

# Patrycja Podgajna

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## Between the Waste Land and No Place : Christopher Nolan's Futuristic Dystopia "Interstellar" (2014)

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### BETWEEN THE WASTE LAND AND NO PLACE: CHRISTOPHER NOLAN'S FUTURISTIC DYSTOPIA *INTERSTELLAR* (2014)

Since the 1990s the number of dystopian films projecting apocalyptic visions of global catastrophe and dramatizing an ecological agenda has radically increased. Much of this trend is inspired by anxieties about the future repercussions of today's actions and the collective responsibility for the future of our planet. One film that aptly represents this category is Christopher Nolan's futuristic dystopia *Interstellar* (2014). Blending generic conventions of space-travel, science-fiction and moral fable, the film, with its bleak vision of ecological disaster, social unrest, and economic decline, clearly evokes the dystopian paradigm in which the projected reality is perceived as significantly worse than the here and now (*sensu* Sargent 1994:5). However, contrary to many dystopias offering nihilistic or anti-utopian denouements, Christopher Nolan's apocalyptic vision clearly posits a progressive and definite possibility of utopian impulse, which is encapsulated by the final resolution of the global catastrophe. The core of the argument is that the neutralization of the dystopian impulse and the resulting projection of the utopian vision are facilitated by the imposition of an interstitial space constructed in the vein of postmodern poetics: an ambiguous fifth dimensional library, in which books perform a two-fold function. While intratextually, they serve as a catalyst between the tangibly dystopian present and the possibly utopian future, extratextually, they function as a universal mode of communication transcending the constraints of time and space.

Keywords: dystopia, global catastrophe, ecology, space, books, utopia

Since the 1990s the number of dystopian films projecting apocalyptic visions of global catastrophe and dramatizing an ecological agenda has radically increased. Much of this trend is inspired by anxieties about the future repercussions of today's actions and the collective responsibility for the future of our planet. One film that aptly represents this category is Christopher Nolan's futuristic dystopia *Interstellar* (2014). Set in the near future, *Interstellar* depicts an America and the rest of the world that is not only in economic, political, and technological decline, but on the brink of starvation due to ecological disaster: blighted food supplies are dwindling and inhabitable Earth is dying. A pilot-turned-farmer and family man named Cooper, prompted by the avuncular Professor Brand, embarks on an exploratory mission through a wormhole beyond the rings of Saturn in search of better prospects for all of humanity.

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It cannot be denied that concerns about nature, its control, exploitation, and reinvention, as well as ecological fears have become very prominent in postmodern science fiction. While early science fiction films particularly addressed the potential repercussions of nuclear destruction and environmental degradation, since the 1980s films have focused more explicitly on the presentation of more apocalyptic visions of global catastrophe<sup>1</sup>. Much of this trend was triggered by the anticipated end of the world at the turn of the second millennium, which was depicted in such disaster and apocalyptic films as *2012*, *Terminator 2*, and *Children of Men*. Besides articulating social anxieties about such issues as technophobia, nuclear destruction, and machine control, the problem of nature seems to hold prominence in science fiction, which as Pat Brereton attests

can be considered a primary postmodern genre, [as it] explicitly represents and problematizes notions concerning 'nature' and thereby addresses specific eco-fears and sensibilities, in particular environmental pollution and the potential risk of human extinction. (Brereton 2005: 187)

Within various spatial locations and possible worlds projected in Nolan's science-fiction odyssey, the image of Earth replete with dust storms, ash-shrouded landscapes, blighted crops, and degraded civilization not only epitomizes the apocalyptic wasteland, but more importantly, it simultaneously articulates past as well as contemporary eco-fears. One striking example is that the imagery of *Interstellar's* dark future is clearly inspired by the real-world ecological catastrophe which swept through much of North America in the 1930s. The Great Plains were struck by a terrible drought, which in turn led to crop failures, dust storms and the displacement of some 500,000 people. Inspired by the real-life events, the dystopic visualization of ecological imbalance and disharmony, the origins of which are not explicitly stated in the film, resonates particularly in the presentation of the spatial frame. Rather than sketching a broader geo-political panorama, Nolan restricts his futuristic vision to projecting a single and isolated setting: a small farm somewhere in the Midwest of the

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<sup>1</sup> In her book *Apocalyptic Dread. American Film at the Turn of the Millennium*, Kirsten Moana Thompson calls these social concerns and fears around global catastrophe as *apocalyptic dread* (Thompson 2007: 1).

