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McAuliffe, Sam. 2022. Utopian Realism. In: Peter Marks; Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor and Fátima Vieira, eds. *The Palgrave Handbook of Utopian and Dystopian Literatures*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 219-230. ISBN 9783030886547 [Book Section]

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Utopian Realism

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The Palgrave Handbook of Utopian and Dystopian Literatures

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Palgrave Macmillan, 2022. pp. 219-30.

978-3-030-88654-7

Abstract:

In *The Principle of Hope* Ernst Bloch makes use of a paradoxical conceptual arrangement, juxtaposing categories that tend to be treated as if they were mutually exclusive: *utopia*, on the one hand, and *realism*, on the other. “Realism in art,” he writes, “is not a descriptive or explicative stocktaking. Rather, it holds up a mirror of immanent anticipation in an activating way. It is tendentious, Utopian realism.” Deployed in a utopian context the referential function of the realist text is reconfigured. It makes reference to reality not in its given state but in view of its “future-laden properties.” What then are the structural features of a textual practice shaped in accordance with this principle? On what set of discursive operations does it rest? And how does it achieve this “activation,” over and above mere depiction? These questions will also be broached in relation to Elias Canetti’s ‘Realism and New Reality,’ a text which stages its own encounter between the two main categories at stake here.

I

Over the course of its history as a distinct discursive form with its own code of conventions, the distribution of categories that provide the utopian text with its frame has undergone a “transformation,” and this has modified in turn the relation that this particular mode of discourse holds to its referent. The claim is made by Bloch at the outset of his discussion with Adorno on “the contradictions of utopian longing”:

“At the very beginning Thomas More designated utopia as a place, an island in the distant South Seas. This designation underwent changes later so that it left space and entered time. Indeed, the Utopians, especially those of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, transposed the wishland more into the future. In other words, there is a transformation of the topos from space into time. With Thomas More the wishland was still ready, on a distant island, but I am

not there. On the other hand, when it is transposed into the future, not only am I not there, but utopia itself is also not with itself. This island does not even exist. But it is not something like nonsense or absolute fancy; rather it is not *yet* in the sense of a possibility; *that* it could be there if we could only do something for it. Not only if we travel there, but *in that* we travel there the island utopia arises out of the sea of the possible – utopia, but with new contents.”

(Adorno and Bloch 1988: 3)

Once it is conceived of in temporal terms, utopia becomes a projection. Located in a future to come, the world it makes reference to concerns reality not as it is, but as it could be. Since, however, this future has not yet come to pass, and since it cannot come to pass in accordance with the present that acts as a support for its manifestation, it follows that utopia is just as readily characterised by its current inexistence. In the present it can only appear at a distance from itself, inaccessible and unattainable, consigned to a state which leaves it, with respect to itself, *nowhere*: “utopia itself is... not with itself.” And yet, as Bloch also suggests here, having acceded to expression a utopian projection draws this possible future closer. By giving a definite shape to “the being of What-Is-Not-Yet,” it demonstrates that the present’s given form is not definitive, that it has “the potential to become otherwise” (*der Potenz das Anders-Werdenkönnen*). With this “transformation of the topos from space into time,” the referential function of utopian discourse therefore finds itself recast: the possibility that its projection gives expression to acquires a degree of reality it would not otherwise have had, were it to have remained unexpressed. Utopia becomes a discursive practice that precipitates the actualisation of its referent, through the act of reference itself, and it is this that constitutes its specificity in relation to all other forms of fiction-making. “Not only if we travel there, but *in that* we travel there the island utopia arises out of the sea of the possible...”

