The Return of Utopian: Aesthetics and Politics in 21st-Century Literature

Organizers:
Gigi Adair, Nadine Böhm-Schnitker, Ronja Waldherr

Academic Programme

Saturday, 3 September: 11:00-13:00

Section 1

11:00-11:20	Introduction (Gigi Adair, Nadine Böhm-Schnitker, Ronja Waldherr)
11:30-12:00	"Being for Being Against: Precarious Futurity and the Dialectic of Utopianism and Pessimism" (Mark Schmitt)
12:00-12:30	"The Limits of Realist 'Utopianism' and the Power of Allegory" (Georgia Christinidis)
12:30-13:00	Discussion

Saturday, 3 September: 14:30-16:00

Section 2

14:30-15:00	"Playing (with) the Post-Apocalypse: Ecocritical Utopia and Dystopian Nightmare in *The Last Us* (2013)" (Markus Hartner)
15:00-15:30	"Solarpunk: Aesthetics of Sustainability and Community" (David Walther)
15:30-16:00	Discussion

Sunday, 4 September: 15:00-16:30

Section 3

15:00-15:30	"'Anyone can be a relative': Creating Communities Beyond 'Work Society' in Novels From the 2010s" (Rebekka Rohleder)
15:30-16:00	"What May We Hope? On the Necessity of Dreaming" (Dunja Mohr)
16:00-16:30	Concluding Discussion

Georgia Christinidis, "**The Limits of Realist 'Utopianism' and the Power of Allegory**"

Abstract

While (social) realism may be uniquely suited to conveying critique, it is limited as a vehicle of the utopian imagination. Realist texts may certainly express the desire for a better social world, yet such desire may be sentimental or nostalgic rather than emancipatory. Thus, many of the instances of post-millennial fiction adduced by Edwards (2019) as at least potentially utopian fail to significantly differentiate the new, longed-for reality from the *status quo*. The utopian impulse exhausts itself in brief epiphanic moments, affective states, bonds among individuals. As a result, they foster not only complacency, but a variant of idealism that is quintessentially neoliberal: after all, the claim that individuals make their own reality through their mindset is an integral component of what Philip Mirowski has dubbed "everyday neoliberalism". Political protest remains symbolic and representational (the chain of protesters in Crace's *All That Follows*), akin in form to the aesthetic artefact itself. Neoliberalism is easily able to contain and commodify these impulses.

The desiderata for a more emancipatory mode of utopianism are noted by Raymond Williams (1978) in a text quoted by Edwards, Storey (2019), and Levitas (2013) that bears rereading in its own right: he points out not only the strengths, but also the weaknesses of "the more open but also the vaguer" heuristic mode of utopianism that recent critics tend to favour. He accuses it of "willed neglect of structures, of continuity and of material constraints" (208). Furthermore, he posits that the "subjunctive mode" of utopian writing must form "part of a grammar which includes a true indicative and a true future" (211). Utopianism must include the transformation of a recognisable social reality by means of struggle to have emancipatory effects. Perhaps paradoxically, British texts beyond the boundaries of mainstream realism have undertaken a more sustained engagement with the preconditions and possibilities of such transformative agency than 'literary' fiction. The *oeuvre* of China Miéville, for instance, constitutes an exploration through allegory of both the necessity and the possibility of transformative agency.

Where Perowne (in McEwan's *Saturday*) cherishes a fleeting and imaginary experience of community triggered by listening to a Schubert Octet, music is neither unambiguously beneficial nor to be passively consumed in *King Rat* (1998). In the guise of the Piper's flute, it constitutes a threat of seduction/control, but the protagonist's hybridity (rat/human) as well as his deeply engrained familiarity with the bass of jungle music enable him to successfully avert the threat. Culture is, here, a physical reality, and community is enacted and created through dance. The central utopian image of *Iron Council* (2004) is the perpetual train, stolen by a group of workers and prostitutes. It is finally saved from destruction but rendered ineffectual by being turned into a *lieu de memoire*. Lastly, *Embassytown* equates emancipatory agency, metaphor, and the ability to lie, as all are dependent on creating or perceiving a gap between representation/aspiration and reality. Despite the ostensibly fantastic settings, Miéville portrays worlds with political power structures and characters that are complex and ring true. The recurrent emphasis on the oppressive/emancipatory potential of modes of communication and cultural artefacts makes his work a sustained, critical, and sophisticated engagement with the politics of culture and art.

