

DYSTOPIAN THEME IN SOUTH KOREAN LITERATURE AND FILM

Nguyen Phuong Khanh

The University of Danang - University of Science and Education, Vietnam

Author corresponding: Nguyen Phuong Khanh - Email: npkhanh@ued.udn.vn

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Abstract: The theme Dystopia began as a response to Utopian theory, which is related to perfect communities. A dystopia is an imaginary community or society that is dehumanized and is therefore terrifying with people who are forced to battle for survival in a ruined environment with technological control and oppression by the governing authority. Dystopian novels or films can challenge readers to think differently about the current social and political contexts, and can even prompt positive actions for the future of human beings. Recently, not only America and Europe but also South Korea has witnessed the increasing release of a range of dystopian or post-apocalyptic films and novels. These creations reflect the harsh reality of our modern life in which human beings have to confront disasters, pandemics and problems of the modern industrialized society. Though usually set in a future scene, the dystopian theme can function as an open gate, an objection from the present, or as the “*archaeology of the Future*”. The success of South Korean literature and film on this topic claims the strong rise of South Korean wave in the world’s pop culture. It also shows that sci-fi works with dystopian theme can be seen as an anti-social discourse as well as their possibility of merging with the mainstream works.

Key words: dystopia; South Korean literature and film; science fiction; apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction; plague fiction.

1. Introduction

Dystopia is no longer a new term in human art life, literature or film. This notion was found in many neo-modern texts, such as the speech of John Stuart Mill¹ or *Utopia* of Thomas More’s². The concern of a decaying and disastrous society has become an interesting subject, originating as an abstract interpreter of resisting the government and defying powerful social institutions, or as a portrait of absurd invisible sentences that tighten individual fates. Even the old stories about Gargantua and Pantagruel giants, Western European gloomy Gothic stories, absurd plays, detective stories depicting law enforcement, magical realistic novels about the dictatorship in Latin America, or sci-fi novels about the

apocalypse and post-apocalypse..., all of them – to some extent - are inspired by a “dystopian” reality, a world that is not-as-dreams. But perhaps, it was not until the 20th century, which is the era of avant-garde art, technocracy, consumption and the crisis of social institutions, the invasion of technological machinery and equipment, the devastation of natural disasters and the catastrophes caused by human, that global literature and film really paid serious attention to Dystopia and has exploited the inspiration from it to the fullest, creating a new “ecosystem” that can counter the stereotypes of rank art (which see detective stories, fantasy, horror, action, etc.,

¹An English philosopher and political economist in the 19th century.

²The book *Utopia* by Sir Thomas Moore, published in 1516, describes a fictional society on an imaginary island in the Atlantic Ocean. The term “Utopia”, from here on, is used to refer to ideal social institutions and also become a prominent theme in science fiction.

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not academic literature but purely entertaining films that are often associated with sensational themes). Western literature and film are almost at the fore in building art worlds depicting a turbulent, brutal, dark society, and fantasy stories often exaggerate disasters and the world's end. In the East, the rise of South Korean entertainment industry is noteworthy when TV programs and bookshelves in many regions, including Vietnam, are filled with works from the land of kimchi. It can be seen that what marks the difference and proves the ability to quickly catch up with the global art trends of Korea are literary and cinematic pieces revolving around the topic of epidemics, disasters, apocalypse and the likes, a kind of post-modern dystopia. Obviously, this is not only the story of “timely” or “trendy” creation, but also a lead to the pursuit of various discourses, an aspiration to explain the truth of human life in the 21st century and the true nature of art works as well as the tastes of the public in the context of “masks are indispensable in Eden”.

2. Results

2.1. The world of “dystopia” – from reality to fiction

Dystopian literature (and Dystopian art in general) has been crowned since the 20th century, fundamentally tied to the sci-fi, which is a genre of fiction that inherently aims to further human in their dreams of conquering the world. It, to some degree, acts as a transition from the dark Gothic art genre of the West that began from the 18th ³ century. Born when Neoclassicism and Romanticism were two different emerging art movements, Gothic literature absorbed some imprints of a spirit full of a strict framework with the desire to escape out of the norms to fully express personal ego which could not satisfy the reality. Gothic art exploits dark corners in the human mind (i.e., fears, hysteria, ghosts, the death) and tends to push human emotion to an intensive state exceeding the threshold. What is distinguished in Gothic art is its scientific feature (the characteristic of reason of the era) which is

