

## **Toward a Diagnostics of the Present:**

### **Popular Culture, Post-Apocalyptic Macro-Dystopia, and the Petrification of Politics**

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#### **Introduction**

According to Fredric Jameson (2016: 1), “we have seen a marked diminution in the production of new utopias over the last decades (along with an overwhelming increase in all manner of conceivable dystopias, most of which look monotonously alike)”. This assessment is seconded by Jürgen Habermas (2019 [1985]: 161) who draws attention to the problematic consequences of such a lack of utopian thinking. He writes that “when the utopian oases dry up, we are left with a desert of banalities and cluelessness”.<sup>1</sup> The present chapter addresses how a dominance of dystopian narratives in contemporary popular culture together with a lack of utopian alternatives reflects a petrification of politics that reifies a received status-quo rather than enabling necessary changes. Ultimately, I argue our utopian potentials are wasted in hyper-commercialized technological hypes rather than allowing them to foment political mobilisation.

Mark Zuckerberg is building a metaverse. It is interesting to note that in the moment an awareness of the truly dystopic nature of his ‘social’ network seems to go mainstream, the next big thing in tech-savvy utopian thinking is pushed upon us via all available channels. We are now made to believe that we can conveniently forget about the surveillance-infested hyper-commercialized marketplace for identities and relations-erroneously-termed-friends and simply move on to the next stage. When we finally discovered the true meaning of the term social media *user*, we are immediately thrown on the already moving bandwagon of the next capitalist tech hype. This time, however, our souls are not enough for Zuckerberg. His next big disruptive innovation aims at the world – and the stars. Behold! The metaverse is upon us. And in it, what we believed was dystopic on Facebook will be force-multiplied beyond reckoning.

The metaverse. The name alone is programme. The term universe from which it is derived comes from Latin ‘the whole’ or ‘totality’. Etymologically speaking, the universe is what you get when everything is seen as a single entity, when everything becomes conceivable as one. But what about the metaverse then? In its original Greek version meta has a series of meanings that denote spatial and temporal positionings. Combined with the Latin root ‘vertere/versus’, meaning to turn,

convert, transform, or change this gives rise to interesting new meanings. Given Zuckerberg's earlier pretensions, I here assume that his metaverse will pretend to offer access to an elevated and allegedly improved version of the universe - while it, in reality, merely will deliver an alternative that has been tacitly changed and tampered with to better serve his and his company's financial and other interests.

Will people not react? Haven't they learned from the promises-turned-nightmares of the past? Of how a utopian 'connecting people' tacitly turned into a surveillance-fueled exploitative dystopia and a tool for a commercially driven divide and conquer (Zuboff 2019)? I seriously doubt it. With our minds attuned to constant flows of decontextualized and fragmented bits of information and genuine insignificancies, with time most of us will have forgotten even the name of the commercial social network that destroyed sociality and is about to bring down what remains of our actually existing democracies. After all, as Robert Gehl (2014) remarks, maybe the apparent success of bots replicating human users on Facebook and Twitter does not attest to the successes of machine learning and AI, after all. Maybe it rather points to the fact that, when entangled in these hyper-commercialized technical networks, humans are trained to act and perceive of one another in a machine-like fashion. Not bots become user-like, but users turn into bots and therefore these entities become indistinguishable. On the commercial Internet, we apparently neither properly think nor remember. We march forward, rather than looking back. The metaverse it is, then.

This little opening story points to an important premise for this chapter, namely the fact that utopia and dystopia are contingent terms. What appears like a wonderful kingdom of heaven to some (e.g. Zuckerberg), and is packaged accordingly, can at the same time be perceived as deeply exploitative and oppressive by others (e.g. me). What some see as utopic and a vision for a better future, others see as dystopic - a foreboding of hardships to come. These perspectives, and the different politics they inspire and imply, are dependent upon context. And this individual situatedness, again, with necessity always will vary and gradually change. Dystopia and utopia do not have fixed coordinates.

In what follows, I will initially offer a conceptual trajectory of key terms I apply in this chapter. I move from an introduction of the concepts of utopia and dystopia to a distinction between macro- and micro-versions of each, before I trace their appearances through contemporary cultural expressions with post-apocalyptic themes. I see both terms as intrinsically connected with micro-

utopias often being nested into macro-dystopias and vice-versa. Consequently, rather than treating the two terms as mutually exclusive oppositions, I follow the suggestion by Blanes and Bertelsen and see them “in tandem” to better understand their ambivalent nature and mutual interferences (2021: 5).

The readings of popular films, television series, and videogames I conduct in this chapter are symptomatic in the sense of Kracauer (1974). In his analyses of German inter-war cinema, he posited that recurring themes and motifs of popular film reflect collective psychological dispositions and attitudes that are prevalent in, and therefore typical for, a specific era. Analyses of cultural expressions can, as such, indirectly tell us something about the dominant politics of an era. Taking my empirical examples from film, streamed series, and digital games, I explore recurrent themes, motifs, and conventions and connect this emerging symptomatic poetics of contemporary dys/utopia to what I term petrified politics – the post-democratic condition that limits an imagination of politics to a merely technocratic management of a received and implicitly reified status quo (Crouch 2004; Fisher 2009). What current popular culture is telling us, I propose, is that the world is no longer ours to change – that there is no alternative to the currently dominating state of affairs – except virtually total annihilation. And utopia is reduced to commercial actors building a metaverse that merely offers escape where we should be mobilizing for change.

