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MODERN DYSTOPIAN FICTION AND POLITICAL THOUGHT: NARRATIVES OF WORLD POLITICS (2018) BY ADAM STOCK

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Stock, Adam, *Modern Dystopian Fiction and Political Thought: Narratives of World Politics*, Routledge, 2018.

As a literary form, utopia seems to survive in Western narrative as its negative image, dystopia, as attested to by its use in public and political discourses. While previous works within the Western dystopian field often dealt with the catastrophe of alternative ways of living, contemporary neoliberal politics appear to increasingly resemble fictional dystopia. Rising economic uncertainty, populism, cultural trauma, and most pressingly, ecological catastrophe all characterise the dystopian nature of what Hegelian philosopher Slavoj Zizek has called "the topsy-turvy world of global capitalism" (*Like a Thief in Broad Daylight*, 18). Against this background, Adam Stock makes the realistic claim that we live in dystopian times. Less supported, however, is his argument that dystopia has, since the 1980s, become the dominant literary mode of critical engagement with contemporary politics, at least in the Anglophone West.

Literary narration, Stock argues, enables us to order the present into a coherent shape by historicising events still *in process*. Adam Stock's *Modern Dystopian Fiction and Political Thought* (2018) argues against the notion that the prevalence of dystopia signifies a lack of confidence in utopian political change. Instead, dystopian fiction is a powerful literary hermeneutic. Rather than engaging critically with the issues of the political present in light of a transformed future, dystopia shows that current political ills are temporary via a form of negation. To account for this, as well as how and why this diffusion has occurred, Stock formulates a critical apparatus for locating dystopian fiction within a series of political and intellectual histories. Drawing on Mikhail Bahktin's concept of the chronotope and Brian Attebury's 'fuzzy set,' Stock investigates the history of dystopian fiction by examples, rather than boundaries. It is an analysis of characteristics, but is not definitive. Furthermore, the production of literary space-time, generic conventions, and narrative forms, Stock argues, are grounded in the material conditions of the period in which these texts were produced. By recontextualising the works of early to mid-twentieth century dystopia (1909-1950), Stock outlines an effective interdisciplinary approach to the construction of narrative and literary worlds in dystopia, drawing on history, art, philosophy, and politics, and how these constructions frame political debate. Rather than re-capitulating what has come before, Stock draws on existing criticism of the dystopian field in order to pursue new horizons in scholarship of the genre.

Crucial to Stock's thesis is the relationship between these interdisciplinary approaches to narrative and utopia as a literary form. Both late Victorian utopia and H. G. Wells' Scientific Romances were characterised by a resistance to narrative closure. This resistance also appears in the partial, fragmented nature of contested 'historical' narratives that frequently appear in dystopian literature. This partial perspective, which Stock terms "*future-history*" enables the reader to extrapolate broader political concerns from the narrative ("Further Considerations," 2, original emphasis). This has two functions. Firstly, to address the ideological underpinnings of storytelling as a practice. And secondly, to understand dystopian narratives as threads of emerging political consciousness, engaging with the political debates of their era, rather than simply responding to them. In Stock's phrase, such narratives conform to Raymond Williams' terming of 'structures of feeling,' a means of ordering social experience still *in process*. Against charges of conservatism, Stock argues that dystopia carries on the critical project of utopia in a negative fashion. Following Theodor W. Adorno and Fredric Jameson's reading of utopia as a negative dialectic, dystopia aligns with utopia as it affirms the value of a transformed world, while negating the oppressive reality of the present.

The viability of this dialectical criticism, however, must be appreciated in the context of, as Kodwo Eshun has termed it in 'Further considerations on Afrofuturism', the way that SF is becoming the research and development department of a futures industry (Eshun, 2003, 291). Dystopia, in this way, may be viewed as an obstacle to change, rather than a call to arms in the capitalist West. In ecological thought particularly, dystopia may illustrate a feedback loop, reminiscent of forest die-back, inserting a teleology into the present whose result is a hostile future, while warding off threats to the market. In this method of control through prediction, Western capitalist modernity becomes a science-fictional novum, pre-programming the present to ensure its longevity. In Stock's refreshingly radical formulation, however, dystopia becomes a mode of immanent critique rather than a cautionary tale of the dangers of alternatives. The combination of the negative hermeneutic of ideology critique with the positive hermeneutic of a utopian-transformation-to-come can be used against the catastrophe of the status-quo. The negative image of the present can thus be seen in the light of a transfigured future, short-circuiting its logic. Dystopian texts, thus, express negativity without hopelessness.

The book's first section analyses relationships between politics and aesthetics. Texts such as E. M. Forster's "The Machine Stops" (1909) and Yvegeny Zamyatin's *We* (1921) implicitly critique the possibility of closure within the societies from which they emerged; the former by situating the text within fin-de-siècle anxieties about empire and masculinity; the latter in the tumult of post-revolutionary Russia. Stock reads Zamyatin's *We* as deferring a final synthesis of totalised human experience, which was associated with high modernism. Zamyatin's use of aesthetic opacity undermines the instrumental, rationalist society of his text. Drawing on Hegelian and Kantian aesthetic theories, and literary cinematic techniques such as the close-up, given the novel's diary structure, Stock argues that the form and content of Zamyatin's novel stimulates debate about contingency and revolutionary action. Situated in Zamyatin's historical and aesthetic contexts, Stock convincingly aligns dystopian fiction with revolutionary critique.

