

# TEENS DYSTOPIA

« Life is a game so fight for survival and find out if you're worth it » (Battle Royale movie).

From young adults novels to movies, the intellectual climate of today finds its place in new dystopian science-fiction stories. In these adventures, the heroes are placed in complete amoral circumstances, within an unfriendly environment. There is a regular narrative outline set up, which could easily remind the bildungsroman structure : a retro-futuristic world; young protagonists left to their own devices, abandoned by the adults; a cruel game; romance.

By studying this typical narrative outline, we will try to find out what young adults are looking for within these dystopian stories. Are there some messages and models writers and movie-makers carry towards them? In other words, what is the subliminal dialogue between the movie makers and the young adults?

A dystopia is the opposite of an utopia : an imaginary world where happiness is impossible. Dystopian stories for young adults are usually driven by the survival and the resistance of the protagonist or of a whole group of young people, within a totalitarian and oppressive state. Actually, movie-makers are using dystopia stories in order to take a critical look at current society by placing it in perspective with the future one, dreamt or bad-dreamt, that we could expect.

Aesthetic wise, dystopias for young adults are most of the time referring to retro-futurism. A kind of anachronism which creates a tension between past and

future and blurs the spatiotemporal setting. The French series *Trepalium* (dystopian fable) is a perfect example of the typical dystopian aesthetic. Vincent Lannoo, the moviemaker, opted for retro-futuristic settings, suits and accessories. In one hand, he found inspiration by looking at how architects from the past, from the 30s to 80s such as Le Corbusier, Oscar Niemeyer or Ricardo Bofill, imagined the future. On the other hand, Lannoo was also influenced by futuristic movies like *Brazil, 1984, Metropolis* and *Gattaca*. These retro-futuristic references are used in order to echo the decline of the future world movie-makers are depicting. It is creating a tension between past and future, between fantastic and realism.

Actually, dystopias can be seen as a distorted mirror of our society because it does refer to our world but it also goes over reality to free our imagination. For instance, the screens are often omnipresent, as it is in our world. But in movies for young adults, it is used as a tool for total surveillance from those in power and as a tool of communication between divided groups of society.

Typically, dystopian stories always show a clear contrast between people : the young people and the adults, the worker class and the upper one, etc. Most of the time, one group is in a survival state whereas the other one is surrounded by the power circle. The first one is depicted as hyper-emotional and hyper-violent whereas the other one is more cold and distant. In order to emphasize the segregation within people, the wall is used as a symbolic element to divide them in a physical way, and to isolate some of them. But in every instance, it actually feels that every citizen becomes property of the state.

This is showing a fear of an authoritarian system. Isolation of teenagers also reveals an anxiety towards adults, which is logical at their age. They have a feeling of abandonment of their own child life and of helplessness. As for the omnipresent screens, it shows the anxiety towards internet surveillance within our own privacy.

Science-fiction is often structured by hypothesis on what could be the future. Teenagers are precisely questioning themselves about their own future and they are looking for answers within these movies. That's why this is a perfect genre to attract them, but also because it is a fact that science-fiction stories do predict some aspects of our current society. For instance, *Star Trek* predicted the reading on tablets, Ray Bradbury (*Fahrenheit 451*) the headphones and the flat screens, H.G. Wells (*The World Set Free*) the atomic bomb! There is even a new website, *Dystopia Tracker*, which takes an inventory of popular culture predictions (science-fiction stories) in order to question the future.

Then, we can wonder, what could predict the very pessimistic dystopian stories of today : a future fear or a lack of entertainment ?

Young adults are looking for emotion and especially for adrenaline when experiencing a dystopian movie. This is easier to reach while identifying with the main character of the adventure, usually a young hero. He is atypical and lonely, either an orphan, and/or far away from his family in order to provide an independent model to teenagers.

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By identifying them to these heroes who are able to face any kind of disruptions and end victoriously against their many troubles, it pushes teenagers to outdo their fears.

Still about the characters, but also about the society in general, perfectionism is another common dystopian element. Perfectionism which is defined and ordered by an authoritarian government in a world which is thought to be as perfect and beautiful as possible. But in actuality depicting a world where perfectionism and extreme beauty destroy happiness and lead to the dissident tracking and eliminations.

*Uglies*, written by Scott Westerfeld, is a good example of perfectionism dystopia. It is set in a world in which everyone has an operation when they turn sixteen to become physically perfect, but then a bunch of radical teenagers decide to keep their own faces. This minor group is tracked by authority and when someone is caught, they try to reprogram his personality and erase his memories.

This kind of rebellion is set up to push teenagers to get away from uniformity, which is necessary involved while reaching for perfectionism.

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The game is another recurrent element of young adult movies, implying a competition reign and extreme violence. The game turns into a fight for death, a fight for survival and a fight for freedom. There is a violent duty in dystopian stories, “It used once to be taboo for children to kill children in stories, now it’s required” (Maira Young).

Recently, writers are looking for new ways to make teenagers feel the game more, as if they were part of it. For example, the trilogy *Endgame* (James Frey and Nils Johnson-Shelton) consists of three novels alongside an augmented reality device and a prize of 500 000 for the winner of the game (in the real world) ! This was already happening with the *Hunger Games* and the app *The Hunger Adventures* where you could play within the fictional world while waiting for the release of the next movie.

With this means of placing the reader inside the game, we can question ourselves : is it a violent fantasy and apology? Are we using violent games as entertainment in our lives? “The world of our hovered-over teens and preteens may be safer, but it’s also less conducive to adventure, and therefore to adventure stories” (Laura Miller). Maybe then, there is indeed a true lack of excitement and appetite for adrenaline which teenagers try to fulfill by watching movies. The game itself and the competition are supposed to teach them, in a way, a desire to succeed and the idea that life is a game. It is giving them strong models of courage and solidarity.

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A Twilight fan expresses her point of view in a forum : “*Twilight* is a forbidden desire and an impossible love story between two people. Edward is the prince charming. He is a gentleman of another time. Young people around us don’t have his gallant manners.” Eventually, love is certainly the most didactic part of dystopian stories for young adults. Movie-makers believe that romance is the special ingredient which attracts teenage girls to dystopian adventures. Love is often set up in a love triangle (a girl split between two boys). Despite being in love, physical love is impossible because the protagonist has other things to do such as save the world, survive, or even because they want to respect chastity until wedding (*Twilight*). This is intended for girls, pushing them to faithfulness, abstinence and even sometimes religious beliefs.

Thus, a parallel is built between young adult dystopias and the adolescent experience. On one hand, teenagers are diving into dystopian stories with the desire to find some answers about their future, personal as well as societal. In response to this, movie-makers are providing them some models to follow, who are placed in what seems amoral circumstances. However it is easy to find moralistic points of view dispersed everywhere all through dystopian adventures. Despite this, these models offer teenagers a positive view on youth, thanks to heroes that dare to rebel intending for a better world.