**DYSTOPIA NOW**

26th May 2017:9am-6pm

Centre for Contemporary Literature

Keynes Library, 43 Gordon Square

Birkbeck, University of London

**Programme**

**9-10: KEYNOTE 1:** Caroline Edwards / Chair: Martin Eve  
  
**Panel Session 1: 10-11:30**  
  
**a) Feminist Perspectives** / Chair: Heather McKnight

SARAH LOHMANN  
Dystopian Entanglements: Violence in Joanna Russ’s *The Female Man*, Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time* and Sheri S. Tepper’s *A Gate to Women’s Country*  
  
Dystopian literature is often rife with violence – global war, systemic violence and personal assaults – while utopian literature is commonly associated with everlasting peace. However, in certain feminist utopias of the late 20th century, such as Joanna Russ’s *The Female Man* and Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time*, violence of varying degrees is present not only historically, as a tool that brought about the utopian society, but also to a greater or lesser extent as an instrument of its maintenance or current invocation. In my talk, I will examine the ambiguous attitude of these novels towards violence, as well as comparing them in this regard with Sheri S. Tepper’s *A Gate to Women’s Country*, a feminist post-apocalyptic quasi-utopia which is eventually revealed to be caught in a tragic loop of dystopian violence. Overall, I aim to interrogate the historical and current presence and function of violence in utopian literature, and in feminist utopias in particular, by drawing on the writings of Simone de Beauvoir, Hannah Arendt and others to investigate the role that power shifts play in the creation of better societies.

ASAMI NAKAMURA  
The Politics of Nostalgia in Katherine Burdekin’s *Swastika Night*  
  
Nostalgia is a yearning for home, or one’s past. Although nostalgia is a common theme in dystopian fiction, it is often criticised as sentimental and reactionary since such longing is fixated on one particular version of the past, presented as an authentic memory. In George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), for instance, Winston’s idealisation of his childhood undermines his resistance against the authorities, for it is exclusive in terms of race, class and sexuality. Yet the concept of nostalgia is not only limited to this fetishist/regressive type, which in fact verges on mythmaking rather than remembrance. What should be examined here is the possibility of a more self-reflective nostalgia and in what form that could be achieved.   
  
Katherine Burdekin’s *Swastika Night* (1937) explores the politics of nostalgia by presenting the regime’s master narrative and a counter-narrative of secret history. What particularly characterises *Swastika Night* is its suggestion of nostalgia with more emphasis on regret as a prerequisite for negotiating new futures (this is voiced by the knight von Hess). This resonates with what critics call feminine nostalgia, which is rooted in the female’s desire for what she never possessed. Memory is enacted by such nostalgia not to fetishise it, but rather to be able to long for and overcome it. What needs to be pointed out, however, is that in Burdekin’s text the counter-narrative and the idea of feminine nostalgia are predominantly voiced by men; this complicates the emancipatory aspect of feminine nostalgia as the text suppresses female voices almost thoroughly.   
  
This paper argues that, instead of dismissing nostalgia in dystopian fiction as inherently regressive, it is more productive to unravel its complex theoretical issues. For this *Swastika Night* proves to be a key text in its depiction of how nostalgia is politicised and gendered, thereby presenting memory as a social construct.

FIONA MARTINEZ  
Utopian Love in Dystopian Fiction: Jeanette Winterson’s *The Stone Gods* (2007)

This paper examines the ways in which Jeanette Winterson’s *The Stone Gods* (2007) presents lesbian romantic love which is feminist in its nature as a source of hope in dystopian times. Described as a text within which ‘love is offered as a solution to all the sickening patriarchal binaries’ (Birlick and Raskesen, 2007), Winterson’s novel (or rather novellas in a novel) features utopian ideals in a series of dystopian environments. Focusing on the feminist depiction of romantic love in the renewing relationship between recurring protagonist Billie Crusoe and robot or Robosapiens, Spike in *The Stone Gods*, I suggest that Winterson’s focus on romantic love between women contributes to contemporary conversations around queer ecology and allows room for faith and optimism in an otherwise dystopian novel through the depiction of love and emotion as powerful and authentic.

