

Cli-Fi and dystopian narratives of the future:

The space of irony in *Downsizing*

***Cli-Fi* e narrativas distópicas do futuro:**

O espaço da ironia em *Downsizing*

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Introduction

Downsizing - translated in Brazil as “Little big life” - is a North American feature film, from Paramount Pictures, of 2017, directed by Alexander Payne, with a script shared with his partner from other initiatives, Jim Taylor. It is science fiction that narrates the possibilities, effects and consequences of applying an ultra-technological process of miniaturizing people to versions of themselves, reduced to the maximum dimension of just over a few centimeters, in the exact 1/12 scalar ratio.

In its diegesis, the narrative plot unfolds ten years after the technological consolidation of complex processes that result in human miniaturization, discovered and developed by Norwegian scientists led by the fictitious Dr. Jorgen Asbjornsen (played by Rolf Lassgard). In the narrative period, the practices of reduction were already relatively dispersed in multiple microcolonies distributed in different parts of the

<https://doi.org/10.46391/ALCEU.v21.ed43.2021.216>

ALCEU (Rio de Janeiro, online), V. 21, Nº 43, p.90-105, jan./abr. 2021

world and the incentive for their expansion continued to be stimulated by large-scale marketing initiatives, further driven by tax and fiscal incentives.

The support of adhesion of many individuals to the applied use of the flourishing technology is discursively given by their desire to reduce the material and financial volume of their consumption of goods and services, encouraged by the perspective that, with this, they would cause lower levels of impact and damage on global environment. However, the main underlying reason - and that establishes the perspective and the dynamics of the ironic game in the film's plot - is that of finding a way out so that different profiles of individuals and families can access or continue consuming all sorts of goods. So, this is being done without worrying about the ailments of enslaving work to obtain the necessary resources to do so, nor with the depletion of the planet's natural resources in its inextricable correlations with the endless generation of garbage, disposal and pollution (BAUMAN, 2008; MARQUES FILHO, 2018). To these uncomfortable questions, is given a simple technical-scientific answer: the reduction in the size of people and, consequently, of all the goods consumed. The expected effects, then, are that of a substantial reduction in the amount of resources needed to produce goods identical to those consumed in the non-miniaturized world and that of the consequent minimization, although late, of the resulting environmental impact.

The article explores the narrative of this fictional work by placing it in the context of dystopian narratives about the future, especially in the context of the subgenre called cli-fi (climate fiction). Highlighting its paradoxically comic character, the analysis goes on pointing to the critique of human resistance to changes in its consolidated and over-stimulated consumption practices in the context of contemporary neoliberal capitalism, even if at the expense of a - albeit fragile - awareness of the compromise of survival planetary. It is an investigation that takes into account the considerations of Terry Eagleton, in "The ideology of aesthetics" (1993), about the malicious in the Schopenhauerian work and that lead to the consideration that "comedy is the mocking revenge of the will on representation [...], but this source of hilarity is also, curiously, the root of our immense hopelessness "(EAGLETON, 1993, p. 116). From this perspective, *Downsizing* weaves a narrative immersed in networks of irony, parody and laughter as discursive events that operate to express ambiguities, tensions and contradictions in human behavior.

Cli-fi (climate fiction) as a subgenre of science fiction (sci-fi)

In the contemporary artistic scene - especially in literature and cinema - the dystopian narratives of the future, under the strong threat of increasingly imminent catastrophes, have an increasingly eco-apocalyptic character in their planetary dimensions. In this context, emerges the subgenre called, in the media jargon of literary criticism and journalism, climate fiction, or in its summarized form, cli-fi (climate fiction).

Most initiatives in this sense undertake frightening and even more sinister narratives, when more credible about the dystopian and post-apocalyptic future of humanity's destiny and, possibly, of all nature and the Earth. These are stories constructed from the risks of dominance of totalitarian powers¹, of biological mutations and induced transgenias, of predatory practices of industry and markets² and of the irrationalities, vanities, frivolities and inconsequences of human behavior³. Rarely, however, narratives in the universe of this subgenre take on the light character of comedy and parodic irony, which makes *Downsizing* an object of particular interest for analysis.

