



Dystopian Imagination: Editorial Introduction to the Special Issue

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Dystopian Imagination: Editorial Introduction to the Special Issue

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dystopia, utopia, digital culture, surveillance, literary studies

ABSTRACT

This special issue, *Shapes of Dystopia*, comprises nine research papers that explore dystopian imagination as a critical framework for interpreting contemporary social, political, ecological, and technological realities. Originating from the inaugural international conference held in Rzeszów in 2024, the volume approaches dystopia not merely as a literary genre, but as an analytical lens embedded in lived experience and philosophical inquiry. The contributions investigate dystopian narratives across literature, film, and digital culture, examining themes such as surveillance, migration, environmental collapse, gendered oppression, digital precarity, neuroculture, and posthuman identity. Collectively, the issue highlights the continued relevance of dystopian studies for understanding crisis, power, and speculative futures.

Introduction

This special issue of *Social Communication*, titled “Shapes of Dystopia” emerges from the first edition of the international conference “Shapes of Dystopia: Trends, Currents and Risks,” held on May 14, 2024, at the University of Information Technology and Management in Rzeszów. Co-organized by the Department of English Studies, the Research Club *Humanus*, and the Poster Design Club B-1, the event brought together scholars, students, artists, and practitioners to examine the cultural, philosophical, ecological, and technological dimensions of dystopian imagination across media. Crucially, the conference proceeded from the recognition that dystopia now exceeds the domain of literary speculation: it has entered philosophical and historical discourse as an analytical category for understanding lived reality, and in many contexts already constitutes a material condition rather than a hypothetical future. The meeting took place against an increasingly volatile and transformative global backdrop marked by accelerating ecological degradation, renewed geopolitical confrontation, the resurgence of illiberalism, and widening socio-economic disparities. At the same time, algorithmic governance, digital surveillance infrastructures, platform capitalism, and the commodification of attention reshape the structures of everyday life, influencing how individuals access information, form relationships, and conceptualize agency, subjectivity, and community. These overlapping crises — environmental, political, technological, and

affective — destabilize established epistemological frameworks and call for critical methodologies capable of apprehending systemic uncertainty, cultural volatility, and post-truth conditions.

Thus, dystopian thought returns with renewed urgency and intellectual force. Once imagined primarily as a speculative horizon, dystopia now serves as a critical vocabulary for reading the present. It reveals the tensions that structure contemporary life — the entanglements of power and precarity, surveillance and vulnerability, crisis and possibility — and offers ways of thinking through what it means to inhabit a world under pressure. In this sense, dystopia is not a retreat into imagined catastrophe but a mode of attention, attuned to fragility, contradiction, and the search for alternative forms of living. The contributions in this issue pursue these questions across literary, cinematic, and digital landscapes. Together, they underscore the growing permeability between fiction and social reality, and the extent to which dystopian imagination has become a method for grasping the conditions of the present as much as for speculating about the future. These contributions affirm that dystopia has moved beyond a single genre or tradition; it has become a critical practice, a way of thinking with and through crisis, and a language for navigating worlds in transition.

The volume opens with **Paula Wieczorek’s** examination of dystopia as a mode of cultural criticism, tracing its development from Enlightenment-era

utopian thought to contemporary algorithmic cultures and conceptualizing dystopian imagination as a diagnostic tool in the age of datafication and platform capitalism. **Syeda Maham Fatima** and **Qurratulaen Liaqat** then analyze *The Hunger Games*, exploring the nexus of spectacle, political domination, and resistance and demonstrating how mediated violence and ritualized rebellion function as technologies of governance. Moving from digital spectacle to transnational displacement, **Wareesha Batool Qureshi** and **Qurratulaen Liaqat** examine *Exit West*, foregrounding surveillance, migration, and bodily vulnerability within geopolitical border regimes. The theme of embodied political control continues in **Muhammad Hamza Ashfaq** and **Haider Ihsan Dawar**'s reading of *The Handmaid's Tale*, which highlights the interplay of patriarchal authoritarianism, reproductive coercion, and ideological indoctrination alongside subtle modalities of agency and resistance.

The issue then transitions to ecological and digital terrains. **Areen Ansari** offers an ecofeminist analysis of *Children of Men*, situating the narrative within discourses on biopolitics and environmental ethics and illuminating the intersection of ecological collapse, militarization, and reproductive control. **Karolina Kossakowska-Dehnert** turns to the digital sphere, examining the internet as a contemporary dystopian environment shaped by algorithmic identity production, cyber-vulnerability, and affective commodification. Ethical agency in dystopian contexts is addressed by **Aisha Khan**, who draws on Lawrence Kohlberg's moral development theory to analyze how characters in *Divergent* negotiate loyalty, sacrifice, and autonomy under coercive structures. **Izabela Bełz-Kaczmarek** shifts the focus to affect and cognition in her discussion of "neuroculture," analyzing representations of emotional exhaustion, pharmaceutical sedation, and dopamine-driven consumerism to reveal the psychological infrastructures of contemporary dystopia. The volume concludes with **Areena Zaman Bodla**'s study of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, which demonstrates how posthuman narrative strategies, temporal fragmentation, and metafiction destabilize humanist assumptions and articulate dystopian experience through trauma, memory, and distributed subjectivity.

Taken together, the contributions in this issue demonstrate the breadth and vitality of contemporary dystopian studies. Moving across literary, cinematic, and

digital forms, they show how dystopian imagination has become a critical method for understanding the social, political, and ecological pressures shaping the present. Rather than depicting catastrophe alone, these works reveal how dystopian narratives diagnose structures of power and precarity while also tracing possibilities for resistance, adaptation, and alternative futures. As Baccolini and Moylan (2003) observe, critical dystopias maintain a horizon of transformation even in the face of oppressive systems. It is our hope that this collection fosters continued interdisciplinary dialogue and contributes meaningfully to the ongoing development of dystopian studies in subsequent conference editions and academic publications.

References

Baccolini, R., & Moylan, T. (Eds.). (2003). *Dark horizons: Science fiction and the dystopian imagination*. Routledge.