

**Return of the Post-Apocalypse: Power-Politics in
Contemporary Dystopian Young Adult Fiction – Analysing
Roth's *Divergent* Trilogy**

**A minor research project report
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BY

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In the last two decades, there has been an explosion of fiction targeted at a young audience. These kinds of novels which are a commercial success for both adolescent and adult readers are now commonly known under the banner of YA (Young Adult) literature.

Nowadays, a significant amount of research is being taken on the popularity of this new-found genre. This genre explores the liminal experiences of adolescence. Karen Coats argues that the constantly changing readership makes it difficult to offer a comprehensive definition of YA literature (322). In spite of the slippery nature of its definition, YA literature is basically defined as literature intended for readers of ages between 12 and 20. This definition does not account for the widespread adult audience. Roberta Seeinger offers the most comprehensive definition:

The basic difference between a children's and an adolescent novel lies not so much in how the protagonist grows – even though the gradations of growth do help us better understand the nature of the genre – but with the very determined way YA novels tend to interrogate social constructions, foregrounding a relationship between society and the individual rather than focusing on the Self and self-discovery as children's literature does. (20)

In recent years, there has been a growing trend in the children's publishing marketplace: the recent explosion of dystopian fiction for young adults. The past decade has seen the publication of more than a dozen post-apocalyptic young adult novels that explore what the future could look like once the sustainable lifestyle of humankind ceases to be sustained.

The word dystopia is derived from the Greek prefix "dyes", meaning bad, and the Greek word "topes", meaning place; thus the dystopia means "bad place". The word utopia, made famous by Thomas Moore, is often seen as the opposite of dystopia, and means "no place". Where a utopia is a place where most would desire to be, or wish that their society one day would develop into, a dystopia is the direct opposite. In a dystopian setting, there are usually many grim elements. Somehow the author wants the reader to understand that something terrible has happened to the world of the book.

Dystopian fiction is about creating an image of the future, which by most would be seen as a horrible world. The factors that make the world dystopian may vary; in some tales it is the environment which is withering away, in others, the government has become corrupt, and quite often it is the society in general which is breaking apart. The conditions vary depending on what the novel is trying to comment on. Dystopian and utopian literature have been used to criticize or comment on current situations; utopian literature often presents ideas as to how much better the society could be, whereas dystopian fiction presents how bad society could become if the current predicaments do not change.

There are many ways of defining dystopian literature, but at the core, it is a tool that enables viewing contemporary realities from a different perspective. When many factors of a society are changed, the ones that remain the same become more apparent. Dystopian literature can be a critical force against settling for what we have, enabling us to see the faults of our society. The norms which have built up society might actually become what bring it down, and critics argue that dystopian literature can function as the warning finger to awaken society from its slumber.

Exactly how long dystopian fiction has existed is hard to say but an arguably early example of dystopian literature, Plato's *The Republic*, is dated to around 380 BC. Some other well-known works of dystopian literature are *1984* (1949) by George Orwell, and *Lord of the Flies* (1954) by William Golding. During the nineteenth and twentieth century the dystopian genre has become more common, and *The Hunger Games* (2008) by Suzanne Collins has received much attention. The *Divergent* series by Veronica Roth is constructed along similar lines.

It is the role of dystopia as a literary genre to display openly the horrific, repressed undersides of the modern man-made "utopias" such as those constructed by the UN after the horrors of the twentieth century. According to Cojocaru, "the post-war period has witnessed a new type of totalitarianism, transcending the parameters defined by... Orwell in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). The rise of the post-industrial era in the West and the collapse of the Soviet Union gave birth to a global, utopian, consumerist society in which the mass culture, prophetically described by Aldous Huxley in *The Brave New World* (1932), becomes a "Foucauldian, carceral society" (Cojocaru 6).

The American short story writer and novelist Veronica Roth was born in New York but was raised primarily in Illinois. She graduated with a degree in creative writing from the Northwestern University, Illinois. *Divergent* was her debut novel, written during winter break of her senior year at Northwestern and published in 2011. *Divergent* is the first book in the acclaimed *Divergent* series, followed by sequels *Insurgent* (2012) and *Allegiant* (2013).

