

Dystopia: A Crash Course

An exploration on the disconcertingly numerous and unpleasant ways human progress could grind to a screeching halt

Among the countless characteristics of humanity that set us apart from the rest of the animal kingdom, our seemingly endless capacity for development and adaptation is the most enduring testament to our humanity. In a period of time far too brief to observe any meaningful effects of evolution, mankind (and womankind, a term which, in itself, exemplifies the fluid nature of our societal norms and conventions) has nonetheless evolved in every way short of actual genetic mutation. In the period of time from the nascence of human civilization to the present day—approximately 10,000 years—lions are still lions, dolphins are still dolphins, and kangaroos are still, to my knowledge, kangaroos. It is also a reasonable assumption that, in general, these animals behave more or less the same way that they do today. Yet our ancestors, though they are the exact same species of human as those who live in the modern era, could not possibly begin to fathom the countless developments that stand as milestones along the road of the human journey. We, their posterity, would appear as alien to them as the androids in *Blade Runner* look to us.

Very cool intro

This immeasurable propensity to change has proven to be humanity's greatest asset. Throughout our existence, the civilizations of human history have perceived themselves to be the zenith of human development. Our ancestors across the reaches of the globe all faced seemingly insurmountable challenges and, through varying combinations of effort and ingenuity, surmounted them. In other words, since the beginning we have been prophesizing the end; and yet here we are. The real, frightening question is this: what happens when we actually do reach the high water mark of human progress? This occurrence—be it in five years, or five hundred—is, in my opinion, the point at which humanity will slide into dystopia. We have faced problems. We have been greedy, and done cruel things, and lived under corrupt and oppressive governments. But when the time comes that the collective human ambition for progress subsides and the human condition begins to rot, stuck in place, the advent of dystopia has come. We are not oblivious to this possibility, and many renderings of such a future have been presented to the public, most in the form of media. Here are some of the dystopias put forth that most effectively portray a human society trudging on with an absence of the human spirit.

Player Piano: Man Rendered Obsolete

The novel *Player Piano* by Kurt Vonnegut is the perfect example of the stagnation of human progress. What's even more curious is how although human technology is in a Golden Age of sorts, development of human character and spirit has completely ceased. The story takes place in an American society completely run

by machines. While the intellectual upper class (comprised of the engineers and managers that developed and presently maintain this automated system) genuinely believes that they live in a utopia, the restless masses disagree. Because every single aspect of operating and maintaining the society is automated, no one has any real job. Without this sense of purpose or collective self worth present in the population, there is no human development. So while the society is certainly functioning, its denizens are little more than an afterthought. In this particular dystopia, the large majority of the people in it have very little to live for. It's a rather plausible possibility—if we ever reach the perfect system, what exactly do we do when we get there? ✓ watch Gilligan's Island Re runs. Doh!

The Matrix: The Death of the Collective Consciousness

The Matrix presents an even darker turn of events than *Player Piano*: not only are we rendered obsolete by our own technology, but are overwhelmed by it as well. In this scenario the machines we used to run our society turn against us; man became the "architect of his own demise." Human technological development has always played a game of catch up with itself: it slowly drifts out of our control, only to be brought back under it by some newer, more effective technology. What *The Matrix* does is explore the ramifications of creating a technology that spins out of our control, and we cannot create anything newer, stronger, or better to control the rogue technology before it destroys us. Which is exactly what it does; by the end of the Animatrix—and just prior to the opening of the actual trilogy—we see a world where there is no human character left to stagnate. The human spirit hasn't begun to decay; it's been snuffed out. While I cannot accurately pinpoint the exact nature of

the technology that will overwhelm us, this strikes me as one of the most likely scenarios. Be it an engineered disease á la *The Stand* or a nuclear war in the style of *Terminator*, nothing is more disturbingly possible than a technology that should never have been implemented in the first place tearing its creators to figurative shreds. ✓

A Brave New World: Satisfaction-Driven, Superfluous Society

Aldous Huxley's vision of dystopia in *A Brave New World* is one of the most important commentaries on the role of perception in deciding the line between utopia and dystopia ever seen in the genre. What I found most interesting about this world is how, generation by generation, Mustapha Mond and the other world controllers forged a society in which people weren't afraid to resist; they just felt no reason to. The mass majority of the people living in the far distant future of *A Brave New World* perceive themselves as happy despite the absence of any remotely meaningful interpersonal relationships or even emotions in general. And why is that a surprise? They were genetically conditioned to be pleased, even smug, with the role in society given to them. Epsilons are just as happy as Alphas. The only reason we would even think this is a dystopia is because we are looking from the outside in, from a place with no such perfection. In this manner Huxley was able to get us to identify with Bernard's discontent with the system, though he is nothing but an aberration and an anomaly in the otherwise perfect and self-perpetuating social systems of The World State. By the end of the novel, even the reader begins to doubt whether or not it'd be nice to live under the beneficent, ever watchful eye of

Mustapha Mond. While this would likely never come to pass, it's a very scary reminder of how meaningless doesn't necessarily have to mean unhappy.

Great sentence

1984: Infallible and Ubiquitous Social Control

Where the World State succeeded in maintaining social control via bombarding its constituency with positive reinforce^{ment} of the social structure, the government of Oceania in George Orwell's 1984 managed to subjugate them with utter misery and fear. The social control of the State of Oceania is as harsh as it is ubiquitous—"Big Brother is watching you." The hopeless hero Winston Smith was caught in his thought crime far before he was aware he was even committing it. Just imagine that—a thought crime. The mere notion is enough to send chills down the spine of anyone accustomed to the rights and privileges associated with living in a democracy. The government in 1984 found that the most prudent way to subjugate the masses was never even give them a chance to come to the conclusion that they ought to be living better. They destroyed family loyalty. They keep the masses so poor that they're too busy surviving to sit around and debate the merits of popular government. Not that they would get that far anyway: just an insubordinate thought is enough to get someone executed. The human condition in 1984 isn't even conscious of its own hopelessness; it's far too busy starving in the ration lines to even think of such trivial things. Fortunately for us, though this is the most frightening dystopia it is also the least likely. Humanity already flirted with the notion of state dominion, and has already progressed past it.

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The Island: A Moral and Ethical Dystopia

The Island stands alone as the only dystopia that doesn't focus on the misery of the general populace. I picked this example because it describes a world that has not changed much in terms of standard of living, government or societal norms. What makes it dystopian is that while human technology progressed, human morality and ethics were compromised in pursuit of material gain. The doctors of the cloning facility play god with real, sentient human beings, and kill them to harvest their organs for people on the surface. How could this be perceived as anything but the stagnation of human character? Technology and society morph endlessly, but what happens when our moral and ethical standards fail to adapt as well? It gives us this, a hollow achievement, its scientific significance dwarfed by the corrosion of the soul. I believe we will begin to see more and more of this in the future, as people expedite ethics in favor of monetary gain.

The question remains, why do we waste our time thinking about these things? They are all, at best, highly unlikely, so why do we pay them a disproportionate amount of attention compared to other fantastical futures? The answer is, at least partly, the fascination of the abomination. A term coined by Josef Conrad in *Heart of Darkness*, it describes humanities inexplicable infatuation with the grotesque, macabre, or generally frightening. We pay attention to dystopian literature because it encourages us, on a microcosmic level, to press forward. Even if it's subconscious, we each leave these movies or get up from these books with some

The horror,
The horror

sort of disinclination toward living in anything remotely like what was just illustrated to us. In a small but noticeable way it compels us to keep progressing and developing as humankind, lest we ever stagnate and begin to slide back toward extinction.

Cool
Loved the Paper
At