

Ceretta M, Dividus A and Trocini F (eds) (2025) *Immaginari distopici contemporanei*. Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura

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In recent years, there has been a remarkable resurgence of interest in dystopian narratives, which have proliferated across a wide range of cross-media productions. While they have become a recognisable cultural trend, dystopia remains an effective lens through which to interpret the present, capable of identifying and representing collective anxieties. However, the fears it articulates have shifted away from the “classic” concerns of the twentieth century. Contemporary dystopian works increasingly engage with issues such as environmental catastrophes, pandemics, emerging forms of authoritarianism – often linked to the growing force of digital dominance and mechanisms of biopolitical control – as well as growing social inequalities and new forms of racism. Against this backdrop, the volume *Immaginari distopici contemporanei* (2025), edited by Manuela Ceretta, Alessandro Dividus, and Federico Trocini, aims to outline the defining features of twenty-first-century dystopian imaginaries, highlighting their continuities and discontinuities from the literary traditions of the previous century through an interdisciplinary collection of essays.

The first section of the volume examines the new threats posed by modern technologies that have become part of everyday life. These technologies are deeply embedded in daily life yet remaining largely invisible. The analysis covers the television series *Black Mirror* by Charlie Brooker and the novels *The Circle* (2013) and *The Every* (2021) by Dave Eggers, as well as various video games produced over the past two decades. S. De Luca notes a crucial feature of Eggers’ works: the risky fusion of the drive for a progressive utopia – aimed at improving collective life – and the unprecedented concentration of digital dominance in the hands of big tech companies. These companies present themselves as creators of a utopia rooted in cooperation, solidarity, and transparency, while individuals willingly

trade their autonomy for services, security, and predictability (De Luca, 2025: 6-7).

R. Cavallo highlights how Eggers' narratives depict a society without rigid hierarchies, but one that is still governed by horizontal control. Unlike Orwell's feared surveillance, contemporary individuals participate in a regime of transparency, monitoring each other. This extends to the political sphere, as illustrated by the "demoxie" system (Cavallo, 2025: 35), which is designed to facilitate political participation and recognise popular will. V. Susca notes that in *Black Mirror*, individuals have asymmetrical relationships with digital entities, gradually delegating aspects of their identity, memory, relationships, and self-perception to technology, often unconsciously.

The analysis emphasises the active role of technology in shaping political and social relations, as well as its potential for distortion. As D. Palano notes, technology can channel and amplify animosity via social networks, serving populist logics. The section also extends the analysis to dystopian video games where S. Orosz-Reti examines the transition of player agency from an individual to a collective and distributed form of action. These games offer critiques of traditional models of political resistance, emphasising cooperative and wide-spread solidarity.

A key focus of the volume's second section is the body in contemporary society, a central concern of twenty-first-century dystopian imaginaries. As M. Ceretta and C. Doria observe, these dystopias probe intimate forms of oppression and control, portraying the human body as both as a site of vulnerability and resistance, and a resource exploited by the economically powerful for productive and reproductive purposes (Ceretta and Doria, 2025: 117–118). As twentieth-century utopian visions waned, the notion of salvation and perfection turned inward, prioritising bodily enhancement over societal change. The discussion focuses on ageing and disability. While classical utopias depict old age negatively and as problematic and degrading, contemporary dystopias offer a different perspective, representing ageing not only in terms of loss and fragility but also as a space for transformation and choice. Examples of this include José Saramago's *Death with Interruptions* (2005) and Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006). A similar reframing occurs regarding to disability. Vic Finkelstein's *Deny or Not Deny Disability* (1975)

