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Models, Theories, Critiques

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Liam Benison

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Contents

Acknowledgements	13
Bionotes	15
Introduction	27
Towards Utopian Possibilities Liam Benison	
Part 1. Art and Architecture	35
1.1. Shock, Tension, Offence, and Satire in Utopian Contemporary Art Jennifer Hankin	37
1.2. From Masterplan to Masterplanet: Architectural Worldbuilding Jennifer Raum	43
1.3. Designing Context-Aware Construction Systems Filipe Jorge da Silva Brandão	51
1.4. “Devise the Art of Waking Easily from Dreams”: Velimir Khlebnikov’s Utopian Proposals Pavla Veselá	61
Part 2. Historical Models	71
Introduction: From the Perfect Republic to a Just and Wealthy Society: Models of Utopia from Early Modern to Contemporary Times Anna Di Bello	73
2.1. Republican Utopia in Antonio Brucioli’s <i>Dialogi</i> (1526–1544) Francesca Russo	75
2.2. From Anti-Parliamentarianism to the Utopia of Council Communism: The Soviet in Great Britain Anna Rita Gabellone	83
2.3. Old Europe, New America: Domingo F. Sarmiento’s Utopia of Well-Being Italia Maria Cannataro	91

Part 3. Utopian Literary History	99
3.1. Exchanges of Knowledge at the Private-Public Divide in Smeeks's <i>Krinke Kesmes</i>	101
Liam Benison	
3.2. "Not only a Robinsonade but also a Utopia": The Early Reception of <i>Robinson Crusoe</i> in Hungary	109
Gabriella Hartvig	
3.3. Utopianism Clean and Pure: The Interconnected Hygiene Discourse of Nineteenth-Century Science and Literature	117
Albert Göschl	
3.4. The Path of Progress: Utopia and Spiritualist Literature	125
Marta Komsta	
3.5. From Utopia to Dystopia, between Local and Global: Two Past South Slavic Futures	133
Kenneth Hanshew	
Part 4. Models of Imagined Communities	141
4.1. Caldeirão da Santa Cruz do Deserto: From Intentional Community to Cultural Artefact	143
Michel Macedo Marques	
4.2. Unimaginable Utopias: Neoliberalism and the Turkish Military Coup of 12 September 1980	149
Ceren Ünlü	
4.3. The End of the "Great Utopia": Svetlana Alexievich's <i>Secondhand Time</i>	157
José Eduardo Reis	
4.4. Spatial-Historical Waypoints in the Possible: Generating Sociological Knowledge through Walking between Manchester's Forty-Four Post Offices	167
Martin Greenwood	
4.5. English Allotments as Sites of Utopic Super-Diversity	175
JC Niala	
4.6. Deaftopia: Utopian Representations and Community Dreams by Sign Language Peoples	183
Cristina Gil	
Part 5. Contemporary Literary Themes	193
5.1. Utopia as Disruption in Paul Chirrakarode's <i>Pulayathara</i>	195
Divya Singh	

5.2. Breaking All the Old Hierarchies: Sex and Gender in Marge Piercy's <i>Woman on the Edge of Time</i> Kevin Hogg	201
5.3. It's All Fun and Games: Countering the Boring Dystopia with the Exciting Utopia Matthew Leggatt	209
5.4. The Distances Between Utopia and Dystopia in Le Guin's "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas" Evanir Pavloski	217
5.5. When Lilliput Becomes All Too Real: Utopian and Dystopian Elements in László Rab's <i>Among the Hungarians: Gulliver's Umpteenth Voyage</i> Bence Gábor Kvéder	223
5.6. Memory Challenges in James Dashner's and Suzanne Collins's Dystopias Adela Catană and Mary-Jane Rădulescu	231
Part 6. Reinterpretations of <i>Nineteen Eighty-Four</i>	239
6.1. Reading Orwell's <i>Nineteen Eighty-Four</i> as a Manifesto for Moderation and Decency Nusret Ersöz	241
6.2. Fraternal Complicity: The Permeation of Patriarchal Well-Being in Orwell's <i>Nineteen Eighty-Four</i> Almudena Machado-Jiménez	249
6.3. The Utopian Impulse in the Post-Truth Era in the Visual Novel <i>Orwell: Ignorance Is Strength</i> Imola Bülgözdi	257
Part 7. Climate and Capitalism	265
7.1. Affects, Effects and Action: Utopia and the Climate Crisis Lisa Garforth	267
7.2. Seeking Alternatives to the Triple-Growth Imperative: A Fool's Errand or a Slave's Dilemma? António Ferreira and Ori Rubin	275
7.3. Digital Utopias and Capitalist Ideology Tom Redshaw	283
7.4. Is What's Mine Really Mine? Reimagining Resource Ownership and Control in Post-Apocalyptic Fiction Cara Linley	291

