

Moral Panic: Utopian and Dystopian Worlds In Popular Music

A comparative analysis of Nothing But Thieves' *Moral Panic (The Complete Edition)* and
Muse's *Will Of The People*

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Abstract

The years 2019-2022 have been very tumultuous regarding socio-political developments in the United States of America and the United Kingdom. Reflections on unrest such as this can often be found in products of popular culture, such as music. British rock bands Nothing But Thieves and Muse created *Moral Panic (The Complete Edition)* and *Will Of The People*, respectively, to reflect on and criticise the socio-political tension that they have experienced over the past years. By conducting a close reading of songs as well as their sonic dimensions, this thesis analyses how Nothing But Thieves and Muse use utopian and dystopian imagery to represent their experience of the socio-political unrest in 2019-2022 Britain in their albums. This study shows how both bands were able to express their frustration and anger about socio-political developments in the US and the UK by using utopian and dystopian imagery in their lyrics, and how the sonic dimension expands their storytelling.

Key words: Popular rock music, Nothing But Thieves, *Moral Panic (The Complete Edition)*, Muse, *Will Of The People*, utopia, dystopia, socio-political context, USA, UK.

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Introduction

“We're at death's door, another world war / Wildfires and earthquakes I foresaw / A life in crisis, a deadly virus / Tsunamis of hate are gonna find us.”¹

These are the chorus' lyrics from English rock band Muse's "We Are Fucking Fucked." This expression perfectly sums up the socio-political unrest, environmental disasters, and universal panic from the past years. The years 2019-2022 have been very tumultuous regarding politics and impactful events in the United States of America and the United Kingdom, which were exactly the context for Muse's work.² One of the biggest markers of anxiety in 2019-2022 was the COVID-19 pandemic.³ Although everyone was separated from each other during lockdowns, they were simultaneously united through a universal panic. From lockdowns to political divides, anxiety about the future to grieving a normal past, people were living in constant uncertainty, both for their day-to-day lives as well as their socio-political circumstances. In a study about political trust in Britain during the pandemic, Ben Davies et al. state that levels of political trust gradually declined during 2020.⁴

Before the COVID-19 pandemic struck, there already was a lot of universal anxiety increasing over time. Surveys in the United States have pointed out that the public's political policy priorities for 2019 resulted from stress about, among others, the economy, healthcare costs, climate change, and immigration.⁵ When the COVID-19 pandemic started, it highlighted the tensions and opposed opinions of the public. CNN's Stephen Collinson describes that the "already divided nation [was] making its choice between President Donald

¹ Muse, "We Are Fucking Fucked," track 10 on *Will Of The People*, prod. and rec. in 2021 by Muse and Helium-3, released on 26 August 2022 by Warner Records Inc and Helium-3.

² Muse, Post on X (formerly known as Twitter), August 26, 2022, <https://twitter.com/muse/status/1504210257798643712>.

³ "Impact of covid-19 on people's livelihoods, their health and our Food Systems," *World Health Organization*, October 13, 2020, <https://www.who.int/news/item/13-10-2020-impact-of-covid-19-on-people's-livelihoods-their-health-and-our-food-systems>.

⁴ Ben Davies et al., "Changes in Political Trust in Britain During the COVID-19 Pandemic in 2020: Integrated Public Opinion Evidence and Implications," *Humanities & Social Sciences Communications* 8, no. 1 (2021): 4, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-021-00850-6>.

⁵ Kristen Bialik, "State of the Union 2019: How Americans See Major National Issues," *Pew Research Center*, February 4, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/02/04/state-of-the-union-2019-how-americans-see-major-national-issues/>.

Trump and former Vice President Joe Biden with fraught political divides exacerbated by the worst public health crisis in a century.”⁶ This divide was strengthened by fears of violent crime, racism, gun policy, and police brutality.⁷ One of the most impactful moments in this time period of racial unrest was the series of demonstrations and protests as part of the Black Lives Matter movement, which highlighted prevalent racist ideologies in the country.⁸

Similar concerns and uncertainties were prevalent in the United Kingdom. The University of Oxford describes the major issues in 2019 as “challenges [that] include the climate crisis; communities more divided than in living memory, with many feeling excluded from today’s politics; and Artificial Intelligence threatening to disrupt jobs and permanently alter the nature of work forever.”⁹ The divided nation saw a lot of uncertainty following the United Kingdom’s withdrawal from the European Union. As Joe Pike explains, Brexit-related problems appeared in “adapting to a new relationship with the EU” and dealing with “the pandemic and economic recovery.”¹⁰ The economic crisis especially was a major point of concern in British social and political attitudes. Human Rights Careers Magazine list the cost-of-living crisis, food insecurity, poverty, and homelessness as the top 5 most pressing social issues in the UK.¹¹

Another globally relevant issue has been climate change. CNN describes that “[2021]’s disasters are proof the climate crisis is intensifying and that the window is rapidly closing to slash our reliance on fossil fuels and to prevent changes that would transform life as we know it,” commenting on the US government’s lack of action when regarding extreme

⁶ Stephen Collinson, “A Nation in Crisis Faces a Critical Moment in History This Election,” *CNN*, November 2, 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/11/01/politics/election-2020-donald-trump-joe-biden-history/index.html>.

⁷ Sara Atske, “Important Issues in the 2020 Election,” *Pew Research Center*, August 13, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2020/08/13/important-issues-in-the-2020-election/>.

⁸ Emmaline Soken-Huberty, “10 Examples of Social Issues in the US,” *Human Rights Careers*, July 15, 2022, <https://www.humanrightscareers.com/issues/examples-of-social-issues-in-the-us/>.

⁹ “Britain in 2019 Faces Major Social, Political and Economic Challenges,” *University of Oxford*, November 18, 2019, <https://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2019-11-18-britain-2019-faces-major-social-political-and-economic-challenges>.

¹⁰ Joe Pike, “Eight of the Biggest Moments of 2020 - Apart from Covid,” *Sky News*, December 29, 2020, <https://news.sky.com/story/eight-of-the-biggest-moments-of-2020-apart-from-covid-12174029>.

¹¹ Pike, “Eight of the Biggest Moments of 2020 - Apart from Covid.”

weather.¹² The same concerns were relevant in UK politics, as described by Human Rights Careers: “While the public supports stronger regulations and emission reductions, the country is not on track to meet its goals.”¹³

The anxiety about current socio-political unrest, environmental disaster, and fear about the future expressed in Muse’s song are thus grounded in reality. The experience of living in a world full of crises and uncertainty is central to Muse’s album *Will Of The People*, which was released on 26 August 2022. In a post on X, formerly known as Twitter, the band confirmed that the tensions and events from 2019 to 2022 were the main influence for their work:

Will Of The People was created in Los Angeles and London and is influenced by the increasing uncertainty and instability in the world. A pandemic, new wars in Europe, massive protests & riots, an attempted insurrection, Western democracy wavering, rising authoritarianism, wildfires and natural disasters and the destabilization of the global order all informed the *Will Of The People*. It has been a worrying and scary time for all of us, as the Western Empire and the natural world which have cradled us for so long are genuinely threatened. This album is a personal navigation through those fears and preparation for what comes next.¹⁴

A similar sentiment can be found in British rock band Nothing But Thieves’ “This Feels Like The End”: “Oh, look at this place, what a waste, it's such a mess / We skim through the horror to find some happiness / But it's getting harder to get a little taste / As we're getting more divided every day / Oh, this feels like the end.”¹⁵ Their album *Moral Panic (The Complete Edition)* thus represents similar fear and anxiety as Muse’s. The band wrote and recorded their work in 2019–2021 and released the album on 19 October 2021, which makes the album’s contexts identical to those in *Will Of The People*.¹⁶ In an interview

¹² Paul LeBlanc, “Analysis: 2021 Was a Transformative Year in US Politics. Here Are the Biggest Stories,” *CNN*, December 30, 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/12/30/politics/year-in-review-us-politics-what-matters/index.html>.

¹³ Emmaline Soken-Huberty, “15 Examples of Social Issues in the UK,” Human Rights Careers, October 14, 2023, <https://www.humanrightscareers.com/issues/examples-of-social-issues-uk/>.

¹⁴ Muse, Post on X (formerly known as Twitter), August 26, 2022.

¹⁵ Nothing But Thieves, “This Feels Like The End,” track 15 on *Moral Panic (The Complete Edition)*, prod. and rec. from 2019–2021 by Mike Crossey and Dominic Craik, released on 29 October 2021 by Sony Music UK.

¹⁶ Nothing But Thieves, *Moral Panic (The Complete Edition)*.

with GEM Magazine, frontman Conor Mason confirms this, explaining that the band was influenced by social unrest, political divide, and environmental disasters and stating that:

This record is like a mirror for people. It's about asking questions like "are you comfortable with this?" and "do you want to live this way?" We were feeling quite disturbed and hardened by what was going on, what we were witnessing and seeing. It's an album for people and about people and about us and how we reflect and react to everything. Which a lot of the time is anger. But there's also sadness, resignation, and a kind of melancholy to it. Where you go, this is it, this feels like the end.¹⁷

Music can be seen a vehicle for expressing uncertainty and reacting to socio-political unrest, which is illustrated by Dale T. Griffiee who states that music is very affective as "many people can be moved to fears or other strong emotions by music, and songs can acquire strong emotional associations with people, event and places."¹⁸ It is thus very natural that Nothing But Thieves and Muse created these albums with this intent and the almost apocalyptic-like narrative.

However, there is virtually no relevant research about dystopian and utopian themes in contemporary popular rock music. Previous research about these themes generally focuses on isolated lyrics rather than entire albums, and analyses general utopian and dystopian imagery without directly connecting it to relevant socio-political context. On top of that, there is no research at all on Nothing But Thieves' or Muse's albums despite their apocalyptic narratives and their ever-increasing popularity. This study aims to bridge this research gap, connecting the socio-political context of the albums directly to a close reading of the songs. Moreover, this study addresses the lack of research on contemporary pop/rock artists whose works are extremely relevant to the British audience and should thus be studied. The research gap is addressed with the following research question: In what ways do Nothing But Thieves and Muse connect utopian and dystopian elements to the socio-political unrest in 2019-2022 Britain and America in their albums *Moral Panic* and *Will Of The People*?

