Czigányik Zsolt: The Theme of Human Freedom in 20th Century Dystopias
(Az emberi szabadság a XX. század disztópiáiban)
Doctoral dissertation

Theses

Objectives

The genre of dystopia became very popular by the 20th century, and in these literary works the theme of human freedom plays a central, structural role. The dissertation, partly because of the large number of the works in question, does not aim at completeness; the works have been selected for analysis according to the following two reasons. The dissertation primarily concentrates on works with a great influence on the reading public, like *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, around which the analysis of the other works is centred. *A Clockwork Orange* by Anthony Burgess and *The Handmaid’s Tale* by Margaret Atwood list among the well-known works, and some others, namely *The Aerodrome* by Rex Warner and *The Wanting Seed* or *1985* by Burgess, were chosen to attract more critical attention in Hungary, that these works unduly lack.

The above works have been analysed with respect to the role of human freedom in them, highlighting how the alternative realities created in these books are unsuitable for exercising or accomplishing one’s liberty. During the analysis it is shown that human freedom as the prerequisite for a truly human life has a central importance in the genre of dystopia. Most works can be seen as indirect anatomies of human freedom; these books depict worlds where human liberty is curtailed, which makes human life deformed or meaningless. Through the demonstration of the large number of dangers and restrictions threatening human freedom, dystopias offer a manifold analysis of the philosophical concept of liberty. As freedom in these works is always presented through its lack, dystopias furnish an indirect evidence for the necessity of freedom and offer a negative definition of the concept. In the analysis of dystopias profit is drawn from the fact that the genre is situated at the border territory of literature and social philosophy, therefore not only literary analysis in the narrow sense is applied, but the works are examined in a wider horizon.
Major theses of the dissertation

1. The genre of dystopia is in close connection with that of the satire, therefore these works should not be analysed in isolation, locked into their fictional space. A major characteristic of the genre is that dystopias reach out of their fictional spaces; this fact also constitutes their distinguishing feature. This feature is presented in the dissertation with the term applied literature.

2. The concrete or local criticism in dystopias is directed against the general and global questions behind the particular problems. Therefore the analysis should differentiate between the local and the global levels, which permeate and reinforce each other, but global criticism is emphasized. The fictitious world becomes inevitably related to the reality outside the fictional space, and the metaphorical meaning offers multi-layered interpretations. Most often the direct satirical interpretation that is limited to certain ages and locations co-operates with the global or universally dystopian meaning that is independent of the particularities of time and space.

From an aesthetic point of view, the most problematic part of dystopias is their introduction, where such basic features of the alternative reality have to be explained which need not be introduced in other novels. Many books, including Burgess's *The Wanting Seed*, become didactic; in *Brave New World* a counterpoint technique is applied to avoid the tedium of the introduction, whereas in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* it is the exceptional relationship of the narrator and the protagonist that solves this problem.

3. Dystopias, due to their specific features, are suitable for widening the knowledge about the reality outside the fictional space. The analysis of these literary works allows for the interpretation and extension of the philosophical concept of human freedom. This approach thus has a double result: the examination of the theme of freedom makes the understanding of literary works more complete, on the other hand, valuable contribution can be gained in the interpretation of the concept of freedom.

The concept that fits this analysis the best is a notion of freedom which entails an opportunity for action, nevertheless it is necessary to distinguish the negative form of liberty, that is, the lack of constraints and restrictions. Freedom inevitably results in incalculableness, and this is
interpreted as a danger by the fictitious states that aspire at stability. These states typically present freedom and happiness as opposing features that eliminate each other.

4. George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* plays a central role in the interpretation of 20th century dystopias. The influence of this work can be found in works produced earlier – much in the fashion of the phenomenon called *apophrades* by Harold Bloom. This influence can be best demonstrated in the case of Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*. These two works exhibit considerable parallels that stem from Huxley in their genealogy, but in their present day interpretations Orwell is stronger. It results in the paradox phenomenon that Orwell’s book feels to have influenced the novel written decades earlier.

5. Dystopian works in general, and most consciously *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, refer to the relationship between language and freedom, and this reference is much more explicit and detailed than the philosophical reflection of this relationship. The control of linguistic means restricts the individuals’ freedom in a way that the mental concepts are eliminated before one could contemplate taking an action. The method expounded by Orwell in the ‘Appendix’ of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* cannot be verified to be a functioning one, yet in the fictional space of the novel it is a powerful metaphor for the total loss of liberty.

