

ALIENATION AS DIEGETIC TECHNIQUE AND SOCIAL CRITIQUE

EXPERIENCES OF STRANGENESS AND SELF- REFLECTION IN ECOLOGIC UTOPIAN NARRATIVES

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Alienation or strangeness is experienced in plenty of ways in everyday life. Unknown situations, like eating a specific meal for the first time, visiting new places or meeting people not situated in the same context as oneself, raise the possibility of reflection on learned social behavior as well as on social and cultural complexities. Literature itself beholds this very same capability of enabling the reader to this experience, as is seen most conspicuously in texts like Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, in which a mixture of narrative techniques and exoticism lead to a most thrilling but also pedagogical reading experience. To investigate this phenomenon of estrangement in literary texts, the aim of this article is to analyse diegetic techniques and literary aesthetics in ecologic-utopian or – in short – ecotopian fiction. At first, it will be necessary to take a closer look at the complex subject of estrangement, in order to lay the foundation for an analysis of *The Legend of the Suns* (*La leyenda de los soles*, 1993) of Mexican author Homero Aridjis. A short glance at how to grasp ecological utopia and how it could be seen in connection with the concept of strangeness will help to further enlighten this nexus.

It is crucial to define clearly the generally used concept of utopian thinking in connection to literary analysis, as there is a multitude of possible definitions of this term.

In this case, the analysis will follow US-American researcher Lisa Garforth, who defined utopian fiction as follows:

[U]topias are vital cultural spaces in which the taken-for-granted arrangements and practices of our everyday lives can be made strange, in which we can reflect critically on the big picture of what is happening in our social world, and through which we can explore alternatives. [U]topia should be understood as a social and cultural process that is partial and provisional, critical and creative.¹

The act of making-strange is crucial in utopian fiction to explore alternatives for a better life – whatever that means. Therefore, utopian fiction sharpens the view on societal problems and allows to form modes of critical thinking. Utopian texts can also be seen as a response to societal problems, as a critique of the current state of society coupled with an explicit worldly approach of social improvement. Furthermore, utopian thinking is seen as a double-bonded process in-between the future and the present, the author and the text, and consequently in-between text and reader. Utopian narratives give a possibility to estrange reality and their aim is to start a discussion on the improvement of a society. The focus lies here on how it could improve, not so much on how it should be or how it will be. Utopia is, in this sense, not a totalitarian dream of forced happiness, but the expression of a complex process of wishing for improvement.²

The act of making strange is crucial in the utopian enterprise, but how to pin it down? Alienation, strangeness, estrangement can be understood as a psychological feature of a fictional character as well as in the reaction evoked in the act of the reception of the text. In connection with the processes of alienation/strangeness and estrangement, we need to handle those terms with caution. While alienation or strangeness can be understood as the emotional or factual, as well as willful or forced detachment of one subject from another subject, a society or an object, estrangement is to be seen as the aesthetic process of changing or deforming intentionally to break common schemes of thinking. To evoke the experience of alienation or strangeness, estrangement is crucial. The first thing coming to mind in connection with this terminology is Russian formalist Victor Shklovsky's concept of *ostranenie*, *Verfremdung* in German, translated into

¹ Lisa Garforth, *Green Utopias: Environmental Hope Before and After Nature* (Cambridge, Malden: Polity Press, 2018), 3.

² As Ernst Bloch showed in his influential work *The Principle of Hope* (*Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 1959, especially in the second part, e.g. see p.107).

English as estrangement, alienation, or making strange, hence the short terminological explication. Shklovsky writes in his 1916 / 1917 article *Iskuttsko kak priyom* here cited from the 1965 translation *Art as Technique*:

And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects “unfamiliar”, to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged.³

Shklovsky is referring to two points here: First, estrangement is used to reveal the real composition of the world surrounding us, it aids to perceive our world truly, as it is. It helps to see the things as they are perceived and not as one learned to handle them. Through estrangement the “stone becomes stony”, so to say, clearer, truer. But estrangement is essentially the creation of a disturbance of the perceptual process, allowing the reader to develop new perspectives.