The analysis of the works will be conducted by a close reading of the lyrics of the songs as well as any accompanying part in the sonic dimension that strengthens the lyrics, as if it were a reading of poetry. The close readings focus on the overall tone and emotions in the songs, as well as any specific utopian and dystopian imagery, which will be elaborated on

¹⁷ Laura Weingrill, "The World's Mirror – An Interview with Nothing But Thieves," *GEM Magazine*, December 2, 2020, <https://read-gem.com/2020/11/27/an-interview-with-nothing-but-thieves/>.

¹⁸ Dale T. Griffiee, *Songs in Action* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1992), 4.

in Chapter 1. The element of comparing two works by different artists will add a nuanced layer, showing how musicians can approach an identical context in diverse ways. To define a framework for the analysis of the two albums, the first chapter of this thesis is dedicated to the theoretical framework of utopian and dystopian elements in fiction, as well as popular music analysis with a socio-political approach. Building on this framework, the second chapter will be used to analyse the ways in which *Nothing But Thieves* explores utopian and dystopian elements in *Moral Panic* as a reaction to the socio-political unrest in 2019-2022 Britain. The third chapter will do the same but will focus on *Will Of The People* by Muse instead. The insights gained in these chapters will be used to answer the research question in the conclusion, where recommendations for further research will be given as well.

Chapter 1 – Theoretical Framework

To read and compare the albums by Muse and Nothing But Thieves, it is important to first set up the theoretical framework with which these works can be analysed. This framework will address the genres of utopian and dystopian fiction, as well as their prominent literary themes. And as the works analysed for this thesis are works of music, this theoretical framework will also give an overview of how an analysis of music can be carried out within these contexts. Lastly, this chapter will explain how these concepts and approaches will be used to analyse *Moral Panic* and *Will of the People*.

Utopian Fiction

Origins and Interpretations

According to Dennis Lensing, “the impulse to create images and writings about utopian existence can be found in virtually every culture.”¹⁹ The genre has been categorised and defined in numerous ways and these definitions have changed over time. In 1516, Thomas More coined the concept of the ‘utopia’, which was derived from his book *De Optimo Reipublicae Statu deque Nova Insula Utopia*.²⁰ The genre of utopian fiction has been around for a long time, even before More gave a name to it. In 1994 Lyman Tower Sargent updated the definitions of some important concepts and these have been widely used since.²¹ One of the concepts central to this study is that of the Eutopia or Positive Utopia, which are used synonymously with “Utopia,” which is the term used for this thesis. Tower Sargent defined utopia as “a nonexistent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably better than the society in which that reader lives.”²² The utopia is thus a society which has a dream-like quality, something the reader should see as positive.

But the utopian genre is not merely a dreamworld, but rather a product of its time, like all cultural works. Jorge Bastos da Silva points out that “utopias are inevitably embedded in

¹⁹ Dennis M. Lensing, “The Fecund Androgyne: Gender and the Utopian/dystopian Imagination of the 1970s,” *Socialism and Democracy* 20, no. 3 (2006): 87–103, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08854300600950251.87>.

²⁰ Gregory Claeys and Lyman Tower Sargent, *The Utopia Reader*, second ed (New York University Press, 2017), 1.

²¹ Claeys and Tower Sargent, 1.

²² Claeys and Tower Sargent, 1.

contexts from which they derive meaning and significance.”²³ The genre is thus used as a reflection of its time and can then also be used as a mode of social and political commentary or projection. Tower Sargent defines this usage of the utopian genre as the “Critical Utopia,” in which the author uses difficulties and obstacles to give nuance to the so-called perfect place.²⁴ Gregory Claeys and Lyman Tower Sargent explain that the first utopias focussed on settings “beyond the human race or death” to achieve the dream-like perfect societies. The utopian imagery was then “projected into future life on earth,” which is how the utopian genre established itself into a subgenre of science fiction and the way we define the utopia today.²⁵

The Utopian Tradition and Utopian Themes

Claeys and Tower Sargent show that the utopian genre is often a work of “escape” and “reconstruction,” which depicts settings that reflect the dream of something better.²⁶ Claeys and Tower Sargent have listed some of the relevant themes in utopian literature, with the consideration that utopia presents itself is by depicting an ideal society, a place where equality and wealth are central.²⁷ The theme of advancement is prominent as it shows how far the society has come in its success. This is often in technological context, which is why the utopian genre is often associated with science fiction. Another important aspect of the utopian genre is that of authority and government, which are well-balanced and overall successful. Carl Rhodes argues that the utopia can also be represented in relationships, as love depicts balance and a dream-like quality, which makes the utopian experience possible in both individual experience as well as the experience of the collective.²⁸ These themes are then also crucial when approaching a work as a critical utopia, as these themes can become vehicles for the author’s criticism. By showing the reader the ideal society, the author simultaneously points out the malfunctions of the reader’s society, even if this happens unintendedly.

²³ Jorge Bastos da Silva, “Utopia and Cultural Memory: A Survey of Themes and Critical Problems,” *Utopian Studies* 31, no. 2 (2020): 315.

²⁴ Claeys and Tower Sargent, 1-2.

²⁵ Claeys and Tower Sargent, 6.

²⁶ Claeys and Tower Sargent, 5.

²⁷ Claeys and Tower Sargent, 7.

²⁸ Carl Rhodes, “Outside the Gates of Eden: Utopia and Work in Rock Music,” *Group & Organization Management* 32, no. 1 (2007): 38, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1059601106294486>.

Dystopian Fiction

Origins and Interpretations

One of the most interesting things about the dystopian genre, is that it defines itself not merely by its themes, but also by opposing itself to the utopian genre. Tower Sargent defined the dystopia or “Negative Utopia” as “a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a cotemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which that reader lives.”²⁹ The dystopia is thus the complete opposite of the utopia, in which all that is good turns into something bad. Keith Booker described how the dystopia is the nightmare version of the utopian dream world.³⁰ But the dystopia does not merely depict a bad society, it rather “reflects the fear that things might get much worse.”³¹ This is also why the dystopia is such a fitting vehicle for political and social commentary, as the author can easily project issues and fears onto the work. So, whereas the utopian genre can be critical of society by showing how things could be rather than they are, the dystopian genre criticises by directly pointing out what is wrong with our world.

In the 1970s the concept of the “Critical Dystopia” was introduced as a way to contrast the so-called classical dystopia, in which virtually no hope can be found.³² The critical dystopia *does* contain hope, even if it might be hard for the reader to find. Raffaella Baccolini illustrates how the utopia is then maintained in dystopia, in which no hope can be found in the story, but rather outside the story.³³ Baccolini adds that this is often achieved by resisting closure, which allows both protagonists and readers to hope, because even if no happiness/hope/love, etc. can be found within the story, characters and readers will want to reach for it.³⁴

²⁹ Claeys and Tower Sargent, 1.

³⁰ M. Keith Booker, “Dystopian Fiction,” in *The Science Fiction Handbook*, edited by M. Keith Booker and Ann-Marie Thomas (Chicester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 65.

³¹ Claeys and Tower Sargent, 5.

³² Claeys and Tower Sargent, 6.

³³ Raffaella Baccolini, “The Persistence of Hope in Dystopian Science Fiction,” *PMLA : Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 119, no. 3 (2004): 520. <https://doi.org/10.1632/003081204X20587>.

³⁴ Baccolini, 520.

The Dystopian Tradition and Dystopian Themes

Much like the utopian genre, the dystopian genre shifted its focus from “beyond the human race or death” to “future life on earth.”³⁵ Claeys illustrates that the nightmarish dystopia first drew on fear of threatening gods and monsters, but that the depicted fears then evolved into modern equivalents, such as a fear for technology taking over the world or replacing humanity entirely.³⁶ These fears are a constant in the dystopian genre, and Claeys explains that we can use these fears to categorise three main versions of dystopias, namely the political dystopia; the environmental dystopia; and the technological dystopia.³⁷ These themes are often interrelated and are usually employed to make a totalitarian political dystopia.³⁸ These versions of the dystopia also reflect the most prominent themes in dystopian fiction. And as the dystopia is the opposite of the utopia, the themes reflect this too. Where the utopian genre uses technological advancement as a successful goal, the dystopian uses technology as means of destruction and oppression. This theme of destruction can also be found in other aspects, such as environmental collapse, overpopulation, etc.³⁹ Where the utopian genre focusses on an ideal and equal society with balanced authority, the dystopian genre shows society as oppressed and controlled, often by a totalitarian and oppressive government. This also goes hand in hand with another important dystopian theme, namely the loss of individuality. Aspects such as collective fear and aligning with groups form important motivational factors for protagonists’ journeys towards self-understanding and -fashioning. Claeys explains that the process of individualisation is often used in dystopian works as something to work for as it has been lost in the need for survival.⁴⁰

Claeys and Tower Sargent describe how the dystopian genre evolved in the aftermath of the Second World War as humanity then entered a new age of nuclear warfare, environmental destruction, and mechanisation.⁴¹ As the world changed, fears that were once unrealistic suddenly became tangible. Claeys builds on interpretations by Ruth Levitas and

³⁵ Claeys and Tower Sargent, 6.

³⁶ Gregory Claeys, *Dystopia: A Natural History - A Study of Modern Despotism, Its Antecedents, and Its Literary Diffractions*, first ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 9.

³⁷ Claeys, 5.

³⁸ Claeys, 5.

³⁹ Claeys, 488-9.

⁴⁰ Claeys, 33.