³Gothic fiction is a genre of fiction that combines horror and romance, often vividly describing mysterious stories with horror, despair, ridicule and dark aspects. It first appeared in England in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, then spread to other countries.

used harmoniously to make the story become an “ambivalence”, which brings a hesitant but both mythical and realistic sense. In general, the Gothic works of each country still follow the typical characteristics of the genre. They also reduce some details of horror and romance as well as bring their national culture into their works. For example, French Gothic is biased towards romantic affection that is hindered by super forces. German Gothic often focuses on the strange lives of knights and their fights against dark forces. Gothic literature of the Americas brings brand new topics such as zombies, shaman or themes of apocalypse. Those mentioned above are exactly the things that have brought new colors to Gothic literature, as it enables “*the imaginative expression of the fears and forbidden desires*” (Crow, 2009), “*presents in disturbing, usually frightening ways, a skeptical, ambiguous view of human nature and of history*” such as “*the repressed, what is hidden, unspoken, deliberately forgotten, in the lives of individuals and of cultures*” (Crow, 2009). Obviously, the art world of Gothic does not describe an ideal reality, however, as Poe stated, since humans are a “defective and potentially evil”, a world of corrupt and deforming people may appear as a multi-dimensional illustration and a great metaphor for issues that emerge from a background of “social anxieties” associated with traumas inside individuals. Thus, in essence, it is also a manifestation reflecting real life with civilized values that disintegrate, theoretical models of human innovation after revolutions, which is a picture of a society and individuals that are completely “enlightened” after thousands of years of building a variety of cultural values, freedom and liberation. Therefore, Frankenstein's⁴ monster is the first “blasphemy” to the belief that science's ability is limitless, so that later the world of “human clones” of Kazuo Ishiguro⁵ also marks a deep awakening of a dystopian world that is expressed in a different way.

⁴In a Gothic novel named *Frankenstein, The Modern Prometheus* (1818) of Mary Shelley.

⁵The novel *Never let me go* (2005) of Kazuo Ishiguro – an English – Japanese novelist. It is a dystopian science fiction novel about a society where humans are cloned to donate organs.

Dracula⁶ started a series of stories about the dark world – where people drink human blood or are cannibals or the walking dead. The holy and evil sides inside a single human being like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hide⁷ are other expressions of Gregor Samsa the bug and Joseph K.'s absurd freakish court in Franz Kafka's fiction.

In general, from the term Dystopia that originates from the dystopian world, Thomas More inspired the topics that describe social designs desiring to build perfect norms for individual existence, to bind individuals to rules (in other words, prejudices), to create maximum control over the ability of people to escape from the power of authority (for instance, this kind of dystopia can be seen in a short story entitled *I only came to use the phone* by Garcia Marquez). From this perspective, we realize that literary theories or writing trends often go together with philosophical and political doctrines, but in a contrary appearance. Inside the desire to perfect the social institutions of politics, there are forecasts of chaos and disintegration in the arts which express a strong critical attitude to human's path of innovation dominated by the ambition of the government or the delusion of infinite human power over nature, universe and other species.

However, in addition to the portrait of the gloomy reality as in American naturalism or Albert Camus' absurdist fiction, the dystopian theme in modern literature is often filled with more traits of fantasy (it should be noted that during Gothic times the theme merely involved fantastic factors; for example, Edgar Allan Poe primarily described the world of evil associated with fantastic phenomena, which is a kind of detective thriller that caused confusion by including spiritual elements – such as the appearance of Pluto cat). Common literary devices used in this type of composition are hyperbole, grotesque and parody associated with scientific and technical content or apocalyptic theories... Since the 20th century, dystopia has almost dominated in the sci-fi genre, in

which mixing gothic fantasies and disasters caused by the pandemic, the risk of being occupied by the aliens, the revolt of animals and robots or the flip side of inventions that seem to bring magic to human life can be mentioned. Emerging topics in science fiction in the late 20th and early 21st century are related to environmental issues, the impact of the Internet and the expansion of information technology, questions about biotechnology, nanotechnology, and post-scarcity economy⁸.

