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**SCIENZA/FANTASCIENZA - UTOPIA/DISTOPIA:
FORME, GENERI E LINGUAGGI**

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INTRODUZIONE

- Gioia Angeletti e María Joaquina Valero Gisbert -

Come eminenti critici hanno sostenuto a partire dagli anni Sessanta e Settanta del Novecento, anni in cui due riviste – “Utopian Studies” e “Science Fiction Studies” – conferiscono agli studi sull’utopia e sulla fantascienza lo *status* di discipline specialistiche e accademiche, il termine ‘fantascienza’ rimanda a un complesso discorso teorico e letterario che ingloba in sé molte delle peculiarità tradizionalmente associate alla narrativa utopica/distopica. In uno dei contributi scientifici più significativi sul genere, *Positions and Presuppositions in Science Fiction* (1988), Darko Suvin individua nel romanzo utopico sia un progenitore della *fiction* fantascientifica sia un sottogenere specifico di quest’ultima che pone in primo piano una dimensione socio-politica e aspetti narratologici nei quali si colgono palesi riverberi della realtà contemporanea. Dopotutto, *Utopia* (1516) di Thomas More è riconosciuto da molti come il primo romanzo di fantascienza, o, per meglio dire, una satira politica in cui quella modalità che Suvin identifica come tipicamente fantascientifica – lo ‘straniamento cognitivo’ o alienazione del protagonista-viaggiatore in un mondo altro – è utilizzata da More per provocare nel lettore una riflessione sul mondo presente attraverso particolari accorgimenti retorici e ironici. In accordo con il percorso teorico tracciato da Suvin, i curatori del *Routledge Companion to Science Fiction* (2009) – Mark Bould, Andrew M. Butler, Adam Roberts e Sherryl Vint – considerano la distopia, eutopia e utopia come sottogeneri della *science fiction*. Un’ulteriore conferma della convergenza, tematica e strutturale, tra narrazioni fantascientifiche e utopiche è data dal critico

THE LANGUAGE OF FEMINIST UTOPIAS

- Eleonora Federici -

The New Wave in Science Fiction

Starting from the Seventies the universe of science fiction changed, the new wave of feminist science fiction introduced new themes, structures and characters in their novels. The feminist point of view entered the science fiction arena: female characters became protagonists, they were no appendices for the male protagonist, passive heroines who made short-lived appearances next to the fearless hero. As Sam Lundwall outlines,

by her obvious ignorance she would give the hero the opportunity to launch into long explanations [...] she should be abducted by some horrible green monster with lots of fangs, which lovingly wound around her appetizing forms¹.

Alternatively, female characters were displayed on the covers, a sort of pin-up, “Las Vegas show-girls exaggerated, Amazonian beauties, skimpily dressed and insatiably hungry for their men’s love”². In 1972 Joanna Russ dedicated an essay to the image of women in SF outlining that:

¹ S. Lundwall, *Science Fiction: what's it's all about*, Ace, New York, 1971, p. 9.

² J. D. Merritt, *She Pluck'd, She Eat*, in M. Barr (ed.), *Future Females*, Bowling Green UP, Bowling Green 1981, p. 41.

women are important as prizes or motives – i.e. we must rescue the heroine or win the hand of the beautiful Princess [...] active or ambitious women are evil – this literature is chockfull of cruel dowager empresses, sadistic matriarchs, evil ladies maddened by jealousy, domineering villainess and so on. Women are supernaturally beautiful – all of them. Women are weak and/or kept off stage [...] women are passive and involuntary³.

She was one of the writers who was going to change this totally revising the contemporary cultural imaginary. During the 70s the cultural revolutions of the 1970s influenced also SF and the new heroines of the future were born in a revised cultural and social imaginary where ecology, peace, egalitarianism, political activism became central issues. Science fiction is a popular genre but its devices such as the subversion of time, space and cultural categories permits a total revision of patriarchal structures together with a critical reflection on feminist issues. As Sarah Lefanu underlines, science fiction is 'feminism friendly' because,

with its metaphors of space and time travel, of parallel universes, of contradictions co-existing, of black holes and event horizons, [...] is ideally placed for interrogative functions. The unities of 'self' whether in terms of bourgeois individualism or biological reductionism, can be subverted⁴.

