisive, if still largely incalculable, role in the planet's ecology and geology, that Human activities have become so pervasive and profound that they rival the great forces of nature and are pushing the Earth as a whole into planetary terra incognita (Clark, 2015, p. 1).

Further, as Timothy Clark effectively summarizes, while "the original coiners of the term dated it from the industrial revolution and the invention of the steam engine" (*ibid*.), others, such as Timothy Morton (2017), have argued that "extensive agriculture and forest-clearing" (the fencing off of the commons) may "have significantly affected the Earth and the entire biosphere", long before the industrial revolution and the Great Acceleration since 1945 (Clark, 2015, p. 1).

Indeed, the volcanic eruption that inspired Byron's poem 'Darkness' coincided with the beginning of the industrial revolution in the 1800s that for many is the

beginning of the new epoch, the Anthropocene (Ghosh, 2016). While today we deal mostly with the dystopian image of the Anthropocene to mobilize awareness and actions against global warming, pollution, and further devastation of the planet, we constantly suppress a link between the Anthropocene and the commons. Besides the monsters hatched on the shores of Lake Geneva, and even before them, the monstrosity in the very intimacy of domestic space is powerfully embodied in this link. In her book *Caliban and the Witch*, Silvia Federici charts out this connection between the appropriation of the commons, the witch-hunt and the development of capitalism. Hardly would anyone imagine that Wall Street or the financial code have anything in common with unruly, ugly critters like witches. In her discussion of the witch-hunt, Federici expands what Marx called

> primitive accumulation (structural conditions for the existence of capitalist society [the commons]) by including: (i) the development of a new sexual division of labor subjugating women's labor and women's reproductive function to the reproduction of the work-force; (ii) the construction of a new patriarchal order, based upon the exclusion of women from waged-work and their subordination to men; (iii) the mechanization of the proletarian body and its transformation, in the case of women, into a machine for the production of new workers (2004, p. 12).

So, the witch-hunt, in her view, was not just exotic outbursts of violence by vehement zealous Inquisitors, but rather an important part of a long, laborious process of primitive accumulation during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that was as important as colonization (and taking the commons). The female womb serves to produce more and more workers; it has become the site of production just as the factory has been for male waged workers. According to Federici, in their grand narrative Marx and Foucault miss the mysterious female body of the witch: Marx in his elaboration of primitive accumulation – Foucault in his history of sexuality, especially in the discourse on demonology. Further on, Federici points out that the witch-hunt demystifies Foucault's concept of biopower – the type of power based on the right to kill that shifted in the eighteenth century to management of the population. Connecting this power to the rise of capitalism, the primitive accumulation and reproduction of labour-power has been a universal process in every phase of capitalism.

Through this long performative the very body in family, in intimacy, the body of the other (the female body) had become strange and unfamiliar. What followed was a bewitched intimacy with nature, fertility, reproduction – sexuality was compressed into the body of the witch, the other – the witch – became uncanny. The witch's body was opening up channels to a new social formation – capitalism. At the same time, from this traumatic event related to the primitive accumulation of the witch's body, expressing the brutal separation from affective commons and solidarity with nonhumans – a modern subject would painfully begin to take shape.

However, it was not just a traumatic event – that is, the emergence of the modern subject; it was also the trauma of the Anthropocene, a geo-trauma that originated in the same event: the foreclosure of human-nonhuman commons.

The cruel disciplinary power of separation prosecuted witches and their friendly relations with domestic animals, pigs, cows, horses, geldings, and mares for practicing bewitchment. At times, the accused did indeed practice an 'ethic of care' involving magic, healing, chanting, and unusual intimacy with nonhumans – but this was seen as disturbing life and sovereignty. Ultimately, the loss of the bewitched world implies the deconstruction and devastation of the environment; the body of the witch embodied the ethic of care we applaud today with its broader ecological webs of connections and cooperation. This traumatic event of the separation between the human and nonhuman (still 'united' in the body of the witch), Morton calls 'Severing': "a foundational, traumatic fissure" between human reality and the real, or "the ecological symbiosis of human and nonhuman parts" of the biosphere.

> Since nonhumans compose our very bodies, it's likely that the Severing has produced physical as well as psychic effects, scars of the rip between reality and the real. [...] How can humans achieve solidarity even among themselves if massive parts of their social, psychic and philosophical space have been cordoned off? Like a gigantic, very heavy object such as a black hole, the Severing distorts all the decisions and affinities that humans make. Difficulties of solidarity between humans are therefore also artifacts of repressing and suppressing possibilities of solidarity with nonhumans (Morton, 2017, p. 41).