Works Cited

Edwards, Caroline. *Utopia and the Contemporary British Novel*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2019.

Levitas, Ruth. *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

Miéville, China. *King Rat.* London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998.

—. *Iron Council*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

—. *Embassytown*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

Mirowski, Philip. *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown*. London: Verso, 2014.

Storey, John. Radical Utopianism and Cultural Studies: On Refusing to be Realistic. London: Routledge, 2019.

Williams, Raymond. "Utopia and Science Fiction." *Science Fiction Studies* 5.3, 1978: pp. 203-214.

Bio Note

Dr. Georgia Christinidis is a postdoctoral researcher. She completed her doctorate on "The Concept of Agency from Modernism to Cultural Studies" at the University of Oxford. Her research has been published in a range of national and international journals, including *Textual Practice*, *Cultural Critique* and the *JSBC*. She is currently completing a book on the contemporary British *Bildungsroman*.

Marcus Hartner, "Playing (with) the Post-Apocalypse: Ecocritical Utopia and Dystopian Nightmare in *The Last Us* (2013)"

Abstract

Over the past decades, dystopian games have become a dominant subgenre of the video game industry, which itself has turned into one of the most profitable branches of the global entertainment industry. While especially the developers and publishers of so-called 'AAA productions', which reach millions of players, are known for attempting to steer clear of content that could inspire political debate (Hayden 2018), contemporary scholars argue that those games still frequently exhibit a certain subversive potential. In particular, the diverse genre of the dystopian game, according to Gerald Farca, frequently contains a "utopian impulse" that reminds players of problems in their world and makes them "look sceptically and quizzically into [the] future [...] with the aim to unveil social wrongs" and "destabilize the status quo" (2021: 276).

While the notion of utopian impulses in dystopian fiction may at first seem counterintuitive, Farca's argument is reminiscent of a theoretical approach developed by John Storey. In his recent monograph *Consuming Utopia* (2022), Storey describes utopia as a form of desire, as "a refusal to be defined or confined by what is currently considered possible" (x). Rather than understanding utopia as a genre devoted to the fictional delineation of an ideal/superior human society, he sees the essence of utopian fiction in its political function to question everyday reality and the "pressure of habitual forms and ideas" (Williams 1965: 10). Utopia thus turns into a particular type of "topic" (Marin 1984: 15) that can be found far beyond the confines of works traditionally subsumed under this label, including most notably many explicitly dystopian texts. "While it is true that dystopias depict worlds we would not want to inhabit," Storey argues, "I do not think it is too difficult to find counter-hegemonic moments of hope and resistance." (2022: 30)

In my talk, I am going to investigate such "moments of hope and resistance" in contemporary video games, in particular, Naughty Dog's highly successful and critically acclaimed *The Last of Us* (2013). I will examine, in how far, the action-adventure and survival-horror game set in a post-apocalyptic America offers political spaces of imaginative resistance, for example, by featuring aspects of an ecocritical utopia that sends "the player on an extraordinary journey towards nature" (Farca 2018: 373).

Works Cited

Beil, Benjamin et al. (eds.). 2019. *Playing Utopia: Futures in Digital Games*. Bielefeld: transcript.

Farca, Gerald. 2021. "Dystopian Games." Mark J. P. Wolf (ed.). *Video Games: The Culture, Technology, and Art of Gaming*. 2nd Edition [3 vols]. Santa Barbara: Greenwood. 2: 271-276.

Farca, Gerald. 2018. *Playing Dystopia: Nightmarish Worlds in Video Games and the Player's Aesthetic Response*. Bielefeld: transcript.

Hayden, Taylor. 2018. "Ubisoft Massive COO: 'We don't want to take a stance in current politics'." Gamesindustry.biz (17 October 2018). https://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2018-10-17-ubisoft-massive-coo-we-dont-want-to-take-a-stance-in-current-politics

Marin, Louis. 1984. *Utopics*. New York: Humanity Books. Naughty Dog. 2013. The Last of Us. Sony Computer Entertainment.

Storey, John. 2022. *Consuming Utopia: Cultural Studies and the Politics of Reading*. London: Routledge.

Williams, Raymond. 1965. *The Long Revolution*. London: Penguin.

