

Science Fiction and the Metaphysics of Totalitarianism

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Totalitarianisms tend to be secretly aware of a transcendent order which defies its temporal command of existence. Whether or not the ultimate source of this order is of human or non-human nature, and in case of a non-human source whether it be intelligent or not, is of great concern to the totalitarian ideologue. The existence of any transcendent order would imply that at some level of human reality there does apply a degree of determinism. If so, then the totalitarian state is not totally powerful. It is subordinate to an order that it did not create and therefore, its command of the past, future, and present is not absolute but merely relative, which therefore implies that the totalitarian state's claim to absolute power is hollow.

To consolidate this claim, the totalitarian state must present itself as an extension of the overriding natural order, as we can observe in the symbolism of the hammer and sickle, and the swastika; in the dialogue between 'the European stranger' and Che Guevara; or in popular culture in the 'I am inevitable' of the villain Thanos in Marvel's Avengers franchise.

In other words, the totalitarian state must create a false determinist universe so as to justify its own existence. It must create a universe where the tree of historical possibilities is carefully pruned. The totalitarian state must present itself as the sole purpose and conclusion of all experience, where all possibilities and potentialities must both blossom and exhaust themselves.

This, of course, is false consciousness. And the truth that the mind seeks will eventually break the wall of this false consciousness at one or many points, usually starting at the top.

Therefore, the mystery of the reality of thought and of the bond between thought and reality is the greatest challenge of totalitarian power, and it is this which Phillip K. Dick masterfully dwells upon in his great novel “The Man in the High Castle.”

Both Hitler and the Japanese militarists are intent on tracking down either the novel “The Grasshopper lies Heavy” (in the book) or the films (in the Amazon TV series) because the variables of reality that these portray inevitably depict totalitarianism not as a necessary and irreversible result of history, but as one of many different variables which fate can generate.

Ultimately, reality is real, not designed by man, but rather inherited by him, navigated by humanity. Such is the bond between man and the universe that he inhabits that the exploration of reality recurrently results in the exploitation of unforeseen potentialities. Certainly the Socratic-Christian continuum consists of the questioning and challenge of reality in order to find truth, or the subjacent undergirding standard upon which reality is based, or draws from: the prime mover, the source.

Ancient societies reflected this deep connection between the moral action of power or the potential thereof, and the health of the ecosystem. This can be found, for example, in the Chinese metaphor of the Mandate of Heaven.

Man secures his place in reality through the journey into his inner self, and the continuum between that inner world and the compendium of laws which constitute the universe.

The 2004 novel “Cloud Atlas” and the 2012 film under the same title explore this interconnected continuity of human nature across different historical scenarios, and where the long-term consequences of ethical decisions are shown to influence and change even the most determinist scenarios, even those where the human form has undergone substantial change.

Natural law, both “The Man in the High Castle” and “Cloud Atlas” would contend, is always transcendent and always universal; it forges historical circumstance and is not determined by it.

In Tarkovsky’s seminal “Stalker” (1979), it is the innermost desires and the love connections to other human beings such as family, that are depicted as the only reality amidst a landscape that can be both altered by extraterrestrial interference and/or mutations of the human condition.

The constant evolution of human perception and hence the multiplicity of potential historical streams as the backdrop for the unyielding drama of the expansion of human consciousness is the central thesis of Frank Herbert’s classic sci-fi series of novels “Dune.” In it, even a techno-religious totalitarianism achieved through veritable immortality and godhood is not complete, and cannot bind the potential of thought in the interplay between human destiny, fate, and faith, from which history derives.

Even though the original totalitarianism, which was the Soviet, dominated the historical and philosophical forms, it failed to completely control the science fiction genre. Tarkovsky and his work are perhaps the best example of this. The questioning of ideology or thought forms designed for political control came through in the science fiction genre under Soviet communism.

And that questioning of the thought-form is perhaps the fundamental role of philosophy and its preferred medium: literature. In the TV series “The Man in the High Castle,” Japanese trade minister Tagome, who plays an ethical Socrates-type figure in the series, consults William James’ “The Varieties of Religious Experiences,” a psychological treatise on the nature of spiritual experience. The book is banned in the alternate historical reality in which Tagome is trade minister in the “Japanese Pacific States.” In this book, James dwells upon the unique ability of the human

mind to be aware of real objects which cannot be *sensibly perceived*. In other words, one would propose that the human mind is acutely aware of the human soul, and the vital organic connection between that soul and a supreme intelligence we refer to as God.

This is the invisible object in the room with which literature is directly or indirectly concerned. And this is also the object in the room with which totalitarianism must deal with, in order to displace it and become the unique subject of all history. In its inability to do so, totalitarianism fails again, and again, but not without first inflicting great harm on the human condition.

Taking as reference that invisible object in the room, those of us who have been through the totalitarian experience or are still under its throes, dwell upon it over and over again. The invisible object in the room has a shadow, the experience suggests, and it is deadly. Deadly enough in all of its consequences never to be forgotten and always to be pointed out to.