



BOOK REVIEW:

*Absent Rebels: Criticism and Network  
Power in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Dystopian Fiction*

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Gonnermann, Annika. *Absent Rebels: Criticism and Network Power in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Dystopian Fiction*. Narr Francke Attempto Verlag, 2021. ISBN 978-3823384595.

What is neoliberalism? Is it a project of the ruling class in which the state forms a crucial part, or is it a phase of our current mode of production characterised by the withering of the state and its replacement by market forces? Any clear-cut answer to this question will be difficult to defend as, whilst it's clear that the state under neoliberalism does relinquish a minimal duty of care to its citizens, wrested from them after the golden years of capitalism, that same state nonetheless stands permanently ready to shore up the interests of the so-called free market; to legislate to maintain the grip of a technocratic elite; and to police a burgeoning and increasingly impoverished working class. Despite attending to some of these complexities from the state-driven side of neoliberalism, Annika Gonnermann's *Absent Rebels* still mostly advances a vision of neoliberalism in which market forces cleanly replace the state. But this vision isn't necessarily, or just, down to the author's own view of the economic system in question. It is, in fact, largely driven by a crucial development adeptly identified by *Absent Rebels*: namely, that depictions of the state in contemporary dystopian literature have disappeared and have been replaced by a view of potential corporate authoritarianism.

We might well posit, then, a schematic ideological function to the disappearance of depictions of the state as identified by Gonnermann: contemporary dystopia that foregrounds corporate power at the expense of state power smooths over the complex overlap between these two things under

neoliberalism, and it creates a view of a spontaneous flowering of domination on the part of corporations. If the totalitarian state of Orwell and Huxley no longer exists, this is attributable more to a particular worldview than any actually existing developments in this regard. Whilst Gonnermann doesn't really address the potentially ideological quality of the development she identifies, she does track a cluster of other developments within what now seems to be an – if not *the* – established mode of the genre. These include depictions of what she dubs “absent rebels”, waning democratic forms, networked power structures, and immanent forms of critique.

In each chapter of the book, we work through this cluster of concepts in turn, and the monograph soon settles into a recognisable pattern of detection and exegesis. This pattern is to Gonnermann's credit: *Absent Rebels* is systematic and thorough, and it convincingly demonstrates the case for the evolution of the dystopian form in relation to the shifting political terrain in the years in which neoliberalism became practically established – namely, the years following the Reagan/Thatcher era. Further, the monograph articulates well how each of its headline concepts works with the other; thus, the absence of rebellion in 21<sup>st</sup>-century dystopia is itself an effect of networked power structures seemingly without centres of command or control. And this form of network power is one which fits neatly with neoliberal ideologies of personal choice and the more hard-edged operations of a now fully global form of capitalism from which states opt out at their peril. If the waning of democratic forms, too, appears as a function of all the other concepts at stake, then this also opens up onto the way Gonnermann reads dystopia in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as providing a form of critique. For the texts that Gonnermann tracks – from M. T. Anderson's *Feed* (2002) to Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005) – don't hold forth on the disappearance of agential subjecthood and democratic norms in order to propose a new mode of society. Rather, a waning of agency and democracy is depicted with the goal of pointing out the flaws and contradictions from within the logic of the (dystopian) societies envisioned themselves. This immanent form of critique, we are told, is one the signatures of 21<sup>st</sup>-century dystopia, and it lends itself well to an emergent networked form of power. It also allows the reader to “comprehend the power mechanisms of 21<sup>st</sup> century neoliberal capitalism” (297).

The literary example that crystallizes Gonnermann's conceptual framework best is probably Dave Eggers's *The Circle* (2013), which Gonnermann analyses in Chapter 1. Readers familiar with Eggers's novel will likely already know the way in which his text depicts the rise of an all-encompassing multinational housed in Silicon Valley and based loosely on the likes of Google, Amazon, and Facebook. Gonnermann here demonstrates how the state is something largely absent in this novel and the way in which a subtle, “voluntary” coercion plays out in the text, thus making rebellion either impossible or undesirable amidst a network of willing participants in the digital economy. The Circle – the name of the novel's eponymous multi-national – thus takes the place of the totalitarian state common to older kinds of literary dystopias. It wields its power differently, though, more obscurely and subtly, whilst nevertheless curtailing the freedoms of the subject. The experience of Eggers's protagonist working within The Circle allows Eggers to expose some of the internal contradictions and quandaries engendered by neoliberalism. Again, this exposure is achieved via the creation of a more extreme version of

our own societies in the core neoliberal states. Gonnermann's framework fits well here, and something similar plays out in the chapters on Margaret Atwood's *The Heart Goes Last* (2015) and M. T. Anderson's *Feed* (2002). These chapters ought to cement this book as a key study in contemporary dystopian fiction, and anything said after this is merely to draw out some further complexities raised by the rest of the book.

