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Speculative fiction and political ideologies: meanings given by the audience

Abstract

Speculative fiction is based on one main question: what if? This paper addresses the question of how audiences interpret such interrogative. In particular, our main interest lies in knowing how the different political ideologemes that may inhabit speculative fiction are signified. Thus, in this study we have focused on the genre of dystopia. To this end, a total of five focus groups were carried out. Specifically, the ideologemes tested in the reception study belong to socialism, conservatism, neoliberalism, liberalism and religious fundamentalism. The significance of these ideological values is empirically grounded in extensive qualitative research.

Keywords
Reception, dystopia, audience, qualitative, politics.

1. Introduction

This study is based on one specific interest, which is to reveal how different political ideologemes that dwell in speculative fiction are understood and interpreted. To this end, a genre especially known for being infused with ideology, which is the dystopia (Moylan, 2000), has been chosen as the object of study. The television series in question is part of a larger film franchise of the same name, called *The Purge* (Amazon Prime: 2018-2019).

To offer a brief description, the series envisions the United States ruled by The New Founding Fathers, a political organisation that has legally stipulated that one night per year all crime, including murder, is allowed. The series was selected based on the relevance of the socio-political issues it addresses in its narrative, which can be extrapolated to other European contexts, such as neoliberalism (Sánchez-Gutiérrez & Pineda, 2021). Before delving into the empirical study, due to limited space we will briefly describe the characteristics of the genre that is the object of analysis –the dystopia.

The definition or description of utopias and dystopias has generated widespread academic discussion, due to the fact that what is considered socially optimistic or disastrous may vary according to the socio-cultural context, as well as the different ideologies of the individuals in question (Claeys, 2022). Therefore, utopia may refer to an ideal society, as an example, yet the features that comprise such a society is still a point of disagreement (Greene, 2011). According to Sargisson (2011), as these are hermeneutical texts, both utopian and dystopian texts are useful for political workings, as they are realms in which we can envision alternative solutions to problems of the present: "The negative critizes while the positive creates or imagines something new" (pp. 41-42).

Continuing this line of thought, Sargisson (2011) and Levitas (2011) argue that dystopian narratives are linked to political ideology, because they help us shape our hopes for the future, which occurs with utopian texts as well: "socialism contains utopias of egalitarism and

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liberalism seeks various (economic, social, and political) utopias of freedom. This aspect of utopianism (and this aspect of ideology) brings hope to politics: the hope and desire that things can be different" (2011, p. 42). Thus, there are utopias and dystopias of different political ideologies, such as the extreme right, socialists, and feminists (Levitas, 2011; Rosenfeld, 2020). In a utopia we make the correct political and ideological choices and create a free and prosperous society, while in a dystopia we are deprived of these benefits (Claeys, 2013).

In the following sections we will elaborate upon the specific genre of the dystopia. The term dystopia has traditionally been attributed to John Stuart Mill (1868), yet the notion had already appeared in a letter to the editor in *The Gentleman's Magazine* in September of 1748, when the word was coined to suggest the inverted and negative meaning of utopia in a poem praising Chesterfield's administration in Ireland, and warning about the imminent socio-political disorder that would follow his departure (Budakov, 2010). Along these lines, dystopian fiction envisions an uncertain future based on contemporary events: "dystopian narratives are also historically aware, responding to present conditions and informed by knowledge of historical events and traumas" (Stock, 2019, p. 2). In the author's view, dystopian narratives are politicised discourses which, as rhetorical structures, can help readers contemplate the political issues of their time: "grounded in anxieties of their present, these political engaged narratives mobilise knowledge of historic events and traumas to speculate upon consequences of current trends and actions for the future" (2019, p. 3). Specifically, Rosenfeld (2021) notes that the values denied by dystopias are the humanistic precepts of reason and debate.

Along the same lines as Stock (2019), the most relevant feature of dystopia, according to Moylan (2000b), lies in its ability to make us reflect on the causes of wrongdoing: "Crucial to dystopian vision in all its manifestations is this ability to register the impact of an unseen and unexamined social system on the everyday lives" (2010, p. xiii). In short, dystopian narratives are an outgrowth of the terrors of the 20th century (Moylan, 2000a, p. xi): "exploitation, repression, state violence, war, genocide, disease, famine, ecocide, depression, debt, and the steady depletion of humanity through the buying and selling of everyday life provided more than enough fertile ground for this fictive underside of the utopian imagination" (Moylan, 2000a, p. xi). Dystopia is presented as the result of human wrongdoing (Tower Sargent, 2013). However, although the images of the future presented in dystopias can lead the reader to despair, the main purpose of this genre is didactic and moralistic. In the same vein, Stock argues that dystopias are politically engaged narratives and "mobilise knowledge of historic events and traumas to speculate upon consequences of current trends and actions for the future" (2019, p. 3). The future society is presented as a real possibility because the aim of a dystopia is to frighten the reader and make them understand that things can go well or badly depending on the moral, social and civic responsibility of the citizens (Viera, 2010): "these are not just ways of imagining the future (or the past) but can also be understood as concrete practices through which historically situated actors seek to reimagine their present and transform it into a plausible future" (Gordin, Tilley & Prakash, 2010, p. 3).

