

## *The Unusual Dystopia of “Never Let Me Go” (2010)*

ELENI VARMAZI

### Introduction

In this chapter I argue how *Never Let Me Go* (2010) differs from other dystopian films regarding both its aesthetics and theme. The film was not created in order to fulfil the functions performed typically by dystopian hard science fiction films. On the contrary, it discusses ideas and subject matters of a different nature that belong to other genres, if at all. This fact makes *Never Let Me Go* a special case study which resists categorization.

The film is an adaptation of a novel with the same title by the Japanese born, British raised writer Kazuo Ishiguro. It is directed by the American director Mark Romanek. The screenplay was written by Alex Garland and the whole film was produced with the collaboration and the consultancy of Kazuo Ishiguro, a fact deeply appreciated by the whole cast and crew (Carnavale 2010). It is set in an alternate dystopian history of England<sup>1</sup>. It takes place between the late seventies and the mid-nineties. It follows the coming of age of three friends who are developing a love tri-

<sup>1</sup> I refer here to Thomas Moylan's definition of dystopia: "Dystopia is thus clearly unlike its generic sibling, the literary *eutopia*, or its nemesis, the anti-utopia. The dystopian text does not guarantee a creative and critical position that is implicitly militant or resigned. As an open form, it always negotiates the continuum between the Party of Utopia and the Party of Anti-Utopia" (Moylan 2000: xiii).

angle during the process of growing. These three characters: Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy are destined to lead a brief life, since their only purpose of existence is to donate organs to other people in order to prolong their lives.

Importantly, the film is set in an alternate history of England and not in the near or distant future as most hard science fiction films. However, the titles in the beginning of the film set the atmosphere for the audience within a science-fictional framework:

The breakthrough in medical science came in 1952.  
Doctors could now cure the previously incurable.  
By 1967, life expectancy passed 100 years (Romanek 2010).

The whole plot of the film is given as a flashback and is narrated by Kathy, who states that she is now twenty-eight years old and she has been a carer for nine years. Her narration, and therefore the film, is divided into three chapters, which are indicated with titles. The first one: *Hailsham, 1978*, depicts the growing up of the three main characters in Hailsham, an English boarding school, designed especially for educating and boarding clones. However, the word "clone" is not used in the film at all. Instead the term "donor children" is applied. During their school years one of the tasks that the children are asked to do is develop artwork for the school gallery. Periodically Miss Emily, the school headmistress, and Madame Marie-Claude, judge and select the best works for exhibition. While in Hailsham the children learn the "purpose" of their lives. One of the guardians in the school, Miss Lucy, who is losing her job for openly explaining to the children their "purpose", states to them:

The problem is that you've been told and not told. That's what I've seen when I've been here. You've been told but none of you really understand. So I have decided that I'll taught (sic) you in a way that you will understand" (Romanek 2010).

Then, she continues by explicitly telling them that they will become adults and before they are middle-aged they will start donating their vital organs. On the third or fourth donation, they will "complete".

In this chapter the kids who are becoming teenagers also develop feelings for each other. Kathy progressively falls in love with Tommy but her good friend Ruth steals him from her. Ruth's action stems a bit out of stubbornness and ego as she tries to prove to Kathy that she can take Tommy away from her. Tommy, on the other hand, develops serious feelings for Kathy and the two become very good friends,

with a deep understanding and communication. However, as far as his love and sexual interest is concerned Tommy lets himself get seduced by Ruth, without of course being fully aware of the rivalry between Kathy and Ruth concerning him.

Later in the first chapter Tommy buys Kathy a present, an old tape with songs from Judy Bridgewater. Kathy, who is heartbroken, incessantly listens from the tape the song entitled “Never Let Me Go”, which gives the title to both the book and the film. Judy Bridgewater is a fictional character-singer, created by Ishiguro. In the film the song “Never Let Me Go”, also created especially for the soundtrack and written by Luther Dixon, is performed by Jane Monheit (Howell 2010).

The second chapter is *The Cottages, 1985*. The life in the cottages is a period of transition, where the three characters work and live for a few years before being called for the donation surgeries. Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy have the opportunity to get a touch of the outside world, watching television, taking strolls and travelling to the countryside and to English towns. They also attempt to trace their “originals” but it is all in vain.

