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LOVE IN THE TIME OF DYSTOPIA: YORGOS LANTHIMOS'S *THE LOBSTER* (2015)

Abstract

In canonical utopias and dystopias, romantic love and deep emotional connection are either discouraged or strongly prohibited. Examples range from Plato's *The Republic* in the fourth century B.C., which bans romantic and familial relationships to enhance one's loyalty to the state, to Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), which fosters promiscuity and technological procreation, to Orwell's *1984* (1949), which punishes those who engage in passionate sexual relationships. The same aversion toward love, between partners and parents and children, can be found in young adult dystopias, such as Lauren Oliver's *Delirium* trilogy (2011–2013). Although *The Lobster* (2015, dir. Yorgos Lanthimos) is not the sole counterexample, it is among the rare dystopian narratives in which romantic love is forced on individuals. In the film, single and divorced people are placed in a "Hotel" for a limited amount of time, in which they have to find a romantic partner. If they fail to do so, they are turned into an animal of their choice. The residents must not masturbate but are exposed to daily sexual stimulation by the Hotel staff as well as to social propaganda on the benefits of partnerships. By using Foucault's theory on biopolitics and administered sexuality, the aim is to disclose the practices used to achieve romantic coupledom in *The Lobster* as a biopolitical dystopian mechanism that forces people to conform to an abstract yet merciless social system or literally be dehumanized by transforming them into animals.

Keywords: dystopia, love, Foucault, biopolitics, sexuality, *The Lobster*, Yorgos Lanthimos

"You want to love, you must love, love is good for you,
and yet love can also be bad."
Catherine Roach (*Happily Ever After* 126)

Introduction

Although romantic marriage became prominent in the nineteenth century—meaning, as Ljubica Matek maintains, that love became the prerequisite for marrying only after centuries-long traditions where marriages were based on social standing and financial gains, with (mostly female) partners not even having a say in whom they marry (27–28)—in modern Western society, love and romantic partnerships come with a long list of requirements, turning the allegedly personal and spiritual quest into a demanding regime to which modern individuals must adhere. As Laura Kipnis argues, romantic love is "subject to . . . much regulation," whereby partners must adhere to "an endless quantity of social instruction . . . to tell us what [love] is, and what to do with it, and how, and when" (40). Moreover, according to Catherine Roach, in modern Western society,

> [t]he happily-in-love, pair-bonded (generally, although increasingly not exclusively, heterosexual) couple is made into a near mandatory norm by the media and popular culture, as this romance story is endlessly taught and replayed in a multiplicity of cultural sites: Disney princess movies, the wedding industry, fairytales, Hollywood movies, pop music lyrics, advertising, the diamond jewelry industry, and more. (4)

Joined with the capitalist ideology, the biopolitical practices foster romantic partnerships for financial gain and control over people. Romance thus becomes something that does not come naturally but that is construed by culture: "We chase romance, we structure our lives around it, we fashion much of our art and culture from it. The romance story is not only a narrative but becomes also, more disturbingly, an imperative" (Roach 4).

The present paper builds on the idea of romantic partnership as a form of social control and argues that the film *The Lobster* (2015), by director Yorgos Lanthimos, portrays romantic coupledom as an oppressive, dystopian narrative of modern Western society. To prove this, apart from Laura Kipnis's critique of monogamy and other forms of oppression that romantic love imposes on individuals and Catherine Roach's "romance story . . . imperative" (4), the pa-

per employs Michel Foucault's theory of biopolitics. According to Roach, the romance narrative marked by a happy ever after between two people—usually heterosexual, but increasingly homosexual (4)—dominates Western culture, and is reinforced through all forms of popular culture. In that sense, it can be compared to biopolitical practices that govern modern societies, as first proposed by Foucault. According to Foucault, biopolitics is a set of practices that replaced capital punishment to thoroughly govern modern individuals' lives (*Discipline and Punish* 25). Initially tying it to prisons and criminals, Foucault asserts that biopolitical practices permeate the entire society, imposing surveillance and discipline even on "free" individuals:

> These methods, which made possible the meticulous control of the operations of the body, which assured the constant subjection of its forces and imposed upon them a relation of docility-utility, might be called 'disciplines'. Many disciplinary methods had long been in existence – in monasteries, armies, workshops. But in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the disciplines became general formulas of domination. (*Discipline and Punish* 137)

For this reason, biopolitical regimes and practices are often employed by dystopian regimes in fiction and other media. While canonical dystopias often present love and sexual monogamy as subversive forces that can threaten the *status quo* (Booker 12, 35, 49; Horan 1), they can also be analysed as insidious mechanisms of biopolitical surveillance and control that make modern individuals actively seek and participate in this form of oppression.

In this light, the article will first explore how love and romantic relationships are construed in canonical dystopias, and then how *The Lobster* contradicts those representations. The aim is to disclose romantic coupledom and the practices used to achieve it in *The Lobster* as biopolitical dystopian mechanisms employed to enforce discipline, annihilate people's individual integrity, and eventually kill them if they decide not to conform.