Part 8. Emotional and Legal Implications of Artificial Intelligence	299
8.1. The Interrelationship between Human Empathy and Technological Progress in Kazuo Ishiguro's <i>Klara and the Sun</i> Ilenia Vittoria Casmiri	301
8.2. Philosophical Implications of Emotional Artificial Intelligence in Science Fiction Dana Svorova	309
8.3. Evantropia and the Law: Legal Issues in Biotechnology in the "Altered Carbon" Trilogy Anna Bugajska	315
Part 9. Education, Knowledge, and Praxis	325
9.1. A Typology of Utopian Knowledge Nina Liebhaber and Lars Keller	327
9.2. Teachers and Students of Utopia: Lessons from Serbia Zorica Đergović-Joksimović	335
9.3. Reaffirming the Negative Function of Utopian Anticipation Tom Moylan	343

4.6. Deaftopia: Utopian Representations and Community Dreams by Sign Language Peoples

Cristina Gil

Abstract

Deaftopia conceptualizes utopian and dystopian manifestations of Sign Language Peoples, drawing from Deaf-led cultural productions. These cultural objects contain narratives and discourses that stem from diverse sources, including Deaf artwork and films, Deaf literature and visuature, Deaf-led activist demonstrations, and even political efforts for sign language recognition. Many perspectives are possible within Deaftopia. The utopian discourse enables us to get a glimpse of an improved societal scaffold, where sign language and Deaf culture thrives, while dystopian counter narratives and discourses of resistance forewarn us about the threats and dangers to Sign Language Peoples and their cultural legacy. This essay outlines findings from my doctoral research, with the aim not only to bring forth knowledge of Deaf culture, but also to contribute to its preservation. This is the role of Deaftopia for Sign Language Peoples.

Key words: Deaftopia, Deaf culture, Deaf communities, Deaf literature, Deaf art

Deaftopia conceptualizes dreams and projections for the future, as well as fears, emerging from Deaf imaginary and experience. The concept brings forth a new perspective on d/Deaf¹ people's cultural productions in a transdisciplinary synergy of culture studies, Deaf studies, and utopian studies. Studies conducted on Deaf culture have had an impact on the understanding of culture. Now, as a field, culture studies is benefiting from Deaf studies, which brings innovative theoretical perspectives through the critical analysis of the cultural productions and centuries-long oppression of Sign Language Peoples (SLPs) (Ladd, 2003; Batterbury *et al.*, 2007). This systemic oppression results in a conceptual counter-discourse that produces complex notions such as "DEAF WAY", "DEAF

WORLD”, “DEAFHOOD”, and “DEAF GAIN” (Erting *et al.*, 1994: xxiii; Lane *et al.*, 1996: ix; Ladd, 2003: xviii; Bauman & Murray, 2009: 3, 2014: xv).² The concepts mentioned above compose what I call a Deaf “Mythomoteur”, which works as an intensifier of group identity, a motor to form a sense of belonging, the same way as a flag or folklore forms the imagined community that we call a nation (Gil, 2019). However, Deaftopia also contains cultural productions and elements that fuels group cohesion in SLPs.

