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Micro-dystopias as Socio-political Constructs in Post-apocalyptic Narratives

KSENIA OLKUSZ

The End is a Beginning: the Apocalypse as a Restart

Apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic[1] literature is often debated in terms of the end, emphasising catastrophic aspects of these narratives as well as indicating the demographic reduction (and thus defeat) of the human race. Some scholar, including James Berger and Anette M. Magid, underscore paradoxically union nature of the narratives dealing with the twilight of the anthropocene. Namely, Berger states that:

> the end is never the end. The apocalypse texts announces and describes the end of the world but then the text does not end nor does the world represented in the text, and neither does the world itself… Something remains after the end [emphasis—K.O.] (Berger 1999: 5-6).

The aesthetic and fictional conditioning of the apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic literature is explored also by Barbara Gurr, as she explicates the cause, for which works devoted to this subject can be perceived in a special manner. The scholar observes that:

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[1] Due to historical and literary reasons, considering its peculiar nature and determinants, as well as political, economic, social or philosophic aspects, it is worth acknowledging that: "Science fiction and popular culture scholars generally agree that the increasing emergence and popularity of post-apocalyptic narratives in popular culture can be traced to the end of World War II and specifically to the dropping of the hydrogen bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the United States. The world after 1945 was not only a changed landscape physically, politically, and economically, it was also a changed world symbolically" (Gurr 2015: 4).

> [...] after the apocalypse—after the eradication of all we know—we who survive will have to build something new out of the ashes. The emerging world may be desperate and dirty; it may be hard and hungry; it may be something completely unexpected (Gurr 2015: 4).

And since the annihilation of the civilization is never total, then:

> The end of the world rarely is the end, at least in popular culture. Instead, it's the beginning of a New World, a World that is Devoid of strong central government and traditional social institutions, and is populated with tougher than nails survivors (Yuen 2012: XIII).

A similar context can be noticed in case of arising narratives which refer directly to the disintegration of power structures, destabilization within the military, police, and other structures related to regulation and enforcement of laws, resulting in a crash within social hierarchies, leading to the disengagement of the existing systems and the emergence of new power structures, most often implemented in the micro-scale.

These constructs, bringing together a small community and possessing an efficiently functioning power apparatus are very often portrayed in dystopian[2] terms, realizing the pessimistic tendencies surfacing in post-apocalyptic narratives. Puzzling predilection of the authors towards the multiplication of the theme of a hegemon tantalising the survivors with an illusion of welfare is, according to some scholars, a consequence of a particular worldview. As Emma Vossen states, after Fredric Jameson, a dystopian tendency is associated with the inability to envision the future with a collective nature[3]. Constance Penley controverts this conceptualization as imagination of the future is unattainable and dystopia is merely an illustration of the inability to achieve a collective agreement which would guarantee maintaining order or a positive shift within determined rules of the existence. As underscored by Vossen, „Both theorists illustrate that dystopia represents our desire for global change, even if we would not want to live in the apocalyptic worlds of our dystopian fiction" (Vossen 2014: 89). The scholar believes, however, that the modern society is

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[2] In my work, I refer to the interpretation of dystopia put forward in *Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited* by Lyman Tower Sargent: „Dystopia or negative Utopia—a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which that reader lived" (Sargent 1994: 9).

[3] "The idea of apocalyptic dread can be traced throughout the lineage of science fiction and horror in both film and graphic fiction: both art forms attempt to confront our ambiguous future. Fredric Jameson's esteemed observation that science fiction is oftentimes dystopian because it embodies our inability to imagine a collective future, has since been taken up by Constance Penley who instead insists that we can imagine a future, and dystopia instead illustrates that we "cannot conceive the kind of collective political strategies necessary to change or ensure that future" (Vossen 2014: 89).

no longer plagued by the fear of the apocalypse, as this fear has evolved into a full of affirmation anticipation of the end. Vossen defines this state as the "apocalyptic anticipation" and clarifies that the perception of the reasons for the end of the world began to transcend the determinants arising from political tensions and a pursuit of a military dominance, turning into visions of the total annihilation. The narratives of dystopian inclination are largely consistent with such predilection as constructs which—according to Vossen—are target points of the end of the world, constituting not so much an illustration of the anxiety concerning the way in which the twilight of the anthropocene will occur, but a fantasy about a variant of the predicted, and, to some extent, accepted apocalypse which is to serve as a disentanglement (or escape) from disagreeable economic and social restraints, as well as from less and less promising global future (Vossen 2014:90).