### **Thinking and acting under the condition of petrified politics**

Petrified politics suggests that there is, indeed both truth and wisdom in the sentence usually attributed to Fredric Jameson and/or Slavoj Žižek who famously stated that, “today, it seems easier to imagine the end of the world, than to imagine the end of capitalism” (cited in Fisher 2009: 2). The quote establishes that a lack of fantasy and utopian thinking are conditions for the hegemonic position of neo-liberal capitalism in the contemporary world. This hegemony not only hampers collective struggles, but also prevents a radical imagination that otherwise might have articulated a road toward concrete alternatives. Following Jameson’s (2016: 1) assertion opening the present chapter, I contend that macro-scale post-apocalyptic narratives are the go-to cultural form for representing and reproducing this condition of petrified politics in our current post-democratic order.

Despite an increasing general awareness of the weaknesses, inherent contradictions, and dire long-term consequences of a capitalist system vested in the brutal exploitation of human beings

and the natural world for the sake of ensuring yet greater profits for the already hyper-rich, it seems that what unites people is a description of current failures, rather than the conception of an alternative. We know that what we have is bad (at least for the many) but have no idea about how to bring it down or what to replace it with, except global disaster. This is the reason why well-meaning and suitably individualist crowds occupying spaces from Wall Street to Tahrir Square tend to quickly dissolve once the question of re-ordering the mess comes to the fore. Here, I propose the diagnosis that the currently prevailing interest for post-apocalyptic dystopia rather than utopia in cultural reflections about who we are and where we go is indicative of this lack of imaginary vision.

In the currently dominating cultural imagination, systemic change can only be thought of as the end of the world as we know it – a total societal, economic, and political breakdown. A post-apocalyptic macro-dystopia thus becomes the only conceivable alternative to the currently existing order of things. This implies that democratic politics and deliberation is replaced by a form of technocratic governance that is merely bent on managing an implicitly reified status quo lest the world goes under (Crouch 2004, Fisher 2009). In the meantime, the growing frustration and perceived needs for genuine change that the popularity of end-time narratives also reflects are channeled into escapist virtual ‘realities’ such as Zuckerberg’s hyper-commercialized metaverse as a quasi-religious alternative. Apparently, the drying oases of utopia, indeed, leave a desert of banalities and cluelessness as Jürgen Habermas (2019 [1985]: 161) suggests in the second citation opening the present contribution.

### **Utopia/dystopia/politics**

What, then, do utopia and dystopia mean for us today? And how can the current political valence of these cultural figurations be understood? The emergence of the term utopia is usually connected to the work of Thomas More, who in his 1516 novel combined the Greek terms ‘topos’ (place) as well as ‘ou’ (none) and ‘eu’ (good) to describe a fictional world remote from and better than the politico-spatial entities familiar to him and his readers at that time (Levitas 2011, Habermas 2019 [1985]: 142, Friberg 2021: 263-264). With the planet not yet fully mapped and explored, More’s initial idea inspired a series of similar fantasy-worlds spatially situated in as-yet unknown areas of ‘this’ world and temporally co-extensive with the various writers’ respective presents (see for instance Campanella’s *Sun State* (1602) or Bacon’s fragment *Nova Atlantis* (1623)). With exploration gradually filling all the blank spots on the increasingly accurate world maps, the spatially configured fictitious ‘better places’ that at the same time were ‘no places’

gradually receded and were replaced by temporally configured alternatives. The world did not any longer yield unknown locations where better no-places could be invented. Instead, utopia moved into the future, they became better not-yet times and societies-to-be – and thereby acquired increasing significance for political projects bent on changing and improving the present.

This move toward an exploration of imagined possible futures by means of fiction and its intrinsic connection to politics was clearly articulated in the works of Karl Mannheim and Ernst Bloch. According to Habermas (2019 [1985]: 142) the two scholars cleared the term utopia of its unreal and fantastic elements and rehabilitated it as a medium for the envisioning and testing of alternative social orders. According to Mannheim and Bloch, argues Habermas, the possibilities sketched out in utopian narratives were closely linked to ongoing historical processes and therefore politics (see also Friberg 2021). The ideas for new societies and states they brought forth became part of future-bound political trajectories aimed at diagnosing the present and changing it into a better, less oppressive, and less exploitative future world. Because of this, utopian thinking became a key element of socialist and other emancipatory movements – eventually also including backward-looking culturally conservative and even fascist projects (see Levitas 2013: xiii). Again, utopia here emerges as contingent and not necessarily progressive. The structure and ideology of future societies envisioned in utopian narratives are dependent upon the political positions of those whose imaginary capacities brought them into being – and different utopic visions for the same society are often at the core of conflicts. Such ambivalences and contradictions make studies of utopia and their implications an inherently interdisciplinary endeavor (Curtis and Hintz 2020).

Today however, Habermas tells us, our utopian energies are about to be depleted and the future-bound trajectories of utopian thinking and writing are about to lose their connections to history (ibid.: 143). The future, he states, is today negatively connotated as dystopia or it is entirely absent. With an alleged end of history, it seems, comes the eternal present and an end of constructive future-bound narratives and thinking. Writing at the height of the neoliberal revolution under Reagan, Thatcher, Kohl and others, Habermas (2019 [1985]) warns against an assertive form of cluelessness about the future that disguises itself as blunt realism to avoid alternatives and paralyze politics (see also Fisher 2009). This situation requires us, he concludes, to devise new utopian narratives. Lest we end up without oases of hope in our veritable desert of the real.<sup>ii</sup>

This conceptual move is reminiscent of Fredric Jameson's (1971, 1991) work on utopian ideas (see Fitting 1998 for a summary). Also basing his work on Herbert Marcuse (1955) and Ernst Bloch (1995 [1954-59]), Jameson identifies ambivalences regarding understandings of utopia in Marxist discourse that oscillate between 1) a critique against what is perceived as an idle diversion from concrete attempts to plan and realize a better world in socialist societies and 2) a necessary imaginative contribution that facilitates progressive thinking and political mobilization. Not unlike Habermas, also Jameson directs attention to how a specific form of realism implied by a technocratic capitalist hegemony severely hampers societies' abilities to envision alternative orders and act politically. According to Jameson, the defeatist position grounded in the allegedly unchangeable natural laws of the market and a reductive understanding of humans as merely a homo economicus can only be effectively countered by a utopian idea that "keeps alive the possibility of a world qualitatively distinct from this one and that takes the form of a stubborn negation of all that is" (1971: 111).