My doctoral thesis analysed the narrative, critical, and activist discourses of Deaf people and theorized the scientific concept of “Deaftopia” as an expression of Deaf culture (Gil, 2020). The concept of Deaftopia was the result of an extensive analysis of the utopian and dystopian manifestations of diverse cultural productions, carefully selected narratives, and discourses produced by Deaf people who use sign language and who consume and/or produce Deaf culture and are engaged in their own Deaf community. Beginning with narrative worldmaking in Deaf literature and visuature (literature conveyed in sign language), the focus was on novels, short stories, and poems. A work that can be considered canonical is *Islay*, a novel by Douglas Bullard (2013) first published in 1986. The novel takes us on a journey with Lyson Sulla, the protagonist, who undertakes the project of creating a Deaf state. Sulla travels the USA to find supporters of the project and gets into many adventures in the process of becoming governor of Islay.

Another example of Deaftopian literature is *Mindfield* by John F. Egbert, which also takes place in the USA (Egbert, 2006). A bioterrorist weapon spreads a meningitis pandemic leading to an unprecedented increase of deafness. The North American government has no other solution than to turn to the Deaf community to learn how to adapt to the new circumstances. In the UK, Nick Sturley published *Milan* in 2003, a dystopian science fiction narrative. *Milan* surprisingly gathers historical figures and events, anthropomorphizes oralist philosophies in the villain, and unexpectedly includes time travel. Sturley wrote for both hearing and Deaf audiences and includes a thought-provoking idea, mainly for those who are not familiar with Deaf communities and Deaf culture, which is the notion that many Deaf people consider becoming a hearing person a dystopian reality.

Other narratives with Deaftopian features include *Vibrating Mouth* by John Lee Clark (2017), “Understanding” by Kelsey Young (2017), “The Sonic Boom of 1994” by Mervin D. Garretson (1984), and “A Brave New World” by Lawrence Newman (2009). These short stories tackle a wide variety of topics that allow the authors to reflect on the origin myth of Deaf communities, as well as critique oralism, thus expanding the discussion of biopower and biopolitics.

There are several traits in Deaftopian fiction that recur, such as the inversion of circumstances. This complete inversion of social dynamics is a common resource in utopian/dystopian speculative fiction. These narratives

usually depict imaginary scenarios that turn the tables, making the majority use sign language. These stories entail a dialogue between utopia/dystopia as they are read by different audiences that hold different values towards deafness and sign language. They allow hearing audiences to understand the Deaf perspective and experience, and allow the Deaf reader to untangle his or her own experience of decolonization of the Deaf mind and to open themselves to the novelties of worldmaking.

In Deaftopian visuature, the literary genre conveyed in sign language, two very rich contributions are notable. One tells the story of planet EYETH, a place where everyone uses sign language, and which has become recurrent folklore in American Sign Language and Deaf culture. The analysis focused on Stephen M. Ryan's (1991) version entitled *Planet Way Over Yonder*. The second is *Bleeva: The Narrative of Our Existence*, a live performance by Benjamin Bahan (2018) that boldly merged Deaf history, Deaf culture, science fiction, and several myths and conspiracy theories to explain why Deaf people are in this world and to identify their origin. This visuature piece articulates not only the storyteller performance of its author in American Sign Language, but also includes a carefully curated visual art composition.

Deaftopian narratives are also featured in films and short films such as *The End* (2011), written and directed by Ted Evans, and *The Destination Eyeth* (2007) directed by Arthur Luhn. *Reverberations* (2018), written and directed by Samuel Dore, will also be included here, although it was not part of my doctoral research.

