

DYSTOPIAN THEORY REINVENTED

Critical Theory and Dystopia. By Patricia McManus. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022. Pp 224. ISBN 978-5261-3973-3.

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Patricia McManus's book re-explores the evolution of dystopian literature from the twentieth century into the present. In McManus's words, "[t]he aim is to arrive at an understanding of the odd shapes of dystopia historically, and from this to build an understanding of the pervasiveness of dystopian fictions in our own moment" (7). It covers a wide range of influential works, including Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1924), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* (1962), and Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* series (2000s and 2010s). The book focuses on the applications of the Frankfurt School of critical theory and in particular Theodor Adorno's work to uncover the political implications and transformations that have shaped the course of dystopian literature through its relatively short history.

The book offers a plethora of stimulating ideas regarding dystopian literature, its implications, its textual habits, and its relationship with or comparison to utopian literature. McManus argues that dystopia is not an "inheritor of the utopian narrative form, [...] nor is it a simple antagonist" (5). Historically, before the term *dystopia* became widely used, such works were often called *anti-utopias* or simply, *negative utopias*; as McManus explains, "[i]n Adorno's essay on Huxley's *Brave New World*, for example, the term 'negative utopia'" (5) appears. Instead, dystopia occupies a special space, in which it is sustained in limbo, never stepping far into the future and maintaining a textual distance from its present. This means that the overall approach of the book is centred around the hypothetical (time) gap between the dystopian work and the reader. In dystopian fiction, MacManus argues, there is nothing to support "the reader through the shift from present to future" (13). This means that the reader is "addressed by the dystopian text as someone who is *in* this new world [...], not] from the reports of fictional witnesses to whom it also might have come as a novel or shocking place" (13). McManus combines Adorno's theories of power and language and Darko Suvin's concepts of the *novum* and *cognitive estrangement* to approach this gap. Thus, *Critical Theory and Dystopia* examines how dystopian fiction reflects on the limits of modernity, the collapse of social structures, and the tension between individual agency and the power of institutions.

In the first chapter, “Negative Commitment at Work,” McManus introduces the difference between the classical dystopias and the dystopias of our time. For this purpose, she explores E.M Forster’s “The Machine Stops” (1909), Frederik Pohl and Cyril M. Kornbluth’s *The Space Merchants* (1952) and Leni Zumas’s *Red Clocks: A Novel* (2018). According to McManus, “[t]he early forms of the classical dystopia had a relationship to their present which saw it [the future] threatened by epochal-altering shifts in technology or discoveries in psychology” (167), in contrast with contemporary dystopias, which “have sloughed off the structural need for distance or are denied it by the dailiness of the situations they trace” (59). The first chapter also provides the clearest explanation of the term *negative commitment*, which is central to McManus’s argument, by drawing on Tom Moylan’s observation that in dystopias the “social values” of the narrator and the dystopian society are oppositional. McManus argues that “the structural presence and narrative impossibility of those same ‘values’ [...] is the ground of negative commitment” (39). The first chapter is integral to the overall structure of McManus’s claims by establishing the terminologies through which she reads dystopia.

The second chapter, “Orwell and the Classic Dystopia,” explores Orwell’s impact on the genre. Referring to the most canonical dystopia of the twentieth century, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, McManus demonstrates the *novum*, *negative commitment* and the disassociation from the past that is characteristic of classical dystopia. There are moments at which McManus’s extensive and complex writing style eludes the reader, making it difficult to keep track of how *negative commitment* works within the sampled primary texts throughout the book. McManus’s theoretical application of *negative commitment* is dense. This complexity is evident when discussing George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, where McManus states:

Orwell wrote a novel in which his commitment to warning of the vulnerability of truth, its tendency to dissolve when subjected to political contests, overcame his own political commitment to democratic socialism. The novel has only the negative commitment enabled or demanded by the regime it despises. (94)

This intricate layering of the concept suggests that the novel’s world is ‘wrong’ not because it loses something, but because it suppresses the “unimaginable” or abolishes the truth that can only be defined by the “hard limits of fact” (McManus, 94). Furthermore, McManus then highlights that “Orwell’s novel surrenders truth to fact because it cannot bear admitting the social and historical antinomies of belief and of value into a realm of truth which, because it has to be protected from them, has become so vulnerably brittle” (97). Such nuanced and abstract explanation of how *negative commitment* functions within the narrative form, while insightful, can require considerable effort from the reader to fully disentangle and follow.

The third and fourth chapters are “Dystopia and the Past,” and “Michel Houellebecq and the End of Dystopia?” respectively. In the third chapter, McManus uses the term *hollow space* (105) to describe the history of dystopia throughout its infancy, asserting that Adorno’s phrase aptly describes how early twentieth-century works contribute to remembering the past, yet erasing from memory some of its crucial features – such as forms of systemic oppression (104) and the *hollow space* it textually occupied in the past. This chapter demonstrates the capacity of the dystopian narrative to comment and reflect on social issues of the past to critique the present. There is also a great deal of analysis devoted to *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) by Margaret Atwood, and how the genre “must estrange the present to create itself” (109). The fourth chapter offers a new perspective through a discussion of the contemporary dystopia *Submission* (2015) by Michel Houellebecq. According to McManus, the novel offers a form of “aggressive assimilation to unified yet ‘moderate’ Islam as a ‘solution’ to the unhappiness and exhaustion of the contemporary ‘Western’ family” (136). This chapter reflects the death of modernity as McManus concludes that the reader’s own civilisation “the ‘civilisation’ at stake [in the novel] is itself long gone” (154).

The fifth and final chapter, “American Dystopia,” focuses on Mark Fisher’s *Capitalist Realism* (2009), Gary Shteyngart’s *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010), and Lionel Shriver’s *The Mandibles* (2016). McManus seeks answers to the question of what the future of dystopia is, and she argues that the above-mentioned novels demonstrate that dystopian fiction no longer describes a ‘future’ but the present. In fact, we are now living in a new dystopia, as the genre continuously closes the gap with the future following each global political and economic crisis.

Across the book, McManus tries to establish a new critical approach to dystopian literature and to study the shift from anti-utopian ideas towards contemporary dystopias. She notes, drawing on Fredric Jameson’s observation, that there has been an “as cited by McManus) “overwhelming increase in all manner of conceivable dystopias, most of which look monotonously alike” (5). To explain this “monotony” in contemporary dystopia McManus engages in a dialogue with Mark Bould who suggests that one reason for the “‘monotony’ may be the totalisation of the present or the present’s success at presenting itself as such a totality, closed and pragmatic and inevitable” (6). Bould argues that if our present reality already feels unavoidable, then dystopian texts struggle to gain sufficient distance to generate the cognitive estrangement that is essential for an effective political critique (6).

Through the interpretative framework of the textual gap, a rhetorical opening created within a narrative, McManus demonstrates the ‘openness’ of contemporary dystopias and her choice of primary texts is wide-ranging. However, the book is a challenge to read as it assumes a requisite, detailed knowledge of the texts and critical theory, leaving the reader lost in the intricate network of references. With

the introduction of new vocabularies and a wide-ranging analysis of a variety of primary texts, from Orwell to Houellebecq, McManus demonstrates her command of the field of dystopian literature. Although the density of the book may be a barrier for some readers, it provides the reader with new perspectives on the genre and its future, and is a refreshing read for experts interested in utopian and dystopian studies.