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**FROM PROGRESS TO RUIN: THE MODERN UTOPIA AND ITS COLLAPSE IN
*BIOSHOCK: RAPTURE AND THE DYSTOPIAN GENE***

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Abstract

The ambiguous connection between utopia and modernism is in need of a closer analysis, as the desire and search for an ideal state/place is a long running theme in literature generating ideas of what a modern city ought to be. The advancement of science and technology is ever-changing, expanding, and improving. And man has never been more powerful than he is now thanks to modern, updated science and technology. But Australian novelist and philosopher, Robert Musil once said, Progress would be wonderful — if only it would stop. A plethora of literature, art, and cinema is out there that talks about such progress of men. The Dystopian Gene (2021) by S. E. Meyer and John Shirley's BioShock: Rapture(2011) are fine examples of such futuristic societies where it all starts with a utopian vision, but one dives deep into the truth only to find that not everything which seems perfect is indeed good. This paper examines the transfiguration of utopian ideals into dystopian realities exploring how both narratives interrogate the fragility of modern utopias. Drawing on themes of technological ambition, bioethics, and social engineering, the analysis reveals how visions of progress—rooted in human perfectibility and liberation from societal constrictions—collapse under the weight of unhindered power and ethical erosion. By comparing Andrew Ryan's underwater city-Rapture with the genetic manipulation-driven Easton of Cornelius Cromwell, the study highlights how the pursuit of perfection often hastens decay, turning promises of progress into cautionary tales of ruin.

Keywords: Genetic Engineering, Modernism, Progress, Technology, Utopia

The image of modern utopian cities of the future has been used by modernists and futurists to “tell the story of metropolis focused on progress, innovation, and governance activities” (Ma). This idea of modern utopia or more precisely, the city of technology comes from the architectural utopia of the Sixties, and it represents a vertical city, “where buildings are high and crowded, relegating citizens to a lower dimension. The city, like a god, controls everything from above” (Venditti). Subsequently, modern utopian thinking “aims to summon aspiration: to desire more, to dream more, and to dream in new ways” (Ma). Moreover, with the passage of time, “the idea of innovation has become more and more connected to software rather than hardware: the immaterial dimension has taken the place of technical physical details, giving to reality an intangible feature. Today, the City of Technology is a place where invisible technology interacts more and more with the physical space and its inhabitants” (Venditti).

Thomas More’s *Utopia* is a political satire written in Latin and published in 1516. Utopia literally refers to “no place”. It is an ideally, isolated, perfect place in terms of politics, justice, law, government, and social conditions. Since its creation, the word has been employed by many authors, artists, and futurists in their works, where they tried to define what an ideal or perfect world would look like. Of particular, in all these works the authors have solely engaged and envisioned a utopian place somewhere in the future. It is a belief that technology and continuous progress towards a better and advanced future could eradicate all human problems and provide an idyllic environment for humans to live. Similarly, the modernists also believed in the progress of technology and a better future. As Timothy Benson has put it, “Utopia functioned within Modernism as a continuous, constructive means of self-critical renewal, an enactment of the central tenet of the avant-garde: creative artistic endeavors can embody hope and prepare the way for better conditions for humanity” (qtd. in Bowman). Thus, within Modernism, utopia was not just a static dream of a perfect world, but a dynamic process which inspired people, artists, writers, and thinkers to hope for a better tomorrow. It embodies the potential to critique and renew the value, form, and structure of the culture.

The important characteristics of the Modern age included the radical shift from tradition which could be seen as the essence of modernism. Modernism judged everything in the light of the new and had discarded and replaced the outdated ones. “Much of the modern world has replaced the Biblical-oriented value system, re-evaluated the monarchical government system, and abolished the feudal economic system, with new democratic and liberal ideas in the areas of politics, science, psychology, sociology, and economics” (Modernism & modernist). It was an age of discovery and globalisation with optimism and belief in constant progress. “The modern era [was] closely associated with the development of individualism,

capitalism, urbanisation and a belief in the positive possibilities of technological and political progress" (Modernism & modernist literature). This progress was a result of human efforts to better their situation and advance in all areas of life. It has transformed an "old world" into the new modern world. Even though,

