Article

Spatial and Psychophysical Domination of Women in Dystopia: *Swastika Night, Woman on the Edge of Time* and *The Handmaid's Tale*

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Abstract: Analyzing Burdekin's *Swastika Night* Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* and Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* the article aims to examine the relations between space, gender-based violence, and patriarchy in women's writing. Hitlerdom in *Swastika Night*, the mental hospital and the future dystopian New York in *Woman on the Edge of Time*, and Gilead in *The Handmaid's Tale* are spatial and social nightmares. The authorities that rule these dystopias imprison women in restricted spaces first, limit their vocabulary and daily actions, deprive them of their beauty, freedom and consciousness, and impose maternity or sexuality upon them. My analysis will connect the limitation of space with the psychophysical domination the objectification and the disempowerment of the female gender. Hoping also to shed light on the dynamics and the reasons for contemporary real gender-based violence and depreciation, the study will be focused on: 1. the ways space contributes to the creation, the stability and the dominion of dystopian powers; 2. the representation and the construction of female figures, roles and identities; 3. the techniques of control, manipulation and oppression used by patriarchal powers against women; 4. the impact of sex, sexuality and motherhood on women's bodies; and 5. the possible feminist alternatives or solutions proposed by the novels.

Keywords: dystopia; space; patriarchy; gender-based violence; sexuality

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Meaning "bad place" in Ancient Greek, dystopia is a genre that describes desperate worlds, dominated by the hyperbolic evolution of history and contemporaneity's worst nightmares, including nuclear and ecological disasters, dictatorships, racial or gender-based violence, corruption, overpopulation, hyper-urbanization, and excess of consumerism and publicity. Often considered as "the shadow of utopia" (Kumar 1991, p. 99), dystopia generally opposes utopia and its "good (or inexistent) places": it promotes anti-utopian visions resulting from the degeneration of utopian attempts to change a community or a whole world. While utopian works foster "a quest for the ideal society" (Booker 1994a, p. 3) by exploring socio-political alternatives able to positively impact reality, dystopia shows "the potential abuses that might result from the institution of supposedly utopian alternatives" (Booker 1994a, p. 3). According to Kumar (1991),

> "utopia and anti-utopia are antithetical yet interdependent. [. . .] The anti-utopia is formed by utopia, and feeds parasitically on it. [. . .] Anti-utopia draws its material from utopia and reassembles it in a manner that denies the affirmation of utopia. It is the mirror-image of utopia—but a distorted image, seen in a cracked mirror.". (p. 100)

But dystopia is not just a "negative response" to utopia (Kumar 1991, p. 100), it "also constitutes a critique of existing social conditions or political systems" (Booker 1994a, p. 3), providing a representation of contemporary societies and their power relations. Baccolini and Moylan (2003) underline the powerful social critique of dystopia and its invitation to resist against different forms of discriminating powers: "the dystopian imagination has served as a prophetic vehicle, the canary

in a cage, for writers with an ethical and political concern for warning us of terrible socio-political tendencies" (pp. 1–2).

Analyzing the socio-political plots of dystopia, we can recognize some common structures and strategies: "the official, hegemonic order of most dystopias [. . .] rests, as Antonio Gramsci put it, on both coercion and consent" (Baccolini and Moylan 2003, p. 5), "building" a public and private body of society through mechanisms that go from fear, violence and pain to propaganda, to a sense of belonging and adulterated needs worshipping pleasure, esthetic, materialism, and comfort.

Generally, dystopian authority strictly organizes spaces and exploits linguistic and psychophysical subjection to repress or manipulate individuals, to fit them into their social, ethical and political standards, excluding, blaming and repressing the non-aligned and the outcasts. Thus, people become "lands" to be invaded and defeated. By limiting spaces, power shows its grandeur, supervises its citizens and identifies the nonaligned, converting places and settings into (both real and symbolic) extensions of authority. By limiting language, power spreads only the necessary concepts and messages, and eventually eradicates unwanted ideas. By limiting bodies, power shapes perfect citizens, docile and obedient, and displays "otherness" as a threatening aspect of societal practices, justifying the marginalization or elimination of sexual, ideological, or racial "others".

When dealing with women, the control of space, abuse, and the impoverishment of language also contribute to the patriarchal objectification and disempowerment of the female gender. In fictional dystopian contexts (as well as in realities that show dystopian tendencies), "women can suffer two times: first, because of political/authoritarian power, secondly through a male/sexist oppression" (Di Minico 2017, p. 71). In which ways do space, sexuality, and violence support dystopia and influence women? Where do women stand in the telling of "bad places"? How are women's stories written in patriarchal systems? This article will try to answer these questions by analyzing three iconic works: Katharine Burdekin's *Swastika Night* (first published in 1937), Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (first published in 1976), and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (first published in 1985). Written in the 20th century by three successful female authors, these novels are not only extremely significant and analytical for their time, but also current and incisive towards contemporary society because of their trenchant analysis of gender issues.

1. Plots of War against Female Bodies

At first glance, *Swastika Night*, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, and *The Handmaid's Tale* show a disparity in terms of style, historical context and geo-location. While English author Katharine Burdekin wrote *Swastika Night* in 1937, analyzing pre-World War II Europe and the Nazi threat, Marge Piercy and Margaret Atwood are two living authors who insert their works in a more contemporary North-American context (Piercy is American, Atwood is Canadian), making their dystopias the results of anti-democratic involutions. Moreover, from a stylistic point of view, *Swastika Night* and *The Handmaid's Tale* are two dreadful dystopias, while *Woman on the Edge of Time* is a critical utopia that uses dystopia to underline the possible future consequences of a society moved by patriarchy and injustice.

Despite these relevant differences, the novels have been chosen because they perfectly describe realities where women are psychophysically violated, isolated and commodified by men, deeply connecting the themes of gender, power, and space. Reflecting on sexuality, maternity, rape, and gender roles, the plots clearly focus on gendered violence, extreme commodification/annihilation of the female body, and male domination fantasies.

