



<b>Title</b>	Imagining Alternatives Utopias-Dystopias-Heterotopias - Introduction
<b>Authors(s)</b>	Pye, Gillian
<b>Publication date</b>	2014-10-01
<b>Publication information</b>	Pye, Gillian. "Imagining Alternatives Utopias-Dystopias-Heterotopias - Introduction." Hartung-Gorre, October 1, 2014.
<b>Publisher</b>	Hartung-Gorre
<b>Item record/more information</b>	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10197/10039">http://hdl.handle.net/10197/10039</a>

Downloaded 2026-06-11 07:43:58

The UCD community has made this article openly available. Please share how this access benefits you. Your story matters! (@ucd\_oa)



© Some rights reserved. For more information

## Introduction

Despite frequent proclamations of an end to utopian thought and practice, fuelled *inter alia* by the brutal and ongoing realities of technological warfare, by economic and ecological crisis, and by pronouncements such as the “end of history”,<sup>1</sup> there seems nevertheless to be general agreement that something of a “utopian revival in popular and political spheres” has occurred since the turn of the millennium.<sup>2</sup> According to Robert J. Tally, while the older sort of “‘blueprint’ utopias” that imagine idealized states with an existence based on spatial or temporal displacement and distance are no longer suited to a globalized world system, “the critical project of utopia as a form of opposition to the apparently intractable state of affairs is all the more vital”.<sup>3</sup> In fact, Tally argues that “utopia has not only made a comeback in the postmodern age of globalization, persisting long after the epoch to which it would seem most suited, but has become a powerful discursive mode and object of enquiry in literature, critical theory, cultural studies and social thought over the past few decades.”<sup>4</sup>

Captured in the anti-capitalism slogan ‘another world is possible’, contemporary concern with utopian possibilities has manifested itself in the myriad micro-utopias flourishing especially in the global space of social networks. These may harbour the potential of the Foucauldian heterotope, a complex space in which, as in a mirror, we envision our absence from the place where we are by looking at ourselves ‘elsewhere’. At the same time, fears sparked by high-profile cases of information-trafficking, -infiltrations, and -censorship, of violent religious fundamentalism and the destructive power of untrammelled capital, remind us of the proximity between utopia and dystopia: what for some might constitute a vision of a better world could spell disaster and suffering for others. Nevertheless, the utopian impulse remains at the heart of dystopian visions, because they express the sense that things could or should be better. Fátima Vieira argues that dystopias that “leave no room for hope do in fact fail in their mission”. Therefore, although they may portray a vision far removed from the ideal scenarios of the utopia, dystopias ought to be seen as “a variant of the same social dreaming that gives impulse to utopian literature.”<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Francis Fukuyama: *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: Free Press, 1992.

<sup>2</sup> Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini: Introduction: Utopia as Method. In: Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini (eds): *Utopia Method Vision. The Use Value of Social Dreaming*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007, p. 13-23, here p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> Robert T. Tally Jr.: *Utopia in the Age of Globalization: Space, Representations, and the World System*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013, p. xi.

<sup>4</sup> Tally: *Utopia in the Age of Globalization*, p. viii.

<sup>5</sup> Fátima Vieira: The Concept of Utopia. In: Gregory Claeys (ed.): *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*. Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 3-27, here p. 7, p. 17.

Although the ideas and fears that underpin current models of utopian and dystopian writing may have been fuelled by global developments in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the idea of imagining alternatives to an existing society or conventional modes of being has a long history. Even before Thomas More published his tale of the island of Utopia in 1516, and thus created the prototype of a genre which sets an ideal society, located in a fictional and unreal space, against the reality of the author's (and readers') own, authors and philosophers have used such fictions to contrast and criticize the ills of their own political and social environment.<sup>6</sup> From the latter part of the eighteenth century, developments in philosophical thought brought about the move from spatial utopias – the imagining of a fictional, idealized realm set entirely apart from the reality of the author's and readers' geographical context – to temporal utopias that set the alternative world in a future which, given the right human efforts and actions, might eventually come to pass. Political events of the twentieth century led to scepticism against any kind of totalitarian system and to a dominance of dystopian scenarios, which serve as a warning of what can happen when utopian fantasies are realized.<sup>7</sup> In more recent decades, postmodernism, naturally suspicious of any kind of absolute and universally applicable narratives, has given rise to a different outlook on utopian and dystopian thought, while, at the same time, returning to a spatial concept of alternative worlds. “Mit ihrer Absage an ein lineares Zeit- und Geschichtsverständnis”, argues Zeißler, “hat die postmoderne Dystopie wieder den alternativen Raum als Schauplatz ihrer Gesellschaftsentwürfe erschlossen. Diese Anti-Utopien scheinen somit durch die Akzentuierung paralleler Orte statt in der Ferne liegender Zukunft zu den Ursprüngen der Gattung – der Raumutopie – zurückzukehren.”<sup>8</sup> The rejection of the concept of a unified, teleological historical

