

Abstracts: FRIDAY

Session IV 8:30-10:00

4. A. Zombies! (Colonial East)

Rosemary Millar, University of North Carolina School of the Arts, “Zomtopia: Remaking the Utopian Vision in *Aaah!! Zombies*”

Zombies threaten humanity! Frank Darabont’s TV series *The Walking Dead*, Lost Zombies’ graphic novel, *Dead Inside: Do Not Enter: Note from the Zombie Apocalypse* and films like George Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* and even the zomcom Edgar Wright’s *Shaun of the Dead* drive home that point. Zombies are harbingers to human extinction if not destroyed. With human extinction, a zombie apocalypse would in turn threaten the possibility of utopia, an ideal place to live, as envisioned by utopists such as Sir Thomas More, H.G. Wells, Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Edward Bellamy. Zombies are antithetical to visions of an ideal place; in fact, they unmake the very idea of a human society and question whether a utopia can even exist in a zombie apocalypse. Matthew Kohnen’s 2007 zomcom film *Wasting Away* better known as *Aaah!! Zombies* attempts to answer that question. His story maintains a conventional human reaction to the zombies as a threat; however, the telling of that story is non-conventional. Kohnen turns the zombie story on its head to tell it from the zombies’ perspective. In doing so, that perspective connects utopia to a rarely discussed, if at all, survivor motif. Indeed, it is a perspective in which the humans-turn-zombies desire a better place but more importantly a safe one so they can survive. Therefore, this paper argues that *Aaah!! Zombies* reimagines the trope of utopia as a survival mechanism in order to make a zomtopia.

Zebadiah Kraft, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, “Possibility in Destruction: Zombie Narratives of Renewal and Utopia”

The zombie is the traumatized global citizen come back to life, originally to rage against the machine and question the role of people in the world system, now to renew the planet through postapocalyptic recovery and evolution. The zombie is no longer merely shambling corpses or manic masses consuming all; it is now a figure of a new way of living and being on the planet. As such, the zombie is truly utopian in its exploration of post-death life and trauma that converges in all our lives. Trauma literature is the permeating form at present because so many of the concerns and anxieties about the future have culminated in political and cultural discourses. The literary form, as a means of expression, allows the possibility of renewal and posttraumatic fulfillment in a wide array of possible futures. My research explores how the zombie is the figure of a return to the planet and our relationships with it. Working from trauma theory and metamodernist sensibilities I will discuss how M.R. Carey’s novels reach beyond the postapocalyptic imaginings of postmodern zombie narratives to address the nature

of existence as already postmortem—these novels insist on traditional utopian dreaming being futile but offer a new capacity to realize a world already in its death throes, seeking what Susann Moser calls a transition to a state of mourning rather than melancholy and denial. Such mourning allows a realization of loss and a new utopian aspiration.

Clarence W. Tweedy, University of Mary Washington, “The Happy Few: The Apocalypse and Resurgence of White Patriarchal Supremacy in Rob Kirkman’s *The Walking Dead*”

In current parlance, many Americans think “apocalypse” means upheaval and destruction, failing to know or understand the original meaning correlates more closely to discovery and epiphany. Even more concerning, is that almost no one will ask the question of who gets to survive in the post-apocalyptic world and why. The graphic novel genre is not only about fantasy; rather, it is a genre that all too often offers a social commentary/ critique on problems or anxieties in our society. Critic Maria Lisboa’s “Prologue” to *The End of the World* argues that we should pay close attention to who survives, and how the world changes in the aftermath of a cataclysm. She writes: “In scenarios of apocalypse, at the heart of terror there lies always the explosive combination of the possible and the unknown: the possibility of transgression and the crossing of a line from what is familiar into unimagined, unimaginable territory. [...] Furthermore, whether in the Book of Revelation or in American evangelism’s millenarian visions of the Rapture, salvation following global apocalypse is usually attained only by a happy few. Within most theo-cosmogonies, therefore, planetary cataclysm only ever has a positive net value from the point of view of the small minority who are saved.” Specifically, I argue that Rob Kirkman’s *The Walking Dead* is only a dystopia for marginalized peoples, but a utopian possibility for white men with the reassertion of white supremacy and patriarchal power. Indeed, one can clearly see that Kirkman’s graphic novel speaks directly to white men’s feelings of angst, social displacement, and powerless in regard to a society that over the past four decades has seen massive shifts in minority rights, women’s rights, gay rights—and their collective corresponding impact on present day society. Moreover, Kirkman’s text rarely takes a moment to comment on the state of gender and race. In this new world those issues are left to wither and die, be avoided, or seemingly do not matter at all. But, one must remember that it only doesn’t matter to the “happy few” as people of color are stereotyped or function as magical tropes, while women are regulated to being protected and only allowed power the old-fashioned way by manipulating/ using men to get what they want.