In our context, then, the Severing, the human-nonhuman separation expressed as psychic trauma, meant the exclusion of the monster, that is, separation from the affected environment. Solidarity existed only in the bewitched world (witches' solidarity with nonhuman forms of life). Once more, geo-trauma emerged through alienation from the affective environment, creating the top layers of the Anthropocene.

This traumatic event occurred in concrete historical circumstances, through a long transition from feudalism to capitalism, and only later, retroactively, in our contemporary times, acquired the traumatic features of the Anthropocene. As we have already mentioned, therefore, the Anthropocene appears to us as a dystopian image of a devastated landscape, as a geological and climactic wound, as the wound in the environment. Of course, like in any trauma, it is not a linear, steadily progressing process, finishing in the theology of narrative closure; it is constantly recoiling at the edge of the void. Even though this traumatic event does take place at a certain point in linear time, its waves ripple out in many temporal dimensions. By interfering in the divine domain of creation (genetic engineering, artificial intelligence, posthumanism), the individual monsters invented on the shores of Lake Geneva, the

vampire, Frankenstein's monster, the classical monsters of the Anthropocene, tend to multiply, producing new forms of life, multiply parasitically using human bodies as vessels, or colonizing protected imperial metropolises. In the end, the massive biopolitical intensity introduces new global regimes, or, in other words, what was a solitary, isolated event on the shores of Lake Geneva spread all over the globe – in terms of genres, it presented a shift from horror to dystopia.

This transition from horror to dystopia has been driven by different phases and transformations of capitalism, so-called primitive accumulation, and the commons. Today it is encapsulated in the neoliberal doctrine. Following the expansion of neoliberal ideology and financial capitalism around the globe, coupled with the world's near total privatization, one asks if there will be an end to privatization or if it is a process that will go on forever and seeking to reclaim the commons is just a utopian fantasy. One asks whether it is possible to find anything of substance that cannot be privatized, that we all must share, something that belongs to the human species, which cannot be alchemically transmuted into finance and privatized. In other words, is it possible to identify some inner human core that can be preserved in an era of a corporate drive toward total privatization?

As a concept, the Anthropocene parallels the second enclosure of what Marx calls "the general intellect", that is, the privatization of the public sphere, the enclosure of virtual space, the corporate drive that seeks to privatize the brain. In the context of the arrival of the second and perhaps third enclosure, I again ask the question, what is the future of dystopia? Perhaps another way to address this question is to solve a series of capitalism's riddles – as Jameson would say, "the riddle of riddles is capitalism itself, and how in its radical difference from all other social formations (or modes of production) it can exist in the first place" (2011, p. 14). Dystopia is a symptom of the enclosure of the commons, thus a symptom as a trace from the future, that may enlighten the riddle of capital. Perhaps the trace of traumatic symptoms comes from the third enclosure, still in process and still ahead of us (by the third enclosure I mean the enclosure of the human by the transhuman and superhuman). This last riddle of capital, I believe, embodies the protagonists of cyberpunk fiction, who like the monsters of the Enlightenment, suffer peculiar PreTSS, but in resonance with our contemporary moment.

To think about the future of dystopia today, I believe we should look, for many reasons, at cyberpunk narratives. Contemporary 'dystopian' tendencies in social theory, ironically, were already envisioned in dystopian cyberpunk fiction of the later twentieth century, and now, quite literally, are becoming increasingly our reality. Cyberpunk fiction, as well as cinematic adaptations, include *Blade Runner* (dir. Ridley Scott, 1982), which expresses the development of hidden fears in response to the rise of corporations and neoliberalism, the fear of the immense privatization

