

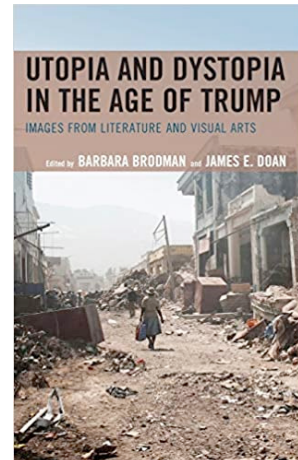
Utopia and Dystopia in the Age of Trump: Images from Literature and Visual Arts, Barbara Brodman and James E. Doan, eds



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Brodman, Barbara, and James E. Doan, eds. *Utopia and Dystopia in the Age of Trump: Images from Literature and Visual Arts*. Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2019. Hardcover. 244 pg. \$95.00. ISBN 9781683931676. EBook ISBN 9781683931683.

The title of this collection is, without any doubt, catchy, and the dystopia part in particular feels very topical at the moment. While I am writing this review, in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis and the protests against the murder of George Floyd, Donald Trump's unique blend of viciousness and ineptitude is reaching new heights (or lows). The images we see from Washington, with armed forces in front of the Lincoln memorial, certainly have a dystopian feel to them. But, as it so often goes with catchy phrases, the title proves on closer inspection also to be quite problematic.



The problem is twofold and really concerns both parts of the book's title. First, surprisingly few of the fourteen essays collected in this volume actually deal with proper utopias or dystopias. While opinions among scholars differ about how loosely the concept of the positive utopia should be understood, dystopia is quite clear-cut as a genre. Dystopias deal with a society which is worse than the one we live in. But neither *Hamlet* (c. 1599-1601) nor Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839), which Christine Jackson analyzes in her article, are set in dystopian societies. It is, of course, legitimate to read Poe or Shakespeare against the backdrop of the Trump presidency (as Stephen Greenblatt has done so beautifully in *Tyrant*), but the mere fact that Claudius has murdered Hamlet's father does not make him a dystopian ruler. Claudius may be a bad person, but there is little evidence that he is also a bad king.

Similarly, Daniel Adleman reads Bret Easton Ellis's notorious *American Psycho* (1991) as a critique "of the callous cultural logic that underpins the utopian ideology of the US neoliberal project". (70) It certainly makes sense to see Ellis's murderous protagonist Patrick Bateman as a kind of proto-Trumpist—as Adleman points out, there are more than thirty direct or indirect references to Trump in the novel—but again it is not really clear how this relates to the concepts of utopia and dystopia except in the most general way..

While some might consider this criticism to be narrow-minded genre policing, it is telling that the editors give only short summaries of the individual articles in their introduction, but fail

to come up with any kind of conceptual framework which would help to explain or contextualize their selection.

Utopia and Dystopia in the Age of Trump is not targeted at scholars of utopias or sf. This becomes evident in Jeffrey Barber's chapter, which is a compressed introduction to and history of sf and utopian writing with a special focus on the theme of sustainability that ends with thoughts on the Trump presidency. While the overview given might prove useful to readers not acquainted with sf theory, the link to contemporary US politics does not go much beyond the assessment that sales of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) have soared after Trump's election.)

And this brings us to the book's second, more serious problem: The question of how much it can tell us about Trump which is enlightening or relevant. Much has been and is still being written on the 45th US President. An obvious disadvantage of an academic book like this is its long gestation time. *Utopia and Dystopia in the Age of Trump* was published in June 2019, which means that probably none of its chapters was written later than the end of 2018. Not surprisingly, some of the essays therefore already feel outdated. Sometimes painfully so, such as Tom Shapira's chapter on Judge Dredd, in which he likens special counsel Robert Mueller to the comic's eponymous protagonist. Like the judge, a member of a special unit who is police, judge, jury, and executioner in one person, Mueller is "an authoritarian figure, a straight and narrow professional, stern of gaze and relentless in his task". (188) Shapira's observation that even people for whom a character like Mueller used to be something short of a bogeyman suddenly rooted for the special counsel is intriguing, but the sad fact that the Mueller report amounted to nothing in the end gives his essay a quite unexpected punch line. Unfortunately, unlike in the comic, in real life the crazy President was not brought down by a disciplined servant of the state.

As an introduction to Judge Dredd—which unlike Hamlet really deals with dystopia—Shapira's chapter works well, as do Matthew Paproth's discussion of the TV series *Black Mirror* (2011-) and Kate Waites's chapter on *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) and the Hulu TV series adaptation of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). But in each case the connection with Trump—which should be the whole point of the book—seems forced and not very productive. Waites's contribution is typical in this regard. Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale* (2016-) is probably the first example that comes to mind when people think of dystopia in the age of Trump. The adaptation of Margaret Atwood's novel does indeed feel very timely, and some of its iconic elements, like the handmaid's red dresses and white winged hats, have become symbols of the #MeToo movement and of resistance against Trump in general. In her analysis, Waites concentrates on visual strategies of the show, though, and says little about Trump.

The already mentioned lack of a theoretical framing for the volume becomes particularly striking with David L. McNarron's chapter, which closes the book. McNarron discusses Albert Camus's classic novel *The Plague* (1947)—which has gained new topicality thanks to the COVID-19 pandemic—and Jean Raspail's *The Camp of the Saints* (1973), an obscure French book which has in recent years become a favorite among the alt-right. McNarron's reading of the two

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novels—which manages to turn Camus’s deeply humanist novel into a plea for nationalism—culminates in a surprising call for strong borders and unabashed support for Trump’s policy.

What is the point of this chapter? Do the editors intend to bring some kind of balance to the selection of texts which are with the exception of McNarron’s decidedly anti-Trump? Is it meant as a refreshing provocation? Since the book lacks a coherent concept, the readers are left to wonder.