Bio Note

Marcus Hartner is assistant professor in English Literature and Culture at Bielefeld University. Among his main areas of research are the study of narrative, travel and migration literature, and Anglo-Muslim relations during the early modern period. He recently published a co-edited volume (together with Nadine Böhm-Schnitker on *Comparative Practices: Literature, Language, and Culture in Britain's Long Eighteenth Century* (transcript, 2022) and is currently revising his habilitation thesis for publication. Other current projects include a co-edited volume (with Susanne Gruß) on *Practices and Narratives of*

Piracy: Connecting the Early Modern Seas (Amsterdam University Press) and the *Handbook of Interdisciplinarity* (de Gruyter).

Dunja Mohr, "What May We Hope? On the Necessity of Dreaming"

Abstract

21st century Anglophone fiction has taken a speculative turn leaning towards a dystopian cultural imaginary that has broadened towards ecohumanities, critical posthumanism, new materialist and CAS approaches, often topicalizing an Anthropocene setting. Indubitably, dystopias are fictional seismographs of potentially negative contemporary socio-economic, political, ecological, and cultural-technological developments. Some may contribute to a listlessness and a competitive drive in the "age of impotence" (Berardi 2017, 33), offering a porous, vapid, and ultimately dissatisfying image of fragile private bliss.

Dystopia has become mainstream literature with a large number of established authors contributing to the genre. In fact, this cultural upsurge extends to films on the big and the (not so) small screen, TV series, games, apps, video installations, visual and artistic performances etc. Accordingly, critics and writers have diagnosed the 21st century's fictional and real dystopian ailments. For Gregory Claeys dystopia "defines the spirit of our times" (2016), Jill Lepore proclaims the "Golden Age for dystopian fiction" (2017). Literary dystopia has become "fashionable" (Robinson 2018) up to the point of verging on "dystopia porn" (Singh 2018) It almost seems as if we're capitalizing on a decadent and fatalist lust for disaster, doomsday, a world in crisis, and our very own vulnerability, cynically revelling in dystopian party mottos and commodified dystopian tropes (Baccolini 2020).

Recently, however, there have been repeated calls for a change of "the political exercise of the insurgent hope of the utopian impulse with its transformative capacity" (Moylan 2021) and to resuscitate utopia, "Utopias are going to come back because we have to imagine how to save the world"' (Atwood 2021). We need to turn away from an "all-encompassing hopelessness" (Robinson 2018) and join a 'game of future, because "[t]o hope is to gamble. It's to bet on the future" (Solnit 2016). It is this capacity to hope and to dream, the narrative utopian elements of processual microtransformations, I want to turn to in my paper, covering a range of recent Anglophone texts (Lai, Nawaz, Dimaline, Robinson). Notably, the instigation of change and utopian hope in recent texts is latched to a cooperative move that embraces more-than-human community and collectivity and presents us with conscious choices of solidarity, community, and responsibility. This utopianism isn't radical but rather of a soft radicality, offering a form of "slow hope" (Mauch 2019) that allows us to catch an imaginative deeper glimpse of our potential and the necessity to dream.

Bio Note

Dr Dunja M. Mohr, University of Erfurt, author of the award-winning *Worlds Apart? Dualism and Transgression in Contemporary Female Dystopias* (2005), editor of *Embracing the Other: Addressing Xenophobia in the New Literatures in English* (2008), and co-editor of the ZAA special issue *9/11 as Catalyst* (2010) and of *Radical Planes? 9/11 and Patterns of Continuity* (2016). Her most recent work has been on 20th and 21st-century *Frankenstein* media adaptations. For her research project "Approximating the non-human", she received a DAAD research fellowship and a Gastdozentur at the CCEAE/IRTG, Université de Montréal, Canada. She acts as Head of the Women and Gender Studies Section, Association for Canadian Studies in German-speaking Countries and is an officer of the Margaret Atwood Society. She serves on the Advisory Boards of Utopian Studies and Margaret Atwood Studies. Publications are on utopian/dystopian literature, Anthropocene fiction, the New Weird, posthumanism, new materialism, Monster studies, Canadian literature, Adaptation Studies, and post-9/11.