Burdekin published *Swastika Night* under the male pseudonymous Murray Constantine and the story itself is narrated by a man. The "maternity" of the novel was revealed only during the 1980s. *Swastika Night* is one of "the most original of all the many anti-fascist dystopias of the late 1930s" (Croft 1990, p. 238), predominantly because Burdekin related dictatorship with misogyny, powerfully attacking the patriarchal ideologies that could work as substrate for wider repressive government tendencies. Deeply understanding Nazi politics and their future outcomes of racial, religious and

sexual oppression, *Swastika Night*, years before the Second World War, is also one of the first novels to chronically imagine a world where an undefeated Nazism rules, as in Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (Dick [1962] 2012) or Harris's *Fatherland* (Harris [1992] 2012). In Burdekin's novel, Nazism has won a global conflict, Hitler is worshipped as a God, Jews have been erased from Earth, Christians are considered "worms", and animalized women are used only for procreation. The whole idea of family has been shattered in favor of a male and manly community, where love is predominantly experienced as a homosexual feeling. Knights rule this hierarchical society. One of them, old childless Friedrich von Hess, reveals to Hermann and Alfred that Hitler is not a deity, but a simple man, and that women were once intelligent, educated, beautiful and loved by men. Von Hess entrusts the future to the protagonists, urging them to organize a resistance group and to support the development of new independent models of femininity, thus saving a society destined to extinction. Mothers are, in fact, gradually ceasing to give birth to daughters, in a sort of natural selection of gender.

Woman on the Edge of Time is a powerful novel written by American writer and social activist Marge Piercy. It blends realistic drama, utopia, and dystopia, placing itself among the critical utopias. The critical utopias arose during the 1960s and the 1970s, in a time when the search for the "good place" supported the political struggles and youth protests in the name of human, civil and reproductive rights, inclusiveness, emancipation, socio-economic justice, and socio-cultural liberation. Shaped by "ecological, feminist and New Left thought" (Baccolini and Moylan 2003, p. 2), this utopian revival forged "visions of better but open future", developing "a critique of dominant ideology" and tracing "new vectors of opposition" (Baccolini and Moylan 2003, p. 2). Piercy's novel tells about Connie Ramos, a Hispanic woman living in a degraded area of New York. A victim of abuse and prejudices throughout her life, she is diagnosed with violent paranoid schizophrenia and unjustly locked into an asylum, where doctors try to surgically control her impulses through brain implants. In this dissociative place, empathetic Connie communicates with Luciente, an androgynous figure from the future. Luciente shows her Mattapoisett, a utopian place where the major socio-political problems of the 1970s (patriarchy, racism, pollution, unrestrained consumerism, and homophobia, among others) have been resolved. Here, a harmony between genders and classes, as well as between humanity and the environment, is established. Regrettably, utopia is not the only alternative for earth: there is also a dystopian version, where women are the "property" of men, nature is contaminated, and the population is controlled, drugged and repressed by multinational corporations. The future is not yet decided and, to support the creation of Mattapoisett, Connie poisons the medical staff who embody oppressive power. She will almost surely end up indicted, but at least she is sure she is fighting for a better future.

The reawakening of utopian themes ended in the 1980s: "in the face of economic restructuring, right-wing politics, and a cultural milieu informed by an intensifying fundamentalism and commodification" (Baccolini and Moylan 2003, p. 2), there was a new rise of darkest nightmares, also fostered by the development of cyberpunk, the republication of *Swastika Night*, and the publication of *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Attacking "Western phallocentrism" (Freibert 1988, p. 215) with ferocity and lucidity, *The Handmaid's Tale* tells about the Republic of Gilead, a regime moved by Christian fundamentalism and ruled by Commanders. To oppose a loss of values, caused by religious tolerance, gender equality, sexual freedom, abortion, and similar "aberrations", the new state annihilates knowledge, dissent, female and LGBTQ emancipation, and other "sins", dragging the nation into a dystopia exalting manhood and blind faith. Disenfranchised, women are pushed back into domesticity. Since the world is suffering from a high rate of sterility, fertile women, called Handmaids, are chosen as surrogate mothers for wealthy families, as in the biblical antecedent in which Rachel asks her husband Jacob to impregnate her servant Bilhah, who gives birth on her behalf. Dressed in red, "the color of blood which defines" them (Atwood 1986, p. 8), Handmaids are breeding slaves who are regularly raped, forced to bear children and then leave them to the Commanders' families. The other female groups include Wives, Marthas (servants), Jezebels (prostitutes), Aunts (the Handmaids' brutal teachers),

Econowives (wives-servants-mothers for the lower-class men), and Unwomen (female dissidents who are exiled to the Colonies—contaminated reclusion areas). The main character is an independent and cultured woman, a wife and a mother. Captured and re-educated to be a Handmaid, she belongs to Commander Fred Waterford and his wife Serena Joy, becoming Offred.

Analyzing *Swastika Night*, Battaglia (1998) affirms that the central theme of the novel is "the relations between male and female principles, between a male system of values and a female one" (p. 180). She adds: "Burdekin clearly shows [. . .] how sadism—the pillar Hitlerdom is founded on—is originated by feelings of inferiority and fear" (p. 182). Said analysis is also true for the other two analyzed novels, and it reflects "real life" dystopias.

According to feminist theories, starting from the beginning of time, "the androcentric character of patriarchy inherently [has confined] women to the fringes of society" (Gilarek 2012, p. 221). The roots of this "ideology of male supremacy" are to be found in the archetypal tendency of endorsing female submission and biological control in order to support masculine myths of superiority. Women's empowerment and freedom undermine this cult and the conservative need for patriarchal control and traditional values, stimulating, in repressive environments, male sadism and hostility toward the female gender. "Fear generates violence and desire of destruction, because destruction is the most reassuring form of possession" (Battaglia 1998, p. 182).