Science fiction - a term forged in 1929 by the inventor, editor and writer Hugo Gernsback - came to designate a particular genre of narrative in which symbolic elements of science and technology sustain artistic creations, engendering verisimilitude and instituting diegeses in their own logic and in their cultural senses (JUNQUEIRA, 2019). It cannot be demanded of it, since it is not within its sphere of purposes and competences, to provide plausible, safe, valid and scientifically verifiable answers to the problems, dilemmas and demands of humanity. On the other hand, is attestable its social value as a symbolic product capable of generating sign keys for the interpretation of the present reality, bearing contributions to the reflections on the future of humanity, as well as regarding the roles and meanings of science and technology,

Kim Stanley Robinson (2019), director of the acclaimed New York 2140, dystopian film about the future, also from 2017, provides relevant clues in this regard:

¹ Cf. Margareth Atwood (*The handmaid's tale*, 1985; *Oryx and Crake*, 2003; *The testaments*, 2019).

² Cf. Kim Stanley Robson (*Nova York 2140*, 2017).

³ Cf. Kim Stanley Robson (*Nova York 2140*, 2017).

while global warming has become one of the central problems of our times, perhaps central, a cross in human and planetary history, people need fiction to help them think about it. It is simply a cultural need, a kind of hunger: we always want and need art to interpret reality and create meaning (CÁCERES, 2020, p. H3)⁴.

In this context, science fiction often takes on allegorical and speculative forms and narratives about the present and the future, and can become a carrier of possibilities and / or political, moral and behavioral warnings by signaling for possible undesirable and avoidable scenarios and that involve, in a special way, the scientific and technological environment. In this direction, it usually involves utopian perspectives, when seeking to conform looks and practices focused on a better future, both for what we do and will do, and for what we can stop doing.

On the other hand, the establishment of dystopian perspectives on the future, forged by the darker perspectives of the ecological catastrophes presently experienced and threatening, has also been increasingly recurrent (GORE, 1993; GIDDENS, 2010; KLEIN, 2014; STENGERS, 2015; MARQUES FILHO, 2018). In these cases, the prevalence of incredulous and hopeless views about the human capacity for regeneration and change and, therefore, pessimistic about the very future of humanity, has been easily identifiable. For Sfez (1996), the eco-bio-religious regeneration of the world, capable of reconnecting the world in perfect fusion and the individual represents the most perfect and the last contemporary utopia.

The film now analyzed, strictly speaking, fits in the perspective of dystopian narratives, especially due to the emphasis it gives to the incapacity and decided ill will of human beings towards their own transformation in the face of the docile submission to the vicissitudes of consumerism. However, the light and comical tone that characterizes his narrative, assures him of a place of particular analytical interest.

In *Downsizing*, the main critical - and subliminal - axis that makes it parodic and laughable is the phenomenon of the subject's absolute resistance to questioning and eventually to revising his lifestyle, even alleging concerns about the health of the environment and survival of humans and non-humans. In this sense, the option for miniaturization becomes a valuable alternative for maintaining the status quo, and, most importantly, for expanded or even unlimited access to consumption, luxury and endless pleasures.

⁴ Our translation for: "enquanto o aquecimento global vem se tornando um dos problemas centrais de nossos tempos, talvez o central, uma cruz na história humana e planetária, as pessoas precisam da ficção para ajudá-las a pensar sobre isso. É simplesmente uma necessidade cultural, um tipo de fome: nós sempre queremos e precisamos de arte para interpretar a realidade e criar significado" (CÁCERES, 2020, p. H3).

All financial resources previously accumulated in the world of normal citizens, not miniaturized, can be transposed and converted with a large margin of profit in the world of Leisureland - the miniaturized colony where the film plot unfolds -, by the new money's relationship with nascent exchange values (\$ 100,000 to \$ 12 million). In this direction and sense, the promises in the new small world and the new small life are designed in the conformation of daily life and permanent leisure routines, in a kind of eternal delights of consumerism.

Since the official premiere of the film, the specialized critic, as a rule, has been lavish in pointing out a large number of imperfections and shortcomings in the work, especially in the face of expectations generated by the author's reputation, enshrined in previous productions such as "Nebraska", a 2013 film by notable success in Hollywood, which featured three Oscar nominations for best director and three for best script. Among the most recurring criticisms, there is a note of the excess of secondary characters who appear and disappear with a certain narrative lightness throughout the plot, the multiplication of extensive scenes of little relevance in the plot (such as the initial sequence of the main character's interaction with the chronically ill mother) and the embarrassing ingenuity of some sequences such as the sunset accompanied by the original Norwegian colony, on the verge of their migration to an underground shelter where they will remain for 8,000 years, in the perspective of thereby saving the human species from its more complete extinction.

