

PHD DISSERTATION THESES

**Technology Criticism in Twentieth Century
Dystopias and Contemporary Philosophy Until the
60s**

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1. Task and outline of the research

Science and its byproduct, modernization through technology are perhaps the most powerful strand of the European spirit and culture. Technological advance is one of the most dominant motives of the utopian works from the dawn of the modern age, and also of dystopias that became an independent literary genre from the beginning of the 20th century. In the first chapter of the dissertation many stages of the increasing role of technology in the utopias are shown/illustrated/discussed but the culmination of this process is in H. G. Wells's modern world state of his novel *A Modern Utopia* (1904). At the same time the criticism of this novel is paradoxically the starting point of many famous dystopias.

Since the end of the 19th century the enthusiasm about technological progress has lost its breath, and from the first years of the 20th century, dystopias have clearly presented the negative social results of using technological achievements. This implies a kind of cultural criticism, as the marker of a crisis symptom of Western civilization. Thus the critique of technology becomes the critique of human beings or communities using technological devices on a larger scale, forgetting their former lifestyle, traditions, that leads them to disadvantage, or – as some say – even straight to self destruction. The establishment of a technicized world produces a drastic change in the human-to-human and the human-environment relations, and consequently mankind does not only benefit, but also endures a massive loss in the long run as well as in everyday life, and when implementing humanity's grandiose plans.

Although half of the dissertation deals with dystopias, I regard here the genre „dystopia” as the vehicle for literary technology criticism, i.e. as the collection of texts written by non-philosophers, but at the same time containing a large body of the fictional description of artistic imaginations regarding the negative tendencies in technological development. The dissertation makes a parallel analysis of half a century of technology criticism from the point of view of the special limit-genre of literature, i.e. the dystopia as well as from the point of view of technology critical philosophy. The analysis is not exhaustive of all sources, but reviews a sufficient body to draw valid conclusions.

In my research work my aim has been to analyze how this crisis-consciousness of Western civilization (namely the processes generated by technological achievements regarded as a crisis) is apprehended in the literature and philosophy alike. Furthermore, my aim was to capture the symptoms and tendencies that arise as a crisis of Western civilization. The purpose of the dissertation is, on the one hand, to exemplify a parallel analysis of philosophy and literature through the critique of technology, on the other hand, by comparing their critiques, to focus to the common manifestations of these crisis symptoms.

2. Structure of the dissertation

The first chapter of the dissertation presents the role of technological progress in utopian thinking, and philosophical utopias. The thesis interprets from this aspect the following (literary) utopias: *Utopia* by Thomas Moore (1516), *The City Of The Sun* by Campanella (1602), *The New Atlantis* by Bacon (1627), *The Theory of the Four Movements* by Fourier (1808), *Looking Backwards* (1888) and *Equality* (1897) by Edward Bellamy, and *News from Nowhere* by William Morris. These works all emphasize the positive question: how social problems can be solved by technical and scientific development.

In the second chapter I interpret and compare in a problem-centered way the undermentioned dystopic works that were written from the beginning of the 20th century till the mid 20's. The emphasized question of interpretation: what kind of (fictional) society and anthropology can be produced by the vision of the totally calibrated technical development?

The Machine Stops (1909) by E. M. Forster can be seen as the overture of the dystopic literature. Forster criticizes the theories of Wells, and in his novel presents a society forced to live underground, but equipped with every kind of high technology. These creatures communicate with each other only electronically: strictly speaking this is the antithesis of the Wellsian world state.

We by Yevgeny Zamyatin (1920) is a novel that mixes the power and scientific management of the Western industrial world with Bolshevik dogmatism. In this story we can see the everyday life of people who worship machines, act like machines, and live under total control.

Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) presents an alternative future with strictly controlled breeding of human beings, an unnatural artificial world and programmed happiness.

Instead of God, the characters of this story –also mocking Wells' thoughts – worship Henry Ford and the mass-production process. The scene of the novel is also a world state.