Defining Micro-dystopias

Making an attempt to de-globalise the reality, the authors of post-apocalyptic narratives refer to experiences connected with the formation of small groups of survivors, the role of a leader, and the citizen management structure. Since these formations often play a significant role in the plot, they should be clarified and placed in a theoretical context of associations with the dystopian aesthetic. These communities can thus be called micro-dystopias and defined as small places separated from the surrounding post-apocalyptic world, in which power is held by a hegemon tantalising the citizens with an illusion of welfare. In reality, however, rules of existence are subordinated to discretionary choices of the tyrant, citizens are under rigorous supervision, and any forms of opposition are not only disapproved of but also ruthlessly suppressed. The asylum, which is supposed to be a harbour from danger, becomes the very danger itself. The terror does not exclusively come from the outside of the alleged asylum, it is present within its territory, transforming it into a trap. The double reversal of the order of reality's existence is all the more severe, since it concerns the supposedly adapted space. It is the place, to which the characters traumatized by the apocalyptic events find their way, people searching for a substitute for "normal life" or simply an escape from the nightmare.

It is worth noting that in many narratives presentations of rules of creating new power constructs are remarkably comparable and display certain regularities. In accordance with these regularities, survivors in need of a guarantee of safety begin to

turn towards a strong individual or a group including such a person, as they recognise him or her as a natural leader. This way the chain of relationships which shapes those within a group is being created. The structure of a given micro-community depends on the personality and emotional aspirations of the leader. An individual prone to authoritarian governance, potentially remaining on the margin or performing insignificant functions within the community, disturbed or frustrated with his or her own personal or occupational circumstances, is depicted by the authors as an individual gradually intoxicating himself or herself with acquired power and increasingly willing to show and exact it. Pathology of behaviours connected with the question of controlling a group is the basis for the formation of micro-dystopias in the works pivoted around the description of the apocalypse.

Lords of Logos—as Krzysztof M. Maj refers to dystopian tyrants[4]—are portrayed in micro-dystopias as individuals holding absolute dictatorship and possessing tools (the power of persuasion and carefully selected "staff") for exacting obedience to the authority. In post-apocalyptic worlds, this type of enforcement depends on the degree of domestication in the space controlled by the hegemon, the development of techniques for maintaining the *status quo,* assembling and equipping the forces keeping order.

In works where the action takes place soon after a cataclysm, micro-dystopias are formed and developed according to the most basic rules, i.e. around a particular kind of a personality. It is a strong, determined, charismatic person able to convincingly acquire allies and striving to organise the occupied area as well as to discipline the survivors. The examples of microsystems displaying dystopian inclinations clearly show that the rules of constructing social constructions manifesting in the fictional reality are akin to authentic mechanisms of establishing the totalitarian power in the most basic dimension. The authors are clearly inspired by the elementary determinants of the relations existing within groups, merely amplifying certain authentic mechanisms, so as to make them more attractive to recipients. These are psychological mechanisms concerning the so-called blind obedience to authority, based

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[4]   Maj defines this figure in the following way: „The father of logos unveils in dystopias one of his most ominous face: a concealed face of the ruler who uses the power of discourse to falsify the true worldview. A perverse nature of dystopia is particularly apparent [...] when the lord of logos realizes that the rule over language is a key to the victory over freedom. Therefore, from the inclusive perspective of dystopia, where one's-own logos cannot be differed from other logos due to the deprivation of correspondence of the truth and its entanglement in a loop of inner coherency, only one way may lead to freedom—whereas any other to damnation (Maj 2014a: 167).