**b) From Big Brother to The Circle** / Chair: Christos Callow Jr

SIMON WILLMETTS

Surveillance Dystopias  
  
Fiction plays a crucial role in shaping public attitudes towards surveillance.  George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, for example, has a near omnipresent status in public, academic and practitioner debates about surveillance.  Yet whilst surveillance studies experts widely acknowledge Orwell’s influence, some argue that the metaphor of repressive state surveillance – Big Brother’s boot stamping repeatedly on the face of humanity – is no longer fit for purpose.  Instead they argue that more complex metaphors are required to account for the distributed and decentralised networks of relationships and systems of control that engender surveillance practices.

Some argue that it is not ‘Big Brother’ doing the watching, rather it us watching each other: ‘Sousveillance’.  Others argue that corporate surveillance by the likes of Facebook and Google poses a greater threat than even the NSA.  Whilst still others propose a Deleuzian understanding of ‘Surveillant Assemblages’. All of these metaphors suggest the existence of a data-driven world that is far more complex than the one Orwell imagined.   
  
So if not Orwell, who can provide us with the fictional metaphors we need to understand the future trajectory of contemporary surveillance practices?  This paper will focus on three recent novels, *The Circle*, *Super Sad True Love Story* and *Little Brother*, which have updated the twentieth century dystopian canon (Orwell-Huxley-Zamyatin) and arguably provided more appropriate guiding narratives for understanding our rapidly emerging ‘transparent society’.  This paper will explore these more recent dystopian representations of surveillance and suggest that a new canon of surveillance dystopias be assembled that is fit for purpose in the twenty first century.

PATRICIA MCMANUS  
Happy Dystopians  
  
This paper will use Dave Eggers’ *The Circle* (2013) as an example of a return to an older form of modelling dystopia as a place where a gendered seduction of a populace occurs in ways which negate ‘freedom’ via pleasure rather than force or fear. This is a model most familiar from the first or classical phase of dystopian fiction, in particular Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932).

Its return in the work of Eggers is of interest as it suggests also a return to a historically horrified liberalism, a liberalism conscious not only of its defeat but of its past complicity with all the forces which constituted that defeat. This is a particularly hopeless type of politics but it dramatizes itself in *The Circle* as a productive politics of privacy, as a defence of the private realm as the realm of both authenticity and of freedom.

That this turn to privacy is an odd move for the author of *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000) to make is clear but this paper will argue that Eggers’ trajectory is one being traced more generally by a contemporary writing desirous of moving to sincerity as a site of political value in an era perceived as being dystopian in part because of its hostility to privacy.

LAURA DE SIMONI  
From Heterotopia to Dystopia: changing dramatic spaces in Philip Ridley’s *The Pitchfork Disney*  
  
This paper will analyse the spatial organization of Philip Ridley’s *The Pitchfork Disney* (1991) in order to highlight the play’s heterotopic and dystopic qualities. Michel Foucault’s definition of heterotopias as ‘other spaces’ that represent contrast and invert real sites of society can be used to describe the dynamics of the spaces presented in *The Pitchfork Disney*’s script. In the play, the two protagonists – the twins Presley and Hayley Stray – live a self-contained life, fearing any contact with the external world. They comfort each other by the constant re-telling of grotesque stories about what the outside looks like and how scary it is. I shall argue that both the internal space of their house and the space of their fantasies can be better understood as ‘heterotopias of illusion’ in the Foucauldian sense. I shall then focus on an immersive production of the text at Shoreditch Town Hall in London (2017). I propose to show how the revival of the play directed by Jamie Lloyd managed to display the heterotopic qualities of the 1991 text, while exposing its dystopic features. I will try to show how the leap from heterotopia to dystopia happens in performance, thus revealing the (con) textual ambiguities embedded in such dystopian piece.

