Pathologies and Dysfunctions of Democracy in a Mediated Context

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Figure 1: II Conference Patologias e Disfunções da Democracia em Contexto Mediático: O novo imaginário distópico do século XXI. De George Orwell ao Black Mirror. Do Big Brother aos Big Data. University of Beira Interior, Portugal. November 12-14, 2019.

Introduction

In the twentieth century, many dystopian narratives seemed to predict pathologies of our current democracy and political communication, from populism phenomena to surveillance, counter-information, and the so-called "*fake news,*" in which authors such as George Orwell, Theodor Adorno, Neil Postman, Michel Foucault, among others, stood out. The third golden age era of television series and contemporary cinema seem to point to a dystopian portrait of contemporary political communication and social mediation processes, from hyper-surveillance, control mechanisms, *scandalogy*[2], infotainment, self-identity to the re(emergence) of xenophobia, racism, cultural, and ethnic confrontations, and how all of these are trying to be balanced in a hyper-mediated society. From the 12th through the 14th of November 2018, the Universidade da Beira Interior hosted the II International Conference titled: *Pathologies and Dysfunctions of Democracy in a Mediated Context: the new dystopian*

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[2] The scientific study of political sex scandals and an analysis of what they say about us as a society.

imaginary of the 21st century. From Orwell to Black Mirror. From Big Brother to Big Data.

Thematic panels focused precisely on how newer technologies, explored mostly on cinema e.i., *Tron* (1982, Steven Lisberger), *Blade Runner* (1982, Ridley Scott), *Blade Runner: 2049* (2017, Denis Villeneuve), and TV series such as *Mr. Robot* (USA Network, 2015-), *Black Mirror* (Channel E4 and Netflix, 2011-), *Westworld* (HBO, 2016-), *Handmaid's Tale* (HBO, 2017-), and so on, with a few notable books, e.g., *Without Sky* (2014), *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), *Flatland* (1884), etc. are changing our politics, relationships, and socioeconomic aspects.

There were four main topics explored throughout all the panels: (1) how new forms of fiction, whether cinema or television series, are providing to the viewer consciousness of new forms of "doing" politics and sensitize them to societal issues beyond politics; (2) our current contemporary obsession with ICT (Information, Communication, and Technology) and how texts, both written and audiovisual, are providing the audience with an imaginary of the political, social and economic repercussions and consequences of technology, when mis(-ab)used[3]; (3) Donald Trump and his political communication and strategy campaign as a recurrent motif in most analysis, and finally (4) the importance of gender perspective analysis in the communication field.

Conference structure

The conference was held over three days and, in a highly interdisciplinary fashion, with a wide range of academic figures. The first day (12th of November) was dedicated to a Plenary Session with Jorge Palinhos (ESAP/CEAA); Francisco Merino (UBI) and Luís Nogueira (UBI) chaired by João Carlos Correia (UBI). This panel was dedicated to how dystopian narratives are predicting our current political contemporary discourse. Following the panel, there were two more panels: the first one was dedicated to media as a form of control and Big Data Society. It was composed by Carla Gamito (UCP); Fabina Lopes Coelho (U. Porto) and João Bravo (UBI), chaired by Luís Nogueira (UBI). The second panel was led by Herlander Elias (UBI), Buğra Kibaroğlu (Ankara University Radio, Television, and Film) and Naíde Müller (UCP), chaired by Herlander Elias. The debate was centered around surveillance, the control of screens, and the Orwellian effect.

The second day (13th of November) was dedicated to four panels and one Plenary Session. The first panel was composed by Marine Malet (CARISM/ Univ. Pantheon-Assas), Èmili Adami Rossetti (ICPD) with Renata Loureiro Frade (U. Porto), Ana S. Moura (LAQV-REQUIMTE) with Natália Cordeiro (U. Porto), João Seixas and João Barreiros (Authors of Speculative Fiction), Cristina Algaba

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[3] I use this specific term as a pun to describe two different types of consequences regarding the use of technology, being those abuse and misuse.