of everything, of the commons. *Blade Runner*, like cyberpunk fiction, envisages a peculiar global urban space of the near future, after the second enclosure of the commons has been completed. The wealthy have long fled to the off-world colonies, while the poor, riffraff, misfits, and other minorities of confusing multiculturalism, including malfunctioning nonhumans, robots, and artificial animals, dwell in filth and pollution mostly on the lower levels of the metropolis. The sprawl of postmodern cities, despite their chaotic fluid movements, is organized through the spatial opposition of High/Low: Eldon Tyrell, wealthy head of the Tyrell Corporation, lives high above the city in a huge pyramid; Rick Deckard, the blade runner, lives some ninety-two stories above the city. Noirish melancholy is deeply intertwined with class conditions. Similar to *Blade Runner*, the metropolis in the novel *Snow Crash* (1992) consists of endless sprawling suburbs and semi-federal insulated urban enclaves, or burbclaves, that are surveilled by a privatized police force. But unlike *Blade Runner*, there is seemingly more democratic opportunity to "jack-in" or "plug-in" to the Metaverse, the internet of the future, which can be accessed through any computer, and in which one can move as an avatar. Thus, for instance, the main protagonist Hiro, pizza deliverer for Uncle Enzo's CosaNostra Pizza Inc., lives a double life: in 'reality' in a shabby shipping container, while in the Metaverse he is a warrior prince, plunging into the enigma of a new computer virus that is striking both hackers' bodies and virtual space. Thus, in cyberpunk fiction, the metropolis is just an exaggerated vision of neoliberal doctrines – the privatization of urban space, with all sorts of vanished commons, including that of being human.

Indeed, in both dystopian visions, whether being a replicant in *Blade Runner* or an avatar in the Metaverse, the ultimate question is: Do I own myself, and if not, who owns me? Replicants are dispossessed, like the victims of the first enclosure – the witch, the prostitute, the landless, the peasant, the proletariat, who owned only their own bodies. Replicants, although becoming human, are completely owned – they are commodities, disposable, their short life span parallels the short life of commodities, built-in obsolescence. Similarly, in the novel *Snow Crash* only a small percentage of humans live on the planet Earth, while the rich can gain access to the Metaverse; however, even their avatars are owned by the algorithm that spans from Sumerian myths to contemporary computer language, a paranoid combination of a virtual and biological virus.

Stephenson's cyberpunk novel was written thirty years ago – now the Metaverse is becoming more and more our reality. *Snow Crash* has become a sacred object for a host of computer geeks in Silicon Valley, a subliminal technological utopia, that corporations (Facebook, Google, and others) are trying to develop, and simultaneously privatise all sorts of digitalised and virtualised commons of the future. Ultimately, by connecting different bits of real spaces, with elements of augmented

reality, the Metaverse will encompass the commons to the point that we will consider it our reality. Like Gibson's cyberspace, the Metaverse is just one example of our contemporary dilemmas of vanishing commons, especially public space, the great achievement of modernity.

The second enclosure, unlike the first, is not just related to the land – its potential for expansion seems almost limitless: Amazon, Google, SpaceX and so on are bringing about the nightmarish cyberpunk dystopias that were predicted at the end of the twentieth century. The aim is the private colonization of other planets, like in *Blade Runner* (Musk offering to take the richest tourists off-planet; Bill Gates saving our tiny planet from the Anthropocene through lucrative philanthropy, sloshing around many billions of tax-free dollars). According to Jill Lepore in her radio interview with Mat Gloway, these economic giants draw inspiration for extraterrestrial capitalism from the vision of the world built in dystopian science fiction, and which they misread as techno-utopias.

Thus, ironically, we have made a full circle: we have come to reveal processes that resemble the 'first enclosure'. Originally an archaeology of monarchic sovereignty over land, the fencing of the commons is now transforming into divine sovereignty over information. In short, these very contemporary dystopian tendencies are a strange combination of neoliberalism and feudalism involving seemingly limitless privatization of the commons (personal contacts privatized by Facebook, software by Microsoft, search by Google, global television series by Netflix and HBO), a new stage termed by some as neo-feudalism, or techno-feudalism. As Yanis Varoufakis claims in a blog written on the web page 'Naked Capitalism':

> ... this is how capitalism ends: not with a revolutionary bang, but with an evolutionary whimper. Just as it displaced feudalism gradually, surreptitiously, until one day the bulk of human relations were market-based and feudalism was swept away, so capitalism today is being toppled by a new economic mode: techno-feudalism (2021).

This very dystopian endpoint is transforming markets into fiefdoms, like those of Amazon and Facebook, and many projects are sustained by central banks. According to Varoufakis, we are witnessing a 'strange' combination of the king, the sovereign, the state, the central bank, and the techno-feudal lords. In summary, in order to enjoy the commons, we should pay the rent or subsist in debt, perhaps even outside the Metaverse.