Thus, from the great fluctuations of humanity since the 20th century, art genres have also gone beyond the normal stereotypes of their responsibility to reflect reality, historical values or wise construction of Eden dreams inherently sprouted from the guilt of the original sin, the loss of Eden and the fall into the circle of birth, old age, illness and death of life. Literature and especially film have vigorously exploited the superiority of science fiction, in which sensational themes about a dark world such as *The Road* (2006) by Cormac McCarthy, post-apocalyptic world caused by ecological disasters such as *Waterworld* (1995), or another terrifying illusion as in *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) by Ray Bradbury are emphasized. Works that follow this trend are inspired by human social reality, and are seen as a means of protesting reality, a critical and satirical voice as well as a horrifying warning for the future. The Dystopian pieces in the flow of sci-fi (SF) are gradually classified as

⁸An economic theory of a time when goods would be so abundantly produced at such a low price that it could be served without any control, sometimes for free. This theory leads to an ideal future with the automatic operation of machines, as Marx argued, the post-capitalist society will no longer exploit labor, whereas automation will allow maximum reduction of labor power in the process of producing necessary goods, and then, people can be freer and have more spare time to pursue their passions or to work for other purposes. Other scholars, such as Murray Bookchin – an American scholar (1921-2006), also outlined an economy based on social ecology, communism, and a multitude of fundamental resources that would allow a possible pursuit of a post-scarcity society. At that time, accumulated needs were no longer considered a prerequisite for liberation, while obstacles in class struggles such as state institutions, social stratification, political parties, can be debunked like a myth.

⁶The novel *Dracula* (1897) of Bram Stoker.

⁷The novella *Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hide* (1886) of Robert Louis Stevenson.

“mainstream” or a kind of “serious literature”, as the American writer Gregory Benford asserted: “*SF is perhaps the defining genre of the twentieth century, although its conquering armies are still camped outside the Rome of the literary citadels.*” (Benford, 1998)

Dystopia is often present in the subgenres of SF, such as apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction, anthropological science fiction, etc. In the fictional branch of the apocalypse and post-apocalypse, the dystopian world boldly appears through the imagination of writers, screenwriters or directors. Its typical manifestations are usually the civilization of the Earth (or another planet – which plays as a metaphor of the Earth) that collapsed or had been destroyed; apocalyptic events caused by climate change with the destruction of life due to nuclear disasters or the shortage of natural resources; medical causes such as the pandemic; and natural or anthropogenic disasters. What is more horrifying is the complete end of human species caused by the invasion of aliens, the peculiar genetic modifications that create monsters or mutants, the rising of artificial intelligence (AI) or the sweep of zombies.

Interestingly, most of the above-mentioned dystopian art works belong to the West, where a variety of novels or films related to dystopia were produced from the early beginning. Asian literature has not been highly appreciated in terms of dystopian theme by the critics, except for Japanese science fiction and some South Korean films including *Train to Busan* – a movie related to the topic of pandemic.

In fact, the rise of Korean entertainment industry is thanks to its speedy grasp of attractively trendy topics, topicality and predictability. Dystopia appears everywhere in any forms, haunting us like an apocalypse, a curse - an *inside storm*⁹ that we can never escape. Therefore, Korean literature and film is as well an attempt to create a common discourse on life, reminding us to look straight at the current reality and go beyond the usual recreation with our instinct.

⁹The word is used by Haruki Murakami in his fiction *Kafka on the shore*.

2.2. South Korean literature and film and television on the topic of Dystopia – the case of epidemic and apocalypse storylines

2.2.1. The appeal of works on the topic of epidemics and disasters in South Korean literature and film

By surveying some South Korean literary works released in Vietnam and films shown on the big screen or on online platforms (e.g., Netflix), we can immediately recognize a decent number of works on the topics of disasters, epidemics, or apocalypse which are perfect combinations between reality and fantasy. They might not be at the same level as some Western works when put together; however, in Asia, South Korea nearly pioneers this Dystopian theme. For example, some top-grossing films which rock global box offices, such as *Train to Busan*, *Parasite...*, or Netflix series, such as *Kingdom*, set in South Korea’s Joseon Dynasty, and a recent movie named *Alive* set in a city with high buildings during a zombie apocalypse have all received great attention from the public.

Deranged (2012) is South Korea’s first medical thriller on an infectious disease epidemic. The film is about a constantly changing parasite called “Yeongasi” that destroys the human body by gradually controlling the host’s brain and completely kill him in the end. Kim Myeong-min plays Jae Hyuk, an employee of a pharmaceutical company trying to save his family from the pandemic.

Doomsday Book (2012) tells the story of human self-destruction in the modern high-tech era. It won the top prize at the Fantasia International Film Festival in 2012. This science-fiction anthology film consists of three stories of human deformity, including humans turning into zombies due to a viral infection, a RU-4 robot named In-myung that wants to become a Buddhist, and the meteor showers that force humans to live in underground shelters.