(Universidad Loyola Andalucía), chaired by Ana Catarina Pereira (UBI), about the construction and representation of femininity in technological fields and TV series, e.g., *Handmaid's Tale* (Hulu, 2017-) and *Westworld* (HBO, 2016-). Following this presentation, Jan Cerník (OUSHI), João Carlos Correia (UBI), José Carlos Alexandre (IPG), Nuno Amaral Jerónimo (UBI), Vinicius Prates da Fonseca Bueno (Univ. Presbiteriana Mackenzie) and Heloísa Prates Pereira (PUC-SP) presented the impact of new media on politics from communism to populism, chaired by Anabela Gradim (UBI).

The Plenary Session included two keynote speakers: Andrew M. Butler (Canterbury Christ Church University) and Mark Bould (University of the West of England/ACE), along with Catarina Moura (UBI) and chaired by Francisco Paiva (UBI); the debate was around the design of patriarchy, neoliberalism, and the design of violence through sci-fiction *œuvres*.

The third panel included Pedro Pinto de Oliveira (UFMT), Daria Dergacheva (UAB), Bruno Serra (UBI), and was chaired by João Carlos Correia (UBI), and was thematically eclectic, covering the exploration of humanity to the agribusiness in Brazil and the networked authoritarianism in Russia. Finally, Ricardo Morais (UBI), Nisia Alejandra Rizzo de Azevedo (UBI), Juliana Bulhões (UnB) and Pricilia Falcão (Queen's University), Giovanni Ricardo Ramos (UBI), chaired by Ricardo Morais (UBI), presented a session about the new roles of citizens and governments, and their consequences in our globalized world through the exploration of dystopian fictions, journalism and literature.

The last day (14th of November) finished with the third Plenary Session of the conference presented by Nelson Zagalo (UA) about the concept of *deepfake* and the future of Audiovisual Simulacra. The fifth and last panel was led by José Antonio Abreu Colombri (UAH), Gaspare Trapani (CECC/UPC-FLUL Lisboa), Ana Taís Martins Portanoba Barros (UFRGS), and was chaired by João Carlos Correia (UBI) about the political communication strategies of Donald Trump and Silvio Berlusconi, and the role of secrecy in digital communication. Lastly, the fourth plenary session included Eduardo José Marcos Camilo (UBI), Patrícia Fernandes (UBI), Manel Jiménez Morales and myself, and was chaired by Luís Nogueira (UBI). The presentations centered on our contemporary discomfort about our modern world, with a specific analysis on film and television stories, by directors like Ford Coppola, novels taken to the televised world like Margaret Eleanor Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, and television series like *Westworld,* all of which have a "techno-paranoia" feeling, exploring the dependence of humanity on technology. It had a societal focus rather than a political one, although the last session leaned more towards a political focus. The conference was closed by Joaquim Paulo Serra (LabCom. IFP and UBI).

Keynote speeches

The keynote conferences were carried out by Jorge Palinhos, Nelson Zagalo, Andrew M. Butler, and Mark Bould.

Jorge Palinhos, through the literary metaphor of the short story titled *Without Sky* (2014), by Vladislav Surkov (as Natan Dubovitsky), explained how our current journalistic and political discourse has become an infinite problem with the distinction of "facts" and "truth." In other words, how the phenomena of "fake news" and the distinction between reality and simulacrum have just begun. Furthermore, Palinhos explained how the short story seemed to raise the possibility of a world of cognitive mutilation which loses the connection with the nuances of the truth and can, by itself, become a political force, making the effects of this dystopia unknowable. In opposition to other books such as *Flatland* (1884) and *The Sleeper Awakes* (1910), *Without sky* (2014) suggests the possibility that those who are denied the truth cannot be just powerless, but they can take power through ignorance. Moreover, Nelson Zagalo explored how new technologies and new mediums are making it harder to distinguish reality from fakeness, in other words, this *deepfake* is "opening a new step in the pandora box of hyperreality" proposed first by postmodern philosopher Jean Baudrillard.