Adopting Robert Scholes's idea of fabulation Marleen Barr (1992), talks about a 'feminist fabulation' that modifies traditional SF because it confronts our way of perceiving the world deconstructing some values and ideologies connected to gender. Similarly, Jenny Wolmark recognizes that feminist SF

"functions disruptively within a masculinist popular genre"⁵. In their alternative spaces women writers re-imagine female identity in opposition to cultural discourses; here the female body – always mediated through language – is transformed into a text, a symbolic sign. The 'utopian language of the female body' is thus both a result and a process:

as a product it is the material embodiment of ethnic, racial and gender identities, as well as a staged performance of personal identity, of beauty, of health [...] as a process it is a way of knowing and marking the world, as well as a way of knowing and marking a self⁶.

The female body as iconographic, esthetic and symbolic code of cultural and social discourses is analysed as a symbolic construct and related to an alternative linguistic code able to project a different notion of female subjectivity and identity. Not surprisingly, women's re-appropriation of SF themes often revolves around a revision of the notion of motherhood and family care. Women writers use cultural archetypes, science fiction themes and structures to make the reader aware of gender issues, for example, the debate nature *vs* technology is central, feminist utopias are deeply influenced by social and

³ J. Russ, *The Image of Women in Science Fiction* in S. Koppelman Cornillon (ed.), *Images of Women in Fiction: Feminist Perspectives*, Popular Press, Bowling Green 1972, p. 83.

⁴ S. Lefanu, *Feminism and Science Fiction*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1988, p. 95.

⁵ J. Wolmark, *Aliens and Others: Science Fiction, Feminism and Postmodernism*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, London 1993, p. 3. For an analysis of women's science fiction see Barr, *Future Females*, cit.; M. Barr, M. Piercy (eds.), *Lost in Space: Feminist Science Fiction and Beyond*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill 1993; M. Barr, N. D. Smith (eds.), *Women and Utopia: Critical Interpretations*, UP of America, New York 1983; H. Carr, *From My Guy to Sci-Fi: Genre and Women's Writing in the Postmodern World*, Pandora Press, London 1980; E. Hoffman Baruch, R. Rohrlich (eds.), *Women in Search of Utopia: Mavericks and Mythmakers*, Norton, New York 1984; J. Howard, *Widening the Dialogue on Feminist Science Fiction*, Academy, Chicago 1982; B. King, *Women of the Future: the Female Man Character in Science Fiction*, The Scarecrow Press, London 1984; R. Roberts, *A New Species: Gender and Science in Science Fiction*, University of Illinois Press, Chicago 1993; T. J. Shinn, *Worlds within Women: Myth and Mythmaking in Fantastic Literature by Women*, Greenwood Press, New York 1986.

⁶ A. Balsamo, *Technologies of the Gendered Body: Reading Cyborg Women*, Duke UP, Durham 1996, p. 3.

scientific discourses of the 70s about the female body, sexuality and reproduction⁷. Women writers aim at: 1) a revision of the cultural and social imaginary through a re-appropriation of the female body and a deconstruction of gender stereotypes; 2) a problematization of the issues of motherhood, sexuality, family care and reproduction; 3) a re-thinking about the redistribution of social roles in society. This is partly done through the deconstruction of patriarchal language and the invention of new ones which can 'speak' the feminine.

Language in Utopian and Science Fiction Novels

The problematic intersection among language, thought and actions has always been at the centre of utopian and science fiction novels. In his seminal study *Aliens and Linguistics: Language Study and Science Fiction* (1980)⁸ Walter Meyers affirms there is a long tradition in utopian fiction that, on the one hand, involves elements of an ideal language (eutopia) – a language that serves for a perfect human communication – and, on the other hand, focuses on the abuse of language (dystopia). Language, thought and reality perceptions are strictly interconnected and as Dunja Mohr asserts,

Starting from a Judaeo-Christian background, early utopias speculated about the retrieval of the imaginary and idealized protolanguage, envisioning a perfect language everyone can understand. In contrast, modern science fiction

(SF) novels foreground alien languages or modes of non-verbal communication and the inherent problems of translation⁹.