Flu (2013) is a South Korean disaster film written and directed by Kim Sung-su in 2013. It is about an outbreak of a deadly strain of H5N1 that kills its victims within 36-hour incubation period, causing Budang district of Seongnam City, where the population is nearly half a million, to fall into chaos. In addition to a virus-caused pandemic exaggerated by the fictional elements (as a forecast), the film also reflects the

attitudes and behaviors of people in tragic situations and the way the authority deals with the disaster.

Pandora, which premiered in December 2016, is a film about a nuclear disaster set in a fictional incident in South Korea. From a fantasy situation, the film portrays a profound picture of a struggle for survival in the disaster and the Government's response to that incident.

In 2016, a South Korean film named *Train to Busan* was introduced by Netflix and quickly became a blockbuster with "the highest domestically-grossing film of 2016 and the first Korean big hit about zombies"¹⁰. The film set a record with over 10 million tickets sold and grossed more than \$95 million worldwide¹¹. This South Korean horror sci-fi film is considered quite similar to *World War Z (2013)*¹², *The Walking Dead*¹³ or *The Road*, with an addition of more terrifying chasing scenes like those in *Mad Max: Fury Road*¹⁴. With this movie success, South Korea successfully entered the zombie field that had been dominated by the kingdom of Western movies and novels and been an integral part of Western popular culture, proving that South Koreans come later but are able to stand on the shoulders of the Hollywood giants.

Part 2 of *Train to Busan* is called *Peninsula (2020)*, following the former world's collapse due to the zombie apocalypse and also directed by Yeon Sang-ho. The film has grossed over \$35¹⁵ million worldwide.

¹⁰<https://www.netflix.com/vn/title/80117824>.

¹¹Based on the statistic on [https://www.the-numbers.com/movie/Busanhaeng-\(south-korea\)#tab=summary](https://www.the-numbers.com/movie/Busanhaeng-(south-korea)#tab=summary)

¹²An American action thriller film set in a zombie apocalypse, directed by Marc Forster, written by Matthew Michael Carnahan, Drew Goddard and Damon Lindelof, based on the novel of the same name by Max Brooks in 2006.

¹³An American television series of horror and post-apocalyptic genres writes about groups of survivors in a world full of zombies. Season 1 was aired in 2010, and there has been so far 11 seasons broadcast exclusively on AMC channel.

¹⁴An American film in the Mad Max series, directed and produced by George Miller in 2015, won 6 film awards in the 88th season of the Oscars. This dystopian movie takes the world as only vast deserts after the collapse of civilization, where people frantically wander in a battle for essential necessities, mainly water and gasoline.

¹⁵Based on the statistic on [https://www.the-numbers.com/movie/Ban-do-\(South-Korea\)#tab=summary](https://www.the-numbers.com/movie/Ban-do-(South-Korea)#tab=summary)

The zombie war continues with *Rampant* directed by Kim Sung-hoon, set in a rather unique ancient setting, with the presence of many well-known actors such as Hyun Bin, Jang Dong-gun. These ancient zombie themes also appeared in a TV series called *Kingdom* produced in 2019, with 2 seasons on Netflix so far. *Kingdom* is set in the Joseon dynasty of South Korea, 3 years after the famous Battle of Unpo Wetland, where 500 South Korean soldiers led by Governor Ahn Hyeon defeated an army of 30,000 Japanese invaders by using the resurrection grass to turn sick Sumang villagers into ferocious zombies. Crown Prince Lee Chang makes a great effort to help his people fight against the zombies and at the same time tries to save his dynasty from a conspiracy to seize power in the imperial palace. Zombies in *Kingdom* and *Rampant* have one common feature - the fear of light, which means they only come out at night. After those successes in the zombie theme, South Koreans continue with their imagination to create a new kind of urban zombies which are blind in the dark but sensitive to noise and especially able to retain the abilities as when alive (for example, climbing, unlocking doors, running fast, etc.). This zombie type is featured in the film *#Alive* directed by Cho Il-hyeong in cooperation with Zip Cinema and Perspective Pictures. The film starred Yoo Ah-in and Park Shin-hye and was premiered in South Korea on June 24, 2020. Netflix later acquired exclusive rights to stream it globally on September 8, 2020; the Vietnamese title is *#Alive: Tôi còn sống*. According to *The Wall Street Journal*, *#Alive* ranked 4th out of ten most viewed foreign films on Netflix in the U.S. in 2020 (Gameran, 2020).