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) by George Orwell a dreary souled technocracy takes control, and takes care of its continental reign of terror by continuous warfare and machine based spying apparatus. The novel is the summary of Orwell's many decade-long critique of industrialism, that appeared in his former works. *Fahrenheit 451* (1952) by Ray Bradbury represents a society without past, where there is a highly developed technical background, unnaturalness, people are illiterate and forced to be happy, but the sense of malaise penetrates the whole system.

The Clockwork Orange (1962) by Anthony Burgess perambulates the problems of an England that is sloughing its democratic character. This situation creates anomic conditions, a crime spree, that inclines the government to apply psychological-pharmacological behavior manipulating techniques against young criminals. In the 50s and 60s such techniques were widespread, and Burgess tells his ethical opinion about this phenomenon.

In all dystopias examined there is an actual social problem that the author ironically and grotesquely exaggerates surrounded by the real or imagined products of technological improvement.

Albeit dozens of literary dystopias appeared from the beginning of the 20s century, among them only the six novels mentioned above can be compared analyzed from the point of view of contemporary philosophy.

The third and fourth chapter of the thesis contain a critique of technology in the 20th century philosophical theories. Although in these chapters the thesis concentrates on the works of Oswald Spengler, Walter Benjamin, the Frankfurt School and Martin Heidegger, as prefigurations appear here Hegel, Engels and Marx, as critics of the technological world. I used as primary

texts for interpreting the train of thought of the chosen philosophers as mentioned below:

Oswald Spengler: *The Decline of the West* (1918); *Man and Technics* (1931); *The Hour Of Decision* (1934).

Walter Benjamin: *One Way Street* (1928); *Children's Literature* (1929); *Reflections on Radio* (1931); *On the Minute* (1934); *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility* (1936); *Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian* (1937); *The Arcade Project* (1927-1939).

Max Horkheimer: *Eclipse of Reason* (1937); Horkheimer-Adorno: *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947).

Theodor Adorno: *The Schema of Mass Culture* (1942); *Aldous Huxley and Utopia* (1948); *Minima Moralia* (1951); *Perennial Fashion – Jazz* (1953); *Stars Down to Earth* (1953); *How to Look at Television?* (1954); *Culture Industry Revisited* (1967).

Herbert Marcuse: *Philosophy and Critical Theory* (1937); *Some Social Implications of Modern Technology* (1941); *One Dimensional Man* (1964); *Aggressiveness in Advanced Industrial Societies* (1968); *An Essay on Liberation* (1969).

Martin Heidegger: *The Self-Assertion of the German University* (1933); *The Origin of the Work of Art* (1935); *The Age of the World Picture* (1938); *The Word of Nietzsche: 'God is Dead'* (1943); *The Thing* (1950); *What is Called Thinking?* (1954); *Discourse on Thinking* (1955); *The Question Concerning Technology* (1955); *Only a God Can Save Us: Der Spiegel's Interview* (1966).

These works not only criticize the industrial age and technological progress, but at the same time they display symptoms of the crisis, which can be understood as warnings or protests alike.

As a result of a comparison of the literary and philosophical bodies of text, the last chapter summarizes the comparatively

apprehended warnings of the crisis symptoms (partly) generated by technological progress. Similar crisis symptoms appear as a result of the analysis and interpretation of these two kinds of texts, characterizing the two genres' common directions in the critique of technology. No similar comparison has appeared in the Hungarian or in the international scientific literature before.

3. Summary of the most important statements and results

In the fictive world of dystopic novels there is an extreme representation of the rule of totalitarianism and/or technology and/or globalism, the total alienation from nature, the vanishing of traditional cultural values and the free individual. Instead of these, there is a manipulated, controlled mass population without free choice, whose lives are extremely distorted, pathological. Thus first of all there is a 'negative type of catharsis' in the aesthetics of these works. They are warnings, they have a critical function through their social-philosophical, referential and ideal meaning. The conclusions of the dystopians about the world ruled by technics are almost the same as the findings of the contemporary philosophers, who work with different practices and concepts related to man's being-in-the-world. The essence of the findings of dystopians and philosophers is that man in his being-in-the-world appears in a degraded, unworthy mode of existence.

