



Critical wheels of reading: Reflecting on the degrees of consciousness of characters in four dystopian works

Rodas críticas de leitura: Refletindo sobre os graus de consciência de personagens em quatro obras distópicas

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ABSTRACT

In this work, we present discussions developed in critical reading circles based on the analysis of dystopian works. The realization of a reading wheel as a learning strategy is a unique opportunity for socialization in the literate world. In this sense, we propose an interdisciplinary work in the dialogue between History, Literature and Cinema, from the realization of spaces for debate, as well as the understanding of the historian's office, from the reflection of historical sources. We start from the assumption that History as knowledge is representation and narrative of the past. Thus, based on dystopian narratives, we understand the potentiality of considering literary and cinematographic representations in historical research. We consider "1984" a classic work, in Calvino's terms (2007), which exerts an influence and imposes itself as unforgettable, being a book that never finished saying what it had to say, relegating current affairs to the position of background noise, without being able to do without it. Complementarily, we also work with other dystopian works, from filmic representations, such as V for Vendetta, The Hunger Games and The Truman Show.

Keywords: Dystopia, Reading, Criticism, Cinema, Consciousness.

1 INTRODUCTION

A dystopian work has its own world (or its own reality), its own codes and degrees of awareness, or not, of the characters of that respective context. As part of a teaching project interfaced with research, we developed discussions on aspects inherent to dystopian works in dialogue with theoretical references in humanities. In this sense, debating in reading circles with high school students, as well as discussing the potentiality of literary and cinematographic narratives, we draw perspectives of analysis about the degree(s) of awareness of certain characters in four dystopias. Thus, obviously, not covering all the themes that such works provide, we will present results from the aforementioned project in this reflection on the analysis of the degree of consciousness of characters in dystopian worlds.



Thus, starting from the concept of consciousness as knowledge, perception and notion of stimuli in the environment in which the individual finds himself, we seek to trace "levels" of perception of central characters in the following dystopian works: 1984, V for Vendetta, The Hunger Games and The Truman Show. We also consider that conscience also concerns the sense of morality and/or duty, related to internal feelings that mobilize certain actions. Therefore, it is the knowledge of external reality, that is, starting from the Latin *conscientia*, we have the knowledge of something shared with someone, closely related to the existence of the "I" itself.

The choice of the aforementioned works was based on the possibility of interdisciplinary dialogues that cover aspects that guide the human sciences, debating historical and philosophical concepts with the participants of the teaching/research project. Thus, we seek, from dystopian reflections, to (re)think issues inherent to the human condition itself in contemporary times.

In the work 1984 (1949), by George Orwell, adapted in the cinema in 1984, considered one of the most relevant in this literary genre, there is a society where even people's thoughts are subject to control. The act of thinking is seen as dissonant in a model of life in which the government punishes those who dare to think. There is even a thought police (*thinkpol*) that illustrates the extreme that this conduct could reach in terms of control. Jobs are assigned, cameras are everywhere, information is manipulated and controlled, and the totalitarian state exerts unparalleled pressure on civilians, where any degree of awareness could be considered a "miracle" in such conditions.

V for Vendetta is a classic comic book from the 1980s by Alan Moore, adapted to theaters in 2005. The reality of individuals is extremely controlled in a totalitarian fascist regime that has taken over England. Suffering is high, religious leaders are hypocritical and abuse their social position, there are curfews and religions not allowed by the state are persecuted. Any minorities that do not align with the dictates of the regime are persecuted and manipulated, physically and mentally, in laboratory experiments, such as homosexuals and gypsies, considered the "scum of the nation". The level of control and manipulation is high, however we consider that in 1984 the extremes are reached in a certain plenitude, while in V for Vengeance there would still be a certain space for more audacious actions on the part of its protagonist.

The Truman Show (1998) is a dramatic comedy film that would be more distant from the dystopian societies dealt with in this analysis, however we consider this work for its potential to explore themes such as the control of an individual's life (basically,



property of a corporation), as well as the role of the media in social relations. The work discusses a *reality show* in which Truman's life is controlled from birth and televised to billions of people around the planet. Everything is fake and modeled within a recording scenario, where everyone plays roles of characters created to act in a society around Truman following predetermined scripts. The protagonist is the only one who does not really know that reality in its completeness, his fears are manipulated so that he remains in that script, so that the audience approves the directions given by the show's direction, generating more income from advertisements and consolidating a global culture that yearns to know what will become of Truman's life.