The project entitled “Scary New World: Roth’s – a Reflection of the Dystopian Trend in Young Adult Fiction” is an attempt to analyze the first novel of Veronica Roth’s trilogy as an instance of the recent popular trend of YA fiction depicting a post-apocalyptic scenario. The proceeding chapter, “Dark Horizons: The Post-Apocalyptic YA Fiction Trend as Represented in Roth’s *Divergent*”, endeavours to examine the various elements of a dystopian novel in Veronica Roth’s debut work. The project concludes with the deduction that the author, in her realistic portrayal of teenage angst within the framework of the dystopian setting in *Divergent*, has successfully explored the literary possibilities of the post-apocalyptic genre.

Chapter Two

Dark Horizon: Roth's *Divergent* as a Young Adult Dystopian Novel

Dystopia as represented in fiction is not a new phenomenon. Right from Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* to Samuel Butler's *Erewhon*, there have been numerous works of dystopian fiction throughout English literary history. Books for young people set in post-apocalyptic or dystopian worlds are also not new. Three notable early examples are Madeleine L'Engle's science fantasy *A Wrinkle in Time* (1962), William Sleator's suspense novel *House of Stairs* (1974) and the politically intriguing *The Giver* (1993) by Lois Lowry. However, in recent years, there has evolved a trend of the representation of post-apocalyptic scenario, especially in young adult (YA) fiction. Starting from Suzanne Collins' *Hunger Games* series, there has been a constant influx of narratives set in the near or distant future, where the people are often governed by a totalitarian government. In these novels, it is often the protagonist who takes it upon herself to liberate the citizens from the yoke of the authoritarian regime, frequently at personal risk. These dystopian works essentially reflect different dimensions of power play and the ultimate success of the dominant power structure as theorized by philosophers such as Michel Foucault. The works represent a Baudrillardian superreality or hyperreality which may be regarded as a hyperbolic representation of the present-day world.

The French philosopher and cultural analyst Jean Baudrillard has also contributed to the theory of dystopia. In his discussion on "simulacra" (hyperreal copies), where modern culture takes "maps" of reality like television, film, etc. as

more real than the actual lives of humans and where the so-called simulacra define human lives.

The utopian space is an imagined no-place which contrasts the real world, as such all utopias are simulacra to some degree. The development of Utopian literature can be understood through Jean Baudrillard's essay "Simulacra and Science Fiction". His essay describes three orders of simulacra, the first is "natural, naturalistic simulacra: based on image, imitation, and counterfeiting. They are harmonious, optimistic, and aim at the reconstitution, or the ideal institution, of a nature in God's image... the separation from the real world is maximal—it is the utopian island in contrast to the continent of the real." (121-122). In the first order, signs do not reflect basic reality but rather mask or pervert it. The island of Utopia and the lands visited in *Gulliver's Travels* are separated from the real world by geography, although the time period is the same as the author's it is clearly a made-up place, a fake. First order utopia presents dialectic of propositions in order to find an ideal society; the reader is invited to accept a proposition or form a synthesis.

The second order of simulacra is science fiction - "productive, productionist simulacra: based on energy and force, materialized by the machine and the entire system of production. Their aim is Promethean: world-wide application, continuous expansion, liberation of indeterminate energy" (121). Science fiction represents an extension to the production power of the real world, it "is most often nothing other than an unbound projection of the real world of production, but it is not qualitatively different from it... To the potentially infinite universe of production, science fiction adds the multiplication of its own possibilities." (122). In science fiction we

imagine a world which could almost be possible if we had the technology and production power. *A Brave New World* portrays this imaginary projection of production power; it is a technologically and biologically advanced world where people are produced in the factory. *Do Androids* shows a world of flying cars and androids; *A Player of Games* has spaceships and drones. The second order represents possibilities; it is a copy of the real world with more advanced productions.

