

The Dystopia Project: Collectivity, Interdependence and the Pandemic

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This panel represents the first public intervention of "The Dystopia Project" collective, a group of scholars and activists drawn together by an interest in furthering their understanding of dystopia. When we started, the pandemic was still several months away. Needless to say, the pandemic has also had an impact on us and on our project.

If there is one thing that the pandemic has taught us, it is that we are in this together – Donna Haraway's famous notion of "staying with the trouble."¹ As Haraway puts it, "The task is to become capable, with each other in all of our bumptious kinds, of response" (2016: 1). The pandemic has taught us at least two very different, almost contradictory lessons: on the one hand, we are all vulnerable, as the pandemic does not distinguish between "good" and "bad" citizens, men and women, believers in science and negationists, etc. On the other hand, the pandemic has also intensified and increased the inequalities among us, and in particular between privileged and more precarious subjects (those who continue to have jobs and those who have lost them, differences in the quality

¹ Similar concepts can be found in Kate Rigby's "dancing with disaster" (2015) and Rebecca Solnit's "hope in the dark" (2016).

and affordability of treatment, space, access to internet, increase of gender violence, age, loneliness, etc.)

For us, it has meant that our reflection feels even more timely and necessary, and that the ways in which we want to carry out our research are also substantial and defining parts of our project. But before I describe today's panel, allow me to say a few words about how "The Dystopia Project" started and what we try to accomplish.

We held our first workshop meeting at the beginning of September 2019, in a two-day seminar organized by Patricia McManus at Brighton University. Besides the organizer and I, that first meeting saw the participation of Antonis Balasopoulos (University of Cyprus), Mark Bould (University of the West of England), Caroline Edwards (Birkbeck, University of London), Ari Mousoutzanis (Brighton University), and Tom Moylan (Emeritus, University of Limerick). We discussed our understanding of dystopia, its transformations as well as co-optations, and the potential for a critical dystopian hermeneutic. Since then, we have continued to meet online and other colleagues and friends have joined us, namely Phillip E. Wegner (University of Florida), Joe P.L. Davidson (University of Cambridge), Darren Webb (University of Sheffield), Darko Suvin (Emeritus, McGill University), and Laurence Davis (University College Cork).

I will let sections from our "Draft Outward-Facing Statement" of "The Dystopia Project" speak for itself:

The Dystopia Project is a collective of scholars drawn together by an interest in furthering our understanding of dystopia. The urgency of our coming together has its roots in the value we place on collective scholarship at a moment of crisis for the institutions of scholarship, and in our insistence on adhering to the repertoire of intellectual practices held in the notion and traditions of critique [and interpretation].

Our motivating object however is *dystopia* – its history and narrative forms, the generation and reception and mutation of these latter, and their interplay in the conceptualization of dystopia as a genre, and its own interrelationship with other genres of fiction. [And from this we are also investigating the possibilities and potential of a dystopian hermeneutic, or indeed a critical dystopian hermeneutic.]

We recognize that we live in a situation of absolute emergency. This emergency impacts directly on all of us in terms of the global context we inhabit, our political and economic realities, on universities and on the other locations in which we live and work. It is our firm presupposition that any work we do as intellectuals and scholars necessarily also involves intervening in these various horizons as well.

The understanding of our own present as a moment of tumultuous, multiple, interconnected crises is an understanding which motivates our work [...] and we wish to locate our own work in relation to the wider world we live in.

We exist internationally and are open to anyone joining us from anywhere. Our only criteria are that [one has] a commitment to pursuing knowledge of dystopia as a historical genre, and a commitment to working in a collective fashion. [...]

Our founding principles involve an insistence on the collective nature of any productive scholarship at this time, and on the politicization of scholarship which critical theory assumes and enhances. [As scholars and citizens, we believe in and sustain academic freedom and university autonomy which are contingent with the teaching of critical thinking.] (“About” 2021: online)

This panel is, then, the first public event that we attend as a group, as “The Dystopia Project” collective. What will follow, therefore, is a dialogue among us, where Tom Moylan and I will start our reflection which will be followed by the responses by Phil Wegner, Trish McManus, Laurence Davis, and Darko Suvin.

The form of the panel is, as said, part of the project. One thing, in fact, that I believe I “re-learned” in these times of trouble, is the importance of *interdependence* – a lesson first learned through the work of Octavia E. Butler. Butler has repeatedly written about the importance of caring for the other(s) and for oneself, about the importance of negotiation and mediation as powerful means of resistance and awareness (cf., for example, the short stories in *Bloodchild*, 2005). Haraway has also stressed the importance of interdependence without using exactly the same word when she says that “staying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters *entwined* in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings” (2016: 1, emphasis added). And recently, Vandana Singh has successfully shown the importance of interconnection in the struggle against climate change in her brilliant novella, *Entanglement*.

Most of us think there is nothing we can do about climate disruption. So, we live an elaborate game of denial and pretend – as though nothing was about to happen, even though every day there are more reports of impending disaster, and more species extinctions, and more climate refugees. But what I have learned from my teacher was that the world is an interconnected web of relationships – between human and human, and human and beast and plant, and all that's living and nonliving. (2017: 58-59)

But interdependence at the same time that we must isolate ourselves is not an easy task. And yet we need to remind ourselves that we are in this together. The sometime annoying mask that we are all invited to wear is an apt metaphor for the importance and the need for interdependence: we wear a mask for self-protection and to protect others.

Despite the overwhelming tendency to mass-market commercial dystopias, powerful critical dystopias are still written and published, as so many of the presentations of these past days have shown. And this conference itself is a demonstration of the power of narratives and of our critical interpretations. Storytelling that brings together art and activism invites us to read critically our present and become aware and active in times of trouble. Whereas commercial dystopias tend to reassure their readers with their compensatory happy endings, critical dystopias continue to maintain their critical emancipatory power with what I would call open endings – endings that are still somewhat disturbing and uncomfortable.

To return to the theme of interdependence, some contemporary critical dystopias seem to revolve around this concept both at the level of form and theme. Works by Leni Zumas, Mohsin Hamid, Vandana Singh, as well as those by the writers that we had the privilege to listen to at this conference – Maggie Gee, Larissa Lai, and Kim Stanley Robinson – present fragmented, multiple points of view and narratives that stress the interconnection of their characters, where the small, individual changes are also generative of collective agency, awareness, and radical transformation.

As a way to conclude this short presentation I want to refer to another project, also on the importance of dystopia, that I am currently carrying out with my colleague and friend Rita Monticelli. We view literary and visual narratives as forms of metaphorically transmissible viruses. Like viruses with effects that

spread globally, language and storytelling can have the extraordinary power of stimulating the anti-bodies that are necessary to understand and critically reassess the intrinsic connections among past, present, and future. Critical dystopia can thus be seen as a vaccine where the virus is inoculated in order to activate a cognitive resistant response in a time of unparalleled destruction. Y

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