Let us try to synthesize both approaches and bring them to a fruitful union. Here the connection to utopian thinking is very close, utopian narration and poetry itself aim at the same target, to create a strange, new perception of the world surrounding us, but also to create change. Some might think of Bertolt Brecht’s concept of the *Verfremdungseffekt* or *V-effect* here, which he developed following Shklovsky, but it is meant for the theatre, therefore we will disregard this approach here.

Estrangement can be seen as a technique to define things, to see them clearly as they are, to give a critical perspective. Art is perceived not as *l’art pour l’art* but as connected to an extra-literary mission, to awaken the reader, to change the circumstances of global living, just the way utopian thinking is to be seen. In both cases, this process allows the reader to detach from an automated perception of everyday life, to let them experience strangeness not just in the text itself but even more after reading. The reader is invited to develop both a critical perspective on the surrounding society and its most urgent problems at hand. Most importantly, it also creates a way of critical perception of poetry, as it reveals the way poetry works.

³ Victor Shklovsky, “Art as Technique”, in *Russian formalist criticism. Four essays*. Trans by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis, Lincoln (London: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 12.

As a means of underlining the previous considerations, an example may prove useful. The novel *Legend of the Suns* (*La leyenda de los soles*) by Mexican author Homero Aridjis, published in 1993 by Tierra Firme, shows a dystopic version of Mexico City–Tenochtitlan in the year 2027. The overall state of the city is devastating: clean water is scarce, concrete is abundant. The ecological environment is nearly non-existent, due to human pollution of the air and ruthlessness towards nature. The city is overpopulated, too many cars effectively cause traffic gridlock and public transport is overcrowded. Together with pollution and overpopulation, an eroded society is shown, in which kidnapping, murder, rape and torture happen in the middle of the street. The Mexican state is ruled by a one-party-autocracy, presided by José Huitzilopochtli Urbina, who is supported by a cruel and ruthless chief of forces General Carlos Tezcatlipoca. On top of that, the phantom of El Tlaloc, a kidnapper and murderer of juvenile women, is running wild in the districts of Mexico City. Frequent and increasing earthquakes shake the foundations of the already tumbling capital. In this environment, the main character of the novel Juan de Góngora, a painter, decides to repaint Mexico City as he remembers it from his childhood: With clear view of the Popocatepetl and the Iztaccihuatl, with green parks and enough water for everybody, a picture of remembrance and hope in the time of living hell.

Now how are techniques of estrangement used in this text? First of all, it is shown in an unsettling way in the usage of metaphors. Aridjis language is scatological, allusions to death, deterioration and putrefaction dominate the scene. The sun is described as “rotten orange” (*naranja pudrido*, translated by D.H.), the district of Ciudad de Moctezuma, a neighborhood of the Mexican megacity, is described by Aridjis as follows:

He observed bare facades, crooked vegetation, the trash the neighbors produce is scattered in the street and reproduces itself and appears in the most unexpected places. The immortal garbage of ephemeral mankind.”⁴

(“Observó fachadas escarapeladas, vegetaciones torcidas, la basura que segrega el prójimo y que esparcida en la calle se reproduce a sí misma y aparece en los lugares más inesperados. La basura inmortal del hombre efímero”, translated by D. H.)

⁴ Homero Aridjis: *La leyenda de los soles* (Mexico City: Tierra Firme, 1993), 47.

“There was a strong smell of rotten food from the kitchen. In a refrigerator with the door open was a variety of rotten vegetables, green cheese, and pestilent pork feet.”⁵

(“De la cocina salía un fuerte olor a comestibles putrefactos. En un refrigerador con la puerta abierta había gran variedad de vegetales podrido, queso verduoso y patas de puercos pestilentes.”, translated by D.H.)

The whole city, the whole life in this novel is made strange through the pure unbearable amount of rotten devastation and disaster that the characters have to endure. On the level of action, other oddities are shown. Juan de Gongora discovers his capability of walking through walls, just by the strength of his will. As this feature becomes important later on, large parts of the first half of the text are dedicated to Juan’s discoveries wandering through the walls of the cities. In his browsing, his perceptions are described in a, so to say, walls-eye or voyeuristic view.