4.B. Interrogating Social Class and Labor (Colonial West)

Robert Seguin, Hartwick College, “The Symbolic Dimensions of Social Class in Mark McGurl and Ben Lerner”

This paper will examine two literary critical works, one new and one from a decade ago, that on the surface would appear to have little in common: Mark McGurl’s *Everything and Less* and Ben Lerner’s *The Hatred of Poetry*. McGurl focuses on the sprawling, hothouse realm of

genre fiction, written mostly by fans and assorted amateurs, enabled by Amazon's self-publishing platform, while Lerner takes the very rigor and exclusivity of poetry as the starting point for his meditation on the form's fraught cultural position. Yet each author—both cultural leftists of a certain, sometimes indeterminate stripe—finds himself working around and toward a Utopian dimension of their respective subjects: McGurl finds in the sheer productiveness of this paraliterary world (thousands of titles, mostly unread) a set of figures for new human cultural and social relations, while Lerner sees in the dialectic of poem vs. Poetry the inscription of a repressed Utopian demand. I want to argue that the conceptual category that lies just beneath the surface of both works, gestured toward but never really confronted as such, is that of social class. The questions of literary production, reception, access, and purpose all entwine around those of class, in particular the difficult matter of class consciousness, especially where this last encounters the problems of aesthetic judgment and political universality. In their own way, each book affords us an opportunity to think through the increasingly symbolic dynamics of class in our own historical situation.

Mackenzie Cox, American University, "Content Creation, Capitalism, and Coogan Law: Labor in the Age of Social Media"

The rise of social media brought with it the promise of a perpetually connected, increasingly globalized utopian future. We find ourselves, instead, in a time in which adolescent social media use is found to be linked to mental health issues; and yet, a 10-year-old like Ryan Kaji can become a famous multimillionaire through his mere online presence, securing a ranking among the highest earning creators on YouTube. In such a dystopian reality, pressing questions must be asked about what it means to be an internet celebrity, and what this unique form of labor can teach us about our economic system. While social science researchers have begun to investigate the role of social media use in mass culture and individual lives, this scholarly field often overlooks the unique experiences of online content creators. Internet celebrities, many of whom become famous at young ages, experience distinctive types of work and fame, which may carry with them challenges not often faced by celebrities in traditional media. Emerging from content analysis of teenage and young adult YouTube creators' videos and podcasts, this paper seeks to deconstruct the phenomenon of internet celebrity. In more thoroughly understanding this phenomenon, it is possible to unpack related aspects of the wider dystopian arrangement, including issues concerning our economic system and labor rights for child entertainers.

Ryan Pine, Bryn Athyn College, "The Circle Was Closing, But Now It's Just Every-where: Dave Eggers's Fatalistic Ennui in *The Every*"

This paper argues a shift has occurred from Dave Eggers's 2013 novel *The Circle* and its sequel, the 2021 novel *The Every*. Eggers moves from satirical utopia in *The Circle* to critical dystopia in *The Every*. This shift will be charted through two main ways: the respective protagonists of the novels and Eggers's tone. The protagonist of *The Circle* steps on to the campus of the world's most influential technology company and exclaims, "My God. Mae thought. It's heaven" (1). Mae would begin life at The Circle with a healthy dose of skepticism towards its culture of surveillance, only to be subsumed by its totalizing ideology.