⁴¹ Claeys and Tower Sargent, 445.

argues that the dystopian genre is not “necessarily fictional in form.”⁴² The utopia can be seen as completely fictional and fantasy-like, because it is ideal and unattainable, whereas the dystopia depicts issues such as environmental destruction and oppression, which we can easily recognise in our own, real world. Claeys expresses that “the adjective *dystopian* implies fearful futures where chaos and ruin prevail,” which can thus also be interpreted as our own future rather than a fictional nightmare.⁴³

A Problem of Definition

To establish the theoretical framework for this thesis, it is important to define the concept of the utopia and dystopia, but this often proves quite difficult. As Claeys explains, these are “essentially contested concepts or concepts that are thought of in ways that do not merely diverge but are, at least as currently understood, fundamentally incompatible.”⁴⁴ This is mostly because the genres’ parameters are quite subjective. The definition of the utopia as ‘better’ or the dystopia as ‘worse’ places can be interpreted differently simply based on different perspectives people have of their own experience.

Another issue in the study of utopian and dystopian literature is that the two genres often interact, which makes it difficult to define a work as one of the two. Claeys points out that “the relation between utopia and dystopia may be more intimate” than we would initially think, because the two genres use the same foundations, but provide contrasting perspectives on the themes.⁴⁵ Additionally, the two genres can directly interact, for example, by using the utopian notion of hope in a dystopian environment in the critical dystopia. And one of the most important similarities between the genres can be found in their purpose, as it can be said that the two share a goal. Claeys expresses that the literary dystopia has a task to “warn us against and educate us about real-life dystopias,”⁴⁶ and even though its style is less pessimistic than the dystopia, the utopia has the same purpose. Both genres are a vehicle for social and political commentary which are used to raise awareness for the relevant contexts of the work, as well as the contexts relevant for the reader.

⁴² Claeys, 5.

⁴³ Claeys, 5.

⁴⁴ Claeys, 5.

⁴⁵ Claeys, 6-7.

⁴⁶ Claeys, 501.

The analysis used in this thesis will draw upon the concepts defined as above and will attempt to link the themes of the case studies to those present in current utopian and dystopian literary traditions as described in this framework. Moreover, this thesis will consider that the boundaries of the utopian and dystopian genres are not set in stone and might interact.

Music as Medium

Music and Politics

In this thesis, the case studies will be considered as works of popular music, which Larry Starr and Christopher Waterman define as “music that is mass reproduced and disseminated via the mass media, that has at various times been listened to by large numbers of [people], and that typically draws upon a variety of pre-existing musical traditions.”⁴⁷

Popular music has the obvious quality of being popular, which points to the medium’s relevance in our society. Simon Frith explains that this is because “pop music has been an important way in which we have learned to understand ourselves as historical, ethnic, class bound, gendered subjects.”⁴⁸ This shows that music is an important medium for social and political commentary, even though music and politics might be seen as two separate realms. John Street argues that these entities should not be seen as separate, but that “music *embodies* political values and experiences, and *organizes* our response to society as political thought and action. Music does not just provide a vehicle of political expression, it *is* that expression.”⁴⁹ Ian Peddie adds that this is quite visible in our culture, as (protest) music follows when calls for social or political change are made.⁵⁰ And music is not merely a site for commentary but is a rather interesting medium for expressing identity. David Hesmondhalgh argues that music is a point where the collective and the individual experiences of the listener can meet, “providing encounters of self-identity (this is who I am;

⁴⁷ Larry Starr and Christopher Waterman, *American Popular Music*. 5th edition (Oxford: University Press, 2010), 6.

⁴⁸ Simon Frith, “Towards an Aesthetic of Popular Music,” in *Taking Popular Music Seriously: Selected Essays* (Aldershot; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 273.

⁴⁹ John Street, *Music & Politics* (Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 2012), 1.

⁵⁰ Ian Peddie, *The Resisting Muse: Popular Music and Social Protest* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 15.

this is who I'm not) with collective identity (this is who we are; this is who we're not)."⁵¹ By including the individual experience, most of the commentary in music can be interpreted in various ways. Commentary can be explicit and refer to specific political events, but it can also be implicit, referring to such an event or to a personal experience that the listener can interpret for themselves. Although much more can be said about the political dimension of music, the interpretations above will be used for the approach taken in this thesis.

Approaching Utopia and Dystopia in Music

The utopian and dystopian tradition is found mainly in literature, but certainly does not restrict itself to this format. Claeys and Tower Sargent point out that the non-print utopia has a long history and is definitely worth looking into. They mention the media formats of film, radio, etc. as well.⁵² But in exploring other media in which the utopian or dystopian genres can be found, research tends to exclude music as medium. This is not because it is not worth looking into, but as John Street explains, "it is less easy to see what it is that might be inherently shocking in different forms of music" compared to the medium of television or videogames.⁵³ But when we look at music through the lens of utopian and dystopian fiction, we find that this medium is a fitting vehicle for expressing utopian and dystopian themes. As Street very relevantly puts it, "music can allow us to imagine other people, so it may conjure up other worlds - both utopian future ones and real, alternate past ones."⁵⁴

To approach the utopia and dystopia in music, the method of analysing music has to be established first. Starr and Waterman argue that music can be analysed through critical listening, which is "listening that consciously seeks out meaning in music by drawing on knowledge of how music is put together, its cultural significance, and its historical development."⁵⁵ The method of analysis in this thesis will be similar to that of analysing poetry, considering both the textual and sonic elements that can provide different thematic layers. The thematic layers will be analysed using the utopian and dystopian categories established in this chapter. The analysis will focus on the emotions and thoughts expressed by

⁵¹ David Hesmondhalgh, "Towards a Critical Understanding of Music, Emotion and Self-Identity," *Consumption, Markets and Culture* 11, no. 4 (2008): 329, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10253860802391334.329>.

⁵² Claeys and Tower Sargent, 527.

⁵³ Street, 21.

⁵⁴ Street, 168.

⁵⁵ Starr and Waterman, 7.

the protagonists in the songs and will take into account how the vocals and instrumentals add to the expression of the themes. The close readings of *Moral Panic* and *Will of the People* will be conducted in context of the socio-political developments discussed in the Introduction and will connect these to the utopian and dystopian imagery depicted.

Chapter 2 – Nothing But Thieves and Moral Panic

Nothing But Thieves formed in 2012 in Essex, England. The band consist of lead-vocalist and guitarist Conor Mason, guitarist and keyboardist Dom Craik, guitarist Joe Langridge-Brown, bassist Philip Blake, and drummer James Price. They brand their music as a “guitar-based rock that balances indie rock artfulness with a pop sensibility.”⁵⁶ As of 2024, the band has four studio albums to its name and has gained a big following, especially in the United Kingdom. The band reached the Top 10 in UK radio charts for all of their albums, which points to their popularity.⁵⁷ The band has written about experiences of the individual, such as love and loss, but also about experiences of the collective, such as frustration towards authorities. In an interview with Tait McGregor, guitarist Joe confirms that the band interacts with “politics and social movements,” and states that they try to be socially conscious and start conversations.⁵⁸ Music Correspondent Roisin O’Connor comments that their second album *Broken Machine* “showcases the band’s consciousness of what they’ve learned since their self-titled debut as well as the global events that have taken place in the past two years.”⁵⁹ The band took an identical approach to creating *Moral Panic* by focussing on their experiences with socio-political unrest as well as what route they wanted to take musically. To comment on this socio-political unrest, Nothing But Thieves employed utopian and dystopian elements, which will be elaborated on in this chapter.

⁵⁶ “About Nothing But Thieves,” Nothing But Thieves | Official Website, accessed May 6, 2024, <https://www.nbthieves.com/about/#>.

⁵⁷ “Nothing But Thieves,” Official Charts. accessed May 6, 2024, <https://www.officialcharts.com/artist/47614/nothing-but-thieves/>.

⁵⁸ Tait McGregor, “Interview: Nothing But Thieves on Moral Panic, Politics and Touring the World,” *The AU Review*, October 22, 2020, <https://www.theaureview.com/music/interview-nothing-but-thieves-on-moral-panic-politics-and-touring-the-world/>.

⁵⁹ Roisin O’Connor, “Nothing But Thieves: ‘There’s No Guidebook for Being in a Band.’” *The Independent*, September 1, 2017, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170910100301/http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/features/nothing-but-thieves-interview-broken-machine-album-release-date-buy-stream-tour-dates-muse-london-a7924226.html>.

Utopian Themes and Imagery

An Ideal World: Dreams and Escapism

As Claeys and Tower Sargent explained, a utopia is a fictional ideal society, something that is like a dream and something to escape to.⁶⁰ The theme of escapism and ideal settings are prominent in utopian fiction, as well as any other imagery that creates a sense of hope and something to look forward to.

Carl Rhodes argues that there is a connection between utopianism and love in rock music, as rock music is often portrayed as an escape from “the dystopia of life itself.”⁶¹ This focus on love as form of escapism is especially clear in “Impossible.”⁶² In an interview with Vents Magazine, the band describes the song as “the complete antithesis of everything else on the album, which has a lot of anxiety and confusion about what’s happening on this planet,” which thus provides a moment of hope and relief in the album.⁶³ The track still holds a lot of passion and longing, which is especially clear in the delivery of the vocals and the lyrics of the chorus: “I could drown myself in someone like you / I could dive so deep I never come out / I thought it was impossible / But you make it possible.”⁶⁴ The protagonist is able to find escape and relief in their relationship, which creates a sense of hope.

The hopeful tone of utopian elements returns in “Free If We Want It,” which emphasises the importance of possibilities and retaining hope.⁶⁵ The sonic dimension is tranquil and calm, with an almost ‘floating in space’ quality. The vocals and lyrics are melancholic but also hopeful: “We can be free if we want it / Or we can stay in this lane all alone / Just say the word and I’m on it / The past is receding so we can move on.”⁶⁶ In an interview with Apple Music, guitarist Langdrige-Brown comments that “it’s important with

⁶⁰ Claeys and Tower Sargent, 1-2.