It is interesting to notice that there is a "self-evident" connection "between political power and the male gender role" (Patai 1984, p. 258) in society, especially in fascist, conservative and/or patriarchal realities. The more the gender roles are fixed, and the authority reactionary, the more the community experiments with gender-based violence (Reid-Cunningham 2008, p. 283). The results could be catastrophic, as shown by the shocking worlds of dystopia: "male egos and female bodies; male persons and female animals: these are the extremes of which an ideology of male supremacy is capable" (Patai 1984, p. 258).

"We were the people who were not in the papers. We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of print. We lived in the gaps between the stories" (Atwood 1986, p. 57), Offred says, referring to the initial underestimation of the first political signs that would lead to the dictatorship. But this quote also perfectly explains the subordinate position of feminine spaces, words, bodies and expectations in repressive and patriarchal society, where women are objects and not the subjects of both their narratives and their lives.

2. Dystopian Spaces/Female Nightmares

Space has not only geographic value, but also a socio-political, economic, cultural, textual, and metaphorical significance that psychophysically influences the citizens who live in it. There is a strong connection between power and spaces. According to Lefebvre, space is not neutral and objective. It is a social product reflecting social relations, politics and ideology of power.

> "Space is not a scientific object removed from ideology or politics; it has always been political and strategic. [. . .] Space has been fashioned and molded from historical and natural elements, but in a political way. Space is political and ideological. It is a product literally populated with ideologies". (Lefebvre [1970] 2009, pp. 170–71)

According to Castells (1983), "space is not a 'reflection of society', it is society" (p. 4): spatial forms "express and perform the interest of the dominant class" (p. 4), leaving outside "peripheralized and oppressed" subjects, such as "exploited workers, tyrannized people, dominated women" (Soja 1989, p. 74), debased racial/ethnical minorities, and demeaned LGBTQ communities.

Thus, urbanism is not just a simple frame constructed on geographical factors, it is also the result of governmental choices showing the possibilities of social inclusion, mobility and freedom for certain communities. In realities (not necessarily conservative and repressive) where equity, justice and rights are not guaranteed for all sections of the population, the isolation of marginalized groups is increased through a spatial organization that supports discrimination. To quote just a few examples, limitation

of movement, ghettoization, decaying infrastructures, insufficiency of or inaccessibility to resources, transports, and services (schools, museum, etc.) affect disempowered people's participation in social, political and cultural life, thus reducing their chances of recovery and improvement.

If, on the one hand, space can support social exclusion, it can, on the other hand, be exploited to maximize both the population's involvement and fear. This is particularly evident in—but not limited to—authoritarian and totalitarian organization of space. Paraphrasing what Mosse (Mosse [1974] 2006) affirmed about Nazi-fascism, dominant powers can use architecture and mise-en-scène to show the authority's strength, to diminish people's individual and collective identity, to favor political control, and to dramatize the relationship between power and submitted subjects. The urban planning of public and private areas and infrastructure (squares, streets, houses, churches, prisons, schools, parks, slums, etc.) serves the political apparatus' needs, transforming gathering places, buildings, and monuments into "pedagogical-political" weapons (Tobia 1998, p. 94). The menace of constant surveillance through architecture, military, spies and technology supports the creation of a restrained, exploitable and almost-transparent society. In addition, the repetition of flags, emblems, stereotyped images, and messages imbeds a liturgical symbolism in the collective consciousness, while public ceremonies—not only those that are strictly political, but also folkloristic events—evolve into cultural rites (Mosse [1974] 2006, p. 33), supporting the affirmation of the mythos, transmitting cognitive contents and generating emotional responses in the observers. Rites determine popular attitudes, ideas and sensations, and sacralize the bonds between crowds and leaders.

From a feminist perspective, space is also revealed to be "tied up with, both directly and indirectly, particular social constructions of gender relations" (Massey [1994] 2001, p. 2). Both in democratic and dictatorial realities, in fact, urban space can disclose gendered limitations. Reflecting on "the spaces of modernism", Massey (Massey [1994] 2001) underlines the tendency to divide public places and private ones, fostering a separation of spheres that support "confinement" of women in the house (p. 233). The socio-political exclusion that women can suffer in daily life is reflected in the male organization of urban space. "The restriction that women face on their mobility [...] allows masculinism to reveal itself an unnatural constraint on women's lives" (Rose 1999, p. 359). From a patriarchal point of view, in fact, there are some public spaces where "virtuous" women are not allowed or where they shouldn't go, just as there are dangerous public places where women could be more exposed to criminal/male violence.

Dystopian fiction has deeply interiorized this link between space and power, showing realities in which dystopian delusions are socio-politically and geographically constructed. To exaggerate the differences between men and women, feminist dystopias often insist on the creation of cities explicitly designed for men, with women coercively relegated to domestic areas or ghettos. In said realities, women's bodies can be almost literally crushed by toxic masculinity and male spaces, until they become physically and intellectually invisible.

Hitlerdom, Connie's present and future New York, and Gilead impeccably materialize a political use of place and architecture, a use that also influences the representation and the construction of female figures, roles and identities. The analyzed novels are spatial and social nightmares dominated by male powers. The pain, fear, and rejection that women feel during their lives are profoundly emphasized by the places in which they are confined and from where they cannot escape. As "symbolic extensions of the theme and characterization" of the plot (Giannetti 1993, p. 281), spaces contribute to the creation of dystopia, visually and psychophysically imprisoning characters within their borders, and influencing the construction of society. Women's limitation of movement directly reflects their lack of, or the restriction of their choices, actions, vocabulary, consciousness and appearance, while spaces appear "masculinized": "through the masculinization of the body politic", public space also becomes "a masculine area" (Rose 1999, p. 364).

Swastika Night's women are segregated in a gender-based Apartheid. They live in small wooden houses in degraded and closed areas, far from the male spaces. The Women's Quarters are supposed to be almost self-contained, to limit contact between the two sexes. Women are generally not allowed

to leave this ghetto except for the Women's Worship, when they are "herded like cattle into the church" (Burdekin [1937] 1985, p. 8). This "holy" swastika-shaped building is not a refuge, but another architectural and symbolic place where women are humiliated and brainwashed. During the mass, women (who cannot sit down) spend the time crying, sobbing, and listening to Knight's misogynist speeches. He lectures "them on humility, blind obedience and submission to men, reminding them of the Lord Hitler's supreme condescension in allowing them still to bear men's sons" (Burdekin [1937] 1985, p. 8), who, after 18 months, are taken in custody by their fathers.

