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## **Dystopia-En-Abyme: Analysis of *The Lobster's* Narrative**

**Abstract:** The paper analyzes the dystopian narrative of the film *The Lobster* (2015, dir. Y. Lanthimos) as a political act. Rather than strictly focusing on *what* the film exposes as problematic (romantic and sexual relationships, emotional intelligence, and love in general), the analysis examines *how* this problem is presented through its dystopian vision, its narrative's trajectory and characters' actions, with what kind of critical potential these are endowed and consequently, what kind of political message the film communicates. It does so by looking more closely at three important narrative elements of the textual dystopia: the space of the film, the protagonists, and the language. Lastly, it examines the interpretative possibilities of its open-ended structure. The analysis aims to show that the film resembles abysmally looping narrative structures through which it acquires an enclosed mythological quality that debilitates any agential potentials of the narrative, fails to provide a utopian impulse, and consequently ends up supporting status quo.

**Keywords:** dystopia; utopia; narrative; counter-narrative; *abyme*; resistance; hope

*It is better to do nothing than to contribute to the invention of formal ways of rendering visible that which Empire already recognizes as existent.*

Alain Badiou, *Fifteen Theses on Contemporary Art* (2004)

In one of the seminal essays in utopian studies, Lyman Tower Sargent (Sargent 1994, 3) defines utopianism most broadly as “social dreaming”—both dreams and nightmares of societies that are to a higher or lesser degree different from the dreamers' actual societies. The etymology of *utopia* as a “no-place” additionally suggests that a place, a society that is dreamed of is not only different but also nonexistent, although always “described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space” (Sargent 1994, 9). However, our reference point for dreaming is always the society that we do know, and the paraphernalia

of our dreams are borrowed from it, rearranged, and further reimagined, whether toward a eutopia (a good place) or toward a nightmare (dystopia or anti-utopia). In either case, utopia then, as Fátima Vieira (Vieira 2010, 7) observes, must be seen “as a matter of attitude, as a kind of reaction to an undesirable present.” This attitude determines and shapes the choices a utopian dreamer makes in imagining a society and in developing a narrative about it. Constructing a utopian narrative (whether a eutopian, dystopian, or anti-utopian)<sup>1</sup> then inevitably becomes a political act—one that, by inventing a nonexistent society, references the real one, comments on and criticizes it, exposes its mechanisms, chooses to resist or support it and therefore, explicitly or implicitly, encourages or discourages a change. In that sense, by “voicing” a utopian narrative in the form of literature, film or any other medium, we consciously and intentionally enter the public dialogue, assume the position of an interlocutor in it, and voice our political attitude, i.e. our thoughts, opinions, feelings, and assertions of the social, cultural, and/or economic state of our world.

Although by default dystopian visions describe bleak worlds, “considerably worse” than ours, always negotiating “the social terrain of Utopia and Anti-Utopia in a less stable and more contentious fashion than many of their eutopian and anti-utopian counterparts” (Moylan 2000, 147), they nevertheless do not “temperamentally refuse the possibility of radical social transformation; rather, they look quizzically, skeptically, critically not only at the present society but also at the means needed to transform it” (Moylan 2000, 133). These “most progressive possibilities inherent in dystopian narrative” (Moylan 2000, 188) become dominant in the form of *critical dystopia* whose emergence Tom Moylan traces in the late 1980s as a reaction and response to the world shaped by the implementation of neoliberal policies in the late 1970s and their fearsome carrying out in the consequent Reagan-Thatcher era. “As an anticipatory machine in that new context, the critical dystopias resist both hegemonic and oppositional orthodoxies (in their radical and reformist variants) even as they refunction a larger, more totalizing critique of the political economy itself. They consequently inscribe a space for a new form of political opposition” (Moylan 2000, 190). However, as Phillippe Wegner (Wegner 2003, 169) rightly notes, this particular “inscription” is “characteristic of *all* dystopias ... the subject of utopian desire in the dystopia is *politics* itself—of agency and of a kickstarting of the engine of history in a moment when it seems to many to be terminally stalled.” In that sense, any dystopia can be read as an embodiment of a political desire.

<sup>1</sup> To the above definition of *utopia*, Sargent (1994, 9) adds the following specifications to the distinct utopian genres: *eutopia* or *positive utopia*: “... that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably better than the society in which that reader lived,” *dystopia* or *negative utopia*: “... as considerably worse than the society in which that reader lived,” *anti-utopia*: “... as a criticism of utopianism or of some particular eutopia.”

It is the dystopian narrative of the film *The Lobster* (2015)—its attitude and the nature of its reaction to the undesirable present—which this paper aims to analyze as a political act. It does so from the contention that even though any dystopian account carries a dormant anti-utopian virus (Moylan 2000, 195), the dire present socio-cultural and economic conditions of our world require a substantive critical “voice” (be it creative or scientific) which would supply necessary dystopian pessimism with agential impulse and not make it an artifact that simply “renders visible” the very conditions already at work. As Peter Fitting observes, the recent proliferation of films made in dystopian settings coincides with a pause in (e)utopian writing and thinking. He designates this pause as significant “insofar as so many people seem to be aware that they are living in an increasingly threatened world (in which inequity and exploitation are on the rise), and yet they remain paralyzed, unable or unwilling to act,” and so he concludes that “[i]n such dystopian times, then, the critical dystopia will do more than simply depict the accommodation with or the flight from that world” (Fitting 2003, 156–157). In such a world where action often seems impossible or unimaginable, creating a dystopian narrative as a *critique* of the contemporary society (and with the intention of *communicating* it to a large number of people, as is certainly the case when a film is internationally released), necessitates going beyond “an empty schematism” (Adorno 1967, 117), i.e., a simple symptomatic documentation of the society’s ills. For, documenting ills without either examining them or offering ideas or images for resisting them, or as Adorno argues in his critique of Huxley’s *Brave New World*, without contemplating “a praxis which could explode the infamous continuum” (Adorno 1967, 117), seems only to lead toward normalizing these ills in the present, and thus reinforcing their continuum in the coming future.