Contingency, deferral, and the refusal of closure inform Stock's thesis throughout this section, particularly in his analysis of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932). In Huxley's use of modernist formal experimentation and 'Scattergun' approach to satire, Stock sees exposure of immanent social contradictions. Drawing on Adorno and Williams' critique of Huxley's 'dystopia of the masses,' Stock rejects the vision of Huxley's future state as monolithic. Huxley's use of the 'counterpoint' technique to highlight elements of the novel's *future history* enhances Stock's argument, undercutting the teleological readings of both dystopia and history at large. Thus, even in texts such as *Brave New World*, in which the World State mass produces ideology through reproduction, conditioning needs, and their remedy through mandatory consumption, such negativity does not imply hopelessness.

Section two of the book follows the shift in the genre's form towards a more politically committed art during the 1930s. This period marked a turning point in the development of the genre away from contemplating existing discourses to allegorical criticism of specific targets. To this end, Stock argues that dystopia constitutes a dialectical link between meaning, allegory, and symbolic determination. As for Jameson, they articulate the central contradictions of their era through a representation of what might be. Coupling this with his argument surrounding historical impasses, Stock analyses the response of writers of the British independent Left to the rise of fascism, through readings of Rex Warner's *The Wild Goose Chase* (1937) and *The Professor* (1986), alongside Katherine Storm Jameson's *In the Second Year* (1936). This 'fuzzy set' of fiction not only draws together a series of texts from dystopia's hinterlands but also reveals a formal ambiguity that problematises formal and historical periodisation. Stock argues that during the 1930s, dystopia mediates not only the relationship between past, present, and future, but also the relationship between allegory, myth, and the pastoral. This argument remains pertinent, in the sense that many works of Western dystopia draw on fascist states and ideologies as templates. Likewise, Stock's focus is on the historical and literary developments of dystopian fiction, rather than their contemporary critical power. As such, he does not reflect on how contemporary dystopia may engage with contemporary global capitalism, in which monolithic regimes give way to decentralised networks of control, that are no less totalising, though not as transparently authoritarian. Likewise, the role of allegory, myth, and the pastoral are arguably diminished, and can easily be co-opted to serve political reaction, as Stock is careful to argue. The pastoral is a complex and ideologically fraught term, yet Stock's tact and honesty about this fact is much welcomed.

The final section of Stock's book re-examines the relationship between historical change and the individual subject through an analysis of George Orwell's *Nineteen-Eighty-Four* (1948) and selected works by John Wyndham. The former, Stock argues, renegotiates the temporality of dystopia by projecting the narrative into the (then) future and reflexively emphasising the question, 'how did we get here?' The protagonist, Winston Smith's memories follow then from real historical events before exploring memories of the future history such as a nuclear explosion in Colchester. By inviting the reader to reconstruct the past based on fragments of memory, Stock argues that Orwell introduces uncertainty through a strategy of "*future-as-past*" (Stock 10, original emphasis). As such, Orwell examines both current socio-political questions and their immanent futures. Rather than arguing that Orwell's Oceania allegorically represents twentieth century atrocities, Stock's argument

returns to how the text articulates existing political contradictions. Equally, this analysis is not confined to one perspective. As well as Orwel's relation to history and politics, Stock situates him within the European traditions of empiricism and rationalism. Additionally, he focusses on the neglected formal innovations of Orwell's dystopian ur-text. Specifically, his treatment of the dialectical relationship between historical tumult and lived experience, and the production of both space and nature within the novel. Similar to Zamyatin's *We*, Stock identifies a dualistic motif in Orwell's work: nature and the human body are detested, save as sites of future disciplinary punishment, or colonisation.

Finally, Stock examines Wyndham's use of dystopia, fantastic fiction, and literary style as characterised by the Cold War. What Stock calls Wyndham's "pessimistic liberal utopianism" is his attempt to resolve contradictions of the Cold War era (175). Specifically, the opposition between East and West, Soviet totalitarianism, the paranoid McCarthyist reaction, and the symbol of the atomic bomb. Wyndham's works *The Chrysalids* (1955), *Day of the Triffids* (1951), and *The Outward Urge* (1959), aid Stock's argument by indirectly engaging with both the Cold War and the science-fictional imagination of apocalypse and of expansive military apparatuses. The analysis of Wyndham's work implies that these contradictions are irresolvable, save through external impositions. In *The Outward Urge*, this manifests as a Hobbesian capitalist elite who maintain order at the cost of establishing new contradictions. As well as suggesting the textual future is not foreclosed, Wyndham's commitment to liberal humanism thus troubles any ultimate reconciliation. In Stock's careful analyses, the surplus elements of the texts are bolstered by a dialectical tension between hope and pessimism, or between utopia and apocalypse, which implies a further negation of the narrative present. Stock draws on their respective merits, while also drawing attention to the contradictions of liberal humanism that remain unresolved throughout Wyndham's novels. Such practices likewise resist a closure of argument, providing an open space for further understanding.

Stock concludes by briefly restating his arguments and areas of future study based on awareness of the limitations of his research. Among these are the necessarily brief analysis of certain literature, but also the omission of non-European dystopias, or those of other art media. The diffusion of dystopia to Young Adult fiction and its ideological commitments are likewise referenced as worryingly ignoring the nuances of social ills, or even legitimising the status quo. Yet this is countered with the knowledge that the generic blending and disruption of cultural hegemony may produce new, innovative forms of dystopian critique. Such literature, Stock hopes, may help explode oppressive structures of class, gender, sexuality, race, and colonialism. Moreover, with ecological or technological catastrophe becoming more present in the public imagination, the apocalyptic as the counter-pole to Stock's argument provides fertile ground for future readings. Despite only hinting at these later possibilities, Stock's book refutes the charges of conservatism and boredom some accuse dystopia of tending towards. Rather than pre-programming the future for disaster, dystopia prizes it open and keeps utopia on the horizon of critical thought.

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