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Introduction: The Disappearance of Utopia?

There seem to be about as many heralds to the end of utopia among the many postmodern obituaries as there are heralds insisting that utopia is quite alive. This is hardly surprising, since the opposition is a false one. Utopia is only dead, and rightly so, if understood in the classical (and modern) sense of a blueprint for perfection. The totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century – both in their left-wing and right-wing manifestations – have claimed to posses such a blueprint and have – luckily – failed. It is this kind of utopia that Fredric Jameson attacks when pointing out that utopian thinking "lies not in helping us to imagine a better future but rather in demonstrating our utter incapacity to imagine such a future."[1] However, humans continue to dream about 'possible worlds' that are somehow better than the world they live in, without necessarily aspiring towards ultimate perfection. In this sense, as less than holistic, transgressive visions of what has previously been unimaginable, unimagined and 'impossible,' contemporary utopian thinking abounds, both in political theory and in literary and critical discourse: the *International Bibliography of the Social Sciences* lists 1.724 entries for 'utopia' or 'utopian' since the late 1960s, 533 of which appeared during the last five years; the *MLA* lists 4.446 entries, 738 of which appeared after 2001. Obviously, utopia is still a concept that appeals to political thinkers, literary authors and critics alike.

Not surprisingly, then, the neo-conservative disputes in the U.S. over the world-wide installation of democratic political systems, the debates in the European Union about ideals of multicultural societies (e.g. the integration of ethnic minorities in the UK, the entry of Turkey into the EU) and the limits of tolerance and recognition (in legal terms), the ecological initiatives to counter global climate change, as well as the belligerent confrontations over the effects of globalization, all share the same questions that have been asked for thousands of years: What is the ideal or, less ambitiously, at least a better form of social order? How can humans live together harmoniously? What other political systems could exist beside the one we live in? How could life be different? How could it be better? It is ironic that these questions should often enough be denounced as 'utopian' in the predominant colloquial sense – as "unrealistic" (*Collins COBUILD*) or "impossibly or extravagantly ideal" (*OED*) and hence 'too good to come true,'

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[1] Fredric Jameson, "The Politics of Utopia," *New Left Review* 25 (January/February 2004): 35-54; 46.

when the critical impetus of utopian thinking is just that: 'imagining the impossible' so that the allegedly impossible can no longer be conveniently relegated to the invisible, voiceless and inconceivable.

Literature, and later film, has traditionally provided a medium for trying out answers to those questions in the form of utopian and dystopian fictions, either in vitriolic reaction to or in prescient anticipation of a given cultural context (in a wide sense of the term). Consistently, the multifarious problems that contemporary societies and nation states face in an ever more rapidly and drastically changing world offer a ripe occasion for a discussion of the role and function of utopian concepts in contemporary literature, film and cultures. However, those contemporary literary traces of utopian thought are often not immediately recognizable. This is a heritage of the generic blurring, i.e. the dissolution and fragmentation of the classical utopia, that has become increasingly visible since the 1970s – against the backdrop of social, political and cultural movements and the upheavals they caused. Thus, utopian thought often appears in unlikely places. Indeed, many of the essays collected here find utopian moments in predominantly dystopian narratives and contexts.

Dunja Mohr's contribution, "Transgressive Utopian Dystopias," provides an excellent starting point for this special issue, since she provides a brief overview of the genre's transmutations between utopia, dystopia and science fiction that has taken place over the last decades. Mohr suggests that a new subgenre has developed in recent years, particularly within feminist writing, which she calls "transgressive utopian dystopias" because these texts "incorporate within the dystopian narrative continuous utopian undercurrents" and "criticize, undermine, and transgress the established binary logic of dystopia." Her concept of the 'transgressive utopian dystopia' is then applied to the analysis of Szuy McKee Charnas's *Holdfast* tetralogy (1974-1999) and to Margaret Atwood's recent *Oryx and Crake* (2003).

Sämi Ludwig finds utopian moments in "representations of a flawed world," specifically in three novels by Chang-rae Lee. He suggests that these flawed worlds are where we have to look for utopian visions after the "apocalyptic experience of the twentieth century [that] has made straightforward utopia impossible." In Lee's novels, Ludwig argues, "utopian aspects mainly manifest themselves in the private realm; there mutual understanding is possible because the generation of new intended meanings is possible." However, their implementation outside the family realm remains difficult "because minorities (in his case mainly Korean Americans) remain excluded from the public realm of a policing syntax that imposes petrified old patterns of binary competition upon them." Despite this, Ludwig sees a "pragmatist vision of survival and even optimism" in Lee's novels, based on "the family as the American nucleus of development and agency, combining both traditional 'family values' and Asian notions of filiality." The essay thus deftly interweaves utopian visions and immigrant experience.

In his essay, Christoph Ribbat goes back to what is arguably the most notorious contemporary architectural nexus of utopian and dystopian visions: Las Vegas. He sheds new light on "the utopian function of the city in American aesthetics" by discussing its representation in American non-fiction and "the dystopian energies

of those literary texts positioned in the tradition of the New Journalism." The essay argues that "Southern Nevada, though frequently considered as a postmodern cityscape of simulacra, has in fact always been reflected and shaped by a strong realist tradition" and offers "an ambiguous template" not only of "visions of crassness" but, as a "unique laboratory of America's urban future," also of "republican dreams." In other words: (Dys/U)topia, Nevada.

In light of the fact that zombies are the walking dead and usually signify the end of civilization, the topic of our discussion in "No More Room in Hell: Utopian Moments in the Dystopia of *28 Days Later*" may seem an odd choice. However, zombies, like utopia itself, can function as a means to comment on or criticize present society; the creation of zombies in *28 Days Later* is linked to an utopian ideal, the elimination of rage; and the film can be read as a quest for a utopian space in a pastoral setting and for a society ordered by family structures. And while both goals seem to be reached at the end, this 'utopia' is far from stable. Thus, the film is discussed as a self-referential mixture of genres that combines dystopia with apocalypse, utopia with the pastoral, and that ironically undercuts all its generic statements.

While most essays in this issue look for traces of utopian thought, or for small utopian spaces, in the most unlikely places, Michael Green's paper, "The Future in the Post: Utopia in the Fiction of the New South Africa," both is and is not an exception. He introduces the literature of a country which many would say has undergone a transformation since the 1990s that seemed 'utopian' (i.e. 'impossible') for decades: Addressing the question what future lies beyond the apparent closure of the 'new' South Africa, Green draws on Jameson and Anderson to scrutinize the connections of the utopian and the national and its traces in the 'utopian mode' of the literature that imagined a state of 'post-apartheid.' However, with apartheid officially gone, Utopia (in its strong sense) has not appeared, and the text Green primarily focuses on, Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, again is no obvious example of the utopian.

The volume closes with an interview with Ernest Callenbach. Thirty years after the first publication of his *Ecotopia*, he assesses and maintains the validity of his vision for contemporary society. Offering an initially depressing tally when asserting that "we have in many areas backslid from where we were 30 years ago," he also sees "the intellectual and scientific and technological potential for rapid and massive change." However, he maintains that, since the political potential is lacking, it will be precisely those aspects of contemporary society most distant and/or adverse to his utopian vision that will eventually "anger so many people that it will generate the basic political strength to have significant effects" and bring about change. "In the long run, it is Ecotopia Or Bust:" utopias may once more arise out of dystopian contexts, though not without struggles and victims.

Thus the collection ends on a positive note, as far as the possibility and importance of utopian thought is concerned. And while all essays would agree that there is no blueprint for *the* perfect society to be had, that does not disqualify all those who discover utopian visions in the most unlikely environments.