

Dystopia

Common characteristics

- An undesirable, horrifying, or dark vision of society.
- Setting is usually a dark vision of the future, but sometimes the setting is ambiguous or suggestive of an archaic society with barbaric practices and traditions.
- Dehumanisation and an oppressive environment or government.
- Questioning or criticism of society.
- Warning to readers about our own society.
- Paranoia and suspicion which creates ambiguity about good and evil.
- An attempt to achieve a utopian society which dissipates.
- An individual rebellion or resistance movement which reacts against the dystopian power structure.
- Questioning of technology, science, or an overly rational approach to solving problems of humanity.
- Extreme interpretation of laws.

Settings

- Dystopian depictions are always imaginary. Although **Hitler's Third Reich** and **Stalin's Soviet Union** certainly qualify as horror societies, they are still no dystopias. The very purpose of a dystopia is to discuss, not depict contemporary society or at least contemporary humankind in general. Stories like *Taxi Driver* and *Enemy of the State* may have dystopian qualities, but they still depict reality, however twisted the prerequisites of those stories might be. Dystopian depictions may borrow features from reality, but the purpose is to debate, criticise, or explore possibilities and probabilities.
- Dystopia is not really about tomorrow, but rather about today or sometimes yesterday. Nevertheless, dystopian stories take place in the future in most cases. The year 1984 may have past, but **George Orwell's** horror story described a plausible future scenario when it was published for the first time in 1949 and it may still come true in a not too distant future.
- Dystopias have always been a powerful rhetorical tool. They have been used and abused by politicians, thus making dystopian stories controversial. The **anti-totalitarianism** in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is explicit, but the **anti-Reaganism** in *Neuromancer* is implicit. The war-ridden world in the *Mad Max* trilogy is obviously a dystopia, but it would be ridiculous to call it a political statement, although one can claim it is a warning against the dangers of **anarchy** and **social-Darwinism**.

Themes

The leitmotif of dystopias has always been oppression and rebellion. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the pseudo-Communist party **INGSOC's** oppression of the people is obvious, but the multi-national **mega-corporations'** oppression of the people in *Neuromancer* is more subtle. The oppressors are usually more or less faceless, as in *THX-1138*, but may sometimes be personified, as in *Blade Runner*.

The oppressors are almost always much more powerful than the rebels. Consequently, dystopian tales often become studies in survival. In *Neuromancer* it is simply a question of staying alive, in *Brave New World* it is a question of staying human. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* it is even a matter of remaining an individual with one's own thoughts. The hero, because it is usually not a heroine, often faces utter defeat or sometimes Pyrrhic victory, a significant feature of dystopian tales. As the citizens of dystopian societies often live in fear, they become paranoid and egoistical, almost like hunted animals. Dystopian citizens experience a profound feeling of being monitored, shadowed, chased, betrayed or manipulated. The factors which trigger this paranoia may be very evident and explicit like in *Brazil* or more diffuse and implicit like in *Blade Runner*. The most extreme example of paranoia is probably the **Thought Police** and the **thought crime** concept in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. As a result of this fearful atmosphere, dystopian heroes become dehumanised. The dehumanisation of society may also be connected to the benefits and hazards of technological progress. **Cyberspace cowboys** refer to their bodies as 'meat' and **blade runners** hunt artificial, but completely sentient beings like animals. In dystopia, the borderline of humanity is often blurred and the very concept of humanity distorted. Finally, dystopian stories tend to explore the concept of reality. **Rick Deckard** in *Blade Runner* is not sure if he is a human being or a bio-mechanical replica. **Case** in *Neuromancer* sometimes cannot distinguish **cyberspace** from reality. **Winston Smith** in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is forced to learn that two plus two make five. In many dystopian tales the people in general and the heroes in particular get manipulated beyond reality.

Aesthetics

Dystopian stories frequently take place in landscapes which diminish people, like large cities with mastodontic architecture or vast wastelands devastated by war and pollution. Dystopian societies are usually, but far from always, battered and worn-out. They may be colourless like *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or kaleidoscopic like *Blade Runner*, but always visually obtrusive.

For uncertain reasons, dystopian movies often use film noir features like dim rooms, rain-wet asphalt, disturbing contrasts, symbolic shadows, etc. Much of the action takes place during night in many dystopian stories. This might be a reflection of the thematic relationship between dystopian fiction and film noir. Generally speaking, the environment plays an active role in dystopian depictions. The environment is not only a fancy background, but emphasises the message. A prominent example is *Blade Runner* where there can be no doubt that the USA has become completely commercialised and the world is in a state of terminal decay.

(Adapted from Niclas Hermansson, *Exploring Dystopia*)