**Panel Session 2: 11:30-1**  
  
**c) Gender and Dystopia** / Chair: Patricia McManus

NICK HUBBLE  
Failed Patriarchal Orders and Interesting Times: Gender and Dystopia in Orwell, Banks, and Alderman  
  
Naomi Alderman’s *The Power* (2016), the only novel longlisted for the 2017 Orwell Prize, imagines both the collapse of contemporary society following women’s development of the ability to emit lethal electric shocks and the subsequent development of a matriarchal society over 5000 years which satirically reverses our current patriarchal society. The implication that maybe another 5000 years would be needed to develop an alternative more civilised society recalls the claim made by the Culture ship in Iain M. Banks’s *The State of the Art* (1989) that the Earth needs to pass through another 10,000 years of ‘interesting times’ before it will accept that ‘there is nothing intrinsically illogical about having a genuine, functioning Utopia’. In contrast, Banks’s novella relates the real world events of 1977 to demonstrate Earth societies as just a collection of dystopias. The most famous of this type of novel – those which paint a remorselessly dystopian picture in order to imply that any utopian possibility can only lie in breaking completely with all that has gone so far – is Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). In the light of the recent critical trend to see the character of Julia as embodying Orwell’s hopes of resistance, these paper reads all three texts as exposing the dystopia of failed patriarchal societies in order to imply that utopian possibilities can only exist outside those orders.

SEAN DONNELLY  
Young Adult Dystopian Fiction as Postfeminist Utopia  
  
Young Adult Dystopian Fiction (YADF) has become a popular sub-genre of contemporary popular fiction. The dystopian boom is often linked to the idea that contemporary adolescents are anxious about a future increasingly perceived as frightening and uncertain, but YADF is also notable for its consistent focus on young women as the arbiters of utopian possibility. YADF has been lauded for providing narratives of young female empowerment through trilogies centred on girl heroes, most notably the *Uglies* (2005-7), *Hunger Games* (2008-10) and *Divergent* (2011-13) trilogies.  
  
In this paper, I will show that despite the manifest dysfunctions of these dystopian societies, gender inequality appears to have been solved as a social problem and is rarely explicitly registered as a locus of power and control. Drawing on Angela McRobbie’s *The Aftermath of Feminism* (2009), I will suggest that YADF can be read as a projection of the future as a postfeminist utopia, in which the battles of feminism have long been won and are no longer relevant. I will critique this projection as an illusion which separates girls both inside and outside the text from a vocabulary with which to identify the manifestly gendered expectations still weighed upon them by their societies.

HEATHER MCKNIGHT  
Dystopian Narratives of Motherhood and Reproduction in TV Science Fiction: Challenging the Patriarchy or Reinventing the Witch Hunt?  
  
‘I am not your property. I am not your weapon’  
- Orphan Black  
  
We see increasing numbers of women in science fiction TV with prominent channels such as Syfy seeing renewed success with what is seen as ‘feminist programming’, and many dealing with critical dystopian narratives of motherhood and reproduction. The focus on how these women are controlled, and in particular how their reproductive processes are controlled, and ‘weaponised’ is worthy of inquiry, through examining thematic and conflicted ways in which their reproductive bodies are used to control or liberate them. This paper questions to what extent these discourses are representations of the ways in which women are used and abused in society, to what extent they are challenging these abuses and making us question our realities, and to what extent they are reinforcing or propagating them.  This article will explore specific examples of this weaponised reproduction in *Fringe* (2008 - 2013), *Orphan Black* (2013 – 2016), *Sense8* (2015 – 2016), *Helix* (2014 – 2015) and *Jessica Jones* (2015), querying narratives of the witch hunt, and questioning whether these critical imaginaries will be able to contain within them a space where women face and overcome these issues, rather than being in a position of perpetual martyrdom.

**d) New Perspectives: MA panel** / Chair: Francis Gene-Rowe  
  
FRANK JACKMAN  
A comparative reading of entropy in H.G. Wells’ *The Time Machine* and J.G. Ballard’s early fiction  
  
My proposed paper centres around a comparative reading of three dystopian texts: Wells’ *The Time Machine*, and Ballard’s *The Drowned World* and ‘The Voices of Time’; these texts deal with the idea of entropy- both social and physical. My intention is to draw comparisons between the way in which entropy is presented by both authors, and then conclude whether the three portrayals of entropy are of the future- or as I would like to posit, the present. My readings and interpretations of the three texts will be supplemented by both primary and secondary sources on each text. I intend to place all texts within their social and scientific contexts- looking at how Wells’ was influenced by post-Darwinian thought (for example Max Nordau and Edwin Lancaster on social degeneration) and the emerging theories of thermodynamics (using Bruce Clarke’s *Energy Forms* as a starting point). Similarly, with Ballard I will look at the influence of information theory on his portrayal of entropy, as well as how he carries on the threads of entropic thought established by Wells. I will argue that through using dystopian settings and the theme of entropy the two authors can provide a commentary on contemporary societal and scientific concerns.  
  
