Editorial

Representations of Dystopia in Literature and Film

PAT WHEELER (Guest Editor)

In this issue of *Critical Survey* scholars from both Britain and North America analyse representations of dystopia in literature and film. In the keynote article, Patrick Parrinder offers an examination of Samuel Butler's *Erewhon*, contextualising it within the tradition of dystopian romance – which, he argues, saw a last flowering in the late nineteenth century. In a thought-provoking discussion Parrinder covers a range of utopian/dystopian narrative strategies and a selection of novels including *The Time Machine*, *The Coming Race* and *A Crystal Age*. In the second article Michael Amey considers Yevgeny Zamyatin's novel *We* through the lenses of Foucauldian and Lacanian theories. He argues that in its depiction of the regulatory power of the pervasive surveillance in The One State, Zamyatin's *We* resonates with Michel Foucault's analysis of the disciplinary regime embodied in Jeremy Bentham's design for the Panoptican. Amey offers an engaging and astute discussion of the unremitting surveillance that in many dystopian societies forces the citizens to internalise the state's regulatory power so that it becomes the principle of their own subjection. He argues that the lack of privacy in The One State, along with a strictly imposed uniformity of actions, insures that individuals are assimilated into the collectivism in which rebellion is nearly impossible. Amey goes on to discuss the self-conscious, reflexive gaze exhibited in the development of the identity of the protagonist, D-503. He believes that Zamyatin's description of D-503's development into an individual relies heavily on the imagery of mirrors and reflections, and closely matches psychoanalyst Jaques Lacan's 'mirror-stage' theory.

In '*Re-membering the Future*: Doris Lessing's "Experiment in Autobiography"', Aaron Rosenfeld argues that Doris Lessing's *Memoirs of a Survivor* (1974) re-reads the future-history literary tradition, critiquing its formulation of the relationship between the individual and history and between the individual and the community.

The modes of future-history – utopian, dystopian, arcadian and post-apocalyptic – tend to pose a world in which the individual either disappears into an abstraction or is granted special status as the last representative of a world gone wrong. Rosenfeld believes Lessing reverses this relation. He calls her text 'an attempt at autobiography,' and says that she employs future history's frame of a dislocated world as metaphor for the subject's struggle for identity within a history that is both personal and collective. In combining utopian, dystopian, arcadian and post-apocalyptic modalities with autobiography, he believes Lessing disrupts the boundaries of both genre and identity. Rosenfeld argues that in the guise of a utopia/dystopia, Lessing seeks to re-configure a world-historical subject who is both within and outside the frame of the traditional models for narrating future history. On the one hand, he says, she challenges utopia's sense of the explorer with an all-encompassing gaze; on the other, she challenges dystopia's sense of the agentic individual under siege by world-historical forces. Drawing on the senses of utopia as conventionally formulated by critics such as Northrop Frye and Lewis Mumford and the genre theory of Mikhail Bakhtin, Rosenfeld situates Lessing's text in the context of other utopias and dystopias, such as Thomas More's *Utopia* and George Orwell's *1984*, and shows how the genres Lessing adapts in *The Memoirs of a Survivor* structure her text. Ultimately, he argues that *Memoirs of a Survivor* offers a pungent critique of utopia and dystopia, and of its oppositions and ideologies as understood by writers like Orwell.

Paul March-Russell analyses E. M. Forster's short story 'The Machine Stops'. He explores the Hegelian character of the society depicted in the story which he believes exhibits the tensions between a residual utopian desire and the regimentation of a dystopian community. Through reference to Paul Virilio, March-Russell shows how this management is not only ineffective but is also at the root of the society's demise. He goes on to say that while Forster denies the possibility of realising utopia, he nonetheless retains a utopian element that is, largely, embodied by the character of Kuno. Forster sees in this tentative utopianism those aspects of humanity – love and imagination – which the dystopia, through its rationalisation of time and behaviour, portrays as degenerate. The eventual social collapse allows for the reconciliation between Kuno and his estranged mother, Vashti, a reunion that approximates Derrida's notion of *aimance*, since it comes at the expense of the pre-existing social order.