Throughout *The Principle of Hope* (published in three volumes between 1954 and 1959), Bloch's engagement with this tendency makes repeated use of a particular concept, the features of which are delineated most sharply in the context of aesthetics. The concept is that of *Vor-Schein*, pre-appearance.¹ It is this that confers upon an aesthetic representation its utopian aspect, making the work of art appear as if "lit by a world which is not yet there" (Bloch 1995: 2, 811; 1985: 950).² On its account an intimation of the future to come is able to appear in all its irreducibility, *here and now*, ahead of time and in advance of its actuality. As Bloch is keen to stress, this phenomenon draws the category of appearance or semblance (*Erscheinung*) away from its recognized meaning in "classical" aesthetics. The work of art formed in accordance with this configuration is neither an "idealistic correction" of reality nor the latter's "mere reproduction" in its given state (2, 809; 947). Rather, by opening up a perspective onto the tendencies and latencies traversing reality as a still ongoing, unfinished process, it traces the trajectory along which whatever is represented finds itself propelled forward, carried beyond its recognisable form, and thereby *viewed ahead*, under a horizon that extends beyond the present's own. What allows pre-appearance to be told apart from the mere semblance [*Schein*] or illusion [*Illusion*] it admittedly always risks being confused with is the unbroken contact it maintains with this "future-laden definiteness [*eine zukunftsfragende Bestimmtheit*] in the real itself" (1995: 1, 235; 1985: 271). In other words, it draws out of reality its *real possibility*, which Bloch defines as follows: "real possibility is the categorical In-Front-of-Itself of material movement considered as a process; it is the specific regional character of reality itself, on the Front of its occurrence... there is no true realism without the true dimension of this openness" (1, 237; 274). This is what makes the work of art anticipatory in nature. Its "claim to truth" is measured less by adequation or verisimilitude, than the degree of pressure it is able to exert on reality through anticipation.

“Utopia as object-determination, with the degree of existence of the Real Possible, thus encounters in the shimmering phenomenon of art a particularly fruitful problem of probation. And the answer to the aesthetic question of truth is: artistic appearance is not only mere appearance, but a meaning [*Bedeutung*], cloaked in images and which can only be described in images, of material that has been driven further, wherever *the exaggeration and fantasising represent a significant pre-appearance, circulating in turbulent existence itself, of what is real* [wo die Exaggerierung und Ausfabelung einen im Bewegt-Vorhandenen selber umgehenden und bedeutenden Vor-Schein von Wirklichem darstellen], a pre-appearance which can specifically be represented in aesthetically immanent terms... Pre-appearance is this attainable thing itself because the *métier of driving-to-the-end occurs in dialectically open space*, in which any Object can be aesthetically represented.”

(1, 214-215; 247. Emphases in original)

And when, much later in the same work, Bloch takes up the question once more he adds the following:

“So art drives world-figures, world-landscapes, without them being destroyed, to their entelechetic limit: only the aesthetic illusion detaches itself from life, whereas the aesthetic pre-appearance is precisely one because it stands itself in the horizon of the real.”

(2, 809-810; 948)

This is the framework within which it becomes possible to discern in Bloch’s aesthetics a re-formulation of the discursive properties, functions and operations associated with the term *realism*. The framework of utopia alters what can be expected from this particular signifying practice. Above all this alteration concerns what Bloch refers to in this section as the realist *demand (Forderung)*: namely, the effort to secure through exactitude of reference a maximum degree of correspondence between the real and its representation; to recover in and through

representation reality in its entirety. “How legitimate Homer's realism is, a realism of such exact fullness that almost the whole of Mycenaean culture can be visualized from it... Such precision and reality is undoubtedly peculiar and essential to all great literature” (1, 214; 245-246). Now it is precisely this demand which increasingly comes to appear in a different light in *The Principle of Hope*.

“Realism in art is no descriptive or explanatory stock-taking, but it holds up, in an activating way, a mirror of immanent anticipation, it is tendential-utopian realism [*tendenzhaft-utopischer Realismus*].”

(2, 811; 950)

The referential function of the realist text remains in effect, but re-directed towards an entirely new end. Reference is reconfigured as a capacity or a power, to draw out and drive forward, and its exercise affects a change in reality itself. It becomes a means of *activation*. In this sense the relation between the real and its representation is inverted. The reality represented by this realism is not in place in advance of its representation *but is elicited through it*. What is reproduced in discourse is at the same time produced in reality, in the mode of “immanent anticipation.” Here Bloch offers a way of thinking through a question that will later be posed by Barthes: “Why not test the ‘realism’ of a work by examining not the more or less exact way in which it reproduces reality, but on the contrary the way in which reality could or could not effectuate the novel’s utterance?” (Barthes 1989: 136)

Making realistic depiction a means of anticipation, a mirror that catches in its reflection the lineaments of what is to come, can only be achieved by dissociating realism from the “surface [*flache*] empiricism” that for Bloch it has been progressively subsumed by. Such empiricism only ever makes contact with the world in a reified form. Arbitrarily cutting into “the flow of the real,” it “keeps a firm hold on individual moments of process and anchors them as facts.”