As Escudero Pérez astutely observes:

Getting to know the original is a different aim from that of learning the reasons why they were created. In some cases, as in *Never Let Me Go*, this goal is presented as potentially enabling to explain their existential profile. Unfortunately for Ishiguro’s clones, more than a source of answers the figure of the original ends up being perceived almost like a chimera, having inspired all sorts of speculation and hypothesis within the group of friends who never get to know who they have been cloned *from* (Escudero Pérez 2014).

Furthermore, they learn about the rumour of the “deferral”. The “deferral” is something that a donor couple can apply for if they can prove that they are genuinely in love. If their application is accepted, then their first donation can be deferred for a few years. On an emotional level, Ruth and Tommy start having problems as a couple and that makes Ruth very angry and jealous of Kathy. Tommy confesses to Kathy that he actually had, and still has, deep feelings for her. This situation leads to the collapse of the friendship of the three characters. Kathy decides to become a “carer”<sup>2</sup> in order to get out of this situation.

The third chapter is entitled *Completion, 1994*. After a few years, while the three of them have lost touch, Kathy who is now working around hospitals as a carer, meets

<sup>2</sup> A carer is a person who keeps company and shows compassion to the clones while they are going through their donation surgeries until they die—“complete” in the terminology of the film.

Ruth by coincidence in one of them. Ruth is there for her second donation. Her physical and psychological health is in a very bad condition. A nurse acknowledges Ruth's poor psychology when speaking to Kathy: "I think she wants to complete and as you know, when they want to complete, they usually do" (Romanek 2010).

Kathy takes Ruth on a trip in the course of which they find Tommy in another recovery centre. Ruth apologizes to Kathy for having intruded in her relationship with Tommy. She admits that it should have been Kathy and not her to have entered into a relationship with Tommy. To make up for the past, Ruth gives Kathy and Tommy the address of Madame Marie-Claude, so that they can ask for a deferral of their donation surgeries. Ruth dies in her third surgery, and Kathy together with Tommy, after finally reuniting; go to find Madame Marie-Claude. Unfortunately, they find out that there is no possibility for deferral, in fact there never was. Tommy dies during his fourth surgery and the film ends with Kathy announcing in the narration that she also has been called for her first surgery. Kathy's last words are: "What I am not sure about is if our lives have been so different from the lives of the people we save. We all complete. Maybe none of us really understand (sic) what we lived through or feel we had enough time" (Romanek 2010).

## The Unconventional Aesthetics

As David Desser states:

SF is [...] a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment (Desser 1999: 84).

It would be fair to say that the dystopian literary tradition has found its most appropriate form in cinema (Booker 1994b: 18). Most of the famous and successful science fiction dystopian films have been adapted from or inspired by literary works. *Never Let Me Go* is also an adaptation of a novel in which, nevertheless, the *mise en scene* does not estrange the spectator. Vivian Sobchack notes:

[...] in every SF film there is a visual tension between those images in such earnestness in any other genre—a tension between those images which strive to totally remove us from a comprehensible and known world into romantic poetry and those images which strive to bring us back into a familiar and prosaic context" (Sobchack 1987: 88).

Although usually dystopian films construct the space, they are set in (far planet, countryside, city, etc.) pointing out elements about the social, cultural, and political conditions they are concerned with, this is not exactly the case in *Never Let Me Go*. According to Mark Romanek, it is a science fiction film without science fiction tropes (Sciretta 2010). Romanek, while researching for the film, had in mind *Fahrenheit 451* (1966) and *Alphaville* (1965) but no other science fiction references. Moreover, although many science fiction tropes were tried during the preparation and the research of the film, at the end nothing seemed to work. In an interview he admits that:

There was some temptation to put in some futuristic buildings, or make this about gadgets. It never felt right. And one day I said, "Well, maybe this is the science-fiction film with no science fiction in it whatsoever." And everyone got very excited by that idea and aesthetic approach. From that point on, it was that (Adams 2010).