In both Jameson and Habermas, utopian thinking is an important tool for movements marginalized by a current apparatus of power that paralyzes what is left of democratic politics and reduces collective deliberation to a ritualized formal voting procedure unable to drive forward necessary changes. Mark Fisher (2009: 2) terms the described condition as capitalist realism - "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it". Furthermore, through its dynamic and adaptable nature, contemporary capitalism appears able to co-opt even the utopias that try to point beyond it (Moylan 2020). Despite this sobering outlook, Habermas, Jameson, Marcuse, and Fisher also show why utopian narratives need to be taken seriously in attempts to re-dynamize the petrified politics of our times (see also Levitas 2013). As Friberg (2021: 264) notes, "utopian visions are not merely literary fictions, but also political imaginaries that provide guidance and direction for concrete political actions". Hence the virtually total absence of utopias in current popular cultural narratives is problematic also from a political point of view.

Similar considerations lead Levitas (2013) to advance the idea of utopia as a method. She states that utopian thinking lies at the core of progressive political projects aimed at leading our societies out of the current dead end. Devising a method she calls imaginary reconstitution of society,<sup>iii</sup> Levitas treats utopian ideas, stories, and actions as key components of an activist sociology for change that offers a holistic perspective on current challenges and possible ways forward. In

soliciting the human imagination as an important source for the creation of utopian projects, she frees politics from policy and enriches dry and technical planning and management with creativity, fantasy and bold exploration thus facilitating concrete steps toward a fulfillment of the individual and collective “desire for being otherwise” (xi) expressed in utopian theories and practices.

These utopian imaginaries solicited by Levitas for a reconstitution of the present, however, are not necessarily promising a world that is better for all and the actions they guide might not necessarily be perceived as equally progressive by everyone. The exact qualities of the politicized horizons of possibility opened up by utopian thinking are neither unidirectional nor unambiguous. Hence the necessity to explore how utopias deal with issues of conflict, deviance, dissent, and resistance (see for instance Troschitz 2021) and the need to look at the interplay between utopia and dystopia both at macro- and micro-levels (Blanes and Bertelsen 2021).

This leads us over to the role of dystopia for a formation of future-bound political projects. Derived from a combination of the Greek words ‘dys’ (hard, bad) and ‘topos’ (place), the term dystopia refers to bad, weird, and threatening places. Similar to utopia, also dystopia gradually changed its meaning to refer to a temporally rather than geographically remote possible order. Fictitious bad places are conjured up in cultural expressions to enable an imagining, and therefore preparation for or avoidance of, not-yet-realized hardships, problems, and challenges. Not unlike their positively connoted relatives, also dystopian narratives take current states of society, politics, and culture as a departure point and imaginatively transpose these into possible futures. By these means, also cultural expressions focusing on dystopic potential future realities can serve progressive (as well as other) political projects (Moylan 2020).

Most people’s real dystopia, however, is today not the grand-scale global apocalypse regularly envisioned by the contemporary culture industry, but the long and stony road toward such a major breakdown. And, in everyday life, for many people such a gradual decline has already begun even though their experiences are only insufficiently reflected in cultural form. Hence, a need to explore micro-dystopia – the current bleak prospects as experienced by those most negatively affected by the contemporary state of affairs – and a necessity to explore their opposites – micro-utopia, the small-scale concrete and lived alternatives that can emerge at the heart of dystopia and that can point to viable ways forward.

By far the most dystopias that are presented in contemporary cultural expressions are rather grand-scale and speak about the fates of peoples, nations, regions, or even the entire globe. Such grand-scale scenarios of future worlds often overlook the significance of the everyday experiences and actions of situated individuals on the move into an imagined utopic or dystopic future. So far, we lack attention to the micro-physics of dys/utopia and their connection to people rather than peoples. Precisely these, I contend, might function as the oases of hope in the desert of the real highlighted by Habermas and might offer concrete steps toward fulfilling individual and collective desires for “being otherwise” (Levitas 2013: xi).

To make this transition from large-scale top-down narratives toward situated small-scale stories, I will turn to Friberg’s (2021) reading of Ernst Bloch’s (1995 [1954-59]) distinction between abstract and concrete utopia. According to her, Bloch’s abstract utopias are not concerned with questions of viability and actual implementation of the voiced ideas, while his concrete utopias put up realizable goals in both long- and short-term perspectives. As such, abstract utopias serve as half-mythical sources of general inspiration for change, while concrete utopias lend themselves more easily to day-to-day questions of political practice in strategic and tactical terms. Both abstract and concrete notions of the concept can become crucial when using utopia (or dystopia) as a method to facilitate an imaginary reconstitution of societies as suggested by Levitas (2013).