Baudrillard explicates on the “Third Order of Simulacra” – the present age - dominated by simulations, things that have no original or prototype (though they may parallel something). It is the era of the model or code: computers, virtual reality, opinion polls, DNA, genetic engineering, cloning, etc. The news media make the news, Nike sneakers are considered as status symbols. Disneyland signifies the death of the real: there are no more counterfeits or prototypes, just simulations of reality, or hyperreality, as Baudrillard puts it. Information replaces the machine as the basic mode of production.

The Third Order of Simulacra corresponds to the end of Science Fiction in literature: the real is absorbed into a hyperreal, cybernetic world. The utopian/dystopian literature of this era is not about an alternative universe, but about a simulation of the present one. Philip K. Dick's *Simulacra*. J. G. Ballard's *Crash*, William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, Ridley Scott's film *Blade Runner*, Paul Verhoeven's film *Total Recall*, and The Wachowski brothers' *The Matrix* belong to this age of dystopian art.

Foucault was among the first philosophers to thoroughly expose how the body is exploited by society and those in power, and constantly regulated and policed by Panopticism to the point that the body internalizes the mechanism of discipline and self-surveillance. The Panopticon, created by Jeremy Bentham in the late eighteenth century, is a type of architectural design for prisons with a circular frame and a tower in the centre, allowing the supervisor to easily observe inmates from the tower without their knowing whether they are being observed (this design can also be used for hospitals, schools, and factories). Because the prisoners can never know with certainty when they are being watched, they start regulating and controlling their own actions, and thus the discipline becomes innate. Foucault's theory is vital to the analysis of dystopian fiction, as it helps us understand the discourse of the state's control and its detrimental effects on dystopian citizens. This Foucauldian interpretation of "discipline" is often employed by critics to analyze how the body in a dystopian world is manipulated, exploited and monitored by the government to achieve the subjugation of the body to the authority of the state. Foucault admits that, as a result of discipline, a series of coercions were created by the ruling class that employed "a calculated manipulation" of the body's "elements, gestures, behaviour" to "explore it, break it down and rearrange it" (138).

Since the publication of both *Twilight* and *Harry Potter*, a new trend dominates American YA publishing: the dystopian novel. YA dystopian literature places the reader within the context of a futuristic, post-apocalyptic version of the United States. Kay Sambell offers two necessary elements of dystopian literature: first, it serves as a

warning against “current human behaviours” and second, it must present a hopeful solution to those behaviors (163).

The contemporary YA fiction resonates with the teenagers in a unique way. It acts as an initiator into the dark underbelly of the adult world. On their journey to self-discovery, they are identifying with a new crop of young protagonists, often in post-apocalyptic worlds, crusading against oppression. Part of the reason is that “...they [the teenagers] too are beginning to question the authority of their parents, become sceptical of our political system, and challenge the traditional power structures like school and law” (Satanic). Veronica Roth’s *Divergent*, the first installment of her trilogy of novels of the same name, is one such instance of post-apocalyptic YA fiction.

Divergent is set in post-apocalyptic Chicago, where society is divided into five factions, each dedicated to the cultivation of a particular virtue – Candor (the honest), Abnegation (the selfless), Dauntless (the brave), Amity (the peaceful), and Erudite (the intelligent).

On an appointed day of every year, all sixteen-year-olds must select the faction to which they will devote the rest of their lives. Beatrice Prior (“Tris”), the heroine, is Abnegation born, but finds out that she is divergent. Since Divergents can think independently and the government cannot control their thinking, they are considered threats to the social order. The rest of the narrative is about how Tris attempts to survive in the totalitarian regime.

Dystopia is described as an unfavourable society in which to live, coming from the Ancient Greek roots *dys-* and *-topia*, which mean "bad" and "place to live" respectively. Dystopia is the antithesis of Utopia. In a dystopian story, society itself is typically the antagonist; it is society that is actively working against the protagonist's aims and desires. This oppression frequently is enacted by a totalitarian or authoritarian government, resulting in the loss of civil liberties and untenable living conditions, caused by any number of circumstances, such as world overpopulation, laws controlling a person's sexual or reproductive freedom, and living under constant surveillance. Dystopian fiction belongs to the genre of Speculative Fiction, and could encompass a number of subgenres depending on the elements of the story. The novel is set in a place governed by totalitarian dictatorships, bureaucracies or corporations. The setting is bleak and dark with the citizens of the post-apocalyptic world living under a depressing cloud of suffering, death, terror and pessimism.