Some novels, drawing on the Sapir Whorf hypothesis, use linguistics as a major plot device. According to Sapir Whorf's theory language functions as a linguistic filter of what we perceive of reality, and as language organizes our thoughts and speech, all verbal communication depends on our linguistic concepts and is limited by the available vocabulary and its contained cultural codes. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis has been much debated, and also criticized for its notion of linguistic determinism and relativism. For linguistic determinism language constitutes our reality and for linguistic relativism it encodes a different worldview, that is to say, language is not neutral but exposes one encoded vision of reality. Starting from this theory George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) underlined that we are able to shift our frames of reference¹⁰; this means that if we are able to analyse how our linguistic training and our cultural schema influence our thoughts then we are able to adapt and transform these frameworks. Famous examples of SF novels dedicated to language are Evgenij Zamjatin's *We* (1921), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), Orwell's *Ninety-Eighty-Four* (1949)¹¹. The misuses and abuses of language emerge in these twentieth century dystopias where the central plot respond to propaganda and totalitarianism, certain words are forbidden and declared taboo, men control language and manipulate it to maintain an absolute power, communication is denied, reading is forbidden, writing and history are hidden. If Zamjatin's formulaic language expresses the lack of any expression in his narrative world, in Huxley's novel linguistic and cultural memories are totally erased and Orwell's fictional language Newspeak is the

⁷ The discussion on technology and the woman's body was central in those years, see S. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*, Morrow, New York 1971 and A. Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, Virago, London 1977.

⁸ W. E. Meyers, *Aliens and Linguistics: Language Study and Science Fiction*, University of Georgia Press, Athens 1980. See also M. Barnes Edwards, *Linguistics and Language in Science Fiction*, Arno, New York 1975. More recent studies are: D. W. Sisk, *Transformations of Language in Modern Dystopias*, Greenwood Press, Westport 1997; R. Cheyne, *Created Languages in Science Fiction* in "Science Fiction Studies", 35 (2008), pp. 386-403 and S. Mandala, *Language in Science Fiction and Fantasy. The Question of Style*, Continuum, London 2010.

⁹ D. Mohr, *The Tower of Babel? The Role and Function of Fictive Languages in Utopian and Dystopian Fiction*, in "Spatial Practices: An Interdisciplinary Series in Cultural History", 9 (2009), p. 225.

¹⁰ G. Lakoff, M. Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, Chicago, UP Chicago 1980.

¹¹ Y. Zamjatin, *We*, Harper Collins, New York 1972 [1921]; A. Huxley, *Brave New World*, Harper Collins, New York 1932; G. Orwell, *Ninety-Eighty-Four*, Secker and Warburg, London 1949.

Party's rigid instrument aimed at controlling people and creating social conformity despite any gender, class or ethnic difference. Another example which incorporates language thematically is Samuel Delany's *Babel-17* (1966)¹², a novel where emblematically, the first person pronoun 'I' has been totally eliminated. If in her book *Linguistics and Languages in Science Fiction-Fantasy* (1971), Myra Barnes was among the first to identify a focus on language as the instrument of both thought control and of resistance in dystopia¹³, in her analysis of women's dystopia Ildney Cavalcanti underlined how many female dystopias reflect the long history of women's exclusion from official historiography and the effective silencing of women in public discourse. Dystopias are often characterized by formulaic speech and the prohibition of a public voice for women; examples of this are Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) where linguistic normativity stands for social and political control or Suzy McKee Charnas's *The Walk to the End of the World* (1974) where women's tongues are cut off¹⁴. A relevant case in point for an analysis of language and gender in utopia/dystopia/science fiction is Suzette Haden Elgin's trilogy *Native Tongue* (1984), *The Judas Rose* (1987) and *Earthsong: Native Language III* (1993)¹⁵. Elgin's texts are engaging examples of language-laboratories and the use of language as a thematic issue in dystopia. The author, who is a linguist, invented a language, Láadan, aimed at the deconstruction of patriarchal discourses and a revision of gender roles. In Elgin's novels language reflects a male-dominated society where standard language is biased and the

new language can function as a mirror for cultural and social changes¹⁶. In the first novel a few family of linguists are in power and women invent Láadan in order to communicate across gender and social class and overcome political and social seclusion. The 'native tongue' enable them to give a voice to women's subjectivity and thoughts; the creation of Láadan is both an act of rebellion towards the totalitarian system and a way to affirm themselves as individuals. The novel focuses around the theme of communication or miscommunication among men and women, humans and aliens and different social groups and refers to linguistic theories that see language as a means to change reality. It is a meta-linguistic novel and as Bray underlines, it suggests a metafictional reading in several ways:

first, structurally, it is not a traditionally sequential narrative; second, as a narrative embodying overtly feminist perspectives, it reverses the traditional hierarchy of male and female readers' distance from its text; third, it is a narrative focused on the concept of language and on the power of language to shape reality; and fourth, it is a narrative which, although it is about women's struggle to make possible a future in which they are fully empowered as human beings, conspicuously does not delineate the shape of that future. In short, it is a text which deconstructs itself on several levels while focusing its readers on that act of deconstruction¹⁷.

