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ABSENT REBELS: CRITICISM AND NETWORK POWER IN 21ST CENTURY DYSTOPIAN FICTION (2021) BY ANNIKA GONNERMANN

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Gonnermann, Annika. *Absent Rebels: Criticism and Network Power in 21st Century Dystopian Fiction*. Narr Francke Attempto, 2021. 352 pp.

Whether or not they succeed in their mission, rebels have been a staple of classical dystopian writing. The compelling subplot of resistance invites readers to side with the dissidents and embrace the proposed alternative to the oppressive system. However, these genre hallmarks seem to be fading as the focus of contemporary dystopias shifts from state totalitarianism to free market capitalism, and the protagonists become increasingly powerless, trapped in opaque network structures. In *Absent Rebels: Criticism and Network Power in 21st Century Dystopian Fiction* (2021), Annika Gonnermann traces the absence of rebels in dystopian fiction produced at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Crucial to Gonnermann's thesis is the link between network power and immanent criticism, a performative mode of critique that helps to unravel oppression within seemingly free neoliberal societies.

Gonnermann takes on the impressively ambitious task of mapping how literary dystopias practice criticism and propose alternatives to the status quo. The author establishes the parameters of her book with a refreshingly realistic claim early on, arguing that dystopias written over half a century ago fail to be adequate channels of critique to make sense of contemporary ills (13). Although classics like George Orwell's ur-text *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) offer timeless lessons about the violation of human rights, they no longer capture the current mechanisms of Western societies, the demise of the nation state, and the encroaching forces of the free market imperative. Novels that adhere to the state-vs-individual paradigm, Gonnermann argues, no longer shock readers, and the wearing out of genre materials continues to weaken their warning effect.

Against this backdrop, the book is comprised of two parts. "The Dystopian Genre" establishes the theoretical backbone of the book, which traces the formulations of critique and investigates the depictions of power in the dystopian canon. The second part offers insightful close readings of five contemporary novels that the author identifies as paradigmatic texts for her argument. Because "they do not flesh out alternatives but rather restrict themselves to demanding a change from the status quo by cognitively mapping the exploitative systemic deficiencies of contemporary neoliberal capitalism," these texts, by form and content, offer a much-welcomed update within the canon and lend themselves to exploring current socio-political and economic complexities (308).

The careful analyses, which occupy most pages of the book, are written with remarkable clarity and are likely to spark interest also amongst those readers unfamiliar with the novels.

The first section begins with a brief overview of the etymology and history of dystopian fiction. Building on observations by Tom Moylan, amongst others, Gonnermann discusses the 'big three' genre-defining works by Orwell, Aldous Huxley, and Yevgeny Zamyatin, and outlines dystopia's logic as a genre to prepare readers for the proposition that contemporary dystopias ultimately function differently from classical dystopias. For readers familiar with the genre, the book's novelty emerges when Gonnermann turns to different formulations of criticism. Following Rahel Jaeggi's *Critique of Forms of Life* (2014), the author contextualises external and immanent criticism against the backdrop of dystopian writing. While external criticism lends itself particularly well to critiquing structures like totalitarianism, immanent criticism seeks to unravel inherent contradictions of the status quo. From the outset, Gonnermann convincingly justifies the book's focus on immanent criticism by pointing to its transformative potential to transcend specific contexts. This *performative* act of criticising, she argues, provides a valuable framework to interrogate the absence of rebels in neoliberal dystopias.

Gonnermann links classical dystopian writing with external criticism, which finds expression in established plot devices like the subplots of resistance and the notion of a ready-made alternative. Orwell's Winston Smith or Huxley's Savage are mouthpieces for an alternative way of life and become easily identifiable rebels, distinguished by their outstanding intellect and ability to think critically, prompting readers to accept the suggested alternative to the dystopian system. Gonnermann posits that these generic templates are insufficient to capture the pervasive atmosphere of the free market imperative, leading her to conclude that classical dystopias "struggle to maintain their integrity as channels of criticism" (67). In turn, she argues that there are texts that employ criticism "without resorting to a patronising, prescriptive, often westernised discourse of how individuals should live." (40) Rather than offering normative solutions, these novels merely unearth contradictions within the hegemonic discourse of neoliberal capitalism. The lens of immanent criticism, Gonnermann argues, helps to make sense of dystopias that blatantly expose characters (and readers) to an atmosphere Mark Fisher has called 'capitalist realism' in which the market logic has successfully conquered the spatial and cognitive capacities of contemporary life. Although these novels seem less radical than classics, the author makes clear that they are no less effective in their transformative potential because they aim "to solve the immanent paradoxes by making them comprehensible in the first place" (68).

Having outlined the shift from external to immanent criticism in the dystopian canon, Gonnermann concludes the first section with key aspects of decentralised power structures, which the author identifies as the narrative *modus operandi* of contemporary texts. Drawing on David Grewal's concept of network power, Gonnermann points to the "peculiar mixture of individual agency and systemic coercion" found in recent dystopias (72). The author emphasises the dangerous entanglement of perceived freedom and actual freedom (voluntariness) in network structures that are shaped by a dominant standard: since there is a lack of acceptable alternatives, individuals

are ultimately pressured into accepting a particular way of life by fear of social exclusion (73-74). Recognising the network power mechanisms is key to deciphering why most protagonists today seem to accept the status quo – a thesis that Gonnermann puts through its paces in the second part of the book.