⁶¹ Rhodes, 38.

⁶² Nothing But Thieves, “Impossible,” track 6 on *Moral Panic (The Complete Edition)*.

⁶³ “Nothing But Thieves Release New Track ‘Impossible’ – Announce Autumn 2021 UK, Ireland and European Tour Including London the O2 Show,” *Vents Magazine*, September 14, 2020, <https://ventsmagazine.com/2020/09/14/nothing-but-thieves-release-new-track-impossible-announce-autumn-2021-uk-ireland-and-european-tour-includin;g-london-the-o2-show/>.

⁶⁴ Nothing But Thieves, “Impossible.”

⁶⁵ Nothing But Thieves, “Free If We Want It,” track 4 on *Moral Panic (The Complete Edition)*.

⁶⁶ Nothing But Thieves, “Free If We Want It.”

a record that's quite dark lyrically to have a bit of light in there,"⁶⁷ which explains the combination of melancholy and hope.

The combination of pensive and hopeful tones can be found in "There Was Sun" as well, in which nostalgia is a vehicle for hope and escapism.⁶⁸ The lyrics "There was sun / Shone down upon me / Felt so warm on me / Golden leaves hanging on the trees" create a romanticist setting, almost like the garden of Eden.⁶⁹ In the Apple Music interview, Dom Craik commented on the "psychedelic" sonic dimension and lyrics, which created an ambience of tranquillity and longing.⁷⁰ Again, the combination of dark and light is used, as the song turns more grievous after the first verse.

The Critical Utopia

Claeys and Tower Sargent also explained how the utopia is not only used for expressing hope, but also as a mode of social and political commentary.⁷¹ By expressing the need to escape, the author reveals that there is something to escape from. Nothing But Thieves employs the utopia with this approach as well. In "Phobia," for example, the protagonist expresses "[They] want to know euphoria," which shows that they want to experience the utopia simply because their life is nothing like it.⁷² This is similar to the sentiment in "Miracle, Baby," in which the protagonist longs for something utopian: "I've heard about a beauty that I can't seem to find."⁷³ The guitars and beats create a tense sound, which emphasises the dark reality which cannot be surmounted by hope.

This is also the point where the boundaries between utopia and dystopia becomes less clear. The utopia is employed to highlight the persistence of the dystopia. This is especially clear in "Ce n'est Rien," as the band describes the concept of an ideal society and then shows how it is far from reality: "Our thoughts and prayers shall salvage the earth / Honest opinions

⁶⁷ "Moral Panic by Nothing But Thieves on Apple Music," *Apple Music - Web Player*, accessed April 15, 2024, <https://music.apple.com/us/album/moral-panic/1519413837>.

⁶⁸ Nothing But Thieves, "There Was Sun," track 8 on *Moral Panic (The Complete Edition)*.

⁶⁹ Nothing But Thieves, "There Was Sun."

⁷⁰ "Moral Panic by Nothing But Thieves on Apple Music," *Apple Music - Web Player*.

⁷¹ Claeys and Tower Sargent, 1-2.

⁷² Nothing But Thieves, "Phobia," track 10 on *Moral Panic (The Complete Edition)*.

⁷³ Nothing But Thieves, "Miracle, Baby," track 5 on *Moral Panic (The Complete Edition)*.

hold equal worth / One day we'll all get what we deserve / It's such a beautiful lie.”⁷⁴ Nothing But Thieves thus uses utopian imagery as actual moments of hope, but also to critique reality.

Dystopian Themes and Imagery

General Dystopian Undertones

As Claeys and Tower Sargent explained, the dystopia does not merely depict a nightmarish society, it also “reflects the fear that things might get much worse.”⁷⁵ Apart from the more distinct dystopian themes in fiction such as technological advancement, the general sense of fear and anxiety is characteristic of a dystopian work. In *Moral Panic*, as the album title suggests, this fear and anxiety permeate every song.

The album’s title track “Moral Panic” encapsulates these general dystopian undertones perfectly.⁷⁶ The song starts with a tranquil and ethereal sound, but also immediately builds tension by using synth cords that create a sense of insistence and unease. This dichotomy of tranquillity and tension is also present in the lyrics, as the vocals are calm, almost tired, whereas the lyrics represent tension and anxiety: “This is the last day of my life, yours too (...) / “And now we're running out of time”, she said / All of the children are so anxious, they're on edge / Yeah, it's tense, so tense.”⁷⁷ The tension continues to build throughout the song, with more layers of percussion and synth, as well as intensified vocals towards the end of the song, representing that the “Moral panic is setting in.”⁷⁸

“Before We Drift Away” is similar when it comes to the combination of tension and tranquillity.⁷⁹ The song starts out calmly, but intensifies during the chorus, which creates a feeling for the listener as if they are being drowned in anxiety. This fits well with the motifs of water Nothing But Thieves uses throughout the song: “Immersed in deepest ocean,” and “Before we drift away.”⁸⁰ The lyric “I’m gonna hang on to this forever” suggests that the protagonist does not want to experience what comes next as the future will be worse than

⁷⁴ Nothing But Thieves, “Ce n’est Rien,” track 12 on *Moral Panic (The Complete Edition)*.

⁷⁵ Claeys and Tower Sargent, 5.

⁷⁶ Nothing But Thieves, “Moral Panic,” track 13 on *Moral Panic (The Complete Edition)*.

⁷⁷ Nothing But Thieves, “Moral Panic.”

⁷⁸ Nothing But Thieves, “Moral Panic.”

⁷⁹ Nothing But Thieves, “Before We Drift Away,” track 11 on *Moral Panic (The Complete Edition)*.

⁸⁰ Nothing But Thieves, “Before We Drift Away.”

what they are already experiencing as drowning right now.⁸¹ The final line “I don’t wanna grow old” confirms this, highlighting the dystopian tone of fear for the future.⁸²

Hopelessness about the future is thus a clear dystopian sentiment, which is used in “Miracle, Baby” too: “You need a miracle, baby / But I wouldn't wait too long / It's not gonna save ya.”⁸³ The lyrics express that we are so far in our hopelessness that we cannot be saved, maybe by a miracle, but this possibility is so small, we should not count on it. “Is Everybody Going Crazy?” portrays the same hopeless feeling, but the sonic dimension is intensified by the dynamic rhythm and build up of guitar.⁸⁴ The chorus is very explicit about these themes: “Yeah, everybody's going crazy (...) / We're so hopelessly faded / Is anyone else feeling lonely?”⁸⁵

The tones of fear and anxiety are so persistent that these are even present in the more hopeful songs. “Real Love Song” is, as the title suggests, about love, but guitarist Dom Craik comments that “this is real love, away from the Hollywood type of love song... But it's also a song within a song; it's about the irony of all these songs written about something that isn't really what it is!”^{86, 87} Love here is thus portrayed as dark and as something that can cause strong negative emotions: “I’ll hate myself for days love,” and “Losing all that’s making me human inside sad.”⁸⁸ The concept of love is thus viewed through a dystopian lens.

The Technological Dystopia

As discussed in Chapter 1, dystopian imagery does not only have to be conveyed through fear and anxiety, but also takes shape in distinct forms categorised by Claeys.⁸⁹ One of these categories is the dystopian genre of technological advancement, in which the destructive nature of technology is central. This can take form of robots taking over the world, but this

⁸¹ Nothing But Thieves, “Before We Drift Away.”

⁸² Nothing But Thieves, “Before We Drift Away.”

⁸³ Nothing But Thieves, “Miracle, Baby.”

⁸⁴ Nothing But Thieves, “Is Everybody Going Crazy?” track 3 on *Moral Panic (The Complete Edition)*.

⁸⁵ Nothing But Thieves, “Is Everybody Going Crazy?”

⁸⁶ Nothing But Thieves, “Real Love Song,” track 14 on *Moral Panic (The Complete Edition)*.

⁸⁷ “Moral Panic by Nothing But Thieves on Apple Music,” *Apple Music - Web Player*.

⁸⁸ Nothing But Thieves, “Real Love Song.”

⁸⁹ Claeys, 5.

can also be more subtle, such as negative consequences of living in the information age in which the internet can be depressing or can remove the concept of authenticity.

This genre of dystopia is immediately introduced in the first track of the album, “Unperson.”⁹⁰ The technological aspect is already noticeable in the song’s sonic dimension, as it starts with a robotic staccato voice, giving the song a futuristic feeling, which is then also reflected in the lyrics: “Now my computer gets sad without me, it’s scary / It’s turnin’ off everything I believe in.”⁹¹ The protagonist seems to be scared of their electronics as it is removing the human parts, such as belief/faith from their lives. It also seems to represent a fear of electronics taking over. This is emphasised by the distorted and robotic vocals.

Nothing But Thieves also refers to a lot of internet-related terms and effects in various songs, which shows how the artist experiences that technology is everywhere now. In “Futureproof,” the protagonist talks about how “They’re shutting down the protest, yeah, we’re so on trend / Quick, go grab a picture, go get that content (...) / Why do you wanna do good when you can feel good?”⁹² The band critique’s the way that social media and reputation have become central in our society. Social media dehumanises us and destroys the opportunity to connect.

This destructive aspect is also visible in “This Feels Like The End,” which shows how the internet has a negative effect on humanity: “Now we’re getting numb to the numbers on the screen.”⁹³ The band’s critical approach becomes clearer throughout the song as frustration and anger intensify in how the vocals are executed. The bridge stands out, as the lyrics are not sung by Conor Mason, but are told by a nameless man who presents the lyrics as if it were a news report: “We stare at whatever clickbait debate next goes viral / Plastic opinions and drive-through funerals / Everything has a price, and then, you / Your consent is manufactured and you are being sold, categorised and catalogued.”⁹⁴ The matter-of-fact news reporting tone becomes more directed and confronts the “you” with an urgency and anxiety. The song thus portrays how the internet is an oppressor in our lives.

⁹⁰ Nothing But Thieves, “Unperson,” track 1 on *Moral Panic (The Complete Edition)*.