Love and Romantic Partnership in Canonical Dystopias

In canonical dystopias, the regime either discourages or prohibits romantic love and deep emotional connection. Those who engage in romantic relationships are often considered outcasts and can often be punished by torture or

death. The present paper focuses on the genre of dystopia, differentiating it from utopia in the approach to social critique. Darko Suvin defines literary utopia as "a systematic verbal construction of a particularized community where socio-political institutions, norms, and personal relations are organized according to a more perfect principle than that prevalent in the author's community" (95). On the contrary, literary dystopias depict "the opposite of 'utopia', the bad place versus what we imagine to be the good place, the secular version of paradise" (Claeys 4). Despite their different approaches, both usually present futuristic visions of society that differ from their authors' time and serve as cautionary tales based on current flaws.

The blurred lines between utopia and dystopia come to the forefront already in Plato's *The Republic*, a seminal utopian text, where the treatment of love and romantic partnerships resembles that of modern canonical dystopian novels. Specifically, it bans romantic and familial relationships in order to ensure one's loyalty to the state: "the wives . . . are to be common, and their children are to be common, and no parent is to know his own child, nor any child his parent" (Plato 382). According to Plato's vision of a perfect society, the only way for it to function is for the guardian class to share their spouses and children, as if they were mere material possessions. The partner with whom one should procreate is not to be chosen based on physical attraction or their mutual feelings; rather, as Matek explains, eugenics is employed to ensure the breeding and survival of those in the best interest of the State (18–19). Such a view of a romantic partnership as a hindrance to State order and stability is a key characteristic of modern dystopian novels that established the genre.

In particular, Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (the original English edition published in 1924) depicts a system which strictly controls sexual interactions between individuals via administrative procedures: "the One State began an offensive against the other master of the world—against Love. Finally, even this natural force was also conquered, i.e., organized and mathematicized, and . . . our historical *Lex Sexualis* was proclaimed: 'Each chiper has the right to any other cipher as sexual product'" (Zamyatin 21). In this way, sexual relations are stripped of emotion and treated as a purely physiological need. To have sex, citizens must adhere to the regulations of the "Bureau of Sex," which issues a strict "Table of Sex Days" and a licence, or the pink "ticket book" (21). Those who go against the rules are considered rebels and are susceptible to being ostracised and punished, either by torture or capital punishment. Namely, the protagonist of *We*,

D-503, who engages in a subversive, emotionally charged, sexual relationship with I-330, undergoes the "Great Operation" (202) that surgically strips him of his imagination and emotions, while I-330 is tortured and executed.

Similarly, the World State in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) employs technological procreation and encourages promiscuity while explicitly prohibiting monogamous romantic relationships. Individuals are forced to find new sexual partners every other day and are discouraged from forming any sort of romantic attachment, proclaiming those who do as odd and unnatural. In this way, sex becomes a consumer product, in line with the World State's main religion: Fordism (Huxley 20). Furthermore, George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) depicts a regime which severely punishes those who engage in passionate sexual relationships outside of state-sanctioned marriages, where sex is to be regarded as "a slightly disgusting minor operation, like having an enema" (Orwell 73) and indulged in exclusively for the purpose of procreation, due to the fact that Orwell's dark futuristic society does not have the technological means to "produce" children as both Huxley's and Zamyatin's do.

The same aversion toward love, between partners as well as between parents and children, can be found in contemporary young adult dystopias. For instance, while retaining marriage and (nuclear) family as social institutions, Lauren Oliver's *Delirium* trilogy (2011–2013) represents a system that treats love as a contagious and dangerous disease termed as "*amor deliria nervosa*," which "*affects your mind so that you cannot think clearly, or make rational decisions about your own well-being*" (Oliver 3, emphasis in the original), to be eradicated through vaccination. Certainly, under the influence of young adult dystopian literature—with its film and TV adaptations being "the most obvious phenomenon[a] in the twenty first century" (Claeys and Tower Sargent 525)—there are also recent popular culture works that exhibit 'hate' towards romantic love. For instance, in the 2015 film *Equals*, human emotions are eliminated, but rebels develop a "Switched-On Syndrome (SOS)," a disease that restores their emotions, which translates to romantic attachment. Most significantly, there is Margaret Atwood's canonical dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) that was recently adapted into a successful six-season series, and in which the totalitarian regime forces procreation while eliminating any emotional relation among participants.

