

## BOOK REVIEWS

Anna Bugajska. *Engineering Youth: The Evantropian Project in Young Adult Dystopias*. Krakow: Ignatianum University Press 2019

In the context of our Western culture, utopias amount to a strange but multifarious phenomenon. They are associated with many different kinds of disciplinary approach, application and interpretation. The notion of “utopia” can be regarded as marking out a theoretical current traceable as far back as to Plato’s *Republic* and *Laws*, or as a literary genre, starting with Thomas More’s book written in the sixteenth century. Moreover, it can also even be construed as including any intentional community formed around ideals that diverge significantly from the status quo. Thus, anyone immersing themselves in the fertile and diverse jungle of utopian studies is bound to end up with a set of interests that are interdisciplinary in character. At any rate, this is certainly what happens to most scholars working in this field, and it also holds true for Anna Bugajska—a young but prolific literary scholar whose promising research lies at the crossroads of literature, philosophy, bioethics and cultural studies.

*Engineering Youth* is a thematic exploration of a particular image of youth in contemporary cultures. The framework for this stems from transhumanist movements, and a key concept here is that of “evantropia,” which I will explain in the ensuing paragraphs. Bugajska’s methodology focuses on the study of a selected segment of this culture framed by transhumanism: young adult literature. Readers should not be misled by the name: young adult literature is not addressed only to young adults—rather, it represents the ideal of youth of our times, and so also reflects the interest of all adults in this particular kind of imagery and literature.

## I

The appreciation of the body and sexuality, fanned by feminist movements and in reaction to Victorian moral ‘puritanism,’ created demand for the body as a product. (30)

In the first chapter of her book, entitled “Human Enhancement and the Evantropian Project,” Bugajska introduces the concept of evantropia with a view to applying it to notions of human enhancement linked to transhumanism and to some of the youth-obsessed discourses of our times. She understands it as an “umbrella term encompassing and emerging from biopunk dystopias” (24). Evantropia is a way of conceiving not only morphological modifications to the human body, but also adjacent realities involving the subject-world relation. The notion can be applied to the typology of enhancement proposed by the German philosopher M. Hauskeller, who distinguishes between physical, cognitive, emotional and moral forms of enhancement. However, Bugajska herself prefers to group the last three of these together under the label of “subjectivity enhancement.”

The oldest reference to the concept of evantropia appears in the work of two Cuban physicians: E. Hernández Pérez and D. F. Ramos Delgado, at the beginning of the twentieth century. They coined it on the basis of the Greek *ευ-*, meaning “good,” and *ανθρωπος*, meaning “human being,” and took it to include two elements: on the one hand, what they called “homiculture,” and on the other, “eugenics.” I myself have since endeavoured to recuperate the concept, and have recently sought to reframe it as representing a new stage in the history of utopianism, following on from the “eutopian,” “euchronic” and “eupsychic” stages.<sup>1</sup> Bugajska has questioned my view of evantropia as solely focused on physical enhancement, and has coined the term “eusomia” to help me distinguish the social aspect of the kind of enhancement I am concerned with from the individualistic sort that I myself am not inclined to consider utopian at all. Furthermore, in the present volume, she goes beyond my more restrictive definition of “utopia,” opting to make use instead of the expression “evantropian project,” which she understands as referring to a project aimed at creating “the perfect human.” It is one that encompasses both evantropia and eusomia, democratic and

1. Lucas E. Misseri, “Evantropia and Dysantropia: A Possible New Stage in the History of Utopias.” In *More after More*, edited by K. Olkusz, M. Kłosiński, and K. M. Maj, 26–43. Krakow: Facta Ficta, 2016.

libertarian transhumanist views, utopian and dystopian features, and both physical and subjectivity-related forms of enhancement.

Furthermore, Bugajska stresses that her preferred spelling of “evantropia”—as distinct from “evanthropia,” which could be regarded as more appropriate in English—has the advantage of including the idea of a “trope,” in the sense of certain figurative devices encountered in literature, as well as the Greek word for “change” (τροπή), as presented in the work of the transhumanist philosopher Max More in the context of his ideal of “extropia” as opposed to entropy. However, while More has attempted to explicitly distance his “extropian” principles from utopianism, Bugajska sees a link between the evantropian project and two of More’s own principles, these being the *principle of self-transformation* and the *principle of dynamic optimism* (45).

Finally, Bugajska holds that if we are to have a complete grasp of what the concept of evantropia involves, it should be contrasted with the classical ideal of *eudaimonia*, understood as human happiness or flourishing. She finds that this new way of thinking about contemporary dystopias proves fruitful when it comes to evaluating the kinds of enhancement presented in the sort of fiction she is dealing with, and on this basis takes it as furnishing a better way to make sense not only of the new technologies involved, but also of how we view them.

