



BOOK REVIEW:

*New Perspectives on Dystopian Fiction in
Literature and Other Media*

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Isomaa, Saija, Jyrki Korpua, and Jouni Teittinen, editors. *New Perspectives on Dystopian Fiction in Literature and Other Media*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020. ISBN 978-1527555396.

Over the last decade or so, popular culture has shown an increasing fascination with dystopia. This dystopian turn has been the subject of much discussion in academia, while traditional news and social media provide daily reminders of the climate apocalypses, technocratic surveillance states, resurgent fascisms, and economic collapses currently in progress. It is within this context that the edited volume *New Perspectives on Dystopian Fiction* aims to intervene. The interdisciplinary and multi-medium approach taken by this collection is welcome, as is its anti-essentialist approach to genre. It also contains much well-contextualised and readable analysis. Nonetheless, more careful and substantial attention to the broader issues of race, class, and queerness would have helped the book more fully grasp the urgency of contemporary times.

According to the editors, the broad, overarching argumentative thrust of this collection is that “dystopian fiction is an umbrella term” from under which a variety of texts slip in and out (xi). Correspondingly, dystopia is historically contingent, and there is no “essence” to dystopian fiction that “remains the same through changes over time and place” (xii). The editors seek to distance themselves, for example, from the approach taken by M. Keith Booker and Anne-Marie Thomas in *The Science Fiction Handbook* (2009), which separates out dystopian and (post)apocalyptic SFs, and instead they emphasise the “thematic connectedness and overlapping of these historical genres” (xii). The editors, and several of the contributors, also make frequent reference to the

work of utopian studies scholars Tom Moylan and Lyman Tower Sargent. In particular, Moylan's work on the concept of critical dystopia and his exploration of the fluid boundaries between dystopia, utopia, and anti-utopia are recurring reference points for this collection. Additionally, a commitment to interdisciplinary analysis also ties together the chapters in this collection. Various chapters draw from approaches as diverse as literary studies, game studies, affective science, and animal studies.

To provide an overview, the first part of the book collects together chapters that consider societal dystopia. The first four chapters – by Saija Isomaa, Sari Kivistö, Hanna Samola, and Jyrki Korpua, respectively – all analyse texts that portray the operation and functioning of totalitarian societies. The first two chapters broadly make reference to canonical dystopias such as George Orwell's *1984* (1949), Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1924), and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932). Samola's chapter turns towards feminist dystopia by focusing on Margaret Atwood's canonical *Handmaid's Tale* (1985) alongside Johanna Sinisalo's more contemporary novel *The Core of the Sun* (2013). Korpua's chapter provides a meticulously contextualised analysis of fascist and theocratic visions of English society in two late 20th-century British graphic novels, *The Adventures of Luther Arkwright* (1978–1989) and *V for Vendetta* (1982–1989). Next, Kaisa Kaukiainen focuses on religious subtexts in young-adult fiction, paying particular attention to Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* (2008). In the last chapter of this section, Esko Suoranta analyses the tensions between dystopia and utopia in Thomas Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge* (2013).

Out of this first section two chapters particularly stand out. First, Kivistö's chapter centres on a close reading of *1984*, paying close attention to physical descriptions of pain and suffering. In Kivistö's reading, pain is a “central totalizing force in Orwell's dystopian society” that “prevents all meaning making and social engagements” by doing violence to language (33, 42). Kivistö explores how pain functions at the level of language within *1984* and places Orwell into dialogue with Virginia Woolf's writings on illness. Kivistö contrasts Woolf's assertion that experiences of pain require the construction of a “new language and unusual expressions” with Orwell's novel where “acts of violence remove words and destroy language” (32). Second, Suoranta's analysis of *Bleeding Edge* provides a refreshingly nuanced utopian perspective to Pynchon's engagement with cyberpunk. Questioning Darko Suvin's assertion that “collective and public” utopianism cannot emerge in cyberpunk, Suoranta considers how Pynchon reconfigures the cyberpunk mode (106). In Suoranta's reading, for Pynchon, utopia “remains ever compromised, but as such non-finite and kept open to the possibility of change” (113). Through an analysis of how systems of technology and meaning-making are contested, this chapter carefully draws out a potentially radical, multiple, and ever negotiated open-source politics within Pynchon's novel.