(1.) One of the results of my comparison/comparative analysis of the two genres is that *humanity/humans do not feel really well in the world that they had built with hard work for themselves during the past decades*. This building process undoubtedly created a working system, a global uniformity that dissolved almost totally those former traditions that made societies work for thousands of years. The fragments of the old values remained alive in the industrial and the postindustrial age as well, but their guiding role had diminished. In these works, the lack of history, the rootlessness transform humans into homeless, uninterested, frustrated beings. The quality that makes possible for humans to reproduce as useful and intelligent beings disappears from the societies of dystopias: they let antisocial and

anti-individual forces to rule them. The mass population without a past was unable to resist Bolshevism and Nazism, these two redemptive and conquering forces growing in the shadow of the industrial age. Neither the consumer idiotism and conditioned existence represented by Huxley, nor the machine-like behavior that looks like a kind of public insanity are pure fiction. Taylor, Ford, the enormous economic boom, the resulting convenient lifestyle in the West, and the Eastern wish to establish this prosperity in Soviet Russia produced these two, divergent ideological attitudes. These ideologies equally destroyed human existence.

The theoreticians of the Frankfurt School state that turning the possibilities in humans into conformism and making the civilized world one dimensional perpetuate the sins of capitalism. Zamiatin and Orwell paint a vivid picture of the devastating face of the Bolshevik ideology.

(2.) *Oblivion and distress as the unconquerable status of the humans of the machine age* are basic tendencies in the dystopias and the technology criticizing philosophical texts alike. In the dystopias the experience of reality and the sinister possibilities of the future hide behind the fantastic glaze.

Baudelaire already spoke to the urban mass – points out Walter Benjamin – for whom „Will power and the ability to concentrate are not their strong point”, because automatism and the compulsory machine-like behavior „have subjected the human sensorium to a complex kind of training”. This life style does not allow humans' inherent forces to evolve freely, despite all achievements designed to ease human life; indisposition and spleen are the concomitant of modern humans. Benjamin presents the hamster wheel of consumer culture, which imprisons all who live in the civilized world. Production maintains civilization and industry, and all of these are possible only by consumption, but

consumption is based on promotion and fashion. If the habit of throwing away still functioning objects in order to acquire new ones becomes widely accepted, we come full circle. Work, i.e. production and consumption, a prerequisite of which are wages, are that two end points between which the pendulum oscillates, oiled by manipulation techniques and fashion. *Humans suspect that they became a creature reduced to fulfil inferior goals.* The resulting frustration, nervousness, flurry, and instability can cause deliberate damage, fights, traffic accidents, industrial disasters, or even war at any time. But oblivion, inferiority of mankind, the rootlessness –formulated by Heidegger – makes humans unprotected in the real life, when a redemptory ideology arises, ensnaring them. Ray Bradbury and Marcuse also dealt with the problem of increasingly growing aggression resulting from the fact that human and machine find each other under the above-mentioned circumstances.

(3.) *The higher the ratio in machine precision, predictability, plannability, the more the environment is synthetic, the less remains of humans' former selves.* Despite the existence of the most up-to-date technology, it is not creative engineers any more who make machines work, but accidentally chosen common people, who watch over mighty powers without knowing these powers well. With this, the epoch of acting without understanding begins, as Spengler says. Walter Benjamin explicitly says that many people are incapable of the amount of concentration that is needed to listen to a well built story, and they cannot recite one either: the brain wants to relax because of the constant droning and the noises of modern lifestyle. Humans have been involved in a ceaseless process of production, and because of its monotony they became so tired that they refuse even the least complicated intellectual challenges. Connected with this neither Ray Bradbury's prophecy of illiteration is a

cynical exaggeration, nor Orwell's newspeak is a fiction that exists only in his novel. Machine age and „right defenders” are steadily destroying and eroding language. The infantile, illiterate, techno-fetishized society of the *Fahrenheit 451* is the direct result of the devolution made by political correctness.