In *The Judas Rose* the language is taught to all women, entire pages of the Bible are translated and songs in Láadan are created. Women's language is

¹² S. Delany, *Babel 17*, Millenium, London 1999 [1966].

¹³ For a discussion on this issue see also R. Baccolini, T. Moylan (eds.), *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, Routledge, New York 2003 and P. Stockwell, *The Poetics of Science Fiction: Textual Explorations*, Longman, Harlow 2000 and *Introduction: Science Fiction and Literary Linguistics*, in "Language and Literature", 12 (2003), pp. 195-198.

¹⁴ M. Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, McClelland and Stewart, Toronto 1985; S. Charnas McKee, *Walk to the End of the World*, Tor Books, New York 1974.

¹⁵ S. H. Elgin, *Native Tongue*, Daw, New York 1984; Ead., *The Judas Rose*, Daw, New York 1987; Ead., *Earthsong*, Daw, New York 1994.

¹⁶ C. Kramarae, *Present Problems with the Language of the Future*, in "Women's Studies", 14 (1987), pp.183-186. See also L. Armitt, *Your Word is My Command: the Structures of Language and Power in Women's Science Fiction*, in *Where No Man Has Gone Before. Women and Science Fiction*, Routledge, London 1991, pp. 123-138 and K. Bruce, *A Woman-Made Language: Suzette Haden Elgin's Láadan and the Native Tongue Trilogy as Thought Experiment in Feminist Linguistics*, in "Extrapolation", 49.1 (2008), pp. 44-69.

¹⁷ M. K. Bray, *The Naming of Things: Men and Women, Language and Reality in Suzette Haden Elgin's Native Tongue*, in "Extrapolation", 27.1 (1986), p. 56.

connected to an act of appropriation of religious texts and religious language becomes the locus of potential subversion; the hybridised Láadan version of the King James Bible pictorially re-inscribes a transgendered divinity. In both novels the reader is confronted with a rethinking of language as a way to shape reality and is made aware that new directions can be taken. Central in the women's process of language creation is the 'Encodings project' which implies the formulation and naming of semantic concepts. Encoding consists, then, of assigning names and descriptions to female semantic perceptions and is the semantic basis for structuring the women's language. Moreover, "Láadan constructs new linguistic and psychological modes of expression, stressing perceptual information and equalising the relation between speaker and listener"¹⁸. Láadan vocabulary mirrors a more differentiated perception of femininity; words to express specific conditions, situations, emotions, and perceptions; its morphemes, degree markers and suffixes indicate emotional quality. Egin's texts demonstrate that linguistics can become a central speculative concept in SF and a tool for social change to be tested in this genre.

Language in Feminist Utopias/Dystopias

Language and communication are at the centre of feminist utopias/dystopias of the 70s. Two are the aims of women writers: to disrupt patriarchal language (and our gendered vision of society), and to use language in order to develop their own discourses. If, as Cavalcanti affirms, "contemporary feminist dystopias overtly thematize the linguistic construction of gender domination by telling stories about language as instrument of both (men's) domination and (women's) liberation"¹⁹, language becomes a critical instrument for a revi-

sion of our gendered culture. Women writers carry on a linguistic deconstruction of gender stereotypes at grammatical and lexical level. English, built on patriarchal assumptions, results to be inadequate to express women's thoughts and experiences and a new language which can translate women's experience of the world, a 'feminine speech', becomes a central topic in feminist utopias. These new languages incarnate a different perception of femininity and are a means of empowerment; they expose the limits of patriarchal language and way of thinking and show how the creation of new social and gender concepts is strictly connected to the creation of new forms of expression.