LAWRENCE JONES  
Utopian, dystopian & heterotopian spaces in Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *We*  
  
In his 1967 essay, Des espaces autres (trans: Of Other Spaces), Michel Foucault discusses the concept of a heterotopia. In contrast to imaginary utopian spaces, a heterotopia is a real space which is simultaneously mythical and real, utopian and heterotopian. Foucault states that heterotopias are most often linked to ‘slices in time’ and ‘function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time’. Published in 1924, Yevgeny Zamyatin’s novel, *We*, is set in the dystopian world of the One State where a person’s days are strictly managed by clock-time; and instead of being given a name people are assigned a number. It was written as a protest against an increasingly totalitarian Bolshevik Russia that embraced F.W. Taylor’s scientific management principles. D503, the protagonist of Zamyatin’s novel, is a loyal citizen who gradually begins to question the credo of One State and instead starts to appreciate memory and the past. Living in a dystopian present he envisages a heterotopian future which seemingly realises a utopian past. In Foucault’s words, D503 becomes a man who has arrived at a ‘break with their traditional time’.  
  
What do heterotopias say about our seemingly dystopian present? Is the answer to progress by reaching back to a ‘real’ utopian past – a heterotopia?  
   
  
EDEN DAVIS  
Zomes to Zigotisopolis: Counterculture and Digital Utopianism in Thomas Pynchon’s *Bleeding Edge*  
  
Suggested by the continuing resonances, in the rhetoric governing ‘cyberspace’ from the Cold War to the present day, of a radical utopianism first associated with the literature of sixties counterculture, the ‘New Left’, and the Whole Earth Catalogue’s communitarianism, this paper will consider aspects of technological utopia in Thomas Pynchon’s postmodernist nostalgias. I will aim to trace, in the fin de millénaire digital u-/dys-topias nascent in *Bleeding Edge* (2013), the historic and ideological continuities and incongruities within this narrative: an aetiology of transhumanist utopianism that is identified and critiqued in this novel, and elsewhere in Pynchon’s works. Fred Turner’s 2006 study, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism*, has, as its title suggests, concretised this lineage instructively. Through a close reading of *Bleeding Edge*’s transhumanist ‘geographies’ of cyberspace, I will examine Pynchon’s strategies of nostalgia/paranoia as complimentary organising principles in his critique of a techno-utopian disavowal of ‘*engagé*’ structural thinking. Through the lens of Adorno’s percipient critique of aesthetic individualism, I will argue that Pynchon’s electronic frontier stages an ironic resistance to the atomizing character of digital transhumanism, a utopia irresistibly undermined by the old hegemonies of capital, totalitarianism, and political reaction. In conclusion, I will argue that Pynchon presents competing visions of cyberspace, responding perhaps to the Foucauldian notion of the heterotopia. The first embodies a decentred cybernetic vision of abyssal plenitude, atomized consciousness, and the retreating horizons of conspiracy. In the second, significantly associated with the child’s playfully intuitive manipulation of ‘bleeding edge’ technology, I will argue that Pynchon invokes quite a different strain of Cold War-era radical utopianism. In directing the possibilities of virtual reality software towards a nostalgic recuperation of their New York neighbourhood before the dislocating events of 9/11, the children of the millennium practice a digital urbanism, or psychogeography: a model of ‘utopia’ arguably more familiar to readers of Guy Debord, Benjamin’s Paris Arcades, or the novels of Italo Calvino, than Buckminster Fuller or Norbert Wiener.