In the other hand, praiseworthy comments and evaluations were abundant in relation to the exquisite scenes of the shrinking of people, as well as the relationships that are established between shrunken and non-shrunk individuals and between these and everyday objects. The extreme care given to the narratives about the need to eliminate hair and body hair and especially teeth, later reimplanted in a scale suitable to the new height standard, generate effects of truth and credibility in the reductionist technique, contributing to a successful fictional narrative.

Regardless of aspects such as these, which relate to the sphere of artistic and artisanal elaboration of the film, our analysis moves towards explicit and implicit criticisms in the discourse of the narrative, emphasizing its metaphorical intertextual character.

The freedom of artistic creation allows the establishment of the author's dialogue with the fabric and the languages own possibilities, beyond the apparent reality of the world. There, several paths are opened,

including those of parodies, stylizations, paraphrases and appropriations, of which the analyzed film is full (SANT'ANNA, 2003).

In Bakhtinian thought (BAKHTIN, 1995, 2010), laughter is a phenomenon that occurs in language, in life and in history and that is revealed in and through discourse. In this context, parody establishes itself as a potent strategy capable of engendering a profusion of discursive genres, which thus see a place for laughter both within popular and learned cultures. We can thus think of laughter in comedy or parody as an event that transitions both between the languages of everyday life and between the languages of art.

The multiple dimensions and directions of shrinkage

In the sphere of literary and cinematographic fiction, human shrinkage has been a recurring theme in narratives on different fronts, with special emphasis on children's literature and the adventure genre. The best-known stories, told and retold, are certainly "The Gulliver's Travels", a bestseller of English literature, authored by Jonathan Swift, originally published in 1726 and "The adventures of Alice in Wonderland", a work by Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, published on July 4, 1865, under the pen name Lewis Carroll.

In cinema, outstanding works in the genre can be found in "The incredible shrinking man" (1957), inspired by the eponymous novel by Richard Matheson, published in 1956, which narrates the adventures and misadventures of a man who when exposed to radiation and vermicide products it starts to shrink. In this work, the drama establishes itself in the search for the character to find a way to reverse the process, under penalty of continuing to decrease until its complete disappearance. Another example is the light and fun comedy "Honey, I shrunk the kids" (1989), which engendered continuities in other films derived from it.

The imaginary of human shrinkage comprises several readings and its artistic approaches are usually enveloped by the immanent possibilities of reversing the process or radical changes in the contexts in which they occur: Alice shrinks and stretches several times throughout her adventures; Gulliver is a giant for Lilliputians, but he himself becomes a miniature in Brobdingnag.

In contrast, the narrative in *Downsizing* does not aim at children's entertainment or dispute the interest in the adventure genre. In it, moreover, the shrinking process is irreversible and the inhabited world

is the contemporary and recognizable human world, shared simultaneously by large and tiny people, in all their dilemmas, economic, social, moral, political and environmental.

In the film, the shrinking process dialogues with multiple intertextualities guided especially by the critique of contemporary consumerism and the threats that result from it to health, if not even for the very survival of human life and of the whole planet.

In this direction and sense, a first analytical axis can be found in its connections with themes and movements of social activism that point to economic degrowth and to the necessary reduction of consumption patterns and styles, on a planetary scale.

The political and economic concept of degrowth was originally formulated by André Gorz in the 1970s, under the influence of the bioeconomic theses of the Romanian mathematician Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen. Such formulation is supported by the perspective of unsustainability of the constant growth of the economic product (Gross Domestic Product - GDP), on a global scale. From this perspective, production and consumption cannot grow indefinitely, to the extent that natural resources are finite.

Serge Latouche (2012), emeritus professor of economics at the University of Orsay, France, has been one of the most prominent theoreticians defending the theory of degrowth. Their approaches and proposals are based on the recognition of the deep ecological crisis experienced on a global scale in contemporary times and the impossibility, in this context, of the insistence on the imagination of the society of infinite growth. For the author, it is a matter of making possible forms of radical confrontation that this order of things imposes on the social collective and which increasingly materialize in exclusion, inequality, misery and plunder. In the framework of his ideas are the contributions of Jacques Ellul (1963) and Ivan Illich (1973), focused on proposals to rethink the imaginary bases of consumer society on its support tripod: progress, science and technique.