According to the dystopian critic M. Keith Booker, dystopian regimes reject and fear romantic partnerships because of their "positive subversive potential"

(35). In other words, the regimes see romantic love as a force that could inspire individuals to fight for themselves and their loved ones and overthrow the established regime that oppresses them. Relying on Sigmund Freud's view of sexuality, passion, and love as powers that are inherently inimical to civilisation, Booker explains how the dystopian regimes repress and deliberately redirect them into other, socially accepted practices, such as politics, art, and sciences (10). The most famous example of such a sexual repression is found in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, where the regime uses the unspent passion and sexual charge among individuals in political rituals such as "Two Minute Hate" and the adoration of the dictatorial figure of Big Brother (Orwell 18). Moreover, Foucault asserts that modern biopolitical regimes are aware of this subversive potential of sexuality and therefore administer it to deplete it of its power: "Sex was a means of access both to the life of the body and the life of the species. It was employed as a standard for the disciplines and as a basis for regulations" (*History of Sexuality* 146). In this way, individuals are encouraged to engage in sexual relations to lose interest in the *status quo* and the power to challenge it, as seen in Huxley's *Brave New World*.

In sum, canonical dystopias (and utopias) reject love and romantic partnerships due to their being uncontrollable and thus potentially subversive. Lanthimos's dystopian film *The Lobster* contrasts this idea and instead oppresses its citizens by imposing romantic partnerships on them as a biopolitical imperative. In other words, "[i]n this society, everyone must have a partner; single life is seen as unnatural, disgusting and downright criminal. All citizens must conform to this societal mandate. There is no room for misfits" (Hestand n.pag.). Thus, the next section will analyse all the biopolitical mechanisms that are used in *The Lobster* to force people to adhere to the "romance . . . imperative" (Roach 4) and the consequences they suffer if they fail to do so.

The Lobster's Biopolitical Hotel and Romantic Imperative

According to Foucault, biopower is "the privilege to seize hold of life in order to suppress it" (*History of Sexuality* 136). It follows that biopolitical practices found in modern societies have and administer complete control over individuals' lives. These mechanisms can be outright oppressive and imposed by central figures or institutions (such as police, prisons, and so on), but the most efficient biopolitical practices are insidious, and they force individuals to internalise them and oppress themselves as a result. More to the point, these practices are

disguised as beneficial, life-saving practices and cause individuals to seek them and see them as desirable, even if they bring them psychological and physical harm. In presenting Western society's representation of love and romantic partnerships as mechanisms of a dystopian regime, Lanthimos's *The Lobster* abounds in biopolitical practices used to decide who gets to participate in modern society and according to which rules. In the film, a romantic relationship serves as a marker of social success and is vital for becoming and remaining a full-fledged member of society; otherwise, one is dehumanised by being turned into an animal or killed. With this ingenious narrative decision, Lanthimos satirises the modern society's exaggerated strong emphasis on coupledom and its biopolitical underpinnings. As Kipnis notes: "The paradox being that falling in love is the nearest most of us come to glimpsing utopia in our lifetimes (with sex and drugs as fallbacks), and harnessing our most utopian inclinations to the project of social control would be quite a singular achievement in the annals of modern population management" (37).

The Lobster's first biopolitical mechanism that resembles classic dystopian societies is the strict, physical segregation between those who fit in the society and follow its rules and those who do not. Namely, the mainstream society in *The Lobster* consists of couples, while single people who are middle-aged are banned from it. In this heavily-regulated biopolitical society, people walking down the street or occupying any type of public space, such as a shopping mall, can at any given time be approached by a police officer and asked to show their "marriage certificate" (01:08:31). If they fail to provide official evidence that they are not single, they are arrested, because single people who exceed the normative age for marriage cannot inhabit the same spaces as married couples. The authorities practice gathering up single people, unmarried and divorced alike, and putting them in the Hotel, which functions as a form of a reform camp or prison. To that end, Vladana Ilić terms the Hotel as "a correctional institution to which decoupled people from the city are sent" (473). The Hotel is specially designated for single people to find a partner; otherwise, they are turned into an animal of their choice. The attempt to leave the Hotel is either punished by an immediate transformation into an animal or by execution.

While the police state assures that mainstream society consists of official couples, life in the Hotel is even more controlled, resembling a biopolitical prison where single people are exposed to constant surveillance and physical restrictions. It invites comparison with the Panopticon, Jeremy Bentham's archi-

tectural prison building that allows for constant surveillance over prisoners and their internalization of surveillance and the consequent self-censorship (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 200). Foucault exposes the multifunctionality of the Panopticon in modern society as a whole because: "[i]t . . . can be implemented in hospitals, workshops, schools, prisons. Whenever one is dealing with a multiplicity of individuals on whom a task or a particular form of behaviour must be imposed, the panoptic schema may be used" (205). Thus, romantic coupledom is represented as an oppressive duty, rather than being a personal choice and source of fulfilment. The only alternative for individuals in *The Lobster* is to join the Loners who function outside of the social constraints. They are a group of rebels bent on staying single and leading a very dangerous life as they are literally hunted and killed for sport by the Hotel residents. Hence, in Lanthimos's dystopia, there is no freedom and no proper life outside of the mainstream society, which demands coupledom.

