Pedagogia oggi

A "black and white" future: the utopia-dystopia antinomy and its uses in education. A reflection

Un futuro in "bianco e nero": l'antinomia utopia-distopia e il suo uso in educazione. Una riflessione

Alessandro Vaccarelli
Professore associato di Pedagogia generale e sociale | Dipartimento di Scienze Umane | Università degli Studi dell'Aquila | alessandro.vaccarelli@univaq.it

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ABSTRACT

The article, starting from two interpretative paradigms of the contemporary time (the *end of history* and the *risk society*), tries to demonstrate how the feeling of security that pervades the way of life of opulent societies is paradoxically combined with a parallel concern for living in a world full of sense of catastrophe. The fear for the future is reduced to a background anxiety, with the consequence that human agency is weakened and reduced to a sense of impotence or tension towards nihilism. Utopia and dystopia, proposed as an antinomy of education, can become categories to be used in education. We will reflect on the potential of dystopian film narrations which, if enjoyed alone, can generate anxiety and a sense of impotence, while, if managed within the educational relationship, they could stimulate the search for a sense of historical belonging and value horizons on which to base individual and collective choices and actions.

L'articolo, partendo da due paradigmi interpretativi del contemporaneo (la fine della storia e la società del rischio), cerca di dimostrare come la sensazione di sicurezza che pervade il modo di vivere delle società opulente si coniughi paradossalmente con una parallela preoccupazione del vivere in un mondo carico di senso della catastrofe. La paura del futuro viene ridotta a inquietudine di sottofondo, con la conseguenza che l'agentività umana risulta fiaccata e ridotta a senso di impotenza o tensione verso il nichilismo. Utopia e distopia, proposte come antinomia dell'educazione, possono diventare categorie da far lavorare nell'educativo. Si rifletterà in particolare sul potenziale delle narrazioni filmiche di genere distopico che, se fruite in solitaria, possono generare inquietudine e senso di impotenza, mentre, se gestite dentro la relazione educativa, potrebbero stimolare la ricerca del senso di appartenenza storica, di orizzonti valoriali su cui poggiare scelte e azioni individuali e collettive.

Keywords: utopia | dystopia | antinomies | future | risk

Parole chiave: utopia | distopia | antinomie | rischio | futuro

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Corresponding Author:
Alessandro Vaccarelli, alessandro.vaccarelli@univaq.it

1. Aporias in the Perception of the Present and Future

It does not seem trivial to assert that we are living in a historical moment that, just a few years ago, no one could have imagined for its restlessness, violence, sense of catastrophe, and for risks that foreshadow scenarios, if possible, even worse than those we inhabit.

We will focus on two interpretive paradigms of the contemporary world, which seem to exclude each other, although they are connected by logics and paradoxes that insinuate themselves within our world, within the perceptions we develop, and the agency we are willing to put into play.

Let's start with the first: the Risk Society. According to Ulrich Beck (2000), into risk society - considered possible through processes of de-traditionalization and individualization typical of post-modernity— the risk is no longer confined only within the attention of experts and technicians but extends to public opinion, generating feelings of uncertainty, insecurity, and fear—Bauman (2006) would speak of liquid fear—as typically post-modern sociological phenomena linked to the dynamics of globalization. Following this logic: atomic risk, which obsessed our collective life during the Cold War years and has reappeared in our times, environmental risks, climatic, global and local risks, natural and constructed risks, political risks confront us and unsettle us, because the systemic (and then political) responses to risk do not always satisfy us, leading us to consider catastrophe as a reality not only possible but also probable. The questions, still provisional, to be answered later, might be: are we sure of these assumpions? Can the discourse be so linear? We perceive the risk, and then?

It is on this "then" that things seem to get complicated because even if we manage to understand and comprehend the risks (who is not worried about global warming?), we end up sweeping them under the carpet, distracting ourselves, preferring to deal with other things.

Denialism is the ideology we oppose, even when it comes to the environment, climate crisis, global warming: we ordinary citizens perceive the risk, criticize those who try to deny it, but unless we fall into the category of activists, we continue to behave as if we were (almost) denialists ourselves.

It is therefore true that risks are at the center of debates, social and public discourse, and political agendas, but they have little impact unless further steps are taken towards assuming individual and collective responsibilities that precede human agency.

Beck himself helps us understand this when he argues that there is also an "organized irresponsibility" that helps to understand how and why the institutions of modern society must inevitably recognize the reality of catastrophe while at the same time denying its existence, hiding its origins, and precluding its compensation or control. In other words, we have in front of us the paradox of a progressive environmental degradation coupled with an expansion of environmental law and regulation (Beck, 2000).