Although *The Lobster* wittily detects our world’s acute emotional cripple-  
dom and satirizes some of our coping mechanisms in relation to it, it will be argued that this film is ultimately an example of “the resigned, closed, anticritical, pseudo-dystopian sensibility associated with the anti-utopian persuasion” (Moylan 2000, 194). Rather than strictly focusing on *what* the film exposes as problematic (romantic and sexual relationships, emotional intelligence, and love in general), the analysis will examine *how* this problem is presented through its narrative’s trajectory and characters’ actions, with what kind of critical potential they are endowed, and with what kind of thoughts or attitude the narrative then leaves us to step back into the reality. It will do so by looking more closely at three important narrative elements of the textual dystopia: the space of the film as the exposition of the “terrible world,” the protagonists as the potential bearers of resistance, and the language as the common dystopian provenance of the counter-narrative (see Baccolini and Moylan 2003, 5). Lastly, it will examine the end of the film and its interpretative possibilities

in view of dystopian critical potentials, especially present in open-ended narratives, touching upon Darko Suvin's distinction between mythical and epic narrative closing.

A widespread acclaim and popularity of *The Lobster* earns it considerable cultural relevancy. Besides close to a hundred wins and nominations in various world festivals,<sup>2</sup> the film competed for the prestigious *Palme d'Or* at the 2015 Cannes Film Festival and won the *Jury Prize*. Two years later, its fame not having waned, it was nominated for the *Best Original Screenplay* at the 2017 Oscars. It has also scored highly on the Web's review aggregators such as *Metacritic* (82% of positive review) and *Rotten Tomatoes* (89%) receiving praises that compared it to Samuel Beckett and absurdist theater (Dimock 2016) and saw it as the protest against the "rationalization of the heart" (Scott 2016).

*The Lobster* also belongs to a number of Greek films that began acquiring international recognition in 2009, corresponding with the country's unrest and its subsequent socio-economic crisis. Soon they were dubbed "Greek Weird Wave" (Rose 2011) for a perceived passionless, often grotesque style they had in common. The films have been largely viewed within Greece's socio-political turmoil, and so in his *Guardian* article, Steve Rose wonders if the country's "messed-up" political situation has sprung its "messed-up" cinematic vision (Rose 2011). Among these films was *The Dogtooth* (2009)—an earlier film from *The Lobster*'s director Yorgos Lanthimos, which explores the theme of totalitarian children rearing, and which also won two awards in Cannes and was nominated for the *Best Foreign Language Film* Oscar. While *The Dogtooth* (as well as Lanthimos' subsequent film *Alps* 2011) was a "fully" Greek film—filmed and produced in Greece with Greek actors and crew, and therefore viewed as a piece that stems from and addresses its national habitat, *The Lobster*, being Lanthimos' first English-language film with the international cast and crew, seems to also acquire an international ambition of addressing conditions and problems that reach beyond national borders. Its dystopian vision is not only something we can perceive as the "Greek problem" but also as a worldwide "disease," of which the various English accents of the international actors and a non-specified geographical place in the film are additionally suggestive. In that regard, the film seems also interesting to examine for its interpretative options in the dystopian political context as it does not belong to the Hollywood blockbuster production and its familiar propagandistic narratives but rather to what is often referred to as European art house and its *auteur* cinema from which certain critical and perceptive "depth" is traditionally expected.

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<sup>2</sup> See *The Lobster*'s awards page on IMDb: [http://www.imdb.com/title/tt3464902/awards?ref\\_=tt\\_awd](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt3464902/awards?ref_=tt_awd).

## Dystopian Spaces

In *The Lobster*, Lanthimos and Efthimis Filippou (co-writer) “dream” of David (Colin Farrell), a middle-aged man, who finds himself deserted by his wife in a society that outlaws uncoupled people. In order to rehabilitate the singles, authorities send them to a hotel in which they have 45 days to find a partner after which they can return to the city and re-coupled, resume their lives. If they fail in this pairing quest, they are turned into an animal of their choosing. David fails to find a partner in the hotel but succeeds in escaping from it into the woods, where he joins a dissident group of “loners”—also runaway singles. Here for the first time, we match the ongoing female voiceover to a character from the story—it is another loner referred to as Short Sighted Woman (Rachel Weisz). Contrary to the state law, the loners strictly forbid pairing, and any type of romantic or sexual involvement among the members is gruesomely punished. However, David and Short Sighted Woman fall in love with each other and begin planning their escape to the city. Loner Leader (Léa Seydoux) finds out about their affair and has Short Sighted Woman blinded. After some deliberation, David kills the leader, and the two eventually manage to escape and reach the city. In the last scene of the film, we find them in a diner where we learn that David has decided to also blind himself. In the last shot, David is standing in front of a mirror in the diner’s restroom hesitantly holding a steak knife before his eyes with the intention to gouge them out. The film, however, cuts to black before we can see whether he really follows through.

The prologue establishes an overall tone of the film and its world. Right after David’s wife informs him that she is leaving him for another man, the doorbell is heard, and David is being escorted to a van by people dressed as waiters, as a convict would be taken up by the police. He is to be transported to the hotel for singles. A ruthless, repressive tone has been set. As we leave their apartment, a female voiceover is introduced, emotionally flat and detached. While watching David being shoved into the van, the voice informs us about his backaches rather than heartaches and tells us that he did not think of crying, as most people would when they realize they are not loved anymore. Both the expedited managing of David’s “case” and the lack of affects in this sequence establish the atmosphere of an oppressive and emotionless society. Such is the dystopian vision of the entire world of the film.