The Lobster focuses on David (played by Colin Farrell), a middle-aged man whose wife divorces him, whereupon he is taken to the Hotel by the authorities. The title of the film refers to David's animal of choice, the lobster. In case he fails to find a partner, the protagonist wants to be transformed into a lobster because they "live for over one hundred years, are blue-blooded like aristocrats, and stay fertile all their life" (00:08:49). Upon arrival, David is questioned and stripped "just as a novel convict" (Ilić 472), suggesting that singledom is a criminal offence against society. Even within the Hotel, which is designed to "reform" single people, there is a strict division between singles and the new couples who are formed during their stay. David is made to occupy spaces for singles: "You'll be staying in a single room. If everything goes well and you make it, you'll be moved to a double room" (00:04:59). The stay at the Hotel is supposed to help single people by providing them with opportunities to meet other singles and form a couple, so the segregation between the singles and couples is highly emphasised in order to make it obvious to the singles that they are somehow "missing out." Single people are allowed to occupy only one part of social spaces: "[Y]ou are not allowed to use the volleyball or tennis courts. These are only for the couples" (00:04:49).

Next, while the Hotel appears liberal in terms of sexual orientation in offering its residents the choice between being registered as heterosexual or homosexual, the practice is still restrictive since they must choose between fixed categories. As Timothy Laurie and Hannah Stark claim, the world of *The Lobster*

is "culturally hermetic, especially in [its] ostensible refusal to admit genuine social diversity into [this] dystopian future" (13). More specifically, "*The Lobster* reveals three dichotomies at the core of heteronormative cultural mythologies: male and female, coupled and uncoupled, human and nonhuman" (Laurie and Stark 1). This evokes modern society's increasing tolerance toward homosexual relationships while still refusing to accept gender fluidity because it does not fit the "either/or box." According to Laura Kipnis, the insidiousness of the biopolitical romance imperative in modern society can be found in the fact that even homosexuals are willing to conform to mandatory marriage regulations by demanding the right to it. As she notes,

> [w]hy bother to make marriage compulsory when informal compulsions work so well that even gays – once such paragons of unregulated sexuality, once so contemptuous of whitebread hetero lifestyles— are now demanding state regulation too? What about re-envisioning the form; rethinking the premises? What about just insisting that social resources and privileges not be allocated on the basis of marital status? *No, let's demand regulation!* (Kipnis 41, emphasis in the original)

Upon his arrival, David must choose one or the other sexual orientation, since all that goes beyond the traditional binaries of single/taken and heterosexual/homosexual gets in the regime's way of maintaining order. As the Hotel official explains to David: "No, sir, this option [bisexuality] is no longer available since about last summer, due to several operational problems" (00:03:56). David opting for the "default," that is, heterosexuality, supports the idea that "even with the possibility of new and more open twenty-first-century norms for gender equality and sexual experimentation, the [heteronormative] romance narrative continues to thrive" (Roach 6). Moreover, even when David is made to choose the animal he will be turned into, he must adhere to the inevitably fixed social norm which only aggravates his already challenging situation: "But even then, you must be careful. You need to choose a companion that is a similar type of animal to you" (00:08:20).

Another important biopolitical mechanism exercised in Lanthimos's Hotel is the administration of sexuality, wherein sexuality is encouraged as a means of ensuring control. Foucault claims that sexuality is not an inherent instinct; it is "a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasure, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowl-

edges, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power" (*History of Sexuality* 105–106). The most famous examples of treating sexuality as a tool of power are Huxley's *Brave New World*, where promiscuity is mandatory and where intimate partnerships are banned to prevent a lack of loyalty to the regime, and Zamyatin's *We*, in which the same principle is applied. As Ilić argues, in *The Lobster*, the Hotel's staff use the inhabitants' sexuality against them, providing them with mandatory sexual stimulation but without gratification (472). The men are exposed to everyday sexual rubbing through clothes, provided by a maid, but they must not climax.[1] Once they get aroused, which is the goal of the stimulation, the maid leaves. The men are left in a state of tension, and those who indulge themselves are severely punished. An example is David's friend, called the "Lisping Man," who masturbates after one such daily stimulation and whose hand is later burned in a toaster by the Hotel staff. In this way, the Hotel administers sexuality by making it a practice that can only be performed by official couples. While Vladana Ilić notes that stimulation and punishment "effectively intensif[y] the sense of the iron control and ideological discipline exercised within the hotel" (472), they also function as tools to urge them to find a partner as soon as possible.

Furthermore, the singles' stay in the Hotel is marked by daily propaganda activities, performed by the managers and the staff. Significantly, the Hotel managers are also a heterosexual married couple, embodying the role models for inhabitants to imitate. During one of the singles' activities, the compulsory communal dance where all men and women wear the same gender-determined outfits, the managing couple performs a song and the singles literally "dance to their tune." As in canonical dystopian regimes, such as Orwell's, which employs "telescreens" (4), and Huxley's, which uses the slogan "Every one belongs to every one else" (34), the propaganda activities are tools through which the Hotel fosters the dominant ideology—romantic partnership—and urges the singles to conform by finding a partner. The activities are used to show them the life-affirming benefits of being a part of a couple. For instance, during his first day in the Hotel, the officials use David's belt to tie his right arm close to his body, to remind him of the necessity of his other hand or the benefits of life in a pair.