Rebekka Rohleder, "'Anyone can be a relative': Creating Communities Beyond 'Work Society' in Novels From the 2010s"

Abstract

In a number of novels from the 2010s, utopian imaginaries are central, albeit within the context of fictional worlds that are predominantly conceived as realistic or even dystopian. The utopian communities imagined within these non-utopian societies are village-sized at most. They do not offer a blueprint for a reorganisation of society as a whole. But all examples that I want to discuss do offer basic principles that could be extended (and that the novels suggest should be extended) beyond the community in question, most notably solidarity across different group identities as well as the formation of social units whose members take responsibility for each other beyond pre-existing social structures (such as the family or the nation). These social units consist partly or wholly in those who are marginalised in the wider society to which they belong. These societies themselves are quite close to those of the real world, even when they have both dystopian and utopian elements; those, too, are at least based on recognisable features of the world in which the reader lives. And that in turn means that work is necessarily a central category in those societies, since it is a central category in the contemporary world. The small utopian communities formed in these novels in their turn make a point of including characters who are, for a variety of reasons, marginalised by 'work society', or at least of being organised around personal and economic relationships that function outside paid work. However, unlike the canonical literary utopias between More and Morris, none of them makes an explicit point of reorganising work in particular. In the proposed paper, I therefore want to look at this non-reorganisation of work, and at the more or less unacknowledged reorganisations which happen nonetheless. The novels in question will be Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* (2013), Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), and Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019).

Bio Note

Rebekka Rohleder studied English and History as well as Scholarly Editing at the FU Berlin from 2001 to 2007. From 2007 to 2012 she worked as a research assistant at the Department for English and American Studies of the University of Hamburg. In 2017 she defended her PhD thesis on "'A Different Earth': Literary Space in Mary Shelley's Novels". Between 2013 and 2017 she taught several classes at the Leuphana University of Lüneburg. From April 2017 to March 2019 she worked as wissenschaftliche Mitarbeiterin for the Department for English and American Studies of the University of Hamburg again. From March 2019 on she works as 'wissenschaftliche Mitarbeiterin' at the Department of English and American Studies at Europa-Universität Flensburg.

Mark Schmitt, "Being for Being Against: Precarious Futurity and the Dialectic of Utopianism and Pessimism"

Abstract

The notion of utopia is intricately linked with pessimist thought. Pessimist thinkers such as E.M. Cioran (1987) and John Gray (2003, 2007, 2013) have notoriously both admired and derided the utopian imagination, and cultural critics such as Stuart Hall, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer have embraced a Gramscian "pessimism of the intellect", paired with an "optimism of the will" (cf. Hall 1988; Horkheimer 1972). Even in their most pessimistic diagnoses, Adorno and Horkheimer conceded that "[w]hen you reject utopia, thought itself withers away" (2019: 3). This dialectic can also be found in other prefigurative cultural forms, such as in the anticapitalist and antiracist critique of the punk subculture. The British grindcore band Napalm Death, for instance, couples a bleak diagnosis of the contemporary world with the vision of a better and more just society on their fittingly titled album *Utopia Banished* (1992). Thus, while at first this might sound counterintuitive, utopianism and pessimism form a dialectic when it comes to prefigurative thought, politics and aesthetics.

This dialectic also continues to be dominant in more recent forms of prefigurative thought and aesthetics. In my talk, I want to trace the dialectics of utopianism and pessimism in what I consider to be new expressions of pessimist philosophy that have emerged in the wake of the "death of utopia" (Gray 2007). Concepts such as afropessimism (cf. Wilderson 2020) address current issues of ethnic identity and correspond to the utopian mode of afrofuturism (cf. Gunkel, Hameed & O'Sullivan 2017; Gunkel & lynch 2019). A distinct queer pessimism has emerged from Lee Edelman (2004) and Sara Ahmed's (2010) deconstructions of the "compulsory narrative of reproductive futurism" (Edelman 2004: 21) from the angle of a pessimist "being for being against" (Ahmed 2010: 162). One of the most radical expressions of new pessimism addresses the destructive effects of the Anthropocene and prefigures an "ahuman" future: Patricia MacCormack's *Ahuman Manifesto* (2020) proposes voluntary human extinction as a utopian possibility for the survival of nonhuman lifeforms.

In my talk I will compare these new pessimisms and how they dialectically go hand in hand with the return of utopian aesthetics and politics identified in the call for papers. I will argue that what these pessimisms and utopianisms have in common is their refusal "to be realistic" about the status quo of the present (Storey 2019). Thus, they offer opportunities for new prefigurative epistemologies in the face of an increasingly precarious futurity.

