

Valentina Romanzi

# American Nightmares

## Dystopia in Twenty-First-Century US Fiction

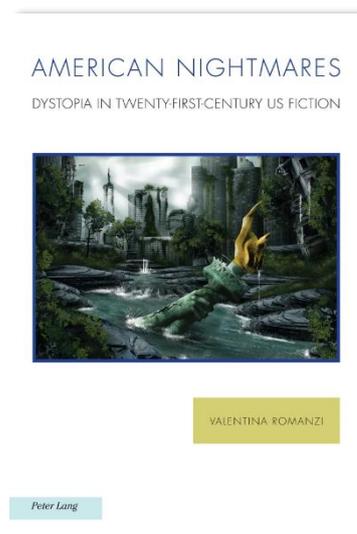
Oxford, Peter Lang, 2022, pp. 304

Review by Mattia Arioli

**Keywords:** *American literature, utopia, dystopia, surveillance, posthuman, environment*

**A***merican Nightmares: Dystopia in Twenty-First-Century US Fiction* makes a valuable contribution to the field of Science Fiction Studies and to the scholarship on utopia and dystopia. One of the most significant features of Valentina Romanzi's book is the fluidity in which she moves through utopian and dystopian literature while connecting the genre through novels and on to videogames and movies; thus addressing literature not just as a mere literate practice, but as a function. This theoretical approach is confirmed by the author's use of a methodology that combines sociological and literary theories to zoom-in and zoom-out on the relation that binds the individual to the collectivity, especially in moments of crisis. The amount of criticism mobilized might seem overwhelming at first, but it all comes together as the reader moves from Part One, which illustrates the methodological framework, to Part Two, where the author analyzes three different subgenres of dystopian fiction (the political, the technological, and the environmental).

Part One offers a general introduction to some key themes, concepts, and theories, giving the reader a bird's-eye view on the available scholarship on dystopia, science fiction, and speculative fiction. Whereas each of these genres has its own specificities, they are closely linked together, even in paradoxical terms. For instance, as Suvin (2016) and Jameson (2007) have argued, even though science fiction collaterally derives from utopia, the latter can be regarded in many ways as a subgenre of the former. The book provides a critical overview of the existing taxonomy on utopia and dystopia, showing how critics often disagree on the necessity of a formal rather than content-based definition to describe these two genres. In her survey of different definitions and



classifications, Romanzi reminds the reader that dystopia within science fiction retrieves and updates elements of other literary genres (such as the Gothic), highlighting its fluidity and malleability. The discussion on the main features of the genre is further grounded through a brief reconstruction of its history and evolution, as the emergence of new subgenres often coincided with pivotal socio-cultural changes occurring within our (western) societies: for instance, cyberpunk was born out of a critique of neoliberalism. Hence, the first two chapters might be considered particularly useful to students and researchers unfamiliar with the current debates on utopia and dystopia. One aspect worth mentioning is that they establish and create a common jargon to facilitate the readers' ability to understand what follows, and help them judge for themselves whether the formulation holds when confronted with pre-existing research on the topic.

After this general introduction to the genre(s), in the second half of Part One, the author decides to delimit her area of analysis to a specific time (post-9/11) and place (the United States). She does so by showing how many contemporary dystopian fictions deal with the crisis of two foundational national myths (America's exceptionalism and the Frontier), showing how (critical) dystopia can be interpreted as a coping mechanism, elaborated on a cultural level. After all, as Jeffrey Alexander (2012, 13) discussed, "Trauma is a socially mediated attribution" that needs to be performed by carriers' groups. Romanzi reconstructs how these myths, which can be traced to the Puritan origins of the nation, started to be questioned in the 1970s, as the utopian interpretations of the Frontier (geographical and technological) and American exceptionalism were replaced by reflections on the uncanny and violent history of the US' formation as a nation. Indeed, The Vietnam War would trigger a questioning of American exceptionalism, showing the nation's moral ambiguity and inability to save the world. Similarly, the counterculture would generate a discussion on the canon, allowing marginal voices to become visible. Nonetheless, it is worth reminding that in the 1980s and 1990s, during the Reagan and Bush presidencies, there have been several attempts to revitalize such myths. Hence, it comes as no surprise that a significant thread that connects the first and second half of the book is the question of whether these myths have been reinstated into their original place or discarded once and for all. As the author cleverly points out, the crisis of these two myths did not cause a complete loss of faith in the notion of progress, which is still dominant today. Therefore, literature is here to remind us of how progress and technology are double-edged swords that must be handled carefully, especially when left unchecked. In our globalized world, the idea of progress has become associated to the current economic and political system, often too enthusiastically. In fact, the acceleration of progress hinders our ability to grasp its material and ethical consequences, which

often challenge humans' abilities to respond to or even cope with its demands, creating forms of anxieties and fears. Although fear did not use to be a prerogative of the contemporary, after the attack on the World Trade Center it became socially ubiquitous, marking a new social era characterized by the shattering of the notion of security.