**1-2: Lunch** (own arrangements)

**Panel Session 3: 2-3:30**

**e)  Apocalyptic Times** / Chair: Aren Roukema

ALICE REEVE –TUCKER  
‘Glowing in that waste like a tabernacle’: Religious Hope in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*  
  
Critical writing on Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* tends to focus on the novel’s pessimistically dystopian elements. In the post-apocalyptic landscape McCarthy envisages, much of humanity has regressed into primitive blood cults, which survive by enslaving, raping, and devouring men, women, and children. The novel’s protagonist is a loving father, whose survivalist instincts make him distrust and avoid contact with strangers. He also struggles internally with his faith, at times hating the God he feels has cruelly abandoned him and his child, a young boy, to a heathen, dying world.  
  
Despite the isolationist teachings of his father, the young boy retains a desire to connect with others and to help them in the depraved environments through which he travels. Time and again, the boy’s instinct is to protect and nurture those who are most vulnerable. McCarthy augments the theme of childish innocence with religious symbolism, as the child becomes associated with a Christian desire to heal. By the end of the novel, the boy even renews his father’s faith in God. The father’s image of his son as a tabernacle, a receptacle of consecrated elements of the Eucharist, symbolises the symbolic function of the child in *The Road*. In an evil waste land, the boy is a vessel for religious hope.  
  
My claim is that McCarthy uses dystopian themes and imagery not as the end-point of the novel, but as a means with which to illuminate the religious significance of the child. Rather than focusing on the evil environment, McCarthy chooses to foreground how the boy metaphorically carries the fire of goodness into the unknown, and uncertain future, in a Messiah-like way. Essentially, and against the odds, the child retains his purity and a form of Christian morality in the direst of circumstances. Thus the novel can be interpreted not as a pessimistic dystopia, but as a critical dystopia (to borrow Lyman Tower Sargent’s term) in which a possible future road out of darkness must contend with the uncertainties of the post-apocalyptic present.

DILETTA DE CRISTOFARO  
Critical Temporalities in the Contemporary Post-Apocalyptic Novel  
  
This paper interrogates the prevalence of dystopian imagery in contemporary post-apocalyptic fictions, arguing that it entails a critique of traditional apocalyptic discourse and, in particular, of its conception of time.  
  
In the first part of my talk, I flesh out the difference between the traditional apocalyptic paradigm and its contemporary articulations. Whilst we generally think of the apocalypse as a catastrophe of unprecedented proportions and overwhelming consequences, something which would, then, most likely bring about a dystopian post-apocalyptic scenario, catastrophe is only the contemporary meaning of apocalypse. The latter term etymologically denotes the revelation of a utopian teleology in history. Apocalyptic writings flourish at a time of crisis as narratives that seek to make sense of troubled periods by revealing that the whole course of human history is tending towards a final resolution which paves the way for a radical utopian renewal. And since apocalyptic logic is inherently temporal, I argue that the shift from traditional utopian revelation to contemporary dystopian catastrophe is also about time: it is about temporalities critical of apocalyptic time. In the second part of my talk, I focus on examples of critical temporalities in the contemporary post-apocalyptic novel, from Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* and its temporal inversion, namely the depiction of the future as a return to a past – and barbarian – stage of human civilization, to David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* and its non-linear narrative structure.

CHRIS PAK  
Dystopia and Utopia at the Cusp in Cory Doctorow’s *Walkaway: A Novel*  
  
Described as a utopian disaster novel, Cory Doctorow’s *Walkaway* (2017) explores the possibility of establishing a utopia in a post-scarcity world where the widening gap between the wealthy and poor threatens to lead to a speciation of humanity into elite transhumans and climate refugees who function simply as surplus resources. Doctorow writes that ‘[t]he difference between utopia and dystopia isn’t how well everything runs. It’s about what happens when everything fails. Here in the nonfictional, disastrous world, we’re about to find out which one we live in’ (‘Disasters Don’t Have to End in Dystopias,’ *Wired*, 2017). Against the background of a world dominated by the imperative of economic accumulation as a signifier of power, *Walkaway* examines the relationship between utopia and dystopia in a world that could resolve into either.  
  
