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Introduction: The Return of Utopian Aesthetics and Politics in 21st-Century Literature. New Approaches in 'Radical' as well as 'Practical' Utopianism

As a literary phenomenon, 'utopia' is said to emerge with Thomas More's 1516 *Utopia*, a satire that became genre-defining for narratives that imagine and describe an ideal state. Written for a circle of humanist friends, More's title puns with the prefix u- that, in English pronunciation, may entangle the semantic scope of the ancient Greek prefixes ou- and eu-, conflating the homophonous non-place (ou-topos) with the good place (eu-topos). More's pun alone already injects some insecurity into the purported aim of a utopia, designating, as it does, both an ideal place and a non-entity. The dialogic structure and the manifold ironies (for further aspects see Erzgräber 1983) render it all the more questionable whether Utopia is indeed supposed to be an ideal state or rather a text aiming to create "a state of mind" (Baker-Smith 2011, 162), leading readers to continue pondering the tensions between political realities and political imaginaries in dialogic exchange (see Erzgräber 1983, 28). Such interpretive insecurities, although ingrained in utopia from its very inception, were, however, soon elided in an understanding of the genre as actually and unequivocally presenting ideal states. As such, they came under severe attack for their implicit or explicit totalitarian tendencies, as Caroline Edwards elucidates:

After the Second World War the question of utopian method became synonymous with the totalitarian regimes of German and Italian Fascism in the first half of the twentieth century; Mao Zedong's People's Republic of China; the attempt to restart history in 'Year Zero' in Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge movement in Cambodia; and Joseph Stalin's political repression and labour camps in the Soviet Union. As Russell Jacoby observes in *Picture Imperfect: Utopian Thought for an Anti-Utopian Age* (2005), a liberal, anti-utopian consensus emerged during and after the Second World War that blurred the distinction between utopianism and totalitarianism. (2019, 36)

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, this cultural critique fed into a media as well as an academic refrain that equated utopia with communism and totalitarianism and revealed utopias to be "realised only by violence and maintained only by political repression" (Levitas 2000, 31). In addition to the genre's vilification as totalitarian, it was also considered to be encumbered in its very aims by economic contexts in particular. In the early 1990s, utopia's insistence that a better social world is imaginable and perhaps even realisable was fundamentally at odds with a postmodern cultural disbelief in truth, morality and the social as in some sense a totality. For Fredric Jameson, late capitalism "poses tremendous and crippling problems for a work of art" (1988, 349) and "utopian imaginaries" in particular (Best 2011, 502). In search of

satisfactory answers to the multiple crises in an unevenly globalised 21st-century world on the brink of ecological collapse, however, many writers and critics have come to re-evaluate the genre in post-postmodernist times.

In the new millennium, Zygmunt Bauman has argued that the desire for "a life 'as it might or should be' is a defining, constitutive feature of humanity" (2003, 11). Since the turn of the millennium we have seen multiple, overlapping global crises: from the 'war on terror' to the Great Financial Crisis of 2007/08 and the severe economic recession in its wake to the COVID-19 pandemic – alongside the more long-term, now escalating climate and ecological crisis and, not unrelatedly, mass migration and flight. This normalized state of exception has been accompanied, or rationalized, with a persistent rhetoric of 'resilience' and 'sacrifice' that seems to have replaced the optimistic 1990s boom-face of neoliberal politics in the global North. In his study of post-crash neoliberalism, Philip Mirowski notes that "the sense of crisis passed without any serious attempts to rectify the flaws that had nearly caused the economy to grind to a halt" (qtd. in Johansen 2016, 32). Instead of holding corporate agents accountable, governments responded by appealing to individual citizens' resilience and resources for adjustment or better yet, self-reinvention in the face of crisis conditions. More than ever, as Wendy Brown put it at the time,

it is the project of macroeconomic growth [...] to which neoliberal individuals are tethered and with which their existence as human capital must align if they are to thrive. When [they] constitute a drag on this good rather than a contribution to it, they may be legitimately cast off or reconfigured [...] At this point, for *homo oeconomicus*, the throne of interest has vanished and at the extreme is replaced with the throne of sacrifice. (2015, 84)

Critical resilience research argues that in the crisis-ridden neoliberal present, the future is envisaged as a string of inescapable catastrophes and consequently rendered unnegotiable: "[a]ccepting the imperative to become resilient means sacrificing any political vision of a world in which we might be able to live better lives freer from dangers" (Evans and Reid 2013, 95; see also Crouch 2011; 2020; Joseph 2013). Neoliberal futurity thus becomes a narrow managerial space of coping best with – or even thriving on – cycles of disaster rather than an open space of political contestation over securing the 'good life' for all beyond crisis.