By erroneously treating this isolated abstraction as the entity's definitive form, it represents the latter without the horizon which belongs to it as a "process-reality" (*Prozeßwirklichkeit*): "the perspective of grovelling empiricism and the naturalism that corresponds to it in aesthetic terms... never advances from the establishment of what is factual to the exploration of what is essentially happening" (Bloch 1995: 1, 222; 1985: 256).³

A "tendential-utopian realism": what would this look like in practice?

1. Paul Scheerbart's *Glass Architecture* (1914) could certainly be said to belong to this genre.⁴ The vision it sets forth, of a built environment in which glass would be the primary if not exclusive material of construction, envisages a redetermination of the very frameworks through which lived experience is channelled. "The new environment, which we must create, must bring us a new culture" (Scheerbart 1972: 41). On account of its fundamental property – *its transparency* – the expanded use of this material would give rise to new forms of dwelling and new forms of sociality, on account of the singular regime of proxemics it makes possible (glass architecture "takes away the closed character of the rooms in which we live" (41)). At the same time Scheerbart always presents this vision from the standpoint of real possibility. For example, the text offers entirely practical instructions for the realization of this new world. As a "simple and convenient" first step, all existing buildings should immediately be fitted with a glass veranda, which would very quickly supplant the building it is an appendage of. "So the veranda continues to grow; in the end it emancipates itself from the main building, and may become the main building itself. To promote this evolution of the veranda will be the chief task of every glass architect" (44). From this relatively inauspicious start, nothing less than "the transformation of the earth's surface" should be expected (71). "One thing leads to another, and to stop the process is unthinkable" (44). This is what it means to view the real in terms of its horizon, to take a material and drive it further through its portrayal.

2. Gabriel Tarde's *Fragment of Future History* (1896) also cultivates a realism of this type. The novel envisages a future age in which the world has been exposed to the catastrophe of "solar apoplexy." With the sun having permanently weakened, the surface of the earth is no longer habitable and what remains of humanity is sent downwards: "There below us, lies the future... Let's make the abyss our home" (Tarde 2004: 45). But underground existence is not simply suffered. On the contrary, it lays the ground for an "undreamt of recovery," humanity learning to utilise the distinct properties of the new milieu in which it now finds itself. For example, the Underground gives rise to "a modern architecture so profoundly original that no one could have predicted it," an immense network of unbroken interconnection which founds a new organisation of spatiality and a new distribution of human relations: a "true social revolution." "For the modern architect only the interior exists. And each work [habitation] is linked to that which has come before. Nothing stands alone. Everything is an 'extension' and a set of decisions based on everything else. An endless continuation..." (69). Transparency of glass, extensivity of earth: each of these utopian projections attain their consistency by recognizing a tendency lying latent in material reality itself. Each presents a vision of matter on the basis of its "future-laden properties" (Bloch: "matter is the site of the conditions according to whose stipulations entelechies reveal themselves" (1995: 1, 207; 1985: 236). However fantastic these future worlds appear, however far the element of "exaggeration and fantasising" in them is carried, their respective lineaments remain derived from and determined by concrete reality. They are instances of what Bloch calls "founded [*fundiertem*] appearance" (1, 216; 249).

There does remain a further feature of Bloch's aesthetic configuration to consider here. The "*dialectically open space*" that the utopian work presides over has as its condition the future defined as an expanse (*Weite*), the horizon of which finds itself ceaselessly pushed backwards. If "everything real passes over into the Possible at its processual Front," if "Mobile, changing,