There are three dystopian spaces in *The Lobster*: the hotel, the forest, and the city. The hotel is the first one we learn of extensively. As the rehabilitation institution of the city, the hotel also teaches us by proxy about the city itself. The inaugural scenes in which David is being checked in to the hotel are reminiscent of the process of a convict being admitted to a prison. A hotel clerk interrogates David and informs him about the basic rules and goals of the singles’ rehabilita-

tion. They are placed in single rooms and have a limited time to find a partner. They must be registered as either hetero- or homosexual, as the bisexual option has been terminated due to “operational problems.” Singles are only to take part in individual sports, such as squash and golf. If “everything goes well,” that is, if a single finds a partner, the newly coupled are then moved to a double room and are able to enjoy sports designed for couples, such as volleyball and tennis. David then proceeds to another room where he must undress and submit his personal belongings; just as a novel convict, he will be given uniform clothes and shoes. All the “guests” are dressed identically: women are in floral dresses and men in dark suits. The strict division between even and odd in the hotel environment is further illustrated when David is asked for his shoes size. He requires a half-size, but there are no half-sizes in the hotel—everything must be evened out.

From his room, a dark and bluish cell, he looks into the yard where the veteran singles have just arrived with tranquilized bodies of the loners they captured. It is another rule of the hotel: each captured loner extends the single’s deadline by a day. Finally, Hotel Manager, a stern, middle-aged lady, visits David in his room, accompanied by her partner and a heterosexual couple of servants. Her partner’s head is consistently cut out from the frame, even while she introduces him, visually contradicting their “partnership” and suggesting its superficiality. She then proceeds to advise him about his stay and thus prepare him “psychologically for all possible outcomes.” The servants then tie and lock his left hand to his belt, which is to remain so for an entire day. The purpose is to remind him how “easy the life is when there are two of something rather than just one.”

Obviously, these prison-like strict rules and regulations are constructed according to the oppressive ideology of coupledness. The singles are not permitted to masturbate, and if caught, they are punished by having their hands burnt in a toaster. Sexual stimulation is, however, mandatory and performed by the staff, yet, never completed. Its purpose is solely to stimulate desire and further motivate the search for its satisfaction. The hotel also has its propaganda well developed: daily didactic theatricals that show scenes from quotidian life designed to demonstrate perils of a single life (for example, a man choking to death alone at home) and to teach how those can be easily avoided in a couple (the same man choking but this time his wife comes to his rescue). The intercutting of the theatricals with the scene in which David is being sexually stimulated by a maid and with the one in which another single is punished for masturbation, effectively intensifies the sense of the iron control and ideological discipline exercised within the hotel. Mostly bluish, dark, overcast lighting, and frame compositions of high symmetry or sharp geometrical shapes visually fortify such atmosphere.

During the first half of the film that takes place in the despotic and bleak hotel environment, we learn about the loners as rebels and consequently the victims

of the organized hunts. As we perceive them as the ones who actively oppose the system, we also develop the belief that they belong to a better world—not necessarily a more comfortable one, but one which rejects the totalitarianism of the hotel and embraces a vision of a freer, warmer, and more spontaneous society. Moreover, the loners inhabit the forest, the nature, a recurring symbol of unspoiled life and hopeful beginnings since Hesiod, later popularized in the Renaissance and with the discovery of the New World. Therefore, we are likely to perceive (or hope) this place will be an alternative to the hotel, or in Raffaella Baccolini's terms, its counter-narrative (Moylan 2000, 148)—the one which questions, critiques and resists the narrative of the hotel and provides space for hope. And indeed it does resist it. Only, when we finally reach it with David's escape, we are disappointed to learn that the forest is the hotel's symmetrical extreme, and its social arrangement is as oppressive as the one it opposes.

The forest represents an inverted hotel's dystopia, similarly bleak and washed in cold greens and blues. It is occupied by the singles who ran away from the hotel before risking to be turned into animals, as well as by animals, among which some used to be single people. It is a tribal community with a female leader, with rules as strict as the hotel's, but of quite the opposite nature. Their doctrine is individualism, and Loner Leader exercises it as unsentimentally as Hotel Manager does hers. Any type of romantic or sexual relations is prohibited and punished by mutilations mirroring the transgression, such as the "red kiss" or "red intercourse." The loners' entire existence is based on an absolute self-reliance. They dig their own graves and secure their own food. Although gathered in the same place, they dance alone, each listening to electronic music on his or her own Walkman. When one of the loners gets caught in a forest trap, the others gather around him without any intention to help, only listening to Loner Leader militantly instructing him on how to proceed in case he manages to free himself. On another occasion, Loner Leader sacrifices The Maid (who has recently defected to the forest) as she uses her as a shield to be stabbed to death in her stead. Our hope of a pastoral idyll and noble savages is diminished.

One might run away back to the city, but indeed it would be a backward act. Since the hotel is a correctional institution to which decoupled people from the city are sent, the ideology that we learn about in the hotel we must assume is the one that is followed and lived in the city. During one of the loners' trips to the city, we witness policemen randomly stopping people in a mall and asking for their marriage certificates. Those who are caught without a partner will be detained and sent to the hotel. Therefore, the city and the hotel might be regarded like two parts of the same dystopian space since the hotel functions as a disciplinary extension of the city. However, the city is presented as a narratively distinct place, physically remote, to which the dwellers from both of these marginalized environments relate and refer, albeit quite differently. The hotel supports and

fortifies the city; the forest counters and rejects it. Citizens are sent from it with a possibility of return; the loners depend on it for their daily supplies, without an option, or actual willingness, to remain there. But both rely on it to sustain their own systems.