In *Woman on the Edge of Time*, we discover three different realities: Connie's contemporary world, a future utopia and a future dystopia. Both the utopia and dystopia have their roots in the protagonist's present society. Connie lives in Spanish Harlem, a poor neighborhood where mistreatment, gender-based violence, prostitution, and drugs are common and almost "contagious". During her hospitalization, Connie is isolated from the external world and has limited interactions with the internal community and an oppressive relation with the medical staff. The descriptions of the asylum are horrific, and insist on the place's darkness, filthiness, and desperation, symbolically materializing the injustices suffered by Connie through a suffocating frame. When in seclusion, for example, she is stuck in a hall with no doors and no windows, a desolate spot with no way out, reflecting the protagonist's life. Filled with "names, dates, words scratched somehow into the wall with blood, fingernails, pencil stubs, shit" (Piercy 1976, p. 60), this empty room is a constant memory of the abuses perpetuated in it, and a gate to hell for alienated and disadvantaged people, betrayed by fate, families, and institutions.

Recalling the confinement of the asylum, people don't have freedom of movement nor any other rights in the dystopian New York, a dreadful evolution of contemporaneity. This megacity is a land of oppression and injustice that vertically separates classes and physically and symbolically represents architectural stratification as an exemplification of tyrannical power, evoking the 1927 film *Metropolis* by Fritz Lang. The "richies" live up in the sky in luxurious space platforms, while the poor are doomed to barely survive on a devastated and polluted earth. Connie meets an inhabitant, Gildina, in a windowless apartment in a guarded complex. Talking with her, the protagonist discovers that nature doesn't exist anymore, air is deadly contaminated, and food is made "from coal and algae and wood by-products" (Piercy 1976, p. 296). Low-class people die around the age of forty, while the élite can live up to two hundred years thanks to surgery and organs ripped from the indigent. To handle solitude, lack of affection, sadness, insomnia, and other similar indispositions, New Yorkers take a lot of drugs, as in Huxley's *Brave New World* (Huxley [1932] 2009). This society is not controlled by a charismatic leader, as the Big Brother in Orwell's *1984* (Orwell [1949] 1983), it is dominated by "multis", multinational corporations that have replaced nations and which own citizens.

Contrariwise, Mattapoisett is a feminist and anti-racist ecotopia where discrimination, violence, and pollution find no place. When Connie visits Mattapoisett for the first time, she doesn't expect a rural village. Future is not a sci-fi reality: there are no skyscrapers, flying cars or space ships. In this utopia there are not even cities: Mattapoisett is a green paradise, a bucolic village with 600 people, many happy and funny animals, idyllic landscapes with gardens, forests, rivers, and few buildings. There is a close and harmonic correlation between nature and people, and citizens appear to be very respectful and caring, towards each other and all living creatures. But still, Mattapoisettians perfectly use technology to protect their environment (they have advanced recycling systems, rainwater tanks, and solar energy) and to enhance humanity, destroying gender inequality, biological determinism, racism, and poverty. Further opposing dystopia, in Mattapoisett everyone has plenty of physical and personal space, to "meditate, think, compose songs, sleep, study" (Piercy 1976, p. 72). *Woman on the Edge of Time* suggests that capitalist authority and patriarchal discourse can marginalize and oppress both the environment and otherness (women, gays, the poor, immigrants, etc.) because "the domination of nature by man stems from the very real domination of human by human" (Bookchin 1991, p. 1). Mattapoisett reflects Bookchin's theory: the "village" is the answer to Western society's "obsession with hierarchy and the mechanism of power politics and power

economics" (Frazier Nash 1989, p. 164). Like Bockchin, Piercy mediates between environmentalism and technology and suggests that the solution for the human/natural crisis is a radical change in the organization of society through social ecology, urban decentralization, measures of self-sufficiency, and face-to-face democracy (Bookchin 1991). We need to dismantle the "chronic domination" of profit and injustice by reconnecting people and nature and valorizing people's alterity as source of strength and wealth.

As in the preceding novels, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, dystopian spaces are also controlled and asphyxiating. After the rise of Gilead, citizens have lost their freedom, and their social ties have been completely destroyed. They are trapped in a motionless but almost unknown space; except for leaders, soldiers, and subjects who live close to border areas, people are not even informed about the national frontiers, nor about Gilead's wars. The Commanders' hierarchical system imposes division between authority and citizens, and then between men and women. Gilead's daily actions are limited for both sexes and there are no places for socialization and dialogue. Worship buildings, schools, universities, libraries, fashion stores, restaurants, clubs, cinemas, and museums have been closed. Overall, the female gender is the most affected by this domination: women's natural space is once again the household, while their possibilities of self-determination and movement are completely nullified by overbearing gender roles, the cult of masculinity and demographic emergency.

In Gilead, private and gathering places become places of death, revenge and propaganda. Salvagings and Particicutions, for example, are public executions in open spaces (e.g., parks, stadiums, squares, etc.), where the population is called to actively participate in the killings, turning regular citizens into perpetrators. On the Wall that surrounds Offred's city, executed traitors are hanged, between barbed wire and searchlights. With their heads cover by bags, these bodies are like "scarecrows" and people walking by are supposed to look, fear and despise them. Like *Swastika Night*, *The Handmaid's Tale* is set in the future, but it is not a sci-fi nightmare: its "bad place" shows medieval and obscurantist patterns. The extremely simplified Gilead life is built on distorted utopian visions where everyone has a position to hold, a purpose to fulfill, a place to be in. Its dystopia is generated by a fascist utopia of a closed, traditional and static society where socio-political harmony basically means human deprivation of freedom and awareness. As anticipated, the passage from utopia to dystopia is a historical cliché and, as Griffin (Griffin 2004) concludes, in investigating the rise of Nazi-fascisms, Gilead too shifts from "being a utopian anti-systemic movement to a hegemonic, autocratic regime which, in order to realize its utopia, [is] forced to create an even more draconian institutional apparatus of social engineering and propaganda" (p. 111).