Eggers, by the time we reach *The Every*, seems to have found the limits of satire and abandons it in favor of a blistering critique of a now clearly totalitarian power. Mae has assumed control of The Every, a merger between The Circle and “the jungle”—a monopoly to end all monopolies. Mae is something of a minor character in the dystopian novel’s plot. Eggers instead chooses to focalize its narration through Delaney—an Every enemy hellbent on bringing down the company from the inside. If *The Circle* represents a satirical utopia—a company ridiculed for the superficial mimicry of the language of human perfection, then *The Every* functions as a critical dystopia—a nakedly authoritarian intrusion into the lives of everyone through sophisticated surveillance technology. Eggers’s tone parallels this shift—from resistant to fatalistic—as if he must spell it out for us.

4.C. Young Adult Dystopias: Cultural Contexts (Citadel North)

Chair: Elaine Ostry, SUNY Plattsburgh

Carrie Hintz, Queens College/CUNY and The Graduate Center/CUNY, “The Bad Boyfriends of YA Dystopia”

Young adult dystopias tend to combine “typical” adolescent concerns—coming of age, romantic entanglements, family drama—with a broader social or political plot. But what happens when we zero in on the romantic relationships in YA dystopias? Considering the ultimate bad boyfriend from the YA dystopia *corpus*—Titus from M. T. Anderson’s *Feed* (1999)—I will consider how dystopian conditions limits our ability to be kind, loyal, empathic and genuinely loving towards one another. How does privilege limit the emotional registers available to those characters in dystopia?

Carter Hanson, Valparaiso University, “Post-Nuclear Kinship Patterns in Young Adult Climate Dystopias: Sherri L. Smith's *Orleans* and Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves*”

My paper examines the ways in which two young adult dystopias from the past decade, Sherri L. Smith's *Orleans* and Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves*, reckon with how the most prevalent mode of kinship in North America—the nuclear family—could be forced to evolve in light of climate and economic conditions. The novels contend that the nuclear family is unable to cope with the effects of the catastrophe-vortex of climate change, disease, and unchecked neoliberalism that unduly afflicts disenfranchised and indigenous minority groups. Both novels conceive of family/kinship along the lines articulated by the new kinship studies within anthropology (and sociology) that frame kinship (or relatedness) as an enacted process not tied to genealogy. Additionally, my paper explores how Smith and Dimaline triangulate kinship, memory, and what anthropologist Veena Das calls “critical events”—events that overturn local established modes of life and bring “new modes of action” into being. The novels critique how states’ neoliberal imperatives accelerate the “critical events” of climate change that destroy/displace nuclear families—acts of destruction and upheaval that then lead to new types of kinship rooted in the memory of oppression and disaster. Thus, the utopian horizon of each novel is not external to, but contained within this triangulation: the political, racial, and environmental injustices perpetrated by the state that destroy the biosphere and disintegrate the

nuclear family also propel its victims to form new kinship practices that harness memory in productive, liberating ways that are themselves tied to the restoration of the biosphere.

Session V 10:15-11:45

5.A. Making/Unmaking Utopian Possibilities Across Genres (Colonial East)

Chair: Phillip Wegner, University of Florida

In this panel, we will explore a variety of genres and aesthetic modes that seek to represent forms of utopian possibility. Each panelist will investigate a cultural object(s) that in some way signifies a type of making/unmaking dialectic. Nathan Stelari will discuss the utopian/dystopian ideological formation at play within ironic and meta-ironic political internet humor and how this informs the common sense of online political discourse. Ryan Kerr will present on Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* and how its dystopian themes (particularly in the novel's final chapter) demonstrates Mark Fisher's concept of "cancelled futures."