In addition to creating an effective ironic turn in the narrative, the failed expectations we face in the woods make a powerful point about “resistance-gone-wrong” by falling into yet another extreme, which from the position of freedom makes little qualitative difference to the one opposed. Alienated and lonely, David is equally un-free to love in both environments: in the hotel, by its absurdly oppressive demand to exercise love; in the forest, by its almost absolute prohibition of it.<sup>3</sup> This ironic turn also places us into an abysmal dystopian vision of no escape in view.

The city operates as a sort of a “real” world within the film that mimics our own. Its malls, restaurants, streets, and architecture look “normal” and identical to our present world. The hotel and the forest may be then seen as forms of our relating to the conditions of the world. But both show insufficient, totalitarian, and filled with loneliness. David appears to be thrown from one extreme to the other, from militant coupledom to militant individualism, circling between fanaticized attitudes and choices, trapped within quantitative variations *ad infinitum*. It is a dystopian vision *en abyme* that repeats its nightmare by symmetrically duplicating its structure. The spatial structures mirror one another creating analogs of “bad places” and thus a dystopian circle with no way out. Like the postmodern narrative devices that undermine the ontological stability of the world (see McHale 1987), the spatial structuring of *The Lobster* seems to undermine the ontological possibility of a eutopian place.

But not all is yet lost. The fact that there is no *place* to escape to or to rebel from does not make a dystopian narrative hopeless, for there still could be a *space*, psychological, emotional, or intellectual, provided within a narrative as a vision, a critical stance, or a hope for resistance and reinvention of forms of living, and embodied in dystopian protagonists, their thoughts or actions.

## Dystopian Heroes and Heroines

Contrary to typical eutopian narratives in which a journey is undertaken to reach and learn about the good place in order to contrast it to the ordinary, the protagonist of a dystopia is already within the terrible world, living a compli-

<sup>3</sup> Love as such is not exactly prohibited and, as Loner Leader explains to David when he arrives, friendships are allowed. However, the interpersonal relationships shown in the forest speak against it, especially the scene with the trapped and injured loner left to manage on his own.

ant life until “a counter-narrative develops as the dystopian citizen moves from apparent contentment into an experience of alienation and resistance,” that is, when the protagonist “confronts, or is confronted by, the contradictions of the society that is present on the very first page” (Baccolini and Moylan 2003, 5–6), or in our case, shot. The terrible world of *The Lobster* is defined by the oppressive requirement for partnership whose foundation is reduced to a common personal trait. More usually than not, that trait is an impediment used as a personal highlight or a tag by which the characters identify themselves, introduce to each other, and eventually match. John and Robert, David’s two friends in the hotel, readily acknowledge their impediments the first time they meet: John has a limp and Robert a lisp. In the film’s credits they are designated as Lispering Man and Limping Man, and not by their names. Other characters do not even have names: there is a Biscuit Woman, Heartless Woman, Nosebleed Woman, Campari Man, including the nameless upper management, Hotel Manager and Hotel Manager’s Partner. The situation is the same among the loners: Loner Leader, Short Sighted Woman, Trapped Loner, Bandaged Loner, etc.

Whereas in the city it seems reasonable to imagine that match once established puts a couple into a worriless position which allows them to become oblivious of the totalitarian aspects of their society through the busyness and diversions of their everyday lives, in the hotel, where the ideology of coupledness and its specificities are amplified so that the “everyday life” does not exist, or rather, it is narrowed down to and focused on making an individual ideologically fit in order to rejoin the society, David and the others find themselves confronted by their very society and placed in the position of the underprivileged and thus instantaneously alienated. Each is isolated, both physically—by being placed in a single room, and psychologically—by being reduced to a personal tag, forced to follow carefully designed daily routine, given a deadline to pair up or die (as a human being at least), and compelled to extend his or her own life at the expense of a fellow human’s. Although confronted by the hotel’s “in-your-face” daily exercise of the ruling doctrine, the majority of the guests do not come any closer to a tipping point of resistance. They continue roaming the hotel in the hope of finding another with the same tag that would yoke them together. And make them citizens once again. If the prospects become grim, they devise roundabouts—like Limping Man who ends up secretly self-inducing nosebleeds in order to begin a relationship with Nosebleed Woman, or they excel within the system itself—like Heartless Woman who is the most proficient loner hunter and prolifically extends her human days with each hunt, or they surrender to the system—like Biscuit Woman who, devastated, commits suicide. As in any dystopian society, its citizens are unreflective, docile bodies under a doctrine’s grip. Finally, some of them run away to the woods, but their resistance, as we have seen, is nothing but the analogous hotel’s dystopia, just founded on the

opposite starting point. The forest could even be seen as a miniature anti-utopia within the film's world, as it materializes a possible utopian vision of a free individual of which the hotel's singles could be dreaming, but it arrives at such an inhumane, fanatical extreme that it automatically compromises the dream and therefore, as any anti-utopia, ends up supporting the system already in place, in our case, the hotel.

And how does the protagonist, our dystopian hero, think and act when directly confronted by these contradicting conditions? From the beginning, David comes across as a full-fledged member of the society. When his wife informs him that she is leaving him for another man, besides letting out a few constrained snuffles, his primary concern appears to be whether the man wears glasses or contact lenses, understanding that his wife's newly chosen must be shortsighted, as he is. He has never been alone before, as we learn during his first interview in the hotel, so his "apparent contentment" seems to have never been disturbed until this point. Not even the experience of his brother having been turned into a dog in that same hotel seems to have left a particularly emotional mark on David. He mentions the event to the hotel clerk as almost a conversational, passing-by remark while docilely keeping the dog by his side. David's lack of empathy is especially noticeable in the dialogue with Biscuit Woman on their bus ride to the hunt. He evades her offer to join him for a walk with his dog by saying that dogs are not allowed outside the rooms, and the narrator informs us how pleased David was with giving such a particularly good excuse. Biscuit Woman proceeds to offer him sex and eventually confides in him that if she does not find a partner soon, she will kill herself by jumping out of the window. David remains silent throughout, and the voiceover explains that he did not know what to say but rather "thought once more how well his excuse had been."