(4.) The rootlessness, the separation from nature makes humans weak and frail. Modern humans' aim is the maximal isolation from what is more enormous than his machines, Nature. Humans build megapolises, hide in them and glance out behind their walls to the „country”, and despoils, depletes it with power plants, boring towers, and tunnels in order to ensure daily life in the defenseless asphalt jungle, says Spengler. Nearly in every dystopia, there are world state-like establishments ruling over nature, like emperors. The calculative attitude that is inherent in this behavior was brilliantly exposed by Spengler and Heidegger, who suggest that this attitude finally causes suffering and anxiety, and backfires at humans. The price of prosperity is restlessness, discontent, wish to consume, which generate energies that can be converted into a workforce supporting consumer society. Humans of consumer culture do not respect objects or souls, albeit for obtaining new objects he gets rid off the old ones. But for him things, are often worthier than people – points out Adorno. The „fellow citizen” who cultivates deeper intimacy with his or her car or television than humans is familiar, and not only from the works of Adorno or Ray Bradbury.

(5.) *Acquisitiveness and decaying morals can defeat even the state of lasting peace, if Western society permanently sinks into a technocratic dreariness.* Richard Rorty pointed this out based on Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four. Here one can see the gruesome and actual description of O'Brian's behavior, personality and world concept. O' Brian talks about a democratic, hopeful, liberal epoch that fell back to a Bolshevik-like

dictatorship, which Orwell expands in the novel to the whole planet. In the novel all three competing superpowers necessarily operate the same type of wreck societies. O'Brian is exactly that kind of intellectual, who „had been shaped and brought together by the barren world of monopoly industry and centralized government”, a well informed, intelligent and sensitive man who has always been the right man at the right place. A realistic character in a future where „intellectuals had accepted the fact that liberal hopes had no chance of realization”. The triad of science, technology and moral deficit create a devastating inflammatory material, and the analysis of this is an important component of the work of Walter Benjamin, Heidegger and the Frankfurt School.

(6.) Being under observation is an indispensable element in dystopias. In the short story of E. M. Forster the Machine controls every movement of the incubator-lives of the degenerated humans like a master, and takes revenge for every irregularity. In Zamiatin's *We* the guards who serve the Benefactor maintains constant control, and whatever cannot be seen by the human eye will be heard through microphones planted everywhere. In Huxley's *Brave New World* the linear happiness is also built up on total control: conditioning, the suitably developed human breeding guarantees discipline. The strict order of the totalitarian amusement park in Fahrenheit 451 is based on severe audiovisual control, and of course on the calculable behavior of the brute mass. The authority of the tired democracy that slowly moves towards dictatorship in Burges' *Clockwork Orange* is plotting to create the perfectly obedient citizen by using psychological and chemical technologies.

In the philosophical critiques of technology there has been an emphasis on the demonstration of how control works, how to shepherd the herd in the desired direction. In Spengler's works this

task is assigned to the megalopolis, the world works by the regulation of the “parasitical man of fact”, he rules public interest and public opinion. Walter Benjamin's hastening city dwellers, who forget their past once and for all are commanded from the conductor's desk of the developing consumer culture, sometimes into peace, sometimes into war. The philosopher tries to press the fire alarm, pointing out that at this speed, the civilized world may run into its destiny. The philosophers of the Frankfurt School demonstrate the depersonalisation of humans and the total control of the culture industry in its entire magnificence. Holding the mass in one hand, influencing it, canalizing its wishes, analyzing its acts, measuring its actions by statistics are indispensable parts of the big business of the culture industry. Heidegger reveals that humans finally catalogue themselves too, and behave as it is appropriate in a world ruled by technology, and deeply entomb their meditative selves. The result is a world where everyone's acts become calculable and mechanical, because „the only thing we have left is purely technological relationships”.