However, unlike the beginning of enclosures, this transformation does not meet significant resistance (no more peasant wars for land, revolutions, attempts to form alternative social formations). Jameson claims that the paradox of capitalism, unlike previous pre-capitalist societies, is that it constitutes social formation by organizing

a multiplicity of people based on the absence of community. This traumatic event includes the development of techno-feudalism (Varoufakis) that is creating a class of serfs whose situation is defined by precarity. This paradoxical state, I think, can be defined by the paradoxical term 'psychotic realism'. In the Lacanian sense the term psychosis differs from repression. In a state of repression, what is repressed still persists in the unconscious and is manifest in symptoms – an utter rejection of the foreclosure of human-nonhuman commons. Psychosis is driven by a frenetic interpretation of reality, with constant slippages in meaning; however, having lost the basis of a symbolic network, a person tries to recover meaning by producing new delusional narratives. Hence, paradoxically, the foreclosed elements come from outside; they are not generated by a refusal of the real but from a lack, a hole in the symbolic order. This outside, viewed as the totality of virtual space and social networks, thus becomes a pulsating, gigantic unconscious in which old meanings derived from words no longer have power. Words are too slow in comparison to the speed of light and the fluctuation of images. The avatars in the Metaverse, the replicants in *Blade Runner*, increasingly resemble the contemporary online world – immense webs of interconnectedness that can seemingly only be supported by psychotic realism. Like the avatars in the Metaverse, psychosis is fascinated with exteriority: the borders between the I and the not-I, the self and the not-self become porous or are abolished; everything is outside, exterior, like the Lacanian unconscious; I become what I touch, what I see, what I feel in the smooth, fluctuating surfaces, my body identifies with the surface of the external world, it even assumes sublime aspects of the Anthropocene. The insatiable thirst for loss of identity, the willingness to become anything, to be everything is epitomized by one of the most famous of Freud's patients, Daniel Paul Schreiber (Freud, 1996, pp. 87-135). Like avatars in the Metaverse, Schreiber felt that his body did not belong to him any longer. He indulged in shapeshifting, becoming a woman, a Jesuit, the Virgin Mary, a prostitute. While Mario Perniola (2004), who coined the term 'psychotic realism', is more interested in artistic praxis from the end of the twentieth century when tackling the collapse of mediation (trying to directly approach the real), I view psychotic realism as contemporary politics' entanglement in cultural wars in an attempt to capture the waning reality effect. Of course, these efforts usually result in numerous paranoid narratives. In other words, psychotic realism expresses what sort of power circulates and operates in contemporary society. This power is becoming a strange combination of neoliberal avatars caught in a tectonic shift of governmentality, by which elusive, Foucault-like micropower congeals into a new (ancient) sovereignty, replete with knights and kings and princesses of the new corporations. Techno-feudalism encloses the commons to such a degree that some are not sure whether we can still call it capitalism; some claim that capitalism is already dead, as suggested by the

title of McKenzie Wark's book – *Capital is Dead. Is This Something Worse?* (2019). Right before our 'psychotic eyes', a new, dominant ruling class is forming that no longer maintains power through the ownership of the means of production, nor through the ownership of land, but through the ownership and control of information. It is not, then, strange that the great theological question concerning the Creator and its Creatures is becoming mundane and trivialized; it is not strange that the new lords, the new kings, are being disfigured into travesties of evil forces – lizard people, spectral communists (basically humanist liberals), faceless manipulators, and so on. These idiotic conspiracy theories, however, are fuelling populist and far-right movements around the world, breeding climate change denialists and more.

However, even if techno-feudalism finally becomes our reality in the years to come, it is still not the final answer regarding our question about the future of dystopia, but rather just one, although perhaps the most realistic, version of the near future. We need to reformulate the question: What comes after neo-feudalism, if not the end of the world, finishing ultimately in the world-without-us, the naked apocalypse, the apocalypse without salvation?

Utopia as a Failed Dystopia

Perhaps, after all these bleak, depressive, dystopian mediations, it is the right time to explore the same question – the future of dystopia – from another, brighter side: from a utopian point of view. In doing so, however, one can become even more depressed. Can we talk today about utopias and avoid the accusation of being delusional lunatics summoning up the totalitarianism of the past century (communism and fascism)? Today, in terms of psychotic realism, utopia is the worst, most fearful dystopia; it is not a matter of confusing utopia with dystopia, with firm belief that every utopia leads to dystopia. Like many political concepts (save for those totally discarded and abandoned like communism and revolution), utopia is frozen in time, in the belief that Moore's Utopia is the only possible version. It is like criticizing those who advocate different visions of democracy by telling them they should exclude women and slaves from the concept. There is a universal belief that has reached its peak, whereby even those on the Left believe that capitalism will remain forever, but if not, that it will turn into something worse, for instance *techno-feudalism*. Pre-trauma, like many other things, thus serves to tame us and prepare for this 'fact', by paralyzing any utopian impulse, the desire that entices us towards everything future-oriented, the desire for utopia. But the former utopian energies, however much neglected, cannot be absolutely suppressed and may blast onto the scene in shockingly surprising forms of different monsters that, even more surprisingly, suppress the return of the repressed in the class struggle originating in the enclosure of the commons.