The heroines or heroes are of different types in various dystopian novels. One is the protagonist who intuitively feels something is wrong with society and sets out to change it, believing that it is possible to overthrow the dictatorship, or merely escape from the misery. Often the protagonist's opinion varies significantly from those around him, leading to clashes, as her/his co-habitants are frequently not aware that they are living in chains. This factor reflects the contemporary situation in the real world where people are oblivious to the fact that they live under a rule which follows the surveillance system where the "Big Brother" is constantly watching them.

Another common form of protagonist is the high-standing, accepted hero, who is part of the Utopian perception of the dystopia, but eventually discovers or comes to

it.

In other dystopian works of fiction, the author concentrates on environmental issues by presenting a world which has experienced a complete environmental breakdown and wherein the characters struggle daily for the very things one takes for granted in real life, such as oxygen, as is represented in *Elusion* (2014) by Claudia Gabel and Cheryl Klam.

Divergent is set in a post-apocalyptic version of Chicago, many years into the future. The novel's version of Chicago has changed considerably from the city one is familiar with now. The highways are crumbling, the bridges have collapsed, and many of the once-mighty skyscrapers have been reduced to skeletons. Even the Lake Michigan, the landmark of Chicago, has dried up and has been reduced to a marsh. This location is in keeping with the post-apocalyptic trend where the setting is futuristic. This helps explain the different structure of society, and justify the power of the totalitarian government.

Similar to Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* with its divisions into districts, in the *Divergent* universe, the inhabitants are divided into factions. Societal grouping extends into most YA dystopian literature, having roots in Lois Lowry's *The Giver*, Carrie Hughes's *The Dream Catcher*, and Zilpha Snyder's Green-sky trilogy (Hintz, "Joy" 108). In *Divergent*, every seventeen year old must choose one of five factions: Abnegation, Candor, Erudite, Amity, or Dauntless. Each faction provides a unique service to Chicago's whole structure.

The state of YA literature in the 21st century is of a genre that has spun wildly into the future and that YA future is a bleak one for the human race. According to Antero Garcia, dystopian YA fiction such as the *Divergent* series feature familiar tropes. This genre envisages a post-catastrophic world in which some sort of unnamed devastation has radically restructured the norms and codes of society. Children in these works are “forced to violently kill in order to adhere to the expectations of adults that perhaps abuse power”; they are “forced into limiting constraints of identity and labour associated with their identity”, and “are in a classed society that further stratifies the wealthy and working class” (Garcia 71).

As regards the climax, in dystopian literature, the story is often unresolved. Often the dystopia is not brought down. The protagonists may make their individual standard often fail, but give hope to others in the dystopia. Sometimes this climax is the protagonist’s escape from the dystopia. In other scenarios, the protagonist fails to achieve anything and the dystopia continues as before.

Another type of dystopian fiction is the representation of a post-apocalyptic feminist dystopia, where women have no rights whatsoever. The novel is set in a place ruled by misogynist laws, where the future of the voiceless “gendered subaltern” is decided by the totalitarian government, as in *Matched* (2010) by Allyson Braithwaite Condie.

Divergent, though it does not depict a feminist utopia/dystopia, concentrates on its female protagonist, Beatrice, and her resistance to the contemporary social order in her world. In fact, as Day et al put it, “...the desire to resist the limitations of gender

and age can be found in many contemporary girl protagonists, particularly in the dystopian novels that are commanding so much attention in the world of young adult literature..." (3). The female protagonists of contemporary YA dystopias occupy liminal spaces as they seek to understand their places in the world in which they live, making their societies more egalitarian, more progressive, and ultimately, more free. The seemingly fearless Tris of *Divergent* both recognizes her liminal situation and, over time, uses her position as a means for resistance and rebellion against the social orders that seek to control them. Balaka Basu, Katherine R. Broad, and Carrie Hintz argue in their book *Contemporary Dystopian Fiction for Young Adults: Brave New Teenagers* that "as young people stand up and fight the system, they also learn their own limitations" (7).