In its earliest incarnations, modernism fostered a utopian spirit, stimulated by innovations happening in the fields of anthropology, psychology, philosophy, political theory, and psychoanalysis... This new idealism ended, however, with the outbreak of war, when writers began to generate more cynical postwar works that reflected a prevailing sense of disillusionment and fragmented thought. Many modernist writers shared a mistrust of institutions of power such as government and religion, and rejected the notion of absolute truths. (Modernism)

There is no doubt that the First and Second World Wars had a huge influence on the literature of the ages; as both the wars ended many delusions, and presented a devastating picture of how technology and advancement could affect human life in negative ways. The modern era wars had filled human life with terror and uncertainty of their existence and safety, and as a result the world was again in desperate need of a new place, possibly a utopia, as an escape from the pains and groans of the present modern world.

The traces of modern utopia as an immediate reaction to the Second World War is textualized in the novel *Bioshock: Rapture* (2011) by John Shirley. The novel is set against the background of World War Second in 1946 North Atlantic Ocean. The opening scene sets out with Andrew Ryan, a business magnate and his utopian dream. Born as Andrei Rianofski in the Soviet Union, Ryan grew up under a communist rule and witnessed firsthand the dangers of state control and suppression of individuals. Therefore, in search of a good life, he flew to the USA where he became devoted to the philosophy of objectivism and individual liberty. He was careful enough to "calculated that the two gigantic empires possess dangerous weapons powerful enough to destroy the entire city, he waited no more but moved ahead with his project a solution for the gigantic problem. A new world "Rapture" (Shirley). His desire was to build a new underwater world "Rapture" that will be "magnificent, unafraid, and a fortress dedicated to freedom" (Shirley). There are two main points worth noting here: Primarily, Ryan's desire to escape the present world, as he knew very well is going to be ruined sooner or later. "We can escape, you and I—and certain others. We can escape from the mutual destruction of the mad little men who scuttle about the halls of government power" (Shirley). The next strategic notion he devised was the location he chose: an underwater utopia: "We are going to build a new world in the one place these madmen cannot touch" (Shirley). His ultimate aim was to create a whole new society, "one which will utterly replace the vile, squirming anthill humanity has become" (Shirley). Ryan was not only considerate about the aftermath of war, but also about the problems prevalent in the society.

He declares his disagreement in the following way: “This isn’t the ‘land of the free’ it pretends to be. It’s the land of the taxed. Every society is the same on the face of the earth these days. But Bill— suppose it were possible...to leave the face of the earth? Just for a time. Just for a century or two. Until the fools have destroyed themselves with their Hiroshima bombs” (Shirley). The passage highlights the illusion of freedom and the standardised situation widespread around the world. It also suggests that all contemporary societies—regardless of their ideology—are equally faulty. So, Ryan announces his desire to escape the situation because of his survival instinct.

The rejection of the supremacy of God and tradition was one of the fundamental characteristics of the modernists. Ryan states, “We need no gods or kings in Rapture! Only man! Here, man and woman will be rewarded with the sweat of their brows” (Shirley). As the founder of Rapture, Ryan's statement is a proof of his radical individualist and libertarian utopian vision. In his underwater utopia, there is no place for either divine authority or political hierarchy, because his objective was to bring freedom to mankind from all kinds of burdens. He considers religious institutions and government as oppressive structures that try to restrict human potential. He again declares, “Here, without interference, we will prove that society can order itself with unfettered competition, with unfettered free enterprise—with unfettered research!... Science will advance without the oversight of pompous tyrants who would impose their personal view of ‘morality’ on us” (Shirley). Ryan believes that laissez faire government and moral lose could help humans strive for more. The declaration, "Rapture will be a great cathedral—but not to God. To man’s will!" (Shirley) is a bold ideological statement. Aligning with Enlightenment and modernist ideals that celebrate human reason and progress, the statement relocates humanity as the object of worship and reverence. A glimpse of Rapture portrays it as a safe, egalitarian environment, free of ethical, moral, and scientific barriers. “A city where the artist would not fear the censor. Where the scientist would not be bound by Petty morality. Where the great would not be constrained by the small” (Shirley). There was nothing that could stop artists, scientists, and individuals from achieving the desires of their hearts. Emancipated by morality, equality, or tradition, Rapture glorifies the supremacy of man’s will and effort. But the reality of Rapture exposes the danger of such a vision. A place without ethical concerns, social balance or supervision is close to its ruins.