United States belonging to ex-NASA pilot Cooper (Matthew McConaughey), who is raising his son Tom and his daughter Murph. Initially, the isolation of the setting combined with its agrarian character seems to perform a pastoral function, creating an idyllic romanticized scene, in which a deceptively green farm with neatly sprawling cornfields seem to signal ecological balance. However, the created intimacy and the implied harmony of this singular location is soon juxtaposed with the vastness and depopulation of the ecologically precarious agrarian landscape, in which the storm dust and the black clouds of smoke from the burning of the very last crop of okra signal the impending possibility of mass starvation and the end of a terrestrial future. The resultant apocalyptic dread and dystopic imagery, considered by many critics such as Frederic Jameson as symptomatic of the science-fiction genre (Jameson 1982), are exacerbated by the visual and sensory aesthetics. This is most apparent in the film's opening frame, juxtaposing scenery evocative of the 1930's Dust Bowl with televised memorials of elderly Americans recounting the blight, in which the dominant use of half-light and darkness highlights the dysfunctionality of the ecocidal world.

The scarcity of versatile spatial locations within the dystopian setting goes in tandem with the fragmentation of socio-political indicators of concrete dystopia (*sensu* Moylan 2004: 208). Rather than embodying and realizing 'organized forces of violence and oppression' (Moylan 2004: 185), *Interstellar* offers only soft hints of bureaucratic or intellectual forms of coercion. Their implications resonate particularly in the rigid educational system which in the light of global catastrophe gives preference to educating agrarians rather than intellectuals. The elimination of intellectual elites is paralleled by the stagnation of scientific advancements. This impotence is reflected not only in the ideological propaganda which contests scientific achievements in school textbooks, asserting that moon landings were a Cold War fabrication, but also in the exhaustion of technological progress. In *Interstellar* technology, considered by many critics (Sontag 1994; Shapiro 2002) to be a major theme of science fiction, is no longer representational. The technological advancements and gadgetry typical of the science fiction genre are dilapidated and outdated: computers no longer serve as totemic objects, the ship which takes Cooper on the interplanetary mission is suggestively called *Endurance*, and its image is far from that of a technologically advanced spacecraft. Departing considerably from the thus defined thematic convention, the technology in *Interstellar* seems to perform only a denotative function: the poorly constructed and equipped spacecraft seem to reflect the downfall of the human dream of progress and technological development. As film critic Andrew O. Scott observes, 'The Nolans [Christopher and his brother Jonathan] cleverly conflate scientific denialism with technophobia, imagining a fatalistic society that has traded large ambition for small-scale problem solving and ultimate resignation' (Scott 2014).

The use of dystopic imagery inscribed in the projection of space also reverberates in the presentation of elemental forces of nature, earth, air, fire, and water, which provide in many films, as Pat Brereton attests, 'a renewed form of balance within the narrative and become potent metaphors for a renewed expression of eco-praxis' (Brereton 2005: 19). In Nolan's *Interstellar*, the natural ecological balance and harmony as quantified and defined by the four primary elements is most notably deconstructed and dramatized. Following this interpretative stance, the universal symbolism of air as the emblematic signifier of life represented in the humans' ability to breathe is countered with its destructive potency as encapsulated by the wind storms