Woman on the Edge of Time: a genderless language

An interesting example of linguistic laboratory is Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976)²⁰ where the reader finds a society where men and women live harmoniously after the elimination of gender roles. It is a sort of 'feminised' society where children are raised by more than one mother (and men also can be mothers) and reproduction takes place outside the woman's body so that motherhood is totally disconnected from reproduction and family care. The word 'father' disappears and the word 'mother' ceases to be sex determined. It is a community which totally "embraces the feminine"²¹. The novel is part of the new wave of feminist utopias of the 70s born in the aftermath of feminist movements of those years and characterized by essentialism for which men and women were thought to perceive the world in a different way and positive values were attributed mainly to women. A world without men or where men were raised totally differently from contemporary society could become a utopian place. This utopian impulse was given also by the

¹⁸ Mohr, *The Tower of Babel*?, cit., p. 242.

¹⁹ I. Cavalcanti, *Utopias off Language in Contemporary Feminist Literary Dystopias*, in "Utopian Studies", 11, 2 (2000), p. 152.

²⁰ M. Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, The Women's Press, London 1979.

²¹ M. Barr, *Alien To Femininity: Speculative Fiction and Feminist Theory*, Greenwood Press, Westport 1987, p. 55.

mis/use of standard language. In the utopian society of Mattapoissett set in the year 2137 Piercy changes the gender-specific pronouns 'he/she' to 'per', derived from 'person', to highlight the failings of the English language used in the protagonist's dystopian society. She erases the possessive pronouns his/her and this lack of gendered pronouns and possessives combined with the lack of gendered code in dress and naming means that it is difficult for Connie (the time-traveller coming from the present) to determine gender. The time-traveller (through telepathy), Consuelo is a Chicana, poor and jobless, imprisoned in a mental hospital against her will. In a hypothetical egalitarian future she could be citizen of Mattapoissett, or in a bleak and grotesque future another Gildina, an objectified sexual object of the dystopian place characterized by a very sexist and racist language. Without giving explanations to the reader Piercy invents new words, necessary in such a different genderless context, such as "mems" (people in a family), "coms" (co-mothers), "hand friends" (friends who are not lovers), "sweet friends" (which replaces friend and lover since in this society monogamy is replaced by non exclusive relationships), "pillow friends" (lovers). All these terms are related to a different idea of personal relationship, motherhood and family and other words like "catcher and sender" (receivers/senders of psychic messages) or "inknowing" and "outknowing" are connected to the telepathic powers and the utopian forms of communication of Mattapoissett. Piercy also uses verbs with a different connotation, for example, "to mother" means to take responsibility for a baby; "to grasp" equals to understand or "to guest" indicates to welcome; others verbs are invented like, for example, "to body" that signifies to give substance to an idea. The author's utopian language reflects the egalitarianism in gender and class and the lack of hierarchies in her utopian world²². She

achieves this through a "defamiliarization of the language of the idealized world"²³.

The Wanderground: *a speechless language*

Sally Miller Gearhart creates a world where telepathy is the central form of communication and women's memory is stored in archives. Women identify with nature and live in a community far away from men who still live in the city following the traditional opposition women/nature *vs* men/technology. The central issue of the novel is separatism, a common theme of feminist utopias of the 70s, women are totally detached from men and foreigners are forbidden to enter the Hill of women. In this society the communities of mothers replace the traditional family: relationships among mothers and daughters are not based on biological ties and the care of the child is collective. Motherhood and reproductive functions are taken care only by women. Reproduction – based on parthenogenesis – is totally detached from legal and institutional links, there are no marriages and sexuality is not regulated through heterosexuality. These women are also amazons, a traditional character in SF that here is used to portray a new idea of woman totally detached from patriarchal society and opposed to the objectification of women as sexual objects in the city of men. Gearhart's amazons have created an harmonious place where they can live outside patriarchal ideas of sexuality and receive energy from nature (they are part of a cosmic system of nature, plants and animals). *The Wanderground* (1979)²⁴ is one of the many examples in the utopias/science fiction of the 70s where the idea of a whole women community translates

²² For an analysis of Piercy's use of 'per' see O. Palusci, *Translating Dolls*, in E. Federici, V. Leonardi (eds.), *Bridging the Gap Between Theory and Practice in Translation and Gender Studies*, Cambridge Scholar, Newcastle 2013, pp. 15-31. See also Lefanu, *Feminism and Science Fiction*, cit., and A. Livia, *Pronoun Envy. Literary Uses of Linguistic Gender*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2001.

²³ D. Burton, *Linguistic Innovation in Feminist Utopian Fiction*, in "Ilha do Desterro", 14, 8 (1986), p. 82.