Their return may be specters, as Marx remarked: "The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living" (Marx, 1975, p. 15). Of course, the proper name for this nightmare that weighs on the brains of the living is trauma; the problem that has been with us since the emergence of the Anthropocene, the tradition of all dead generations, including those seeking utopia, will stay with us. The past is not dead – the undead haunt the present like specters – the memories of oppressed ancestors, the memories of the commons, buried deep in the Anthropocene...

Based on this, I think that our working slogan should move from the usual mantra of 'dystopia is a failed utopia' to 'utopia is a failed dystopia'. Nonetheless, here lies the potential for futurability, for opening a crack in the future. Why is it, after all, as Jameson once remarked, "easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism", and, as he later reflected, revising this statement, try "to imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world" (2003).

This second proposition – "to imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world" – is perfectly illustrated by the dark, apocalyptic satire in the film *Don't Look Up* (dir. Adam McKay, 2021). In it, scientists discover that a planet-killing comet is heading directly for Earth – an extinction-level event. Kate Dibiasky (Jennifer Lawrence) and her professor Dr. Randall Mindy (Leonardo DiCaprio) struggle to raise awareness of this horrendous outcome, trying to contact the President, the media, the military and so on. However, in spite of the urgency, this apocalyptic news is drowned out by everyday politics, TV news, social media.

Instead of adding to the proliferating commentary on this film, I think, we should look at the comet (because everything is condensed into it) and ask a very simple question: What really is the comet? The nature of the comet is on the one hand easily determined – it is a massive and dangerous object on a collision course with Earth. However, this fact (determination) does not entail an adequate response – that is, the comet is just a determination that asserts itself with a coercive and violent character. Entangled in numerous responses, it is absolutely unique, precisely because it only exists for itself and is incapable of appearing in any other way. Hence, the interpretative activity, as Clement Rosset (2009) argues, confronted with its irreducible singularity, erupts in different forms of stupidity. But the comet itself, the impenetrable thing-in-itself, evoking numerous responses, stays mute – while ominously and steadily approaching our planet. It is an impenetrable thing, the thing-in-itself; if we want to approach it directly, it starts a cascade of innumerable idiotic responses. As if there were no way to move outside its orbit, it becomes an impenetrable, inexpressible, horrific object morphed into the rubbish bin of contemporary trash. Finally, this traumatic event (the comet) cannot be absorbed by symbolic fusion in a society of spectacle, since it would mean the end of spectacle

itself, that is, the end of capitalism. In spite of neglected aspects of the comet (I was amused by reading critical responses and commentaries that appeared to be part of the film itself), in spite of this trashy, cheesy film, the comet evokes the spirit of neglected utopian common solidarity, including nonhumans – the utopian desire for common praxis. But even if we excavate this aspect as the most important one, it will grotesquely vibrate as if it were a new but idiotic vibration added to the many.

So, the film illustrates our situation: "to imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world" means, among many other things, that even my working slogan – 'utopia is a failed dystopia' – may be in danger, that is, blocked out by the sheer amount of idiocy. Therefore, we should reconsider, rethink the very utopian impulse in this context: How can we deal with the traumatic core of dystopian narratives without envisioning new utopias? I do not believe we should build new utopias for the twenty-first century, though it would be very interesting to see how, for example, one of them would look in a Hollywood utopian blockbuster. 'Failed dystopia' is related to the question of how we can reinvent or perform a new political and aesthetic praxis of the commons. Here, I am very close to Fredric Jameson's proposition in which he paradoxically discards all possible stereotypes of utopias, even if they envisage an alternative or perfect society. The best utopias for him work by way of negation, opening up new potentiality in the present by breaking out of our ideological imprisonment. Accordingly, the utopian wish should be marked by the hollowness of absence of failure. Furthermore, utopian narratives are most revealing not through what is said, "but what cannot be said, what does not register on the narrative apparatus" (Jameson, 2005, p. xii). In other words, a utopian narrative is metaphorical – rather than a map of an island, it is something that is not mapped out. Rather than a voyage to outer space, it is a voyage into the unknown. In the end, both dystopia and utopia originate from the traumatic core of capitalism: both represent the Severing, the emergence of the modern subject that correlates with the Anthropocene and the eruption of new modern monsters and monstrosities. Since its beginning, capitalism has constantly produced different sorts of ends, where the end of the world is nothing more than just another fun blockbuster. But the real end, like the comet ominously approaching in the film *Don't Look Up*, is almost impossible to envision. If capitalism is dead, like Wark suggests, it still operates as the undead, or as Jameson says:

