

## Book Review

Matthias Thaler: *No Other Planet: Utopian Visions for a Climate-Changed World*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. Pp. v, 295.)

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The governing premise behind Mathias Thaler's interdisciplinary exploration of utopianism in and for the Anthropocene is that "we urgently require utopias to identify ways out of our current predicament" (6). In light of this, he considers utopian depictions in social and political theory and in speculative fiction, interrogating their overall functionality or productivity and "predetermined faultlines" (282).

Thaler stresses the value of an interdisciplinary approach in contending with the Anthropocene, which he views as one of eco-philosopher Timothy Morton's massive, unwieldy hyperobjects. We must, he argues, "break through the walls of our comfortable silos" (32). His writing spans the diverse areas of political theory, utopian studies, and the environmental humanities. Thaler furthermore takes the somewhat unusual step of asserting that utopian visions in speculative fiction are as important as theoretical utopian discussions, integrating popular and academic texts in his writing. In his view, speculative fiction adds depth and nuance, as well as the pivotal quality of critical self-reflectivity, to theoretical discussions; fictional narratives "complement and complicate theoretical insights" (285).

Consistent with Thaler's interdisciplinary approach is his examination of the arguments of critics of utopianism and scholars in the field of utopian studies. He extracts from these sources some key propositions. These include a disavowal of utopian perfectionism, the concept of "radical hope" or "the bare idea that something good will emerge" (73) even from apocalyptic events and the demise of entire societies, the distinction between estrangement *for* the world and estrangement *from* the world and, finally, the necessary symbiosis between hope and despair in utopian and dystopian visions for the Anthropocene.

Borrowing from philosopher Walter Benjamin and speculative fiction novelist Octavia Butler, Thaler contends that there are three utopian "constellations" categorized as the What-If, the If-Only, and the If-This-Goes-On. These have distinct functions or mechanisms: the What-If operates by way of estrangement, the If-Only has a galvanizing impact, and the If-This-Goes-On provides a cautionary effect. Thaler explores each constellation in turn, drawing upon case studies from political theory and speculative fiction.

The What-If constellation is represented in political theory by the Gaia hypothesis, a planetary-scaled perspective initially developed by scientist James Lovelock and revisited by political theorist Bruno Latour. Earth is viewed here as a living planet with agency. For the purposes of this constellation, Thaler's fictional case study, more commonly viewed as fantasy rather than science fiction, is N. K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* trilogy; the trilogy evinces similar "planet-centred thinking" (130) and, furthermore, highlights the violence underpinning human and interspecies relationships. Thaler points out that this form of "defamiliarizing utopianism" (144), while highlighting "other ways of being and living" (143), founders on the "fault line of indeterminacy" (145).

By way of contrast, ecomodernists, with arguably inflated confidence in human ingenuity, proffer concrete solutions. The belief that humanity can engineer its way through the Anthropocene distinguishes the second utopian constellation: the If-Only school of thought. Proponents disagree on whether market forces will suffice, or whether the state must intervene. Kim Stanley Robinson, whose *Science in the Capital* trilogy is the chosen fictional case study for this constellation, adopts the latter position, providing "a triumphant ode to what an efficient bureaucracy can accomplish" (200). The fault line in this constellation is wishful thinking: a "gloss[ing] over the risks and dangers inherent in the status quo" (220).

There is a pleasing sense of symmetry in Thaler's thesis. He delves into three disciplines, organizes utopias into three categories, assigns them three functions, and selects trilogies for his three fictional case studies. Themes and key motifs are clustered in groups of three. Yet the chaos and unpredictability of what Thaler, following Amitav Ghosh, refers to as "our greatly deranged age" (24) belies this orderly symmetry and, for that matter, seemingly confounds utopianism. Hence, in the final constellation of If-This-Goes-On, Thaler turns to dystopian portrayals and expressions of bleak despair about the futility of action. He reflects upon the speculative writing of historians of science Erik M. Conway and Naomi Oreskes, the philosophical stance on "learning to die in the Anthropocene" adopted by Roy Scranton, and the "post-cautionary tales" (241) of the creative collective which calls itself the Dark Mountain project. Thaler then turns to Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy, in which her "probing of what comes after the cataclysm pushes her speculative fiction beyond the ideas" (276) of such theorists. Fatalism and defeatism constitute the faultline in this constellation but these phenomena can be, and need to be, countermanded by radical hope.

Thaler's focus is upon utopianism as storytelling and theory. Utopian practices receive scant attention, with only a passing mention of intentional communities in a "short intermezzo" (44). Furthermore, contemporary practices of activism, which are underpinned by utopian visions and designed to estrange, galvanize and/or caution, do not feature in his case studies and conclusions. Such practices nevertheless play an increasingly important

storytelling or narrative function in the Anthropocene; one need only consider the ways in which Extinction Rebellion and the school climate strikes have reconfigured climate as emergency, foregrounded its intergenerational injustices, and highlighted the culpability of the business and political sectors.

Thaler also does not consider the role of activists in fictional utopias/dystopias. In the pre-apocalyptic near future depicted in the *MaddAddam* trilogy, the MaddAddamites, who are for the most part renegade scientists led by the resilient, shape-shifting trickster Zeb, engage in disruptive acts of ecoterrorism. While these acts play no discernible part in either precipitating or warding off a pandemic-driven apocalypse, it is notable that ecoterrorism and environmental activism are critical agents of change in other contemporary works of speculative fiction. Such works include Kim Stanley Robinson's most recent utopian novel, *The Ministry for the Future* (2020), in which the writer returns to the theme of a benign bureaucracy which oversees and addresses the climate crisis; this international bureaucracy has, however, a wing which carries out radical misdeeds against the perpetrators of the crisis, as does an ecoterrorist group called the Children of Kali. In Stephen Markley's climate fiction masterpiece *The Deluge* (2023), ecoterrorist network 6Degrees and radical but nonviolent activist organization A Fierce Blue Fire both play key roles in forcing the American government, albeit very belatedly, to embrace mitigation and adaptation strategies. Different forms of activism, both real and fictional, are an important part of contemporary utopianism and could also be grouped within the three constellations identified by Thaler.

Drawing upon the utopian trope as manifested in theory and fiction, Thaler tackles the difficult question of how we can shape a future for humanity and for nonhuman lifeforms on a radically altered planet. His methodical analysis and critique of utopian ideas, and his innovative use of speculative fiction to shed light on and add depth to theoretical discussions on Earth and our future, constitute an important intellectual contribution to this critical debate.

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