In addition, the Vietnamese and the world public also know about other disaster-themed films featuring dramatic actions, dark horror of South Korea, such as *The Host (2006)*, *Haeundae (2009)*, *The Tower (2012)*, *Tunnel (2016)*, *Baekdu Mountain (2019)*, *Exit (2019)*... Especially, *Snowpiercer (2013)*¹⁶ also takes climate change as its topic. This series was later made into a TV series by Netflix with mostly Western actors. Boon Joon Ho's *Snowpiercer* illustrates a scene in 2031 where

¹⁶The first English-language film by talented South Korean director Boon Joon Ho (the director of *Parasite* that won the 2020 Oscar).

humanity is destroyed by the snow, returning to the frozen ice age, with only a train that travels a globe-spanning track carrying the last remnants of humanity around the Earth. The world in the extravagant front cars and the world in squalid tail compartments represent the class discrimination, which makes the film a bleak political parable mixed with some sense of humor, exactly as Boon Joon Ho's style.

For more than a decade, South Korean film has proved its strong rise in commerce and great improvement in technology, showing that romance and drama series for housewives are not all they have. The new kind of films shows a subtle perspective and a frank attitude towards the sensitive social issues of South Korea and the down sides of a rising wealthy capitalist society. It is also an exposed metaphor of a dystopian world – a harsh world where a poor dreamy girl in the middle of lavish urban can never meet her prince.

As for literary works, there are currently two novels exploiting the fictional world related to the epidemic, namely *City of Ash and Red* (Pyun, 2017) and *28* (Jeong, 2018), whose Vietnamese versions are sold in bookshops in Vietnam. Both books are based on the topic of epidemic but have different ways of designing their plots. *City of Ash and Red* by Pyun Hye-Young employs features of a whodunnit, telling the story of a nameless man sent by his company on an extended assignment in a country called C. Right after he arrives at the airport, he soon descends into chaos and paranoia due to a contagious disease. What is worse is that he is told his ex-wife was murdered while he becomes the prime suspect, which throws him into an endless escape. The story ends without any clear explanations about the case to the man. After a long period of struggling to survive in the streets of this chaotic city, he is finally saved and decides to live the rest of his life in C as a rat killer. While witnessing “the infectious disease spreading like a wildfire, then settling down and remaining soot everywhere, the man still sees green grass budding again from the dusty pieces of land” (page 255). People in C in the midst of the epidemic with the constantly increasing death rate decide to live with a calm attitude and accept their cruel fate.

28 – a novel by Jeong You-Jeong, a contemporary writer who has many years of experience in health care - illustrates a dark perspective when the red-eye disease

spreads. The infectious disease is transmitted to humans by humans' best friend - dogs, causing red swollen eyes and full-body hematoma that leads to a horrific death. The pandemic breaks out and becomes a disaster when information is sealed by the authorities. The citizens, who are trapped in the city of Hwa Yang, are caged and treated no differently from animals. The book describes 28 days of fear with a variety of characters, showing a world of brutality and inhumanity in the struggle for survival, where even the isolated in crisis ruthlessly step on each other to exist. Peaceful Hwa Yang, in a short pace of time, turns into a hell on Earth when blockaded, in which people struggle with diseases and with political intrigues, and therefore reveals the depraved humanity, the brutal control of the government and the end of a world without man” (the phrase used in the ending of the novel).

2.2.2. A new discourse on socialization and internationalization in the Dystopian era

South Korean works of literature and film pursuing the theme of disasters, pandemics or apocalypse as mentioned above are clearly not unfamiliar with the world. Dystopia is a vision of the future with societies decaying in the greatest cataclysms, with individuals fighting against environmental destruction, technological control, and government oppression. Dystopian novels or movies may challenge readers or viewers to think differently about nature, society, politics and humanity in the current context. In many cases, it may even inspire further actions. A decade ago, the readers or viewers might consider it as an integral part of science fiction. However, in the last two years, works of absurd fiction seem to become prophecies, and we may acknowledge them as predictive discourses upon reality.