In this sense, expecting people to make lives in the tight space between crisis resilience and sacrifice is a radicalised version of neoliberalism's most pervasive crisis, that of the political imagination. TINA – "the coercive language that states baldly that 'There Is No Alternative'" (Docherty 2016, 19) to the increasingly desperate and sacrificial pursuit of economic growth – stretches in an unbroken line from Margaret Thatcher's wholesale demolition of Britain's socio-economic fabric to German economy minister Robert Habeck's plans to make customers pay for corporations' dramatically increased costs for natural gas after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Indeed, the need to resurrect the most "notable casualty of [our capitalist present]," namely "the utopian ideal" (Evans and Reid 2013, 96), could hardly be more pressing.

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 the increasingly obvious exigencies of neoliberal capitalism as well as (and interrelatedly, of course) the intensifying environmental and climate crisis.

Tom Moylan, for instance, asks us to remember "the political exercise of the insurgent hope of the utopian impulse with its transformative capacity" (2021, 1). John Storey advocates a similarly transformative power of utopia in his recent *Radical Utopianism and Cultural Studies: On Refusing to Be Realistic* (2019). He discards any kind of "blue-print utopianism" for his preferred term "radical utopianism" that "works through defamiliarization – the making strange of what currently exists in order to dislodge its taken-for-grantedness and in so doing make possible the production of utopian desire;" this type of utopianism, he claims, "offers a challenge to our complicity with power" (1). Radical utopianism serves to designate forms of resistance in the field of cultural studies and thus expands on new-historicist debates about negotiations of resistance and containment in the field. Storey currently concentrates on the ways in which reading or consuming fictional utopias may be conceived of as political in his 2022 *Consuming Utopia*. Here, Storey wishes to foster "[t]he ability to imagine the world in a different way, disturbing the 'naturalness' and 'inevitability' of the historical here and now" (2022, x). He emphasizes the "utopian contrast" (13) between what is and what might be a motor to envisage, desire and bring about change. Thus, reading, or consuming for that matter, becomes a political act that spills over into extratextual realities.

These current publications on utopianism agree on the importance to 'imagine otherwise' and they converge in their emphasis on the importance and necessity of change. They differ considerably, however, with regard to the extent of utopianism. Caroline Edwards, in contrast to Storey, moves away from the genre utopia and rather diagnoses a dissemination of utopian impulses across a wide range of different genres. In *Utopia and the Contemporary British Novel*, Edwards is equally interested in the reading process and its political impact, but with a focus on twenty-first century novels that, she contends, frequently merely contain utopian passages or moments rather than fully fledged utopian story worlds. She seeks to develop

a strategy of reading that can excavate the utopian content expressed by a number of contemporary novels, which is sometimes explicit, but functions more often than not in a quiet, latent way. This content ranges from meditations upon the good society, to smaller moments of utopian experience via personal fulfilment or a sense of togetherness with others, to even more minimal ciphers of symbolic utopian anticipation. (2019, 25)

Quite in line with postmodern notions of fragmentation, utopia does not return in one piece after its vilification as a totalitarian genre in Edward's work.

The common denominator of utopian studies today is a conviction that cultural forms do have the power to influence our imagination, our views, habits and attitudes in the face of multiple crises. The return of utopia can thus be seen as a symptom of our current meta-modernity and its rekindled hope for repair. As Nick Bentley argues,

Metamodernism, if it is to be a valuable concept, is only useful at the level of its attitude towards the fragmentary and plural nature of contemporary local, national, and global conditions. It could, in that sense, represent a workable tag to identify those texts that display fragmented narratives in order to explore (and tentatively celebrate) the possibility of reducing that fragmentation and deconstruction and the implied dissociation of and factional disruptions that are a feature of contemporary societies. Metamodernism, then, attempts to re-humanize a posthuman or indeed anti-human set of conditions that pertain in much poststructuralist and postmodernist work. (2018, 740)

As such, the return of utopia may be read in the context of the metamodern. Utopia, as Edwards understands it, does not move beyond the postmodern in a nostalgic fashion, it remains informed by postmodernist fragmentation, but is no longer caught up in games of ontological and self-referential reflection. With regard to narrative form in particular, there are now corresponding approaches that theorize the ways in which literary forms may impact on, for instance, our attitudes to the environment. In *Narrating the Mesh* (2021), Marco Caracciolo has recently argued that "[e]xposure to formally sophisticated narratives could foster argumentative, ethical, and (in a broad sense) attentional skills that heighten our awareness of human-nonhuman connection and its underlying complexity" (179). Training in reading, seemingly restricted to a reading of high culture – if that is what 'sophisticated' means – may lead to a transfer of skills from reading to acting in the real world. Correspondingly (and leaving the high-culture bias aside), one current approach to utopianism is to reflect on the performativity of literary forms and their impact on our cognitive framing.