intoxicating the atmosphere with dirt and dust, gradually making it unbreathable for humans, so that *'the last people to starve will be the first to suffocate'* (*Interstellar*). The resultant imagery of all-pervasive pollution and environmental degradation is exacerbated by using the potency of fire, which exemplifies on the one hand heat and light, and on the other, destruction. In Nolan's eco-dystopia its destructive power paradoxically serves humanity with a life-affirming purpose: once the blight hits, setting fire to crops is the only means to slow its spread. In this ubiquitous image of the wasteland it seems that only water, as the life-giving force, remains the primary signifier of ecological sustainability on Earth. However, even its realizable potency of creating eco-utopianism is deconstructed with the motif of Doctor Miller's water planet, on which massive tidal waves arising from a black hole make it completely inhabitable. Consequently, by focusing on ecological imbalance and dysfunction exposed in its visual imagery and symbolism, Nolan's science-fiction epic seems to reflect a growing tendency 'to help to revitalize, if not create, potentially new ecological metaphors within postmodernist science-fiction' (Brereton 2005: 185).

The resultant future-noir aesthetic underpinning this eco-dystopia is juxtaposed with the indeterminacy and discontinuity of the interstitial space as epitomized by Murph's library. Its apparent mimetism and empiricism is deconstructed in the very first scenes by introducing the techniques of defamiliarisation and ontological instability. The former, as a mode of representation that allows both for recognition of something while at the same time making it seem unfamiliar, relies on displacing the pragmatic dimension associated with the quotidian space with its apparently supernatural function. Early in the film, Murph attempts to decode a meaning from the seemingly random volumes that fall from her bookshelves, as she is certain that what she calls a ghost is using the books to try to communicate. Paradoxically, this estranging effect intensifies only at the very end of the film, in which the library transpires to be an interstitial space, through which Cooper manages to transmit data to the adult Murph as the 'ghost' of her childhood. What is most striking about this scene is that it is the physicality of the books which Cooper knocks off the shelves to transmit the data in Morse code, and not technological devices, that enables humanity to solve the gravity equation. Consequently, by conjoining disparate dimensions and incompatible temporalities of an earthly home and a distant cosmos, Nolan not only violates ontological boundaries in the vein of postmodern poetics, but he also constructs a complex symbolic and metaphorical space, one in which books serve as a catalyst between the dystopian present and the utopian future.

The latter is notably encapsulated in the projection of the utopian space as epitomized in the impossibly large space station named after Cooper's daughter, who by solving the seemingly impossible gravity equation allows humans to construct impossibly large space stations and instantly move them to space. Paradoxically, this outer space with its cylindrical design, rotational gravity, and self-contained eco-system is fully capable of sustaining life in outer space. Capable of hosting life-giving elements of the natural world such as water, sun, soil, and earth, Cooper's space station is also replete with all the elementary private and public spaces such as houses, hospitals, and even baseball diamonds, which sustain human life in distant galaxies. Its utopian character is enhanced by the visual aesthetics and imagery. In contrast to Earth's ecological blight depicted in the opening frame through the bleak imagery, the emergent utopian space portrayed in the film's closure resonates with vivacious green colors of ripening fields, implying restored ecological balance and harmony.

The metaphorical dimension of the interstitial space is inextricably bound up with its visual representation in Nolan's film. Portrayed as a multilayered and infinite multiplication of Murphy's bookcase and bedroom, this fifth dimensional library serves to physicalize time as a vehicular space. It is this space-time continuum with its ordered labyrinth-like structure representing moments in time in which Cooper can navigate backwards and forwards to find specific moments in space. The projection of time as a physical space is particularly encapsulated in the artistic visualization of timelines as strings, which when hit cause vibrations and serve Cooper in communicating cryptic messages in Morse code to create a unified theory of physics. Consequently, by projecting time as a physical dimension, Nolan's film not only violates human perception of time as a linear concept, but it also visualizes multiple permutations of past, present, and future all happening along the same time axis. Intratextually this temporal paradox enables the spatial reunion of the temporally detached father and daughter; extratextually, this unusual temporal trajectory exacerbates the ontological instability and plurality of the represented world(s).