The typical characteristics of the Dystopia Fiction are often associated with social issues such as: [1] the attitude of the authorities, regarding their dominance to create a perfect society (Government control), [2] the destruction of the environment that leads to disasters or pandemics (Environmental destruction), [3] the loss of human power to their technological inventions (Technological control) [4] human survival instinct (Survival) and [5] the loss of individual personalities, freedom, and corruption (Loss of individualism). South Korean literature and film also focus on these issues, the

most prominent of which are themes [1], [2], [4] and [5]. A world that collapses during and after disasters and the philosophies behind anarchy or people's effort to survive after an apocalypse have haunted viewers' mind, especially during the course of the Covid-19 pandemic. Same as other western Dystopian works, South Korean creations are not simply for entertainment, they also appear as a serious dialogue with the "mainstream", simultaneously evoke a flashback to the problems of civilization, of consumer capitalism, of technocracy, of races of technology and politics, and foresee the possibilities of humanity, a blowback to their selfish ambitions and atrocities in the past.

This feature makes South Korean works of art, whether set in Korea or not, boldly "internationalized", as *Dystopian is Everywhere*. The red flames igniting everywhere to burn human corpses in the novel *City of Ash and Red* are no different than the burning pyres in India in the last days of April 2021. Quarantines in the course of the influenza pandemic (in the film *Flu*) or red-eye epidemic (in the novel *28*) have also taken place worldwide, leaving the civilized world shocked by the lockdown of all activities. And the most frightening thing human have to face, which is to be abandoned and alienated by their fellow men (as Franz Kafka tragically described through the fate of a traumatic bug named Samsa – once human, but when he turned into a bug, he was caged in his own room by his own family), once again, presents on a wide scale, with incredible brutality and insanely senseless decisions of the authorities. These are pandemics, which appear anywhere and spread rapidly. This is reminiscent of a book by Nobel Prize-winning Spanish writer José Saramago named *Blindness*. When a sudden mass epidemic of blindness afflicting the citizens, all the blinds were captured in a quarantine area and here an inhumane world, filled with trash and violence, was exposed behind the isolated door. It seems that the works of South Korea or the West all show a horrific trait in the belief of humanity, that is, people are fragile, unwise, easily "corrupted" or "metamorphosed" (words by Franz Kafka), easily trampled creatures and not hesitant to expose savage nature in the dark realm of chaos. That thing is not the prospect of Utopia theory which always visualizes perfect communities as their people are transcendental. And perhaps, compared to Japan - the earliest

"Westernized country" in the Asia - Pacific, South Korea caught up with the West later but the issues behind a rapidly capitalized country that chooses entertainment industry as its path to develop globally were expressed in many different art forms, placed in an international discourse and aimed at global audiences. It is possible that those stories, either on a film or in a novel, may be witnessed in reality – or it will become a reality – anywhere on Earth. Japan addressed the dystopian problems earlier as a result of World War II, of the atomic bombs and of a country that stood up after the disaster by all means. Dystopian theme has already appeared in Japanese mangas and animes but little is seen in the works of official literature. It is possible that the journey of Shimamura in *Snow Country* of Yasunari Kawabata (the first Japanese writer to win the Nobel Prize in 1968) is also a heartsick picture of the decay of a beauty that is inherently the identity of Japanese soul, with the dazzling image of the fire burning beautiful Yoko on the immense ground covered with white snow. And the spooky glittering Milky Way flowing with fierce roars is a forecast for the loss and destruction of the whole culture, or in other words, the human soul itself. Oe Kenzaburo (the writer who won Japan's 2nd Nobel Prize) tries to describe a Japan with deep polarization and stifling grotesque by the "objectification" method (all images in his novel *A Personal Matter* are compared to animals, even the protagonist is also called *Bird*), by tragedy of corruption in appearance and humanity, which is possibly considered as an Oe-style Dystopian work. However, Korean works are more likely to deliberately exploit global issues, with a more intense and darker way of reflection. Therefore, when reading *City of Ash and Red* or *28*, the readers are knocked out by the brutal nature and the horror elements highlighted from the theme to the characters and context. In *28*, the world is a mixed combination between people and dogs, in which people and dogs, dogs and people, sick people and sick dogs cannot be categorized among the flaming red of sick eyes, of blood, of floods of dogs and human-forced in isolation, into the burial pits, into the non – human realm. With a quick collage, swift cutting and switching, many crossing points of view from different characters such as a firefighter, a nurse, a veterinarian or a dog..., Jeong You- Jeong brings dizziness and "nausea" to the readers just like when we watch similar scenes in

Parasites or *Flu*. And finally, as 28 barbaric days have passed by, the authority calmly asks everyone to “pause their daily routines and gather at the City Hall...” and the tragic pain of Hwa Yang is sunk in oblivion: “As if by burying the dead into the ground, this world buried Hwa Yang into the flow of time, and then return to its normal daily life.” (Jeong, 2018). Hwa Yang becomes a dense forest full of concrete blocks and corpses. Red Eye disease has burnt Hwa Yang like the inferno, with crimes committed everywhere and machine guns brought to massacre people by their authority. All of these may eventually become remains when Hwa Yang escapes people’s mind, but do the obsessions left by the book remind us of any possible futures of mankind in the context of the current epidemic?