Thus, the authors reviewed agree in pointing out the socio-political, speculative, and ideological components of dystopias. In particular, Trotta and Sadri define the genre "as fiction that explores social or political struggle" (2020, p. 4). These authors note that the power structures in these stories continue to function, at times in a way that seems orderly and efficient, yet at times they appear to be on the verge of collapse. According to Levitas (2011) and Rosenfeld (2020), there are dystopias of various political ideologies. Therefore, the undesirable power structure (or lack thereof) will vary according to the author's values.

Having mentioned the main precepts of the genre, we will now develop the methodological instrument of data collection that will enable us to reveal how the dystopia under study, *The Purge*, is interpreted. However, we will first explain the conceptual framework for the two key concepts in our study: political ideologies, and ideologemes. Ideologies are a set of deeply

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rooted attitudes through which diverse social groups propose, explain, and justify their objectives, as well as the means they use to achieve them. Moreover, all of the above can also be used for the purpose of preserving, modifying, or destroying a particular social order (Seliger, 1976; Heywood, 2012). Ideologemes, on the other hand, are the different specific precepts that make up political ideologies (Voloshinov, 1986), such as the free market defence of neoliberalism.

2. Methodology

With the aim of determining the ideological meaning that the dystopia *The Purge* transmits to audiences, we have chosen to use one of the quintessential qualitative techniques in television reception studies: focus groups. In this regard, as Kitzinger and Barbour (1999) point out, focus groups are ideal for exploring people's experiences, opinions, desires and concerns: "a gathering of a limited number of individuals, who through conversation with each other, provide information about a specific topic, issue or subject" (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013, p. 375).

As such, the authors of the present study would like to understand what the series *The Purge* means to audiences, specifically in Spain. Thus, although this study is based on the theoretical underpinning of the ideologemes that are the object of interpretation, the cultural factor becomes important, as we shall see in the results. To this end, as the participants were aware of the importance of genre at the time of reception (Jauss, 1988), they were recruited and grouped according to their series preferences, as well as their knowledge of the dystopian genre and familiarity with *The Purge* franchise. Therefore, after conducting a call on social media and in university settings, those interested were asked to fill in an initial survey in which they were asked various questions about their television preferences in order to group the participants according to five profiles: Group 1 was familiar with *The Purge* franchise; Group 2 was genre-savvy, naming two or more dystopias as favourites; Group 3 had considerable knowledge of audio-visual culture, and they followed large number of series and films, but not any particular genre; Group 5 was not familiar with series or films in general, as they were not avid spectators. In order to create a trusting atmosphere, participants were assured of the confidentiality of their data on the survey form. Although the participants of these groups had diverse academic and professional backgrounds, such as lawyers, IT specialists, and others, there was a certain prevalence of communication undergraduates. Finally, due to the socio-political nature of the genre, with its high theoretical content, we created one final group of experts in communication, comprised of university professors of journalism, advertising and audio-visual communication, which was designated as Group 4. In summary, the groups consisted of five to seven people, totalling twenty-eight participants.

In addition to audio-visual preferences, in an attempt to establish possible patterns in the responses, the survey included questions in which the participants were asked about their ideological leanings and the political party they voted for in the last general elections in Spain. The ideological labels were taken from surveys conducted by the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (CIS) [sociological research centre]. It should be noted that we are aware of the difficulty of revealing precise ideological attitudes. This was due to the fact that the surveys were not completely anonymous, so although their personal information would not be published, it would be revealed among the participants during in-person meetings. Consequently, the participants may have tended to respond according to social desirability. Nevertheless, we believe it is important to have an initial image of the subjects, from which more information can be obtained later in the focus groups. Finally, it should be noted that our aim is not to establish correlations between ideologies and responses, which is more appropriate for quantitative-experimental techniques, but instead to provide more information for the analysis of the responses.

To encourage conversation in the groups, a question sheet was designed in order to learn more about the different meanings of the genre, following the indications of Krueger (1997a;

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1997b), who recommends separating the questions into four blocks: introductory, transitional, key, and closing, all preceded by the presentation of the group. Regarding the specific objectives of the study, the key and closing questions are highly relevant, as more specific issues are addressed in these blocks. Along these lines, we began the discussion by asking questions about the perception of the dystopian genre and then moved on to more specific questions about the ideological hallmarks of the series. For this purpose, five scenes were selected from the series, one per group, with different ideologemes: liberalism and neo-liberalism (Group 1); ethnic and civic nationalism (Group 2); socialism (Group 3); conservatism, liberalism, and nationalism (Group 4); and religious fundamentalism (Group 5).

The in-person sessions worked as follows: participants were exposed to one of the scenes with the ideologemes indicated above, and once the scene was presented, we followed Krueger's (1997a) recommendation for complex issues, like political ideologies, and provided participants with a sheet of paper where they were required to write down the stances of the characters in the scene. After the activity, participants were encouraged to share their ideas with the group and discuss the attitudes of the characters in the scene. Finally, the moderator gave two ideologemes, one of which pertained to the scene in question, and then asked the participants which one they thought was more appropriate based on what they had seen.

3. Results

To present the results, we have addressed the answers according to the groups that were created. Following the methodological design, we have described the ideology that was self-assigned by the participants in each of their responses.