If worse comes to worst, David wants to be turned into a lobster because lobsters live long, have blue blood as aristocrats, and remain fertile all their lives. Additionally, David likes the sea very much. Apart from his love of the sea, David's reasons for his choice of the animal reveal his existential priorities as far removed from any elevated romantic or social dreams: longevity, social status, and sexual fulfillment. This commonsense practicality is reestablished in a conversation with Limping Man, who in his defense for faking his nosebleeds, asks David to honestly tell him whether it is worse to "die of cold and hunger in the woods, to become an animal that will be killed and eaten by some bigger animal, or to have a nosebleed from time to time." David opts for faking the nosebleeds, without imagining the slightest variation to the three proposed options. Then again, we must be reminded that David is introduced as a part of the emotionally flat dystopian world we are learning about during the first half of the film, and that his particular reaction to it, and possible change, is only to come.

With his deadline approaching and some of the familiar guests already turned into animals, David's practical reasoning bears him a thought that "it is more difficult to pretend that you do have feelings when you don't than to pretend you don't have feelings when you do," and so he decides to follow Limping Man's footsteps and woo Heartless Woman. After a few occasions spent together, including the one in which they both witness Biscuit Woman's dying cries, David manages to convince her that he is as heartless. Their "engagement" is announced, and they are moved to the couples division. One morning, which seems to be his fiancée's final test regarding David's emotional levels, she wakes him up informing him that she has just beaten his brother (the dog) to death. Although David's voice is audibly at the edge of breaking, he persists in his emotionless role, but when he reaches the bathroom and sees the bloody corpse, he breaks and bursts into tears. One might expect this to be David's tipping point at which he decides to act instead of continuing to react to the imposed circumstances. Still, once more his action is a reaction, but not before he is pushed to it by reaching the ultimate point of life-or-death situation. Firstly, however, he makes one last attempt to maintain his current role and convince Heartless Woman that his tears are water from washing his face. As she is relentlessly determined to bring him to the manager, and he learns that the punishment for this kind of deception is turning one into an animal nobody wants to be, David fights back. With the help of The Maid, he captures and transforms Heartless Woman into an animal, and escapes to the woods. At this point, David's experience of alienation escalates, and he steps into what appears to be the realm of resistance. However, he enters it unchanged, for his escape is not a result of his willed choice (as we learn from his conversation with Limping man, he considers the woods a worse option than a deceitful partnership—the stance he then turns into practice by engaging with Heartless Woman), but simply an instinctive reaction to avoid death.

In the woods, we finally see the heroine to whom we have been listening throughout the film and with whom David falls in love—Short Sighted Woman. Their love, born at the place freed from the clamp of coupledness but also occupied by militant individualism, would appear to be, and within the context of the narrative should be, a growing space of hopeful resistance. And it could be if the love were not too similar to the ones we have seen, or we could reasonably imagine, in the hotel. Firstly, the basis of their attraction to each other is also a common impediment—they are both shortsighted. There is nothing else in the film's narrative to indicate anything beyond shortsightedness that draws them together. The heroine spots him first, and since he wears glasses, instantly recognizes him as similar and therefore attractive. "The next day, in the city, he found out that I was shortsighted, too," says the heroine. His face visibly lights up at learning the fact, and in the scene directly following, he confesses his love to her. Thus their relationship begins.

Neither does their love's practice seem to be different from, for instance, the love between the Nosebleed couple: they kiss, they dance, and they dream of returning to the city, living there as any other couple—going for walks, enjoying bath tubs, having sex, and going on vacations together. Besides the ironic fact that it happens in “the wrong place at the wrong time,” there is nothing about their love that comes across as being unorthodox, let alone subversive. This becomes even more pronounced after Short Sighted Woman gets blinded. As their love's connecting tissue is removed, David spends days questing for another one that could replace shortsightedness. He checks if she plays the piano, speaks German, or likes berries, even if their blood type is the same, but nothing else seems to connect them, and their relationship falls into crisis. We see David suffering in solitude resembling a priest fighting the crisis of his faith. Finally, he decides for an ultimate leap of love—to blind himself and thus reconnect with the loved one. What in a different context could be regarded as a supreme act of love, in this one it appears as the final proof of imaginative impotence. There is no indication that David wants to blind himself, for example, as a protest or out of a spiritual desire to share the burden with the loved one, but only as the result of his ideological conditioning, which dictates that love is a common trait and that without one, it does not exist.

A claim could be placed that one important aspect of their love, which would also suggest its uniqueness within *The Lobster's* world, is in that their love seems “true” or genuine. The Nosebleed couple's relationship is based on deception, and so is the Managers.' In the scene in which the loners break into the hotel with the goal of exposing the love practiced there as superficial and bogus, we witness Hotel Manager's Partner ready to kill his wife in order to save his life. David himself learns from his essayed engagement with Heartless Woman that “a relationship cannot be based on a lie,” as she puts it herself after discovering that he had been deceiving her. In short, all the other couples whom we get to know a bit more intimately emerge loveless. On the other hand, the scene in which blinded Short Sighted Woman waves her knife at the leader and desperately protests that she could have blinded David instead of her, together with David's subsequent crisis of love, places a considerable doubt on the authenticity and depth of their mutual devotion. Even if we dismissed these facts on the account of temporary human weaknesses coming out of the great shocks life imposes on us and accepted the interpretation of their love as genuine, the narrative then would seem to propose that the hero and the heroine need to escape to the place where romantic love is prohibited in order to find it afresh; once they have, they can return to the city and continue living within the system, enjoying its diversions *genuinely*. In this case, the resistance is reduced to another variation *within* the system, which does not disturb it in the least. Moreover, it confirms the status quo as a “liberal” space that allows personal quests and modifications, and seems to encourage us to find our “authenticity” within its ideological barricades.