*Walkaway* works as both a critique of dystopia, and as an inspiration for the work of creating a utopia in the face of disaster. In this presentation, I examine how Doctorow uses dystopia and utopia to comment on contemporary society, and how he uses these narrative modes to interrogate the values and assumptions that underpin both orientations to the future.

**f) Politics & Finance** / Chair: Nick Hubble  
  
CHRISTINA BRENNAN  
‘Dystopian Finance Fiction’: Foreclosure, Homeownership and the end of United States in Lionel Shriver’s *The Mandibles*  
  
In the *New York Times*, Ruth Franklin praises Lionel Shriver’s *The Mandibles: A Family, 2029-2047* (2016), centred on the eponymous Brooklyn family who lose their fortune amidst a global currency war, as a ‘searing exemplar of a disquieting new genre – call it dystopian finance fiction’. This paper interrogates Franklin’s definition of ‘dystopian finance fiction’ and argues that this sub-genre, with its particular resonance after the 2007-08 US subprime mortgage crisis, is centred on the American (specifically white, middle-class) homeowner whose destitution after house foreclosure is synonymous with the national collapse and and devolution of the United States. Specifically, I argue that *The Mandibles* intersects a contemporary dystopian trend in popular and political culture (which envisages the ‘shrinking’, ‘crippling’, or inevitable ‘destruction’ of middle-class America) with imagery from conservative ‘doomsdays’ (perpetuated by far-right media pundits including Glen Beck) which envisage the ‘Hispanicization’ of the American Southwest, and the eventual collapse of the US under a liberal, predominantly Latino, US administration. Situating this close-reading of *The Mandibles* within the context of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, my paper reflects on the contemporary intersection of dystopia and realism, and ultimately how contemporary dystopian narratives support opposing racial projects in today’s ‘climate of fear’.  
  
ADAM WELSTEAD  
‘Dystopia, Dissensus and the Divided Kingdom’  
  
A fundamental claim of Jacques Rancière’s recent philosophical work is that both aesthetics and politics are forms of dissensus. Dissensus, for Rancière, is ‘an activity that cuts across forms of cultural and identity belonging and hierarchies between discourses and genres, working to introduce new subjects and heterogeneous objects into the field of perception’ (2010: 2). This inherently egalitarian manifestation of the political (*la politique*) ruptures the homogeneous consensus of a ‘police order’ (*la police*) and transforms a given socio-political space of appearance in order that heterogeneity and political subjectivities can emerge. This paper argues that contemporary writers of dystopian fiction are meaningfully engaged in this ‘activity’ of dissensus – an argument that supports Tom Moylan’s claim that dystopian literature can ‘enable its writers and readers to find their way within – and sometimes against and beyond – the conditions that mask the very causes of the harsh realities in which they live’ (2000: xii). The paper begins by exploring forms of dissensus evidenced in the work of contemporary authors such as J.G. Ballard, Maggie Gee, Sarah Hall and Rupert Thomson. The main section of the paper presents a theoretically-informed close reading of Thomson’s timely novel *Divided Kingdom* (2005), and assesses the ways in which Divided Kingdom challenges destructive forms of consensus surrounding discourses of belonging, inequality and democratic participation in contemporary Britain. The paper concludes with the affirmation that, rather than offering a mere political pessimism, the ‘dystopian dissensus’ evident in contemporary British dystopian fiction presents a potent, transformative mode of critique through which we might interrogate our increasingly divided political present.

ESTHER ANDREU

Living in Interesting Times: Dystopia as a Place for Hope  
  
In *The Political Unconscious* (1981) Jameson pointed out a ‘convenient working distinction between cultural texts that are social and political and those that are not’, which also conveniently creates a gap between the poetic and the political. This last decade seems to be putting an end to the widespread idea we were fed since the 1990s that we were living the end of history, and that talking about politics and literature was somewhat of bad taste.

Taking Clifford D. Simak’s *City* as example, I would like to reflect in this paper about despair and resignation in the dystopian writing, but also the role of dystopia and utopia as a potential place for resistance and hope. Following the idea of politics as something that permeates all aspects of life, this paper tries to relate dystopia to what might be fairly considered as a dystopian present, and reconnect it to the private and the poetic as political. I would argue that reading and rereading dystopia now is important because ‘the exploration of alternative is necessary part of the process of transformation’ and it brings the opportunity of a potential ‘life-transforming shift in consciousness’ (‘Utopia in Dark Times’, Lucy Sargisson).