Yet, as Valentina Romanzi highlights, even though we currently live in an age of fear, many contemporary (critical) dystopias try to elaborate and transform social grief into a driver for change. Actually, this study on (critical) dystopian fiction serves in itself as a warning on the possible outcomes of our present choices and actions, while also articulating a desire for change and hope. Indeed, retrieving Bloch's (1995) understanding of hope as *docta spes*, the product of experience and trials (which encompass failure and resistance), the book examines how contemporary critical dystopias often show an awareness that there is always a way to move forward. This focus on hope seems particularly urgent in our current post-9/11 context, for this event shattered America's false sense of security and functioned as a turning point in the way we perceive fear. Building upon several sociological theories (Zipes 2019; Eagleton 2017), Romanzi points out how the past informs both our fears (providing knowledge of what caused the disappearance of a 'past civilization') and hopes (functioning as a stimulus and a source of inspiration, reminding us of an alternative). This reflection on fear and hope, and the following debate about the cohesive elements that allow a society not to break apart are particularly poignant. Given these premises, it is no surprise that the volume coherently uses a wide range of sociological theories to analyze the relation between the individual and society.

Part Two offers a discussion on three subcategories of dystopian fiction (political, technological, and environmental), originally suggested by Gregory Claeys (2017) and here implemented and contrasted with a wide variety of sociological and philosophical theories pertaining to the field of Surveillance Studies, Posthumanism, Transhumanism, the Anthropocene, and Cultural Trauma. The chapter devoted to political dystopias discusses State control (over the body, the mind and/or the information system) as a recurring trope, ranging from the 'classics' of the genre to more contemporary productions. Through a close reading of Margaret Atwood's *Testaments* (2019), Romanzi successfully shows how narratives about oppressive surveillance have been reshaped to become a tale of rebellion and hope. Moreover, whereas Atwood's novel is in line with the 'tradition' of the genre, presenting a Panoptic type of surveillance, the analysis of Dave Eggers' *The Circle* (2013) shows the challenges of the digital environment in which we currently live, posing questions on our data doubles, the dematerialization of the body, and the internalization of Big Brother through acquiescence. In the last chapter, Romanzi convincingly discusses how the post-apocalyptic, post-Western scenario of the movie *The Book of Eli* (2010)

shows the resilience of societies, which have a tendency to reproduce their structure even after a catastrophe, while also highlighting their precariousness. Probably, the most fascinating analysis in the volume concerns the videogame *Detroit: Become Human* (2018). Indeed, chapter six does not only engage with the moral challenges of the posthuman relations featured in the main narrative (demanding the viewer/player to go beyond humanist dualisms), but it also deals with the formal characteristics of the medium, which shape the experience of the consumer of such cultural products. The player is no longer a passive recorder of the events, but shapes them by interacting with non-playable characters and the setting/social context, assuming a moral responsibility and deciding for the sake of the character. Hence, as Romanzi points out, the medium creates a continuum between the posthuman condition of the characters and the experience of the player, who does not only ‘fuse’ with the machine (in a transhuman sense) but is also invited to inhabit the intradiegetic dimension of three different characters, embodying different subjectivities at the same time. Therefore, one of the elements that deserve praise is the author’s will to go beyond the established canon, tackle the hyper-contemporary, and validate her arguments by testing them against stories that circulate across different media, while acknowledging the “biases” and “constraints” (Strate 2017) of each form. The relevance of the subject treated in this book seems to be confirmed by the percolation of this genre into public discourse, as dystopian and (post)apocalyptic scenarios are often critically evoked by the media to discuss the present.<sup>1</sup> Hence, an attentive reading, as the one offered by Romanzi, becomes particularly significant as it prevents a thought-provoking genre to be reduced to a series of worn-out clichés, adaptable to any circumstance.

**Mattia Arioli** is a research fellow at the University of Bologna. He holds a PhD degree in Modern Languages, Literatures, and Culture from the Alma Mater Studiorum — University of Bologna; his doctoral project focused on the remembrance of the Vietnam War in graphic narratives. His main research interests include Cultural Memory Studies, Comics Studies, Asian American Studies, Indigenous Studies, and Visual Culture. He authored several essays on War Comics and the relationship between Comics and Cultural Trauma.

## Works cited

Alexander, Jeffrey. *Trauma: A Social Theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012.

Atwood, Margaret. *The Testaments*. London: Vintage, 2019.

---

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of this phenomenon, see Lamberti (2018).

- Bloch, Ernest. *The Principle of Hope*. 1954. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995.
- Claeys, Gregory. *Dystopia: A Natural History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.
- Detroit: Become Human*. Sony Interactive Games, 2018.
- Eagleton, Terry. *Hope without Optimism*. New Heaven: Yale University Press, 2017.
- Eggers, Dave. *The Circle*. London: Penguin Books, 2013.
- Jameson, Frederic. *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. London: Verso Books, 2007.
- Lamberti, Elena. "Fake News, Cognitive Pollution and Environmental Awareness." *FRAME* 31.2 (2018): 91-106.
- Strate, Lance. *Media Ecology: An Approach to Understanding the Human Condition*. New York: Peter Lang, 2017.
- Suvín, Darko. *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*. 1979. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2016.
- The Hughes Brothers. *The Book of Eli*. 2010.
- Zipes, Jack. *Ernest Bloch: The Pugnacious Philosopher of Hope*. Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019.