Many contemporary writers, particularly of climate and ecological fiction, seem to follow suit. Margaret Atwood, for instance, has left dystopia behind to create so-called practical utopias for a better future. Early in 2022, Atwood invited interested parties to engage in some 'practical utopianism: an exploration of the possible' as an incentive to imagine a sustainable future and to imagine better than utopias in the past. Hence, an engagement with literature, both from the perspective of writers and of readers, is considered to impact on our everyday behaviour. Utopia, Atwood suggests, is required to solve the climate crisis. Contemporary literature clearly moves out of the house of postmodernist fiction and back into a realm of real-world impact.

Amitav Ghosh is another case in point. In 2015, he argued that "the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination" (9) and situates some of these failures in established cultural forms such as the novel. He contends that "the challenges that climate change poses for the contemporary writer [...] derive ultimately from *the grid of literary forms and conventions* that came to shape the narrative imagination in precisely that period when the accumulation of carbon in the atmosphere was re-writing the destiny of the earth" (7; our emphasis). This evaluation once more illustrates that literary forms are considered to be performative – in the sense that a genre such as the novel has trained us to think along the lines of probability and regularity, those two pillars of middle-class ideologies encoded in novelistic plot structures, character conceptions, encodings of temporality and semanticizations of space. Irrespective of whether cultural forms are said to either preclude or to foster our climate awareness, there seems to be a general consensus among theorists and writers that literary forms

do have the power to influence our ways of thinking, our habits and attitudes. Furthermore, Ghosh's view posits that the imagination is the human capacity to be addressed for solutions to current social, political and environmental challenges. With his emphasis on the imagination and the performative power of cultural forms, he is very much in line with a literary movement towards both a *littérature engagée* and utopian studies that zoom in on the imagination as the cultural and personal space where solutions to predicaments such as the climate crisis can purportedly be found. Utopian studies must thus address the functions our imagination is put to in particular.

The contributions to this section explore the ways in which contemporary literature and culture articulates and negotiates utopianism. Marcus Hartner explores utopian enclaves in the computer game *The Last of Us* (2013), published by Sony Computer Entertainment and Naughty Dog for PlayStation 3. He argues "that the game world strategically draws on the evocation of nature as a regenerative force in its attempt to cast the town of Jackson as a seemingly utopian space" (142) and reveals the reactionary politics of the supposed ideals presented as desirable in the game. Crucially, the game's ideological set-up rests on gender difference.

David Walther's contribution focuses on solarpunk, a newly emergent genre in the wider field of eco-critical literature. While malleable, the genre conventions comprise a "focus on community and social justice, sustainability, and technology" (161). Departing from the well-established Wittgensteinian notion of genre as "family resemblances" (160), Walther charts solarpunk's as yet underexplored diachronic and synchronic relations to literary and cultural genres such as cyberpunk, steampunk, and ecotopian fiction. In his wide-ranging localization of solarpunk, the author does not only consider textual representations, in the form of short analyses of poetry, short stories and collaborative art projects, but also the genre's (utopian) performativity in terms of activism and social change.

Rebekka Rohleder's article traces the partial return to utopia in contemporary novels from Margaret Atwood, Arundhati Roy, and Bernardine Evaristo that imagine and represent utopian spaces and communities within dystopian speculative or realist narratives. She argues that these bounded utopias function as a space to explore alternative forms of community, identity and relationality beyond the categories of "work society" (179 and *passim*).

Georgia Christinidis engages critically with a contemporary utopianism that is often content to identify minimal or minimalist glimpses of other possible worlds in fictional texts that otherwise fail to offer alternatives to or even defamiliarise the status quo. She argues that 'utopian fiction' thus classified in fact "employ[s] a move I term the 'estrangement double-shuffle,'" which means that "the novels concerned are able to endow [...] moments of redemptive agency [...] with a utopian charge only by distorting their representation of the status quo in a dystopian direction" (191). By contrast, the author reads China Miéville's ab-realist, allegorical fictions as radial critiques of capitalist realism and genuinely hopeful visions of collective agency.

Finally, Ronja Waldherr explores narrative negotiations of utopian possibilities in novels that describe highly gendered social inequalities in the context of neoliberal constructions of precarity. Analysing afterlife fictions such as Ali Smith's *Hotel World*

(2001) and Elif Shafak's *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World* (2019), Waldherr shows how "female-centred multiple narration [...] lends distinctive shape to a reimagination of futurity in terms of the more ethical political community that resists the hegemonic practices of differential precarity" (213). Drawing on Chantal Mouffe and Judith Butler in particular, Waldherr reveals afterlife fictions to be crucial interventions into female precarity in neoliberal economies.

Considering the plurality of crises that our contributors tackle and the symptomatic return to the performativity of cultural forms in utopian studies, innovative theorizations of "*fictions of the not yet*" (Edwards 2019, 24) seem more timely than ever.

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