In *City of Ash and Red*, Pyun Hye-Young does not even give her protagonist a name (or at least a letter K as Franz Kafka's character), and many unknown human beings appear only by numbers, or ones with names but never present. From the tragedy of being condemned as Joseph K. the banker, we turn to the character of Pyun Hye-Young, an unknown employee, promoted by his talent of killing rats (the theories about the rampant waves of rats appear throughout the book were, claimed by the author himself, inspired by the novella *Of Mice and Men*, a famous work by an American writer named John Steinbeck). The context of the epidemic takes place in a country marked as C (and a country marked as T where the protagonist and his wife used to travel), which could be anywhere. The story opens with a detective sense since the character is sent on a suspicious business trip to C, then is informed that his wife was killed, and he was suspected to be the murderer. While struggling to seek a shelter amid the haze in an unfamiliar country that is attacked by a fatal infectious disease, he mysteriously loses his suitcases and all his contacts before three strangers come knocking on the door of his room (which reminds us of two police officers and two executioners coming to find K. in *The Trial* by Kafka). Filled with a lot of confusion and fear, he flees by jumping from the balcony to the underneath rubbish dump and since then, he starts wandering in the filthy slum without any governance and fully filled with haze of decontamination smoke. The novel, at first thought to follow the genre of detective, turns out not to be “detective”, as the story does not focus on solving the case, but let it gradually

fall into oblivion with many people who have lived, died, burned alive and been dumped everywhere in this city of disease. In the midst of the haze of decontamination smoke, a variety of sewers filled with black filthy water that is full of rat corpses, the blazing ash of the areas used for burning corpses..., the main character constantly recalls his past (although he cannot fully remember all the events) and seeks to explain the breakage of relationships, especially between him and his wife (exactly his ex-wife, because they are divorced), then eventually realizes that he craves the moments of conversations - talking to each other even though it may be just a dialogue to the dead or about the death: “... She must have wished to tell him the moment she felt the death coming, how terrified she was, how much scared she was when the blade thrust into her body -...- she was so hopeless and when she realized she was on her last legs after being repeatedly hit by a knife, how much desperate she was, and when she sneezed out, used her last breath to witness the killer, who could imagine how terrified she was at that moment. Just as the man feels lonely because he cannot tell his ex-wife about his loneliness, his wife must have felt the same because she couldn't tell anyone about her death.” (Pyun, 2017).

Existential loneliness and anxiety are once again portrayed partly as a thorny problem of humans – something that never gets old, never comes to an end. People live on their lonesome in the skyscrapers, among crossing roads and continual epidemics¹⁷.

¹⁷Human plagues have appeared in Western literature since the Middle Ages. Boccaccio in *The Decameron, Or, Ten Day's Entertainment of Boccaccio* tells the story of 10 people who sheltered in a secluded villa outside Florence to escape the Black Death (plague), which later inspired Geoffrey Chaucer's famous British work named *Canterbury Tales* written in the 14th century. Tuberculosis appears in many Russian and English novels. *The Last Man* (1826) by Mary Shelley narrates a future of the Earth after the 21st century, ravaged by a pandemic, a mysterious disease that rapidly sweeps across the world, ultimately leading to the extinction of the Earth and most human beings. *The Plague* by Albert Camus in 1947 describes the plague from an absurd existential perspective. *The Scarlet Plague* (1912) by Jack London is a post-apocalyptic fiction, about the world in 2073, after the Red Plague wipes out the entire civilization...

Totalitarianism - a steel hand of the government - again leads to chaos, such as a place called “*Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*”¹⁸. Therefore, *City of Ash and Red* can be read as a discourse of globalization, debating the notion that a literary work must be the characteristic voice of gender, of nation, and the prejudice of deterritorialization. Literature will become borderless to establish its new boundaries in the era of globalization.

3. Conclusion

Recently, South Korean film is notable for its blockbuster *Parasite* (2019), which was awarded the *Palme d'Or* prize in the 2019 Cannes Film Festival in France and won 4 out of 6 Oscar nominations. It created a remarkable milestone in the history of South Korean film by becoming the first Asian film to win the 92nd Academy Award for Best Picture.

