Dr hab. Urszula Terentowicz-Fotyga, prof. UMCS

The Social Media in the Contemporary Literary Dystopia

In the last two decades, social media have rapidly advanced into the epicentre of the social world spawning a flurry of critical debate about their role, function and impact on different spheres of life. One of the most fascinating aspects of this debate is how, within a very short period of time, positive perspectives gave way to a pessimistic, even catastrophic outlook; utopian optimism turned into dystopian gloom. In 2011, on the wave of the Arab Spring, they were deemed a liberation technology; only six years later, following the scandal of Cambridge Analytica, they came to be seen as the major culprit in the crisis of democracy and the pending threat of authoritarianism. At the same time, the shocking scale of digital surveillance raised serious questions about the possibility of individual's protection against the corporate Big Brother; the alarming data on rapidly growing addictions, depression and suicide rates stirred major concerns about the threats social media pose to younger generations.

The rapid shift from a utopian to dystopian vision of the social media is the originating idea behind the research project. The discussion about the role and future of online platforms is of crucial importance for the shape and evolution of the contemporary world, and the analysis of literary projections of such futures can make a significant contribution to this debate. The research project aims to analyse the literary dystopias based on the social media published in the last fifteen years with the aim of identifying both specific threats and potential solutions they imagine and to locate these literary projections of the future in the current interdisciplinary debate on the evolution, role and impact of the social media. We will be interested in what aspects of the social media, according to the analysed authors, are the most dangerous, and whether the narrative scheme of dystopia, based on individual rebellion against the surrounding world, offers a viable path to avoid a dystopian future. We will also ask if traces of the utopian vision that accompanied the beginnings of online platforms have been preserved in the dystopian images of the future.

The research project aims to identify and define the "social media dystopia" as a new thematic subgenre of technological dystopia and discuss three main thematic areas in the key novels representative for the convention. Firstly, we will examine the literary visions of the evolution of the social media in the context of their actual development. Secondly, we will discuss the influence of the social media on the construction of identity by focusing on the relationship between real and digital selves and the ways the impressionistic, public, often ludic and performative nature of the social media influences the process of constructing an individual and a community. The third aspect concerns the relationship between the individual and power structures. The project proposes to examine the dominant types of power in the analysed dystopias, including the relationship between government systems and corporations. It will inquire whether these representations differ from those portrayed in earlier dystopias and what they say about our immediate future in the context of political systems. An important question in this part of the research is about the future of democracy. Since at the core of the social media is voluntary, individual, public participation, what is the path to enslavement and the collapse of the democratic system? These issues will be discussed both in relation to the twentieth century dystopian tradition and in the context of the current interdisciplinary debate about these problems.

A measurable effect of the research project will be three publications in the form of articles or book chapters and a proposal for a book publication that will be submitted to one of the leading publishers from the 2nd level of the ministerial list.