

Book Reviews

Absent Rebels: Criticism and Network Power in 21st Century Dystopian Fiction

ANNIKA GONNERMANN. Narr Francke Attempto, 2021. 352 pages.

ISBN: 978-3823384595

Dystopian fiction has a history of being used as a means to criticise the power structures of the societies in which the narratives were produced. This is demonstrably true for most of the stories that are considered “classic” dystopias: Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932), Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), and Zamyatin’s *We* (1921). These texts all feature a protagonist who challenges the authority of a centralised figure of power, actively and openly rebelling, successfully or otherwise, reflecting the power structures that existed in societies that preceded neoliberal capitalism. Annika Gonnermann’s monograph *Absent Rebels* examines the role of social criticism in more contemporary dystopian texts, and how the actors in these stories are constrained by the systems of power that exist in their fictional worlds, resulting in a lack of rebellion.

Contemporary dystopias lack some of the hope found in their classic predecessors. These classic dystopias are optimistic in some parts of their endings: in *Brave New World*, Bernard Marx is allowed to leave the society he finds repulsive; in *We*, there is a sense at the conclusion of the novel that the One State might collapse; even *Nineteen Eighty Four* can be conceived of as ending on a hopeful note, as Margaret Atwood has stated – the style in which the coda at the end of novel is written indicates that the time of Big Brother and Newspeak is over. By contrast, Gonnermann’s text showcases repeatedly how under neoliberal capitalism, utopia is harder and harder to imagine: hope is more difficult to access in these texts. Dystopian narratives produced since the start of the twenty-first century reflect this pessimism – “[o]ur imagination is able to conceive of the end of the world, the total destruction of the human race, yet not of an alternative to free market capitalism. With ideas and developments like universal basic income in their infancy, and alternative communities co-opted by ‘hipsters’... this dilemma is likely to continue for some time” (67).

Absent Rebels analyses five contemporary dystopian narratives through the lens of immanent criticism of network power—a system of power, such as neoliberal capitalism, that is defined not by force or direct threats but by “a peculiar mix of individual agency and systemic coercion” (72) which is so ubiquitous and pervasive that it cannot be escape—and investigates how network power disables individual rebellion against its systems. Gonnermann recently completed her doctorate at the University of

Mannheim, Germany, where she taught as an assistant professor until 2020 and published on a variety of topics in the areas of dystopia, AI, science fiction, and surveillance.

The thesis of *Absent Rebels* brings together several theories to make a case for how twenty-first century dystopian fiction can no longer always be adequately examined through the same critical models as those used to elucidate meaning from classic dystopian writing. Of course, there are many dystopias still being produced that follow the classic model of clearly corrupt authority versus righteous insurgents as is seen in a large quantity of young adult fiction such as *The Hunger Games* (2008), *The Maze Runner* (2009) and *Divergent* (2011). However, while these examples depict futures that are certainly dystopian, they do not depict futures that reproduce the capitalist reality of their authors. The texts that Gonnermann analyses in *Absent Rebels* all portray dystopias that are set in societies and time periods that closely reflect the reality in which they were written and as such are positioned to critique the society in which they were written.

In these chosen texts Gonnermann maintains that there is an absence of clear revolutionary sentiment in the actions of the characters and those around them. She states that this is derived from the lack of centralised power to rail against under a system of network power such as neoliberalism – there is no single figure or group to abolish in order to achieve a change of power. The way out of neoliberal capitalism requires a much more difficult and complex path than direct rebellion. The texts that Gonnermann has chosen for analysis are ideal for highlighting this issue; they all depict people who are unable to challenge their own powerlessness. However, as Gonnermann notes, the act of depicting these immobilised characters is a strategy of rebellion in itself as it provokes readers to find the inconsistencies in network power – to consider their own position within capitalist reality and how a path back to utopian dreaming might be forged either within literature or indeed within reality itself.

Making up approximately one third of the book, the theoretical analysis in *Absent Rebels* is comprised of several parts. Firstly, it examines the current position of dystopian literature as a genre defined by its antagonistic stance towards the society in which it is created, and how this has changed as systems of power have changed. The contemporary dystopian narratives Gonnermann introduces for analysis all represent neoliberal societies, but their antagonism is less direct than that of their predecessors. Instead of centring revolutionary protagonists, they feature characters who are ineffective or incapable of fighting against the systems of power that rule them. Secondly, Gonnermann describes Rahel Jaeggi's theory of "immanent criticism" and its usefulness in dystopian literary analysis, particularly as it is distinguished from other forms of criticism, namely "external criticism" and "internal criticism." Immanent criticism works by exposing inconsistencies and contradictions in a system through analysis, a method that Gonnermann promotes as the best form of critique for systems of power like neoliberal capitalism, which is the economic and social setting for all five of the contemporary dystopian novels she has chosen to analyse. Finally, Gonnermann explains in exceptional detail what network power is, how it operates, and the futility of challenging it directly. Network power is omnipresent, decentralised, and pervasive in every aspect of the lives of its populations.