3.1. *Group 1: Familiar with The Purge franchise*

The scene displayed involves a meeting of executives who are brainstorming possible types of masks to be sold during Purge night. The themes that emerge in the conversation revolve around those encoded in the scene: capitalism, social minorities, and liberalism. Accordingly, the ideologemes encoded in this scene are as follows:

> Tolerance and diversity (Liberalism): the willingness to accept views or actions with which one does not agree (Heywood, 2012).

> Deregulation and the free market (Neoliberalism): to obtain greater economic growth, no state should intervene in the private market, as entrepreneurs are fully capable of regulating themselves and benefitting the economy (Antón, 2020).

The discussion is opened by Participant 3, who comments with a tone of outrage that the characters show values related to "capitalism, patriarchy, and individualism… all of them…" (Category 3[1], feminist). According to what is written in her notes, the participant bases these assumptions on the value of corporate profits, as the actions of the characters in the scene are guided selfishly by this single purpose, even to the point of exploiting social minorities. Thus, for this participant, the prevailing individualism of the scene is relevant, because in contrast to the search for the common welfare of society, capitalism is seen as a cynical system that encourages the pursuit of self-interest. In this way, "capitalists, you know…" takes on a pejorative connotation for the participant, as capitalist characters, including everyone in the scene, "reflect privilege and exploit the market" (activity document of Participant 3). Later, she reaffirms her view by adding that the capitalist system itself has created *the Purge*: "They're literally creating *the Purge*." Furthermore, this commodification of the LGTBI movement, a collective historically vilified by the patriarchy, implies that the movement has been non-ideologized for the benefit of the market.

While Participant 3 places all the characters under the same capitalist banner, the other participants start a debate about the ideological implications of the *Employee* in the scene,

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[1] This data signifies the ideological position that the participant assigns to him/herself.

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who is a hesitant character. One example is Participant 6, who changes his opinion after listening to Participant 3: "In general, I had written a lot about capitalism and so on, but I thought that this Employee character didn't really agree, and then I felt fooled" (Category 6, progressive). In this regard, in his notes he considers that the *Employee* behaves according to more noble convictions than others: "He's more socially aware, wants to donate, and is concerned about the problems of others" (Category 6, liberal). Moreover, Participants 1, 2 and 4 also change their opinion about the character, as they write in their comments adjectives such as "sensible" (activity document, Participant 1), as well as "sensitive and conscientious" (Participant 4). However, in the conversation after the comments made by Participant 3, they are convinced that the character acts just like everyone else: "Finally, everyone ends up having same preferences, in a sense, and if the majority of the people think this is the normal thing to do, they just follow the crowd" (Participant 5, Category 5, apolitical). Thus, market implications are the common denominator of the comments made by all the participants. Along the same lines, Participant 1 (Category 6, liberal) explains that she has based her evaluations on the emotions conveyed by the scene: the fear of having to conform to the system (the male employee as a person who suppresses his own personality); frivolity (the female employee who uses the LGTBI movement for financial gain); and a sense of unease in the presence of power.

In similar terms, Participant 5 describes the scene as a "capitalist world" (activity document, Participant 5) where businesspeople use the standardised tastes of the "crowd" to open up new markets, regardless of the messages they deliver: "they say we're not going to support a serial killer and... [mocking laughter] they've got a face like Hitler's; I mean, come on..." Participant 6 adds in his notes that the female employee is portrayed as "greedy" and "only cares about money," like her boss, (activity document, Participant 6). Participant 2 notes that the female employee is depicted as using "cold" and "manipulative" techniques, while her colleague justifies the means: "She doesn't care what means is used, as long as the goal is achieved" (activity document, Participant 2). In short, the capitalist system is collectively noted with negative adjectives, such as frivolous, dehumanising, and manipulative. In the comments of Participant 4, this consensus is broadened, as he introduces the term "liberal" and "conservative." In this regard, although he does not express it during the conversation, he notes that the boss is "conservative, greedy, and impartial, as he only wants profits" while the female executive is "transgressive, proactive, and liberal" (activity document, Participant 4). As stated in the notes, Participant 4 relates conservatism to the capitalist market, seeing the former as based exclusively on corporate profit, and the latter on economic profit plus innovation.

Like his peers, it can be inferred that Participant 4 associates capitalism, and thus conservatism, with a frivolous value system. Regarding liberalism, if he describes the first character with adjectives that can be seen as positive in the business world, such as being proactive, the second personality is described in the following way: "liberal, insensitive, wants to be noticed" (description of Jimmy, Participant 4, activity document); therefore, Participant 4 also links liberalism to a business ideology which, despite being innovative, is still frivolous.

Finally, the participants were presented with two ideologemes, from which they had to choose the one they thought was most in line with the scene:

> Freedom (Liberalism): the right of every individual to pursue one's own interest (choice of religious belief, profession, etc.) without being persecuted (Heywood, 2012).

> Deregulation and the free market (neoliberalism): to obtain greater economic growth, no state should intervene in the private market, as entrepreneurs are fully capable of regulating themselves and benefitting the economy (Antón, 2020).

They all concurred with the free market ideologeme, "since they vary their discourse until they say, well, this is what sells, and so on..." (Participant 6, Category 6, liberal). In short, competition in the free market "is a competition of egos, where everyone is trying to charm

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the boss by selling what he wants" (Participant 6). Agreeing with Participant 6, Participant 1 makes the following comment: "In the end, the person who seems more reasonable is just the same; at the end of the day, what he wants is to support the interests of the company, and he doesn't care… at least, that's the feeling I get…" (Category 6, liberal). The importance of the scene is the supremacy of corporate profits and economic growth without any decree, whether legal or ethical, so companies are allowed to accumulate wealth, even during *the Purge*.