The criticism that emerges from the *Downsizing* irony is that of the human refusal to give up their consumption desires and the will to adhere to sumptuous and conspicuous lifestyles, even in the case of citizens pierced by speeches about planetary insolvency and the imminent risks of a global catastrophe. In this context, the decrease does not result (and cannot result) from the reduction of consumption and its appetites, which remain untouchable or even more insatiable; it occurs by the only possible way then: the reduction of the human scale. The consumerist drive does not cool down and experiences, even, unchecked

expansions. The reduction of exploitation and environmental damage resulting from consumption become mere questions of proportion, as well as the efforts of labor to obtain income for spending on the markets. In this context, it is imagined that the world will consume less, not because it was able to reorient its ideologies and social practices, but only because the quantities of raw materials and products were minimized by a simple equation of scalar conformity.

The parodic connections that are established there corroborate the functioning of the language of laughter, strengthening the game of ambiguities that sustain and denounce “the failure of the constituted power, in a society full of contrasts” (ARAGÃO, 1980, p. 19-21).

Autopoietic machines and the production of subjectivities

The concept of the autopoietic machine was developed by biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela at the end of the 20th century. It aimed the scientific rationalization of the self-production processes of living beings from cell reproduction, as well as the permanent creation of their stability based on dynamics of interaction with changes and disturbances in the environment, sustained by an inexorable maintenance of self-organization, typical of complex systems. To this idea, the authors attributed the term "operational closure" (MATURANA; VARELA, 1998).

Félix Guattari (1976) appropriated the concept of an autopoietic machine by these authors, expanding it to understand everyday social reality, in his self-production of the modes of existence. The author therefore moves away from the mechanistic and thermodynamic views of the visceral gears of the original concept of the autopoietic machine, to cover the complexities of the social universe. For Guattari (1976), the machinic system serves to study the dynamics of subjectivation, capable of engendering new ways of living and thinking about the reality-world. The deepening of this concept, in partnership with Gilles Deleuze, led this author to formulate the perspectives of the collective agency necessary and desirable to the production and experimentation of new possible realities, in existential processes of formulation and invention of new subjectivities (DELEUZE; GUATARRI, 1977).

Within the scope of this article, the inclusion of the Guattarian perspective of the theory of the autopoietic machine serves the purpose of highlighting the ironic emergence of the *Downsizing* narrative,

by denouncing that even subject to radical processes of alteration of the systemic organization of the biological body, humanity tends to keep subdued and not resistant to the ideological dictates of contemporary neoliberal capitalism. This is the condition under which is unable or unwilling to be seduced by the potential production of the unprecedented social. In denying the creation and experience of new subjectivities, the subjects and their micro-communities, in *Downsizing*, succumb to the mere reproduction of the senses, values and (in) sensitivities that - at least in the illusion of the speeches - motivated the decisions of the shrinkage. The world, in short, can be reduced on its physical scales, but it reproduces the exact dimensions of inequities, injustices and social disasters.

The North American Loser⁵

The main character of *Downsizing*, Paul Safranek (played by Mat Damon), is the typical loser designed by liberal capitalism within the scope of American culture. The loser is, in this context, the other side of the coin of the self-made-man, a successful example of self-entrepreneurship, to which neoliberalism never tires of chanting enthusiastic stories; he is the failed subject, threatened by the imminent stigma and social erasure. The most tragic dimension of the loser is its imprisonment to a social identity that chains it to subordination and permanent frustration in the face of the powerlessness to conquer the objects of its restless and insomniac ambition of consumption (SANDAGE, 2005).

Although hardworking, thoughtful and economical - like any typical loser - Paul is gradually becoming aware that he will never be able to raise enough money to acquire the goods that he and his wife Audrey Safranek (Kristen Wiig) dream of, mainly a mansion of luxury, its correlated and resulting objects and lifestyle.

This becomes, in fact, the main trigger of the Safranek couple's decision to abandon their mediocre life in the city of Omaha and to migrate, miniaturized, to the Lazerland colony. It is worth mentioning, however, that, in the narrative sequence, the wife Audrey gives up the process of shrinking, condemning Paul to move forward on the project alone and irreversibly transmuted.