Rapture was changing, and Ryan was unable to stop it from happening. When Fontaine confirmed that Ryan had indeed built a massive underwater habitat, “a kind of free-market utopia”— he knew what happens to utopias. So, he patiently waited for the right opportunity to carry out his own strategic plan. Because such “‘utopia’ was a pure opportunity for a man like him. When this undersea utopia fell apart, he’d be there, with a whole society to feast on” (Shirley). While Ryan represents an imperfect idealist trying to build a utopia, Fontaine is the

Machiavellian who exploits that very utopia for his personal gain. His character is crucial in highlighting the internal conflict and unavoidable collapse of Rapture. He was aware that a system without regulation or ethical limits is ripe for exploitation — and he took advantage of it ruthlessly. He funds illegal ADAM labs, runs black-market networks, and uses Rapture’s underclass as pawns to seize control. Ryan had built Rapture, his brave new world to match his dream, but it had become a nightmare. The idea that Rapture's failure signifies is rather evident: “humans, when left unchecked, don’t thrive but kill each other” (Lopes). As Leszek Kolakowski also wrote: “to go to the length of imagining that we can design some plan for the whole society whereby harmony, justice and plenty are attained by human engineering is an invitation to despotism” (qtd. in Sargent).

A more recent description of Modern Utopia can be found in S. E. Meyer's *The Dystopian Gene* (2021). In the novel, the city of Easton is well surrounded by walls to protect the citizens from the outside world's chaos. One has access to all forms of treatment, safety, and protection. The only problem is who can afford it. But, the more one dives deep into the roots, the more one discovers the delusion under which the people are living their life. The novel brilliantly uncovers the illusions of choice and safety available for citizens of Easton. The mechanism of how it works is again an interesting point and a new dimension of modernism.

The technology, in the form of the Project Shepherd by Cromwell Corporation, plays a crucial role. Project Shepherd is all about the citizens and as a herd of sheep is safeguarded by a single shepherd, so it is with the citizens where their shepherd is a modern electronic computer, a mega project. “Project Shepherd was always about being able to herd all the sheep, simultaneously, in real time...Nothing can escape or be hidden from this” (Meyer). The project only needs a person’s smart phone to record and analyse all the data needed. As Richard, the next heir of the Cromwell dynasty explains, “Even when their phone is in their pocket or on their desk, the microphone is on. We're always listening... If his phone isn't working or if his battery is dead, the computer uses the microphone of anyone within earshot. In fact, we are recording and analyzing over one hundred thousand simultaneous conversations at this moment” (Meyer). The project adds another layer by not only recording and analysing information, but measuring the threat level of the citizens. The citizens are required to live a life of a good little sheep, and are expected to take their vaccines and treatments on time, and cannot rebel or go against the governing power. This highlights the breach of privacy, as nothing is hidden from the authority. And these “platforms that surveil user behavior...have the power to manipulate opinions and behaviors, subtly influencing...social movements, and consumer habits” (Youvan 4). Other than the project Shepherd, Cromwell Corporation was also managing all the food companies too. Richard declares: "We set up a new holding company that will re-absorb all five of the top food

companies under your majority stock holdings and we spun off two more, to add a little more illusion of choice”(Meyer). A monopolistic system dominance, public opinion manipulation, and the preference for profit over genuine competition reflects the hallmarks of dystopian capitalism.

Cornelius Cromwell was not only monitoring the actions of the citizens but their health as well. Being appointed as interim president of the Food and Drug Board, he had full control over the food companies, the pharmaceuticals along with all the hospitals. Now, people may wonder why the corporation is doing all these things? Why does only one company controls everything? What could be the possible agenda behind all these? Well, the answer is pretty simple,

Cromwell figured out a way to hold everyone's health at ransom. Because, if one owns all the hospitals and clinics, there's no money in healthy people, is there? There's no money in dead people either. Cromwell has figured out a way to keep everyone right where he wants them, somewhere in-between. Poisoning the very food, we buy to make us sick, and then profiting from the treatments to keep us healthy. (Meyer)