The End is a docu-fiction, meaning it resembles a documentary but the content is entirely fictional and enacted. It is a short film that follows the life of four characters, Arron, Mohamed, Sophie, and Luke, showing their experiences in five chronological frames: 1987, 1995, 2008, 2031, and 2046. The narrative leads us to several subjects under constant discussion among SLPs, such as Deaf education and the politics of rehabilitation, Deaf identities, biopower, and biopolitics concerning the right to be born and to be proud of one's language and identity (Ladd, 2013). In this narrative, a cure for deafness is presented, and although it appears to be voluntary, we see that forces of intimidation and coercion are set in place to convince Deaf people to engage in the treatment. As the narrative evolves, we end up following Arron, who consistently refuses "the treatment" and wants to continue to be Deaf and use British Sign Language. As we approach the finale, Arron, already an isolated man without any interpersonal connections, is visited by a sort of government social welfare assistant and is informed by them that he is the last Deaf man on Earth. The scenes create a profound feeling of solitude as we understand, in the film's final shot, that the film we are watching is also being displayed at a gallery or museum. This "cure", which could apparently signify a utopia for hearing people and is, therefore, an intense dystopia for people who are familiar with Deaf culture and are members of SLPs.

Reverberations is a sci-fi short film, a drama that tells the story of a fascist government that wipes out deafness through gene therapy. The film follows an organized Deaf resistance in 2167. A young Deaf time traveller goes back to 2018 to warn the responsible researcher of how her work is going to be used in creating this “perfect” society. Both *Reverberations* and *The End* were produced with the assistance of the British Sign Language Broadcasting Trust, which are accessible to both Deaf and hearing audiences. Evans and Dore are both writers and directors, as well as members from the British Deaf community.

From the USA, *Destination Eyeth* is a revivalist silent film with a slapstick comedy style that explores the attempts of a scientist to travel to planet EYETH, a planet where everyone speaks sign language. The dialogue between the two characters, a man and a scientist, is conveyed through title cards. They present a plan and make three failed attempts to travel. The film ends with the statement “To be continued ...” instead of “The End” to suggest that they are not giving up on reaching EYETH. This short film, the first directed by Arthur Luhn, with a duration of only 2 minutes and 56 seconds, appears in the PBS documentary *Through Deaf Eyes* (at minute 28:08) as an illustration of the quest for EYETH.

Deaftopias are also found in non-fictional narratives, as in the case of a heated exchange of letters that took place in the USA between 1856 and 1858. These letters concerned the hypothesis of building a Deaf Commonwealth, first proposed by John J. Flournoy, and later discussed by Edmund Booth and many others. As a philosophical debate, the content of these letters remains pertinent to considering the pros and cons of such an endeavour (Flournoy & Turner, 1856; Flournoy, 1858; Flournoy *et al.*, 1858).

All cultural productions mentioned above were categorized as narrative discourses; however, a second part of my research examined critical and activist discourses that are pivotal to broaden the potential of a concept such as Deaftopia.

Sources for the first part of my research included narrative discourses in literary works such as novels, short-stories, poetry. Non-literary texts such as letters and, in a different medium, short-films were also included. The second part of the research turned the focus on critical and activist discourses, including speeches, political manifestos, activism, lobbying for sign language legal recognition, and the development of shared sign communities. (Shared sign communities are villages, islands, and other types of somewhat isolated communities, where sign language is used by everyone.) The existence of shared sign communities is far more common than generally acknowledged in the scholarship, and it occurs in all continents. In these communities, Deaf people remain a minority, even if the demographic density is higher than usual, but hearing people embrace the local sign language and start to use it regularly. Shared sign communities are not utopian in their genesis, nor artificially created or projected, with perhaps the exception of Soviet Russian towns (Gil, 2020: 221). However, they symbolize an ideal that many

Deaf people from western countries recognize as utopian. The most paradigmatic example of a shared sign community is the extinct Martha's Vineyard settlement, which is known to this day by Deaf communities worldwide (Groce, 1985).

Now turning our gaze to Deaf-led activist demonstrations, the most iconic of which is the speech by George Veditz in 1913 entitled "The Preservation of Sign Language". This was filmed in the aftermath of the Milan Congress, as Veditz, and many others at the time, thought that after the prohibition of sign language in Deaf education, the result would be the extinction of signed languages and Deaf Culture. Veditz gathered signing experts, both Deaf and hearing, to film speeches in American Sign Language to leave an archive of their testimonies and their heritage for future generations as they were facing the threat of extinction. Veditz's speech is known as the Deaf community's cultural equivalent of Martin Luther King's iconic "I Have a Dream" speech.