Both *Swastika Night* and *The Handmaid's Tale* describe regimes with a strong ceremonial observance. Their rituals deeply reflect the historical process of "sacralization of politics" that "transforms the ideology into a dogmatic doctrine, and the Party into a Church" (Gentile [2001] 2007, pp. XXIII–IV). Power in Hitlerdom and Gilead assimilates religion and creates a complex system of beliefs, symbols and customs, originating, just as Nazism, "new political forms, new myths and cults", adapting "old traditions" to "new purpose" (Mosse [1974] 2006, p. 1) and putting spaces at the service of control. In the contemporary and future dystopias of *Woman on the Edge of Time*, the sacralization of politics is not a central theme, but a strong link between architecture, politics and authority is still present and places are transformed into cages, both in Connie's present and in Gildina's future. Despite the differences, the final aim of these "bad places" is to erase dissident dimensions, creating a "one-dimensional" reality and determining "not only the socially needed occupations, skills, and attitudes, but also individual needs and aspirations" (Marcuse [1964] 1991, pp. XLV–VI). Marcuse links one-dimensionality with mass culture and the consumerist era, but his reflections also apply to repressive and patriarchal dystopian systems, where authority aims to annihilate critical thoughts, dialectic, nonconformity and liberty, equating disobedience to sins.

3. Feminine Bodies as Linguistic, Sexual and Maternal Dystopian Lands to Conquer

External spaces are not the only "lands" dystopia needs to conquer in order to impose its imperium and prevent rebellions. Bodies and minds become "battlefields" for campaigns in which the use of prejudices and stereotypes such as: legitimated practices; the disempowerment of (racial, social, economic, sexual, etc.) otherness; the collapse of interpersonal relationships; and the isolation and/or brutal repression of "discordant" groups are functional tactics. According to Rose (1999), who also referred to Haraway, "bodies are 'maps of power and identity'; or, rather, maps of the relation between power and identity" (p. 361). The bodies that symbolize "otherness", such as women's bodies, are "sites of repression and possession" (Wolff 1990, p. 122): they are inferior but still exploitable and "colonizable", because superior systems can dispose of them at will. In *Swastika Night*, *Woman on the Edge of Time* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, violence is predominantly directed towards women, related to the sexual sphere and supported by gender roles and biological determinism.

In Hitlerdom, heterosexuality is separated from pleasure and affection, and women are debased and abused, becoming "pure reproductive conduits with no hope of a future" (Lothian 2016, p. 458). In Connie's United States, women, especially poor and marginalized ones, are chained to stereotypes of motherhood and inferiority, while, in Gildina's future, many women are concubines and maternity is generally not included in their relationships' contracts. In Atwood's Gilead, women's only purposes are to give birth and to take care of children.

In *Swastika Night*, the female body profoundly disgusts men:

"Hairless, with naked shaven scalps, the wretched ill-balance of their feminine forms outlined by their tight bifurcated clothes—that horrible meek bowed way they had of walking and standing, head low, stomach out, buttocks bulging behind—no grace, no beauty, no uprightness, all those were male qualities". (Burdekin [1937] 1985, p. 12)

Nevertheless, while "despicable" groups as Jews have been exterminated, women are still needed for procreation: even when annihilated, they cannot escape from biological predestination. Their individualities are crushed, their values and abilities are denied, and their own bodies are torn apart, becoming the slavish properties of men, but motherhood is imperative, and it is the only reason they survive. In the story, women are neither protagonists nor antagonists. They are invisible, and don't occupy any physical or narrative relevant space. Burdekin gives them no voice and no action. Women remain in the background, defeated and humiliated, reduced to "a collection of wombs and breasts and livers and lights" (Burdekin [1937] 1985, p. 105).

The annihilation is complete because they are not even able to understand their potential values and to conceive change or disobedience.

"They were no more conscious of boredom or imprisonment or humiliation than cows in a field. They were too stupid to be really conscious of anything distressing except physical pain, loss of children, shame of bearing girls, and the queer mass grief which always overtook them in church" (Burdekin [1937] 1985, p. 158).

These literary choices underline and mimic the rhetoric Nazis used to justify their racial policies: in order to allow repression or assassination of selected human beings, those have to be properly dehumanized. So, the "righteous" and desentimentalized part of the population will perceive them as something "other", unnatural, inherently enemy, as an inferior and "separate body" from the rest of society, as Arendt (Arendt [1951] 1962) suggested about the Jewish community in the Germany before and during Hitler's command (p. 54).

Thus, while Hitlerdom's women are presented as soulless animals that cannot feel pain or sorrow, men and masculinity are celebrated and sacralized. Theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven, the power and the space on earth. This tendency is emphasized by the Führer's "miraculous birth", who, according to the Swastika religion, was born without a mother: strangely resembling the birth of Athena from Zeus's head in Ancient Greek mythology, Hitler exploded from the head of God the Thunderer. As Christianity reveals a rejection of sexuality through the idea of the "Immaculate Conception" of Christ, Hitlerdom

shows a complete rejection of femininity: "motherhood and biological reproduction become sites of abjection" (Lothian 2016, p. 463), necessary only because society doesn't have a technological sci-fi alternative. The only possible female rebellion is extinction, of women and consequently of men. The imperative to bear-boys-and-not-girls ultimately becomes an attack against the power, which will eventually disappear precisely because of its misogynist male supremacy. The most paradoxical detail of *Swastika Night* is that the only salvation for women comes from men because female gender is shaped by male necessity, wishes and authority. "Women will always be exactly what men want them to be. They have no will, no character and no souls; they are only a reflection of men" (Burdekin [1937] 1985, p. 70), von Hess affirms. The only hope for a decaying world is to educate women, making them re-acquire awareness of their identity and possibilities, but, according to the Knight, to raise strong daughters, it will be necessary to impose male models on them, at least for a while. Who knows when or whether "being women" will be enough.