*The Lobster's Tongues*

Since dystopian systems are often largely maintained through the control of language, in dystopian counter-narratives language is then often reappropriated as one of the main tools of resistance (Baccolini and Moylan 2003, 6). *The Lobster's* lovers develop one, too. It is a sign language, which they invent in order to speak love to each other freely, as well as to warn each other of any coming danger. It might seem that the fact they practice love where it is forbidden, through the language they themselves designed, in the plain view of those who forbid it, is a sure act of resistance. Be that as it may, there is one crucial aspect missing. As Baccolini and Moylan observe, “[a]n important result of the reappropriation of language by the dystopian misfits and rebels is the reconstitution of empowering memory” (Moylan 2000, 149), a memory (re)enabled of imaginative leaps beyond its capacities tamed and shaped by the dominant system, in order to then, through the language, “draw on the alternative truths of the past and ‘speak back’ to hegemonic power” (Moylan 2000, 149). The signs that these dystopian misfits produce do not speak *another* language; they are mere tools. The messages they exchange belong to the hotel’s ideological realm of coupledness, and they are the means for planning the escape back to the city. There is no imaginative leap in sight which might bring them closer to an alternative vision of the world and their love in it. Moreover, if we extended the above-mentioned interpretation of the forest as the anti-utopia in relation to the hotel (and therefore, to the city), their language is but a successful resistance exactly to any idea that challenges the ruling one. Thus this language becomes not only not subversive but also backward. It becomes their tool for practicing coupledness until they have safely returned to the city. “We love each other, and we suit each other, and that is the reason why we’ve decided to leave the woods and stay together forever in the city,” the narrator informs us. In this view, the experience of the resistance in the woods seems to now acquire the function of reestablishing the city, relative both to the hotel and the woods, as some sort of a eutopia, the place of “free love.”

The heroine’s voiceover is identical to the language used in all the film’s dialogues. The tone of the language used in the film is monotonous, almost without any emotional oscillations, and its content is reduced to nearly stenographic descriptions, comments, or personal expressions. This militant rationalization sways between producing a bureaucratic and an infantile quality of the language, and therefore of the communication and of the characters’ psychic abilities (which we learn about largely through their language). It finely conforms to the film’s overall representation of its world as cold, evened out, militant, emotionally crippled, and minimized to persons whose characteristics resemble machine’s specifications. While it effectively complements the portrayal of the

film's dystopian citizens, in regard to the heroine's voice, it faces us with another hope's dead end.

Like in the case of the sign language she and David invent, her language, or its tone, does not undergo any changes. Besides a few occasions on which we are given a little more insight into David's thoughts and some of the actions' motivations, the narration is largely limited to restating the observed on the screen. Hence it remains deeply integrated within its environment. This might also be the reason it becomes dramaturgically barely impactful when it shuts down and disappears within that environment, after Loner Leader gets hold of Short Sighted Woman's diary, and thus, of her voice. A quick comparison to the language of D-503's diary in Zamyatin's *We* gives an idea of how a counter-narrative and therefore, a space for resistance, can be accomplished through language (Moylan 2000, 149). D-503 uses the formal tongue of the official state—arithmetical and scientifically dry, but as he “discovers” his soul and emotions, he begins speaking another language with that tongue, expressing another, newly (re)discovered world. Even though by the end of the novel all resistance is apparently crushed, and D-503 yields to the ruling doctrine, the diary remains, whose “text from the very beginning generates a literal and self-reflexive counter-narrative” (Moylan 2000, 160)—if but for the reader, who is thus defamiliarized and presented with creative possibilities within the very shackles of that reality. Using the building blocks of the very system, D-503 constructs the world opposed to that system, while Zamyatin himself demonstrates radical potentials of art. Even if the plot does not offer hope, the novel's formal aspects do.

The same cannot be said for the formal aspects of *The Lobster*. Its visual language complies with and consequently constitutes the atmosphere of the world presented. It obeys the classical (and basic) rules of visual storytelling consisted of master shots complemented with close-ups and shot-reverse-shot systems, without noticeable “subversive” formal interventions. The camera is mostly static with sporadic and quite controlled movements, which are largely motivated by need (for instance, to follow somebody's movement within a shot) rather than by a decision that would add a layer of meaning to the observed action. Shots of details are nearly non-existent, as if the visual language conformed to the bureaucratic and infantilized citizens and their perceptive qualities, denying even to us—the viewers, the perception of any pieces of reality that could distract or inspire us. Like the other *Lobster*'s tongues, it remains unchanged throughout the film thus failing to present any angle or rhythm of seeing beyond the barricades of its world. Non-diegetic music of roughly two types of moods is used with an obvious function to enhance emotional response to a scene: dramatic, somewhat ominous, on one, and melancholic, on the other hand. The music is especially combined with sequences in slow motion, which are used for events that happen to David for the first time: his first dance at the hotel,

first hunt, first coded dialogue with Short Sighted Woman, and his first trip to the city. These scenes are thus accentuated and appear to have a purpose of highlighting what could be critical episodes in David's experience. Since, as we have seen, nothing really *happens* to David in regard to his way of thinking and perceiving the world around him, these scenes remain some kind of emotional intermezzos that connect stages of David's journey. Hence, if David and the narrator remain static, so does the film's form. Each repeats the stylistic qualities of the other generating thus another abysmal circle.

### *The Lobster's Moral*

*The Lobster's* story is a circular narrative of "bad places" and unimaginative bodies. It is a looping nightmare, which through its stylized dramaturgy and direction employs elements of satirical comedy, the absurd, and science fiction. When the style is peeled away, we are left with the plot of a man who falls from the system's good graces and is imprisoned. He manages to escape and find shelter among other fugitives. There he falls in love with a woman of the same destiny, and after a few peripeties through which they ruggedly persist, the lovers return to the society where they should begin *a new life*—the content of which, however, the viewer cannot quite imagine outside the ideological boundaries of the world presented.