envisages a society built for wheelchair users, where non-disabled individuals are continuously injured and considered severely disabled. This scenario illustrates that disability is shaped primarily by social, environmental, and cultural factors rather than by an individual's physical traits. To complement this reflection, C. Attimonelli's contribution examines how the body has been transformed in the era of social networks. In her essay, she shows how everyday practices, such as taking selfies, contribute to the creation of a "recorded body" (Attimonelli, 2025: 109-113) that is constantly exposed and reproducible. This leads to the multiplication and accumulation of an individual's image within a regime of perpetual visibility. G. Giuliani further explores the political dimension of the body, extending the analysis to bio- and necropolitical violence, and noting how the gap between apocalypse and environmental catastrophe has narrowed. Giuliani challenges the myths of limitless capitalism and the hierarchical vision of the Anthropocene, highlighting the numerous catastrophes that have already occurred as a result of colonial and capitalist violence. From this perspective, the 2019 film *Bacurau* is interpreted as a political representation of the Anthropocene, in which biopolitical and necropolitical violence is explicitly enacted against marginalised bodies. Within the same critical framework, Carlotta Cossutta compares various feminist dystopias, highlighting their capacity to stimulate imagination and political action and to challenge marginalisation through the experiences of those who endure it. Finally, M. Bartolini examines the empathetic relationship between a human and a humanoid artificial intelligence in Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* (2015), arguing that it can be read as analogous to the relationship between the spectator and contemporary media forms.

If the control of bodies and lives is one of the central concerns of contemporary dystopias, it is expressed most pervasively in the organisation of society, which is the focus of the third section of this volume. In this context, M. P. Paternò demonstrates how the freedom of self-optimisation in today's neoliberal society serves as a vehicle for a "soft" totalitarianism capable of imposing performance and alienation. In the 2006 novel *La scuola dei disoccupati*, the total institution *Sphericon* embodies this system, efficiently neutralising any form of resistance and shaping individuals who are obedient and success-orientated. V. Romanzi further explores the link between

social control and capitalism by comparing Philip K. Dick's *Ubik* (1969) with Cory Doctorow's *Unauthorized Bread* (2019). While both novels criticise the disproportionate power of mega-corporations, Doctorow also emphasises the profound social injustices that arise from this concentration of power. Similarly, A. Dividus illustrates how a neoliberal meritocratic society transforms merit into an "aristocracy of talent", marginalising care and assigning individuals sole responsibility for their own failures. In contemporary dystopian novels, those who fail to meet meritocratic criteria are demoted or excluded in a system of incentives and controls that exacerbates social inequalities and has dramatic existential consequences. To conclude the section, A. Petter's essay offers a broader reflection on humanity's self-destructive potential through Go Nagai's *Devilman* manga (1972) and its Netflix adaptation, *Devilman Crybaby* (2018). While twentieth-century manga often interpreted the apocalypse through fears related to the Holocaust or environmental disaster, the contemporary adaptation shifts the focus to twenty-first-century anxieties, explicitly linking catastrophe to the acceleration of climate change and the environmental crisis (Petter, 2025: 199).

The final section of the volume addresses contemporary geopolitical and social tensions. G. Catania and A. Arciero highlight the evolution of control, shifting from the totalitarian nightmares of Orwell and Huxley's works to a more subtle and pervasive "surveillance culture" that is often accepted and grounded in technology and big data. Contemporary control is no longer limited to imposition; it operates through the manipulation of information and various forms of exhibitions, as depicted in *The Truman Show* (1998). It also integrates geopolitical themes such as environmental crises and demographic decline, as shown in *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985).

In contrast, F. Trocini analyses ideological dystopias and fanaticism, reflecting on the crisis of the West and the "clash of civilisations". Despite their limited literary value, works such as *The Turner Diaries* (1978) have provided a foundation for far-right extremism and fanaticism. Obsessions with immigration and fear of "internal conquest" are symptoms of a perceived lack of values in liberal democracies, a void that dystopian literature can represent with striking clarity. Finally, D. Possamai and L. Righi focus on post-Soviet Russian literature, which is characterised by the trauma of the

Soviet Union's history and dissolution. In works such as Tolstaya's *Kjys'* (2000), Righi attempts to categorise the novel as dystopian and post-apocalyptic. In his analysis of Glukhovsky's *Metro 2033* (2005), Possamai highlights how the author advocates abandoning old ideologies in favour of individual freedom and salvation.

In conclusion, the volume offers a comprehensive and interdisciplinary analysis of twenty-first-century dystopian imaginaries, highlighting their capacity to engage with the complex social, political, and technological challenges of our time. The collection of essays stands out for its approach, which combines multiple disciplines and provides readers with a rich and multifaceted understanding of dystopian imagination. This volume not only identifies the continuities and discontinuities with twentieth-century dystopian literature but also opens new perspectives for exploring how fiction shapes our understanding of the future.

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