In the present chapter, I re-envision Friberg’s and Bloch’s distinction as a difference between macro- and micro-versions of utopia and dystopia and trace their emergence in contemporary cultural expressions. This move brings my inquiry into proximity with Blanes and Bertelsen’s (2021: 6-7) anthropological approach that seeks to shift focus “from utopia as an ideal or ‘spirit’ into utopia as praxis generative of mobilisation” and that therefore directs attention to “the ‘everyday’ performances of utopia in networks and spaces”. In the following, I will explore such performed everyday practices of micro-utopia and micro-dystopia and their entanglements with macro-dys/utopia as they are reflected in contemporary post-apocalyptic films, games, and streamed series. In doing this, I will offer a diagnostic of the present as a neoliberal rule stabilized by means of veiling possible alternatives and constantly reiterating the idea of an impossibility of politics and a virtually total powerlessness of the ruled.

### **Macro-dystopia, the post-apocalypse, and the petrified politics of popular culture**

In most contemporary dystopian narratives, the grand-scale catastrophe is presented as a fait-accompli, at best briefly summarized in a prologue, a few flashback sequences, or a series of news



headlines embedded in title sequences. Just to offer a few iconic examples, in both the novel (McCarthy 2006) and the film version (Hillcoat 2009) of *The Road*, the reader/viewer is directly cast into a post-apocalyptic setting. Only gradually a few bits and pieces of information are made available that point to the nature and reasons of the catastrophic event that destroyed the entire planet's biosphere and left the remaining survivors to starve. The purpose of both novel and film is an exploration of micro-dystopias embedded in macro-dystopia in a narrative that is centered upon a boy and his sick father trying to reach (possibly merely imagined) still inhabitable areas farther south. The story draws a depressing picture of human nature and the capacity of individuals to cooperate for mutual benefit. Without ordering forces from above, film and novel implicitly suggest, humans turn into vicious animals murdering, enslaving, and literally devouring everyone who is not part of one's own nuclear family. *Homo homini lupus*, the bleak principle invoked by Thomas Hobbes (2010 [1651]) to justify absolutist rule, could hardly have been articulated more clearly. This ideological frame makes the narrative align nicely to a petrified politics aimed at merely managing a received status quo lest change lets lose the demons of our true nature.<sup>iv</sup>

Something similar is true for the post-apocalyptic film *Snowpiercer* (Joon-ho 2013) that is based on the graphic novel *Le Transperceneige* (Lob and Rochette 1982) and has recently been made into a Netflix series with so far two seasons (2020-). In this dystopic climate-fiction narrative, the sudden breakdown of all order is the result of a misguided attempt to reverse climate change that instead turned the planet into an uninhabitable chunk of ice. The only survivors live in a giant train that perpetually circles the planet. Against this (arguably weird) background, the film presents a rigid class structure where class 1 passengers brutally exploit, starve, and oppress the rest, while the train's security detail mercilessly defends the status quo.

Both film and series have been read as offering an allegory to the injustices of contemporary global capitalism and the revolutionary impulses these imply. And, even though both dare to use the word revolution and give it a positive connotation, the success of the uprising is yet again dependent upon the heroic deeds of one iconic male hero imbued with the mission to effectuate change against a merely superficially envisioned system of oppression distanced from our own condition by means of a pre-set global apocalypse enforcing authoritarian rule. In the film version, the revolution succeeds in overcoming the train's various micro-level dystopias but ends in the destruction of the train and the death of everyone inside except two lone survivors. In the (ongoing) series, parts of the train are destroyed before a revolutionary unit is separated from the

rest. Revolutions and uprising, the narrative of *Snowpiercer* suggests, are dangerous things, indeed, and should better be avoided lest we engage in our own self-destruction. Authoritarian capitalism or death emerge as the only conceivable alternatives.

Something similar is true for the apparently revolutionary inclined dystopian movie *V for Vendetta* (McTeigue 2005) that is based on the comic book series of the same name (Moore and Lloyd 1988). Even though the setting of a world ravaged by a deadly virus, the US fractured by a new civil war, and right-wing supremacist ascending to power in Europe should suggest quite a few areas of critical connection to our current condition, the film ultimately ends up retelling the story of a super-hero enabling a violent uprising against a fascist regime the emergence of which is explained by sudden apocalyptic conditions rather than the contradictions inherent to a capitalist order. Evil is focused through the acts of abominable individual perpetrators and structural aspects of oppression are systematically underemphasized or outright hidden behind fascist authoritarianism. Finally, an open ending does not indicate the ultimate success or failure of the revolt and leaves it to the viewer to determine the long-term viability of an individual act of terrorism destroying the highly symbolic parliament building. As such, the film ends with the destruction of the given rather than pointing out possible ways toward a utopian new order.<sup>v</sup>

Also in popular computer games, and in particular in story-based first- and third-person shooters, macro-dystopias are preferred settings. Global wars, pandemics, alien invasions, or zombie apocalypses suddenly wiping out established orders and authorities all serve as suitable backgrounds to enable pleasurable and unproblematized killing sprees by a (usually male) hero controlled by players and directed against unambiguously evil and deplorable enemies. Some games, however, offer complex narratives and game worlds that attempt to deal with the complexities and ambiguities of conflicts and attempt to explain their contexts and internal logics of escalation.

In games, players' ability to change the course of the events is limited. Some games are more susceptible to player choices and preferences than others. As Bogost (2006) observes, this limitation of player freedom through rules and mechanics constitutes a procedural form of rhetoric that positions players and conveys ideology on a par with narrative. Consequently, when analyzing games, the ways these predispose player interaction with the game world and other characters is equally important as critical readings of the narratological devices through which the story is told.