## II

Evantropia as a social project is concentrated on actual emerging technologies, and their social, political and ethical implications for people and the world they currently inhabit. (132)

In her second chapter, “Building a Literary Evantropia: From Huxley to the Present,” Bugajska analyses the limitations of the concept of eugenic dystopia, and builds a case for the concept of literary evantropia, first on the basis of literature targeted at an adult audience, and later, more specifically, on that of young adult literature. Bugajska links the origin of evantropia to Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932). By contrast, a Spanish writer, Francisco Martorell Campos, has judged that same work to be a milestone in the exploration of technological dystopias.<sup>2</sup> Both views may be regarded as converging on Bugajska’s conception of the evantropian dystopia as

2. Francisco Martorell Campos, *Soñar de otro modo: cómo perdimos la utopía y de qué forma recuperarla*, Algemesi: La Caja Books, 2019.

corresponding to the misuse of biotechnologies, in that precisely those emergent technologies constitute the main difference between Huxley's novel and other eugenic elements present in utopias and dystopias. For instance, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Thomas More, Tommaso Campanella, and Francis Bacon all made mention of some forms of eugenics, but did so in a very traditional way, treating this as a procedure for matching people with one another in order to optimize features relating to both their bodies and their character. The model they had in mind was that of animal breeding. Even Francis Galton's conception, in his 1911 eugenic utopia *Kantsaywhere*, is not that different from this latter notion.<sup>3</sup> *Kantsaywhere*'s novel feature is the organisation, and sometimes prohibition, of reproduction via a system of points based on genealogical and physiological testing. But Huxley's new world included cloning, the bio-designing of human castes, and hypnopaedic practices, all on a global scale. Following in the footsteps of G. Claeys, eugenic dystopias can be construed as amounting to a second dystopian turn, but the British historian places Huxley's book second, after Zamyatin's *We* (1924), which was published almost a decade earlier. Nevertheless, I myself am inclined to support Bugajska's and Martorell Campos' view to the effect that something different started with Huxley. In Zamyatin's book, the technology is not as radical as in *Brave New World*: D-503, the main character in *We*, is diagnosed as possessing "soul," and all the technology around him is designed to make him transparent and rational, but devoid of emotion. It is thus more of a psychological dystopia than a eugenic or an evantropic one.

Bugajska notes that in contrast to earlier dystopias, evantropias include an ethical message that presupposes some degree of biotechnological knowledge on the part of readers. Evantropias are in the midst of biopunk and dystopias, and what helps us to recognize them is the criterion of "biovaluability." This certainly implies some bioethical concerns, yet in the narrative context what we see is that emergent technologies are basically aimed at improving human well-being, or at the negative equivalent of this, meaning human enhancement's dystopias. Among the characteristic topics of the literary evantropia, Bugajska enumerates the following: bioethical issues, human enhancement-related rhetoric, the tension between eutopia and dystopia, the thriller as a preferred conventional genre, posthuman and/or transhuman characters, and, finally, some sort of biosocial perspective. All these are prototypical characteristics, though they will not all be

3. Francis Galton, "The Eugenic College of Kantsaywhere." *Utopian Studies* 12, no. 2 (2001): 191–209.

exemplified by any one given text. Bugajska also mentions some other possible candidate texts as ones she will not be addressing in her last chapter, but which she nevertheless considers noteworthy: apart from Huxley's *Brave New World*, these are L. Lowry's *The Giver* (1993) and M.T. Anderson's *Feed* (2002), with the latter being closer to a biopunk dystopia than evantropia. Having defined her conception of evantropia, she is then in a position to apply it to young adult literature, too.

### III

If there is a morphological freedom, there must be a morphological slavery.  
(172)

In the third chapter, "Human Enhancement in YA Dystopias," Bugajska focuses on physical enhancement and "subjectivity enhancement"—the latter corresponding to a set of interrelated enhancements including cognitive, emotional and moral ones. The corpus of young adult dystopias Bugajska has chosen is a highly diverse one, including 65 texts, of which those subjected to the most thoroughgoing analysis are, amongst others, *Artemis Fowl* (2001-2012) by Eoin Colfer, the *Uglies* series (2005-2007) by Scott Westerfeld, James Patterson's *Maximum Ride* cycle (2005-2015), *The Unwind Dystology* (2007-2014) and *The Arc of a Scythe* (2016-2019) by Neal Shusterman, and Dan Wells' *Partials* (2012).

After having analysed the concept of an evantropian project as a utopia combined with human enhancement by means of emergent technologies, Bugajska applies it to her young adult dystopian corpus, aiming to arrive at a more explicit understanding in the process. First, she looks at physical enhancement, dividing this into four main categories: morphological freedom, the making of hybrids and chimeras, overmen as supersoldiers, and the pursuit of immortality. "Morphological freedom" is a term coined by Anders Sandberg to explain how an individual has a right to alter herself in ways that, through technological enhancement, will help express her identity and willpower. This therefore concerns not just what might be considered athletic enhancement, aiming at a better performance in respect of certain skills, but also cosmetic enhancement in Juengst's and Moseley's sense.<sup>4</sup> What is closer to athletic enhancement, though, is the

4. Eric Juengst, and Daniel Moseley, "Human Enhancement", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by E. N. Zalta (Summer Edition 2019), accessed July 17, 2019. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/enhancement/>.

third category Bugajska employs: supersoldiers. While morphological freedom means converting the body into a means for the expression of one's identity, this other category corresponds to a weaponization of the human body. Construed thus, it usually undermines human dignity by converting the human person into a mere means for waging war, and thus a disposable instrument. The second and fourth categories, meanwhile, aim to take one beyond the human: into the realm of hybrids, cybrids, and chimeras, or posthuman immortals. Bugajska employs the concept of biovaluability to evaluate these enhancements in the context of the evantropian projects of some of the young adult dystopias already mentioned. By "biovaluability" she understands the possible value such enhancements can have for human lives and humans' well-being. While morphological freedom tends to be invested with a positive biovalue, the cases of hybridization and immortality remain unclear, and that of the weaponization of humans clearly shows up as negative.