---

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Schöderle: *Geschichte der Utopie*. Vienna: Böhlau, 2012, follows the continuities and re-orientations of utopian and dystopian thought and literary representation from antiquity to postmodernism. For other recent studies that deal with aspects of the genre and concept of utopia, often understood as encompassing both positive eu-topias and negative anti- or dys-topias, see: Klaus Geus (ed.): *Utopien, Zukunftsvorstellungen, Gedankenexperimente. Literarische Konzepte von einer 'anderen Welt' im abendländischen Denken von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*. Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 2011; Elena Zeißler: *Dunkle Welten. Die Dystopie auf dem Weg ins 21. Jahrhundert*. Marburg: Tectum, 2008; Judith Leiß: *Inszenierungen des Widerstreits. Die Heterotopie als postmodernistisches Subgenre der Utopie*. Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2010; Artur Blaim and Ludmila Gruszewska-Blaim (eds): *Spectres of Utopia. Theory, Practice, Conventions*. Frankfurt a.M.: Lang, 2012; Miguel A. Ramiro Avilés and J. C. Davis: *Utopian Moments. Reading Utopian Texts*. London: Bloomsbury, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Titles of studies such as Zeißler: *Dunkle Welten. Die Dystopie auf dem Weg ins 21. Jahrhundert*, or Reo Borg and Bodo Würffel (eds): *Utopie und Apokalypse in der Moderne*. Munich: Fink, 2010, illustrate the dominance of dystopian imaginings in the twentieth century.

<sup>8</sup> Zeißler: *Dunkle Welten*, p. 62f. The chapter titles of Zeißler's study illustrate the heterogeneity of literary dystopias in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries,

development and its replacement through the idea of simultaneously existing, different versions of history mark the connections between such spatial utopias and postmodernist thought. The imagining of alternative worlds in a spatial sense can also be linked to Foucault's concept of heterotopia. In fact, heterotopias, which set places, times and ideologies – often originating in real life environments and social realities – next to one another without creating an obligation for the reader to construct a coherent meaning have been termed a “postmodern subgenre of utopia”.<sup>9</sup>

Although there is agreement that the desire for a “better way of being and living”<sup>10</sup> is common to all cultures and historical epochs, the notion that this desire is “innate”<sup>11</sup> to man does not offer a particularly useful point of departure in critical thinking on the subject. Rather more productive, however, is the conviction that utopian thinking is a “socially constructed response to an equally socially constructed gap”.<sup>12</sup> Hence, Lyman Tower Sargent points out that the lesson we might draw from the collapse of Communism in Europe in 1989, is that “utopias are one of the ways that nations create themselves” and that, even in an age of globalization, they are specific to their cultural and temporal location.<sup>13</sup> The contributions to this volume all focus on literary texts by German, Swiss or Austrian authors which articulate localized concepts of utopia. Only two of the articles deal with works written before the turn of the millennium, thus underlining Vieira's contention that, far from being obsolete, today utopias may still constitute an important “arena for struggle” and, particularly in the absence of coherent blueprints for a better world, may offer a “freer exploration” of desires and needs than earlier, more comprehensive models.<sup>14</sup>

In his contribution, **Klaus Birnstiel** looks at the history of utopian writing from a specifically German perspective. In particular, Birnstiel focuses on the genre's temporal turn in the eighteenth century which has often been associated with the philosophy of history and the emerging concept of history as a linear progression. Birnstiel argues that the idea of a clear caesura or shift in the utopian genre from the spatial to the temporal, generally identified with the French novel *L'an 2044* (1770) by Louis Mercier, is not easily applicable to literary utopias written in German vernaculars where the outlines of utopian traditions seem to be much less clearly defined and where traces of utopian writing appear in a wide range of literary configurations. In an attempt to answer the question of whether German utopian

---

as she explores postmodern, scientific-technological, postcolonial and feminist, and ecological dystopias.