Thus, while technically *Never Let Me Go* is a dystopian science fiction, Romanek's vision for the film version of Kazuo Ishiguro's novel leans more towards a touching melodrama. It is a story less about a dystopian world of cloning—and the political and moral issues associated with it—and more about love and loss.

Indeed science fiction has been discussed as a generic hybrid and genres generally are considered as "intersubjective, discursive constructs, full of contradictions and constantly in flux" (Vint and Bould 2009: 51). However, in *Never Let Me Go* the singular allusion to science fiction is the idea of the existence of originals and clones. None of the audio-visual aspects of the film suggest estrangement. There is only one technological element depicted in the whole film and it is actually shown twice. It is a very discrete bracelet that the donors are wearing, which they slide in front of a small panel when they go out and come back from Hailsham's building and the cottages. However, the rest of the settings, costumes and art design have nothing futuristic, nothing that indicates high technology. Even in the numerous scenes in the hospitals where we see the surgeries for donations taking place there is no indication of a future progress in High Technology. As Escudero Pérez points out about the book:

Real science is completely absent, both in the plausibility of the plot and in its textual presence. Instead, a murkier science is suggested: not only is its abuse legal and public, but it is also portrayed as unthinking, irrational and, to a certain extent, naïve in its incapacity to foresee the obvious ethical conflict into which the practice would lead (Escudero Pérez 2014).

There is in that sense an enormous effort in the film not to create estrangement in the viewer. There is not even a distinction between nature and technology. Everything is kept very familiar.

The settings of the film, on the contrary, emphasize the old and the worn; they have a feeling of retro and rustic. Additionally, the colours of the film are very earthy greens, browns, and blues avoiding all the neon and very saturated colours that we usually witness in the futuristic science fiction films. Mark Romanek particularly asked for a gentle colour palette and forbade the colour black, since he wanted "the film to have a gentle delivery" of the disturbing truths that it discusses (Curtis 2010). Furthermore, the lighting of the film avoids also utmost stylization. There is no *chiaro scuro* lighting or any other type of low-key lighting even in interior and night scenes, thus allowing the audience to have a clear view of the screen.

The cinematography in *Never Let Me Go* by Adam Kimmel also stays extremely close to the human point of view. It avoids shots from unusual angles. There are no high or low or diagonal or bird's point of view angles as in futuristic dystopian films like *Blade Runner* (1982), *Total Recall* (1990), *Dark City* (1998), *The Island* (2005), *In Time* (2011), and others. The whole film is shot from a human-eye perspective discouraging estrangement in the audience's visual perception. The final result of the film is a hybrid of British and Japanese sensibilities. In an interview the director states:

Then I read in an interview that Kazuo felt very influenced by certain Japanese cinema, perhaps even more than by other authors, so that sent me on a journey of just immersing myself in Japanese cinema and Japanese ideas of aesthetics and art. I tried to overlay a sort of British story with some sort of quality of the simplicity that you see in Kazuo's writing (Carnevale 2010).

From Britain Romanek managed to capture the sense of elegant decay and, while exploring concepts in Japanese aesthetics in art, he came up with three concepts that helped him define the mood and the tone of the film. These three concepts are the *yūgen*, the *wabi-sabi*, and the *mono no aware*. The *yūgen* can be literally translated as "dim", "deep", or "mysterious". It comes from Noh Theatre and expresses the "joyful acceptance of the basic sadness of life". It is "the calm surface that belies the deep strong currents underneath" (Sciretta 2010). This "Profound Grace" is expressed in the film in Kathy's stoicism and the graceful way she accepted her fate as well as in the general subtle emotional mood of the film. The concept of *wabi-sabi*, literally translated as "beauty that is imperfect or incomplete", represents the notion that things which are "broken or rusted or cracked or worn or torn or old are far

more beautiful than things that are new and perfect". It is the "Simple Beauty of something or someone that has aged well" (Sciretta 2010) and in the film it is particularly obvious in the art design of the settings and the costumes. Finally, the Japanese concept of *mono no aware*, literally "the pathos of things", describes the idea of how impermanent things are and expresses the main subject of the film, the preciousness of time, the brevity of the human lifespan. Mark Romanek stresses the importance of *mono no aware* in an interview:

[...] one of the concepts I thought was really germane to the film was this idea of *mono no aware*,« [...] It's another way of saying a perpetual sigh, this quality of indefinable eternity that you can find in the most mundane things, and the sense of the transience and the impermanence of things. I think that's a lot of what the book is about in some ways, and I tried to make a cinematic equivalent of *mono no aware* in this English world, which is a strange hybrid (Adams 2010).