Finally, *The Hunger Games* (2006), based on the work of Suzanne Collins and adapted to the cinema in a quadrilogy, presents itself as a less harsh dystopia in certain aspects than *1984* and *V for Vendetta*, which have totalitarian states, although it is also based on an authoritarian world focused on the power of a capital. The districts, exploited by this central power, are part of a set of games that would serve as a competition between children/adolescents in order to alleviate social ills. In other words, a policy similar to that of *Bread and Circuses*, as entertainment for other spectators. At this point, we can draw a parallel with *The Truman Show* in terms of the power of media and social and cultural constructions in the realization of high impact events. Young people aged twelve to seventeen are drawn (or can volunteer) to represent one of the twelve districts, one boy and one girl from each. In all, twenty-four participants fight it out until only one is left alive. The competition is a way for the capital to subjugate the other districts as well. In addition, in all districts there are guards from the central power who stay there to watch them and check if they are following the rules. There is widespread hunger, torture, lack of food and basic resources such as energy, among other ills common in highly controlled dystopian worlds.

We start from the thesis that literature and cinema are productions of knowledge and contribute to the construction of reality as language (Carvalho, 2016), constituting a potentiality of space-time reading as a singular human experience, highlighting the dystopian aesthetic as an expression of contemporary society. We emphasize, therefore, that this research is a key to interpretation and the possibility of analyzing a complex and fragmented reality, based on the richness of the interweaving of multiple languages.



2 OBJECTIVE

To discuss the potentiality of literary and cinematographic narratives by drawing perspectives of analysis about the degree(s) of awareness of certain characters in four dystopias, from reading circles with high school students.

3 METHODOLOGY

This is a discussion of the literature, developed with articles and fundamental theoretical references in the human sciences, associated with the experiences developed in a teaching project in interface with research.

4 DEVELOPMENT

The degree of consciousness of Winston, the protagonist of 1984, is like a "miracle" in the face of the conditions in which he finds himself. He realizes the manipulations promoted by the government, to a certain extent, reaching the revolutionary level of writing a diary. However small it may seem, this act of supremacy underscores his autonomy in a world where thinking is a crime, going far beyond what he was allowed.

Winston distinguishes himself from most of the citizens of Oceania with an increasingly differentiated worldview (albeit limited in the face of constraints). He can partially recall the past, although his memories are more like blurs. This is very significant in a context where the Party exerts enormous pressure on individuals and historical records are fatally manipulated.

Winston demonstrates a certain achievement of this awareness in his going to the Ministry of Love. Even if he hates the Party (Ingsoc), he needs to act in a sensitive way to avoid being discovered, in the same way that he evades the controls of the teletype when writing his diary. Other characters such as Julia, with whom Winston has a relationship (something forbidden by the totalitarian regime), have a certain level of consciousness, but in a more limited way, that is, from the awareness of a certain dissatisfaction of their living conditions, such as the lack of coffee powder, the lack of sex, makeup and other female accessories, etc. being a paradox in this context. On the other hand, Winston has a deeper interest in the government, in the way the world has changed, in the lives of the people around him, among other issues more inherent to the human condition.



Resistance to the totalitarian regime in *V for Vendetta* is more evident as minorities are rejected, a level of awareness is fostered by V about his reality, the manipulations and experiments carried out by the government and the living conditions of the population, reinforcing his discontent. Based on an enigmatic figure who tried to carry out a revolution in 16th century England, Guy Fawkes, who bases his mask, V seeks to make more individuals in that dystopian world aware of the oppression in which they find themselves. At the end of the work, there is a greater awareness of people from the acts provoked by V against the regime, its buildings and its ideology, being a small spark that was lit.

Truman's (*Truman Show*, 1988) lack of awareness about *reality* is necessary for the show to progress and, throughout the feature film, we observe a certain "gain" of awareness or apprehension of the world around him, so that in the end the character gains his independence. In a similar movement, but in a strongly repressive world, Evey also gains her intellectual autonomy in the face of totalitarianism in *V for Vengeance*, from the influence of V. On the other hand, Truman, since his birth, is manipulated by everyone, although as difficult as it is, he gains a certain autonomy by distrusting everything around him.

Moreover, as much as Truman escapes that practiced alienation, the viewers of the reality show have not. Everyone is as alienated as Truman. Even Christopher ended up being "caught" in his own web of traps, as he lost his audience of billions of viewers. At the end of the show, everyone simply switches the channel and remains dependent on other reality shows.