3.2. *Group 2: very familiar with the dystopian genre*

Next, the second scene was shown to the participants of Group 2 and the results have been described in detail. In this scene, Joe Owens is an advocate of ethnic nationalism, and he tries to purge Penelope Guerrero, who advocates civic nationalist values. The themes analysed by the participants are close to the theoretical postulates: racism, multiculturalism, and patriotism. Before discussing the results, we would like to define the two ideologemes in the scene:

> Ethnic nationhood (nationalism): this indicates the importance of ethnic unity and a shared history, implying that nations are characterised by a common ancestry that creates powerful bonds among the population. The inhabitants of a certain nation share a set of values that differentiate them from other nations: a language, a religion, and traditions (Heywood, 2012).

> Civic nationhood (nationalism): this refers to the importance of civic consciousness and patriotic loyalty. From this perspective, nations can be multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-religious, etc. What is important is the loyalty of the individual. Moreover, the distinction between nation and state, or between nationality and citizenship, is blurred (Heywood, 2012).

Participant 9 begins the conversation in this block by describing the opposing views of the two characters in the scene: Penelope, described as a girl who "believes in a change in a country through the reconciliation of its inhabitants, regardless of their culture or intercultural background" (Category 2, feminist); and Owens, a man who proposes a return to the original United States, with citizens who share blood ties. Participant 9 quickly grasps the two ideologemes in the scene and offers a more detailed explanation. Moreover, she links Owens' attitude to patriotism, social-Darwinism, and the American dream. As Owens is a character whose personality is already noted by his being dressed as a soldier, in the opinion of Participant 9, he pursues "a regeneration of the country and a return to a golden age by removing the discordant elements" (Category 2, feminist) through *the Purge*, thus achieving a racially homogenous country.

Regarding Penelope, Participant 9 underlines the fact that she is from the United States and her parents are immigrants, a fact that drives the character's civic nationalist philosophy, as she defends a country where all citizens, regardless of their origin, have a place in her words, she seeks "the improvement of the country by reconciling its intercultural and racial differences […] with a new generation that is committed to pacifism" (activity document, Participant 9). Following her example, Participant 11 highlights everything stated by Participant 9 and goes on to say that the scene shows two "very opposite ideas" (Category 1, progressive). While P9 defends the possibility of belonging to a nation regardless of origin, P11 sees progress as an authoritarian vision. Thus, while Penelope is guided by dialogue and conciliation, Owens stands out for his use of violence and exclusion, "believing that in this way he is helping the advancement of the nation to which he has sworn allegiance" (Participant 11, activity paper). Furthermore, he writes that Penelope "stands for life, support, and collectivism in order to foster general improvement" so she "trusts in the will of the people." P11 also stresses that for Penelope, freedom does not imply a threat to other people.

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In short, Participant 11 portrays Owens as an authoritarian character who imposes his nationalist racial vision, while Penelope advocates an idea of civic cooperation.

Participant 7 shares these views, although with slightly divergent nuances. P7 identifies Owens as a "flattering racist" (activity document, Participant 7), who is an advocate of the system "that is imposed" (Category 2, progressive and feminist), while Penelope's ideological foundation is socialism, as she is "a person who is progressive and non-conformist." In the written document, Participant 7 describes Owens as a Republican, or extreme right-winger, and Penelope as a Democrat. In the discussion, Participant 7's use of the term "flattering" sparks a discussion between Participants 11 and 9, as they reassert their agreement with the indoctrination of Owens, who instantly halts his Purge attempt at the sound of the siren announcing the end of the night. More lenient interpretations are found in Participants 8 and 10. The latter comments that both characters agree on the idea that improvement is needed, or in other words, "they both agree with the idea that change is needed, but they do not agree with the direction of that change," nor with how to implement it. Owens "seeks progress from his own perspective" (Participant 10, activity paper), which implies taking justice into one's own hands regardless of the means used. Penelope, on the other hand, "defends freedom" (Participant 10, activity paper), as she tries to redeem the enforcer by convincing him to embrace a calmer "and more conservative" demeanour like hers. Participant 8 intervenes in the conversation by affirming what was stated by Participant 10, and she merely expresses the two positions of the characters regarding *the Purge*: Owens defends it as freedom, while Penelope believes in helping the "desperate people" (activity document, Participant 8) who do not want to live in the USA. Moreover, in the conversation Penelope says that "regardless of the fact that she is a citizen of the country, she doesn't feel like she belongs to it, and she doesn't agree with *the Purge*" (Category 5, apolitical). Therefore, P8 has not interpreted that Penelope argues in favour of her US citizenship with Latino ancestry.

As can be seen, this scene has not raised any doubts and, to a greater or lesser extent, both characters have been qualified according to the ideologeme present in the text. In the first part of the activity, Participants 8 and 10 had a more lenient interpretation of the content.