The fourth article by Derek Maus looks at dystopian literature as an increasingly common form of cultural dissent against the *status quo* in both Russian and American literature. Maus believes that critics have often succumbed to the temptation of the overwhelmingly binary 'us-vs.-them' reasoning that defined the conflict, therefore interpreting such texts as rejecting the values of one of the two ideologies ostensibly vying for supremacy. This article departs from that view, arguing that the prevalence of dystopian and anti-utopian sentiment in Russian and American fiction is a parodic-satirical response intended to subvert the rampant utopian mindsets of *both* the superpowers. Works such as Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, Kurt Vonnegut Jr.'s *Cat's Cradle*, Vasily Aksyonov's *The Island of Crimea* and others he examines do not affiliate themselves with either side in the Cold War, but rather attempt to undermine satirically the conflict's overarching logical context. Maus addresses two recurrent dystopian techniques – which he terms 'serial dystopia' and 'systemic dystopia' – in the fiction of the period and illustrate this focus on the broader dystopian context of the Cold War, rather than just the particularized dystopian situation of one country or the other within that context. Both methods suggest that dystopia is not simply the result of following a particular political philosophy, but that the global context of the Cold War makes alternative or even oppositional philosophies equally likely to end badly. Maus explores dystopian satire during the Cold War and finds it is comparable to revisionist history or even counter-history in that it deflates such grandiose rhetoric as the self-serving product of those with unfettered control over the language. In both the Soviet Union and the United States, the increase in the role of science and technology in daily life is accompanied by an increase in the utopian prognostications for the future. These predictions, he argues, only further augment the substantial utopianism – symbolized by the American promise of a 'more perfect union' or the Soviets' invariable drive to 'the radiant future' – already contained in each country's formative political utterances. Such rosy forecasts often originate from those who stand to benefit monetarily or politically from these discoveries, casting serious doubt on the validity of such language. Finally, Maus argues that while exposing patent absurdities in the language of the powerful, the works he discusses here attempt a radically contradictory interpretation of history intended to help break the dystopian cycle.

In 'Reality Is What You Can Get Away With', Ben Wheeler explores the ways in which realities, both internal and external, are constructed

within the modern subject through an analysis of Terry Gilliam's seminal dystopian vision *Brazil*. He looks primarily at the ways in which dystopian fiction more generally has sought to reveal the myriad influences and manipulations that form what Timothy Leary refers to as 'reality tunnels' – that is, the construction of personality and worldview through the way the central nervous system organises and interprets the data that continually floods our senses. In this article Wheeler foregrounds a range of critically informed references to the different strains of thought that have laid specific stress on the subject's ability to classify everyday experience so that these psychic edifices are reinforced and not challenged. Central to this persuasive article is an exploration of various methods of psycho-therapy and analysis such as those practised by Freud, Jung, Reich and Laing, as well as an acknowledgement of transactional psychology and existential philosophy. The work of Marx and Marcuse, with their emphasis on the function of ideology and illusion, are also included. Finally, the notion of resolving the apparent opposition between subject and object, conscious and unconscious, through the faculty of imagination is addressed, with reference to the transcendental philosophy of von Schelling and the anthropological account of Mesoamerican shamanism found in the works of Castaneda. In this way Wheeler attempts to find a common base for each of these disciplines, and shows how *Brazil*, in its depictions of a contemporary subject struggling with the disparate nature of modern or dystopian life, can be seen to explore similar concepts.

Finally, Douglas Cunningham discusses Peter Weir's *The Truman Show*. His article shows that trapped within the fictional coastal town of Seahaven (itself fabricated beneath a geodesic dome in the heart of the San Fernando Valley), the film's hero, Truman Burbank, lives out his days eagerly yearning for the world he believes to exist beyond the confines of his 'island' home. He argues that while the film rightly inspired the always interesting debates about Panopticonic voyeurism and the self-reflexivity of media power, Weir's portrait of a dazzling dystopia also has a good deal to say about the ways in which the built environment affects perceptions of racial and class inequalities. In Cunningham's perceptive reading of the film he argues that in 1998, many critics claimed that Weir's representation of Truman's home, Seahaven, was, in fact, meant as an indictment of the failed promises of the New Urbanist movement. Quite to the contrary, however, Weir's film instead distorts the New Urbanist aspects of Seaside, Florida,

beyond recognition in an effort to critique the erasure of racial and class struggles inherent in such Disney design overhauls as the nostalgia-laden Main Street, USA, in Disneyland, or the whitewashed Times Square 'clean sweep' of Giuliani's New York City. Cunningham explores the differences between these two types of urban planning – The New Urbanism and Disney design – the ways in which *The Truman Show* illuminates those differences, and the reasons why The New Urbanism is already transforming the hyper-capitalist dystopias of today's urban and suburban landscapes into the neighbourhood utopias of tomorrow.