In contrast to the above, what Bugajska refers to as "subjectivity enhancement" is more problematic. This is firstly due to the fact that it appears to be based on a dualistic view of the human being articulated in terms of notions of physicality and subjectivity. Also, the distinction between cognitive, emotional and moral forms of enhancement—as she herself acutely recognizes—is problematic, on account of their being mutually intertwined. Despite this, Bugajska asserts that cognitive enhancement plays no major role in the evantropian projects of young adult dystopias. As a consequence, its biovalue "is rather low" (212). Meanwhile, emotional enhancement, analysed with reference to memory enhancement, "is accorded an overwhelmingly negative biovalue" (219). The case of moral enhancement is more ambiguous, but what Bugajska stresses here is a general suspicion towards science as a way of dealing with subjectivity. This is interesting, in that being addressed to young adults, these novels tend to serve as a means for helping them form their own identities, while the message that can ultimately be extracted seems to be that subjectivity cannot itself be "built" with technology. Even so, this need not preclude technology's playing a key role in our lives, or entail this role's being a purely negative one. Moreover, if we agree with Bugajska, then the negative treatment of subjectivity enhancement can be seen as revealing more about the limitations and outdatedness of dystopian authors than about the forms of technology available now.

## IV

It would be valid, then, to ask who dreams the evantropian dream. (134)

Having outlined the key ideas presented over the course of the three chapters of Bugajska's book, I now wish to conclude with some critical remarks concerning her view of evantropia, in the hope of opening up the conversation surrounding this to a broader public. Bugajska sets out to defend this concept as a tool for analysing dystopias, and I believe she has succeeded in showing that it is a serviceable notion when seeking to assess the large number of literary works available—at least for extracting not only the *Zeitgeist* of Anglophone young adult dystopias, but also their shortcomings, and for delineating certain normative guidelines also potentially relevant to real evantropian projects outside of literature. However, there remain some tensions in her conception of that project. Sometimes, for example, it appears to be a unified endeavour, such as would demand a unified ethics to evaluate it, and we see Bugajska employing the concept of biovaluability to arrive at ethical evaluations of the different kinds of enhancement that appear in the dystopian corpus she is analysing. Yet it is hard to imagine what, exactly, “biovaluability” itself could mean independently from some ethical grounding or other, and unfortunately we do not find any such grounding made explicit in her work.

Another important tension in Bugajska's conception of the evantropian project is between the social drive of utopianism and the individual drive that she herself associates with the transhumanist movement. Even conceding the assumption that there is a unified transhumanist movement, the thought that this tension could not be resolved in favour of the social drive construed as some sort of democratic transhumanist claim strikes me as somewhat dubious. (What about, for example, James Hughes, as well as certain Francophone philosophers, all of whom prefer to talk about “technoproggressives”?) In Bugajska's thinking, on the other hand, this tension seems to be dissolved in a quite different manner, in that she speaks of “true evantropia” when referring to one focused on individual enhancement (233), and of “social evantropia” (rather than just “evantropia” *simpliciter*) when the social drive is more prominent (83, 104, 131). If evantropia is the individual drive, what makes it different from the transhumanist drive?

As I see it, the way out of this conceptual maze has already been envisioned by the author of *Engineering Youth* herself. In her critical discussion of my own work, she argues that in reinterpreting the concept, I myself did not “perform a moral evaluation of the project” (232). At the same

time, she holds that evantropia ought to be contrasted with the classical notion of *eudaimonia*, stressing that while *eudaimonia* is clearly a moral concept, evantropia is not backed by any moral theory in the strict sense. What lies closer is the idea of moral enhancement—one that, for the most part, gains support from at least some forms of ethical consequentialism, but which is nevertheless highly problematic inasmuch as it overlaps with determinism, and would therefore appear inadequate here. Freedom, after all, is necessary for moral agency, and is also important to any discussion of enhancement, as behind the idea of something's being "enhanced" there must lie some sort of valuation—or biovaluability, to use Bugajska's own term. It is no surprise, then, that the author chooses the following phrase from Albert Camus as an appropriate epigraph in relation to her conclusions: "Freedom is nothing else than the chance of being better." Bugajska's book will, I am sure, provide a touchstone for an improved understanding of young adult dystopias, but in some way it also offers us something else: a call to think about the ethics of evantropian projects. I can only hope—in terms themselves imbued with utopian enthusiasm—that her call will find some echoes in the near future.

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