Finally, the participants were presented with two ideologemes in order to discuss which of the two was more indicative of the scene, an activity that was the second part of the block:

> Ethnic nationhood: this indicates the importance of ethnic unity and a shared history, implying that nations are characterised by a common ancestry that creates powerful bonds among the population. The inhabitants of a certain nation share a set of values that differentiate them from other nations: a language, a religion, and traditions (Heywood, 2012).

> Social Darwinism: life is a constant conflict where the weak must be eradicated (Heywood, 2012).

At the beginning, Participant 7 comments that Penelope is more associated with ethnic nationalism, based on her comment about "nationality regardless of origin" (Category 2, progressive and feminist). When P7 correctly describes Penelope as arguing that nationality should not depend on ancestry, the moderator repeats the definitions, leading to a rectification by Participant 7 and a reflection by Participants 11 and 9, who comment on the paradox that two people born in the same country might not be considered fellow nationals because they have different traits.

Furthermore, in line with the above, the P11 and 9 associate Owens with the social Darwinist ideologeme, as he pursues a racial purge, seeking to "eliminate whatever is necessary" (Participant 9, Category 2, feminist), to build a nation that is similar to that of the golden age (Participant 11, Category 1, progressive) by violent means: "I think in this sense, he really believes that these people are dragging the nation down, and he thinks that for the country to return to the golden age, it has to be without them..." (Participant 11). These

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arguments put forward by Participants 9 and 11 are reaffirmed by Participant 7, who relies on the framing of the scenes to guide the interpretation: "Also, even the camera shots, like the high and low- angle shots of Owen, give him more authority…"

3.3. *Group 3: considerable knowledge of audio-visual culture*

In this section, we will analyse in detail the participants' comments and thoughts on the flashback scene of Owens, who was a union worker in a factory before it was offshored to another country. In general, the comments point to values associated with communism for factory workers, while the boss, who appears in the scene, has a more authoritarian personality. As with the other groups, below is a reminder to the reader of the ideologeme present in the text:

> Working-class community (socialism): the idea of the collective is manifested in a unified vision of human beings as social creatures, capable of overcoming their problems by relying on the power of the community rather than solely on individual effort (Heywood, 2012).

The discussion is started by Participant 16, who describes the foreman Owens as "a bit like the boss," and as a person who displays brotherhood with the employees. P16 goes on to say, "I see him as closer; he cares about others' health; he reminds them that they have health insurance, and that the company will have to pay for it" (Category 0, communist). Thus, in line with the ideologeme of the working-class community, Participant 16 perceives Owens as a caring person who fosters a bond among his fellow workers. In fact, Owen tries to help one worker in particular by reminding him that he has the right to receive medical services: "So he seems more human. He is at the bottom with all the other employees, and the woman is the one who is always at the top" (Category 0, communist). Participant 18 considers Owens to be indoctrinated by the corporate discourse, believing that his boss is looking out for his interests, while John (the worker) is more aware of the false promises of industry, endorsing communist values "because he appears resigned, and defeated" (written document Participant 18). As for the female boss, she "represents capitalism, luxury, and power" (written document Participant 18). In this way, you could say that Owens has a false consciousness and "seems oblivious to reality" (Category 3-4, feminist), as he is deceived into believing that "the union and the company are looking out for his welfare" (written document Participant 18). As such, the participant lumps together the union with the company, which is a lack of trust that may be due to the context, because in the discussion she comments that communism in the US must be put "in quotation marks." Following on from the previous comment, Participant 13 points out that Owens' speech should be invalidated because of the existing class inequality; however, she accuses John of being a conformist.

In fact, Participant 16 says that John reminds her of the character of Horse, from *1984*, because even though he has health problems, he is determined to continue working, "saying what else can I do, this is the life I've been destined for… and, well, it seems like he just wants to continue working and doesn't want to stop" (Category 0, communist). In similar terms, Participant 17 mentions that John is a person who is defeated, and who accepts subordination, while Owens has a spirit of "camaraderie and optimism" (Category 6, progressive liberal).

Finally, a more indicative interpretation is found in Participant 15, who says the following: "The woman has a more distant authority, but the other character has a closer type of leadership, so the latter character feels disdain…" (Category 5, social democrat). Even though this participant expresses doubt, we find a more elaborate interpretation of John in the writing of P15, because she crosses out right wing and replaces it with communism, presumably as a result of the comments made by her colleagues. In this regard, she notes a certain "mistrust that the company will provide her with health insurance" (written document, Participant 15). We also find an opinion that has not been mentioned so far, which qualifies

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John as sexist because of his rejection of the female boss. Finally, we must point out a completely contradictory opinion given by Participant 14, who writes "fascism" on his sheet (written document Participant 14). Although the moderator asked for further detailed feedback on the activity document, the participant did not want to continue with his explanation.

At this point, the last part of the focus group was carried out with the following ideologemes being presented to the participants:

> Fiscal counter-reform (neoliberalism): linked to the above, neoliberalism advocates the abolition of taxes. The economy, and by extension society, progress properly when citizens have more money in their pockets to spend in the private market (Antón, 2020).

> Working-class community (socialism): the idea of the collective is manifested in a unified vision of human beings as social creatures, capable of overcoming their problems by relying on the power of the community rather than solely on individual effort (Heywood, 2012).