The chapters in the book's second section all engage in some way with representations of the post-apocalypse. The first two, by Jouni Teittinen and Mikko Mäntyniemi, respectively, both focus on the overlapping, folded, and simultaneous temporal relationships between past, present, and future in post-apocalyptic fiction. Both chapters focus on the early 2000s, with Teittinen's chapter centring on Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) and Mäntyniemi looking towards Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003). The following chapter, by

Sari Piittinen reads the video-game *Fallout 3* (2008) through the lens of Gothic dystopia. Next, Essi Vatiolo's chapter engages with the TV shows *Battlestar Galactica* and *Caprica*, considering both their boundaries between utopia and dystopia and their understandings of collective human responsibility. Finally, the last two chapters take an ecological turn. Maria Laakso closely reads Richard Adams's *Watership Down* (1972) as an indicative animal dystopia. By this, Laakso argues that Adams's novel can be "perceived as [a] dystopian eco-novel" which critiques the "destructive capacities of human societies from the perspective of an animal" (203). Finally, Juha Raipola and Toni Lahtinen read Johanna Sinisalo's New Weird novel *Birdbrain* (2010) and its attempts to unsettle colonial narratives of human mastery.

Out of the second half of the collection, Piittinen's chapter particularly stands out. Bethesda's *Fallout 3* is often compared unfavourably with Obsidian's subsequent *Fallout: New Vegas* (2010), but Piittinen offers a compelling reading of Gothic monstrosity within the text. Piittinen argues that monstrosity is a point of connection between dystopia and the Gothic. Drawing on Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's analysis of monsters as symbolic of social boundaries, difference, and otherness, Piittinen considers the uniqueness of video games as a medium for constructing both destabilising and sympathetic encounters between players and monsters. For Piittinen, *Fallout 3* provides the player not just with "Gothic monstrosities" for the player to defeat, but also with "those whose monstrosity the players must assess" (179). Both Laakso's and Raipola and Lahtinen's chapters provide interesting and engaging close readings of their central texts. Laakso argues that certain animal fantasy novels function as more than just allegories and can be read as animal dystopias, which work to defamiliarise and estrange humans while simultaneously humanising animals. Likewise, Raipola and Lahtinen examine how the novel *Birdbrain* destabilises the boundaries between the human and non-human, critiquing narratives of human rationality and agency from an ecological perspective. In *Birdbrain*, the environment itself comes to have a "menacing agency" as Sinisalo's "novel starts to deconstruct the dichotomy between the human and non-human" (236).

There are however some oversights of methodology and perspective within the collection that should be noted. First, in the chapters that discuss Margaret Atwood, there is no mention of the broader feminist dystopian tradition that underpins her work, including the works of writers such as Suzy McKee Charnas, Joanna Russ, and James Tiptree Jr. There is also no recognition of black feminist critiques of Atwood's work. For instance, the dystopian forms of gendered and reproductive discipline depicted in *The Handmaid's Tale* have historically been disproportionately targeted at marginalised black women. What is presented as a dystopian scenario for white women in Atwood's text has historically been, and in many cases continues to be, reality for many women of colour.

This is indicative of a wider oversight within the collection where the uneven nature of "dystopia" and "apocalypse" as critical terms is under-acknowledged. As a dystopian text like Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) suggests, the apocalypse can be experienced deeply unevenly, and different individuals and communities slip into – and experience – apocalypse at different speeds. While several chapters in the collection acknowledge that dystopia is often utopian for some, the implications of race and class raised by

this assertion are not always fully explored – although, notably, Korppu’s chapter does identify in Alan Moore’s work an analysis of how fanatical English nationalism operates to oppress and marginalise ethnic and sexual minorities.

Likewise, Laakso, Raipola, and Lahtinen do begin to acknowledge issues of ecology and colonialism, but the reader is given the impression that environmental crisis is being driven by humanity as an undifferentiated whole. Alternatively, it might be argued that western capitalist modernity specifically, along with the neo-colonial relations that underpin it, is the driving force of contemporary ecological destruction. The collection often refers to the warning function of dystopian fiction, but a warning for whom, precisely? A more intersectional analysis is needed: for marginalised people around the world, particularly for black, queer, and indigenous peoples, the most dystopian and apocalyptic predictions that the privileged can imagine have already arrived. While some inroads are made towards these issues in the book, a more substantial centring of texts written from marginalised perspectives would have helped significantly.

However, there is still much to recommend the collection. The writing is clear and engaging throughout, making the text suitable for those new to SF and dystopian studies. There are also enough sparks of new insight and innovation to interest those familiar with the field. Each of the chapters contributes something to the study of its respective cultural texts. And, taken together, the collection offers a range of further interdisciplinary perspectives on dystopian media.

Biography: Sasha Myerson is a PhD student at Birkbeck College, University of London. Her research focuses on urban space and the built environment in 1990s feminist cyberpunk SF. Sasha is a former co-director of the London Science-Fiction Research Community and a member of the Beyond Gender research collective. She has written on Japanese cyberpunk film for *Science-Fiction Film and Television* and has co-authored a forthcoming chapter on the SF poetics of Sun Ra.