With the second paradigm, the End of History (Fukuyama, 1992), we encounter other paradoxes still.

It is true, with Beck, but also with Bauman (2006), with Morin (2000; 2001; see Annacontini, 2008), among others, that the sense of uncertainty pervades our lives, that risk appears on the scene as the protagonist of debates, it wanders within our daily lives, but it is also true the opposite or, at least, it has been, until some time ago, also true the opposite.

According to Tagliapietra (2012), from risk, which involves measuring and rationally limiting what we fear, arises the principle of security: Wolfgang Sofsky calls this "Das Prinzip Sicherheit," combining the principle of hope and the principle of responsibility. These principles have shaped modern ideology and fuel the illusion that risk can be completely eliminated.

Fear, a fundamental human emotion that makes us aware of our limits and the possibility of death, then transforms into a "fear of being afraid." This leads to an obsession with security. However, security is not the opposite of risk, but merely an infantile psychological removal of it (Ibidem).

The fear of having fear risks becoming its opposite: a sense of security mixed with distraction and denial, at least when this fear is not exploited and redirected towards security policies so cherished by certain "strong" powers, aimed at maintaining privileges and the status quo. Consequently, History, with a capital H, especially for us citizens of the opulent world, always unfolds "elsewhere." We observe it between meals, perhaps sipping good wine, as represented by the media theater; the catastrophe always happens "elsewhere," regardless of the distance (it could be just a few hundred kilometers) and concerning others; it is, therefore, alien, different from us, distant. In this sense, we do not feel like historical subjects, encapsulating our past in a temporal bubble, making our future perpetually present (Vaccarelli, 2019).

We might say that Fukuyama, in erroneously proclaiming the end of history, essentially captures and systematizes a widespread perception (thus reinforcing it): the illusion of the wealthy worlds—perhaps a hope and perhaps also a reminiscence of the modern idea of linearity (cumulative and progressive) and the unidirectionality of historical time, of the success of capitalist democracies as the best of all possible worlds. With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War era, for Fukuyama, History ends, leaving the last man to witness economic and technical development and the spread of liberal democracy and capitalism across the globe.

Thus, caught by the illusion of the end of history, and perhaps not fully aware of how the risk society constituted the context of our individual and collective lives—with its invitations to cultivate the uncertainty that Morin (2001) so fruitfully places at the foundation of a new way of conceiving knowledge—our predictive capacities or simply our imaginative capacities (as ordinary citizens, institutional actors, politicians, civil society) did not seem to go beyond the wall of a perception of the future as a presentified time, still operating under the unilinear and optimistic vision of development.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused millions of deaths, confined the global population to their homes, destabilized economies, and triggered political crises. The war in Ukraine, with its victims, refugees, and nuclear risk, has revived Cold War-like tensions. Similarly, the ongoing crisis in the Middle East, particularly the war in Gaza, reopens old wounds and risks escalating the conflict. The climate crisis now affects us directly, evident in prolonged heatwaves, extreme weather events, and the increasing scarcity of resources like water, compounded by migrations driven by disasters due to environmental causes.

These emerging challenges underscore the warnings of many "prophets"—scholars, scientists, and intellectuals—whose concerns have often been overlooked or superficially addressed in political decision-making.

Latouche's concept of *degrowth* (2007) offers a realistic critique of our "common home" and challenges capitalist and neoliberal practices of resource exploitation and unchecked development. Meanwhile, Agenda 2030, although less radical in thinking the economical structure, advocates for sustainability that remains distant from current actions and realities. Finally, the pacifist stance faces criticism, and political trends are questioning the constitutional principle of "repudiation of war" despite ongoing nuclear risks.

2. Utopia and education

Pedagogy, deeply connected to the political realm, needs utopia now more than ever. However, it must construct this utopia starting from dystopia if we are to align it with the dystopian traces that signal the future in our present.

Some Italian scholars have explored the prophetic aspects of pedagogy and its link with utopia. Franco Cambi's essential studies highlight the deep and constitutive vocation of Western pedagogy and its passion for the future a (Cambi, 2012, p. 12). Notable are also the reinterpretations of Aldo Capitini (Catarci, 2013), as well as his own view of education as an act to transcend an imperfect reality (Capitini, 1951); Freire's work (2002) and subsequent reinterpretations (Catarci, 2016; Fiorucci, Vaccarelli, 2022) constitute other interesting perspectives.