Participants 13 and 17 perceive the value of the working-class community. P13 relates it to John, because of "his attitude, although he doesn't encourage people to take action…" (Category 0, communist), while P17 interprets it in both characters: "I do see a bit of community among the workers. I see a relationship of leadership and team spirit, of camaraderie…" (Category 6, progressive liberal). On the other hand, Participants 16 and 14 interpret the fiscal counter-reform as "related to the insurance issue" (Participant 16, Category 0, communist). Thus, P16 believes health insurance is mentioned in order to make it known that without the company, the employee would not have such benefits. In a broader sense, Participant 14 makes a personal judgement on the tax collection system. Specifically, P14 agrees and considers that lower taxes are equivalent to greater equality: "What it's saying is that we're all in the same boat… and the issue of all the money in your pocket; and naturally, here everyone has the freedom to spend that money on whatever they want, and no one can be above it" (Category 3, social democrat). Finally, Participant 15 remains distant from the aforementioned ideologemes and expresses that the woman seems to be liberal "in economic terms, believing that the market is above social welfare, and that everything should take second place to the economy."

3.4. *Group 4: communication experts*

In this section we detail the results concerning the scene, which is set on the radio programme of the secondary main character Bobby Sheridan, who is one of the strongest supporters of *the Purge*. In general, although the ideologemes have been interpreted, this was done without much explanation, as participants focused their attention on the issue of the media and social media. It bears mentioning that this may have been due to the limited time available to the participants, as well as the fact that more ideologemes came into play than in previous cases. As mentioned above, the last part that involves choosing between two ideologemes was not done in this group. Here are the ideologemes of the scene in detail:

> Tradition (conservatism): this refers to religious beliefs or to accumulated knowledge from the past. The institutions and practices of the past have stood the test of time and should therefore be preserved for the benefit of future generations (Heywood, 2012).

> Reason (liberalism): the ability of humans to define their own interests rationally and successfully (Heywood, 2012). Reason, in liberalism, makes the value of education paramount, and conflicts are resolved through dialogue and the rejection of violence (Rivero, 2008).

> Ethnic nationhood (nationalism): the denotes the importance of ethnic unity and a shared history, implying that nations are characterised by a common ancestry that creates powerful bonds among the people. The inhabitants of a certain nation share a set of values that differentiate them from other nations: a language, a religion, and traditions (Heywood, 2012).

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Participant 22 starts the discussion by commenting on the role of social media in the scene as a developer of common sense. In the written document, this participant notes that the journalist in the scene tries to present an alternative to the prevailing common sense, yet this is immediately rejected by "the Likes on social media." Thus, although P22 does not point this out directly, he differentiates between the perspective of Sidney and the ideas of Lena and Bobby Sheridan, the latter of whom seem to have an anti-rationalist concept: "Violence as a solution to human ills" (written document Participant 22). Finally, P22 notes the value of "tradition," a "tradition instituted by *the purge*," which is in itself "a value for that society" (paper of Participant 22). Participant 20 agrees with P22, and attests that the role of social media and journalists is to be a "detractor of violence" (Category 5, social democrat). Thus, in line with the value of reason, in the written document P20 describes Sidney as an "innocent" person and a "defender of peace," who is "against the purge" and "the established system" (written document Participant 20). On the other hand, Lena is an "unscrupulous person without ethical values" who "defends power" and organises her actions based on the idea that "the end justifies the means" (written document Participant 20). In similar terms, Participant 21 highlights the "social justice" of Sidney's character and her position "against the dominant system of the Purge," while Lena positions herself in favour of "controversy" and acts as if "the end justifies any means" (written document Participant 21).

Participant 23 frames the characters along the American ideological spectrum of right and left wing: Bobby and Lena on the American far right and Sydney on the moderate American left. Sidney comes up with a universal value "such as pacifism," while Sheridan and Lena enact "fear, violence, manipulation, ethnic cleansing and oppression of those who are not the chosen ones, referring to the lower class" (participating written document 23). Finally, in addition to Sidney's justice and pacifism, Participant 19 mentions the role of the media in spreading Sheridan and Lena's hate speech:

> I feel more or less the same, although I would possibly add media control, don't you think? The importance of having an impartial observer to reaffirm situations of the previous power, whether it's the programme or whatever... an apparently external legitimiser whose validity is subjective and intentional, is the ideological construction of information and disinformation (Category 0, Marxist).

3.5. *Group 5: unfamiliar with series and films in general*

In this group, participants were shown the scene in which Penelope Guerrero, a member of the fundamentalist organisation led by Good Leader Tavis, is cheering on her comrades during the night of *the Purge*. Broadly speaking, the ideologeme present in the text coincides with the ideological sign interpreted, and Penelope has been described as a person with strong beliefs who belongs to a cult that offers her life along with her companions in exchange for a spiritual promise. As on previous occasions, we remind you of the definition of the ideologeme:

> Militancy (fundamentalism): being rooted in their community and having faith in their beliefs endows fundamentalists with a strong sense of belonging. This sense of belonging leads believers to see themselves as proud militants with a purpose: to help others find the sacred path of scripture (Heywood, 2012).