<sup>9</sup> See Leiß: *Inszenierungen des Widerstreits*, p. 16.

<sup>10</sup> Ruth Levitas: *The Concept of Utopia*. Syracuse University Press, 1990, p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> Vieira: *The Concept of Utopia*, p. 20.

<sup>12</sup> Levitas: *The Concept of Utopia*, p. 181.

<sup>13</sup> Lyman Tower Sargent: *The Necessity of Utopian Thinking: A Cross-National Perspective*. In: Jörn Rüsen, Michael Fehr and Thomas W. Rieger (eds): *Thinking Utopia: Steps into Other Worlds*. Oxford, New York: Berghahn, 2005, p. 1-14, here p. 2.

<sup>14</sup> Levitas: *The Concept of Utopia*, p. 193.

traditions can be seen as a “Sonderweg”, Birnstiel follows spatial and temporal concepts in German utopian literature from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, from humanist scholarly dialogues and works expressing chiliastic ideas, to works integrating utopian elements into the genre of travel writing and robinsonades, or *Staatsromane*, or to the enlightenment period.

**Tina Pusse’s** article deals with Rilke’s concept of “Weltinnenraum”, which offers a kind of shelter “out of reach” of the surrounding social environment.<sup>15</sup> Pusse explores Rilke’s *Duineser Elegien* and his *Sonnette an Orpheus*, showing how they offer poetic alternatives to the utopian spaces articulated in both Christian and pre-Christian myth. Crucially, Rilke conceives of “Weltinnenraum” as an imaginary space, accessed by means of the poem, which suggests the overcoming of the dichotomy between body and mind. Seeking immediacy, this space also echoes the utopia of universal communication, where meaning is grasped without hesitation. Moreover, the idea of “Weltinnenraum” offers an alternative to Christian concepts of utopia, symbolized by the figure of the angel, who is able to unify the realms of the living and the dead. Boundaries of life and death are exposed as artificial, revealing instead an “infinite loop of mutual consumption” and thereby re-articulating the utopian topos of a harmonious relationship between man and nature.

With the exception of Birnstiel and Pusse, all contributors focus on texts from the twenty-first century, thus confirming the relevance of utopian and dystopian writing in contemporary literature in the German-speaking countries. **Dominic Orth’s** study of two twenty-first-century Austrian novels illustrates the return of the utopian genre to a spatial imagining of alternative worlds. Both Thomas Lehr’s *42* (2005) and Thomas Glavinic’s *Die Arbeit der Nacht* (2006) depict fictional environments in which a dramatic and sudden change occurs, leaving the protagonists isolated in a dissolving society. In Lehr’s novel, the world has suddenly frozen in time; in Glavinic’s text, the protagonist finds himself in a space from which all other human beings have disappeared. In both novels, the fictional universe is closely related to a contemporary reality recognizable to the reader. Responding to current concerns such as acceleration and the challenge of existing in a globalized, information society, the worlds of isolation imagined in the two texts function, on the one hand, as potential alternatives to current ways of life but, on the other, also illustrate the dystopian potential of those alternatives and thus their ultimate failure.

Concurring with Birnstiel’s argument that German-language literature has somewhat different traditions of utopian writing than other European literatures, and echoing Orth’s analysis of isolation in contemporary society, Achim **Küpper’s** contribution discusses the dystopian dimensions of novels by Austrian writer Christoph Ransmayr, focussing particularly on his 1988 novel *Die Letzte Welt*. Set in unspecifiable and unspecified spaces, Ransmayr’s texts recall the geographical separatism that characterizes much of the utopian tradition. However, they also

---

<sup>15</sup> Vieira: *The Concept of Utopia*, p. 18.