Hintz and Ostry, in the introduction to their book *Utopian and Dystopian Writing for Children and Young Adults*, contend that "children [and young adults] learn about social organization" through dystopian writing (7). In the instance of Tris, she learns that reaching adulthood is wholly dependent on her ability to conform to her society's mandates, which govern virtually every aspect of her life. If she lived in a society which encouraged young people to embrace their individuality and grow into independent beings, Tris likely would not feel compelled to rebel. It is because her government is so controlling that they are able to recognize the faults and weaknesses of post-apocalyptic Chicago and eventually, to rebel against them. The female protagonist becomes a subject, at least in part, because she is oppressed by the dystopian regime.

Tris, the protagonist of Veronica Roth's debut novel, struggles to claim her own agency. She has grown up in a world that is ordered and safe. Born Beatrice Prior, Tris lives in a society that provides for its citizens, who are neatly divided into the five factions of Amity, Erudite, Dauntless, Candor, and Abnegation, in which Tris has been raised. Abnegation values a selfless life. At the outset of the novel, Tris gives a description of the rules of her faction: "Our faction allows me [Tris] to stand in front of it [a mirror] on the second day of every third month, the day my mother cuts my hair".

Roth has created a dystopian world in which gendered stereotypes seemingly matter little. Tris is a far cry from the typical teenage girl. Her birth faction of Abnegation discourages vanity and frivolity. As a result, Tris has been conditioned to believe her physical appearance, something with which most teenage girls are preoccupied, is of little importance. She mentions that she looks at her reflection in the mirror "not for the sake of vanity, but out of curiosity" (Roth 1). According to her, the "gray clothes, the plain hairstyle, and the unassuming demeanour of my [Tris's] faction are supposed to make it easier for me to forget myself, and easier for everyone else to forget me too" (6).

Most YA dystopian fictions contain elements of conformity, or extreme equality. The inhabitants of the post-apocalyptic world are forced to be very similar and to conform to the rules and expectations that the government has set forth. Accordingly, the inhabitants of the *Divergent* universe are forced to adhere to the customs of their respective factions. "Faction customs dictate even idle behaviour and

supersede individual preference”, as Tris comments (9). Faction comes before blood in the world created by Roth.

In the *Divergent* universe, children remain with their parents, completely immersed in their birth factions until the age of sixteen. Then, boys and girls undergo an “aptitude test”, which reveals “which of the five factions” they are best suited. Following the test, the teens participate in a “Choosing Ceremony”, during which they decide to remain with their birth factions or transfer to a different one (2). This rite of passage offers individuals a false sense that they are independent beings, as they seemingly are able to choose their own futures. In actuality, however, the limited freedom the Choosing Ceremony seemingly offers is an illusion, as is the stability the faction system appears to ensure.

During her aptitude test, Tris learns that she is Divergent; that is, she displays an equal aptitude for three factions: Abnegation, Erudite, and Dauntless. Tris is told Divergence is an “extremely dangerous” condition, and that she “should never share” the results of her test with anyone (23). “The potential threat to her safety concerns Tris less than the uncertainty about her identity, which she expected the test to end” (Basu 24). The aptitude test was meant to reveal who Tris was and where she belonged. In revealing her Divergence, the aptitude test forces Tris to know herself and her desires in order to choose the faction to which she believes she belongs. The act of choosing is significant primarily because it leads Tris to commit her first significant act of rebellion of the novel: she rebels against her natal faction of Abnegation and joins Dauntless. Her choice also forces her to demonstrate some level

Tris becomes the typical YA protagonist when she decides to save the Dauntless and Abnegation factions from the machinations of the Erudite. On the Initiation day of the Dauntless faction, Tris goes through her final assessment, a simulation containing each one of her fears that she must conquer, one after another. She is extremely successful and ranks first, becoming an official member of Dauntless. However, she later realizes that in the excitement of the day, the Dauntless leaders injected everyone with a simulation serum that day, calling it a tracking device. She knows they must be lying, and that Erudite will use this serum as a simulation to get Dauntless to fight Abnegation for them.