[1] Arguably, women are also stimulated in certain ways to make them want to find a partner, but Lanthimos chooses to focus on the male side of sexual exploitation, reinforcing the gender stereotypes on the differences in male and female sexuality.

This means that single people are treated as incomplete human beings who are lacking basic means for a successful life without physical and mental suffering. This aligns with one of the key elements that the romance "imperative" imposes on individuals: "*It is hard to be alone*" (Roach 21, emphasis in the original).

Apart from these overt restrictions, there are other activities that are disguised as entertainment while also embodying propaganda. Those are the "daily didactic theatricals that show scenes from quotidian life designed to demonstrate perils of a single life" (Ilić 472). The Hotel managers use them to brainwash the inhabitants and scare them into obedience, that is, finding a partner as soon as possible. In two such demonstrations, a male and a female official at the Hotel demonstrate that a solitary life can be deadly for both men and women. In the first, titled "Man eats alone" (00:24:16), a man is shown sitting at a table and eating alone. Simulating choking on a piece of his food, he enacts dying since there is no one to help him. In a repeated scene, the man is joined by a woman, who performs a Heimlich manoeuvre and saves his life. The couple end the demonstration by smiling happily at the audience. While the Hotel manager provides narration to introduce the scene, the events that subsequently take place lack narration, letting the audience draw their own pessimistic conclusions about their destiny if they remain single. This corresponds to what Roach terms as "[t]he brainwashing of individuals by power structures with something to gain" (27).

While both men and women are encouraged to find a partner to be physically safe, the Hotel's rules also allude to contemporary society's reliance on traditional gender dichotomies. As seen, women are appreciated for their care, while men are appreciated for their physical strength. Thus, in another demonstration, "Woman walks alone" (00:26:44), a young man pretends to assault a woman, whereas in "Woman walks with man" (00:27:31), he looks at her but refrains from attacking her because the woman is not alone. The role-plays are simplistic and appear ridiculous to film viewers; for instance, when the woman flails her arms and weakly calls for help, or when the couple circles around the attacker on the tiny stage, but they effectively scare the Hotel inhabitants into obedience. The message is clear: both unmarried men and women are unsafe, and the Hotel practices are there to "help" them.

Even the health-affirming practices, which are often tied to biopolitics due to their striving to "incite [and] . . . optimize . . . the forces under it" (Foucault,

History of Sexuality 136), are twisted in the film to encourage the exploitation of single people and foster coupledom. When David is introduced to the Hotel's daily practice of hunting and shooting the Loners, he learns that smoking is forbidden. Despite the obvious health benefits of non-smoking, the intent is not to keep the residents healthy for their own sake. The Hotel wants them to remain healthy to increase their chances of killing others who do not fit the norm: "That way you'll be able to run for longer during the hunt without getting tired, and your breath won't smell when you kiss" (00:06:04). The conditioning to act against the rebels is the ideal dystopian mechanism, evoking the one in Orwell's dystopia, whereby citizens, family members, and prisoners are encouraged to inform on and turn against each other. Winston Smith, for instance, renounces his romantic interest when exposed to torture: "Do it to Julia! Not me! Julia! I don't care what you do to her. Tear her face off, strip her to the bones. Not me! Julia! Not me!" (300). Likewise, the communal hunt in *The Lobster* exhibits "the complicity of individuals in collective practices of cruelty" (Laurie and Stark 2) within the film's wider scope of exposing "absurdity and abjection in modern life, class aspiration and the hypocrisies of taste hierarchies" (2), where both the conformists and the outcasts function within very limited categories.

Perhaps the most oppressive biopolitical mechanism in *The Lobster* is the strict time limit that is imposed on the inhabitants of the Hotel. Specifically, they must find a partner in forty-five days (00:04:59). If they fail, they lose the chance to participate in human society altogether, as they will be turned into an animal or killed if they try to run away to avoid the procedure. Next to the control and subjugation by the regime, this makes single people dehumanise and strip themselves of individuality to achieve the goal. The threat of being turned into an animal makes them desperate to find a partner. The need to make a life-changing decision is present with them all the time, like a countdown clock. In this way, Lanthimos turns the biological clock concern stereotypical for women on its head since the Hotel applies it to all the inhabitants, regardless of their gender, and adds a literal terror element due to their fixed expiry date. Once again, this evokes Zamyatin's "Table of Hours" in *We*, whereby all elements of one's daily life are under constant surveillance and must follow a strict protocol.