One iconic example for a narratively tight structured game with a post-apocalyptic setting that leaves little influence to players, is the series *The Last of Us* produced by the developer Naughty Dog (2013, 2014, 2020). The first game, *The Last of Us* (2013), establishes a grand-scale dystopic background for the entire series – a rapidly spreading mushroom infection that kills most of the population and turns many more into flesh-eating monsters. The breakdown is presented as sudden and the result of an external catastrophe. Thus, gradual processes of decline are de-emphasized, and the setting is disconnected from contemporary politics including capitalist relations of exploitation and oppression. During the game, players can explore various aspects of a pre-set new authoritarian order including a series of nested micro-dystopias (and one micro-utopia). However, the game mechanics severely limit what players can do in the diegetic world and, with very few exceptions, leave violence as the only way of interacting with non-player characters. Again, attention to the difficult challenges and moral ambiguities of a slow and gradual process toward an ultimate demise of the given world is circumvented thus limiting the ability of the game to critically speak to our own current condition. In addition, the game reiterates, yet again, a total inability of human beings to cooperate for mutual benefit.

In the subsequent titles of the series the overarching post-apocalyptic setting remains the same. However, in particular in *The Last of Us: Part II* (2020), the nature and composition of nested micro-dystopia and micro-utopia change in a manner that allows for a critical interrogation of the contingency of dys/utopia and the logics of violent escalation that are relevant to the present chapter. I will get back to this later.

As a last example, the dystopic open world game *Fallout: New Vegas* (Bethesda 2010) offers a scathing and sarcastic critique of the fears and aspirations of a 1940s USA where bourgeoisie expectations, morale, and norms cross with apocalyptic ideas of nuclear wars, mutations, and killer robots. Players can create their own characters and are left with considerable freedom on how to engage with the diegetic world and solve the various in-game challenges including speech- and charisma-based nonviolent alternatives. On their ways through a devastated post-nuclear waste land, players encounter various individuals and communities that change their behavior in correspondence with how they are treated. As a result, players can tease out both dystopic and utopic potentials at a micro-level through their game play. Despite several critical hints at corporate new speak that for instance try to sell the catastrophe and subsequent life in a bunker under authoritarian rule as a genuine opportunity or that rationalize both autonomous weapons

and nuclear war as logical solutions to rather undefined problems, it is precisely the counterfactual setting looking at the future with hegemonic eyes from the 1940s that also reduces the value of the narrative as a critique of our current condition of digital capitalism. As so often in contemporary mainstream pop culture, also in *Fallout: New Vegas* a concrete and viable alternative to the homo-homini-lupus-problem remains lacking.

As the examples so far have shown, in the contemporary culture industry, it is not only easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism but imagining the end of the world apparently also attracts more audiences and is therefore more in line with the profit interests of the production companies thriving under capitalist conditions. It comes to little surprise that these companies do not massively invest in cultural representations critically dissecting the status quo and offering a clearly outlined and believable alternative (see e.g. Artz 2015, Alford 2011, and Pötzsch 2019). Rather, as Beaumont (2014) puts it in his critique of the Hollywood disaster movie, popular culture opts to “conceal the corrosion of [...] capitalism beneath the biblical destruction of absolutely everything” (80).

Besides taking an overarching macro-apocalypse for granted, thereby cushioning spectators against potentially disruptive onslaughts of utopic and dystopic settings too close to our own lived reality, contemporary cultural expressions also tend to dwell on the bleakness and horrific nature of our near future without offering any glimpses of light at the end of a dark tunnel that might empower audiences. Utopia, in other words, are largely absent and with them the inspiration necessary to motivate political engagement for change.

The television/streamed series *Black Mirror* (Channel 4/Netflix 2011-2019) presents detailed and often both uncomfortable and deeply troubling dystopic potentials at the heart of our current societies. However, also this product falls short in the crucial aspect of offering an alternative or at least a glimpse of hope amid all the depicted dystopic bleakness. Taking the *Black Mirror* episodes *15 Million Merits* (2011), *The Entire History of You* (2011), *The Waldo Moment* (2013), and *Nosedive* (2016) as examples, they all take up difficult issues pertinent in present society and imaginatively and believably extrapolate them into a near future dystopia. As such, *15 Million Merits* focuses on the issue of precarious grinding work for virtual value, sexist and oppressive media practices, and the total cooption of even violent acts of desperation into the overarching logics of an all-powerful commercial media apparatus, while *The Entire History of You* mercilessly exposes the terrible consequences ubiquitous recording and surveillance

technologies have for inter-personal relations and sociality. *The Waldo Moment* deals with political manipulation of the media and the undermining of democracy by powerful interests. Finally, *Nosedive* shows the devastating effects constant practices of mutual rating and evaluation have on self-esteem and social relations that become reduced to a manufactured, tightly regulated, and inherently oppressive and homogenizing form of toxic sociality.

All these episodes offer detailed and convincing analyses of potential, and given Zuckerberg's latest plans indeed not entirely improbable, future trajectories toward a thoroughly dystopic and inhumane world. None of them, however, gives even the slightest hint or vision as to what to do with the identified troubling shortcomings. The presented realistic small-scale dystopias appear without a solution and the viewer is left with the impression that resistance is either futile or simply impossible. The implicit ideology of *Black Mirror* can be summarized with reference to Beaumont's (2014: 82) critique of Hollywood action and disaster movies. He writes that the genre is "reactionary [...] insofar as it implies that, even in the advanced capitalist nations people are little more than flies to wanton gods—politically both helpless and hopeless". *Black Mirror* stages total powerlessness as the core of the human condition. Politics is nothing more than a play for the gallery staged by merciless and all-powerful elites. There is no alternative and, therefore, resistance is useless. Capitalist realism meets petrified politics.