typify contemporary concerns with the heterotope in their interrogation of the relationship between centre and periphery and the potential of marginal spaces. As such, they lend weight to the argument that the contemporary experience of globalization has reinvigorated the utopian preoccupation with alternative modes and spaces of belonging.<sup>16</sup> Küpper shows that Ransmayr's novels undermine the idea of the periphery as a postcolonial space of empowerment. Instead, he argues that Ransmayr's marginal spaces fail to offer an alternative to the order and control of the centre. Küpper also suggests that the particularly dystopian characteristic of Ransmayr's writing is its presentation of spaces of "total alienation" which have neither a sense of place or time. This is central to another aspect of Ransmayr's work, which is its exploration of the marginalized position of the writer and the utopian desire underlying writing itself. The sense of future underpinning the literary dystopia's (utopian) contention that things could, or at least should, be different, and the belief that artistic and literary endeavour may raise awareness of this need,<sup>17</sup> comes under critical scrutiny here.

**Sylvie Grimm-Hamen's** contribution also looks at Christoph Ransmayr's work, placing it alongside that of his countryman Raoul Schrott. As does Küpper, Grimm-Hamen considers the link between postmodernist writing and literary utopias. Both Ransmayr and Schrott set their utopian worlds in a remote landscape far removed from civilization, thus returning to the spatial imaginings of classical literary utopias. However, as Grimm-Hamen argues, the worlds imagined in Schrott's *Tristan da Cunha* (2003) and Ransmayr's *Der fliegende Berg* (2006) are devoid of escapism or exoticism – instead, they are deeply ambivalent, containing both eutopic and dystopian features. Both texts employ postmodernist techniques – such as the merging of different historical times in Ransmayr's novel, or the intertextual references to classical literary utopias in Schrott's text – but neither of the two allows for any unified utopian vision. Instead, utopian visions appear not only as individual and subjective, but also as ambivalent and contradictory, ultimately undermining the notion of a unifying myth such as that of the "Insel der Seligen" which dominated the socio-political discourse in Austria after the Second World War.

In contrast to Grimm-Hamen's claim for a strong association between postmodernist and utopian writing, **Inga Ketels** argues that contemporary dystopian and utopian novels often respond to recent political developments by departing from a postmodern focus on playfulness, self-referentiality and meta-fictionality and, instead, turning to concrete social concerns, such as the increasingly invasive

---

<sup>16</sup> Judie Newman: *Utopia and Terror in Contemporary American Fiction*. New York, London: Routledge, 2014, p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> On the importance of 'culture' as a "form of awareness" which is "ethically vital and politically useful" see Jorge Bastos da Silva: Introduction. *Revis(it)ing the rationales of utopianism*. In: Jorge Bastos da Silva (ed.). *The Epistemology of Utopia: Rhetoric, Theory and Imagination*. Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2013, p. 1-6, here p. 2.

measures with which the state, in a time of growing fears of international terrorism and the resulting wish to maximize measures that ensure security, controls the individual and puts them under constant surveillance. Of the three novels under investigation, Juli Zeh's *Corpus Delicti* (2009) and Christian Kracht's *Ich werde hier sein im Sonnenschein und im Schatten* (2008), make use of dystopian scenarios to warn of the consequence of placing an over-emphasis on security versus individual freedom, while Dorothee Elmiger's novel *Einladung an die Waghalsigen* (2010) envisions a society in which all infrastructure has been destroyed as the result of an environmental disaster. The catastrophe leaves the few surviving inhabitants in a state of passivity and lethargy, but two young female protagonists actively resist the inertia of their fellow citizens, thus representing hope for the future. All three texts have in common, according to Ketels, that the alternative worlds they imagine show society not to be an unchangeable fact but an imaginary institution with the potential to be constantly reshaped and remodelled.

**Rebecca McMullan's** article also considers the role of imaginary alternatives in the construction of political realities, but at the same time, reflects on postmodern attempts to address the inauthenticity of a globalized, digital age. The discussion focuses on Christian Kracht's novel *Imperium* (2012), which deals with utopian ideals implicated in motivating and legitimizing colonialism. *Imperium* thematizes the life of August Engelhardt, who travelled to Kabakon Island, Papua New Guinea in 1902 in order to establish a coconut plantation. A fervent believer in the life-giving properties of the coconut, Engelhardt espoused the utopian tradition of privation and simplicity,<sup>18</sup> contributing to a *Südsee-Mythos*, which sought to counter the ills of industrialized Western society with the benefits of the 'primitive' life. Kracht's novel revisits the idea of the island as utopian place, but connects it to postmodern concerns with the entrapment in simulacra. Specifically, McMullan argues that Kracht's text is a literary exploration of Baudrillard's concept that one must engage in a "symbolic exchange" with the simulacrum in order to address confinement within the time-space compression of a globalized world. McMullan shows that Kracht's novel engages in a fraught, but ultimately unsuccessful attempt to construct utopian potential by mapping out "an escape from the simulacrum".