²⁴ S. M. Gearhart, *The Wanderground. Stories of the Hill Women*, The Women's Press, London 1985 [1979].

the idea of 'wholeness', unity and synergy. This is usually based on a strict relation between nature and human beings, where "the mothers provided a world in tune with nature, accepting the ambiguities of life, maintaining a community of all living things"²⁵. Nature with its continuous movement and dynamism is opposed to the static hierarchical patriarchal order. Lee Cullen Khanna has defined these texts as "Primitive utopias" based on notions such as cooperation and collaboration in opposition to patriarchal hierarchies and dualisms:

Instead of dualistic thinking, whether the ranking of individuals, gender distinctions, division of reason and emotion, or weighing the rival claims of private and public interests, feminist science fiction presents holistic social models. These societies are based on a broad network of connections among all forms of life as well as aspects of human experience²⁶.

The revised archetype of the Mother Goddess incarnates here a feminine genealogy and symbolizes the retrieval of wholeness with 'Mother Earth'; as in ancient matriarchates the communion with the natural world and women is strong and part of feminine identity and life. It is an example of feminist eutopia built on the notion of sisterhood where "women's utopian quest is [...] an attempt to recover a real past. [...] In many ways, the contemporary dream of equality existed in pre-state egalitarian societies"²⁷, a sort of "mythological science fiction" where women's power is visible in telepathy and transcendental capacities. The network of women communicating among themselves is a current theme in women's science fiction and we can see consider it, together with other linguistic tools such as re-

naming and the invention of new words, as a "subversive action of resistance"²⁸. In this alternative space Gearhart re-imagines female identity; the female body is mediated through language and transformed into a text, a symbolic sign. These women represent the perfect union of mind and body, a union explained through an extremely lyrical language which reflects the main themes of the novel, the strong union among women, telepathy and the deep connection with the natural world. The language of women is correlated to nature, life, birth, renovation while men's language and patriarchal discourse are connected to stasis, violence and death. Gearhart demonstrates it is possible to go beyond the limits of words visualizing a form of communication and sensual perceptions. Words are not necessary anymore and non verbal communication seems to work better. Gearhart chooses a total escape from verbal language which mirrors a new way of thinking; the language produced by women present a very different world from the one the reader is accustomed to. The women of the Hill communicate through listening and not talking because, as they say: "In the listening is all real speaking"²⁹. They know and speak through their bodies. Discussing Gearhart's invention of verbal terms to account for the new abilities of the Hill Women, Jeana del Rosso talks about a "womanization of language"³⁰; as a matter of fact, Gearhart invents new words for the female experience, like for example, "learntogethers" (educating process); "gatherstretch" (collective decisions); "enfoldment" (mental touch)³¹; "minstretch" (women's rhetorics); "listenspread", "mindsweep". The author explains which concepts are related to her neologisms clarifying the language and making clear the values of the people she describes. Neologisms communicate a different

²⁵ Shinn, *Worlds within Women*, cit., p. 30.

²⁶ L. Cullen Khanna, *Frontiers of Imagination: Women Worlds*, in G. Saccaro del Buffa, A. Lewis (a cura di), *Utopie per gli anni ottanta*, Gangemi, Roma 1986, p. 471.

²⁷ Shinn, *Worlds within Women*, cit., p. 7.

²⁸ Cavalcanti, *Utopias off Language in Contemporary Feminist Literary Dystopias*, cit., p. 153.

²⁹ Gearhart, *The Wanderground. Stories of the Hill Women*, cit., p. 124.

³⁰ J. Del Rosso, *The Womanization of Utopias: Sally Miller Gearhart's Rhetorical Fiction*, in "Extrapolation", 40, 3 (1999), pp. 213-223.

³¹ K. Elliott, *Subverting the Rhetorical Construction of Enemies Through Worldwide Enfoldment*, in "Women and Language", 27, 2 (2004), pp. 98-103.

meaning at several levels: they signify difference, they show the inadequacy of standard language heavily biased by gender differences and roles and they demonstrate utopian possibilities of linguistic (and therefore social) transformation. Linguistic innovation becomes a metaphor of women's agency in the fictional and the real world; creating a new language is an assertive action because new concepts are formulated through that language and linguistic properties are intertwined to the cultural ones. Neologisms are born from absence, they express concepts that cannot be found in patriarchal language. If language mirrors a man's worldview women's language reflects a possible different one, aware of gender differences. In so doing the author makes the reader aware of the role played by language in the construction of gender identities.