**Panel Session 4: 3:30-5**  
  
**g) Cities & Ecologies** / Chair: Chris Pak

AMY BUTT  
Aerial Perspective: Estrangement and Vertical Urbanism

‘It was an evil deed to change the world in this way, to pile up thousands of people in a single colossal building, to create this beehive life.’ Robert Silverberg, *The World Inside*  
  
A report by New London Architecture published in 2015 details the 263 towers currently being considered for planning permission in London. Alongside the iconic heights of buildings such as the Burj Kalipha, this abundance of high-rise development in cities such as London demonstrates the extent to which vertical urbanism and the experience of living at height are rapidly becoming ubiquitous and inescapable parts of everyday urban reality. Drawing on Darko Suvin’s definition of science-fiction (sf) as the literature of ‘cognitive estrangement’, this paper argues that dystopian sf provides a critical space for reflection on this proliferation of vertical urbanism. This paper will examine the classic dystopian sf novel, *High Rise* by J.G Ballard, written in response to the vertical transformation of London in the 1960s and 1970s, alongside the contemporary dystopian sf of Kim Stanley Robinson’s *New York 2140*, which places the transformation of the vertical city within the wider context of radical environmental change. It will utilise the principles of utopia as method developed by Ruth Levitas to question the fears at their foundation and the social structures they make manifest.  
  
These novels provide space to question the social and spatial intent which underpins this urban change. These dystopian high-rises provide a space from which to challenge principles of urban development which might otherwise seem inevitable, a vantage point from which to influence the vision of the future city currently under construction.

SEAN GRATTAN  
Apocalypse, Near Apocalypse, Post-Apocalypse: The Disaster and What Remains  
   
The dystopia of the contemporary no longer looks like the brutalist blocks of Huxley or Orwell. Instead, the contemporary dystopia pits individuals or small bands of  
hardy crusaders against a world changed—but not destroyed—by a cataclysmic event. In *Zone One*, by Colson Whitehead, for instance, Mark Spitz reflects on his old life while making lower Manhattan habitable for the rich again. In *New York: 2140*, Kim Stanley Robinson describes the normalization of fifty foot floodwaters in New York. Stock market forces rage on and the rich get richer. Perhaps the real dystopia, then, is the persistence of capitalism through the apocalyptic.

HOLLIE JOHNSON  
Anthropocenic Hubris: Dystopian Visions of Environmental Fall  
  
What happens when the utopian aspirations of our society are shown to be fundamentally opposed to the material limitations of our surrounding environment? Arguably, it is in pursuit of the modern utopia -the neoliberal vision of limitless man -that the current environmental crisis has come to haunt the horizon, complicating previous ideals of progress, profit, and comfort. Environmental breakdown thus stands as the dystopian outcome of our utopian hubris, and has become a staple feature in recent speculative fiction, with many dystopian texts presenting nightmarish future societies which emerge from the consequences of environmental destruction.  
  
The shift in content away from anthropocentric concerns and towards more ecologically holistic visions of humanity demands new formal innovations, which often challenge the traditional conventions of the dystopian novel. Addressing these challenges, this paper explores the literary techniques employed within an emerging trend of ecodystopian fiction. I analyse how these texts portray the consequences of environmental change for the day-to-day functioning of the economy, society, and ethics of the modern world, and consequently attempt to challenge contemporary attitudes towards environmental politics. Ultimately, this paper argues that the genre of dystopia offers a potentially productive forum for creating an ecocritical dialogue around the issues of environmental exploitation and responsibility.  
  
**h) MetaDystopia** / Chair: Francis Gene-Rowe

CHRISTOS CALLOW  
The Dystopian Function of Dystopian Literature and its Criticism: Factual and fictional crises in *The Lobster*  
  
Instead of solely examining the purpose of dystopian literature, this paper will explore the purpose of examining such a literature; what is the function of such a genre, and of its criticism? My approach will focus on the latter question, my argument being that the very nature of dystopian literature, as a fiction of social criticism, reflects the essence of literary criticism and critical thinking in general; that the genre is to contemporary literature, film and popular culture what literary criticism is to the genre.  
  
