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Beyond the Usual Suspects: Other Ways to Imagine Dystopia

When we picture dystopia, most of us bring on the same handful of images almost automatically: a Big Brother watching through a screen, a Handmaid in red, a girl volunteering for the Hunger Games. These stories are powerful, and rightly celebrated and they've earned their place at the centre of how dystopia gets taught, discussed and played.

Ask a room of European youth workers to name a dystopian story, and you'll get Orwell, Huxley, Atwood, Collins almost instantly. Ask them to name one written outside the dominant Western European and North American canon, and the answers usually come more slowly.

That's not a failure of imagination – it's simply **a reflection of which stories have travelled furthest and been translated most**. But it does raise an interesting question: if these five or six examples shape most of our intuitions about what dystopia is, **what other shapes might the genre take that we haven't spent as much time with yet?**

A genre bigger than its most famous authors

Dystopian storytelling is often traced to a fairly compact lineage: Zamyatin's *We* (1921), Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), and the generation of authors that followed. It's a genuinely rich tradition, shaped by very specific Western European anxieties – **industrial bureaucracy, totalitarian surveillance, the trauma of two world wars** (Claeys 2016). Tom Moylan (2000) describes this tradition as one that explores **societies in which social and**

political systems have gone wrong – and, as he also notes, it is one such tradition among several, not the only one.

Dystopia, as a mode of storytelling, **isn't owned by any one region**. Wherever political systems have failed people, wherever power has been abused, writers have imagined the worst version of it – and rich dystopian traditions exist across **Asia, Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Africa**, each shaped by its own political histories and fears (Baccolini and Moylan 2003).

What's interesting is that these traditions don't just retell the same story with different names. Often, they orbit a **genuinely different core fear**.

Different systems, different nightmares

Western dystopia tends to circle **one central anxiety: the all-seeing, all-controlling state, and the individual who must resist it alone**. It's a very specific historical fear – born of totalitarianism, the Cold War, and mass surveillance.

Step outside that lineage, and the nightmare often takes a different shape:

- **Colonial and post-colonial dystopia** frequently centres not a surveillance state but an extractive one – a system that survives by taking: land, labour, resources, futures. The oppressor isn't always a faceless Party; it can be a structure inherited from empire, still running on the same logic long after formal independence.
- **Latin American dystopian fiction**, shaped heavily by the region's experience of military dictatorships and disappearances, often foregrounds collective trauma and memory – the question isn't only “how do I resist as an individual?” but “how does a community carry on when its history has been erased or rewritten by force?”
- **East Asian dystopian fiction** frequently interrogates hyper-modernity and technological acceleration itself – not technology imposed by a single tyrant, but a whole society racing toward its own transformation (or collapse) through consumerism, labour intensity, or ecological overreach.
- **African speculative and dystopian fiction** often refuses the premise that the worst has yet to come – it can build directly on lived histories of colonisation, extraction, and structural violence, while insisting just as strongly on imagination, resistance, and futures beyond mere survival.

None of this makes the Western European tradition any less powerful or worth using. It simply means it's one lens among several – and each lens brings a different kind of oppressive “system” into focus, which in turn opens up different kinds of ethical dilemmas for players to sit with.

Another angle for scenario design

This is where the idea becomes genuinely practical rather than just theoretical. Every dystopian larp scenario is built around some version of a “**system gone wrong**” – and that system shapes the dilemmas players actually face during play.

A scenario built on **surveillance and propaganda** naturally produces dilemmas about **privacy, loyalty, and dissent**. A scenario built on **an extractive system** – one where the central mechanic is what gets taken, not who is watched – naturally produces a different set of dilemmas: **who gets to keep what they produce, who decides what counts as a resource, what happens when a community's land, labour or history is treated as something to be extracted rather than protected**. A scenario built around **collective memory after a ruptured past** raises questions less about individual resistance and more about **how a group rebuilds trust, truth, and shared narrative**.

None of these are better or more valid than an Orwellian surveillance scenario –they're simply additional lenses, each opening a different emotional and ethical terrain for participants to explore. An invitation to explore further or a starting point for anyone curious to explore further can be:

- Fiction and speculative work that centres **colonial and post-colonial extraction as the “system,”** rather than a backdrop
- Latin American dystopian and testimonial literature dealing with **dictatorship, disappearance, and collective memory**
- East Asian speculative fiction exploring **hyper-capitalism, labour, and ecological transformation**
- African speculative fiction that treats **resistance and imagined futures as central,** not incidental

This kind of exploration also connects naturally to what Erasmus+ itself asks of the projects it funds. Inclusion and diversity are named as one of the programme's horizontal priorities, with a clear expectation that projects reach and reflect participants from different cultural, social, and geographic backgrounds, including young people from migrant, minority, or otherwise underrepresented communities.

Drawing on a wider range of dystopian traditions is one concrete way of living up to that priority: it means that “civic, democratic and environmental education” through dystopian larp has more than one door for young people to walk through, whatever historical or cultural lens their own family history runs through.

Stay tuned through our project website to discover these upcoming scenarios and guides.

Sources

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