In *The Lobster*, the need to quickly find a partner forces people to focus on superficial common traits instead of developing meaningful relationships and making sure they match over time. Instead, they are encouraged to rely on obvious physical flaws or personality traits. As Zac Hestand notes: "companionship

results from sharing similar characteristics: being prone to nosebleeds, possessing coldhearted manners, or in the case of David, nearsightedness" (n.pag). The focus on physical likeness and flaws satirises modern society's focus on appearance and perceived (lack of) attractiveness. According to Roach, "[i]n love, giving up individuality of coupledom requires a willingness to make changes in one's life for the sake of another and generally involves sacrifice" (23). It follows that to form a successful couple, two people need to invest a lot of effort into overcoming their individual differences and weaknesses and stay together no matter what.[2]

The Lobster takes these romantic imperatives to a dystopian extreme, making people purposefully forgo their individuality to form a couple as well as retain their human form, although their humanity is only a mask. The couples must be based on joint similarities and weaknesses, which forces them to invent them if they are non-existent. This often results in loss of individuality and bodily harm. People are forced to harm themselves since otherwise they will be harmed by the regime. An example is David's friend, the "Limping Man," who sets his eyes on a woman with frequent nosebleeds. For them to become a couple according to the Hotel's rules, *The Lobster* features a gruesome scene in which the Limping Man gets a nosebleed by smashing his head against the concrete edge of the pool (00:34:29). Soon after, they are officially pronounced a couple and sent on a cruise for couples. In this way, confirming the cultural rootedness of the romance imperative, the film parodies the motif of sacrifice/trial to be paired with the loved one, as in Orpheus and Eurydice, Cupid and Psyche, Hero and Leander, and so on.

Another example of the painful consequences of an insidious biopolitical regime that forces people to harm themselves is the "Biscuit Woman." Having been in the Hotel for a longer period than David, she refuses to accept the prospect of being turned into an animal and dehumanised in that way. Instead, she aims to commit suicide if she fails to find a partner in the allotted timeframe. While Lanthimos's choice of a protagonist, who is a middle-aged single man desperate to find a partner, precludes the film from pushing the "desperate spinster" stereotype, sexism is still present in the case of the Biscuit Woman. Trying to coax David into considering her as a partner, the woman embodies another

[2] "Moreover, Colin Farrell speaks of the film's similarity to online sites that match people in terms of things they have in common, noting the narcissistic basis of this set-up" (Cooper 7).

key element of the romance imperative outlined by Roach: "It's a man's world," where "[w]omen are often socialized into looking after men (and children and elders) and have their needs and interests overlooked by men" (21–22). In line with this, the Biscuit Woman pleads with David: "Can I come to your room sometime for a chat? I could give you a blowjob. Or you could just fuck me. I always swallow after fellatio and I've got absolutely no problem with anal sex if that's your thing. My ex-husband always used to say I had the most beautiful thighs he'd ever seen" (00:29:59). The woman's "name" indicates her function, that is, sexual availability: she is an object to be consumed, just like food or a sweet, reflecting the Hotel's absurd bureaucracy.

The Biscuit Woman's eventual suicide is at first unsuccessful, resulting in her jumping from a window and lying in a pool of blood while screaming in pain. Evoking pity in the viewers for the woman who was forced to undertake such a desperate step, the gruesome scene scares David further into obedience and advances his search for a partner. Opting for a younger partner, David approaches an "absolutely heartless" woman (00:11:56) and comments on the screaming woman as a nuisance to convince the woman that they share the same cruel personality. To ensure they become an official couple, David fakes a number of their interactions: he fails to react as she pretends to choke on an olive, and then kicks a little girl, his friend's daughter, when she attempts to greet him with a hug. David's faking his personality and cruelty to others just to seem similar to his partner and remain with her suggests "that none of the relationships which are established in this way have emotional elements such as sincerity, love, and trust" (Oktan 182).

Though the goal of the single people who come to the Hotel is to find a partner, their need to conform does not stop there. Hypocrisy and hiding one's true self to satisfy the social and cultural imperatives are especially notable in the case of having children. In the film's extremely ironic commentary on the married couples' attempts at repairing their strained relationship by procreating to fulfil societal expectations, the Hotel manager informs them, "If you encounter any problems, any tensions, any arguing, that you cannot resolve yourselves, you will be assigned children" (00:36:37).

Moreover, *The Lobster* reveals Western society's relentless insistence on only one kind of connection and love: the romantic one. All other forms, which are present in abundance—parental and filial connection, love between siblings, loving other forms of life such as pets—are made void and unsatisfactory for an

individual to be a representative member of mainstream society. The romantic imperative demands that people prove they are worthy by exclusively finding a romantic partner. As Roach sees it, "all of this loving is incomplete without the icing on the cake: You need to find a special 'Somebody to Love', as Jefferson Airplane (1967), Queen (1976), and Justin Bieber (2010) all agree" (21). Hence, while David is shown making friends with the Limping Man and the Lisping Man, and having platonic conversations with older women, friendships have no value in *The Lobster*. This is a highly ironic portrayal of modern society's tendency to see people as outcasts if they are incapable of forming a romantic couple. Lanthimos emphasises this by showing how the Hotel's biopolitical practices force single people to disregard all other connections and focus exclusively on the need to find a partner, making them selfish and inconsiderate. Even communal gatherings with food and dance lose their traditional appeal as enriching social experiences (Sceats 21) and encumber the Hotel inhabitants with the need to find a partner.

