Valentina Romanzi
American Nightmares. Dystopia in Twenty-First-Century US Fiction

"Ralahine Utopian Studies", Oxford, Peter Lang, 2022, 285 pp.

Valentina Romanzi's first monograph adapts her PhD thesis for Peter Lang's "Ralahine Utopian Studies", one of the series that is most actively shaping the field of utopian studies today. *American Nightmares* focuses on the second pole of the eutopia/dystopia (or positive/negative utopia) dichotomy in order to explore the connections between contemporary US dystopian fiction and the major cultural shifts taking place in the post 9/11 US. Romanzi's arguments, then, function both as studies of dystopias from the perspective of sociology and as a «commentary on the status of American collective identity» (2). From a theoretical standpoint, Romanzi is less interested in unravelling the intricacies involved in defining dystopia as a genre (she simply positions it within the domain of speculative fiction) than in classifying dystopias according to a sociologically meaningful taxonomy. This is why *American Nightmares* is structured around Gregory Claeys's classification of *negative utopias* according to three categories: political, technological, and environmental dystopias. Working across a variety of media, from literature to film through videogames, Romanzi proposes four case studies that fit perfectly into Claeys's categories. Margaret Atwood's 2019 *The Testaments* and Dave Eggers's 2013 *The Circle* are read as political dystopias through the lens of surveillance studies; the 2018 video game *Detroit: Become Human* is analysed as a technological dystopia with the help of the theories on posthumanism; disaster and trauma studies are mobilized to

investigate the Hughes Brothers' 2010 movie *The Book of Eli* as an environmental dystopia.

The general argument developed through the course of the monograph aims at configuring these texts and media products as key examples of what Tom Moylan calls *critical dystopias*. Contrary to the "classic" dystopias of the 1930s-1950s, which were grounded in a deeply pessimistic view of humanity's future, critical dystopias «embrace the belief that society can change, particularly if the individuals that make it up react to a situation that does not fit their needs» (15). Seen from such a perspective, this new kind of negative utopias «seem paradoxically to be the last locus of hope» (99). It is, of course, a type of hope «informed by reality» (113), which Romanzi describes by borrowing the concepts of "authentic hope" and "educated hope", coined by Terry Eagleton and Ernst Bloch, respectively. Contemporary critical dystopias assume then, in Romanzi's view, a role not too dissimilar from that of the «oracles of the apocalypse» found in the Bible, tasked with «pointing out the evils of their civilization and of retaining the forlorn hope that they will be proven wrong» (112).

By putting the methods for the study of fiction in dialogue with the methods of sociology, Romanzi also reflects deeply on the interconnections between these two fields. After providing an overview of the narrative theories of dystopia in chapters 1-2 and analyzing the decline of the "American Myth" in chapter 3, chapter 4 draws on Zygmunt Bauman's and Riccardo Mazzeo's *In Praise of Literature* (2016), among other works, to demonstrate that dystopias represent a key site for the exploration of the "sociological imagination" of a given culture. On the other hand, the methods of sociologists can (and should) be of great interest to literary scholars, as they have the potential to add a whole other layer to their hermeneutic practices. Which is exactly what Romanzi proceeds to demonstrate in chapters 5 to 7.

Atwood's *The Testaments* and Eggers's *The Circle* are read contrastively as portraying two opposite interpretations of a panopticon-like surveillance apparatus. While in Atwood's novel a

state of near-total surveillance is achieved through direct observation and the disciplining of the female body, Eggers's work offers «[a] thinly veiled compendium of everything that could go wrong with information technology» (161) when it is put to the service of what Shoshana Zuboff calls "surveillance capitalism". The two novels also display a radically different approach to the genre of dystopic fiction itself: whereas *The Testaments* can be read as a cautionary tale about «how easy it would be for a theocratic regime to be established» (159) in the US, *The Circle* provides a poignant investigation of the dark heart of Big Data.

Starting from Rosi Braidotti's idea of the posthuman subject as inherently relational and «constituted through contact among *zoe*-forms» (188), Romanzi's study of the videogame *Detroit: Become Human* aims to show how such a media product enables its players to experience what it means to be part of a posthuman apparatus. By following the vicissitudes of several androids in a world where humans hate artificial life forms, the videogame's players are forced to experience the storyworld from the perspective of the oppressed. Depending on their reaction to such an experience, the players have the possibility to develop the game's plot in a number of directions. This could lead to an even more severe enslavement of the androids, or to a treaty with humans by recognizing the rights of androids, or to many other scenarios. By analysing the interactions between the videogame's subject matter and its peculiar mechanics, Romanzi argues that *Detroit: Become Human* has the potential to «[foster] a post-anthropocentric turn» (204).

The final chapter focuses on the neo-western, post-apocalyptic film *The Book of Eli* by blending film studies with the branch of cultural trauma studies developed by Jeffrey Alexander. Here Romanzi explores one of her most fascinating ideas, that is, the role played in post-apocalyptic scenarios by the "error of rebound", «of resettling in old patterns of social interaction that, given enough time, were the cause of the apocalypse» (231). By portraying the (disastrous) consequences of maintaining pre-apocalyptic social dynamics after the

fall of the world, works like *The Book of Eli* strongly advocate for the need to rethink our society before it is too late.

In conclusion, *American Nightmares* represents not only a valuable contribution to the field of utopian studies from the perspective of US fiction, but also an admirable interdisciplinary endeavour that demonstrates how sociology and the study of fiction can interact in ways that go way beyond those codified by the sociology of fiction. In an era in which dystopias seem to be everywhere, a book like this can certainly help us to bring hope back into the heart of our worldviews.

The author

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The review

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