changeable Being, presenting itself as dialectical-material, has this unclosed capability of becoming, this Not-Yet-Closedness both in its ground and in its horizon” (1, 196; 225-226), this is only insofar as the future lies before it as something inexhaustible: “a world... would not be in the least changeable without the enormous future” (1, 223; 257). But here a tension begins to make itself felt. Whenever the work of art drives something forward into this expanse, this movement is not undertaken indiscriminately but in view of the represented entity’s end, its “entelechetical limit”: the work is “*a portrayal of the tendency and latency of its Objects occurring in the manner of the pre-appearance driven to an end*” (2, 809; 947). Were it to be attained, this end would mark the definitive fulfilment of the entity – its “immanent perfection,” Bloch says – making it that after which nothing further could be expected. An attainment of the *Ultimum* (1, 203; 233). In this sense pre-appearance presents the future of the thing *but also* the thing without future. By bringing this end into view, a restriction is imposed on the “open space” that allows this end to be approached in the first place.⁵ No doubt Bloch is perfectly aware of this aporia. “The motto of aesthetically attempted pre-appearance runs along these lines: how could the world be perfected without this world being exploded and apocalyptically vanishing, as in Christian-religious pre-appearance” (1, 215; 248). This end is both the condition of the model of representation instituted by Bloch here, but also its unrepresentable limit.⁶

II

The future understood as a question that realist discourse is brought face to face with as a matter of necessity at a particular phase in its development, and especially insofar as this question is given its shape by the context of utopia, is also a central concern of a short text written by Elias Canetti in 1965, ‘Realism and New Reality’ (*Realismus und neue Wirklichkeit*).⁷ At its outset, with the realist enterprise defined as “a method of gaining reality for the novel. *Total* reality, it was important not to exclude anything from this reality, whether for aesthetic or for bourgeois

moral conventions,” Canetti asks himself under what conditions it would be possible to produce such a work *today*. “Could those of us who are after the same goal, though as people of our era, and who regard themselves as modern realists – could we employ the same methods?” (Canetti 1979: 55; 1981: 72). The question is necessary because the extent to which reality has been transformed since this method’s progressive development over the latter half of the previous century is “enormous.” What is it, then, that characterises “modern reality” understood as something that lacks all contiguity with all that has gone before? On the one hand, Canetti argues, it has become more abundant: “a lot more exists now, not only numerically, there are many more people and things; but a far greater immensity exists in quality as well. The old, the new, and the different flow in from everywhere” (55; 72). On the other, it has become more precise: “The sector of ‘approximate’ activity and knowledge is rapidly shrinking... Reality is departmentalized, subdivided, and can be grasped down to its minutest units from many directions” (57-58; 75). And yet, whilst these tendencies show a divergence with past reality, it is nevertheless possible to anticipate their development on the latter’s basis. This is not the case with the final phenomenon that holds Canetti’s attention here. From the perspective of what was, its occurrence will have been entirely unforeseeable. As such it constitutes an absolute break with the period it distinguishes itself from. This change concerns, so Canetti claims, “the *reality* of the *future*” (*die Wirklichkeit des Kommenden*), the author tending to refer here not to *die Zukunft* but *das Kommende*: the forthcoming, that which is on the verge of coming about. He writes:

“The future exists quite differently from ever before, it is approaching more swiftly and it is being consciously brought about. Its dangers are our most intrinsic work; but so are its hopes. The reality of the future has split: on the one side, annihilation [*Vernichtung*]; on the other, the good life. Both are simultaneously active, in the world, in ourselves. This split [*Spaltung*], this double future, is absolute, and there is no one who could ignore it. Everyone sees a dark and a

bright shape [*Gestalt*] at once, approaching him at an oppressive velocity. One may hold either shape at bay to see only the other, but both are persistently there.”

(58; 75-76)

“It is particularly this double aspect of the future, actively wished and actively feared, that distinguishes our century’s reality from that of the previous one... The aspect of the future is totally different [*Der Aspekt des Kommenden ist ein von Grund auf anderer*], and one can say without exaggeration that we are living in a period of the world that does not have the most important thing in common with the period of our grandfathers: its future [*Zukunft*] is not a whole thing anymore, it is split in two.”

(59; 77)

This, then, is the fundamental feature of present-day reality for Canetti: its future has come apart. Henceforth it is something that bears down upon the present in two distinct forms, *at one and the same time*. (In Bloch’s terms, it is as if the horizon at reality’s outer edge no longer coheres as one). These two shapes are not only irreconcilable but impossible, mutually exclusive to the extent that the actuality of either would constitute the radical negation of the other. This is why the split is absolute. Yet because neither side outweighs the other, because their degree of viability is in each case absolutely the same, in the extremity of their difference they become locked in a relation of co-implication. Impossible *and yet* concomitant. “One may hold either shape at bay to see only the other, *but both are persistently there.*”