⁹¹ Nothing But Thieves, “Unperson.”

⁹² Nothing But Thieves, “Futureproof,” track 2 on *Moral Panic (The Complete Edition)*.

⁹³ Nothing But Thieves, “This Feels Like the End.”

⁹⁴ Nothing But Thieves, “This Feels Like the End.”

The Political Dystopia

According to Claeys, another category of the dystopia is the political dystopia, in which the utopian equal society is turned into a nightmare where society is oppressed and controlled, often by a totalitarian government.⁹⁵ The themes in this category can take form of oppression, loss of individuality and society's reaction to this, which can be compliance or rebellion.

The political dystopia gained popularity from its representation in George Orwell's *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*, in which oppression and totalitarianism are distinct themes.⁹⁶ Nothing But Thieves refers to this work in their album, which highlights the political dystopian narrative. They do this most explicitly in the first track "Unperson," of which the title is already a direct reference.⁹⁷ In *Nineteen-Eighty-Four* it is explained one of the characters "was already an unperson. He did not exist: he had never existed. - being erased from memory and history," which means that the oppressive government erased this person's identity and existence altogether.⁹⁸ Nothing But Thieves recreates this setting in which the protagonist directly addresses the oppressor: "Cause I'm another unperson / You created this mess / You are the grand designer / Revel in our unrest."⁹⁹ The vocals are fragile and soft, which hints at the fragility and lack of control of the protagonist. The vocals and instruments pick up during the chorus, showing more frustration, which adds to the lyrics: "And we're getting sick of your doublethink (...) / My thoughts are mine, I didn't sign up for this."¹⁰⁰ Here, the band refers to *Nineteen-Eighty-Four* again by using 'doublethink,' which is an aspect of the totalitarian state's indoctrination in the book.¹⁰¹ The protagonist tries to stand up to the oppressor by stating that they still exist, but as the song progresses they state that "[They're] just another cone of a clone," which shows that they have lost their individuality.¹⁰² This is strengthened by the sonic dimension, as the vocals are drowned out by heavy guitar, drums, and extra vocal layers, which suggests that the protagonist is not able to fight back anymore.

⁹⁵ Claeys, 5.

⁹⁶ George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (London: Penguin Books, 2008).

⁹⁷ Nothing But Thieves, "Unperson."

⁹⁸ Orwell, 48.

⁹⁹ Nothing But Thieves, "Unperson."

¹⁰⁰ Nothing But Thieves, "Unperson."

¹⁰¹ Orwell, 223.

¹⁰² Nothing But Thieves, "Unperson."

This sense of defeat is also present in “Your Blood,” in which the protagonist is oppressed in a less direct way.¹⁰³ Rather than being oppressed by government, they are oppressed by toxic masculinity. In an interview with Boys By Girls Magazine, the band confirms that the track revolves around “relationships with fathers (...), and male figures and what that means.”¹⁰⁴ The protagonist is confronted with expectations by earlier generations of men, and is forced to conform to these, losing their individuality and true self-expression: “I don't wanna be somethin' I'm not to stay alive” and “So I'll carry the lie, we're real men till we die.”¹⁰⁵ The vocals carry a desperation and hurt, which emphasises the hopeless, oppressed position of the protagonist.

But Nothing But Thieves does not only just represent oppression and its dire effects for the victims, the band also brings a form of protest and rebellion to the album. In “Phobia,” the protagonist expresses their hate for people in positions of power: “The fame suckers in their block-long cars” and “Fat cat hotel, I don't feel well,” where ‘fat cat’ refers to someone with a lot of money and power.^{106, 107} The protagonist does not experience direct oppression caused by these people, but experiences the dehumanising and awful circumstances which could be changed by people in power if they would care: “I get some pills, but not some help / From love junkies in their private hell.”¹⁰⁸ The circumstances keep worsening and pull the protagonist in, which Conor Mason explained as “[their] inner demons coming out.”¹⁰⁹ By expressing anger and frustration in the vocals, which are amplified by the loud instruments, the protagonist shows their discontent.

The anger and frustration intensify and peak in “Can You Afford to Be an Individual?” in which protest is a central theme.¹¹⁰ This is also noticeable in the sonic dimension, as the song starts with strong percussion and tense guitar chords. The heated vocals emphasise the protest against authority in the lyrics: “I couldn't be anything that I

¹⁰³ Nothing But Thieves, “Your Blood,” track 16 on *Moral Panic (The Complete Edition)*.

¹⁰⁴ Cecilie Harris, “Conversations: Nothing But Thieves,” *Boys By Girls*, July 26, 2021, <https://boysbygirls.co.uk/conversations/nothing-but-thieves>.

¹⁰⁵ Nothing But Thieves, “Your Blood.”

¹⁰⁶ Nothing But Thieves, “Phobia.”

¹⁰⁷ “Fat Cat | English Meaning,” *Cambridge Dictionary*, accessed June 10, 2024, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/fat-cat>.

¹⁰⁸ Nothing But Thieves, “Phobia.”

¹⁰⁹ “Moral Panic by Nothing But Thieves on Apple Music,” *Apple Music - Web Player*.

¹¹⁰ Nothing But Thieves, “Can You Afford to Be An Individual?” track 9 on *Moral Panic (The Complete Edition)*.

didn't wanna be / It's stubborn as hell, or a problem with authority.”¹¹¹ The protagonist also confronts the oppressor with hostility: “What will you do when the vultures come for you?” and “And as you stare into your own reflection, what do you see? / Your black hole for a soul.”¹¹² In an interview with All Things Loud, the band comments that “[the song is] holding up a mirror like, ‘this is you. Deal with it. It’s disgusting and ugly.’”¹¹³ The band also does not shy away from connecting this directly to their political climate: “Oh, you're a walking contradiction in a MAGA-hat / It's where I wanna be, God bless the land of the free.”¹¹⁴ By referring to America and a ‘Make America Great Again’ hat, Nothing But Thieves obviously directs their anger towards Donald Trump. The track continues to reveal the hypocrisy and unbalanced society: “And you can't have an opinion unless you're one of us / (...) So have I gotta kill myself to be original?”¹¹⁵ The anger rises to a climax here as the vocals have reached a metal-like scream rather than regular singing. The protest and anger are directed at both the authority and the society they have created, which causes the loss of individuality.

The Environmental Dystopia

The last category of the dystopian genre according to Claeys is that of the environmental dystopia, in which themes such as environmental collapse and overpopulation are prominent.¹¹⁶ This also goes hand in hand with a general apocalypse or end-of-the-world narrative, which has been amplified by the influence of nuclear warfare and need for survival. The themes of environmental collapse and the apocalypse often overlap, and thus often depicts a general image of destruction.

Imagery of the environmental dystopia is very prominent in *Moral Panic*. In “Futureproof” the protagonist expresses their need to become “Future-proof,” and in another interview with Vents, the band explains that the track is about survival and self-preservation.^{117, 118} The song depicts an apocalyptic image of the world: “There's poison in

¹¹¹ Nothing But Thieves, “Can You Afford to Be An Individual?”

¹¹² Nothing But Thieves, “Can You Afford to Be An Individual?”

¹¹³ Jack Parker, “Can You Afford Freedom? Inside Nothing But Thieves’ Darkest Album to Date,” *All Things Loud*, October 15, 2020, <https://www.allthingsloud.com/can-afford-freedom-inside-nothing-thieves-darkest-album-date/>.

¹¹⁴ Nothing But Thieves, “Can You Afford to Be An Individual?”

¹¹⁵ Nothing But Thieves, “Can You Afford to Be An Individual?”

¹¹⁶ Claeys, 5.

¹¹⁷ Nothing But Thieves, “Futureproof.”

the water, and we deserve it / The future is a monster, and now it's turning,” portraying the disasters happening in the world.¹¹⁹ The band also emphasises that these disasters are everywhere, including right in front of our own eyes, which adds a layer of urgency about the problem as no one is doing anything to stop it.

“If I Were You” continues the apocalypse narrative and also calls out authorities for not taking action: “If I were you, I'd settle the weather / It's comin' soon, I'd pull it together / Yeah, get it together, it's a matter of time.”¹²⁰ The anger in the instrumentals and vocals are threatening, which creates an anticipation for a fight, which is almost war-like. This is also the case for “Ce n'est Rien,” although this track emphasises the hopelessness of the situation: “There's a hole in the sky / And it don't fucking matter / Make any sound that you like / The crueler, the better, it don't fucking matter.”¹²¹ In the interview with *Boys by Girls* the band confirms that the track is about “nihilism, a complete lack of interest in what it means, that it's all pointless.”¹²²

Besides anger, the album also conveys a sense of panic when it comes to the environmental dystopia. This fear and anxiety is prominent in “Before We Drift Away,” in which the protagonist again comments on disasters happening: “A sea to wash away the last of us” and “The world's at war again.”¹²³ The anxiety reaches a point at which the protagonist wonders whether death would actually be a relief: “Somnus waits for no one / A clock without a face / Will it feel like an arrest or our escape?”¹²⁴ Another song in which this sentiment is used is “This Feels Like the End,” of which the title already encapsulates the apocalypse narrative. In the chorus, the protagonist expresses that “[they] don't wanna see, wanna see / What we've become,” which suggests that the destruction has reached a point where they do not want to experience what the future might bring.¹²⁵

The feeling of panic increases in “Moral Panic,” where more imagery of the apocalypse is given: “This is the last day of my life, yours too,” “And now the blackest sky is

¹¹⁸ “Nothing But Thieves Release New Single & Video ‘Futureproof,’” *Vents Magazine*, June 8, 2021, <https://ventsmagazine.com/2021/06/08/nothing-but-thieves-release-new-single-video-futureproof/>.

¹¹⁹ Nothing But Thieves, “Futureproof.”

¹²⁰ Nothing But Thieves, “If I Were You,” track 11 on *Moral Panic (The Complete Edition)*.