With the brief symptomatic walkthrough of the implied ideology of post-apocalyptic and dystopian films, series, and games in mind, the following key elements of the genre can be summarized: 1) a lack of utopian vision, 2) an asserted inability on the side of the oppressed to act and resist in a meaningful manner, and 3) a setting implying a Hobbesian homo homini lupus as the essence of the human condition implying an incapacity to act collectively and presenting (even authoritarian) leadership as an absolute necessity. The next section will investigate cases where this hegemonic subtext of the post-apocalyptic genre is challenged and (partly) subverted in interesting manners.

### **Shifting perspectives: Trying to imagine the end (or, at least, the contradictions) of capitalism**

Given its current prominence in the Netflix-induced collective imaginary, the Korean series *Squid Game* (Dong-hyuk 2021) merits attention at this point. Presenting a troubling dystopic setting, the series follows a selection of debt-ridden individuals who are solicited into a deadly game organized by a tightly knit group of powerful men. Those who succeed in surviving the various ordeals are promised awards equaling several hundred million Euros. As the sadistic games advance from

one horrific scenario to the next, the various episodes elegantly draw a chain of equivalence between the cynical, brutal, and inhumane game environment, and the situation of the participants in the outside world making it increasingly difficult for both characters and audiences to determine with any moral certitude which of the two is worse. Oppression, inequality, exploitation, and death, the series suggests, are not tragic and unintended failures, but form the constitutive core of our current economic system.

The game presented in the series is based on simple rules with one of them stating that, if a majority of players decides to stop playing, the game will be terminated. After nothing less than a massacre during episode 1, precisely this happens when the surviving participants vote in favor of termination and are subsequently returned to their former lives under South-Korean capitalism. The episode then exposes the hollow nature of this alleged ‘freedom to choose’ and it quickly becomes clear that, due to their material condition, the depicted characters did not have a real choice at all. Forced by poverty, debt, exploitative work-relations, and more, one participant after the other eventually leaves their respective real-world micro-dystopias behind and voluntarily returns to the game - despite its horrific nature. By these means, the series suggests that a complete devaluation and instrumentalization of individual lives as well as a virtually total powerlessness experienced by the players in the game environment is not unlike their real lives under an unregulated form of capitalism that relentlessly separates the redundant from the resilient (Domingo 2019).

On some occasions *Squid Game* makes the mostly allegorical parallels between game world and real-life authoritarian capitalism explicit. This happens for instance in flashback sequences of the main protagonist that blend traumatizing experiences from the game with memories from the brutal oppression of workers striking against the South Korean car manufacturer Ssangyong Motors in 2009 (see Chang-kun 2021). On some occasions the series even suggests that the game world might be the better alternative for most players as the rules rigidly enforce a complete equality between the participants regardless of their education or background in real life. As such criminal low-lives, wretched souls from slums, and illegal immigrants play under the same conditions as highly educated white-collar workers or academics and gain something they are systematically denied in actual life - a level playing field and equal opportunities to succeed.

*Squid Game* offers an astute critique of the conditions normal people are forced to live under in advanced neoliberal capitalist societies such as South Korea. As such, the series convincingly uses

dystopic motifs and nested dystopias to make visible some of the hidden and troubling undercurrents of our contemporary order that are usually eschewed in expressions of commercial popular culture with a wide appeal. In one aspect, however, the series fails to realize its potentials. Unbound capitalism and its consequences are unveiled, mercilessly dissected, and critiqued but the series does not offer a concrete alternative, a vision for a better future, or at least a viable way forward.

The meticulously developed nested micro-dystopias of *Squid Game* lack a unifying utopia. The game participants are isolated individuals that are crushed like insects at the whims of powerful men - Beaumont's (2014: 82) "flies to wanton gods" - and remain thus to the degree that the main character winning the prize in the end is so damaged that he doesn't even know any longer what to do with all the money he earned by successfully making his way to 'the top'. Rather than empowering the oppressed, the series reiterates a key aspect of petrified politics - that resistance to the given deeply unjust and inhumane order is either futile or impossible. An inspiring rallying cry for change looks different.<sup>vi</sup>

In a similar manner, Adam McKay's *Don't Look Up* (2021) only apparently interrogates the contradictions of contemporary capitalism. The *Netflix*-film follows two scientists who in vain attempt to warn the world of the imminent impact of a giant asteroid but are drawn into a corrupt and corrupting system of media, money, and power. Partly, the film takes up the destructive implications hypercommercialized social media have for our ability to act collectively and successfully subverts beliefs in the ability of new technologies to save the planet. In the end, however, the film suggests that 1) politics is only a play for the gallery conducted by self-serving elites, 2) if the US cannot save the planet, no one can, and 3) the only option available for well-meaning and intelligent human beings is to enjoy a family dinner while waiting for the inevitable apocalypse. Again, we see the image of petrified politics emerging as a common denominator that effectively undermines any attempts at coordinated collective action. In the case of *Don't Look Up*, however, a total apocalypse is left as the only alternative. Enjoy while you still can and watch the earth go bye-bye.

The latest instantiation of the third-person shooter game series *The Last of Us* offers a different take on macro-micro dys/utopian dynamics in popular cultural expressions. *The Last of Us: Part II* (2020) presents an interesting constellation of overarching macro-dystopia and nested micro-utopia that alert us to the contingency of these terms and problematizes them by setting them up

against one another in a critical deconstructive move. The game starts in a backward-looking micro-utopia typical for the genre of the post-apocalyptic shooter – a small and heavily armed community of survivors who hold up in a fortified rural settlement. The iconology of the game’s initial hours of play time connotes the Western genre with hard-baked bearded men and sturdy women bravely defying the hardships caused by the catastrophe. Despite certain inner tensions and occasional sexist slurs, the impression of a community of plain and honest equals is created where people are different but trust and support one another in crucial concerns. As Cole (2020) points out, the Western-style village and rural farmhouses connoting safety and community offer a nostalgic and inherently conservative version of America as an implied ideal – a backward-looking nested micro-utopia in the terminology of this chapter.