6. It is pointless to examine the feasibility of dystopias. Similarly to utopia, dystopia is a fictive experiment, functionality in this case means coherence within the fictional space. Similarly, the future tense, which is so typical of this genre, does not refer to a prophetic intention, it is the device of *displacement*, isolation from empirical reality – a distinctive feature of the genre.

7. Dystopias depicting social stability typically require individuals whose demands and behaviour are utterly predictable and controllable. This condition constitutes the definition of the opposite of liberty, thus the essential condition of functionality of the utopia is the lack of freedom. The lack of freedom is complemented by a perfect totalitarian power that becomes invisible. Dystopias usually show this world from the point of view of individuals that cannot perfectly fit into the system because of their individual liberty.

8. The conception of Anthony Burgess on political cycles (expounded in the first chapters of *The Wanting Seed*) can be well applied both on the political system of *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The dissertation does not examine whether Burgess’s system that
classifies the changes of political power in their anthropological and quasi-theological features is adequate for the analysis of existing political systems, but it is shown to be applicable in the description of fictitious states; it is well suited for the world of utopias.

9. Dystopias often depict a liturgical surrogate religion; in Brave New World it is Orgy-porgy, in Nineteen Eighty-Four Two Minutes Hate, in The Handmaid’s Tale ‘Ceremony’, but such elements can also be found in the books of Burgess or even Zamyatin. These liturgical events in their symbolism and contents reflect the essence of the fictive world in a condensed way. If any of these books were to be characterised adequately by only one scene, the description of the liturgy would be an appropriate choice.

**Theses on individual works**

10. The society of Brave New World, however pleasant in the surface, constitutes a system that creates an absolute lack of freedom. Mental conditioning in early infancy is the method that establishes a society that eliminates freedom, where individuals can only exist due to the imperfections of conditioning. Huxley’s book depicts a totalitarian state whose efficiency surpasses that of Nineteen Eighty-Four.

11. The narrative structure of Nineteen Eighty-Four allows the effects and consequences of a totalitarian state to be manifested through the blocked and impotent mind of the protagonist, and this state of mind is what guarantees the total power of the state. The key to the stagnant, locked universe of Nineteen Eighty-Four lies in the state of mind of the protagonist. The anxiety which appears as the product of tyranny is also part of the matrix out of which that vision of absolute tyranny springs. In Orwell’s book it is not the extrinsic factors of dictatorship (like torture) that represent lack of freedom, but Winston’s state of mind. Oceania is a horrible country, but not mainly because of the secret police or room 101, but the hopelessness of everyday life.

12. A crucial point in Jean-Paul Sartre’s existentialist phenomenology is the look, as one of the constituting elements of the structure of a personality. The look of the Other has a double meaning; it is necessary for our human existence as the limit of our subjectivity, thus becomes the basis of our freedom, at the same time it represents danger. In Orwell’s book the others’
look also has a central role, yet in the world of Big Brother it is exclusively a source of danger.

13. Despite its relative obscurity, Rex Warner’s *The Aerodrome* is an important part of 20th century dystopian tradition. The aesthetic flaws of the book (e.g. the narration and certain scenes) are surpassed by the formation of the character of the archetypal dictator and the magnetic appeal exerted by this character. This appeal is so strong that the followers, at least temporarily, are devoid of the ability to think and act freely.

14. The nature of freedom is often depicted as non-conformism in the works of Anthony Burgess. At the same time freedom means a potential for Burgess, the ability of the individual to influence the world, in other words, to control their own life. In this respect conformism is the opposite of freedom, a limitless adaptation, the lack of creativity and originality. Just as in many other dystopias, freedom is also in tight connection with the state or political power in Burgess’s works, and the state always appears as a limiting factor trying to determine the notion of good and bad according to its own purposes. On the contrary of this, in the first part of *1985* Burgess gives the definition of good with respect to freedom: ”good is concerned with promoting the ability in a living organism to act freely” (Burgess 1994, 337). Dystopias of the 20th century typically depict the evil that is dedicated to take such freedoms away.