Gonnermann uses five novels across five chapters to demonstrate her argument: *The Circle* (2013) by Dave Eggers, *The Heart Goes Last* (2015) by Margaret Atwood, *The Feed* (2002) by M.T. Anderson, *Cloud Atlas* (2004) by David Mitchell and *Never Let Me Go* (2005) by Kazuo Ishiguro. These five chapters make up the majority of the monograph, and their positioning and structure allow for a clear, accessible understanding of the argument being made. The chapters are arranged such that the novels move from relatively traditional dystopian form in *The Circle* to forms that are significantly removed from the classic dystopia, such as those depicted in *Cloud Atlas* and *Never Let Me Go*. Under Gonnermann's critical lens, each novel reveals a different set of complications involved in criticising network power.

Across the five novels, Gonnermann successfully argues several points: firstly, that network power is omnipresent and inescapable; secondly, that network power cannot be challenged directly or defeated by eliminating one individual or group; thirdly, that network power redirects responsibility onto the individual by offering the illusion of freedom by presenting involuntary choices, creating path dependence for people across generations; and, finally, that immanent criticism both within these texts and applied to them by the reader draws out the need for readers to think critically about their own role within network power and how best to disentangle the systems that maintain it.

Gonnermann presents a wealth of evidence of the omnipresence and inescapability of network power across all five novels. Beginning with *The Circle*, and progressing through *The Heart Goes Last*, and *The Feed* to finish with *Cloud Atlas* and *Never Let Me Go*, she creates her own narrative through her chapter organisation about how network power grows and becomes entrenched within populations. *The Circle* depicts the conception of a network power; *The Heart Goes Last* shows network power as established but still in its infancy. In *The Feed* there are still mild attempts to challenge some aspects of network power, but in *Cloud Atlas* even the idea of rebellion starts to fade, as each character fails to understand their own powerlessness, and finally in *Never Let Me Go*, the power of neoliberal capitalism is such that the characters do not even question their terrible lives, and the concept of an alternative life is completely inconceivable.

The creation of the eponymous Circle in Dave Egger's novel provides an avenue to explore potential rebellion in contrast to mass acceptance of network power. Gonnermann shows this by examining the actions of Mercer, who is one of two characters who attempt to challenge the power of the Circle by trying to physically escape it, but is utterly incapable of doing so because of crowd-sourced surveillance, led by the protagonist Mae, who gleefully watches her ex-boyfriend fail in order to gain further approval within the network.

At the opposite end of Gonnermann's narrative, in *Never Let Me Go*, none of the characters attempt to escape their place under neoliberal capitalism. They do not try to get away from their physical position of powerlessness within their own country, let alone attempt to leave a system that would take their vital organs away and ultimately kill them to service the wealthy. The clones are aware, on some level, that there is no physical distance they can put between themselves and the omnipresence of the network power of neoliberalism. As Gonnermann states: "network power is not bound spatially and *not* defined by dominion over a certain territory (284)." The clones cannot

leave, the concept of leaving does not really even occur to them, such is the impact of network power on their consciousness. Gonnermann notes that this failure to even consider rebellion is a strong deviation from the norm in traditional dystopian narratives.

The series of novels examined in Gonnermann's monograph shows that as network power cannot be evaded, it also cannot be fought or challenged. Returning to *The Circle*, there is a second character who attempts rebellion, this time one of the founders of the Circle, who is convinced that he can stop what he has started. Unfortunately, as Gonnermann notes "he demonstrates that he has not understood the mechanisms behind network power" (100). Gonnermann indicates that his idea to warn everyone to simply stop participating in the system of power simply would not work as individuals who freely (though not voluntarily) made the choice to join the Circle cannot withdraw their consent to do so after the fact: "[his] rebellion has failed before [it has] even started" (100).

Similarly, in her analysis of M.T. Anderson's *Feed*, Gonnermann illustrates how these contemporary dystopias demonstrate the utter futility of rebellion under network power. The eponymous "feed" effectively transforms every aspect of existence into a commodity, which in the novel includes air, reproduction and even consciousness. The characters who attempt to challenge this by thinking that they can opt out cause the death of their daughter, who is identified by the feed as not being compliant and thus not useful enough, productive enough, or economically worthy enough to be kept alive. Gonnermann uses close reading to great effect to show how ineffective "external criticism" is against the decentralized power of neoliberalism. Violet's death is ultimately meaningless, her failed revolt against the feed is pointless - there is no figure to rail against, no Big Brother, no World Controller, instead there is a vast network of power disseminated amongst wealthy individuals and corporations that has no clear figurehead. Her life and her death have no impact (174).