So, in short, “the sheep are paying for the poisoned grass that feeds them on their way to get treatments to stay healthy, all while emptying their pockets to the same people that poisoned them in the first place!” (Meyer). In the novel, not only the health of the citizens is treated in such a ridiculous way, but the treatment they receive is also not much harmless. The mandatory treatment and vaccines the people receive is because of a newly discovered Fleishman’s disease. But the vaccine was actually modifying the genes in the body of the individual. As Isabelle states the treatments are there, “To make us more docile, submissive, non-combative and suggestible. That would explain why no one is willing to stand up and do anything. [or] Fight for change...Our original human DNA is all we have...It makes us who we are. All of our creativity, our drive, and ambition. Humanity's strength and will. They've stolen that and turned us into mind controlled slaves” (Meyer). The lines reflect the use of biopower to create social passivity and systematic erosion of critical thinking and resistance. As Douglas C. Youvan in “From Fiction to Reality” states,

The moral implications of enforcing compliance through technology are profound. Free will is a cornerstone of human identity, morality, and dignity. The ability to choose between different courses of action, even if some choices lead to harm or failure, is fundamental to personal growth, creativity, and moral responsibility. Removing or constraining this freedom risks reducing individuals to passive subjects, unable to exercise agency over their lives. (25)

And “... this unethical advance of science provides a stimulus to the downfall of humanity: if people already have a strong tendency to violence, technology only facilitates it” (Lopes).

Everything the Cromwell Corporation was doing is having some hidden agenda similar to a fascist. It is also responsible for inducing unwanted fear. The “fear of what people will think of us, fear to disappoint, fear of standing out, fear of being ridiculed. Fear to offend. It played right into the marketing companies' psychological warfare plans" (Meyer). Even as that was not enough for the authority, they control social media. "So now people didn't have to keep up with their neighbours and coworkers alone. No, now everyone has a thousand friends to compare themselves to, right?" (Meyer) The use of social media is not only limited to initiating unwanted fear and baseless comparisons, but also for the promotion of fake agenda. These platforms are being used by the corporates as an agent to promote and hype its aim, ratings, commodities and leaders. In the novel Cromwell was “climbing strongly across social media and stand to gain there. Thanks to the tens of thousands of fake accounts [the] computers monitor. They're always working hard to sway their...friends" (Meyer).

The clear differences between the past modern utopian thinking to the present are the infiltration of the food consumed, and the use of social media platforms to manipulate, deviate, transform, and control the masses. The Fleishman's disease was there to ensure double profit: one was to make people docile and submissive so that the history of wars of the Modern age would not be repeated; and the other was to ensure a continuous profit to the elite. If the greediness and hidden agenda of the elite are kept aside, another enemy of humanity is the unfettered progress. Because it is serving the elite and corporate motives to ensure mass control and manipulation.

In conclusion, one may agree that the modernists belief in progress and utopia's concept of an ideal place goes hand-in-hand while dreaming about the future. However, it is also true that the idealness of such a place makes it unattainable, turning the very cause into something totally different. As, “utopian has come to be a code word on the left for socialism or communism; while on the right it has become synonymous with ‘totalitarianism’ or, in effect, with Stalinism” (Ma). In other words, “utopia-lite ends up being process, not system; journey, not destination. The point is not to build something, but merely to care passionately about the idea of building something” (Bowman). All these things are only possible because of technological progress. In this race of development, growth, and innovation man has forgotten the boundaries and ethics labelling them all under an umbrella term “Progress”. So, “The notion that even as the future of technology arrives, another future and another inevitable need for ‘more’ awaits” (Spears), clearly summons the writing that utopia with modernism is quite unattainable. Whether it is Andrew Ryan's unchecked, moral lose society, or Cromwell's genetic surveillance society, both challenge readers to consider ethical and societal costs of prioritizing profit over public good. To counter these trends Youvan suggests, “society must advocate for stronger regulatory frameworks, greater corporate transparency, and the preservation of democratic principles,” because without proper

precautions, “the future could see corporations replacing governments as the primary architects of society, leading to a world where profit reigns supreme and the rights of individuals are subordinate to the whims of corporate overlords” (11-12).

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