All these aesthetic principles were implemented during the shooting in England with a British cast and crew and mingled with the English environment film set in order to create a visual and a tonal analogue to the book's language. Everything in the film is very restrained and subtle, a characteristic that belongs to both British and Japanese cultures. The same tone of reserved emotions was applied also in the voice over, in the narration of the film, which is implemented by Kathy's character, in the beginning and the ending of every chapter and at the final ending of the film.

## The Unconventional Ideas

Through the aforementioned characteristics one is led to believe that *Never Let Me Go* tries to focus on more internal issues and not so much on social and political critiques. As Booker remarks:

Dystopian literature is specifically that literature which situates itself in direct opposition to utopian thought, warning against the potential negative consequences of arrant utopianism. At the same time, dystopian literature generally also constitutes a critique of existing social conditions or political systems, either through critical examination of the utopian premises upon which those conditions and systems are based or through the imaginative extension of those conditions and systems into different contexts that more clearly reveal their flaws and contradictions (Booker 1994a: 3).

Usually in dystopian films, made in order to criticize social and political systems, both sides of the system are presented, i.e. the authority and power of the established system as well as its victims. In *Never Let Me Go* this is not the case. By whom, how, and why this system is established is not known and it is not presented. There is an

enormous lack of information about how the clones are created and who authorizes their creation. Is it the matter of social class? Can some people have clones and some not? All these issues are not addressed in the film. We also never see an original of the main three characters or of any other donor. In other words, there is no duplication of a character. Escudero Pérez, while discussing the book notices, "We are alien to this in Ishiguro's fiction because, in its narrative rareness, we never get to meet any other copies of the characters we are introduced to. We know they are clones but we don't have the originals or other reproductions". She also points out that:

The double threatens the physical, mental and spiritual survival of the original, whereas the clone doesn't. In spite of one's initial rejection of the figure of the clone as an impostor, in most clone narratives there is no tension or rivalry between the original and the clone(s): they either don't co-exist or are simply unaware of each other's existence (e.g. *Never Let Me Go*) (Escudero Pérez 2014).

The structure of dystopian fiction whether it concerns books or films, as Raffaella Baccolini states, is "built around the construction of the narrative [of the hegemonic order] and a counter-narrative [of resistance—E.V.]" (Moylan 2000: 148). The dystopian novel or film starts within the nightmarish society, and therefore "cognitive estrangement is at first forestalled by the immediacy, the normality, of the location" (Moylan 2000: 148). The protagonist becomes dislocated, as she becomes alienated from the society and the rules of the hegemonic system; therefore she becomes aware and usually brought into submission in the end, or else finds a way to escape from the nightmare. Then, the resistance of the protagonist is towards the hegemonic system that is presented. The antagonist of the novel or film, which is the hegemonic system itself and its ideological apparatuses, is closely related with the present time that the novel or film is written/produced.

However, this is not the case in *Never Let Me Go*. Neither the book nor the film are concerned with the present of the author in terms of time and place, hence the choice of an alternate dystopian past England. The only form of authority presented is the teachers together with Madam Marie-Claude and Miss Emily, the headmistress of Hailsham. However, what one finds in the third chapter is the fact that Hailsham was a school established to protect the clones, to morally question their existence, to prove that the clones also have souls. Miss Emily states in the third chapter:

You have to understand, Hailsham was the last place to consider the ethics of donation. We used your art to show what you were capable of, to show that donor children are human but we are providing an answer to a question none was asking. We did not have the gallery in order to look into your souls. We had the gallery to see if you had souls at all (Romanek 2010).