The film ends ambiguously. Or it seems so at literal sight. Although with its open-ended narrative the film simulates a sense of hope as many critical dystopias do in order to provide a utopian impulse (see Moylan 2000, 189), it seems that no matter what we imagine David eventually doing, the narrative has already cemented the film's alley toward an "epical" hope (cf. Suvin 1982). The last scene of the film shows David and Shortsighted Woman in a diner, in the city, preparing for David's act of blinding himself. In the next to last shot we look at David looking at himself in the mirror with the knife pointed to his eye. He seems ready to gouge it out. However, Lanthimos then cuts to the last shot of the film in which for over a minute we are watching Short Sighted Woman blindly sitting at the table, waiting for David. Then the film ends leaving us in doubt not only about whether he blinded himself or not, but also *how* he did or did not do it, and why. Therefore, judging by what we have seen until the last scene (and not by what we can imagine ourselves from our optimistic or pessimistic inclinations, or from our own imaginative capacities), either option appears only to be a confirmation of the persisting hegemonic system and the lovers' integration within it. If David did gouge his eyes, then we can imagine the lovers finding their loving shelter somewhere in the city and thus passively supporting the status quo, in which case the film nears the familiar Hollywood

mythological narratives. If he did not follow through, then the narrative imposes a conclusion that their relationship either ends or significantly suffers as the crucial reason they persisted and decided to escape to the city even after Short Sighted Woman had been blinded, is David's willingness to blind himself and thus make them compatible again. In this case, we can assume another narrative loop opening up, resembling the one we have just watched, with a similar end that would then initiate yet another loop and so *ad infinitum*. Either closure seems to support a "mythological structure with cyclical world-time" that shuts down on the epically unforeseeable (Suvin 1982, 77).

The actress Ariane Labeled, who played The Maid in the film, proposes a "third" option, namely, that the lovers devise a third solution, beyond the system's requirements (Lanthimos 2016). This option, however, does not seem plausible because no norms have been established in the narrative that would warrant such interpretation. Neither of the narrative's physical regions nor characters' "psychologies" reveal "a zone of un- or not yet-conquered space" (Moylan 2000, 158). The narrative agents appear unable of "such transformations of each other which can bring forth neither truly new values nor a hesitation as to the empirical success of existing values" (Suvin 1982, 78). David strikes us as an embodied end of the dystopian misfit, a full-blooded anti-hero, deprived of any depth of consciousness, memories, empathy. It would require either a new film, a sequel at least, in which we would witness the protagonists' psychic changes out of which they would be able to imagine an alternative love between each other whose practice then might create some new, different values and thus an enclave with a utopian impulse within or away from the city; or a full deployment of the viewer's intellectual and emotional capacities, more or less independently of the film. But in the latter case, do we need this film?

The first thought that presses itself against this question aligns with the view of the film as a "creative display" of a current human condition. In that sense, its goal is not necessarily to show a way out and offer readymade solutions, but to direct our attention to the problems of our society and therefore, takes a step toward inspiring us to think about them, as well as about the paths we could undertake ourselves toward a change. In this case, it seems reasonable to require from the very experience of watching the film to disturb our mental or emotional status quo. For example, in her analysis of *The Terminator* (1984), Constance Penley sees the film as a critical dystopia because besides showing a bleak future, it also "locates the origins of future catastrophe in decisions about technology, warfare and social behavior that are being made today," so "it tends to suggest causes rather than merely reveal symptoms" (Penley 1986, 67, 68). *The Lobster*, however, not only fails at pointing to the possible causes of the society we witness, but also renders the symptoms relatively undisturbing. The coolness of its narrative trajectory appears to be a decision consistently

executed throughout the film with the intention of documenting the manifestations of a sick society. Combined with the comical absurd that only intensifies this coolness, their documentation becomes written in shorthand, resembling offhand sketches lacking on one side, psychological layering that could deploy the viewer's emphatic capacities, and on the other, philosophical insights or formal interventions that could deploy the viewer's intellectual capacities. The sporadic asides heard in the dialogue (e.g., electronic music as the music of loneliness and children as helping crutches of marriage) seem too isolated and hackneyed remarks on the phenomena of our culture. The film actually appears to add another *abyme* by itself mimicking the theatricals performed in the hotel, both on the level of its dramaturgy and its direction. The only difference is that the film avoids providing an explicit end, i.e., the moral of the story. In terms of the effect it accomplishes at the end, this seems to be more of a deficiency than richness added to the narrative. Maybe if we had followed the story to its logical extreme, to an openly pessimistic, even cynical, dystopian resolution, and experienced the plastic horror of the city in which the two lovers are hopelessly subdued into blindness, grotesquely groping one for another like the blind in the Bruegel's painting, we might have been affected, disturbed enough to think, feel, imagine, and act in our real world. Maybe, as Irving Howe suggests, the presented horror would have moved us "with such power as to validate the continuing urgency of the dream" (quoted in Moylan 2000, 126).

Instead, *The Lobster* puts on a cloak of a critical dystopia and thus simulates the genre. Its cloak, however, is in a highly aestheticized "weird" style with its frame compositions of pleasing high symmetry, intensified coloring of enjoyably fashionable high contrasts, dashing wide shots of Irish countryside, and amusing absurdist-comical style of acting. "Today, indeed, as a fundamental genre of the postmodern, dystopia, far from warning of apocalypse, has aestheticized it and transformed it into an object of consumption and satisfaction" (Jameson 2016, 97). Its ambiguous, indeterminate end in particular, reveals utopian impotence, yet a curious denial of open pessimism, leaving us confused and apathetic within the present world, both intellectually and emotionally. In that regard, the film not only fails to disturb the status quo and inspire a potent thought or emotion that would further enable us to imagine or feel resistance, but it ends up supporting it precisely because it "may appear to challenge the current social situation but in fact end[s] up reproducing it by ideologically inoculating viewers and readers against any form of anger or action, enclosing them within the very social realities [it] disparagingly expose[s]" (Moylan 2000, 196). Its comical aspects wrapped in a pleasing, unchallenging aesthetics make it only more soothing.