¹²¹ Nothing But Thieves, “Ce n'est Rien,”

¹²² Cecilie Harris, “Conversations: Nothing But Thieves.”

¹²³ Nothing But Thieves, “Before We Drift Away.”

¹²⁴ Nothing But Thieves, “Before We Drift Away.”

¹²⁵ Nothing But Thieves, “This Feels Like the End.”

falling over you,” and “Now, the earth, it burns so slow.”¹²⁶ Similar to the other tracks, the apocalypse here consists of environmental disasters that are not merely fictional, but are currently occurring without action being undertaken: “Now, the earth, it burns so slow / A million faces in a row / Standing back and we watch it go.”¹²⁷ In the interview with Apple Music, the band confirmed that the song is inspired by real events: “This is a song about climate change; it was written at the time Extinction Rebellion was happening.”¹²⁸

Throughout the entire record, Nothing But Thieves employs utopian and dystopian imagery to express frustration about their experience of living with socio-political tension. There is a lot of anger present in the tracks, but at times the approach is more hopeless and defeated. The band uses a lot of utopian elements, but these also overlap with dystopian elements at times. The songs remain mainly implicit about referencing socio-political context, commenting on the destructive consequences of technology, the oppression caused by authorities, and the lack of action for environmental disaster. General comments and insights from interviews provided an extra source of confirmation of the themes used in the album.

¹²⁶ Nothing But Thieves, “Moral Panic.”

¹²⁷ Nothing But Thieves, “Moral Panic.”

¹²⁸ “Moral Panic by Nothing But Thieves on Apple Music.” *Apple Music - Web Player*.

Chapter 3 – Muse and *Will Of The People*

Muse formed in 1994 in Devon, England. The band consists of lead-vocalist, guitarist and keyboardist Matt Bellamy, bassist Chris Wolstenholme, and drummer Dominic Howard. Their music ranges from alternative rock to pop with electronic and classical influences. As of 2024, the band has nine studio albums to its name and they are considered very popular, especially in the United Kingdom. In an interview with Audacy, Matt Bellamy stated that Muse “has always dabbled in sort of dystopia doom gloom kind of apocalypse stuff,” confirming that Muse’s work fits into the dystopian genre quite well.¹²⁹ This is even more clear when noticing the references to George Orwell’s *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*, which the BBC reports as a major influence in *The Resistance*.¹³⁰ As mentioned in the Introduction, their album *Will Of The People* was influenced by the instability and unrest in the world.¹³¹ But the band has taken it further this time, as Bellamy explains in an interview with Variety: “And even though we’ve usually stayed in the realms of the relative safety of fiction, I’d say that this album sort of collided with reality a little bit.”¹³² This “reality” is thus represented by the utopian and dystopian imagery, which will be illustrated in this chapter.

Utopian Themes and Imagery

An Ideal World: Dreams and Escapism

Based on the categories Claeys and Tower Sargent laid out, *Will Of The People* consists of two songs that can be considered to be utopian fiction. Following Rhodes’ comments that love can form escapism in a dystopian world, this is definitely the case for Muse’s album.

“Verona” is a love song which is based on the relationship of Romeo and Juliet who are not allowed to be together but keep trying to fight for their love.¹³³ Shakespeare’s play was actually set in Verona, which emphasises the theme of love in the track. The longing and

¹²⁹ Audacy Music, “Audacy Check in: Matt Bellamy,” *YouTube*, August 26, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?t=14m38s&v=uwSdQO90OtA&feature=youtu.be>.

¹³⁰ Greg Cochrane, “New Muse Album ‘inspired’ by 1984,” *BBC News*, August 4, 2009, <https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-10000720>.

¹³¹ Muse, Post on X, August 26, 2022.

¹³² Chris Willman, “Muse’s Matt Belammy on Why Band’s New Album ‘Will of the People’ Is Even Better Than a Best-Of, Plus Tour Plans,” August 26, 2022, <https://variety.com/2022/music/news/muse-matt-bellamy-interview-will-of-the-people-tour-1235352254/>.

¹³³ Muse, “Verona,” track 8 on *Will Of The People*.

passion is very prominent in both lyrics and the sonic dimension. The protagonist expresses their need to be with their lover, “It’s not over now, I won’t leave you in the dark / Because I need you so,” which is amplified by the desperation and longing in the vocals.¹³⁴ The environment of the protagonist is dark and hopeless and the connection between the two characters is what keeps them going, it is their one true spark of hope in life: “If this is my last day on Earth, I just want to be with you / You are all that’s true.”¹³⁵ The softness of the synth builds up throughout the song, which creates a feeling that their love is only growing bigger.

The same focus on hope is present in “Euphoria,” though the song’s approach is a bit different.¹³⁶ The sonic dimension is more dynamic and upbeat. In the interview with Audacy, lead singer Matt Bellamy comments that the track is “one of the more positive, uplifting, tracks on the album. [It’s about] that feeling that we all had of being kind of trapped at home for a long time. That song came out of just missing what it was to be on stage, missing that feeling of fun and celebration and everything. It’s probably the fastest tempo song we’ve done for maybe forever.”¹³⁷ Rather than focussing on love as form of escapism and dreaming, “Euphoria” finds hope and escape in the emotion of nostalgia and being free.

The Critical Utopia

Just like Nothing But Thieves, Muse does not only use utopian themes to express hope, but they also use utopian imagery to critique socio-political tension. The utopian imagery in “Verona” and “Euphoria” is used as form of escapism, which suggests that the environment itself is bad enough to need an escape from.

Dystopian Themes and Imagery

General Dystopian Undertones

In *Will Of The People*, the general fear and anxiety about both the present and future can be found in every track. These negative emotions are made explicit halfway through the album

¹³⁴ Muse, “Verona.”

¹³⁵ Muse, “Verona.”

¹³⁶ Muse, “Euphoria,” track 9 on *Will Of The People*.

¹³⁷ Audacy Music, “Audacy Check in: Matt Bellamy.”

in “Ghosts (How Can I Move On)” in particular.¹³⁸ Lyrics such as “There are unsolved feelings that haunt me” and “I know I can't bring back your love” clearly depict an underlying anxiety and fear for the future.¹³⁹ The track is completely different from the others as it is a vulnerable piano ballad. Matt Bellamy’s voice is full of despair and grief, setting the tone for the song.

The feeling of anxiety continues in the next track, “You Make Me Feel Like It’s Halloween,” but rather than taking form of grief and uncertainty, the anxiety is represented in the adrenaline that comes with Halloween and horror.¹⁴⁰ The lyrics reveal that the protagonist is part of a toxic relationship and feels trapped: “You make me feel like I’m on the run” and “I’m shackled, there is no way out.”¹⁴¹ As the song progresses, the thrilling atmosphere turns into terror, which comes to a climax in the breakdown. The guitar solo sounds like it is imitating monstrous growling as well as a typical horror-film scream, highlighting the fear and anxiety as important aspects of the song.

This distinct form of fear is intensified in the following track “Kill Or Be Killed.”¹⁴² The song is introduced by wailing guitars and tense drums, which creates a soundscape almost like a battlefield with air alarms. Music journalist Zane Lowe describes the track as Muse’s heaviest and most metal work in their repertoire, which adds to the tension in the song’s sonic dimension.¹⁴³ The lyric “Cornered, I’m exhausted with fear” reflects the tension in the music and is a great example of fear and anxiety in dystopian fiction.¹⁴⁴ Fear about the future specifically, is made explicit yet again in “Our hopes and dreams erased,” which shows that the protagonist’s situation is the exact opposite of the hopeful and dream-like utopia, namely the dystopia.

The anxiety and fear peak in the last track of the album “We Are Fucking Fucked.”¹⁴⁵ The title clearly highlights the panicked and cynical tone used to conclude the album. Bellamy confirms this in the same interview with Lowe: “That’s the anxiety (...) That song

¹³⁸ Muse, “Ghosts (How Can I Move On),” track 5 on *Will Of The People*.

¹³⁹ Muse, “Ghosts (How Can I Move On).”

¹⁴⁰ Muse, “You Make Me Feel Like It’s Halloween,” track 6 on *Will Of The People*.

¹⁴¹ Muse, “You Make Me Feel Like It’s Halloween.”

¹⁴² Muse, “Kill or Be Killed,” track 7 on *Will Of The People*.

¹⁴³ Zane Lowe, “Report on interview with Matt Bellamy on Apple Music,” *Apple Music - Web Player*, March 2022, <https://music.apple.com/us/album/will-of-the-people/1613405576>.

¹⁴⁴ Muse, “Kill or Be Killed.”

¹⁴⁵ Muse, “We Are Fucking Fucked,” track 10 on *Will Of The People*.

literally sums them all up, I think.”¹⁴⁶ The anxiety and fear for the future are again made explicit in lyrics such as “It’s a losing game” and “We’re at death’s door.”¹⁴⁷ This is further accentuated by the song’s sonic dimension, which is up-tempo and uses dynamic guitar. The tense guitars and drums build up to a climax during the bridge and last chorus. Whilst lyrics are repeated, more voice layers and chanting are added to create a cacophony of sound, which represents the theme of anxiety.

The Technological Dystopia

Claeys’ category of the technological dystopia is ever present in Muse’s album.¹⁴⁸ And even though *Will Of The People* does not explicitly critique the influence of social media or robots taking over the world, Muse shows how current technological advancement can negatively impact our lives.

“Compliance” introduces technology as theme, not necessarily in explicit textual references, but rather in sound and as tool that can be used during oppression.¹⁴⁹ The track starts with a “futuristic synthpop” sound, labelled as such by NME Magazine, and robotic backing vocals, which highlights the modern setting.¹⁵⁰ The protagonist is trying to convince the other party – including the listener – to “give [their] compliance,” to give themselves to the protagonist’s cause. In an interview with NME, Bellamy explains that this is based on the influence of the internet: “The lack of accountability online became obvious to me. (...) It’s not freedom of speech; it’s freedom to manipulate.”¹⁵¹ He points out that current technology, primarily the internet, has created an environment where manipulation and oppression can easily be exercised. In this track, technology is thus depicted as something destructive.