In *Woman on the Edge of Time*, Connie and many of the other characters try to find their place in a world that does not valorize or support them, ending up as "broken" subjects, disengaged from society and in need of fixing, although their "damage" is inflicted by social imbalance and rejection. Through Connie's devastating, isolating and debasing experience, Piercy critiques the treatment of mental illness in the 1970s, as well as the medicalization of social problems. At the same time, the author uses the protagonist's pain as a metaphorical representation of discrimination and marginalization, against women, minorities, and underprivileged individuals. Piercy's outcasts are rejected and abused not only because of their gender, but also for being non-white, poor, uneducated, queer, or helpless. The "good" space is mostly a "white, bourgeois, heterosexual masculine public space" (Rose 1999, p. 367), and it minimizes the "other": "transparent space, as an expression of social-scientific masculinity's desire for total vision and knowledge, denies the possibility of different spaces being known by other subjects" (Rose 1999, p. 367).

As a Mexican middle-aged woman with a history of abuse coming from an impoverished reality, Connie is an invisible and unexpected heroine, and represents "otherness" from sexual, racial, and economic points of view.

The novel's powerful figures, both men and (white) women, are abusive, merciless or indifferent to the pain felt by the outcasts. They decide and impose their thoughts and rules on "inferior" citizens. Embodying a judgmental and discriminatory authority, doctors, social workers and other institutional figures refuse to hear and help Connie, even ending up psychophysically harming the protagonist. Connie is sterilized against her will because "residents wanted practice" (Piercy 1976, p. 45). Her daughter is taken away from her after an episode of maltreatment and adopted (by devious methods) by a rich white family. The men in Connie's life are violent, oppressive, belittling, or dead. Her father was a sadistic beater, while her brother Luis is greedy and dominant, and agrees with her hospitalization. Connie's college professor, Everett Silvester, who enjoyed having Spanish-speaking secretaries (offensively nicknamed "Chiquitas"), used his position to sleep with her, establishing a relationship that was a sort of "genteel slavery" (Piercy 1976, p. 57). Eddie (the father of her daughter Angelina) raped and often beat her, also causing her a miscarriage. The list of "positive" men is restricted to two deceased partners. Martín was her first affectionate husband, he made her feel protected, worthy and loved, but he died after being stabbed. The pickpocket, Claud, also cared about her, but he died in prison, after being a subject for a medical hepatitis vaccine trial he officially volunteered for.

Many of the other characters depicted in the novel show a similar desolate fate as Connie's. Dolly (Connie's niece) is a drug-addicted prostitute beaten up by her pimp/lover Geraldo, who is also responsible for Connie's reclusion. Mariana (Connie's mother) had an unnecessary hysterectomy after a difficult pregnancy and was emotionally rejected by her husband, who considered her "no longer a woman. An empty shell" (Piercy 1976, p. 45). In the asylum, Connie meets sensitive and intelligent patients, tormented for their nonconformity, as Alice, Skip, and Sybil. Rebellious, happy and fierce Alice undergoes surgery that eradicates her identity and personality, transforming her into "a toy, a puppet,

a laboratory monkey" ([Piercy 1976](), p. 232). Rejected by his family, who try to "cure" his homosexuality, Skip is a young gay man with suicidal tendencies who eventually kills himself. Considering herself a witch, Sybil is an extravagant and combative woman who supports women's independence teaching them "how to heal themselves and encouraging them to leave their husbands" ([Piercy 1976](), p. 84). Sybil rejects sex because she interprets intercourses as an invasion: she recognizes a sort of geometric and conceptual vulnerability of women in relationships, refusing to be "a dumb hole people push things in or rub against" ([Piercy 1976](), p. 85). These characters are categorized as "monsters" and they are forced to consider themselves as such, to diminish their identity and to humiliatingly confront themselves with impossible standards of success and integration. They are victims of outrageous injustice and prejudices: otherness, indigence, desperation, oddity, misconduct, socio-political activism and their sexual preferences become psychiatric illnesses and crimes, emphasized by the environment they come from, which is seen as an additional aggravating factor.

In Connie's world, women often experience sexuality as a power relation and a source of oppression. It seems that they cannot freely enjoy and use their sexuality, depending on male desires and paying a price for intercourse, as when Connie is abandoned by her boyfriend Chuck, rejected by her family and forced to leave university after an unwanted pregnancy that ends in an abortion without anesthetic. This is even more evident in the future New York. Gildina embodies a hypersexualized dystopia. She is a doll-woman who lives in a misogynist reality where sexual slavery imposed through temporary contracts has replaced marriage, and where women's identity is destroyed in order to be re-constructed and chained to denigrating values of beauty and behavior. Female bodies are modified in extreme ways to satisfy male fantasies, materializing fetishism and erotic perversions. With large breasts, very thin waists, and small feet, Gildina is a "cartoon of femininity [...] cosmetically fixed for sex use" ([Piercy 1976](), pp. 288–99), so physically imbalanced that she can barely walk (or escape). Since she has no personal identity, Gildina doesn't recognize the trivialization and the alteration of her body as forms of violence. The commodification is completely accepted and there are probably no alternative and independent models of women. Moreover, reconfirming Piercy's will to attack both patriarchal oppression and socio-racial persecution of otherness, one of Gildina's characteristics is her lightened skin, a racist principle imposed on the epidermis, implying that this future interpretation of beauty "means pallor" ([Davis 1995](), p. 32).

Sexual workers are hired just for pleasure. Maternity is reserved for another group, the "moms", described by Gildina as women who are "so fat", "cored to make babies all the time" ([Piercy 1976](), p. 290). This dichotomy, that anticipates the separation between Handmaids and Jezebels in *The Handmaid's Tale* and Wives and Concubines in Louise O'Neill's *Only Ever Yours* ([O'Neill 2014]()), echoes a heavy double standard that generally imposes a separation between motherhood and uncensored and free female sexuality, between nurturing traditions and sins, between virginal ideas of caretaking and carnal desires. After all, "the sexual woman is not a breeder. Breeders need not orgasm" ([Davis 1995](), p. 60).