Something of this situation can be approached through the framework provided by *The Principle of Hope*. At least up to a point. To conceive of process-reality in terms of its Not-Yet-Closedness is to establish that changeability (*Veränderlichkeit*) is a fundamental feature of its constitution. This, after all, is what the real’s “capability-of-becoming-other” signifies. But

whenever such change is on the point of coming to pass, this liminal moment introduces an element of “uncertainty” into the process, since the outcome of this change cannot be secured in advance. If reality always “has something advancing and breaking out at its edge” (Bloch 1995: 1, 197; 226), there is nothing to guarantee that this will not be to reality’s detriment. A change “for the worse.” “The disaster character [*Unheilscharakter*] of the Possible thus militates against the above-mentioned salvation character [*Heilscharakter*], hope character of the Possible, which lies no less powerfully in the changeability of a situation” (1, 233; 268).

A light shape and a dark shape. In each case Canetti has a definite project in mind. On one side of the split, there lies utopia. At this historical juncture utopian projection has acquired an unparalleled power (*Stoßkraft*): “Everywhere on earth, in the most diverse forms, utopias are about to come true... There is no utopia that could not be materialized” (Canetti: 58; 76). This power installs utopia as a means of placing “the enormous sum total of reality that has come down to us” on a different trajectory, re-directing the line of extension along which process-reality is unfolding. “Utopias are sliced up into segments and then tackled as plans stretching over a given number of years.” And yet, Canetti insists, it is precisely the effort undertaken to implement such plans that brings the future’s other form into view. “But let us not forget,” he writes,

“that there are very different kinds of utopias and that all of them are active at the same time. Social, scientific-technological, national utopias strengthen each other and chafe each other. They protect the continuance of their realization by developing weapons to intimidate. One knows what these weapons are like. Their actual use would turn against the user with no less force. Everyone senses this dark side of the future, which may come true.”

(59; 76-77)

On one side of the split, utopia, on the other side, destruction, total and without limit.⁸ Dark accompanies light as its shadow. This shadow is cast not in spite of what utopia promises but because of it. And the stakes of this situation are further compounded once it is acknowledged that this “oppressively close, unrelenting threat” would in actuality amount to the irrevocable withdrawal of any further future. This contingency is described by Blanchot, writing one year earlier than Canetti, in the following way: “Today there is the atomic bomb; humanity can destroy itself; this destruction would be radical; the possibility of a radical destruction of humanity by humanity inaugurates a beginning in history; whatever happens, whatever precautionary measures there may be, we cannot go backward” (Blanchot 1997: 101). Here “the disaster character of the Possible” acquires a disconcerting new sense, because it now concerns an event that would foreclose all other possibilities.⁹ And yet however much this circumstance constitutes a “beginning in history,” for Canetti this alone does not exhaust the specificity of modern reality, which rests with the fact that such destruction appears inextricably bound up with its absolute antithesis. The standpoint of modern reality is traversed by both possibilities at once, the light and the dark, never one without the other, and its modernity consists in being inscribed within or exposed to this double bind.¹⁰

All this has significant implications for any discourse charged with representing reality. How would the referential function of this discourse be administered in view of this situation? In *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno develops one possible answer to this question. He does so, moreover, from the very same standpoint as Canetti, with reference to the modern epoch as “an age in which the real possibility of utopia – that given the level of productive forces the earth could here and now be paradise – converges with the possibility of total catastrophe.” He continues: “In the image of catastrophe, *an image that is not a copy of the event but the cipher of its potential*, the magical trace of art's most distant pre-history reappears under the total spell, as *if art wanted to prevent the catastrophe by conjuring up its image*” (Adorno: 33; my emphases).

The nuclear event, the instantiation of this “total catastrophe,” can only be referred to in an anticipatory form, as having not yet happened.¹¹ As with Bloch’s utopian realism, then, referentiality is reoriented toward the future. But in this instance its function becomes apotropaic. It is deployed as a means of warding off the event in question, whose possibility it nevertheless acknowledges; its aim is to maintain the event in its inexistence, preventing it from passing across the threshold from possibility into actuality. As such this model of representation can be considered the precise inverse of the one informing Bloch’s, for which reference is also anticipatory, but as a means of activation.