(7.) The area of the autonomous actions in the mechanized everydays of modern civil society has extremely narrowed down according to the philosophical critiques of technologies discussed in the dissertation. Thousands of routine actions of millions make social reproduction alive, and in this big noise as many autonomous products arise as this modern world needs. It is not accidental that Heidegger states in 1966 that the contemporary literature is worthless and in most cases destructive. Almost everything is routinish, the inevitable technical and methodological progress infiltrates among the routine, but this hardly improves the general state of alienation. In the modern industrial society virtually nobody has a concrete life goal: the masses dragged into some kind of accidental paid work for supporting their biological being, but breaking free from this one

dimensional life that makes this degraded existence easy is impossible for them. The civilised world has not moved towards the accomplishment of talent. Rather, people do specialized jobs and subtasks, and most of them wish these subtasks to hell. Work – as Marx describes it splendidly – is typically far from those pleasant challenges that can test human creativity. Instead, it became hated, stupid, monotonous routine, despite that marvelous machine stock that has – theoretically – one task: make work easier, as Marcuse explains it.

(8.) It is obvious, says Marcuse, that consumer society is sick, but this state leads to profit, sickness became a basic principle, because it is the only way to make the system function in which „negative is in the positive, the inhuman in the humanization, enslavement in liberation”. In such circumstances a paradoxical situation arises: although individual autonomy is unaccomplishable, life still seems comfortable and rational, *surrendering one's freedom* is not ineffective. Surrendering can also be found at the institutional level. Science, for example produces its novelties at full speed, it has past and future, but it is controlled by the consumer culture. Science must produce exactly those products that the industrial world needs at the moment – as the very effective analysis of Horkheimer and Heidegger show us. The world of consumerism finances science, which has to produce ingenious objects, devices, toys, machines, medicine for minimizing humans' physical activities and mental abilities. The creative scientific society fulfills the enormous works of mechanization and modernization with clock-like regularity, but since the beginning it has been working under the control of industry, as Horkheimer declares it. *Brave New World*, or *Fahrenheit 451* show these processes in an extremely suggestive literary style. According to Heidegger, *in a community that follows an improper lifestyle science is the same kind of*

addendum, like all the other units that help to make the world of the calculative ethos work. The lack of self-reliance in science, its involvement in the above mentioned trends is very dangerous: Heidegger doesn't even exclude the opportunity of demolishing mankind. The same thing can be read on the pages of Fahrenheit 451 where science produces electronic amusement gadgets for the illiterate mass. In Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four science is reduced to military technology and intelligence, the individual cannot even enjoy the opium of sweet idiotism (as can be seen in Huxley's and Bradbury's world), he cannot even relax because he has been under total surveillance in every second of his life. Orwell reached the outmost point in representing the scientific-technological degradation of the human being.

(9.) The lack of freedom and free will fundamentally determines the worlds of dystopias. In philosophical critiques of technology, this fact is constantly brought to surface. In E. M. Forster's dystopia the localisation and the lack of physical movement is a basic principal: the protagonist even has to learn the concept of 'near' and 'far' when he tries to live a different life without the machine. In the dystopias of Zamiatin and Orwell the free acts are unaccomplishable even in the minds of the characters. Further, the society of *We* has been definitely in war with the „wild state of freedom”. Huxley and Bradbury bury every free action under the concrete sarcophagus of happy idiocy. Finally, Anthony Burgess shows us what it is like when all the protesting possibilities of the individual are suppressed by the state, using brutal training and chemical drugs. The lack of freedom is at the same time in close connection with the civilising process. In Spengler's writings it is an axiom that civilisation is the grave digger of culture. Norbert Elias in the *Civilising Process* (1939) reinforces Spengler's thoughts, when he says civilisation requires self-restraint, „considerable

automatism”, it needs not personality but plasticity, to this mimicry become man’s „second nature”. *Adorno builds the lack of freedom upon the categorical imperative of the culture industry: you shall conform, without instruction as to what.*

The civilised way of life and autonomy exclude each other, only the external, altering principle exists, which is commanded by temporary interests. Objects, as human relations travel with the individual for a while, but when the trend changes, it is advised to change them or end them. Haste, inhumanity, aggression, over-mechanization and commodity fetish do not make a solid ground for a dignified life, but for a life saturated with a kind of minima moralia, a „life that does not live”. Literary and philosophical critique of technology alike find routine, conditioning, manipulation, rudeness, haste, intellectual and moral corruption in place of freedom.