As Nick Pinkerton notes, "Coupledom, we come to gather, is governmentally enforced by authoritarian dictate, and so a desire for self-preservation is, perforce, behind every union" (n.pag.). This makes people ready to betray themselves and everyone around them, just to comply with the rules. A cruel instance of de-individualisation which the biopolitical regime imposes on individuals is when the Heartless Woman kills David's brother, who was turned into a dog due to his inability to find a partner. Covered in his brother's blood, the Heartless Woman relates how she kicked his dog/brother while he whined helplessly. David, aware of the deadly consequences of being de-coupled, once again fakes indifference to the woman's cruelty, hiding his pain and his true self. However, the Heartless Woman catches him crying in the bathroom and threatens to report him and get him transformed into an animal. The woman's intent to report David does not stem from her feeling betrayed, because she is incapable of loving David or anybody else. Rather, her loyalty lies with the biopolitical regime which has brainwashed her, which is evocative of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and the regime's brainwashing of family members to snitch on their "loved ones" if they are going against the rules. Likewise, in *We*, citizens are encouraged to be as transparent as possible and to report those who exhibit any kind of disobedience.

The most horrifying biopolitical practice used to oppress single people is the transformation process. Used by the Hotel management, the process turns into animals all the humans who do not succeed in finding a partner within the set

time limit. Clearly "a device to signify 'dehumanization,'" as seen in Franz Kafka's 1915 classic *The Metamorphosis* (Kenney n.pag.), the process of becoming an animal and the veil of secrecy surrounding it are intended to inspire fear among the single people who have to undergo it. Namely, the process is never explained beyond the "you'll turn into an animal if you fail to fall in love with someone during your stay here" (00:08:07). Neither the pair of managers nor the staff explain what will happen to them. The only physical evidence of the process is a closed door at the end of the hallway where the hotel residents' rooms are, with a "Transformation Room" sign. This mystery serves to instil fear and urge single people to find a partner as soon as possible, and what is more, to strip themselves of their personality on their own to fit the romantic mould. This is an elaborate ellipsis which is only narrated in order to amplify the horror without showing it; the same convention is present in the narratives of *We* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, since the latter deliberately fails to reveal what happens to Julia and to O'Brien once the Thought Police got him. This is a classic manoeuvre that aims to amplify the overall horror of absurd social logic of a dystopian world.

Finally, the cruelty of the biopolitical regime in *The Lobster* is evident in the literal murdering of those who do not conform to its romantic imperative. According to Foucault, the biopolitical power is "essentially a right of seizure: of things, time, bodies, and ultimately life itself" (*History of Sexuality* 136). The Loners are outcasts who cannot participate in mainstream society due to their decisive single status. They are on the run all the time, joining the mainstream society only in need, and presenting a fake marriage certificate in the process. The Hotel management uses the hunt of Loners as a reward system for its residents. Every day, a hunt of the Loners is organised and the residents are taken by bus and given shotguns to hunt and kill them, like animals. The Hotel residents are eager to kill the Loners, disregarding both their own humanity and the humanity of the people they kill, because the biopolitical system paints the murders as rewards. As someone says, "One loner, one extra day" (00:07:39).

The Loners embody the exact opposite attitude to love and romantic partnership since they refuse to be partnered and live in mainstream society. According to Sarah Cooper, the Loners represent an "equally stark rule-bound set-up in which human contact and attraction are now just as strictly forbidden" (3). Being just as oppressive as the Hotel managers, the Loners punish those who engage in passionate romantic relationships, such as cutting one's lips for kissing, and force people to survive (or die) on their own even when they can help. Once

David joins the Loners, he meets the Short Sighted Woman (Rachel Weisz) and falls in love with her, but cannot be with her due to the Loners' hate toward coupledom. To be together, David and the Short Sighted Woman must run away from the Loners and join the mainstream society, but when she is blinded by the rebels' leader, David must become blind, too. By portraying the Loners as just as restrictive and cruel as the regime bent on creating and maintaining couples, Lanthimos once again warns about the dangers of strict adherence to "dichotomies at the core of . . . cultural mythologies" (Laurie and Stark 1). Additionally, "*The Lobster* exposes the risks of externally imposed and internally engrained imitative structures founded in the replication of likeness" (Cooper 4). By eliminating differences among individuals, both sides of the society deprive them of their true identities and the freedom to be who they truly are.