Participants:

Ryan Kerr, University of Florida

Nathan Stelari, University of Florida

5. B. Emily St John Mandel (Colonial West)

Katrin Isabel Schmitt, University of Konstanz, Germany, "Picking up the Pieces: Rebuilding Community in Post-Apocalyptic Literature"

Apocalyptic stories are set in shattered worlds in which most of humanity has vanished and urban spaces have been destroyed. Yet, contemporary apocalyptic literature does not mainly focus on the destructive apocalyptic moment but on what happens after this cataclysm. Berger describes such narratives as a "study of what disappears and what remains, and of how the remainder has been transformed" (7). Hence, the apocalypse is not an ultimate endpoint but a beginning after the end, which makes works of the genre inherently post-apocalyptic. In this framework, the (potential) rebuilding of post-apocalyptic communities is a key topic. Wind Meyhoff argues that post-apocalyptic narratives "most often focus on traditional family values, implying and promising a new beginning and a new life of community and solidarity" (307). However, reforming such social groups is usually more complex. Post-apocalyptic communities do not only repeat previous societal patterns but also introduce altered forms which renegotiate values and ideals such as gender roles, violence, or biocentrism. Key figures reflecting this transformation are children, both a symbol of hope and agents shaping the post-apocalyptic future. To approach these topics, I will examine three exemplary post-apocalyptic novels: Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam*, and Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven*. Based on this corpus, I will outline how communities after the end rearrange fragments to create something new while questioning if

they portray a utopian impulse or the threat of returning to destructive structures and behaviors of previous times.

Ellen Rigsby, Saint Mary's College of California, "Time Travel in Emily St. John Mandel's *The Sea of Tranquility*"

This paper will argue that Emily St. John Mandel's novel, *The Sea of Tranquility*, examines our senses of belonging and disconnection through human experience of space and time, especially when her characters feel disconnected or lonely. Popular time travel narratives often let its characters see they are more connected to other times or to people in other times. Sometimes, though, they show that time itself is a construction of our own minds. In *The Sea of Tranquility* the time travel form allows its characters, and to a greater extent its readers to see the seams our minds sew to create what we call reality. David Wittenberg's monograph on time travel argues that time travel is a narrative laboratory for storytelling. The speculative or utopian generic aspects of *The Sea of Tranquility* depict characters disconnected from their times and places to highlight the human possibilities of connection. It demonstrates that we need space and time, a relationship to the past and the future, to be human, even if we have to make them up.

Claire Curtis, College of Charleston, "Human artifice and living in a pre-made world: Emily St John Mandel's *Station Eleven*"

The postapocalyptic world of *Station Eleven*—both the comic internal to the novel and in the plot of the novel itself— involves characters living in a built environment from the past. In neither instance is the goal of those characters to re-make the world. Traditional postapocalyptic fiction emphasizes the re-building after the disaster, and that re-building is often the site of utopian imagining. But here the utopian impulse is found instead in the relations among the characters. This paper explores the role of building and making and the idea of the new in *Station Eleven* the novel itself and the graphic novel found within.

5.C. Crosscurrents of Utopian-Socialist and Marxist Thought in America's Gilded Age (Citadel North)

This panel explores the underlying current of American utopianism advocated by the late nineteenth century's radical political actors. During the unrest of the Gilded Age, a variety of socialist groups embraced utopianism as a political tool to reorganize and remake the nation into a more equitable and liberated place. Our three papers demonstrate the extensive embrace of utopianism by socialists during a period in which Marxism, a so-called scientific form of socialism, was on the rise. Graeme Pente's paper identifies the influence of utopian-socialist Charles Fourier on the work of one of the most popular American utopians: Edward Bellamy. Pente demonstrates how Bellamy adapted Fourier's vision of a harmonious future to a bureaucratic age of industrial capitalism in works such as *Looking Backward* (1888) and *Equality* (1897). Daniel Joslyn's paper examines the crosscurrents of utopian socialism and Marxist socialism in the feminist socialist circles of the late nineteenth century. Dissecting Edward Carpenter's *Love's Coming of Age* (1896), Joslyn shows the way Carpenter blended

utopian free love, Fabian, and Marxist ideas and its influence among late nineteenth century feminists. Ashley Garcia's paper explores the creation of the Brotherhood of the Cooperative Commonwealth (BCC), a socialist organization that embraced intentional-community-building as a viable means of remaking America into a socialist paradise. The BCC gained support from popular socialists, such as Eugene Debs, and worked to unite the nation's socialists into a single brotherhood. Together, these papers demonstrate the persistence of utopian thought through the turn of the twentieth century and its impact on the early rise of Marxian socialism in the United States.