The Female Man: *a linguistic laboratory world*

The beginning of *The Female Man* introduces the reader to the deconstruction of patriarchal language which is at the centre of the novel: "there have been no men on Whileaway for at least eight centuries [...] I don't mean no human beings, of course, but not men and this society is run entirely by women"³². This sentence is just one of the many in the novel where the reader is confronted with a rethinking of standard language. Playing with the title of the book the author affirms: "if a woman wants to be considered as a 'man' or 'human', she must take a special pains to include herself, she must call herself a female man"³³. Russ's linguistic deconstruction is carried out in a narrative structure focused on female multiple identity; the reader finds four women that represent four possible versions of the same story and any of them fights to affirm themselves as human beings in their contexts

functioning as a parody of the patriarchal system. Joanna – alter ego of the author – lives in the present, Janet Evason lives in the whole-female utopia of Whileaway, Jeannine lives in a 1969 version of America still living the Great depression and Jael-Alice the Reasoner is a citizen of a dystopian future. Russ's revision of social and political patriarchal attitude is developed through role-reversal. In Jael's world men are surgically transformed into women "male females who suffer the degradation and impediments experienced by real women"³⁴. The body becomes the site of a metamorphosis in a whole female world, a sort of dystopian reversion of a misogynist world. Thanks to parallel universes and the travel in space and time the author creates a 'laboratory world' where sexual and gender roles are put into discussion unveiling a practice of gender role which is not based on biological data but on culture. The alternate voices of the four characters are a continuum of the same woman whose identity is divided into four in order to unveil the cultural and social code inscribed on the woman's body and her identity. Feminine clichés, myths and representations are parodied by Russ through a use of the ironical register. The unconventional narrative structure enables a different use of language and the manipulation of ordinary conversation structure forces the reader to re-think taken for granted values. Moreover, Russ inserts the authorial persona in the text in order to focus even more the reader's attention on gendered language/culture. The author plays with pronouns, like in the following example where she is describing a "half-changed" man in Manland called Anna:

Anna, with a mechanical shiver of desire, says that we must go with him. "Her?" says Jeannine confused. "Him!" says Anna in a strained contralto. The half-changed are very punctilious – sometimes about the changeds superiority and sometimes about their own genitals³⁵.

³² J. Russ, *The Female Man*, The Women's Press, London 1985, p. 9.

³³ Barr, *Alien To Femininity*, cit., p. 13.

³⁴ *Ivi*, p. 14.

³⁵ Russ, *The Female Man*, cit., p. 172.

In order to describe Anna the author utilizes someone with a feminine name but still using the pronoun 'he'. A 'he' who is a parody of femininity; a transgender figure attached to his masculine pronoun. The reader is certainly confused by Russ's play with pronouns and notions of femininity/masculinity and grammar is used to subvert his/her idea of sexuality. Foreseeing what Judith Butler described later as the 'gender performativity' the author makes the reader aware of the construction of femininity/masculinity. Here we have an example of Joanna, which starts with a direct reference (and parody) to Simone de Beauvoir's famous sentence:

I'll tell you how I turned into a man. First I had to turn into a woman. For a long time I have been neuter, not a woman but One of the Boys, because if you walk into a gathering of men, professionally or otherwise, you might as well be wearing a sandwich board that says: LOOK! I HAVE TITS! There is this giggling and this chuckling and this reddening and this Uriah Heep twisting and writhing and this fiddling with ties and fixing of buttons and making allusions and quoting of courtesies [...] if you get good to be One of the Boys it goes away. Of course there is some disembodiment involved³⁶.