Finally, she manages to free the Dauntless from mind control. The novel ends by shattering the two factions Tris has close ties with, Dauntless and Abnegation, leaving their erstwhile members basically factionless. Tris has no alternative at this point but to embrace her Divergence, concluding that with “no home, no path, no certainty”, she is “no longer Tris, the selfless, or Tris, the brave” (487). Ultimately, the rebellious acts Tris commits lead her to transform from a girl on fire to a young woman in charge of her own future.

The allure of fiction has always had roots in escapism. Dystopian fiction such as *Divergent* helps the reader to escape to a fictional society darker than that which exists in reality, which is refreshingly different from one of rosy idealism. Post-apocalyptic YA novels such as Roth's work also have a cathartic effect on the readers

- the dull landscape of futuristic Chicago would make one appreciate the society one lives in, even if it is a flawed one.

Chapter 3

Conclusion

Veronica Roth's saga follows the trend of novels written for the young adult readership like James Dashner's *The Maze Runner Series* (2009-2011) and Suzanne Collins's *Hunger Games* (2008-2010), which can be ascribed to a wide variety of genres from dystopian, science fiction, fantasy, survivor story to Bildungsroman, action adventure, political and romance. Despite the increasing popularity of young adult fiction, scholars are just beginning to talk about the "aesthetic qualities and political valences of these texts (Basu, Broad, Hintz 2).

With their capacity to frighten and warn, dystopian writings such as *Divergent* engage with pressing global concerns: liberty and self-determination, environmental destruction and looming catastrophe, questions of identity, and the increasingly fragile boundaries between technology and the self. When directed at young readers, who are trying to understand the world and their place in it, novels such as *Divergent* are distilled into exciting adventures with gripping plots. Roth's novel cleverly makes use of the typical narrative techniques of dystopian novels which makes the readers close to the action, with first-person narration, engaging dialogue, and introspective thoughts by the narrator imparting accessible messages that may have the potential to motivate a generation on the cusp of adulthood.

The dystopia in the *Divergent* universe functions as a rhetorical *reductio ad absurdum* of the utopian philosophy, extending the utopia to its most extreme ends in

order to caution against the destructive politics and culture of the author's present. The post-apocalyptic world such as the one represented in Roth's trilogy differs from utopia in that its prescription is negative rather than positive: it tells us not how to build up a better world, but how not to continue destroying the one currently at our disposal. Although traditional dystopias such as George Orwell's *1984* were largely an extrapolation from the present that involved a warning, recent examples, especially for young people, such as *Divergent*, are expressly concerned with how to use this warning to create new possibilities for utopian hope within the space of the text. The dystopian world of *Divergent* is bleak not because it is meant to stand as a mere cautionary tale, but because it is designed to display – in sharp relief – the possibility of utopian change even in the darkest of circumstances.

Divergent has been brought to the big screen by director Neil Burger and screenwriters Evan Daugherty and Vanessa Taylor under the same name in 2014, with Shailene Woodley ("Tris") and Theo James ("Four") as the lead characters. It can be labelled as a typical coming-of-age film, in the vein of the 'bildungsroman', where the focus is on identity – about searching of the soul and determining who one is, and how one fits in the futuristic totalitarian world of Chicago. The second instalment of the film, *The Divergent Series: Insurgent* was released in 2015, and the third instalment, *The Divergent Series: Allegiant* came out in 2016. The success of the *Divergent* film franchise reflects a growing popularity of dystopian movies in recent years such as *The Hunger Games*, *The Maze Runner*, *The Giver*, etc. Notably, almost all of these post-apocalyptic movies are adaptations of novels of the same names. This fact demonstrates the influx of the dystopian fixation into movies from fiction

To conclude, it can be observed that a study of Veronica Roth's *Divergent* ultimately leads to a prismatic understanding of the dystopian genre as a political, social and aesthetic phenomenon. The young adult dystopian world of *Divergent* offers the liberating potential for self-change despite confining, seemingly insurmountable circumstances, and moving forward towards a world where change, rather than being feared, is embraced.

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