The final scene takes place in a restaurant with David going to the toilet to blind himself while the woman waits. Before the final black screen, there is a lengthy scene with the woman waiting for him at the table. The peculiar length of her waiting allows for two interpretations. On the one hand, David blinds himself by committing "a gesture of terrible sacrifice that, according to the presiding laws, is the only act that can preserve his romance" (Pinkerton n.pag.). Not only that, by staying with the Now-Blind Woman, David is able to survive in the mainstream society, so the black screen is what he now "sees." On the other hand, viewers can infer that David refuses to mutilate himself for love, so he is returned to the Hotel and transformed, with the black screen representing the end of his (human) story. In any case, the film points to the perils and sacrifices of living with(out) love and the oppressive biopolitical practices that regulate our romantic partnerships in modern society.

Conclusion

Yorgos Lanthimos's 2015 *The Lobster* takes the societal romance imperative to a dystopian extreme. Offering an exaggerated, highly satirical portrayal of marriage as a literal matter of life and death, the film explores how modern biopolitical society uses both overtly oppressive and insidious mechanisms to force people to conform to coupledom to fit the norm. Focusing on the destiny of a middle-aged single man whose wife divorces him, the film shows the "carceral nature" of modern societies (Booker 79) by literally imprisoning and/or executing single people who fail to find and retain a romantic partner. By relying on Michel Foucault's theory of biopolitics, Laura Kipnis's criticism of

the social and cultural institution of monogamous coupledom, and Catherine Roach's argument on the reinforcement of the romance imperative through popular culture, this paper has demonstrated that *The Lobster* satirises the demands on romantic love and partnerships by construing them as dystopian mechanisms of biopolitical oppression.

With the help of methods such as discipline, surveillance, segregation, propaganda disguised as entertainment, de-individualisation, and internalisation of oppression, *The Lobster's* Hotel functions as a biopolitical prison that satirises many similar dating and marital practices found in real life. The film pushes the argument that, even if love is something humans cannot live without, it is less so because it is a private matter that gives one's life meaning, and more so because biopolitical practices of society construe it as such. Challenging the idea that love has to be officially sanctioned and include children, Lanthimos's film opens up space for rethinking which parts of one's life are mandatory for self-fulfilment and which are imposed by society and reinforced through culture, especially entertainment. Not only does *The Lobster* satirise the authoritarian approach to love and coupledo[o]m, it also criticises the stigma imposed on single life and rejects the idea that single people are incomplete, arguing that, to conform to the romance imperative, individuals are often forced to engage in self-denial and self-harm. Finally, by portraying an equally oppressive fraction of society in the form of the Loners, the film shows how an insistence on fixed dichotomies, with no opportunity to exist in between, eliminates one's individuality, which is the most prominent element of a dystopian society.

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LJUBAV U DOBA DISTOPIJE: FILM *JASTOG* (2015.) REDATELJA YORGOSA LANTHIMOSA

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Romantična ljubav i duboka emocionalna povezanost u kanonskim se književnim utopijama i distopijama ili suzbija ili strogo kažnjava. Primjeri se kreću od Platonove Države u 4. st. pr. Kr., u kojoj su romantične i obiteljske veze među klasom čuvara zabranjene kako bi se osigurala odanost Državi, preko Huxleyjeva *Divnog novog svijeta* (1932), koji potiče promiskuitet i razmnožavanje uz pomoć tehnologije, do Orwellove *Tisuću devetsto osamdeset četvrte* (1949.), u kojoj se kažnjava sve one koji se upuštaju u strastvene seksualne odnose. Jednaka nesklonost ljubavi, između partnera te roditelja i djece, prisutna je i u distopijama za mlade, poput trilogije *Delirij* autorice Lauren Oliver (2011–2013). Premda *Jastog* (2015., red. Yorgos Lanthimos) nije jedini protuprimjer, film spada među rijetke distopijske narative u kojima se pojedincima nameće romantična ljubav. U Lanthimosovu filmu, društvo smješta samce i razvedene u tzv. „Hotel" na određeno razdoblje u kojem moraju pronaći romantičnog partnera. U suprotnom ih pretvara u životinju po vlastitom izboru. Stanari Hotela ne smiju masturbirati, ali su izloženi svakodnevnoj seksualnoj stimulaciji koju provodi hotelsko osoblje te propagandnim aktivnostima o prednostima života u paru. Uporabom Foucaultove teorije o biopolitici i seksualnosti, cilj je rada prokazati prakse koje društvo u *Jastogu* rabi za postizanje romantičnog partnerstva kao biopolitičke distopijske mehanizme koji pojedince prisiljavaju da se prilagode apstraktnom, ali nemilosrdnom društvenom sustavu, ili ih doslovno dehumaniziraju, pretvarajući ih u životinje.

Ključne riječi: distopija, ljubav, Foucault, biopolitika, seksualnost, *Jastog*, Yorgos Lanthimos