

George Orwell's Legacy: Post-Communist Dystopia in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus

Aim of the project

The aim of this project is to cover the first comparative history of post-communist dystopia in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. The research material includes a corpus of relevant texts that consists of more than 90 books written in utopian/dystopian discourse. More than 700 SF and utopian/dystopian books have been published every year in Slavic languages since 1991.

In my research, I argue that dystopian literature serves both to critique the realities of their own society and to posit alternative visions of the future that are themselves predicated on the same states of exception and provoke resistance. Dystopia starts at the point where the protagonist rejects the utopian Ministry of Truth and its Orwellian principles.

Research description

The theoretical framework combines the concept of 'state of exception' with traditional tools, like motif analysis, close reading, etc. We analyze the evolution of the dystopian genre in the context of the "state of exception," a strategy of power employed by authoritarians to transform democracies into totalitarian states. Giorgio Agamben insisted: 'The fact is that in both the right of resistance and the state of exception, what is ultimately at issue is the question of the juridical significance of a sphere of action that is itself extrajudicial.' (Agamben 2005, 11).

The research will address six distinct aspects of dystopias as they appear in this genre:

1. The dystopia stands in debate with a whole genre while clothing its arguments in an aesthetically engaging form;
2. The hero of the dystopia is always eccentric. He lives according to the laws of the fairground spectacle. There is, strictly speaking, nothing surprising about this, for the Bakhtinian carnival also represents the triumph of eccentricity;
3. Another structural peculiarity of dystopia is the ritualization of life. Indeed, the individual life is now programmed. Narrative conflict arises when the individual rejects his or her role in the ritual in favor of his or her own path;
4. The dystopia is distinguished by its emphasis on the individual, his or her hopes and troubles: its anthropocentricity. The individual in the dystopia is always opposed to his or her environment;
5. The structural pivot of the dystopia is the pseudo-carnival. The principal difference between the classic concept of carnival, as developed by Mikhail Bakhtin, and its Janus-face, the pseudo-carnival, the spawn of the totalitarian age, lies in the fact that carnival is based on ambivalent laughter, whereas the pseudo-carnival is built on absolute terror;
6. Finally, we will turn our attention to the theme of sadomasochism. The sadism of authority is directed downwards, while the masochism of the individual is directed upwards, towards authority.

The reason for undertaking the research topic

Some scholars called George Orwell 'the most influential political writer of the twentieth century' (Cushman, Rodden 2004, 281). In post-communist literature, Orwell was a prophet who predicted the path of dystopia as a genre. The undertaken research is a response to the challenges posed by the complicated struggle between democracy and totalitarian tendencies in three countries neighboring Poland. Being a frontier genre, dystopia metaphorically reflects this struggle.

Expected results

The research results will be significant not only for literary scholars and linguists but also for anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, and other researchers in the humanities. The original outcome including the annotated dataset of post-communist dystopias will be able to be applied and further developed by scholars in neighboring fields. When this research is published some serious corrections to history of post-communist literature will be needed, as it will seriously change current understanding of contemporary literary processes. Changes and corrections in the literary textbooks and other book production will follow.