Utopia" originally referred to an ideal country, a fictitious name coined by Thomas More in 1516 (More, 2016) in his Libellus vere aureus nec minus salutaris quam festivus de optimo reipublicae statu deque nova insula Utopia. Combining the Greek words ("not") and ≠ ("place"), it signifies "a place that does not exist" (but also "good place"—eu-topia), representing an ideal form of society and world that generates political and transformative tension for pedagogy. Utopia, due to its "perfect" nature, remains unattainable. It can be reinterpreted in various ways: as a movable limit or aspiration towards something new and beautiful for humanity, thus as a possibility for the perfectible (consider Dewey's progressive views or other revolutionary conceptions); or as a "limiting" theoretical model, leading to pessimism, nihilism, or realpolitik focused on the present with little regard for the future; or as a tool to guide the masses, transforming it into ideology (as false consciousness, in a Marxist sense) and sometimes into its dystopian counterpart. This leads us to dystopia, the "bad place."

Arrigo Colombo (Colombo, 1997, p. 22) prefers "dystopia" over terms like counter-utopia or negative utopia. Dystopia, like ou-topia and eu-topia, involves the Greek prefix dys, meaning evil, as opposed to

eu, representing good. Thus, if utopia is the "non-place" that is a good place (eutopia), dystopia is the "bad place," characterized by injustice and malice. If utopia represents a just and fraternal society, dystopia represents an unjust one.

While utopias remain elusive, history has shown scenarios suggesting the concrete possibility of dystopia. The totalitarian regimes of the 20th century, the Shoah, and Auschwitz'emblema exemplify dystopia realized in history (Vaccarelli, 2023). While utopia, with its unattainability, concerns the future and conditional possibilities, dystopia, due to its realizability, pertains to past, present, and future.

It may be from the dystopian traces in our world that we can build utopias, as these traces can activate resilience and resistance—concepts relevant both politically and pedagogically (see Contini, 2009; Vaccarelli, 2023). These processes can reawaken prophetic tension, utopian arguments, and goals, motivating thought, analysis, critique, imagination, planning, and action. Thomas More's "prototype" of utopia, invented through the word and conceptual structure, envisioned the non-existent (and good) place from the problems of his time. The work of SIPED's Emergency Pedagogy group (see Annacontini, Zizioli, 2022; Annacontini, Vaccarelli, 2022) on catastrophe—a concept linked with dystopia—highlights transformation and the possibilities of regeneration arising from resilience and resistance, signaling something new within the image of the end and the potential for a new beginning.

3. The Unheeded Cassandras and the Antinomy of Utopia-Dystopia

This brings us to education, and thus to pedagogy. If we accept that pedagogy requires utopia, we might also ask whether it needs dystopia (and perhaps consider this dyad within the discourse of educational antinomies). Can catastrophe, or risk as the prefiguration of catastrophe, assist us in a better comprehension? Let's revisit the concept of risk. Beck (2000) defines it as an "anticipation" of catastrophe, but also as a rationalized form of fear.

Throughout human history, risk has replaced the simple sensation of danger without eliminating it. Rather, it has burdened humanity with the responsibility of deciding based on weighing gains and losses. The fear of danger is quite different from the fear considered through the lens of risk.

The fear of danger leaves us unprepared (and thus powerless) in the face of what is anticipated. Fear itself—in its most primitive form—can become part of the danger (in a psychological mechanism where fear drives behaviors that worsen the situation) or an ideological tool (consider, politically, the scapegoat mechanism). However, from the perspective of risk, fear is accepted, rationalized, analyzed, and operationalized, allowing for reflection, situation analysis, and human agency aimed at reducing harm. Rather than to have fear of fear (and thus following, as a third option, the logic of denial and the illusion of security, the end of history, etc.), it becomes crucial to educate, teach and learn to be afraid. Latouche (2007) speaks of a pedagogy of catastrophes alongside the re-enchantment of the world, referring to the former as the educational role they play, and to the latter as the urgency of rediscovering meanings and values that enable humanity to envision alternative life projects. If we consider, with Loiodice (2018), pedagogy as knowledge/action that "bets" on the emancipatory and transformative power of education—and therefore on the possibility of relying on individuals capable of managing the complexities of contemporary life—then, by betting on the future, pedagogy has to intrinsically aim at what has not yet been realized, in two movements:

1. Resisting an undesirable and dystopian, future, the traces of which we find in the present: a pedagogy in this sense has to be critical, deconstructive, and resistant;
2. Aspiring towards a desirable future: here lies its utopian tension, its constructive part.