**Simone Schroth's** contribution compares two texts, which might be seen as inheritors of the critical dystopian tradition epitomized in the early twentieth century by George Orwell (1984) and Aldous Huxley (*Brave New World*). Dutch author Frederik Hermans' short story "De laatste roker" ('The Last Smoker', 1991) and Juli Zeh's novel *Corpus Delicti* (2009<sup>19</sup>) explore the idea that the (utopian) pursuit of perfection, particularly when systematized as a set of rules, may ultimately produce a social dystopia. Schroth examines the treatment of "healthism" in her chosen texts:

<sup>18</sup> On the role of 'want-denying ideals' in the history of utopia see Gregory Claeys: *Searching for Utopia: The History of an Idea*. London: Thames and Hudson, 2011, esp. p. 23f.

<sup>19</sup> Published two years after the premiere of Zeh's stage play with the same title. See Elisabeth Tropper's contribution to this volume.

“De laatste roker” describes a society gripped by a strictly policed smoking ban, whilst *Corpus Delicti* imagines a more generalized set of rigidly enforced health rules. Schroth’s analysis underlines the continued importance of literary explorations of the utopian and dystopian as part of a critical engagement with the relationship between order and contingency.<sup>20</sup> In their exploration of the relationship between the utopian wish to improve human health and the dystopian vision of total social control over individual bodies, the texts considered in Schroth’s article reveal the implications of the contemporary withdrawal of utopia into an apparently “personal” space.<sup>21</sup> Connected to ideals of performance and efficiency, these “healthist” dystopias expose the fact that, contrary to those who erroneously saw the “end of utopia” in the collapse of European communism in 1989<sup>22</sup> in fact “utopias are not just the preserve of the Left” but continue to drive neo-liberal agendas.<sup>23</sup> As Schroth shows, whilst Hermans’ text focuses on the deployment of a partial healthism, in which the smoking ban is one mechanism of state control, Zeh’s critical dystopia reveals normative health discourses at work in contemporary societies and asks in whose interests the utopian goal of perfect health might operate, and what price we are willing to pay to pursue it.

**Elisabeth Tropper’s** contribution also deals with Julie Zeh’s *Corpus Delicti*, but looks at the novel’s earlier (2007) incarnation as a stage play, which Tropper considers in tandem with Falk Richter’s *Im Ausnahmezustand*, premiered in the same year. Central to Tropper’s discussion is the extent to which dystopian imaginings in texts for the stage – which obviously contain a socially critical impetus – can be characterized as ‘political theatre’. In a short overview of trends in dystopian drama, Tropper states that texts for the stage – just as their narrative counterparts – often address contemporary phenomena, thinking them through to their apocalyptic end. In the twenty-first century, this results in the popularity, for example, of biopolitical or ecological themes, or in imagining the downfall and disintegration of Europe or the European Union. In both examples analysed by Tropper, ideas with mostly positive connotation in contemporary discourse, such as health, security or progress, are systematically elevated to absolute values and, in turn, reveal a dystopian potential. In *Corpus Delicti*, this dystopia takes on the guise of a state-dictated and state-controlled obligation to actively look after one’s own health, while Richter’s text imagines a gated community in which the promise of protection and happiness comes at the price of isolation, conformity, surveillance and paranoia.

---

<sup>20</sup> On this see Wilhelm Vosskamp: The Narrative Staging of Image and Counter Image: On the Poetics of Literary Utopias. In: Rüsen et al (eds): *Thinking Utopia*, p. 263-75, here p. 266.

<sup>21</sup> Levitas: *The Concept of Utopia*, p. 192.

<sup>22</sup> Sargent: *The Necessity of Utopian Thinking*, p. 1.

<sup>23</sup> Levitas: *The Concept of Utopia*, p. 186.