My paper will look at both fact and fiction to explore two dystopian functions; that of the genre and that of its critique. Taking the metaphysical approach of Joyce Hertzler into consideration – that ‘Utopia is not a social state it is a state of mind’ (and so is its opposite, dystopia), I will examine the dystopian mentality in recent dystopian fiction, such as the film *The Lobster* and in dystopian actuality, such as the current socio-political climate in the UK. My primary concern is the role of the dystopian critic; how can one meaningfully critique dystopia, but most importantly, how can one, through dystopia, critique criticism? Keith Booker plays on Bloch’s ‘utopian impulse’ in his book, ‘The dystopian impulse in modern literature.’ My approach on the Dystopian function of the genre and its criticism similarly draws inspiration from Bloch’s ‘The Utopian Function of Art and Literature.’

MAXI ALBRECHTS  
‘It Ain’t Rocket Science’ – The Cultural Politics of Survival Intelligences in Contemporary Dystopia  
  
Fictional contemporary dystopian narratives often crystallize around aspects of survival and the characters’ struggle to survive. They construct values and skills deemed not only vital to survival in a specific dystopian scenario, but I argue that they also construct, reflect on and actively contribute to wider socio-cultural conceptions of survival skills, and by extension further signify as skills and abilities which are legitimized as symbolic capital outside of this survivalist context. Aside from bodily skills and strength, cognitive abilities – including practical, emotional and social intelligences – are central aspects of survival. Many struggles faced in the dystopian scenario are framed in terms of having and employing intelligences to survive.  
  
Thus, taking intelligences as medially and culturally constructed and constructing entities, this paper will argue that contemporary dystopian narratives highlight the vital importance of certain intelligences and that their representation symbolically legitimizes these intelligences as symbolic capital and thus renders them markers of socio-cultural meaning. By exemplarily analyzing Alex Royas’ movie *I, Robot* (2004), I will argue in this paper that the dystopian genre uniquely highlights human intelligences and their significant cultural relevance as producers and bearers of meaning and that the genre and its conventions actively contribute to this process.  
  
THOMAS TRAVERS  
Archaeology for a Future Age: Generic Discontinuities and Don DeLillo’s *Zero K*  
  
Don DeLillo’s 2016 novel *Zero K* marks both the continuation of the themes of historical temporalization, technological acceleration, and the global rule of finance capital that dominated his twenty-first century fiction, and the reactivation of an older generic concern with the ‘institutional’ novel found in *Endzone* and *Ratner’s Star*. Predominantly set in a research centre called ‘the Convergence’, itself located in an indeterminate region of the former Soviet Union, DeLillo arguably ‘decodes’ the collective Utopia of Communism and recodes it with capital’s fantasy of immortality. Taking its cue from the striking similarity between the narrator, Jeffrey Lockhart’s reflection on the cryogenic pods as ‘archaeology for a future age’ and Fredric Jameson’s theorisation of science fiction as ‘archaeologies of the future’, this paper will scan ‘the Convergence’ for its anticipations of ‘dystopia now’. Shifting from the ‘cosmological’ or ‘transcendent’ crisis of the meteor that landed outside Chelyabinsk, to the ‘political’ or ‘immanent’ crisis of Konstantinovka, via the suspended perpetual present of the cryogenically frozen Artis Martineau, the Convergence becomes a site of overlapping and nonsynchronous temporalities. The presentation will focus on the one hand on DeLillo’s representation of cryogenics, arguing that it functions in the novel as an ‘exodus’ of capital, a ‘dropping out of history’ from above. On the other, the paper will pause on the films of climate disaster that recur throughout the novel, suggesting that DeLillo produces something that, after Hito Steyerl, called be called ‘the wretched of the screen’. The argument will conclude by exploring the extent to which the generic discontinuities that constitute DeLillo’s text could be considered symptomatic of a world and planet ‘out of joint’.

**5-6: KEYNOTE 2:** Mark Bould / Chair: Roger Luckhurst