

Call for Papers
The Return of Utopian Aesthetics and Politics in 21st-Century Literature

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Late capitalism, for Fredric Jameson, “poses tremendous and crippling problems for [...] utopian imaginaries” (1988, 349). At the same time, Zygmunt Bauman argues that the desire for “a life ‘as it might or should be’ is a defining, constitutive feature of humanity” (2003, 11). While the utopias of the modern world were largely characterised by stable territoriality and finality of an imagined ‘good order’, neither of these provides a satisfactory answer to the multiple crises of futurity in an unevenly globalised 21st-century world on the brink of ecological collapse. This section sets out to explore post-neoliberal, transnational, postcolonial and environmental utopias in postmillennial Anglophone literatures and cultures.

By the early 1990s, utopia had come under severe attack as both an aesthetic and political concept in the global North: its insistence that a better social world is imaginable and perhaps even realisable was fundamentally at odds with postmodern cultural disbelief in truth, morality and the social as in some sense a totality. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, this cultural critique fed into a media as well as academic refrain that equated utopia with communism and totalitarianism and hence rendered it politically immoral, to be “realised only by violence and maintained only by political repression” (Levitas 2000, 31).

Yet since the millennial turn, overlapping global crises from the ‘war on terror’ over the Great Financial Crisis of 2007/08 and the severe economic recession in its wake to the escalating climate and ecological crisis to mass migration and refugee movements have dramatically reinvigorated engagement with possible futures in journalistic, academic and activist quarters. Currently popular resilience paradigms naturalise crises as *prima facie* givens for governmental practices. Neoliberal futurity thus becomes a narrow managerial space of coping best with – or even thriving on – inescapable cycles of disaster rather than an open space of political contestation over securing the ‘good life’ for all beyond crisis. Conversely, scholarly considerations of (neoliberal) precarity from Bourdieu to Butler urge the necessity to imagine otherwise, beyond the political apathy of individual and collective adaptation. Such utopian imaginaries and new cultural practices, as Naomi Klein makes clear, are indispensable to bringing about a fundamental transformation. Recognising “a reconceived sense of social engagement in the twenty-first century” (Edwards 2019, 3), cultural and literary critics such as Ruth Levitas, John Storey and Caroline Edwards have refined a contemporary approach to utopia as a crucial political intervention in pressing discourses about the social, political and ecological sustainability of postmillennial, openly anti-democratic neoliberal capitalism. Accordingly, John Storey (2019, 1) describes the function of what he calls “radical utopianism” as “confront[ing] ‘realism’ with possibility. It gives us the resources to imagine the future in a different way”; in a “double articulation, radical utopianism may begin by looking somewhere else, but it is at its most powerful when it turns its critical gaze on the world from which it emerged”. In postcolonial studies, building on early studies of postcolonial utopias (e.g. Pordzik), more recent work has pointed to the value of the aesthetics and politics of utopia developed by critical theory for understanding the particular intervention of postcolonial writing in imagining alternative futures within and yet beyond the pressures of the global market in publishing, and in imagining futures from the particular historical and political contexts and experiences of the global South (Bahri; Brown; Su).

Taking its cue from the renewed interdisciplinary academic and political interest in utopias against the backdrop of escalating global crises that are variously linked to the deep fault lines of neoliberalised global economies and governance, this panel seeks to explore in what ways twenty-first-century cultural utopias renegotiate the present to envisage liveable futurities beyond mere resilience. We would like to reflect, for instance, on the intersections of postmillennial utopianism with established emancipatory criticisms in literary and cultural studies (e.g. postcolonial, ecocritical, queer, feminist); on the place and potency of postmillennial literatures in imagining and creating (utopian, near) futures; and on the viability of post-traditional, procedural approaches foregrounding that “what is most important about utopia is less what is imagined than the act of imagination itself, a process which disrupts the closure of the present” (Levitas 2000, 39).

We invite contributions (20-minute papers plus 10-minute discussions) to the panel that engage with the following or related questions and issues:

- Utopianism as a theoretical and analytical concept in twenty-first-century literary and cultural studies
- Intersections of utopianism with postcolonial/environmental/queer/feminist criticisms
- Utopianism and conceptions of the post-postmodern
- Utopian imaginaries and alternative social worlds: post-neoliberal, transnational; diaspora and (trans-)migration
- Utopian times: death, time travel, apocalypse
- ...

Please mail your proposals (300-400 words) and a short bio note to gigi.adair@uni-bielefeld.de, nadine.boehm-schnitker@uni-bielefeld.de and ronja.johanna.waldherr@uni-bielefeld.de by January 15, 2022.

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