on three aspects, which can determine the consolidation of a similar power construct. Pointing to certain regularities in the formation of this type of dysfunctional relationship, psychologists often stressed that, in order to create a similar relationship, it is crucial to have an authority that inspires confidence and offers clearly defined rules, specifying the process of gaining control by distributing specific roles in the community. This way an individual may transform from a person reacting independently to the one acting in accordance with a function assigned by the dominator. Once known social standards are disrupted by a cataclysm determining the end of the world and the new ones take their place. These new standards are crucial to survival in the post-apocalyptic reality and they constitute the determinant in the models of initial dictatorial behaviours[5].

In micro-dystopias, where the rules imposing an absolute obedience have been well-established for a long time (sometimes even for years), impulsive, unplanned actions usually do not occur but rather developed and tested methods of punishing defiant individuals, or those breaking the rules of coexistence are implemented. It relates to a characteristic ritualization being an integral part of obedience towards the one wielding power. In the structures which foundations are the reflections of the original primitivism those would most frequently be spectacular and often bloody rituals, which aim at warning against the legitimacy of resistance against the autocratic power. This tendency derives from a classic motif in dystopian narratives, often enough introducing safety valves of the sociostasis, as Stanisław Lem called them (Lem 1996). In George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* these were the famous *Two Minutes Hate*, in Huxley's *Brave New World* orgy-porgy, in Stanisław Lem's *Observation on the Spot* "rage-inhibitors", in Susanne Collins's *Hunger Games* the eponymous hunger games, in the post-apocalyptic TV series *The 100* (The CW 2014-, an adaptation of the first book of the trilogy of the same title written by Kass Morgan) bloody tribal contests. As pointed out by already quoted Maj, all these rituals "became safety valves of the internal integrity of the logosphere, channelling the rebellious and threatening the general order activities in the isolated, secure environment" (Maj 2014b: 52).

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[5]   When joining a community created by survivors and governed by a dictator, the same mechanisms are at work. The mechanisms determining human behaviours in situations of exploring a new group of people. As Philip G. Zimbardo, Robert Lee Johnson and Vivian McCann write: "When a person joins a new group, such as a work group or a group of friends, there is always an adjustment period during which the individual tries to discover how best to fit in. Adjustment to a group typically involves discovering its social norms. Individuals experience this adjustment in two ways: by first noticing the uniformities and regularities in certain behaviours, and then by observing the negative consequences when someone violates a social norm" (Zimbardo, Johnson. McCann 2009: 482).

By contrast, in communities possessing predilections for shaping sophisticated systems of power, the punishment mechanisms are more discreet—as illustrated by the example of the Mount Weather bunker in *The 100* mentioned before or the Arc from the same production, as well as the City of Vega from the *Dominion* TV series (Syfy 2014-2015). Both methods of enforcing the established laws allow wielding power in a closed biotope, where the balance must remain unaltered, as any kind of unrest among the numerically limited community may launch a revolt resulting in a breakdown of the existing order. Citizens confined to a limited area must be kept in a mental stasis by any means necessary precisely not to destroy the illusory order maintained within their habitat.