On a more abstract level, the recurring motif of books in tandem with the ambiguous fifth dimensional library portraying bookshelves multiplying and intersecting in all directions seem to aptly foreground and visualize the concept of intertextuality, defined broadly as 'a permutation of texts, [...] the space of a given text, where several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another' (Kristeva 1980:36). This interpretative stance seems to be supported not only by the repetitive quotations of Dylan Thomas' poem "Do not go into that gentle night" but also by the seemingly coincidental compilation of book titles appearing on Murphy's bookshelves: Mark Helprin's *Winter's Tale*, Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow*, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* are just a few examples alluding to the malleable and volatile concept of time. This intertextual interconnectedness is also enhanced by the explicit allusion to Jorge Luis Borges' short story *The Library of Babel*, which conceives the universe in the form of a vast library with an enormous expanse of adjacent hexagonal galleries. Incorporating and emulating the visual representation of an 'infinite library', Nolan symbolically visualizes an intertextual space, with the exception that every single permutation of texts is contained in an infinite number of Murphy's bedrooms. Metaphorically, the fact that Nolan's multi-dimensional library is modelled after *The Library of Babel* is symbolic of how books serve not only as a repository of the past but also as a universal mode of communication. One can read a book by an author who is long dead, yet their voice, their ideas, and their legacy transcend the constraints of time and space.

Oscillating between the apocalyptic wasteland and a progressive no place, Nolan's futuristic space odyssey clearly illustrates the possibility of a utopian future in outer space. Its realization is facilitated primarily by the imposition of interstitial space, as epitomized by the fifth-dimensional library which in Nolan's *Interstellar* constitutes a potent metaphor for various ideological concepts. While intratextually, books serve as a gateway to a realizable utopic world in the distant galaxies, extratextually they function as a means of communication beyond space and time. Furthermore, constituting a visual representation of time and intertextual space, Nolan's infinite library as a complex symbolic and metaphorical space with its 'openness to intertextual circulation' constitutes not only an alternative model of reality but also a valuable model for a postmodernist consciousness (McHale 1992: 12).

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## MIĘDZY DYSTOPIĄ A UTOPIĄ: FUTURYSTYCZNA WIZJA ŚWIATA W FILMIE CHRISTOPHERA NOLANA *INTERSTELLAR* (2014)

Już od lat 90. liczba filmów dystopijnych ukazujących apokaliptyczne wizje globalnej katastrofy oraz poruszających kwestie ekologiczne znacznie wzrosła. W dużej mierze zjawisko to związane jest z rosnącą obawą przed destrukcyjnymi skutkami działalności człowieka oraz z coraz większym poczuciem odpowiedzialności za przyszłość naszej planety. Futurystyczna dystopia Christophera Nolana *Interstellar* to film, który doskonale wpisuje się w tę kategorię. Rozgrywający się w niedalekiej przyszłości *Interstellar* ukazuje Amerykę oraz resztę świata nie tylko w stanie ekonomicznego, politycznego oraz technologicznego kryzysu, ale przede wszystkim na skraju ekologicznej katastrofy: z powodu klęski ludzkości grozi głód, a Ziemi zagłada. W obliczu globalnego zagrożenia Cooper, dawny pilot NASA, wraz z grupą naukowców pod kierownictwem profesora Branda wyrusza na międzygalaktyczną ekspedycję, która zakłada podróż przez tunel czasoprzestrzenny w okolicach Saturna w celu znalezienia planety mogącej posłużyć ocalałym ludziom jako drugi dom. Główna teza niniejszego artykułu zakłada, iż neutralizacja impulsów dystopijnych, skutkująca projekcją świata utopijnego, jest możliwa dzięki wprowadzeniu przestrzeni pogranicznej skonstruowanej według poetyki postmodernistycznej – pięciowymiarowej biblioteki – w której książki pełnią podwójną funkcję. Na płaszczyźnie tekstowej służą jako łącznik pomiędzy dystopijną teraźniejszością a utopijną przyszłością, natomiast na płaszczyźnie pozatekstowej funkcjonują jako uniwersalne medium komunikacji przekraczające granice czasu i przestrzeni.

Słowa kluczowe: dystopia, utopia, globalna katastrofa, ekologia, książki