Ashley Garcia, University of Texas at Austin, Chair

“Association and Cooperative Colonies in the 1890s: The Utopian-Socialist Organizing of the BCC”

In the 1840s and 1960s, the United States experienced waves of communitarian activity. Hundreds of thousands of Americans turned to communal organizing as a method of reform that they believed could most effectively reshape the world. However, in between these two periods, America experienced a third communitarian wave far less studied than its counterparts. In the midst of the unrest of the Gilded Age, Americans turned to intentional community building as a viable means of socialist revolution. Utopian-socialists of the 1890s formed an organization called the BCC, or Brotherhood of the Cooperative Commonwealth. The BCC attempted to unite every socialist, including the country's Marxists, under one roof to populate the nation with socialist colonies. This paper explores the attempt of the BCC to create one unified socialist movement that would remake the world from the bottom up. Their utopian vision produced a community in Washington named “Equality” and they almost succeeded in creating a powerful socialist alliance with unionist Eugene Debs that would have catapulted their cause from a grassroots movement to a national reform campaign. This paper investigates how this communitarian-socialist-Marxist alliance almost came into being and the impact the BCC had on socialist politics at the turn of the century.

Daniel Joslyn, New York University, "When Love Came of Age: Marxism and Utopianism in Turn-of-the-Century Socialist-Feminist Thought"

First published in 1896, Edward Carpenter's *Love's Coming of Age* quickly became one of the most widely read radical works of the early twentieth century. Carpenter called on women to rise up and overthrow the “cash nexus” of marriage, alongside male workers rising up and shattering the restraints of capitalism. Combining the Marxist treatises of Friedrich Engels and August Bebel, and on the world of “utopian” socialisms from Robert Owen to John Humphrey Noyes, Carpenter wrote a revolutionary treatise cum relationship manual that would go on to sell hundreds of thousands of copies and go through almost a dozen editions. Just as Carpenter drew on an eclectic mixture of socialist thought so the work inspired radicals from Eleanor Marx (Karl's daughter) to the anarchist Emma Goldman, the socialist Upton Sinclair and became a “bible” of the New Woman movement. Looking at the circulation of this text allows us to see the intertwining in turn-of-the-century US radical thought of utopian socialist critiques of marriage and Marxist challenges to the capitalist order. At the same time, in

following the adoption of Carpenter's ideas in popular society, we can see how easily calls for white people's "sexual liberation" could and can be integrated into a racial capitalist order and the concordant demands for economic justice overlooked or cast aside.

Graeme Pente, Independent Scholar, "Fourierism on a National Scale: Edward Bellamy Leads Visionary Socialism into Politics, 1878-1898"

The American followers of the utopian socialist Charles Fourier (1772-1837) long eschewed formal politics in trying to bring Fourier's vision to reality. Nonetheless, their model for a harmonious future society included democratic practices in day-to-day operations that would give individuals more power over their lives. As Gilded Age Americans cast about for solutions to the ills of the era, the journalist and novelist Edward Bellamy (1850-1898) reached back into the American past and modernized Fourierism for a bureaucratic age of industrial capitalism. This paper examines the influence of Fourier on Bellamy's model society by reconstructing the novelist's connections to the American Fourierist Albert Brisbane (1809-1890) and highlighting the Fourierist dimensions of Bellamy's major works. Ultimately, it argues that the democratization that occurred between *Looking Backward* (1888) and *Equality* (1897) owes as much to the model's Fourierist roots as it does to Bellamy's experience with anti-monopolist politics in alliance with the People's Party. In tracing this lineage, the paper shows the persistent influence of antebellum utopian socialism on American radical politics.