

CFP Special Issue: Re-Conceptualizing Utopia: Thinking the Future Today (Seminar: A Journal of Germanic Studies)

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CFP Special Issue: Re-Conceptualizing Utopia: Thinking the Future Today ([*Seminar: A Journal of Germanic Studies*](#))

Faced with the return of violent geopolitics in Europe, an ongoing pandemic and its ensuing ‘new normal,’ and the ever-increasing urgency of addressing climate change, our first reaction when thinking about the future might be to shudder. We certainly no longer live in an optimistic age permeated by visions of socio-economic progress. Unlike in the early 20th century, the “Zeitalter der Träume” (Alida Bremer, *Träume und Kulissen* 2021), we now recognize the social, economic, and ecological violence and destruction brought about by what Aleida Assman calls the future-oriented modern time regime and the attendant utopias that emanated from both ends of the political spectrum (*Ist die Zeit aus den Fugen?: Aufstieg und Fall des Zeitregimes der Moderne* 2013). In his often-cited “The Ends of Utopia” (2010), Krishan Kumar therefore doubts whether the relative absence of utopian thought today is something to be mourned: “We might feel that the times get the works they deserve, that, the world being what it is at present, it would be unreasonable to expect the production of utopias. There would be something unnatural, almost unseemly, about the attempt. [...] Something more is needed, something that relates more directly to the condition of intellectual and cultural life” (564).

Nevertheless, while utopian thought in the form of large-scale blueprints for some perfect society no longer resonates today, thinking about alternative and better futures persists. Of course, any notions of what constitutes ‘better’ remain highly contested, and as Jennifer L. Allen reminds us, the broad appeal of utopian thought and practice across the political spectrum requires that we “be neither too sanguine nor too pessimistic about the resuscitation” of utopian discourses (*Sustainable Utopias* 30-31). Considering these contemporary realities, we should not expect imaginative visions of future possibilities to appear in the familiar forms of the past. As Sean Austin Grattan suggests, utopian desires are more likely to be expressed in forms that are marked by ambivalence and incompleteness, a reflection of the postmodern rejection of master narratives and the very challenge of expressing hope in the contemporary moment (*Hope Isn't Stupid* 5).

For this special issue, we solicit articles that analyze what Kumar’s notion of ‘something more’ looks like today in regard to envisioning more diverse, just, equitable, and sustainable futures. We invite

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proposals for articles that examine how, when, and where the future is envisioned and conceptualized in 21st-century German-language imaginative art—broadly conceived and including everything from literary fiction, theatre, and activist art to visual art, graphic narrative, feature films, and experimental documentaries.

Potential questions and topics to be addressed include:

- How does contemporary German-language imaginative art foster critical hope (Paulo Freire 2007) and celebrate the human capacity for change, rather than re-entrench apathy and despair?
- What revised versions of utopian thought, what ‘sustainable utopias’ (Jennifer L. Allen 2022), are depicted and enacted by writers, playwrights, directors, and other kinds of artists today?
- On what scale(s) (individual, local, regional, temporary, and so on) does the socially transformative, political agency of art play itself out today? In what ways is contemporary German art attentive to the fact that not all communities engaged in “future-thinking” are structurally enabled to also engage in “future-making” (Emina Mušanović & Ashwin Manthripragada, “Unsettling Futurity,” *Seminar* 2019)?
- What contemporary future-oriented visions emerge in response to past injustices and erasure that continue to shape our present? What is the capacity of contemporary German-language art to foster futurity in the way Amir Eshel defines it (Eshel, *Futurity: Contemporary Literature and the Quest for the Past* 2013)?
- What is the role of German-language science fiction and speculative fiction in forging better futures, for instance, in the context of Afro-German Afrofuturism (Priscilla Layne)?
- What other old and new artistic media, genres, literary devices, and so on seem most adequate to capture non-totalizing visions of better futures today? For example, what novel or hybrid artistic forms and genres are used to respond to the environmental crisis in ways that go beyond disempowering dystopias?
- What is the place of affect, emotion, spirit, or ‘poetic reason’ (Marica Bodrožić *Poetische Vernunft im Zeitalter gusseiserner Begriffe* 2019) in transforming the present and conceiving alternative futures? When is such hope not ‘stupid’ (Sean S. Grattan *Hope Isn’t Stupid* 2017)?
- How does art participate in and/or depict contemporary movements, not just moments, of revolt and revolution, including in the non-human world?
- How is time itself re-conceived to allow us to think and work towards the future without reinscribing the modern march of progress? How do we trouble time(s) and undo the future (Karen Barad)?
- Does contemporary art already reflect (on) ways in which the recent and ongoing experience of the COVID-19 Pandemic might point to better futures?

Please send a 500-word abstract and short bio to Christina Kraenzle kraenzle@yorku.ca and Maria Mayr mmayr@mun.ca by September 1, 2022. Prospective contributors will be notified by October 1, 2022. The deadline for draft manuscripts (6000-8000 words) will be March 30, 2023 and Oct 2023 for revised, final manuscripts. Each contribution will undergo rigorous double-blind peer review before publication of the special issue in spring 2024. Submissions are welcome in English, French, or German.

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