The level of awareness of the characters in *The Hunger Games* is variable given the manipulative conditions of that dystopian world. As much as there is retaliation and lies, some characters are aware of their oppressed reality and associate guilt with the centralized government. There is discontent on the part of the population, although there are no mobilizations for a change in the *status quo*. In district twelve, the inhabitants have more freedom of expression despite the latent social ills, while in district eleven there is greater retaliation. District two is basically the only one with benefits from the central government and is complicit in the belief of favoritism despite also being exploited. The privileges accorded to districts also vary according to the degree of alienation their individuals find themselves in. There is a kind of "bread and circuses" policy based on futility and pride encouraged by the government, favoring manipulation with the



entertainment of games. Thus, this "limited consciousness" can be compared with the other dystopias, citing the control of proletas in 1984, in order to avoid rebellions.

In general, being deeply affected by questionable/threatening government attitudes that cause bloodshed or persecution of a group, or the reduction in the quality of life of the local residents, are major drivers for acquiring an intellectual "enlightenment" about the dystopian reality in these contexts. Winston and Julia, for example, evolve such awareness of the facts (obviously, part of the facts) in the face of the terrible conditions in which they live and the extreme control of the Party and Big Brother. Similarly, this is repeated in V for Vendetta by the violence, terror and precariousness of living conditions. These abuses are also notable in The Hunger Games, while in The Truman Show, however mild the society is compared to those dystopias, there is a control of the individual from birth in a game of manipulation / alienation so broad that it also affects all viewers who are trapped in Truman's life narrative.

Happiness, therefore, is something intangible in these dystopian societies, as well as the awareness of individuals, since few characters, basically the protagonists of these works, partially achieve this feat. Thus, we emphasize that such dystopian works highlight a central aspect in this narrative style, that is, they bring societies controlled by the State or by other extreme means of oppression, such as the media or religious institutions, which create unbearable living conditions for individuals. The extreme of this translates into the thought crime described by Orwell in 1984.

The dystopian contexts exposed are potentially associated with the concept of panopticism taken up by Foucault (2014), so that the degree of awareness can be associated with the level of submission of individuals to those elements of body control. Modern man is shaped by several mechanisms and his subjectivation processes are various (nuclear family, school, barracks, hospitals and prisons), so that the panoptic model bases this entire social structure. We can notice panoptic elements also in dystopias, citing the maximum example of the thought police and the telethons in 1984.

We consider, therefore, that panoptic architecture can be used in almost any place and institution. Moreover, this conception allows the gaze to go beyond its borders: the school can observe the parents; work can observe the moment of fun; children can denounce their own parents - Big Brother is absent and present at the same time in the face of the potential ramification of disciplinary mechanisms. In this sense, we understand that dystopias reflect far beyond the fictional narrative, they are based on elements of the



so-called real and the historical-social world, permeated by panoptic discipline in training, coordinating and enabling obedient bodies.

In view of the above, we sought to map basic elements of character awareness in the four dystopian works listed, as we noticed societies with the extreme of repression and control (some moderate and others that could not be considered properly dystopian), although much of threatening questions about our own lives in contemporary times. Therefore, our reflections point out that much of the dystopian narratives are realities that we experience in everyday life, in control and surveillance, in the screens scattered everywhere (cell phones, cameras, etc.), in hate speech, in the role of the media and in the intellectual "domestication" of individuals. Winston, Julia, Truman, V, Evey, Katniss, among others, are facets of individuals who resist, up to certain limits, in markedly authoritarian societies.

5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

We can define dystopia as the representation of an imagined, oppressive reality or society, usually associated with the opposite of utopia (characterized as a perfect and harmonious imaginary reality). We note that dystopias are marked by repressive state control or other means of oppression such as the media, visibly present in 1984, V for Vendetta and The Hunger Games. Although The Truman Show is not exactly a dystopia, we chose this work as an object of analysis in the project due to the possible similarities in working to what extent an individual's life can be controlled.

The discussions presented in this investigation are part of the set of analyzes elaborated in a teaching project in interface with research developed with high school students in a federal educational institution. Obviously, the discussions are not limited to such aspects discussed in this brief investigation. In addition to the analysis of literary and filmic works, we also developed studies on theoretical references of relevance to the presented theme (such as Arendt (2013), Foucault (2014), Calvino (2007), among others), as well as the elaboration of didactic materials and the elaboration of workshops with the socialization of research and moments conducive to the discussion of themes inherent to the human condition in contemporary times.

Finally, this reflection leads us to think to what extent we are also alienated and immersed in a series of panoptic mechanisms of control and disciplinarization of our bodies and minds. The works presented present their own characters and peculiarities with the development of individual motivations of each protagonist who seeks his own



identity. In some societies, the possibility of rebellion was more latent, in others it would be unthinkable. However, the aforementioned works highlight the deprivation of human rights, the lack of freedom of expression, the control of the media, among other elements characteristic of totalitarian regimes.



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