The usefulness of technology for destruction is also depicted in the next track “Liberation.”¹⁵² But rather than emphasising this with futuristic music, Muse turns to

¹⁴⁶ Zane Lowe, “Report on interview with Matt Bellamy on Apple Music.”

¹⁴⁷ Muse, “We Are Fucking Fucked.”

¹⁴⁸ Claeys, 5.

¹⁴⁹ Muse, “Compliance,” track 2 on *Will Of The People*.

¹⁵⁰ Mark Beaumont, “Muse: ‘There’s Gonna Be a Big Shift. We’re Dealing with a Disruptive Transition,’” *NME*, June 13, 2022, <https://www.nme.com/big-reads/muse-cover-interview-2022-will-of-the-people-3243209>.

¹⁵¹ Mark Beaumont, “Muse: ‘There’s Gonna Be a Big Shift. We’re Dealing with a Disruptive Transition.’”

¹⁵² Muse, “Liberation,” track 3 on *Will Of The People*.

tranquil and classical piano for this song instead. This highlights the vulnerability and fragility of the protagonist, who expresses their discontent with the oppressor's use of technology to control society: "You stole the airwaves, but the air belongs to us."¹⁵³ In the interview with NME, Bellamy explains that this was a reference to the experience of "waking up to a mental tweet every day... That hijack of public discourse by one person," referring to Donald Trump who used technology in a destructive way.¹⁵⁴

Additionally, Muse seems to be comment on the experience of living in the current information age where people have been conditioned to live with a work-oriented mindset, essentially making robots of ourselves. This point of critique is brought up in "Euphoria," in which it is asked to free the world from dehumanising circumstances: "It's been all work and no play."¹⁵⁵ In their work on rock and utopian and dystopian fiction, Carl Rhodes explains that the "dream of escape, at least from work, is (...) difficult, if not impossible, to achieve."¹⁵⁶ The escape is thus a utopia, even though this dream might not be achieved. That means that the reality from which people want to escape is the nightmare, the dystopia.

The Political Dystopia

Muse has worked a lot with the concept of the political dystopia, in which oppression, totalitarianism, and rebellion play a central role. This theme is a prominent feature in *Will Of The People* as well, which is already hinted at by choosing this title for the album.

The title track "Will Of The People" is a clear example of the political dystopia.¹⁵⁷ The song represents a rebellion with everyone standing up against the oppressor(s): "Let's push the emperors into the ocean" and "We'll smash your institutions to pieces."¹⁵⁸ The song is energetic and powerful, reflecting the frustration and anger felt by the protagonists. This feeling is strengthened by the sonic dimension, with the powerful chanting of "The will of the people" and the up-tempo rock beat.¹⁵⁹ The music has an enticing energy, almost as if it is inviting you too join the rebellion. And this is not just to make a popular track, as it is a direct

¹⁵³ Muse, "Liberation."

¹⁵⁴ Beaumont, "Muse: 'There's Gonna Be a Big Shift. We're Dealing with a Disruptive Transition.'"

¹⁵⁵ Muse, "Euphoria."

¹⁵⁶ Rhodes, 38.

¹⁵⁷ Muse, "Will of the People," track 1 on *Will Of The People*.

¹⁵⁸ Muse, "Will of the People."

¹⁵⁹ Muse, "Will of the People."

refection on current tensions in the UK and USA. In an interview with Audacy, Bellamy explains that the song reflects “that there is sort of a change happening in the West” and that there is a need for this change.¹⁶⁰ But Muse uses this song as a warning for the potential negative side of a revolution as well. The lyrics and sound become so energetic and angry that they become violent and almost scary. The rebels take it too far and risk becoming the very thing they hate, namely the controlling and destructive oppressor: “We’ll build you right up, then we’ll tear you down” and “The judges are jailed and the future is ours.” This is emphasised further by one of the lyrics in the bridge: “Will of the sheeple,” in which the rebels are seen as “sheeple,” people with pack mentality, which causes a loss of individuality, which is exactly what they want to fight for.¹⁶¹

The same anger directed at the oppressor(s) can be found in “Liberation”: “We have plans to take you down (Forced abdication) / We intend to erase your place in history (Regime revocation).”¹⁶² Bellamy explained that the intense frustration and call for action in the song was based on the experience of witnessing the Black Lives Matter protests.¹⁶³ This frustration about oppression can also be found in “Won’t Stand Down”: “You are just a user and an abuser / And I refuse to take it.”¹⁶⁴ The intense emotion is emphasised by screaming and wailing guitars as if the protagonist is engaged in a battle. This aligns with what Bellamy himself said about the song’s approach, which is “to face adversity with strength, confidence and aggression.”¹⁶⁵

“Compliance,” takes a step back from the potential danger of a revolution and re-centres on the destruction caused by the oppressor.¹⁶⁶ In a post on X, the band explained that the song is “about the promise of safety and reassurance sold to us by powerful entities during times of vulnerability.”¹⁶⁷ Society is thus imbalanced as authorities take advantage of ‘the people,’ which is fitting for a political dystopia. The totalitarian protagonist, possibly a

¹⁶⁰ Audacy Music, “Audacy Check in: Matt Bellamy.”

¹⁶¹ Muse, “Will of the People.”

¹⁶² Muse, “Liberation,” track 3 on *Will Of The People*.

¹⁶³ Beaumont, “Muse: ‘There’s Gonna Be a Big Shift. We’re Dealing with a Disruptive Transition.’”

¹⁶⁴ Muse, “Won’t Stand Down,” track 4 on *Will Of The People*.

¹⁶⁵ Sam Moore, “Watch the Dark New Video for Muse’s Comeback Single ‘Won’t Stand Down,’” NME, January 14, 2022, <https://www.nme.com/news/music/muse-wont-stand-down-single-video-3137071>.

¹⁶⁶ Muse, “Compliance.”

¹⁶⁷ Muse, post on X, March 11, 2022,

https://x.com/muse/status/1502298309368631296?t=y_bYhSIIn-ACWG9c1-n0Xg&s=19.

representation of government, tries to convince the “you” to give themselves over, using manipulation and false promises: “we know what's best for you” and “Fear is controlling you (...) / It is time to give up (...) / And give in to us.”¹⁶⁸ In the verses, Bellamy uses in an intimate and persuasive tone, which adds to the intention to tempt the recipient into compliance. Between the manipulation, the protagonist reveals their true intention – “Our toy soldier, you'll do the dirty work” –, which is accompanied by the staccato and robotic music, adding to the fact that the oppressor does not care for the person they are trying to control.¹⁶⁹ In this track, the individual becomes a pawn in the game of the oppressor and as there is no point where the protagonist overcomes this oppression, which again shows how individuality is lost.

This sentiment is repeated in “You Make Me Feel Like It’s Halloween,” in which the protagonist is trapped in a toxic relationship, being controlled and oppressed: “I can’t escape.”¹⁷⁰ In the interview with NME, Bellamy explained that the song is written for and about “victims of lockdown domestic violence,” which confirms that the relationship described is an oppressive and destructive one, showing that the imbalance in society can also appear in individual and not only collective experiences.¹⁷¹

Muse also focuses on the individual, personal experience of oppression in “Verona,” but rather than portraying oppression in a relationship, the relationship here is part of fighting oppression.¹⁷² This love song is based on the relationship of Romeo and Juliet, for which Shakespeare’s play was actually set in Verona, who are not allowed to be together. But by pursuing their love against society’s wishes, the characters achieve a revolution, albeit a small one: “They can’t stop us now” and “We will touch and reach forbidden bliss.”¹⁷³

The Environmental Dystopia

Similar to Nothing But Thieves, Muse uses the environmental dystopian genre to comment on environmental collapse and general concept of destruction, represented by war, for example. The theme of the apocalypse narrative is also strong.

¹⁶⁸ Muse, “Compliance.”

¹⁶⁹ Muse, “Compliance.”

¹⁷⁰ Muse, “You Make Me Feel Like It’s Halloween,” track 6 on *Will Of The People*.

¹⁷¹ Beaumont, “Muse: ‘There’s Gonna Be a Big Shift. We’re Dealing with a Disruptive Transition.’”

¹⁷² Muse, “Verona.”

¹⁷³ Muse, “Verona.”

The apocalypse narrative elements are quite prominent in *Will of The People*. In “Compliance” the narrator expresses that “the world will fall apart,” referring to inevitable existential catastrophe.¹⁷⁴ This element returns in “Verona”: “If this is my last day on Earth.”¹⁷⁵ None of these lyrics have dramatic sonic elements, as other ‘doom’ scenarios might have, but this regular sonic dimension actually fits well with reality: this end-of-the-world imagery has become the new normal. This pessimistic and cynical sentiment peaks in “We Are Fucking Fucked,” with its title already showing that there will be no good outcome, which is also reflected in the first verse: “You really believe / We can survive all of this? / The black vacuum of the universe, it was designed / To swallow us whole / It's a losing game.”¹⁷⁶

As mentioned before, Muse has included a lot of dystopian elements in their discography. In the interview with Variety Bellamy elaborates on this: “We’ve always had elements of sort of dystopian fears for the future. And even though we’ve usually stayed in the realms of the relative safety of fiction, I’d say that this album sort of collided with reality a little bit.”¹⁷⁷ The band thus used the elements of the dystopia to process their own reality. One of these realities is that of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the Apple Music interview with Lowe, Bellamy explains that the pandemic was the main influence for “Ghosts (How Can I Move On)”: “During the pandemic, I did a couple things on my own, just on the piano, acoustic. (...) It really is a direct expression of that loneliness, and also the tragedy of what was happening for so many people.”¹⁷⁸ The tragedy of this is emphasised by the sonic dimension, as the song is very vulnerable and emotional. This is also the case for “Verona,” in which two characters are in love but are not allowed to be together.¹⁷⁹ This could refer to social distancing and the loneliness from the COVID-19 pandemic. Lyrics such as “Can we kiss with poison on our lips?” and “(...) take off your mask” could directly refer to the deadly virus and measures taken to protect ourselves from it.¹⁸⁰ The pandemic is later mentioned in

¹⁷⁴ Muse, “Compliance.”