Many "prophets" go unheard, and by "prophets" we refer to individuals or groups of high intellectual, cultural, and scientific standing. Without delving into why they are ignored or generate skepticism, we can revisit the mythological figure of Cassandra, not only because she is exemplary and evocative but also because, perhaps, within her story, we find something that (beyond time?) resonates in the face of impending disaster: Cassandra was granted the gift of prophecy by Apollo, but, having rejected him, the god

ensured that no one would believe her (Messina, 1985). Those who announce disaster thus become so troublesome that they are perceived as carriers of disaster (in the fatalistic sense of bad luck).

Or they become inconvenient figures, highlighting the political and instrumental burden of not wanting to listen, not wanting to believe, or not even having the time to do so. This leads to either indifference or mockery, especially in hedonistic cultures born from consumerism and resource-devouring development models centered on profit, where attempts are made (as mentioned to remove the problem, hide it under the rug, thus fostering denial). After all, while the Titanic sinks, the orchestra is instructed to play cheerful music, and someone, reassured, continues to dance.

The recent and widely discussed film directed by Adam McKay in 2021, *Don't Look Up*, like other examples of dystopian narratives conveyed through literature, cinema, and television, fully represents the distracted attitude with which the world is observed on multiple levels. In the movie, two astronomers, graduate student Kate Dibiasky and Professor Randall Mindy, discover that a comet within our solar system is on a collision course with Earth. Incredibly, however, no one seems to care about the looming threat to the planet, least of all the authorities. This dystopian scenario (the world is about to end, yet everyone is preoccupied with other things) perfectly encapsulates the role of the protagonist as a modern-day Cassandra.

There is always something more important, always a false sense of well-being, always a public opinion to appease and reassure—"reassurancism", a category introduced within the anthropology of catastrophes (Ciccozzi, 2014)—all in the name of consensus or consumption, even in the face of an imminent "catastrophe." The sense of individual responsibility thus risks drowning in an idea of collective responsibility too vast to manage, where not only individual choices but also those of political and economic decision-makers—forces perceived as overwhelming in the face of our agency—converge (see Vaccarelli, 2024).

4. A Future in Black and White: Dystopian Narratives for Education

Now, let's talk about dystopian narratives. We have used the example of *Don't look up* intentionally, and particularly as a pretext to touch upon dystopian representations and their educational potential as mediated by cinema (and before that, literature, which we will not delve into here). These have played a significant role in the very dissemination of the term "dystopia" and have given rise to a genre (both literary and cinematic) properly understood. The present of future catastrophes – and here we refer, once again, and not coincidentally, to Beck's definition of risk (2000) – can be perceived, despite the fact that they are merely plausible imaginings, within the content of films and the scenarios they depict. Let us therefore ask ourselves, while keeping certain parameters in mind, how these imaginaries represent the world, politics, social relationships, and gender issues in the projections of a humanity that manages to survive the future.

By conducting a global and still preliminary analysis of four dystopian television series (streaming on Netflix), we have identified recurring themes and issues in the representations of the future imaginary.

Sonowpiercer (USA, 2020, 3 seasons) - Year 2026: After repeated failed attempts to curb global warming, the world has become an immense sheet of ice, an uninhabitable desert. The only survivors have taken refuge aboard the Snowpiercer, a train that perpetually circles the Earth. However, this salvation is only apparent; initially, only the privileged 'rich' are granted a place aboard the 1,001-car train, while the 'poor' storm the train and eventually establish themselves onboard. Extreme inequality soon emerges, with the front cars filled with luxury and comfort, while the rear cars are steeped in poverty and destitution. Revolts erupt in the rear cars, bringing chaos and redefining relationships.

3% (Brasil, 2016-2020, 7 seasons) - In an unspecified future, after a series of natural upheavals, the world is divided into two areas: the Inland, a decaying metropolis devoid of resources, and the Offshore, an idyllic island where food and water are abundant and advanced technologies serve the citizens. At the age of twenty, Inland inhabitants can participate in the Process, a selection process that tests their physical, logical, and psychological abilities. Only 3% will leave the Inland and settle in the Offshore. While many see the Process as a unique opportunity to escape poverty, some view the system as deeply unjust. A terrorist group, the Cause, is committed to destroying the Process and the Offshore to restore equality and redistribute wealth.