Gonnermann demonstrates clearly and repeatedly across all the novels she analyses that the widespread compliance with network power stems from the lack of real freedom given to individuals. Her analysis of *Cloud Atlas* and *The Heart Goes Last* show this most distinctly: for the former she shows how the aggregation of involuntary individual character choices presented as freedom under neoliberal capitalism "morph[s] into a system of involuntariness which eradicates alternative forms of living" (234), or "path dependence." In *The Heart Goes Last*, this path dependence is not yet established as the network power system is still developing, however, the characters are offered just as little real choice as those in *Cloud Atlas*. Gonnermann analyses the ways in which this text highlights the deceptiveness of late capitalism and how it portrays itself as the eutopian ideal, offering false choices under the illusion of freedom. Gonnermann effectively demonstrates that within this novel, there is a clear distinction between the illusion of freedom and how difficult it is to imagine a truly eutopian world from the position of a citizen existing within neoliberal network power.

Finally, Gonnermann effectively argues that in order for contemporary dystopian fiction to function as criticism of contemporary society, it needs to be analysed through Jaeggi's model of immanent criticism, rather than external or internal criticism. If these texts are to be viewed as commentary on the various authors' own capitalist realities, then they must be challenged in a different fashion to the dystopias of the previous

centuries. Gonnermann thoroughly demonstrates that the existence of network power in the societies in which these novels were developed and published means the novels must necessarily be examined in this manner to provide any useful insight into possible change. One by-product of this that *Absent Rebels* observes is that immanent criticism can and should be used as a tool for pushing the reader to consider their own position within network power. She points out that both David Mitchell and Kazuo Ishiguro utilise this strategy in *Cloud Atlas* and *Never Let Me Go*. The breadth of time and space covered by the six characters in the fictional world of *Cloud Atlas* provides the reader with a macro view of how network power impacts societies across time periods providing the reader with "the unique chance to avoid the mistakes made by the characters: while the characters fail to 'learn their lesson,' i.e. to comprehend the power of network standards brought about by path dependence, readers are given the chance to do so *six times* [original emphasis]" (241). Gonnermann highlights here how Mitchell's novel uses the inability of the characters to rebel against the systemic powers that stymie their freedoms as a tool to stimulate the reader into thinking about how they might act against the same powerlessness in their own lives, and how they might create their own eutopia, or at least, a less dystopian future than the one portrayed in *Cloud Atlas*. To the same end, Gonnermann shows that in *Never Let Me Go*, Ishiguro provokes his readership by refusing to offer any solution to the criticisms he sets forth about network power in his dystopia about clones who are resigned to their fate as involuntary organ donors: "rather than producing ready-made alternatives, the novel's critical contribution rests on the performative depiction of immanent paradoxes... The absence of a clear moral compass and the constant frustration that accompanies the reading process constitute a hallmark of this extraordinary novel which breaks with well-established genre conventions, precisely to shock the reader into critical thinking" (292).

Gonnermann's argument that the contemporary dystopian narratives she has examined encourage a different kind of criticism to the traditional dystopian narrative is extensively researched and ultimately persuasive. She has effectively established that these texts signify a shift in dystopian writing in the twenty-first century which is somewhat under-researched. There are of course necessary limitations in writing about this phenomenon. Gonnermann's selection of texts offers an abundance of material for literary analysis, leaving only a little room for discussion of form: although form is mentioned in the introduction as one of the organising factors of the chapters, especially regarding *Cloud Atlas* and *Never Let Me Go*, given their relative deviation from the configuration of a traditional dystopia, within the chapters themselves there is relatively little space given to the form and structure of the novels. Undoubtedly, if there were more space available, there would be further investigation within the chapter studies into this aspect of how these contemporary dystopian narratives are formed and presented, particularly in comparison with their traditional predecessors.

In terms of further research, Gonnermann makes the point in her introduction that the resurgence in popularity of the dystopian genre is focused on narratives of the traditional model – *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Hunger Games*. As she shows, these texts are not especially useful in garnering effective solutions to the problem of network power as they do not represent societies that are affected by it. While she rightly makes the case that popular focus is misplaced, it would be interesting to explore and expand on the ways in which the publishing industry within neoliberal

capitalism benefits from pushing this form of dystopia on a disgruntled populace rather than promoting texts that offer genuinely critical perspectives of network power structures.

In any case, Gonnermann's book is an excellent resource for anyone seeking to analyse twenty-first century neoliberal dystopias. The structure of the text and the detailed analysis of the novels she has chosen offer an ideal framework for any scholar wishing to apply the same theories to their own contemporary dystopian research. In a field which requires significant expansion, Gonnermann has successfully presented a model for branching out and away from reworking the same traditional dystopian texts over and over again.

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