Parasite is considered as a black comedy film with a central theme of class warfare and social inequality. Obviously, we can immediately see that this is a common problem of all time. However, to some extent, we can see *Parasite* as a dystopian presentation of Bong Joon Ho's style. A world of Eden is built above the ground, with a luxurious mansion and a garden under the sun, and a dark hell lies underground, which is reminiscent of the basements filled with crimes in Edgar Allan Poe's gothic stories. Director Bong Joon Ho has made some sci-fi films (for example, *The Host*, *Snowpiercer*, *Okja*), but apparently, *Parasite* proves to be a realism-oriented movie. However, after watching *Parasite*, people seem to be unable to accept the devastating and exaggerating metaphors embedded inside. Without any portraits of monsters, technology nightmares or perverted killers, *Parasite* still disturbs audiences by naked truths, too ordinary people and an unbelievable tragedy. Will Kim Ki-taek's son be able to buy the mansion to free his father from the hell underneath, or will another case continue?

But after all, a dark reality, as a post-apocalypse, is still shown at the end of the film: Ki-woo continues

living with his mother in a poor semi-basement, Ki-jeong has been stabbed to death, and the father still hides himself in the old dark basement.

The film still reflects reality, and it is also a dark sarcastic shocking Dystopian picture. A Utopia is real, and so is a Dystopia. There is no need to put an end to one to lead to the beginning of the other as they co-exist. It is the portrait of our world today, looking from a perspective, and its inverted version, looking from a different perspective.

So, why do we keep spending money on films and books with a gloomy theme that frightens and depresses us? Are we also living at the end of the world surrounded with pandemics and catastrophes, with the significant waste of resources and dependence on technology, but we distract ourselves, fascinate ourselves and satisfy ourselves with the top products of entertainment; or because in some way, those works have issued a warning, an attempt to awaken humanity to act for their future?

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¹⁸The title of a novel by Haruki Murakami published in 1985.

ĐỀ TÀI “PHẢN ĐỊA ĐÀNG” TRONG VĂN HỌC VÀ ĐIỆN ẢNH HÀN QUỐC

Nguyễn Phương Khánh

Trường Đại học Sư phạm - Đại học Đà Nẵng, Việt Nam

Tác giả liên hệ: Nguyễn Phương Khánh - Email: npkhanh@ued.udn.vn

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Tóm tắt: Đề tài phản địa đàng (Dystopia) khởi đầu từ việc phản ứng với lý thuyết về xã hội không tưởng. Phản địa đàng chính là một cộng đồng hoặc xã hội hư cấu tàn phá nhân tính và rất u ám đáng sợ với những con người phải đấu tranh sinh tồn trong môi trường bị huỷ hoại, sự khống chế của công nghệ và sự áp bức từ thể lực thống trị. Những cuốn tiểu thuyết hoặc bộ phim kiểu phản địa đàng có thể thách thức người đọc suy nghĩ khác về tình trạng xã hội và chính trị, và từ đây có thể thúc đẩy những hành động tích cực nào đó vì tương lai. Gần đây, không chỉ phương Tây mà cả Hàn Quốc đã chứng kiến sự ra mắt liên tục các bộ phim hay tiểu thuyết thể loại phản địa đàng hoặc hậu tận thế. Những tác phẩm kiểu này đã phản ánh tình trạng khắc nghiệt của bối cảnh đời sống nhân loại hiện đại khi phải đối diện với các thảm họa, dịch bệnh và những vấn đề của xã hội công nghiệp hoá hiện đại. Mặc dù thường lấy bối cảnh ở tương lai, nhưng thể loại phản địa đàng có thể xem như một cánh cửa mở, một thái độ phản kháng, từ chính thực tại, một “khảo cổ học cho tương lai”. Những thành công của văn học và điện ảnh Hàn Quốc trên đề tài này khẳng định sự phát triển mạnh mẽ của làn sóng Korean trong văn hoá đại chúng thế giới. Đồng thời cũng cho thấy các tác phẩm khoa học viễn tưởng lấy đề tài phản địa đàng có thể được xem là một diễn ngôn kháng cự xã hội cũng như khả năng hợp nhất với nghệ thuật dòng chính.

Từ khóa: Phản địa đàng; văn học và điện ảnh Hàn Quốc; khoa học viễn tưởng; tiểu thuyết tận thế và hậu tận thế; tiểu thuyết dịch bệnh.