Illusory Micro-asylums

Thus every micro-dystopia constitutes an illusion of life in freedom as this limitation is not only connected with depriving an individual of the right of self-determination—if a community is led by a tyrant—but also with a special confinement. The area available to residents is usually separated from external threats (e.g. zombies, aliens, people infected with a virus or other survivors organised in extortion groups) with some form of a wall. As a consequence, the area becomes at the same time a sanctuary and a trap impossible to escape from. The illusoriness of order in this case is realised in a systematic demonstration of external threats which are subsequently contrasted with a beneficial cohabitation of the leaders and their subordinates in the isolated area (bunkers, forts, bastions, fortified cities, stronghold ships, etc.). Enforcing the supremacy of a community and the loss of individuality in order to create a state of collectively, inhibited identity becomes the dictator's goal, which may take a variety of forms in different interpretations. It may range from a giver of life (Immortan Joe in *Mad Max: Fury Road*), through a politician (Lord of the City and the senator subordinate to him in the *Dominion* series), an allegedly benevolent keeper (the President from Mount Weather in *The 100*), a leader of a sect (micro-dystopias in the *Z Nation* series [The Asylum, SyFy 204-], *The Last Ship* [TNT 2014-; based on a novel by William Brinkley of the same title), to a ruthless tyrant (the Governor from the universe of *The Walking Dead*). Each of them assumes a specific social role adapted to the emotional expectations of the citizens and to the conditions of the ecosystem, which surrounds the micro-dystopia at the same time.

Typical dystopias often require an artificial isolation from the natural environment, while in case of micro-dystopias, this isolation is determined by the conditions independent of the tyrant, most often related to certain deformations of the existing biotope. Therefore, the alienation of the dystopian area is not another illusion but a fact, which keeps the residents confined to the uncomfortable habitat. Isolation is *conditio sine qua non* for survival; therefore, it is neither an illusory guarantee of separation nor does it determine its volitional dictatorship of the hegemon, but it outreaches arbitrary decisions. Such confinement is a form of impossibility for a community to survive in different territorial systems and, at the same time, a condition for recognition for a collective community. The knowledge of the way in which the outside world functions does not inspire questions concerning the cause and nature of the isolation—as it is obvious from the dawn of its time. A micro-dystopia indeed separates its residents from external threats, which are real ones, while in case of classic dystopias, an external threat may be an imaginary construct created by the lords of logos in order to legitimise their oppressive governance. In a micro-dystopia threat is indisputable, although it constitutes a similar basis for stressing the role of a community in opposition to an external threat.

A micro-dystopian tyrant, as opposed to the dystopian Lord of Logos, despite the self-oriented principles of ruling a micro-country, does not maintain, or succumb to the illusion of the idea of building an asylum—he or she simply creates it. However, the point is that having isolated the subjects from external threats, the tyrant transforms the domicile into an environment determined by his own aberrations or obsessions (much like in a sect). Micro-dystopian biotopes generally are not even a poor substitute for an artificial paradise, as from within them it is impossible to achieve the same level of perfection and welfare in order for the captive citizens to remain firm in the belief that they live in a place resembling the Garden of Eden. The structure of micro-dystopias presented in many post-apocalyptic narratives is almost immediately revealed by both the newcomers and the residents to be a dysfunctional territory (pathological), where even appearances of welfare cannot conceal the actual decomposition within the community. A somewhat more reliable illusion of perfection is generated by leaders of micro-dystopias functioning for centuries, where the primal gesture of salvation from the consequences of a disaster anointed the leader and his successors (as in the case of the president of Mount Weather in *The 100*).

In the dystopian formations shaped during the apocalyptic period, tyrants do not need to create any illusions of perfection, because the possibilities this asylum offers are enough for the survivors. A vision of being left alone in the throes of a disaster is so traumatizing that many leaders do not even have to create any illusion of welfare, as the awareness of living in a safe place, surrounded by a social formation, is well enough for the citizens. This passiveness towards the lord of logos is amplified further by experiences related to surviving the apocalypse—the loss of loved ones, violence, the disintegration of the state structures, or the loss of the social status in such situations. Survivors, trying to redefine their existence, accept conditions proposed by the ruler of the micro-dystopia and agree to surrender to the rules characteristic of this construct. "The founding lie [*kłamstwo założycielskie*]" indicated by Paweł Ćwikła (2006: 131) admittedly still is a form of a secret kept from the citizens but, due to the particular nature of a micro-dystopia's existence, its disclosure is not entirely a form of a collective mystification.