By neither presenting possible causes for the existing conditions nor giving a contrasting utopian reference of any sort, the film normalizes such conditions.

Its critique acquires a level of somewhat witty, yet dispassionate chats people often engage in, filled with observations about “the terrible state of the world” whose pseudo-ambiguous end resembles a typical but equally bogusly ambiguous rhetorical closure of such chats: “Ah, what’s to be done...” uttered through a deep sigh. Then the interlocutors part, as the viewers do with the film. Although somewhat disheartened by the gravity of the observations, yet, enlivened by the mutual understanding and agreement about the dire state the world is in, they feel that despite not coming closer to imagining the forms of a change, they have made a “step in the process” toward it by “thinking around alienation, duality, polarizations, competition, separation, and oppositional thinking” (Levitas and Sargisson 2003, 17). But no idea of the reasons for the state we are in or an image of a better state has the film born. Surely because it has never set that as its goal to begin with. Instead, it has “raised our awareness” about social issues—uploaded it onto a cloud which, it appears, we are expecting soon to rain that accumulated wisdom onto the world and rinse all the dualities and polarizations away. While thus expecting, we are far from interfering with the system’s mechanics, and we are running the risk of fulfilling Forster’s vision in *The Machine Stops* where “[t]hinkers settle into lives of complaisant reflection on reflections, and the general population is relieved to become even more passive, to be free not only from labor but also from curiosity” (Moylan 2000, 117).

Utopia understood as social dreaming *with a will* must become our necessary touchstone which can enable us to see that “the life we lead, the society we have, is inadequate, incomplete, sick” (Sargent 1994, 25) and to conceive a better future as possible. To be sure, utopian imagination has been deeply compromised. On one hand, the experience of the twentieth century utopias has equated utopian thinking with totalitarianism and has made us fearful of utopian imaginings. On the other hand, Hollywood has thoroughly hijacked utopian mode of thinking by its jolly didactics and cloying happy ends, which have both vulgarized the idea of human happiness (as well as its path to it) and transferred it to the realm of pipe dreams, thus planting on us the perception of utopian imagination as either repellent escapism or a complete naiveté. This gives us pause in which “we should become the pitiless censors of ourselves” (Badiou 2004), yet without becoming faint-hearted or lazy to think and rethink ways and means of imagining a happier society, which are neither unrealistic or naïve. We must never surrender the image of the dystopian misfit to the image of an imaginatively impotent David. Most importantly, coolness (cf. Haselstein 2013), our contemporary version of ironic distance that takes on an “anti-mainstream” cloak of critical perception and detachment, while smuggling (wittingly or unwittingly) shallowness, cowardice, and apathy, might presently be the most dangerously luring sedative in thinking and acting against the neoliberal capitalism and its various cultural offspring.

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### *Distopija-En-Abyeme: analiza narativa u filmu Jastog*

U tekstu se analizira distopijski narativ kao politički akt u filmu *Jastog* (The Lobster 2015) režisera Jorgosa Lantimosa. Umesto da se strogo fokusira na ono što film iznosi kao problematično (romantične i seksualne veze, emocionalnu inteligenciju i ljubav u načelu), analiza će se usmeriti na to kako je taj problem predstavljen u distopijskoj vizuri, u narativnoj putanji i postupcima likova; s kakvom potencijalnom kritičkom snagom su ti problemi predstavljeni i, posledično, kakva je politička poruka filma. To će biti urađeno kroz pažljivije ispitivanje tri narativna elementa tekstualne distopije: prostora u filmu, protagonista i jezika. Najposle, biće razmotrene interpretativne mogućnosti otvorene strukture filma. Analiza ima za cilj da pokaže kako film zapanjujuće podseća na isprepletane narativne strukture kroz koje film zadobija i mitološka svojstva

koji onemogućavaju bilo kakav delotvoran narativni potencijal, film ne uspeva da pokrene utopijski impuls i shodno tome završava se podržavajući status quo.

*Ključne reči:* distopija, utopija, narativ, kontra-narativ, provalija, otpor, nada

*Dystopie-En-Abyme: Analyse du récit du film The Lobster*

L'article analyse le récit dystopique du film *The Lobster* (2015, dir. Y. Lanthimos) comme un acte politique. Plutôt que de se concentrer strictement sur ce que le film expose comme problématique (liaisons romantiques et sexuelles, intelligence émotionnelle, et l'amour en général), l'objet de l'analyse est la manière dont ce problème est présenté sous l'angle dystopique, puis le déroulement de son récit et les actions de ses personnages; enfin, l'on examine de quelle espèce de potentiel critique tous ces éléments sont dotés et par conséquent, quel est le genre de message politique communiqué par le film. L'on procède en examinant de plus près les trois éléments narratifs importants de la dystopie textuelle: l'espace du film, les protagonistes, et le langage. Enfin, l'on examine les possibilités interprétatives de son dénouement ouvert. L'analyse tend à montrer que le film ressemble infiniment à des structures narratives enchevêtrées à travers lesquelles il acquiert une qualité mythologique qui mine les potentiels puissants du récit, manque à donner une impulsion utopique, et par conséquent à la fin supporte le status quo.

*Mots clés:* dystopie, utopie, récit, contre-récit, abyme, résistance, espoir

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