Participant 27 starts the discussion by emphatically describing Penelope as a martyr, or in other words, a person who suffers for her cause. Thus, P27 observes that Penelope is a woman with strong beliefs from which she finds it difficult to uproot herself, as she continues to espouse her convictions even when her faith nearly shattered. As for Good Leader Tavis, Participant 27 believes she is a cult leader "with political power" (written document, Participant 27), who is not emotionally attached to her followers, because "she doesn't empathise with the martyrs" (written document, Participant 27). Participant 28 agrees with P27 and depicts Penelope as having empathetic traits, whereas Good Leader Tavis is seen as a lofty personage

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who lacks the empathy needed to connect with people. Thus, while Penelope relies on persuasion, Tavis exerts authority ineffectively. However, this does not imply that the participant believes Penelope is freely committed to the cause, as she points out in her notes that the character is indoctrinated: "I see her more as a person who has been brainwashed, and that's why she defends this ideology so much and seems so close to it. So, the leader knows that Penelope will be better at convincing her companions" (Category 2, socialist, feminist and apolitical). Consequently, this seems to be why she defends the cause. Participant 28 also believes that Penelope has the traits of a charismatic leader, "in the sense that she is close to the cause, isn't she? To the brother and sisterhood, so to speak." All of the above characteristics make Participant 28 link the scene to the political realm, because in her opinion, political representatives disguise the values of the party with their image. In this way, a certain suspicion toward the country's political organisations is revealed:

> In the end, political image is embodied in a representative, and the individual chosen is always close to the party and capable of persuading, so to speak, and convincing the voters, and so on. And the person is also able to convince the citizens of an ideology. But behind the representative there is much more. There is an organisation... there are more things related to issues; purer things, so to speak.

In similar terms, Participant 25 argues that the scene is a religious depiction in which two characters profess their faith with two different objectives: Penelope wants to contribute to a good cause, such as *the Purge*, yet Tavis is more interested in expressing patriotism and service to society (written document Participant 25). Like Participant 28, P25 is also of the opinion that in the end, the scene reflects an indoctrination of the followers, and the influence of the group as well, as it is evident that there is social pressure on the bus for everyone to sing and express themselves in unison, "because if I don't sing along, they won't know what to do with me... I think it is also a bit like that, the social pressure of having to do what everyone else is doing" (Category 4, left-wing). It is worth recalling that this scene is the first in which Penelope starts to doubt her faith, as she has witnessed how her companion was purged against her will. In summary, the participant states the following:

> It's a kind of religious cult that has indoctrinated everyone and put into their heads that they should sacrifice themselves for something good, something that... is a type of service to society... they have it all very much internalised... in terms of... removing fear: I'm going to die, but it's for a good cause, because I'll go to a better place in the afterlife (Category 4, left-wing).

Meanwhile, Participant 26 adds *freedom* to what her colleagues have said, as it seems that all members are expected to voluntarily adhere to the organisation: "It's mentioned that the members are free to do it or not [...] but most of all it's that; they think it should be done together" (Category 4, social democrat). Like her colleagues, P26 expresses that the scene conveys a sense of need on the part of the members, as the reward is something they long for that overcomes the fear of sacrifice. "It's sacrifice vs. fear" (written document Participant 26). In short, everything creates a sense of belonging to the group, although with different ranks among the characters, which means that the members themselves support each other in transmitting all the positive things that their faith entails.

Lastly, regarding the interpretation of the ideologeme, Participant 24 agrees with the other members and emphasises how the scene portrays the characters' need to belong to the group and how fervently they profess their beliefs. This participant mentions that the members belong to a cult that promises them a destiny free of suffering, and as they are indoctrinated, they boldly profess their faith in an uncompromising way, although she P24 notes that Penelope is shy in the beginning.

To finish this section, two contextual issues emerged from the viewing of the series, as Participant 28 recalled historical events such as World War II and jihadism. In this sense, the

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indoctrination of the characters reminded her of the education of the German National Socialist regime, in which children were taught to live, and die, if necessary, for the party. In a more current context, P28 associates the faith of the characters with another fundamentalist religion, jihadism, where "there is an administration at the top that recruits young people, and those same young people are educated and indoctrinated to recruit more young people, because they can relate to each other..." (Category 2, socialist, feminist and apolitical). This opinion is contested by Participant 27, who thinks that every religion acts in this way, as every religious belief indoctrinates and tries to impose its truth. However, although Participant 28 does not consider herself a religious person, she thinks that both beliefs are distinguished by the fact that jihad believers immolate themselves for their faith, to which Participant 27 responds, "Missionaries also send them to their deaths" (Category 2, unlabelled). In the end, Participant 28 lists the parallels between Tavis and jihad leaders, as they are considered superior beings who are not offered in sacrifice.

To conclude with this group, we will present the last activity, in which two ideologemes were presented in order to discuss their relevance in the scene. The ideologemes in question are militancy, already mentioned at the beginning, and the following:

> Human imperfection (conservatism): human beings are psychologically limited and dependent creatures; therefore, hierarchies and traditions are important in society, where rules and laws are not conceived as suppressors of freedom, but as guarantors of maintaining order (Rivero, 2008).