After witnessing the brutal murder of her surrogate father and savior from the first game, Joel, the main protagonist Ellie sets out on what initially resembles a revenge mission typical for the shooter genre. Leaving the relative safety of the countryside behind, Ellie and her girlfriend traverse into the chaotic cityscape of a derelict Seattle where deadly dangers lure behind every corner and slowly kill their way to a first direct encounter with Joel’s murderer – the alleged main adversary of the game, Abby. Then, after approximately 10 hours playtime, the *The Last of Us: Part II* suddenly rewinds time to the moment Ellie first entered Seattle and shifts perspective. From then on, players are forced to play the same three days as Abby, Joel’s murderer and Ellie’s apparently evil, ruthless, and merciless opponent.

During the hours of game play that then follow, players not only learn the reason and context for the brutal murder of Joel lending it some justification but also get to know many of the non-player characters Ellie has killed during her earlier journey through the ruins of the city. And players are quickly forced to concede that these people were no different from those surviving in Ellie’s own community in the countryside. A received genre-typical discourse of conflict built around an unambiguous self-other dichotomy is thus unhinged and the classical plot line of a fight against evil is fundamentally undermined. The apparently righteous violence exerted by Ellie is deprived of its legitimacy. By these means the game subverts key conventions of the shooter genre and makes violence and its implications an explicit object for critical interrogation (see Pöttsch 2021).

What also becomes accessible to players when controlling Abby is a second micro-utopia nested into the macro-dystopia of the game world that is radically different from the one encountered earlier in the countryside. In Seattle, a well-organized communitarian, yet militarized, collective



has been formed where people work and contribute for a common good harvesting from gardens, rearing and educating children, securing the community, scavenging outside, or maintaining weapons, buildings, and machinery. Money, a very usual ingredient in most narrative computer games, is absent as a game play device in *The Last of Us: Part II* and while the game still indicates that things cost money in Ellie's rural community, in Abby's urban environment all goods and services are apparently distributed based on need. Both these micro-utopias could have coexisted if it wasn't for the received structures and dynamics of war, violence, and a masculinist-military mindset that together emerge as the core of an overarching macro-dystopia threatening to undo everything people have built in the various communities. The game thus suggests that the crucial factor leading to violent escalation is not human nature, but a militarized discourse and military leadership.

Eventually, a third nested micro-utopia in the game becomes conceivable in a group of religious zealots, the Scars, vying for control over Seattle with Abby's community. Also here the player is initially positioned in a clear-cut good-evil opposition between Abby's organization in Seattle and the allegedly madly murderous opposing group based on an island nearby. However, the key non-player character of Lev, a former Scar, as well as several letters and conversations players can access quickly re-focus the situation drawing a far more nuanced picture of this group and its development thus questioning and undermining Abby's allegedly legitimate cause (Pöttsch 2021).

Not unlike *Squid Game* and *Don't Look Up*, however, also *The Last of Us: Part II* leaves its audience clueless about what to do and how to improve the situation or defuse the deadly and mutually destructive cycle of escalation binding together the three micro-utopias nested into the overarching post-apocalyptic setting and its destructive dynamics. The game mercilessly exposes the deadly logics of violence, war, and militarist mindsets and in doing so critically interrogates generic shooter mechanics and war discourses. What the game lacks, however, is an overarching macro-utopia with the capacity to make imaginable a different and more peaceful world and thus facilitate progressive change. As Petit (2020) expresses it, *The Last of Us: Part II* feels "like a surrender to the most hopeless notions about who we are" and, accordingly, fails to inspire. The game successfully unveils a set of severe problems relevant to our times but does not offer a viable alternative or even a remote dream of a better future.<sup>vii</sup>

## Conclusion

Zuckerberg's metaverse promises us a utopia. However, his project does not refer to the collectively negotiated, shared, and political empowering utopias thinkers such as Bloch, Habermas, and Jameson had in mind. Neither does it point to the use of utopia as a method to facilitate joint progressive struggles for a better world as envisioned by Levitas as well as Balnes and Bertelsen. On the contrary, Zuckerberg aims at something quite different and far less arduous – a series of private and privatized micro-utopias neatly tailored to each individual users' most intimate needs, wishes, fears, and preferences. Tacitly personalizing our very access to reality by means of adaptive VR and AR technologies that autonomously respond to each individual users' profile and change what we see, hear, and even feel in correspondence with this data, the metaverse will let each of us live in blissful isolation in our very own worlds – and seemingly makes the worst thinkable scenarios explored in *Black Mirror* come true.<sup>viii</sup> The system will gather data, predict, propose, and prevent with the overarching aim of holding attention, amplifying affect, and producing desires. As a result, massive opportunities for manipulation for economic and, indeed, political purposes abound. But then, being able to visit the whole world in a manner perfectly tailored to *you* must come at a cost. To me, precisely this makes the metaverse appear as the logical macro-dystopic conclusion of what commenced with Facebook & co roughly 15 years ago. Delusional dystopian disconnect. Profit petrifies politics.

As the symptomatic readings and heuristic diagnostic conducted in the present chapter have shown, current developments toward such a not entirely unlikely dystopian prospect are only inadequately reflected in today's cultural sphere where mass entertainment apparently only can envision (the end of) capitalism as either an anarchic disaster for everyone (*Snowpiercer*, *V for Vendetta*) or an arena for the lone male hero to reinvent and prove himself - saving the world and reinstituting both a received economic order and the nuclear family in the process (*The Last of Us*, Hollywood disaster cinema). The difficult gradual transitions from our times into various possible dystopias are usually underemphasized (and thereby they avoid assigning blame to anything other than individual villains or natural forces), while resistance is presented as either destructive, futile, or impossible (*Black Mirror*, *Squid Game*, *Los favoritos de Midas*). Occasionally, the deficiencies of a corrupted political system are presented as responsible for the inevitable apocalypse (*Don't Look Up*).