⁵ In the Portuguese version of the article, we kept the original term in English because we believe that there is not enough translation for the meaning that the term has in the original language. In addition, the word was forged in the context of American neoliberal capitalist culture, where it finds its maximum sign expression.

Throughout the film, Paul reaffirms his inexorable loser identity, having his finances reduced by divorce and the impossibility of exercising his old profession, given that the new environment reproduces the bureaucracy of the previous world, not recognizing his professional records for work in another State, New Mexico, in this case. Failed, Paul ironically takes on services designed to meet, via call center, the desires, dissatisfactions and wishes of consumers of goods and services that ended up being denied himself.

Meat: the interdiscursivities of unsustainability

Paul Safranek's work, not by chance, is that of an occupational therapist in the slaughterhouse industry. On the contrary, the intertextual reference could not be better constructed, given that it is the productive segment most targeted by contemporary environmental criticism. Paul, who weaves socially and for himself a weak and hesitant discursive defense of his option for shrinkage as a contribution to the good of planetary health, lives daily with the slaughterhouse industry without signaling the minimum level of awareness about its impacts and consequences on the climate crisis.

Over the years, important global value chains have been scrutinized and publicly denounced for their socioeconomic and environmental unsustainability, especially when they involve the maintenance and exploitation of their workers in conditions similar to those of slavery. Among them, for years, the beef industry has been the target of concerns and complaints from relevant health and environmental agents from various parts of the world. The threats of the activity to the deforestation of forests and its high rates of emissions of greenhouse gases contribute to this. To combat such events, reductions in the consumption of red meat have been requested and different educational campaigns and guidance measures are adopted with the support of medical authorities and nutrologists, from different lines and guidelines in collective and dietary health. Relationships between high consumption of red meat and incidences of heart disease, high cholesterol, high blood pressure and degenerative diseases, such as various types of cancer, seem to find no more room for scientific refutations.

The need for constant attention in order not to suffer serious injuries, under the demand of a number of sequential and uninterrupted operations, does not differ from the environment of the Fordist industry already portrayed by the French philosopher Simone Weil (1909-1943), from his experience as a worker in the factories of Alshon and Renault, in Paris, between the years of 1934 and 1936.

Activist movements such as vegetarianism and veganism, on different fronts, join efforts in the direction of the reduction, or even, total elimination of animal slaughter. However, even in the current pandemic context, consumer behavior does not seem to cool down in relation to the demand for meat, causing, on the contrary, scarcity and price increases in view of the sanitary need for a momentary reduction in slaughter and transportation of refrigerated meat.

Once again, the ironic discourse is established in the narrative plot, functioning as an argumentative strategy in the complex game of the communicative process.

Redemption through solidarity

In *Downsizing*, another intertextual dimension also emerges: the dialogues with the so-called contemporary “solidarity legitimacy” (LAVAL, 2020, p. 465). It is a political perspective in which individuals increasingly become more sensitive and active in relation to common causes and the awareness of mutual dependence between subjects and between populations, beyond states and national borders. In this context, solidarity is established as a new form of coexistence between humans and non-humans, consolidating alternatives for the world's housing, beyond the domination of nature. Against the imminent threat of the collapse of the world due to the advances of industrial capitalism in the methodical and constant destruction of resources and conditions of existence, it is advocated, in this context, for a holistic ecological knowledge that is capable of introducing new knowledge and new simultaneous practices in relation to the environment, social relations and subjectivities (GUATTARI, 1990). Thus, the aim is to recover the idea, principles and perspectives of care for all dimensions of life (STENGERS, 2015).

In this sense, the film - from its dystopian narrative and its ironic discourse - fulfills its “social objective”, as advocated by Göyrgy Lukacs (1971, p. 13-14):

If a film as a work of art, it has been possible for people to seriously reflect on a past situation in the present, their objective has been achieved. [...]. The film has to represent the positive and negative aspects of society, and, as in this plan, it must have an essential relieve, it must achieve that the man of the street reflects carefully and with care that generally he touches the themes above and without reflection, reacting only on the sentimental plane. If in the film, a person about death can find his way, the film has achieved its objective⁶.

⁶ Our translation to the original in Spanish: “Si un film como obra de arte, ha logrado hacer que la gente reflexione seriamente sobre una situación del pasado o del presente, ha logrado su objetivo. [...]. El film tiene el deber de representar los aspectos

Final considerations

Downsizing is a dystopian science fiction work that, in its light, comic and metaphorical narrative, proposes and encourages deep reflections on the human condition.