Moving on to these complexities, then, we might start by pointing out that Gonnermann's model less neatly fits books like David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004) and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005). To take Mitchell's novel first, Gonnermann's reading in Chapter 5 only really substantially covers a portion of this text – namely, one dystopian section of the book, set in a future Seoul that exaggerates some of the aspects of contemporary neoliberalism. To an extent, her model works well here and brings to light some of the section's key themes, from thwarted and re-appropriated rebellion to the commodification of life itself. The issue with the reading advanced in this chapter, however, is in the model's application to the book as a whole. There is a more trivial aspect to this, which is that the majority of Mitchell's novel is not dystopian, and so Gonnermann's tight framework loosens somewhat. Apart from trivialities, though, there is the broader issue of the historical range of Mitchell's text. Whilst it is true in part to say, as Gonnermann does, that *Cloud Atlas* gives an overview of the history of capitalism and its apparently predatory nature, these different phases of course do not fit into a neoliberal viewpoint (Gonnermann doesn't explicitly suggest this, but it is a premise of the overall argument of the book). Whilst we might well read the novel in the light of its resistance to, or reproduction of, neoliberal ways of seeing, Gonnermann doesn't really stray into this mode of reading.

As noted, Gonnermann does identify an exaggerated version of neoliberalism in the chapter set in a future Seoul – but one wonders whether this society really is neoliberal in our current sense of the word. One aspect sticks out: this is a society that seems to rely predominantly on slave labour (in the guise of clones) rather than on workers selling their labour. Of course, actual global neoliberalism has not purged itself from a reliance on slavery, despite the received opinion to the contrary. But whilst this was a conspicuous part of liberal capitalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the neoliberal reliance on slavery is a hidden one, which takes place predominantly in the mines and the factories of peripheral states. That Mitchell's text depicts slavery as enmeshed in a high-tech metropolis is suggestive of something new – perhaps something worse – when compared with our own current configuration of capitalism. The centrepiece of Mitchell's text, set in post-apocalyptic tribal Hawaii, would seem to confirm Mitchell's interest in thinking beyond neoliberalism and beyond capitalism itself, but this doesn't really feature in Gonnermann's account. Something similar is going on in the chapter on *Never Let Me Go*, in which again we are presented with a society based around slave labour. As before, Gonnermann wants to make the argument that this is a neoliberal society. But Ishiguro's text mixes some of neoliberalism's hallmarks with disciplinary modes of power (figured through institutions like schools and hospitals), which we might more readily associate with the era of welfarism, plus the modes of labour now largely a thing of the distant past within core states. Again, these complexities are bent to fit Gonnermann's claim that the disappearance of agency and the figure of the rebel is a function of neoliberalism, but this claim

is difficult to accept without reservation when Ishiguro's text is about something at a slant to neoliberalism properly speaking.

The above is not to say that the readings in *Absent Rebels* are not productive or valuable or scholarly; they are. In fact, it is in some cases because Gonnermann has switched the focus on the reading of the genre that these productive deliberations come to light, and the reader is forced to consider much broader contextual issues. The book's major contribution is to highlight the disappearance of the state in dystopian fiction and the consequent disappearance of the rebel, that time-honoured figure of democratic and revolutionary spirit. Indeed, Gonnermann's argument is one of those that seems so crucial that it is strange that no one has made it before. This isn't a book focusing overly on form or technique, but it never claims to be. Whilst it makes some intriguing in-roads into developing a methodology adequate to tackling texts that depict networked forms of power, this doesn't always feel fully worked out. What the monograph does give us a glimpse of, though, in some cases unintentionally, is the ways in which neoliberal societies might be altered or become something else. The texts which Gonnermann brings together in *Absent Rebels* suggest ways in which this something else might be something significantly worse, and it is perhaps a mark of the trajectory of our current societies that these alternatives don't feel particularly far-fetched.

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