Micro-dystopias: What Tyrants Want and Why It Is so Easy for Them to Claim It

The motivation for the ones in charge of micro-dystopias is not always making people happy *hic et nunc* but first of all the imperative of wielding power impossible to obtain in the world before the disaster. In order to maintain the *status quo,* the tyrant usually resorts to solutions which entail using physical force but rarely the psychological one.

The lack of rebellions characteristic of many micro-dystopias is tightly connected with the citizen deindividualization phenomenon. The more anonymous micro-community members are, the less likely they are to have reservations about committing ethically reprehensible acts. Social roles are distributed according to an established hierarchy. They become a recognised tool of control and, at the same time, a point of reference in case of any deviations from standards. Individuals or groups ruling over a community are entitled to the law of the strongest. In these circumstances maintaining law and order seems to be crucial for the preservation of

the established *status quo* by the rulers, involving the creation of a reality correlating with the despot's concept[6].

In a classic dystopia deindividualization of an individual proceeds as planned in the form of commitment to slaying a creative individual in the process of unification. However, in micro-dystopias, the obliteration of identity takes place in entirely different circumstances, most often during the apocalypse, when the disastrous *danse macabre* tears people out of their current position in the social hierarchy. It deprives them of the meaning of their work, their profession, it neutralizes achievements by transforming them into an insignificant past, it undermines plans and ambitions, extracts them from their places of living, breaks familial and friendly relationships— only to make the newly shaped survivor face loss, only to abstract him or her from known values. The world after the apocalypse is full of lost people deprived of the defining past. In such circumstances, no tragedy or personal drama is unique as they are a part of a horrific collection of constant loss, never ending mourning, and a process of reinventing themselves. Micro-dystopias are collectives of such survivors and their new identity is usually related to finding a place in an asylum, a sense of belonging with the society, which caters to the herd instinct and calms the survival one as well. Survivors are separating themselves from others and, most often, their passive attitude towards the autocrat constitutes a result of experienced trauma and the desire of redefining themselves in the community and giving their existence a meaning and a purpose once more.

The relationship of the post-apocalypse with the apocalypse is expressed in this very "post", post-modernist relationship between the actual world and the one-that-is-no-more, one which spectre looms over the sprouting new life. The paradox of this relationship is based precisely on the fact, that regardless of whether the circumstances of the disaster will be used to build a brave new world, or its dystopian *al rovescio*—a spectre of the past will continue to haunt them, provoking questions

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[6]   In many narratives authors or screenwriters are clearly inspired by real phenomena. The amplification of the negative factors makes the plot more dramatic. However, it is important to note that those speculations or visions only function in close liaison with authentic problems faced by various communities, as written by Todd S. Platts, who states that: "cultural productions reveal something about the societies that created them, and patterns emerging from the content of cultural productions partly unsheathe underlying structural patterns of those societies" (Platts 2013: 551). This means that various motifs present in post-apocalyptic narratives derive from the criticism of the real phenomena.

about the past and its relationship to the present. The "post-" character of this relationship, as recalled by Anna Burzyńska, is not only a cause and effect sequence but also develops a certain critical distance (characteristic of dystopias):

> "Post-" means also, in other words, a thematisation or objectification (Heideggerian *Verwindung*) of certain formations, paradigms, or traditions in order to conduct their critical re-vision and, therefore, to rework them. However, it is a simultaneous parasitic "utilization" of those formations etc. (most often by radicalisation some of the assumptions) in accordance with a well-known (also "postic" in nature) belief about a lack of something completely new. Any "post-" is then a phenomenon internally complex, even paradoxical—as it combines simultaneously relationships and a severance, impeachment and assimilation, engrafting and radicalisation. At the same time, every "post-" is a time of purification, revaluation, or reworking—thus it is simply the time of Lent[7], which comes in order to provide conditions for something new to come. However, the consequences of this whole process are not immediately visible but always from a further perspective (Burzyńska 2007: 337).