To act like a man brings to the erasure of femininity and a feeling of inclusion in the men's world. In this extract Russ's choices of verbs reveals the connection between female identity, body and sexuality and the protagonist's reaction towards a total disembodiment in order to assert her mind. As Amanda Boulter emphasises, "Joanna's gender transformations are both performed by her and upon her. She becomes a woman (as she must) and then she turns into a man (as she must be human – for humanity is Man)³⁷. While offering to the reader a reflection on gender roles through a dialectical

antagonism between men and women, Russ exposes and revises the operations of a language that codify certain norms such as the use of "man" or the male pronoun to refer to all human beings. Joanna, "a man with a woman's face"³⁸, is an oxymoron, a 'female man'. Similarly, the surname of one of the protagonists, Janet, is Evason where: "Evason is not 'son' but daughter'. This is *your* translation"³⁹. In using a masculine term, 'son' and transforming it into a feminine one, 'daughter' Russ sets off a process of "reversal of universality"⁴⁰. Furthermore, 'speaking her way out of her gender' through Joanna's word the author refers to writing as a sign of femininity/masculinity:

You will notice that even my diction is becoming feminine, thus revealing my true nature; I am not saying 'Damn' any more, or 'Blast'; I am putting in lots of qualifiers like 'rather', I am writing these breathless little feminine tags, she threw herself down on the bed, I have no structure (she thought) my thoughts seep out shapelessly like menstrual fluid, it is all very female and deep and full of essences, it is very primitive and full of 'and's' it is called 'run-on sentences'⁴¹.

From this, and many other examples, it is possible to retrace in Russ the influence of discussions taking place in the same years on the variation among men and women in the use of language⁴² or the debate on language and psychoanalysis especially the work of Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous. The 'theories of dominance'⁴³ of the 70s treating gender differences as indicative of women being dominated in interaction and totally

³⁸ Russ, *The Female Man*, cit., p. 134.

³⁹ *Ivi*, p. 18.

⁴⁰ S. Ayers, *The 'Straight Mind' in Russ's The Female Man*, in "Science Fiction Studies", 22 (1995), p. 28.

⁴¹ Russ, *The Female Man*, cit., p. 137.

⁴² R. Lakoff, *Language and Woman's Place*, Harper and Row, New York 1975.

⁴³ L. Litosseliti, *Gender and Language: Theory and Practice*, Hodder Arnold, London 2006.

³⁶ *Ivi*, p. 133. Cf. S. De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, Bantam, New York 1953.

³⁷ A. Boulter, *Unnatural Acts: American Feminism and Joanna Russ's The Female Man*, in "Women. A Cultural Review", 10, 2, (1999), pp. 151-164.

mis-represented in a man-made language are also to be read in-between the lines of the novel. *The Female Man* is a product of a specific historical moment of opposition and feminism in the US in the mid-70s. It represents one groundbreaking text that contributed to the revival of utopian writing as subversive exploration of social alternatives through the reconstruction of women's subjectivity. This exploration included also a problematization of social and linguistic discursive constructions of gender identities.

Conclusions

These three feminist utopias reflect the debate that was going on in the late 1960s and early 1970s within the second-wave feminism and sociolinguistics where language was considered as central for gendered ideologies. Discussion on the representation for women in language began with an analysis of derogatory language and trivializing terminology; sexism in language was supposed to be deconstructed through neologisms and a critical awareness to language use. The discussion was not only on lexicon and terminology but also about content. These novels demonstrate an awareness for linguistic inferences and authors are conscious of the power of making new meanings in language. How people say things, their use of vocabulary, their grammatical choices, the form of sentences is extremely important. From this perspective feminist utopias and science fiction of the 70s can be seen as performative acts. Writers like Piercy, Gearhart and Russ shape language, mould it and create a new one; they play with language considering it a performance, they regard their linguistic practices as a battleground for a new cultural gendered identity. As Austin affirmed, "to say something is to do something"⁴⁴ and these writers said and did something, they carried on a 'performative linguis-

tics', not only signaling sexism in language and demonstrating that language use is not neutral but takes place in a specific socio-cultural ideological context and is marked by categories of gender, race/ethnicity and class, but using language as cultural intervention, as part of an effort to alter expressions of domination at the level of concepts, syntax or terminology. These writers foresaw Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity where she demonstrates the linguistic texture of the social construction of identities. Through a postmodern structure, the use of non linear narratives, the insertion of multiple voices/narrators and different linguistic registers these authors made clear gender difference can have an agency in women's life. If, as Butler says, "to say that gender is performative is to say that there is a certain kind of enactment"⁴⁵, Piercy, Gearhart and Russ act as active agents of a linguistic/cultural deconstruction and 'reconstruction'. Their novels became objects of potential social change, their pages a space for women's performativity.

⁴⁴ J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, Oxford UP, Oxford 1962, p. 12.

⁴⁵ J. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, New York 1990, p. 1.