4. Publications in the topic of the dissertation

- Kádár Zoltán: Az idiotizmusig és még tovább – avagy Ray Bradbury némelyik rémálma mára valóra vált. [Until Idiocy and Even More – Some Nightmares of Ray Bradbury Today are Real] In *Az utópia ezer arca*. PTE BTK NTI, szerk.: Bálint Ágnes, 2009, 75-80.
- Máté Zsuzsanna - Kádár Zoltán: Az akaratszabadság hiányának következményei a XX. század első felének filozofikus jellegű antiutópiáiban. [Consequences of the Lack of Free Will in 20th Century Philosophic Dystopias] *Lábjegyzetek Platónhoz 9. Az akarat*. Szerk.: Laczkó Sándor, Pro Philosophia Szegediensis Alapítvány - Magyar Filozófiai Társaság, 2010. 380-395.
- Kádár Zoltán: *A nyugati civilizáció válságtudata a XX. századi antiutópiákban*. [Crisis-Consciousness of the Western Civilisation in 20th Century Dystopias] *Mikes International*, XI/2, 2011, 16-28.
- Kádár Zoltán: *Az ipusztársadalom okozta fizikai és pszichikai degeneráció empirikus vizsgálata Max Nordau és George Orwell műveiben*. [Empirical Study of the Physical and Psychological Degeneration Caused by Industrial Society in the Works of Max Nordau and George Orwell] *Mikes International*, XI/4, 2011. 21-28.
- Kádár Zoltán: *Antiutópikus vonások Imre Madách's The Tragedy of Man* [Dystopic Elements in Imre Madách's The Tragedy of Man] In XVIII. Madách Szimpózium. Szerk.: Bene Kálmán és Máté Zsuzsanna. Madách Irodalmi Társaság, Szeged-Budapest, 2011, 84-94.
- Kádár Zoltán: *Emberszelidítési kísérlet a polgári társadalom szétmálló díszletei között — idén ötven éves*

Anthony Burgess kultikus rémálma, A Clockwork Orange.
[Experiment of Taming Humans Among the Dingy
Coulisses of Civil Society –The Cultic Nightmare 'A
Clockwork Orange' by Anthony Burgess was Published
50 Years Ago] Mikes International, XII/1, 2012. 27-39.

- Kádár Zoltán: *A nyugati civilizáció válságtüneteinek előképe a Tragédia falanszterében.* [Prefiguration of the Crisis Symptoms of Western Civilisation in the Phalanstery of 'The Tragedy of Man' by Madács] Crisis In XIX. Madách Szimpózium. Szerk.: Bene Kálmán és Máté Zsuzsanna. Madách Irodalmi Társaság, Szeged-Budapest, 2012, 43-52.
- Kádár Zoltán: Az ember elgépiesítésének elmélete és gyakorlata a Szovjetunióban és a nyugati ipusztériális társadalmakban. [Theory and Practice of the Mechanization of Humans in the Soviet Union and the Western Industrial States]. In Garaczi Imre (szerk.): *Érték és sors. Nemzetpolitika-kulturális örökség-identitás.* Veszprémi Humán Tudományokért Alapítvány, 2012, 433-449.
- Kádár Zoltán: *Walter Benjamin — flaneur az emberi idegrendszer komplex kiképzésének korában.* [Walter Benjamin — A Flaneur in the Age of the Complex Kind of Training of Human Sensorium] Mikes International, XII/2, 2012, 13-20.
- Kádár Zoltán-Tóth I. János: Ráció és utópia. [Ration and Utopia] In *Lábjegyzetek Platónhoz 10. Az ész.* Szerk.: Laczkó Sándor, Pro Philosophia Szegediensis Alapítvány - Magyar Filozófiai Társaság, 2011, 312-323.