In *Spectres of Marx* Jacques Derrida associates a similar "post-" relationship with a metaphor of spectrality—known also by the name of hauntology—and, in accordance with the latter, he formulates categories of haunting the contemporary discourse with spectres of the past. Moreover, he writes: "Hegemony still organizes the repression and thus the confirmation of a haunting. Haunting belongs to the structure of every hegemony" (Derrida 1994: 48). The spectrality of an association of the post-apocalyptic with the apocalypse or any other kind of terrible events from the past (an epidemic, genocide, world war, alien invasion) is connected with hegemony and a discourse of power in a sense that those spectres of the past may be used by dystopian tyrants for legitimising their own rule over survivors. This allows to avoid superficial references to post-apocalyptic narratives as narratives dealing with dark, bad worlds in favour of examining micro-dystopias as emanations of critical discourse. After all, as Jacques Derrida points out:

> At bottom, the specter is the future, it is always to come, it presents itself only as that which could come or come back; in the future, said the powers of old Europe in the last century, it must not incarnate itself, either publicly or in secret. In the future, we hear everywhere today, it must not re-incarnate itself; it must not be allowed to come back since it is past. What exactly is the difference from one century to the next? Is it the difference between a past world-for which the specter represented a coming threat-and a present world, today, where the specter would represent a threat that some would like to believe is past and whose return it would be necessary again, once again in the future, to conjure away? (Derrida 1994: 48).

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7   Untranslatable pun of Polish word for Lent ("Post") and a prefix "post-".

Narrative Role and Allocation of Micro-dystopias

While traditional dystopias constitute the world-building axis, micro-dystopias are non-dominating constructs, merely parts of the storyline, a type of a transitive territory akin to heterotopia, which are encountered by wandering characters or faced during the struggle for supremacy over a given survivor colony. The aspect of domination and aggression is also a recurring motif in the network of relationships between the protagonists and micro-dystopian rulers. However, a thread of the destruction of dystopian order is not a meaningful element of the storyline—thus it may or may not emerge. A disaster is not always the event leading to the creation of a dystopia in the traditional sense, since a dystopia can emerge in the process of evolution, as in the case of the story of coming to totalitarian, panoptical power in the TV series *Person of Interest* (CBS 2011-2016)[8]. Conversely, the emergence of micro-dystopias is usually connected with an apocalypse ending the world we know—although there are some examples of deviation from this rule, as in the case of the second season of the *Helix* (season 2, SyFy 2015) series and the presented promiscuous cult of immortality on the St. Germaine Island (Brother Michael's sect).

As the presented material illustrates, micro-dystopias only partly fit into or correlate with the determinants of a classic dystopia. A similar positioning results first of all from the fact, that these are not pivotal constructs, and their meaning to the storyline can be—although not always is—relevant, as long as they constitute a mere transition point in the journey or adventures of the protagonists, and not a core, meticulously described element of the storyworld.

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[8]   In the description of the series available on the arstechnica.com website is written: „brooding over all the action—whether it was organized crime, secret government assassinations, subversive Anonymous-like political groups, or out-of-control surveillance tech—was the Machine, slowly gathering sentience over the seasons. Finally, it figured out a way to steal its own servers from the government, stashing its distributed brain in hidden underground facilities and, eventually, in a massive, redundant network that stretched across the whole country. Meanwhile a corporation called Decima got its hands on a second AI called Samaritan with powers equal to the Machine. But unlike Finch's emo creation, Samaritan is unhindered by ethics and unmoored from a social group of do-gooders. Decima sells Samaritan's services to the government and promptly begins dividing US residents into desirables and undesirables. All subversive elements are ferreted out and removed. Aided by Decima's cackling CEO, Samaritan even throws local elections and begins to build up an elite army to do its bidding. [...]In season 5 [...] the Machine has been severely disabled by Samaritan. [...] And Decima has taken over the US using Samaritan's powers of surveillance and social media propaganda" (Newitz 2016: par. 3).

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