Another highly relevant moment for Deaf activism and agency in Deaf history was the Deaf President Now movement. In brief, Deaf President Now or DPN is a movement that developed on Gallaudet University's campus in March 1988 and had international impact. The Deaf community, including students, faculty, alumni, and many others, gathered to demonstrate and demand a Deaf president for the university, among other changes to make the institution Deaf-led. Gallaudet University is a singular place for Deaf students with a majority of Deaf faculty members. It has been identified by many as a Deaf space, the closest thing to a Deaf utopia or Deaf mecca (Gil, 2020: 105). By achieving its ends, the movement scored a victory in terms of Gallaudet's history and administration, and also inspired activism for Deaf rights in the rest of the country and worldwide (Christiansen & Barnartt, 2003; Gannon, 2009).

The town project of Laurent serves as another significant milestone within critical and activist discourses. In 2002, Marvin Miller moved to Sioux Falls and founded the Laurent Company. Miller had a project to build a Deaf town in South Dakota. Although he gathered the names of many Deaf people who were interested in moving to that town and taking part in the experience, and despite the generous media coverage, Laurent was put on hold and later abandoned due to the financial crisis and insufficient support (Miller, 2006).

On a different note, across the Atlantic, in 1976, a group of Deaf activists in the UK inaugurated the National Union of the Deaf (NUD) and wrote *Blueprint for the Future: A Radical Manifesto* (NUD, 1977). The collective reclaimed its right to exist, the right to be Deaf, the right to sign language accessibility, and the right for Deaf cultural representation, among other claims. The particularity in this approach was that the language used was not at all the common diplomatic approach of other institutions of the time, such as the British Deaf Association (BDA). The NUD were unapologetically proud of their heritage, culture, and identity.

Although the field of linguistics established that signed languages are full-fledged languages with the publication of William Stokoe's ground-breaking research in 1960 (Stokoe, 2015), legal and social recognition in many countries has been slow to emerge. To have their rights acknowledged, Deaf organizations and Deaf people worldwide have inaugurated political efforts for sign language recognition in their own countries. Furthermore, this effort bears on the cultural and linguistic sustainability of Deaf communities and SLPs. The lack of adequate educational policies, lack of Deaf agency and representativity, and a lack of accessibility to information and equal opportunities are only a few of the claims that inspire Deaf people, and signers overall, to fight for sign language recognition (De Meulder, *et al.*, 2019). It is always a joyful moment when another country legally proclaims the right to use sign language. The transnational Deaf network is always supporting each country's Deaf community accomplishments.

In conclusion, a complex trait of Deaftopia is that it encompasses both utopian futures and perspectives which Deaf people dream about, as well as containing dystopian warnings, such as the threat of extinction of Deaf communities, signed languages, and the preservation of Deaf people's right to exist. These dark possibilities fuel the creation of counter narratives and discourses of resistance. Deaftopias fall into the categories of transgressive utopias and critical utopias (Sargisson, 1996: 10; Levitas, 2010: 197, 2013: 110; Moylan, 2014: xv) and function as a method for critically engaging with Deaf history and the colonial legacy (Gil, 2022). The concept of Deaftopia helps to bring forth knowledge that contributes to the preservation of Deaf culture and sign languages, as well as opening the discussion of cultural diversity as a positive trait of humankind.

Notes

1. The division of d/D has been used since 1970s in Deaf Studies. "Deaf" refers to people that use sign language and participate actively in the Deaf community and consume or produce Deaf culture; and "deaf" means people that are not sign language users and prefer to live assimilated among hearing people and whose preferred means of communication is oral. This binary division has been questioned and the capital D is still the subject of heated debate (Kusters *et al.*, 2017). However, although understanding, and in part agreeing with, the issues raised by this fruitful discussion, the author still finds it important to use a capital D, just as capitalization is used to refer to specific groups, nationalities, ethnicities, and identities.

2. Small caps indicate English glosses of concepts from sign language.

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