> What is crippling is not the presence of an enemy bur rather the universal belief, not only that this tendency is irreversible, but that the historic alternatives to capitalism have been proven unviable and impossible, and that no other socioeconomic system is conceivable, let alone practically available. The Utopians not only offer to conceive of such alternate systems; Utopian form is itself a representational meditation on radical difference, radical otherness, and on the systemic nature of

> the social totality, to the point where one cannot imagine any fundamental change in our social existence which has not first thrown off Utopian visions like so many sparks from a comet (2005, p. xii).

Since the beginning of this essay, I have looked at radical otherness with reference to the systematic nature of social totality and its variations of dystopias. In the midst of social media's flood of idiocy, the dilemma 'look up or do not look up' can be replaced by 'look at yourself or do not look at yourself'. By this I certainly do not mean the New Age celebration of undiscovered inner wealth and power, nor the neoliberal celebration of a reified inner self. This look inside is just a different way to confront radical otherness – the monster, the devastated Anthropocene, the naked apocalypse, and the world after dystopia, the world-without-us, and even total annihilation, death. This gaze, an impossible gaze of the dead (or even the undead, the gaze of capitalism) is for Jameson utopia; utopia is inseparable from death in that it gazes away from the accidents of individual existence, taking the point of view of the species, of human and nonhuman history, of the genesis of the Anthropocene (Jameson, 1996, p. 123). In the geological sense, our presence has been a short time, a blink of an eye.

This gaze is an impossible gaze from the position of the dead. Like Jameson's (1996) response to utopian texts, this position enables a confrontation with the reality principle itself, the traumatic real, with a plethora of terrestrial and cosmic variations. It is not, then, about fantasy shielding us from an apocalyptic end and death; on the contrary, it is about embracing the position of the already dead. It is not submitting to karmic cycles and orbiting in nirvana-like passivity; it is occupying distance from all individuals and the existential experience – a satellite-like orbiting of the spectacle around us, in us. It means to embrace death as the greatest detachment from cruel optimism, to take the point of view of the species by overcoming the stubborn need for self-preservation, to counter the ideological fabrication of egoistic instincts and, free of self-interest, to see the common in all commons, including humans and nonhumans.

Indeed, how much are our particular desires, our egoistic fantasies, really ours, and how much do they reflect competing and irreconcilable tendencies in capitalism? Self-survival enmeshed in disciplined bodies blocks a collective wish-fulfilment, or the desire called the commons, the desirability of the commons. This is why we favor defamiliarization, estrangement from reality, in order to figure out what we really want in the first place, to bring our desires into narrative configuration of a new commons. That is why we have to unlearn what we have learnt, to make strange what is familiar, to decolonize the intimacy that we cherish. In other words, we should learn anew the peculiar desire for the commons that has been constantly suppressed, transfigured by various forms of capitalism. Ultimately, we

should question the kind of egoistic subject that occupies the human form and that we are so terrified of losing in the post-human era.

Finally, the dilemmas about the future of dystopia, viewed from this position, can be resolved by a fresh, new praxis of the commons. However, it must come from below, and this below is so often put in different compartments – the poor, the immigrants, the workers, the dispossessed, gender inequalities, and so on. But perhaps this position from below, which the Left still struggles to name – the multitude, the formation of a new subjectivity – should resist naming and stubbornly persist in its anonymity. After all, the noun 'anonymity' comes from a Greek word meaning 'without a name'; this namelessness is the closest to death, to the utopian view from death that sees through psychotic realism, the last stage of the society of spectacle.

In the end the future of dystopia, from this position, depends quite simply on whether we will invent a new praxis of the commons, or finish in the world-without-us.

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