Approached along these lines, one of the fundamental paradoxes encompassing utopian realist discourse at this particular juncture is that the “double future” it is tasked with representing demands two distinct models of referentiality, the respective operations of which cannot be brought into correspondence with one another. To draw the light side of the future nearer on the one hand, to keep the dark side of the future at bay on the other. It is this that the realist text must bring to expression, as Canetti’s closing words indicate: “Presumably, one or several of the aspects of our reality, such as I have briefly described, must emerge in the novel of our times; otherwise one could hardly call it realistic. It is now up to our conversation to determine the extent to which this has already happened or could still happen” (Canetti 1979: 59; 1981: 77). Ultimately, then, what this understanding of the future gives us to think is a form of writing the realism of which would rest with the capacity to approach its object against the background of these two fundamentally antagonistic realities, the light and the dark, its standpoint having found a way to let itself be marked by the alternation between them.

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¹ The term appears in a variety of forms in English translations of Bloch's work. Jack Zipes, for example, renders it as "anticipatory illumination." See his 'Introduction: Toward a Realization of Anticipatory Illumination' for an account of the concept's relation to the wider German aesthetic tradition (xxxiii-xxxvi).

² Quotations from this work refer to the English translation first (volume and page number), followed by the German original.

³ Bloch's critique here shares several points of affinity with the Brechtian effort to derive a different sense from the literary form in question and the intention to practice this form differently (that is to say, *politically*): "A realist perspective is one which studies the dynamic forces, a realist mode of action is one which sets the dynamic forces in motion" (Brecht 2003: 260). These competing visions of the realist enterprise are also identified by Fredric Jameson in his study of the form: on the one hand, a realism "absolutely committed to the density and solidity of what is," this amounting to "a professional endorsement of the status quo"; on the other, a realism of tendency, concerned with the "transformation of being... somehow implicit in being itself" (Jameson 2013: 215-16).

⁴ In fact Scheerbart does make a brief appearance in *The Principle of Hope*, in the section 'Buildings which depict a better life, architectural utopias' (2, 736; 861).

⁵ Elizabeth Grosz's stringent critique of the utopian tradition is focused on this tendency: "utopia, like the dialectic itself, is commonly fantasized as the end of time, the end of history, the moment of resolution of past problems." What does this mean? In short, "While a picture of the future, the utopic is fundamentally that which *has no future*" (Grosz 2001: 137-38). For her the viability of a utopian projection rests on its ability to resist this closure, so that the future it envisages keeps open the possibility of another future in turn.

⁶ An analysis of the same configuration can be found in Hans Magnus Enzensberger's 1978 essay, 'Two Notes on the End of the World': "without catastrophe no millennium, without apocalypse no paradise" (234; 240-41).

⁷ Quotations refer first to the English translation, and the original text subsequently.

⁸ Indeed Canetti's notebooks confirm that this thesis concerning *die Wirklichkeit des Kommenden* is conceived in direct response to the deployment of the atomic bomb, the first appearance of what he refers to there as the "double-tongued future" explicitly tied to the date "August 1945" (1978: 66-67).

⁹ One could envisage something like a new political imperative emerging in response to this circumstance, of the sort described by Jameson when he writes: "Perhaps indeed we need to develop an anxiety about losing the future... a fear that locates the loss of the future and futuricity, of historicity itself, within the existential dimension of time and indeed within ourselves" (Jameson 2005: 233).

¹⁰ A systematic study of this double bind would have to account for the fact that once the light and the dark are conjoined in this way, the "actively wished" and the "actively feared" become increasingly difficult to tell apart. For Michael S. Roth, the context in which the implications of this tendency are best understood is that of trauma: "The terrain demarcated by the concept of trauma has become a crucial form of negative utopia of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century... In this discourse the negative of utopia is not pointing toward a state of affairs that we would all strive mightily to avoid but rather to a state of affairs that we might intensely desire. Dystopia is the utopia you must be careful not to wish for" (Roth 2012: 87-88).

¹¹ See Derrida, writing a generation later, on this point: "It [nuclear war] has never occurred, itself; it is a non-event... The terrifying reality of the nuclear conflict can only be the signified referent, never the real referent (present or past) of a discourse or a text. At least today

apparently.” Hence “it has existence only through what is said of it, only where it is talked about” (Derrida 1984: 23).