La valla (2020, Spain, 1 season) - Epidemics, economic crises, and natural disasters have plunged the planet into World War III. Under the threat of weapons, major Western democracies, including Spain, surrender their liberties to totalitarian regimes that promise a return to lost order and security. After a long journey from Asturias, where his wife died from the virus ravaging the Spanish countryside, Hugo Mujica arrives in Madrid with his daughter Marta and his brother to reunite with family. When Marta is kidnapped and placed in a secret government-funded program, Hugo ventures with his sister-in-law Julia beyond the Barrier, the massive wall separating ordinary inhabitants from the more affluent classes.

The 100 (USA, 2014-2020, 7 seasons) - To escape a nuclear holocaust, a small portion of Earth's population finds refuge on a space station called the Ark. After nearly a century in space, however, the Ark begins to suffer malfunctions, and resources are depleting. The Council, which governs life aboard the Ark, approves sending one hundred juvenile prisoners to Earth to assess the planet's conditions. Led by a teenager imprisoned as the daughter of the scientist who first warned of the depletion of resources, the group of one hundred youths finds themselves exploring a wild Earth, vastly different from the civilized planet it once was. They soon realize that the planet was not uninhabited during this time, as semi-primitive human clans still populate the Earth's surface.

While these series portray various crises—such as glaciation, desertification, pandemics, and nuclear war—they reveal certain constants that make the analysis particularly compelling. Within these dystopian contexts, we observe elements that align with specific pedagogical frameworks, including gender education and intercultural education, as well as representations shaped by contemporary trends in cinematic and television language. These trends are broadly associated with LGBT+ and Queer cultures. Although sexism and racism appear to be mitigated in these depictions of the most extreme future scenarios (raising questions about the impact of politically correct choices by the authors), the focus shifts to a pronounced social class hierarchy. This hierarchy emphasizes the ownership and access to resources and material goods, coupled with the evident presence of totalitarian power structures. In summary, the following constants can be identified:

– *political relations*: power dynamics are characterized by authoritarianism, with the presence of a police state and a totalitarian framework.
– *social and economic relations*: there is a clear hierarchy based on social class rather than ethnic discrimination. This hierarchy is closely linked to the distribution and access to primary resources, which are regulated by mechanisms of severe inequality and the presence of privileges rather than rights. Regarding gender, there are no indications of discrimination; instead, relationships are often depicted as symmetrical, although female roles may sometimes be modeled on male prototypes. Sexual fluidity is typically portrayed as a normalized aspect of these future societies.
– role of Science: Ethical boundaries are frequently breached, with significant focus on eugenic experimentation and psychological manipulation. In these dystopian futures, science often crosses moral limits, venturing into areas of questionable ethical practice and pushing the boundaries of what is considered acceptable.

5. Conclusion

Within these narratives, which captivate both young and older audiences, we can discern both the strengths and limitations of informal education. The sense of anxiety and unease left by these stories—especially when experienced in solitude—often leads to perspectives of meaning (impotence) or meaninglessness (nihilism) that are difficult to define. These narratives provide concrete examples of how humanity might be overwhelmed by already present dystopian traces and offer a depiction of the "community of destiny"—a concept dear to us pedagogues (c.f. Morin, 2001)—which perhaps becomes the main protagonist of these stories.

The interconnections between environmental themes, resources, technologies, the role of science, and morality—morality that in extreme conditions always overturns its own logic—along with political powers, leave space for exploring formative trajectories centered on complexity, the fertility of uncertainty as a hallmark of postmodernism, and educational work oriented toward species (or planetary) identity. There-

fore, Morin suggests focusing on these narratives and future representations to explore their educational and formative potential, expanding them to groups, debates, and studies, and integrating them into both formal and informal educational processes. It is no longer about solitary and often distressing visions, as previously mentioned, but rather a collective approach, with educational mediation stimulating reflection, debate, and analysis, and fostering agency: how do protagonists deal with hostile environments? What can we do to correct the course, prevent problems, and manage risks?

Liliana Dozza (2018) emphasizes that the overarching perspective should be that of lifelong education, viewed as learning to inhabit the world ecologically. This includes educating our agency, also from a historical perspective, rediscovering ourselves as historical subjects.

Moreover, as Morin (2007) notes, cinematic narratives represent a powerful machine of projection/identification that triggers within us a profound moment of understanding others. We understand the vagabond, the gangster, the assassin from within, whereas in normal life, such identificatory bridges are often cut. There is perhaps no moment when we are better able to understand others than during a film.

And the "others" could be us, so different from who we are today: in one year, ten, a hundred, or two hundred, it does not matter. The future humanity will be a choice between utopia and dystopia, because, as Malavasi (2020) affirms, we born human being but we must learn – trough education - to be human.

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