With his hands full of sand and gravel, his feet clogged by cables and rods and with a spider climbing up his jacket, Juan de Góngora crossed a brick wall, went down to a rammed concrete basement with a hose wound on the ground. An unnecessary light was shining in the neighboring house, as the man who lived there was blind. At the end of the bedroom, on a nightstand, a useless portrait and a book opened on any page were placed in rigorous disorder.⁶

(Con los manos llenas de arena y gravilla, los pies estorbados por cuerdas y varillas y con una araña patona subiéndole por el saco, Juan de Góngora cruzó un muro de ladrillos, bajó a un sótano de hormigón apisonado con una manguera ovillada en el suelo. En la casa vecina prendió una luz innecesaria, el hombre que la habitaba estaba ciego. Al fondo de la recámara, sobre una mesita de noche, estaban colocados en riguroso desorden un retrato inútil y un libro abierto en una página cualquiera. translated by D.H.)

Aridjis employs a very graphic style through the use of graphic language and descriptions, which is astonishingly absurd at the same time. Through this perspective, the reader perceives a truly nihilistic, grotesque and dark view of mankind.

⁵ Homero: *La leyenda de los soles*, 46.

⁶ *Ibid*, 60.

As one could notice, the names of the leading characters in the novel, Huitzilopochtli and Tezcatlipoca, as well as El Tlaloc, are Aztec deities. All of them demand human sacrifice. In the text, these characters are the pillars of a police-state as well as a terror regime supported by dog-eat-dog capitalism and rampaging neoliberalism. They also possess, as we already saw it with Góngora's ability to cross walls, supernatural powers. At the beginning of the novel the funeral of General Tezcatlipoca is shown, but surprisingly for the mourners as well as for the readers, he gradually comes back to life, gets rid of his body bag and returns to his office. The relation to fantastic literature is visible – enhanced by the third main plot of the novel, the twilight of the gods, apocalypse, and the Aztec legend of the five suns.

The seismic activities, the appearance of mixed, human-god deities, the supernatural powers introduce a mystic, metaphysical layer to the text. Aridjis fuses Christian apocalyptic narratives and the Aztec twilight of gods as expressed in the dawn of the fifth sun and the coming of the sixth sun.

The myth of the five suns, as described in Bernardino de Sahagún's *General History of the Things of New Spain (Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España)* of 1569, is as follows: Before the sun we see today, there existed 4 other suns, each had their own characteristics, presided by a different god, but eventually came to an end, killing almost all life on the planet. The actual sun is presided by Huitzilopochtli, a god of war, human sacrifice, the sun and the patron of the city of Tenochtitlan. The chief of forces Tezcatlipoca are traditionally associated, among other things, with the night, discord, chaos, sorcery, and war. In the novel, the end of the fifth sun is imminent, and Góngora plays the key role in this process. Either the god of chaos, Tezcatlipoca, or the blue goddess, apparently a personification of nature, peace and hope will be the god/goddess of the new sun. Through the kaleidoscope of Christian and Aztec religious telling, the future of Mexico City–Tenochtitlan becomes more and more distorted, more and more estranged. The two surviving characters, Juan de Góngora and his paramour Bernarda, do not know how to cope with the violence and destruction all around them, until, with the coming of the sixth sun of the blue goddess, all is gone and there is only clarity: cleanness of the air, clarity of the spirit.

The concept of utopian narration as a mode to make reality strange has already been mentioned. This happens through estrangement, *ostranenie* as Shklovsky put it. In the text of Aridjis we saw the future version of Mexico City–Tenochtitlan extrapolated from the problems and societal processes at work in Mexico in 1993: the waste of water, the

pollution of the environment through economic activities and lifestyle, the basic failures of mankind like greed, power, lust and egoism, the violence and the unmistakable impact of globalized capitalism and consumerism on everyday life. With the introduction of the mythological, transcendental world into this dystopia, Aridjis changes the way dystopian fiction works. The absence of god is usually a typical feature of dystopian writing, but with Aridjis we see dystopian writing with a utopian impetus. Through the diegetic technique of *ostranenie*, through the estranging mode of narration, the strangeness and oddity of human activities and behavior comes to light. Nevertheless, there is always the possibility of self-improvement. That exactly is where the strange utopian moment of this overall devastating text is located.

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