On the other hand, Andrew M. Butler made a presentation on *Tron* and *Blade Runner* under the scope of a gender perspective and their multiple readings on patriarchy. *Blade Runner*, whether intended or not, highlighted the absence of family life in film and *"the subversive nature of the genre in terms of undermining the locus tradition of the patriarchal authority and site of our spiritual well-being"* (Williams, 1998). On the contrary, the second installment, *Blade Runner 2049,* is set in a space-industrial L.A., 30 years after the original film. While it is set on a futuristic place in which there are flying cars and holograms, many things of the past remain intact, especially the patriarchy, misogyny, and ingrained masculinity. In *Blade Runner 2049,* females are perceived as merchandise, there are product lines of female holograms for either sexual entertainment or as household helpers, cooking in 50's-style. Their existence is solely to serve men. There are many violent female deaths, to show today's patriarchy perspective that women are nameless, faceless, disposable beings, objects to be used or murdered. With a quote of Ruda (2016: 183), Dr Butler concluded that:

> *Blade Runner* acts as a reflection of modern-day America; the most striking parallel was the female-led revolution. It is possible to see how the capitalist world functions, and it is evident that this very transparency is the one which obscures and obfuscates one's vision... the very nakedness of capitalist dynamics functions as its newest disguise, which ultimately paralyzes the imaginary in such a manner that even the production of utopia seems impossible.

Finally, Mark Bould, with a presentation titled: *"Daily life in the War Machine: Neoliberalism and Climate Change in The Purge",*

examined *Blade Runner* as an example of "free markets," in which a neoliberal government encourages the destruction of free-market ideals for profits. There is a continuous racist massacre, and conspiratorial market, exemplifying the deep crisis of liberal leftist politics nowadays, leaving untouched several leftist "restrictions" that are central to the multicultural ideals of tolerance, pluralism, and inclusion. Inadvertently, the *œuvre* ends up reproducing the same contradictions that afflict the dominant neoliberal multicultural ideology underlying its form and content.

Conclusions

There is an apparent influence on how we perceive our modern politics due to the way current dystopian TV series, especially: *Handmaid's Tale, Black Mirror, Westworld,* among others, are portraying it. Moreover, there is a close link between politics and technology, and a repeated theme regarding how technology is not enslaving us or making us "worse" as humans, but with savvier audiences and rapid advancements there is a worrying effect on how its mis-(ab)use could be affecting us. In the conference there was a lot of discussion on how these sci-fi TV series were presenting neoliberalism as the dominating political structure of the western political sphere since 1980 and how the increasing inequality and reduced social mobility make people feel powerless in a system that promotes economic inequality. Finally, and considering one of the main topics of the conference: the political communication strategies in the Trump campaign and the rise of populism, discussed from *Black Mirror* episodes to traditional journalism, could be summarized in four main aspects; (1) an awakening of a political nationalism and economic protectionism, (2) fear in the media for the propagation of political messages, (3) the extended effect of social degradation due to globalization and the economic crisis of 2008 and (4) the fatigue with political and institutional correctness, and the turning to an anti-establishment discourse.

In conclusion, in the twentieth century, the imagination of the future has vanished and become narrower and darker. We are in a period in which audiovisual works are set in a modified present rather than in a futuristic context. Dystopias can create systems about a world that is going to be even worse than the one we are living in. The contemporary television, literature, art, and cinematographic industry, and especially American productions, are continuously reviewing traditional science fiction narratives through adaptations, sequels, reboots or reimagined series that shape the different themes and iconographies of the genre to new audiences and context. In which overtime performance of identity operates on the digital landscape as a mode of self-surveillance (Turkle, 2011: 12). In a sense, our screens will become our mirrors. So, dystopian stories, no matter the medium, are reflective of our contemporary sociopolitical realities and extrapolate worst-case scenarios as warnings for an "immediate" necessary social change or caution. As always, they

present a close connection with ICTs. However, due to the constant advances in technology, it is increasingly harder to distinguish between entertainment and reality (hyperreality). Dystopias are no longer exploring the concerns and fears of "futuristic scenarios", but instead analyse the side effects they have in our contemporary culture.

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