In this activity, the opinions were mixed. Participant 24 believes that the ideologeme present in the scene is militancy, although she believes that the aspect of human imperfection is also present, but to a lesser extent. Participant 25 mentions that the beliefs of the characters make her think that the ideologeme of human imperfection is present, because "in the end they have the fear of knowing whether they are doing the right thing or not..." (Category 4, left). On the other hand, Participant 28 believes that the ideologeme of human imperfection is defended by Tavis, "because in the end, a person who organises this structure does so because they honestly believe that hierarchies are necessary, but we can all be manipulated. Who knows? If people are there, it is because there must be some truth in it..." Finally, Participant 26 believes that what is relevant in the scene is faith and, consequently, militancy: "In the end, I believe that faith is what manages to bury survival" (Category 4, social democrat). In this sense, Participant 24 recalls the indoctrination of the characters and links the following opinion with militancy: "I believe militancy has a lot to do with it, because in the end, what we're saying about belonging to a group where everyone is indoctrinated to think the same way, you do things out of conviction. In this case, the purpose of the action is to go to paradise..." (Category 2, socialist).

4. Discussion and conclusions

In conclusion, it can be affirmed that to a greater or lesser extent, the participants have interpreted the corresponding ideologemes of the scenes viewed. Thus, if we compare the responses according to the profile of each group, we can see that even in the group with a scant amount of audio-visual culture, the features of the dystopian genre have been deciphered, and these have helped them interpret the ideologemes. As such, one of our conclusions, which is in line with Jauss (1988), is the importance of genre at the moment of interpretation, because knowledge does not have to come from primary experience, as such knowledge may come from the opinions of friends or partners, for example.

In short, our work has demonstrated the validity of one of the foundational assumptions of reception studies: the active audience (Livingstone, 2002). More specifically, focus group participants have interpreted the ideologemes displayed in the scenes either in positive or negative terms, adapting the meaning to their own framework of values. Therefore, in the

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encounter with the ideologeme, several factors have been involved, such as the ideology itself, personal and or contextual experiences, and the genre of the work. Consequently, the role of the dystopian genre at the moment of interpretation is noteworthy, as participants have identified its general features and the critical intentions of its authors. Moreover, as pointed out by Barker (2004), it is important to note that audiences easily distinguish between fiction and reality, and they like to play with those boundaries. In our case, participants have identified a dystopian world that is fictional, yet through this make-believe world they have reconsidered real situations in their own environment. The factor of cultural variability should be noted here, as the political ideologemes being interpreted have sometimes been contextualised by the participants in a particular setting: the United States. Consequently, we agree with Askanius (2019) on the "symbolic community" that a series can create with its content. As such, the ability to apply the ideologemes in the series to their own environment was contextualised according to the existing differences between Spain and the United States, an example of which is a note written by Participant 18 regarding the erroneous conception of communism in the North American country.

Furthermore, it bears recalling one of the axiomatic assumptions set forth by Raymond Williams (1975), known as the structure of feeling. With this theory, the author examines the patterns found in the values and feelings perceived with regard to the culture of a given historical moment. In these terms, the structure of feeling plays a fundamental role in reception studies, and in our work in particular, as it states that values and emotions are important in giving meaning to cultural products, in our case television. With regard to television dystopia *The Purge*, we have found that hope plays a key role in interpreting undesirable fictional futures. The dystopian context has served as a starting point for reflection on contemporary socio-political reality, and how the negative trend portrayed in fiction might serve as a warning for the purpose of evading such dynamics.

The potential effects of the dystopian genre are also tied to the study by Green (2019), regarding the reception of another speculative genre par excellence: science fiction. In the study, the author identifies nine functions of fictional scientific discourse: communication, criticism conciliation, engagement, curiosity, catharsis, change, competition, and connection. Communication refers to when subjects intentionally explain scientific concepts through fictional products. In our research, due to the genre to which it is applied, this function is extrapolated to the moment in which the participants explain the intertwinement of socio-political circumstances or the functioning of institutions of power. In Green's study, criticism is a rhetorical tool used when viewers perceive the narrative to be untrue, adding that criticism can be extended through conciliation, when the viewer relies on other elements of the story to eliminate discordance; in our focus groups, the participants tried to shed light on the inner workings of power to disguise its influence. On the other hand, the engagement function is related to the fan community, in which the textual experience is enriched through various platforms, but this function goes beyond our objectives. Curiosity is the inducement to seek bibliographical sources in order to broaden scientific knowledge through the visualisation of science fiction, of which we found no evidence in our reception study. Catharsis, on the other hand, refers to the participants' relief at being able to share with others the displeasure they felt toward the fictional scientific discourse in question, while the change function heightens the level of discomfort with the active intention of modifying the fictional discourse of science. In this research, we have found certain similarities with the function of catharsis. As this function is considered purely emotional, we have seen how the participants have expressed concern for the unpleasant socio-political situations depicted in the dystopia.

Finally, our work is in line with the findings of Buckingham (1987), Porto (2005), Roberts *et al.* (2018) and Nærland (2019), as our results have confirmed that people can discuss real political issues based on the plots of television series, especially dystopias. Specifically, we

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find the charging function described by Nærland (2019) to be useful, as it refers to situations in which participants are emotionally affected by viewing series that deal with issues, they consider to be sensitive. In the case of dystopias, this function is reflected in the repudiation by participants of systems they consider undesirable, such as authoritarianism. Thus, we assert that dystopia functions as a narrative vehicle that effectively conveys the concerns about negative social trends that the author of such stories wishes to convey. In this sense, the viewing of these dystopian scenes has triggered political debates among the participants of our study, who have discussed the undesirability of certain political ideologies as fascism, fundamentalism, or neoliberalism.

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