At the same time that, through the path of intertextualities that are sometimes direct, sometimes subtle, it denounces the inertia and subordination of individuals to the dictates of insomniac capitalism and unrestrained in its appropriations of science and technology, also points to a possible way out, from the path of social solidarity.

The film questions the effective opportunities and possibilities of social change, even when a new reality can offer a path for experimentation, for the fabrication of new politically possible imaginary and the exercise of social invention. In this sense, the narrative succumbs to hopelessness.

The Guattarian perspective of the autopoietic machine, in this fiction, does not come true, inasmuch as it aborts the possibilities of elaborating the new, the strange, the not yet known and restores all the vicissitudes of the world on the way to collapse. However, in a last breath of inspiration for the collective future of the world and in the world, the film points to the door of solidarity.

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Received on: April 2, 2021.

Approved on: May 3, 2021.

positivos y negativos de la sociedad, y, como en ese plano puede tener un relieve esencial, debe lograr que el hombre de la calle reflexione atentamente y con cuidado ya que generalmente suele tocar los temas por encima y sin reflexionar, reaccionando únicamente en el plano sentimental. Si en el cine, una persona sobre diez logra encontrar su propio camino, el film ha logrado su objetivo”.

<https://doi.org/10.46391/ALCEU.v21.ed43.2021.216>

ALCEU (Rio de Janeiro, online), V. 21, Nº 43, p.90-105, jan./abr. 2021

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Abstract

The article discusses, from the critique of a fictional work, the discursive dimensions of irony in the dystopian narrative of the future, in which the inexorable advance of consumerism, capitalist progress and its impacts on the global climate crisis threatens human life and the very survival of the planet. Methodologically, the text explores the Bakhtinian concepts of the language of laughter in shaping the social senses, seeking to identify its potential as an argumentative strategy. The analysis points to the discursive efficacy of irony to address irremovable human behavior in the face of the pleasures of the inexhaustible pleasures of permanent leisure and consumerism and the failure of the Guattarian autopoietic machine in the production of new subjectivities and collective agency for

the production of new realities, both phenomena necessary to face the imminent environmental collapse.

Keywords: Dystopian Narratives. Future; Science Fiction. Discourse.

Resumo

O artigo discute, a partir da crítica de uma obra ficcional, as dimensões discursivas da ironia na narrativa distópica do futuro, no qual a vida humana e a própria sobrevivência do planeta encontram-se ameaçadas pelo avanço inexorável do consumismo, do progresso capitalista e dos seus impactos sobre a crise climática global. Metodologicamente, o texto explora os conceitos bakhtinianos da linguagem do riso na conformação dos sentidos sociais, buscando identificar seu potencial enquanto estratégia argumentativa. A análise aponta para a eficácia discursiva da ironia para abordar o comportamento humano irremovível frente às promessas dos prazeres inesgotáveis do lazer permanente e do consumismo e o fracasso da máquina autopoietica guattariana na produção de novas subjetividades e do agenciamento coletivo para a produção de novas realidades, ambos fenômenos necessários ao enfrentamento do iminente colapso ambiental.

Palavras-chave: Narrativas Distópicas. Futuro. Ficção Científica. Discurso.

Resumen

El artículo analiza, a partir de la crítica de una obra de ficción, las dimensiones discursivas de la ironía en la narrativa distópica del futuro, en que la vida humana y la propia supervivencia del planeta se ven amenazadas por el inexorable avance del consumismo, el progreso capitalista y sus impactos sobre la crisis climática global. Metodológicamente, el texto explora los conceptos bajtinianos del lenguaje de la risa en la configuración de los sentidos sociales, buscando identificar su potencial como estrategia argumentativa. El análisis apunta a la eficacia discursiva de la ironía para abordar el comportamiento humano inamovible frente a los placeres inagotables del ocio y el consumismo permanentes y el fracaso de la máquina autopoietica guattarana en la producción de nuevas subjetividades y agencia colectiva para la producción de nuevas realidades, ambos fenómenos necesarios para afrontar el inminente colapso ambiental.

Palabras clave: Narrativas Distópicas. Futuro. Ficción Científica. Discurso.

<https://doi.org/10.46391/ALCEU.v21.ed43.2021.216>

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