What Stories, Which Future?

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Dystopia is often considered one of the most prominent genres of the early twenty-first century. In a text published in 2012, Mark Fisher wrote:

> The phenomenal success of *The Hunger Games* and the two novels which followed it has led to some bookshops now features [*sic*] a "Young Adult Dystopian" section, and it's tempting to see the shift from wizards [*Harry Potter*] and lovelorn vampires [*Twilight*] to teenagers fighting for their lives in a state-organised spectacle as indicative of general change in the cultural temperature.[1]

Yet, during the Covid lockdowns and after the return of war in Europe, this "general change" seemed to come to a halt. Charlie Brooker, the creator of *Black Mirror* – the most chilling dystopian series of our time – stopped production in June 2019 after a fifth season, stating: "at the moment, I don't know what stomach there would be for stories about societies falling apart."[2] He then went on to write the mockumentary *Death to 2020*, implying that satire seemed a more fitting genre for someone trying to foster a critical view of contemporary society. However, in June 2023, Brooker surprised his audience with a new season of *Black Mirror*: dystopia was still (or once again) in the cultural game.

On his K-Punk blog, Mark Fisher had high praise for *The Hunger Games* (both the 2008 novel and the 2012 film adaptation), suggesting that Suzanne Collins was sparking a desire for revolution in teenagers around the world. There is some truth to this. However, since the release of the movie, a mass of similar scenarios has flooded our screens: today, the list of movies and series – some good, some bad – set in a dystopian future seems endless. But if watching *one* movie in which a hero fights against a near-future totalitarian government might inspire revolutionary energy or at least provoke critical thinking, watching infinite variations of dystopian scenarios generates something very different: it instills the idea that the future will be dark, arid and inhuman. The (problematic) story of progress is replaced by one of regression, and the endless repetition of this storyline runs the risk of becoming a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. *Smile and wait for the apocalypse* – act or don't act, it's going to happen. The resisting hero becomes a mere footnote to this new grand narrative, and instead of producing revolutionary energy, the dystopian plot now cultivates dullness and passivity.

Moving towards a better, emancipatory future involves – at a minimum – telling different stories. This is something we can learn from feminist science fiction writers such as Ursula K. Le Guin, or philosophers such as Donna Haraway and Isabelle Stengers. Writing in "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction" (1986), an experimental essay often mentioned by Haraway and Stengers, Le Guin presents storytelling as the most important tool to shape our thoughts and actions. In her witty style, she argues that since prehistoric times, the narrative apparatuses have been the hero, the weapon, the killing. Such a framework, in and of itself, promotes violence, destruction, and individualism instead of solidarity, care, and reparation. It remains at the core of most mainstream fictions, including contemporary dystopias.

To live on in a damaged world without adding to the damage, not only do we need to tell different stories, but also to change the very framework through which stories are told. This is what Haraway means when she writes: "it matters what thoughts think thoughts; it matters what stories tell stories."[3] Le Guin advocates for abandoning the hero; the weapon, as the central driver of fiction, should be replaced by a *bag* – "a leaf, a gourd, a shell, a net, a bag, a sling, a sack, a bottle, a pot, a box, a container. A holder. A recipient."[4] Anthropologists have indeed argued that these must have been the very first human tools, used to collect and gather things. Turning the bag into a hero not only honors this stifled heritage, but also implies a different conception of what it means to be human and to be in the world.

In contrast to the weapon, the bag enables us to tell different stories: what Le Guin calls the "life story." After all, how could a hero carrying a weapon ever foster life? What could they ever repair? This does not mean that the new stories are devoid of conflict: even if it is not its primary function, a bag can certainly serve to strike aggressors, as Le Guin points out. If someone or something carrying a bag full of things – food, plants, seeds, medicine, stories – might not be able to restore what Anna Tsing calls the "ruins of capitalism," they will likely not add more ruins to the mass of those that already exist.

Cultivating a reparative future requires changing the stories we tell – dystopian scenarios might not be part of them.

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1. Mark Fisher, "Dystopia now," https://markfisherreblog.tumblr.com/post/39217506447/dystopia-now.
2. Günseli Yalcinkaya, "Charlie Brooker is taking a break from Black Mirror," *Dazed*, https://www.dazeddigital.com/film-tv/article/49141/1/charlie-brooker-is-taking-a-break-from-black-mirror.

3. Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham University Press, 2016), 39.
4. Ursula Le Guin, *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, (Ignota, 2019 [1986]), 29.

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