Another unusual aspect of this dystopian film, which also stirred a debate among critics and audience, is that the clones do not rebel or revolt (SciFi.StackExchange.com 2011). Usually dystopian films that involve clones, replicas, or subordinates as main characters, lead to a revolt and possibly to at least a rupture or even an overthrowing of the established hegemonic system. These, for example, are the cases of *Total Recall* (1990), *The Island* (2005) and the *Divergent* series (2014-2015). *Never Let Me Go*, however, does not involve any kind of rebellion; on the contrary, the characters seem to accept their fate, their purpose for “completion”, in a very calm and esoteric way. The only resistance shown in the film, which is not really a resistance but more of a hope, is Kathy’s and Tommy’s attempt to get a deferral. Again, this is just an attempt for postponement for a few years that does not come through. As Escudero Perez points out: “In Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*, exceptionality resides mainly in the conformism of the victims, but the contextual assembly also differs significantly from any other clone narrative” (Escudero Pérez 2014).

## Ending Remarks

In conclusion, *Never Let Me Go* is not so much a criticism of a socio-political system. Its form and content do not bare typical dystopian films’ characteristics. According to Mark Romanek:

The whole cloning concept was meant to be experienced as a sort of metaphoric delivery-system for these larger, very Ishiguroan themes—the very human tendency toward self-delusion, an often wilful lack of perspective about our lives, and our inability to really grasp the preciousness and brevity of the human life span (Giroux 2010).

As Fredric Jameson notes, from a narrative analysis perspective, what is important to the Utopian construct “is not what is said, but what cannot be said, what does not register on the narrative apparatus” (Jameson 2005: xiii). Although the film on a second level touches upon ethical issues that concern contemporary societies (such as those concerning medical progress), it focuses mostly upon things that we all know, but we tend or want to ignore: the human condition and the essentials of human existence, such as emotionality, hope, conflict, as well as poses an emphasis on mortality. The alternate dystopian England is just an excuse not to critique social and political conditions, which belong to “now” and “here”, but to reflect deeply on

human mortality, which is an issue that “has always been” and still is a disturbing truth and belongs to the sphere of “ever”. Ishiguro also seems to agree on that aspect:

If you're referring to the fact that the children are actually clones, and they're being brought up for [the sake of] organ donations—that all sounds rather ghastly. Personally, I prefer to get that out of the way, so that people can focus on what the film is really about. I think the surprising thing about the story comes later on, in a more subtle way” (Block, Greene 2010: 01,14-01,33).

Later on Ishiguro adds that: “what interests [him—E.V.] is the surprising enormous extent to which most people accept the fate that’s been given to them, and find some dignity” (Block, Greene 2010: 04,11-04,22). This seems to be also the reason for why the audience learns about (or rather, is spoiled) the purpose of the characters’ existence early during the first chapter in Hailsham in order to be able to emotionally engage with the love story. When the teacher in Hailsham spells out the truth to them and, therefore, loses her job, there is a sense that the children almost knew what was going on but they were unable to fully capture it intellectually. They were unable to understand the deeper meaning of her words. According to Romanek, this is the moment that really sets the film in motion—“the repercussions of having this knowledge is what the rest of the story is about” (Block, Greene 2010: 02,57-03,02).

Mark Fisher tries to place *Never Let Me Go* next to *Hunger Games* (2012) and *The Island* (2005) by stating that: “The peculiar horror of the film, in fact, resides in the unrelieved quality of its fatalism” (Fisher 2012: 30). He compares Hailsham to “an ideological state apparatus” which is so strong that prevents clones to escape because there is nowhere to escape. “The fact that the clones' time is short lends their thwarted love affairs, their lazy afternoons spent reading in meadows, and their day trips to the coast a nearly unbearable intensity” (Fisher 2012: 30). The film’s concerns are very different from the ones to which he is comparing *Never Let Me Go*. It is impossible to escape the futility of time or mortality. The short length of life, the preciousness of time, loneliness, hope, human emotions and relationships are important, but hardly acknowledged whether you are a clone or not.

The film aims at addressing human issues that are rarely discussed in dystopian films by using the short lives of clones as an excuse in order to make the audience more aware of big truths usually expressed in Ishiguro’s writings. It is a sensitive study of love and mortality. Mark Romanek successfully reversed the patterns of hard science fiction dystopian films in order to address these issues in a gentle way and resonate the book’s deceptive simplicity.