In the analysis chapters, Gonnermann turns to five contemporary dystopias, all of which *perform* criticism of the paradoxes inherent in neoliberal capitalism. In so doing, they dare to violate stock features of the genre and modify established character constellations. According to Gonnermann, these novels chronicle the extent to which recent texts have ultimately deviated from classics: They do not impose one world view onto another (external criticism), nor do they recover the underlying values and morals (internal criticism); they are first and foremost diagnostic in nature. These literary examples “spell out the inevitability of free-market capitalism” and cognitively map the entrenched mechanisms of network power, self-consciously pointing to their own limitations in conceptualising alternatives (304).

The suggested continuum starts with Dave Egger’s *The Circle* (2013). Arguing that this novel confronts readers with a “form of power that has rarely featured in dystopian fiction to date” (118), Gonnermann delineates the intradiegetic shift from democracy to corpocracy and the emergence of a particular technological standard called ‘SeeChange,’ which ultimately “alters the code of conduct for politicians” (92). Showcasing how difficult it is “to criticise the shining world of the Circle externally,” the author fleshes out the alluring mechanisms of this crowd-funded dystopia (114). Gonnermann uses vivid examples to support her argument that the protagonist not only disqualifies as a dystopian rebel but also plays an active part in establishing the hegemony of the Circle. Particularly revealing is the discussion on the tragic attempt of rebellion which outlines that network power nullifies any meaningful challenge to the status quo. In a similar vein, the author investigates the inconsistencies of the Consilience project and points to the devastating effects of conflating freedom and voluntariness in Margaret Atwood’s *The Heart Goes Last* (2015).

In her analysis of M. T. Anderson’s *Feed* (2002), Gonnermann explores how difficult it is to resist the ‘feed’ standard in this hyper-consumerist society in which schools carry trademark labels, and the state is conceptualised as a dangerous, unwelcomed residue that interrupts the flow of capitalism. The chapter frames protagonist Titus in his function as a mouthpiece *for* the dominant neoliberal ideology, rather than against it. Void of alternative structuring principles and meaningful resistance, the only ‘way out’ is the complete breakdown of the status quo: “everything must go” (201). This notion of the (post-)apocalypse as the logical conclusion of the trajectory of neoliberal capitalism resurfaces when Gonnermann turns to Zachry’s narrative in David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* (2004). Here, the author fleshes out “the defining matrix behind all social interaction” in the six historical snapshots the novel offers, illuminating capitalism as an imperative inextricably linked to human history (212).

The analysis section closes with Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* (2005), a novel that exposes readers to a claustrophobic world void of alternatives. According to Gonnermann, the

novel's use of euphemisms underlines the extent to which the clone protagonists have accepted the dehumanising logic of this world. Given the absence of punitive measures common in classical dystopias, they live under the illusion that their choices are free. The author refrains from accusing the clones of compliance, and instead plausibly outlines their entrapment in a network shaped by a dominant standard. Ishiguro's novel seems a fitting choice to close the proposed continuum, as it marks the greatest deviation from the traditional *modus operandi* of dystopias, primarily due to the protagonists' inability even to *imagine* alternatives. Throughout the book, Gonnermann convincingly delineates the critical potential of these texts, pointing out parallels among the novels and thereby cementing her thesis that network power is the common denominator of the respective dystopias. The author argues that they encourage readers to think "systemically and globally" and ultimately function as innovative channels of critique because they do not fall for methodological individualism (303): rather than seeking the cause of oppression in individual sin, they foreground the pathologies of the centreless network structure of late capitalist societies.

Absent Rebels does not end on a hopeless note. Drawing on Theodor W. Adorno, Gonnermann argues that these novels dialectically start "a long-term project, which departs from the false and which will eventually lead to the good" (45). They offer no "exact route" but subscribe to a "trial-and-error principle," gradually nudging readers towards a better understanding of the entrenched network power mechanisms (305). Gonnermann finally hopes that these "iconoclastic dystopias" show readers a *direction away from*, instead of a *direction towards* (308). To tackle capitalism's hegemony and initiate reform, *Absent Rebels* concludes by advocating that network power should also be recognised as a positive force rather than an obstacle to be overcome. Just as network mechanisms can spin into dystopian nightmares, the accumulated choices of individuals can also yield network standards that fit "the imperatives of sustainability and equality" (311). Against the backdrop of the socio-political ills that mark the twenty-first century, *Absent Rebels* makes a clear case for the urgent need for a network theory of collective responsibility.

Taken together, the strengths of this book lie in its refreshing insights beyond the content of contemporary dystopian writing. Readers interested in literary dystopias will find a plethora of impulses and will not be disappointed by the in-depth discussions of novels that have received less critical attention to date. However, given that dystopias increasingly escape the literary form and proliferate in the film and television landscape, *Absent Rebels* would have benefited from a more nuanced contextualisation of dystopias on screen. Comments on cinematic and serial adaptations do surface throughout the book (119, 215, 292). Yet, these are largely restricted to fidelity problems and focus on the 'unsuccessful' adaptation of the respective source text. With the exception of one positive reference to the *Black Mirror* (2011-current) anthology (107), these rare but nonetheless recurring passages might leave readers with the impression that audio-visual renderings of dystopia ultimately remain stuck in external criticism, struggling to find a language for the absence of rebels. More explicit references to the critical potential of dystopias outside the literary realm, which follow their own media-specific logic, would have countered this lingering notion. In fact, there is a growing number of examples that show that dystopias on screen have become an equally potent vehicle for criticising contemporary ills. However, given that Gonnermann's primary interest lies in the literary

genre, this minor shortcoming does not outweigh the rich and hugely researched substance of this book. *Absent Rebels* makes an essential contribution to dystopian studies and pursues new horizons in scholarship by tracing in elegant details the changes and modifications of the genre.

BIONOTE

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