Desired, imposed or denied, maternity is a fundamental value in society: being a (good) mother is the most important and praised feminine characteristic, the aspect that most defines women's role and identity, and also a judgment parameter for society. "Women not only define themselves in a context of human relationship but also judge themselves in terms of their ability to care" ([Gilligan [1982] 2003](), p. 17). For Connie, maternity is both a source of joy and satisfaction and a "site of oppression" ([Burwell 1997](), p. 143). Connie is a mother, but she is a bad and barren mother, estranged from her child and deprived of her uterus. She has lost the only pride she ever had, and this inability further tears her life down.

In Connie's reality and in Gildina's future, the female identity is shaped (and sometimes condemned) by sexuality, motherhood, economic condition and race. Conversely, in Luciente's world, these "elements" have no negative impact on women. In Mattapoisett there is no poverty, race or binary division of roles and genders, similarly to what happens in Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* ([Le Guin [1969] 2000]()), where Gethen's inhabitants are intersexual. Since pregnancies are

completely artificial and the reproductive system is subjected to genetic engineering, Mattapoisett's council decides "to breed a high proportion of darker-skinned people and to mix the genes well through the population" ([Piercy 1976](), pp. 103–4). Sexuality, love and maternity are always liberating and empowering experiences, "not driven by possession" ([Levitas and Sargisson 2003](), p. 21). Women and men's characteristics have been leveled in favor of androgynous figures, and children are "comothered" by three parents, not necessary female. Men can also be mothers, and they can even breastfeed. The mechanization of births completely frees women from "old hierarchy". They renounced

> "the only power we ever had, in return for no more power for anyone. The original production: the power to give birth. Cause as long as we were biologically enchained, we'd never be equal. And males never would be humanized to be loving and tender. So we all became mothers". ([Piercy 1976](), p. 110)

Gilead's people are miserable, traumatized and not-only-biologically barren. The regime "wishes to impose a sterile stasis on nature, both internal and external" ([Coupe [1997] 2008](), p. 180). It forces both the male and female population to completely re-write their cultural traits, collective behaviors, intimate dispositions and expectations, replacing past aspirations to happiness, fulfillment and other personal hopes with obedience, submission and faith. By reminding citizens that "Gilead has no bounds, it is within" them ([Atwood 1986](), p. 23), this intrusive control desentimentalizes interpersonal relations and destroys human "spontaneity", as in Nazi lager ([Arendt [1951] 1962](), p. 455).

"Echoing Freud's suggestion that religion is one of the principal forces that act to repress erotic energies in human society" ([Booker 1994b](), pp. 162–63), the regime depicts sexuality as a sinful act, especially when it has non-procreative intentions or if it is "against nature". But Gilead's emphasis on sexual repression and spiritual salvation expresses "a question of political power" ([Booker 1994b](), p. 165) more than religious concerns. This is confirmed by the existence of brothels, places where all male fantasies, even the most perverted and blasphemous ones, can be fulfilled. As in *1984*, dystopian regimes discipline sex and affectivity in order to establish a deep-rooted supremacy on the population, catalyzing citizens' repressed energy in service of the state. Since personality is often "defined in terms of sexuality" ([Bourke 2008](), p. 425), regulating sexuality or sexually abusing bodies is a way to control social structures and, consequently, female gender identity and roles.

Offred often reflects on her body: it no longer belongs to her, it doesn't respond to her will anymore. Her body is a simple incubator and women are just "two legged wombs" ([Atwood 1986](), p. 136) used to save the world from extinction. Handmaids are commodities bearing a product that will be possessed by their masters, recalling Connie's belief that Angelina has been "stolen" from her by richer people who have "bought" her child as an object. Gilead's maternity has been capitalized and is a medium of oppression that directly opposes the ideas that are usually associated with the term, as happens, for example, in P. D. James's *The Children of Men* (P. D. [James [1991] 2006]()), another emotional novel with a barren society that inspired a homonymous and touching film directed by Alfonso Cuarón in 2006. Here, dystopia cannot deprive motherhood of its positive essence and significance, and the maternal body remains "a vessel of hope for the future" ([Sparling 2014](), p. 161). This interpretation finds no place in Gilead, where capitalist and patriarchal power doesn't just control and repress sexuality, it imposes sexuality and legalizes a form of gender-based violence that can be defined as mass rape. The finality of this crime is not to "destabilize or even break a particular ethnic, national, or religious group or to 'ethnically cleanse' a whole society" ([Dusauchoit 2003](), p. 3) as dramatically happened, for example, during the Yugoslav War (1992–1995) or the Rwandan genocide (1994), but the reasons for violence against women in Gilead are similar to those of the long history of mass rape in warfare. Rape evolves into an instrument of war that "erases the victim's cultural identity and treats her as nothing more than a kind of biological box" ([Allen 1996](), p. 87). The male communication behind these abuses sees women as property of men, "sacred vessels" ([Atwood 1986](), p. 136) for political purposes, without rights nor freedom of choice. In a vision in which women can personify nations, minorities, beliefs, and doctrines, "occupying" female bodies through sexual violence means to assault and humiliate an enemy's state, group, ideology, or liberty.

The Handmaids have to face the trauma of rape every month. They have to normalize their life and to accept violence, disempowerment and depreciation as regular systems. They have to "celebrate" sexual assaults and forced pregnancies as miracles. They are treated like cattle, as in Hitlerdom, and Aunts can use electric shock prods to punish them and make them more obedient. Their bodies are responsible and condemned, not only for their sexuality, but also for the involuntary desire of sexuality that they inspire in men, even in cases of violence and rape.

Swastika Night, *Woman on the Edge of Time* and *The Handmaid's Tale* remind us that women's worth is directly dependent on their sexual morality, while male impulses are condoned as ungovernable. This patriarchal tendency "drives home the point that women's sexuality is unnatural, but also sets up a disturbing dynamic in which women are expected to be responsible for men's sexual behavior" (Valenti 2009, p. 108), merging victim blaming and the "purity myth".