## Works Cited

- Adams, Sam (2010), Mark Romanek interview, *A.V. Club*, online: <http://www.avclub.com/article/mark-romanek-45803> [accessed: 30.11.2016].
- Booker M. Keith (1994a), *Dystopian Literature: A Theory and Research Guide*, Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press.
- Booker M. Keith (1994b), *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature: Fiction as Social Criticism*, Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press.
- Block, Mellisa, David Greene, 'Onscreen, Ishiguro's Sci-Fi Novel Is No Mere Clone', *NPR.org*, online: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=129880145> [accessed: 30.11.2016].
- Carnevale, Rob (2010), 'Never Let Me Go—Mark Romanek and Kazuo Ishiguro interview', *IndieLondon.co.uk*, online: <http://www.indielondon.co.uk/Film-Review/never-let-me-go-mark-romanek-and-kazuo-ishiguro-interview> [accessed: 30.11.2016].
- Curtis, Amy (2010), 'Exclusive Interview With Mark Romanek On *Never Let Me Go*', *WeGotThisCovered.com*, online: <http://wegotthiscovered.com/movies/interview-with-mark-romanek-on-never-let-me-go/> [accessed: 30.11.2016].
- Desser David (1999), 'Race, Space and Class: The Politics of Cityscapes in Science-Fiction Films', in: Annette Kuhn (ed.), *Alien Zone II. The Spaces of Science Fiction Cinema*, London & New York: Verso.
- Escudero Pérez, Jimena (2014), 'Sympathy for the Clone: (Post)Human Identities Enhanced by the "Evil Science" Construct and its Commodifying Practices in Contemporary Clone Fiction', *Between*: 8, online: <http://www.Between-journal.it/> [accessed: 30.11.2016].
- Fisher, Mark (2012), 'Precarious Dystopias: The Hunger Games, In Time, And Never Let Me Go', *Film Quarterly*: 4 (65), pp. 27-33.
- Giroux, Jack (2010), 'Awards Interview: Mark Romanek Talks *Never Let Me Go*', *Film-SchoolRejects.com*, online: <https://filmschoolrejects.com/awards-interview-mark-romanek-talks-never-let-me-go-6528cd13e687#.1o249nrlh> [accessed: 30.11.2016].

- Howell, Peter (2010), 'The hunt for the elusive Judy Bridgewater', *TheStar.com*, online: [http://www.thestar.com/entertainment/movies/2010/09/30/howell\\_the\\_hunt\\_for\\_the\\_elusive\\_judy\\_bridgewater.html](http://www.thestar.com/entertainment/movies/2010/09/30/howell_the_hunt_for_the_elusive_judy_bridgewater.html) [accessed: 30.11.2016].
- Jameson, Fredric (2005), *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, London: Verso.
- Moylan, Tom (2000), *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia*, Colorado: Westview Press.
- Romanek Mark, dir. (2010), *Never Let Me Go*, DNA Films, Film4, Fox Searchlight Pictures.
- SciFi.StackExchange.com (2011), *Why didn't the \*characters\* rebel or run in "Never Let Me Go"?*, online: <http://scifi.stackexchange.com/questions/4434/why-didnt-the-characters-rebel-or-run-in-never-let-me-go> [accessed: 30.11.2016].
- Sciretta, Peter (2010), 'Interview: Never Let Me Go director Mark Romanek [Part 1]', *SlashFilm.com*, online: <http://www.slashfilm.com/interview-never-let-me-go-director-mark-romanek-part-1/> [accessed: 30.11.2016].
- Sobchack Vivian (1987), *Screening Space: the American Science Fiction Film*, New Brunswick, New Jersey, London: Rutgers University Press.
- Suvin Darko (1979), *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Vint, Sherryl and Bould, Mark (2009), 'There Is No Such Thing As Science Fiction', in: James Gunn, Marleen S. Barr and Mathew Candelaria (eds), *Reading Science Fiction*, New York: Palgrave Macmillian.