Besides the implied delegitimization of resistance and the shortcomings in the presentation of believable dystopia with clear connections to present day contradictions and challenges that were identified above, also concrete utopias remain lacking in the presented narratives. After the

catastrophe there is usually either nothing (*Don't Look Up*) or a struggle of all against all necessitating (and justifying) even authoritarian leadership (*The Road*, *Snowpiercer*). Despite honest attempts to offer more varied accounts with relevance to contemporary systems of oppression and exploitation (*Black Mirror*, *Squid Game*, *The Last of Us: Part II*), the main impression is created that today's unjust order is without an alternative, that attempts radically to change what capitalist realism posits as simply given is both dangerous, irresponsible, and ultimately destructive to all. Instead of functioning as a utopian rallying cry, the films, series, and games investigated in this chapter rather pacify both characters and viewers in purposeless (and latently voyeuristic) witnessing and pointless suffering under a status quo that is implicitly reiterated as the only possible order there is. These widely recurrent tropes, together with an absence of any utopian impetus, make the studied cultural products a go-to form for the reproduction and perpetuation of contemporary petrified politics. A lack of oases of hope, it seems, indeed leaves us nothing but a desert of the real controlled by wanton gods for their own gains.

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<sup>1</sup> My translation. German original reads: “Wenn die utopischen Oasen austrocknen, breitet sich eine Wüste von Banalität und Ratlosigkeit aus.

<sup>2</sup> Another suitable reference for both the importance of utopian narratives and the debilitating effects of a reality-principle that reduces humans to rational automata in need of suppressing their desires to be able to function in society would be Herbert Marcuse’s *Eros and Civilization* (1955). For the sake of length and readability, I will have to refrain from discussing this significant work at this point and move on to presenting my empirical examples. The same is true for Michel Foucault’s (1986) relevant concept of heterotopia that could enrich my later discussion on lived micro- versus abstracted macro-dys/utopia.

<sup>3</sup> Given her interest in a reconstitution of society by means of creative imagination, it appears strange that Levitas (2013) does not refer to the work by Cornelius Castoriadis (2005 [1975]).

<sup>4</sup> The Zombie-genre starting with Romero’s iconic movies follows a similar logic except for Romero’s first two films. *Night of the Living Dead* (Romero 1968) uses the micro-dystopia of survivors sheltering in a remote farmhouse to critically explore issues of gender and race leading to the final assertion that humans constitute worse threats to one another than the zombies roaming outside. This, of course, reiterates the ideological position identified with reference to *The Road* as it suggests that, without authority to control them, people will not cooperate but turn upon one another. The second movie, *Dawn of the Dead* (Romero 1978) allegorically connects the figure of the zombie to brainless consumerist consumption. However, this connection is not explored in any considerable detail and remains at the level of postulation. Both films lack a utopian vision that points beyond what they set out to criticize.

<sup>5</sup> Alfonso Cuarón’s movie *Children of Men* (2006) that is based on P.D. James novel with the same title from 1992 follows a comparable logic. Here a male hero enables the escape of the last pregnant woman in an otherwise infertile world into an unknown future. The film explores various micro-dystopias and uses these to delegitimize any form of collective organization that all appear driven by egotistical considerations. A convincing connection to current contradictions is equally lacking as are concrete ideas about better alternative orders.

<sup>6</sup> Similar logics are at play in the Spanish Netflix productions *Los favoritos de Midas* (Gil 2020) and *La casa de papel* (Pina 2017-). *Los favoritos de Midas* unveils the merciless activities of hidden deep-state networks behind the facades of Western democracies yet at the same time stages the complete powerlessness of civil society and journalism to launch any meaningful form of resistance. *La casa de papel* on the other hand features an active challenge to ruling powers but reduces it to the actions of a group of likeable bandits struggling to secure individual gains rather than inciting collective struggles for change. Both series therefore circumnavigate utopias and rather subscribe to the logics

of petrified politics either reiterating total powerlessness or rearticulating resistance as exclusively a struggle for individual gains. Also *El hoyo* (Gaztelu-Urrutia 2020) articulates a complete powerlessness of the oppressed.

<sup>vii</sup> This is not unlike the game *Life Is Strange* (Square Enix 2015) that initially unfolds significant potentials and seemingly enables two young women to self-confidently maneuver complex issues of inequality, sexism, and injustice in contemporary US society. In the end, however, the game enforces a choice between either the tragic death of one of the women (and the psychological destruction of the other) or the devastation of their entire hometown thus leaving death and destruction or submission to a status quo as the only available options (see Pötzsch and Waszkiewicz 2019).

<sup>viii</sup> Virtual reality (VR) is a technology that uses for instance specifically designed headsets, gloves, and/or sensor suits to allow users to enter and interact with a computer-generated virtual world (in the case of the metaverse modelled to replicate our own) and experience it in a manner that allegedly solicits responses-as-if-real. Augmented reality (AR) on the other hand, uses similar interface technologies to put layers of additional information over our perception of the actual world (in the case of the metaverse, users wearing for instance special glasses might see different ads when entering a shop, receive auto-generated profile information on people they see, or be spared scenes profiled as triggering the respective user in a negative manner). For recent critiques of VR/AR-based immersive technologies of mediation, see for instance Schlembach and Clewer (2021) and Pötzsch (2022).