To eradicate women's resistance, dystopia wages against feminine bodies a war in which "the penis is explicitly coded as a weapon" (Bourke 2008, p. 379). Authority exploits abuse (not only rape, but also psychological violence, devaluation, etc.) to impose oppressive gender roles, to subjugate women and to exalt male dominion, annihilating identities that are considered corrupted, and depriving women of their image, individuality, femininity, self-perception, and spaces.

Women's bodies in the analyzed novels, and often in real life, are externally and internally modeled and used by masculine power, to be practical, obedient and serve an economic use. As de Beauvoir (de Beauvoir [1949] 2011) affirms:

> "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman. No biological, psychic, or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female takes on in society; it is civilization as a whole that elaborates this intermediary product between the male and the eunuch that is called feminine". (p. 330)

Patriarchal societies—in fiction and in history—have been obsessed with sexuality and purity. The "virgin-whore complex" has profoundly influenced the affirmation of female gender, and still does. Despite cultural, religious and political differences depending on time and place, ideal women have often been depicted as pure, passive and nurturing figures (virgin), while independent and sexually liberated models of femininity have usually been interpreted as negative and dirty (whore). Manhood, instead, has always been linked to active and dominant attributes, roles and behaviors, to the idea that men are in charge of society, while women's identity is strictly connected with domesticity, maternity, and submission.

Women are objectified and diminished for the "male gaze" (Mulvey [1975] 1985) and for male authority. Even when female bodies are covered, mortified or not visually eroticized, plots are obsessed with female shapes and sexuality, reinforcing patriarchal ideology and supporting conservative fantasies of domination.

4. The End of Dystopia(s)

Silenced, abused, controlled, and manipulated, the women in *Swastika Night*, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, and *The Handmaid's Tale* show where patriarchal dystopias hit the hardest and remind us what we should defend: our spaces, our choices regarding our bodies, and our expression. These novels tell with lucidity, passion and pain how female social exclusion is also linked to limitation of space and mobility and how the female body can become a political vessel and an object to promote/impose a patriarchal, conservative and repressive authority. The story of the nameless Hitlerdom women, of Offred, of Connie and Gildina remind us of how dangerous some political discourses can be and how easily democracy can collapse or reveal its "dystopian" traits. In a piece about *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood (Atwood 2012) wrote for *The Guardian*: "I made a rule for myself: I would not include anything that human beings had not already done in some other place or time. [...] I did not wish to be accused of dark, twisted inventions, or of misrepresenting the human potential for deplorable behavior". Like Atwood, also Burdekin and Piercy's exposed traumas are not just fictional. Restriction of female

spaces, psychophysical abuse, cult of masculinity, victim blaming, depreciation of female identities and roles are just some of the dystopian "precedents" that the three authors recognize in Western society and that still nowadays support dangerous stereotypes. They find their roots in history and contemporaneity, reviving the worst actions of past dictatorships and dramatizing the objectification, the hyper-sexualization and the debasement of women also present in Western democracies.

Dystopia is a current literary and cinematographic phenomenon in expansion. Especially after the 2016 US election, which saw businessman Donald Trump become the 45th President, publishers and bookshops have seen a record sales increase in dystopian works. Between November 2016 and January 2017, *1984* sold +9.500% (De Freytas-Tamura 2017), while, in the first half of 2017, sales of *The Handmaid's Tale* increased +200% (Reilly 2017), also thanks to the critically acclaimed Hulu series based on the novel, which premiered in April 2017.

Since then, the Handmaids have become a metaliterary trend topic, and many journalists, critics and scholars have evidenced the allegorical connection between Gilead's reality and the contemporary political context of several nations. After decades of blind faith in cultural, socio-political and economic progress, in which many advances have been made in terms of civil and human rights, we are experiencing one of the cyclical crises of democracy, just as Huntington (1991) predicted.

In recent years, in many countries, from the United States of America to Brazil, from Italy to UK, from Argentina to Germany, conservative, patriarchal, racist, homophobic, and illiberal discourses and actions are gaining new and alarming support, and it is not unusual to hear worrying political declarations undermining gender equality and female reproductive and civil rights. Consequently, violence against women is also debased, despite being a plague that affects 35% of women worldwide, according to estimates by the World Health Organization in 2017 (World Health Organization website 2017). Women's spaces and freedom are seriously questioned.

In response to these real "dystopian" tendencies, new feminist movements are emerging worldwide, such as the Ni una menos movement (born in Argentina in 2015, in response to an increase of gender-based violence and feminicide in the country) and the #MeToo movement (born in the United States of America in 2017, after the emergence of sexual-abuse allegations against film producer Harvey Weinstein). One interesting detail of this new feminist wave is that, mainly since the summer of 2017, after the first season of *The Handmaid's Tale* series, thousands of women's rights activists across the United States and abroad have started to organize cosplay-protests "against gender discrimination and the infringement of reproductive and civil rights" (Hauser 2017), especially regarding conservative modifications to abortion and rape laws. Demonstrations with women wearing the iconic Handmaid's "uniforms" have been reported and are exponentially increasing in the USA, Canada, UK, Italy, Argentina, and may more nations.

The Handmaid's Tale is sponsoring a political use of dystopian fiction that has become extremely significant for its social relevance and recalls what has already happened with other works, such as Moore and Lloyd's 1980s graphic novel *V for Vendetta* (Moore and Lloyd [1988] 2017) and the 2006 homonymous movie based on it and directed by McTeigue. Just like V, the Handmaids have gained a political significance, mobilizing women and men in real-life spaces. Even if only provocatively, dystopia can help us to spot the symptoms of a sick society. If we want to avoid shaping our future days to be dark misogynist nightmares, we should increase our opposition to patriarchal discourses and masculine myths through culture. Read a book, watch a movie or a series that will make you question your worldview, stand up for someone who is in difficulty or danger, raise or help raise strong women and respectful men. Do not let fiction foresee history.

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