Bio Note

Dr. Mark Schmitt is a researcher and instructor in British Cultural Studies at TU Dortmund University. He has previously taught at Ruhr-University Bochum and the University of Mannheim and has been a research fellow of the Stuart Hall Foundation London from 2016-2019. His research interests include cultural theory, literary and film studies, the intersections of race and class in Britain and Ireland, and the area of futures studies. He has published several articles on utopianism and post-capitalist futures and is currently working on a book titled "Spectres of Pessimism: A Cultural Logic of the Worst" (commissioned by Palgrave and scheduled for publication in 2023). His latest publications include *British White Trash: Figurations of Tainted Whiteness in the Novels of Irvine Welsh, Niall Griffiths and John King* (Transcript, 2018) and *The Intersections of Whiteness* (ed. with Evangelia Kindinger, Routledge, 2019).

David Walther, "Solarpunk: Aesthetics of Sustainability and Community"

Abstract

In the 21st century, humanity faces ecological apocalypse. While the IPCC provides guidance within a framework of current climate science, an eco-critical perspective has also become more prevalent in speculative fiction and popular culture. Within the last decade, a new subgenre called Solarpunk has entered the ecological discourse, arising out of blogs, social media, video games, short films, art, and various anthologies. Whereas Cyber- and Steampunk deal with the relationship between humanity and the digital world/machines respectively, often configured as dystopias, Solarpunk revolves around the nexus of nature.

Most Solarpunk narratives are situated in a world that has either already suffered ecological collapse or managed to escape such a fate by a last-second reorientation of values. As such, a focus on the confluence of architecture and technology, as well as its symbiotic relationship to what remains of nature, buttresses the various visions of communal sharing that provide this genre with its utopian inflection. In Solarpunk, bioluminescent fashion mingles with festivity, glacier domes preserve snow and teach about conservation, and solar-powered giraffes "traverse the land / like gilded towers", purifying water and enriching the soil (Pevyhouse 2017, 90). Past mistakes are learned from; greed combatted. Through this anti-establishment, community-driven perspective, the genre earns its „punk" moniker, operating in a framework opposed to systems of capitalism, racism, and gender inequality.

Nevertheless, the implicit dangers of these visions have to be recognized. As Williams (2019) points out, the flawed desire for a clean slate, the unequal distribution of solar power (much like that of wealth), and the systems of production imbricating photovoltaic technology are points of contention that should not be discounted.

Despite these warnings, though, Solarpunk presents an emerging genre in the wider field of eco-critical literature that demonstrates new avenues for removing the future from the grasp of apocalyptic visions. This contribution therefore aims at tracing the origins and aesthetics of Solarpunk in popular culture, while also showing how it introduces imaginaries of sustainability and community throughout three anthologies – Sunvault: Stories of Solarpunk and Eco-Speculation (2017), Glass and Gardens: Solarpunk Summers (2018), and Glass and Gardens: Solarpunk Winters (2020) – providing a reprieve from the oversaturation of dystopian fiction and leading to its answer: literary optimism.

Works Cited

Clark, Chloe N. "Fairy Tales & Other Species of Life." Sunvault: Stories of Solarpunk and Eco-Speculation (Eds.: Phoebe Wagner and Brontë Christopher Wieland). Nashville: Upper Rubber Boot Books, 2017, pp. 135.

Pevyhouse, Jack. "Solar Powered Giraffes." Sunvault: Stories of Solarpunk and Eco-Speculation (Eds.: Phoebe Wagner and Brontë Christopher Wieland). Nashville: Upper Rubber Boot Books, 2017, pp. 90.

Ulibarri, Sarona (Ed.): Glass and Gardens. Solarpunk Summers. World Weaver Press, 2018. Ulibarri, Sarona (Ed.): Glass and Gardens. Solarpunk Winters. World Weaver Press, 2020.

Wagner, Phoebe and Wieland, Brontë Christopher (Eds). Sunvault: Stories of Solarpunk and Eco-Speculation. Nashville: Upper Rubber Boot Books, 2017.

Williams, Rhys (2019): ""This Shining Confluence of Magic and Technology": Solarpunk, Energy Imaginaries, and the Infrastructure of Solarity." Open Library of Humanities 5.1:60, pp. 1-35.

Bio Note

David Walther studied English and German at Greifswald University and the University of Manitoba. He is currently working on a dissertation on the grotesque as a discursive interface in the works of Salman Rushdie.