¹⁷⁵ Muse, “Verona.”

¹⁷⁶ Muse, “We Are Fucking Fucked.”

¹⁷⁷ Willman, “Muse’s Matt Belammy on Why Band’s New Album ‘Will of the People’ Is Even Better Than a Best-Of, Plus Tour Plans.”

¹⁷⁸ Lowe, “Report on interview with Matt Bellamy on Apple Music.”

¹⁷⁹ Muse, “Verona.”

¹⁸⁰ Muse, “Verona.”

“We Are Fucking Fucked”: “a deadly virus,” which confirms the influence of COVID-19 on the creation of this album.¹⁸¹

The destruction of the environmental dystopia is also represented in violence, war, and actual natural disasters. “Won’t Stand Down” already shows this sentiment in its title and this continues in the lyrics: “Won’t stand down, you’ve used me for too long / Now die alone” and “Now I’m coming back, a counterattack.”¹⁸² The sonic dimension is very tense and dynamic, creating the feeling as if the band is engaged in a battle. This imagery of war can be found in more songs, such as “Kill or Be Killed,” in which the protagonist expresses they are dehumanised to such a degree that they only care for survival now: “Fate is driving me insane / It’s forcing me to face / I must kill or be killed.”¹⁸³ The violence and destruction are thus connected to being dehumanised and stripped from one’s individuality.

Muse has used a variety of utopian and dystopian imagery in *Will Of The People* to give a voice to their anger and frustration about their experience with socio-political unrest. The sentiment is mostly energetic and angry, sometimes even violent. They approach the unrest by means of protest and rebellion, often focussing on oppression. The band also shows a softer side, expressing that hope can be found in bad places, even if it consists of small acts of rebellion. Muse is very active in referencing rebellion, war, disaster, and oppression, but most of the references remain implicit. The insights from interviews with Matt Bellamy provided some more information about the album’s context.

¹⁸¹ Muse, “We Are Fucking Fucked.”

¹⁸² Muse, “Won’t Stand Down.”

¹⁸³ Muse, “Kill or Be Killed.”

Conclusion

Nothing But Thieves and Muse both created utopian and dystopian worlds in their albums, voicing their fears and concerns about socio-political developments, as well as building a place where listeners are invited to critically think about the albums' contexts. This thesis has analysed how Nothing But Thieves and Muse have explored the socio-political unrest in 2019-2022 Britain by creating dystopian and utopian worlds in their albums *Moral Panic* and *Will Of The People*. Chapter 1 established the theoretical framework for the utopian and dystopian genre and fictional traditions characteristic of these. This chapter also investigated how pop/rock music could be analysed with a socio-political approach. Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 analysed the utopian and dystopian elements in Nothing But Thieves' *Moral Panic* and Muse's *Will Of The People* respectively. This conclusion will reflect on the findings from Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, answer the research question, and provide recommendations for further research.

Chapter 1 outlined the origins and interpretations of utopian and dystopian fiction. Two people prominent in the field of dystopian literature, Claeys and Tower Sargent, have set out the traditions and elements that are characteristic of the genres.¹⁸⁴ They first describe how utopian fiction depicts a dreamlike setting and can be seen in four forms: religious radicalism, voyages of discover, scientific discovery, and aspirations for social equality. The utopian genre can also be utilised in a critical way, to show all the unattainable goodness reality does not have. They then describe how dystopian fiction depicts the opposite, namely a nightmarish setting which has three main versions: political dystopia, environmental dystopia, and technological dystopia. General fear and anxiety about the future are prominent in the genre. These genres and elements have become popular in the second half of the 20th century and are still substantial in cultural products today. And although the utopian and dystopian genre have not achieved the same popularity in popular music as fiction novels, for example, music can still be a site of (political) expression and critique.¹⁸⁵ These intentions form the base for utopian and dystopian narratives, and consequently the base for the analysis of the case studies.

Chapter 2 analysed *Moral Panic (The Complete Edition)* by Nothing But Thieves as a case study of utopian and dystopian fiction elements. Chapter 3 analysed the same elements

¹⁸⁴ Claeys and Tower Sargent.

¹⁸⁵ Ian Peddie, 15.

but analysed *Will Of The People* by Muse instead. Both bands included utopian elements in their albums, but rather than depicting just a utopian setting or emotion, they focused on utopian dreams within dystopian worlds. By writing about dreaming of a better place or finding love despite dire circumstances, both artists were able to critique the dystopian reality whilst giving a sense of hope. Muse mostly focused on love as nostalgic utopia, whereas Nothing But Thieves added both this form as well as a more ironic utopia, using the promise of hope as fake and unattainable, giving the album a more pessimistic approach despite using more utopian elements than Muse did.

Compared to the utopian elements, the dystopian themes and imagery in the albums are more prominent and explicit. The general fear and anxiety about the future is clear in both albums. In *Will Of The People* Muse creates a narrative in some of the songs, in which hope is lost and people generally feel helpless. This is also the case for *Moral Panic*, but Nothing But Thieves employs a more continuous anxiety throughout the entire album. This anxiety is key when it comes to the technological dystopia. Nothing But Thieves is very critical of destructive technological advancement such as the internet and social media, as well as the loss of authenticity and individuality. These themes are made very explicit, which makes the band not only critical of the future, but also of the present. Muse has a similar critical view but engages with authorities' misuse of power when it comes to the internet and authenticity. Both bands address society's pack mentality and make references to George Orwell's *1984*, creating an intertextual layer of criticism of oppression. This is continued in the band's depiction of the political dystopia. Critique of politics is a major element in both albums. *Moral Panic* displays a lot of anger at government and authorities, expressing frustration about being oppressed and dehumanised. The world is viewed as a place at war. This is also the case for *Will Of The People*, but Muse uses a more forceful and active approach, moving to rebellion and protesting. Muse expresses they want to fight back and take control, whereas Nothing But Thieves take a more pessimistic stance as the songs express the situation is already helpless. The last dystopian themes analysed were those of the environmental dystopia. Both albums depict apocalyptic imagery about the world falling apart and needing to be saved. Nothing But Thieves refers to a lot of environmental disasters such as fires and burning, all connected to climate change. Muse does this as well, and quite explicitly too. Muse also addresses the COVID-19 pandemic, so the apocalyptic imagery is connected to a more recent context than that in *Moral Panic*.

The sonic dimensions in both albums add to the themes and emotions addressed in the lyrics. Both bands utilise their rock sound to build a sense of tension and anxiety, as well as nostalgic tranquillity in the softer tracks. Overall, both albums focus on the utopian and dystopian elements mentioned above. Nothing But Thieves seems to have a more helpless and melancholic approach to the topics, and often utilises utopian imagery in an ironic way as well as elements of nostalgia and love. Tension and anxiety permeate every song but stronger emotions such as anger and disgust come forward in a few tracks. Contrastingly, the stronger emotions and anger are more prevalent in Muse's album, which has a more energetic and hostile ambience. Muse uses utopian imagery solely as depiction of love and connection.

Nothing But Thieves and Muse both explicitly refer to relevant events from their own socio-political experiences. *Moral Panic* and *Will Of The People* both engage with environmental disasters, such as wildfires, floods, etc., addressing climate change and the governments' lack of action. And frustration and anger towards government is a significant theme in both albums, which the bands have also confirmed in interviews. Both bands have actively addressed their socio-political context in their works and have employed dystopian elements to describe their experiences of living in our current society. Utopian themes are used to describe nostalgia for a better time, whilst also adding hope to the works, showing that love and human connection are the things that could save us.

By analysing *Moral Panic* and *Will Of The People*, this thesis has shown how Nothing But Thieves and Muse used dystopian imagery to voice their anger and frustration about socio-political tension and people's lack of action, as well as utopian imagery to depict hope and escapism to get away from panic and destruction. The case studies show rock music has the ability to reflect on and critique socio-political context by creating a narrative with dystopian and utopian worlds. By conducting the analyses, this study has addressed the lack of research on dystopian and utopian imagery in popular rock music, particularly with regard to the categories established by Claeys and Tower Sargent. This thesis also addressed the lack of academic attention for Nothing But Thieves and Muse, despite their prominence in the British pop/rock scene their active engagement with politics.

To better understand the approaches taken by Nothing But Thieves and Muse, future studies could address the remaining supplementary aspects of the albums, such as analysis of the album covers, more text interpretations, official video clips, media activity, and live performances. Further research on the implications of categorising these works as pop/rock could also prove to be beneficial, as different genres have different approaches to topics,

which thus determines the lens through which these topics are addressed. Another interesting approach would be to analyse the dystopian and utopian elements, such as connection, technological advancement, and oppression, in the works' language. A socio-linguistic approach could add another layer to the analysis by engaging with the storytelling quality of the lyrics.

And as the world is flooded with such moral panic, it is imperative that research focuses on more cultural products that reflect our society's experiences. The approach of creating utopian and dystopian worlds to process frustration and anxiety about society is not new, but analysing these elements in music has not been a major focus in cultural studies. It is thus important to also take into account more unconventional storytelling media such as popular music when engaging with dystopia and utopia. Nothing But Thieves and Muse actively engage with significant changes and socio-political unrest, addressing important issues to a broad audience. And in a world where connection and hope feel unattainable at times, these artists are able to give people a platform to process frustration, anger, and helplessness. *Moral Panic* and *Will Of The People* show that we are not alone in feeling these emotions and witnessing life-changing events. The artists' ability to use music to connect and give glimpses of hope in a tumultuous and scary world is exactly what we need, so we better listen to them.

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