SEM6. Contemporary narratives of humanity in a dystopian world

6A   **12 September h. 14:00-16:00, S1 Moro**
6B   **12 September h. 16:30-19:00, S1 Moro**

Convenors
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Abstract
Since the beginning of the 20th century, dystopias have been far more popular than utopias: all contemporary forms of storytelling seem to compete to imagine a negative, if not catastrophic, future for humanity. Both utopias and dystopias have always constituted a critical mirror of contemporary society, but while the former project – in another place or time – a better version of reality, as in an inverted mirror (reality as it should be), the latter tend to act as a deforming mirror of a present that finds itself reflected in its worst version (reality as it should not be or become).

The seminar's objective is to explore the reasons behind the contemporary unabashed preference for the genre of dystopia. As Krishan Kumar noted in 1987, fictional dystopias frequently do not signify a sense of pessimism and resignation, but rather, they function as a form of caution, motivated by an aspiration to avert potential political, ideological, or technological scenarios that could result in adverse consequences. Consequently, dystopian narratives aim to provoke awareness and galvanize individuals to act ethically before the most unfavourable outcomes materialize. The prevailing threats to liberal democracy, the looming catastrophe of climate change and environmental collapse, along with the apprehensions engendered by the transhumanist vision of hyper-technologized bodies and lives, within a milieu increasingly dominated by algorithms and artificial intelligence (Harari, 2018), could collectively provide ample rationale for the pervasive presence of dystopian, if not apocalyptic, narratives.

However, should we totally surrender to the idea that the world will persist in being envisioned solely as it ought not to be, or to be recounted retro-topically, as Bauman (2017) laments, rather than explore the options for a better society? Might we consider alternatively Fredric Jameson's (2005) perspective, which emphasizes the importance of resuming utopia as a political instrument and an in-depth reflection on the future of humanity, intended to counteract dominant discourses that may seek to divert attention from any aspiration for change?

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SEM6. Papers

6A   **12 September h. 14:00-16:00, S1 Moro**
- *A*sylum, surveillance, and nomadic erasure in Ali Smith's Gliff (Giuseppe De Riso, Università di Napoli L'Orientale)
- *The algorithm is watching: Surveillance, paranoia, and dystopian logic in Lucy Kirkwood's That Is Not Who I Am* (Francesca Forlini, Sapienza Università di Roma)
- *Posthuman empathy and affective simulation: The case of Hotel Reverie* (Chiara Frescofiore, Università di Napoli L'Orientale)
- *Companion species in a pandemic dystopia: Humans and/as hybrids in the TV series Sweet Tooth (2021-2024)* (Maria Fiorella Suozzo, Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II)

6B   **12 September h. 16:30-19:00, S1 Moro**
- *Kazuo Ishiguro's altermodern ustopia Klara and the Sun* (Laura Colombino, Università di Genova)

SEM6. Abstracts

Gender fluidity and dystopian materiality in Aliya Whiteley's *The Beauty* (2014)

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This paper aims at exploring the disruptive nature of dystopian narratives in the way it displays in Aliya Whiteley's *The Beauty* (2014), whose fungal allegories and bodily metaphors offer critical tools to reflect on the social dimension they refer to. This novella deals with the issues of gender and sexual fluidity, represented by a transformative and hybrid corporeal materiality, as well as with the power of language in framing reality.

Set in The Valley of the Rocks, *The Beauty*'s story is narrated by Nate and concerns the events of a group of people who decided to make it their home to escape the overwhelming city life and be closer to nature. Suddenly, a strange event takes place, perturbing the daily life of that community, as well as the entire world: women get sick with some unknown illness and die; no woman survives, and they all disappear from the earth. Six years later, something is changing again: some yellow mushrooms are proliferating in the graveyard. This leads to a very unexpected consequence: hybrid creatures with both human and fungal traits come to life from the corpses of the women and the people in The Valley of the Rocks react with both desire and repulsion, resulting in opposite occurrences: birth and death, progeny and massacre.

Therefore, this contribution aims at investigating how Nate's narration, which advocates a deconstruction of social heteronormative dynamics, shows the reader a fictional world in which humanity, as we know it so far, has come to an end. The only chance for human beings to survive is transgressing boundaries and leaving violence behind to be part of such a process of regeneration and corporeal hybridisation.

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Kazuo Ishiguro's altermodern ustopia *Klara and the Sun*

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Ishiguro's fictional world is pervaded by the theme of memory and is usually structured around the undulations of a reminiscing mind. It is also invariably and predictably concerned with the past, whether distant or recent. His mildly sci-fi, dystopian novel *Never Let Me Go*, now celebrating its 20th anniversary, is no exception, but the recent companion work *Klara and the Sun* (2021) departs from this usual pattern, as Ishiguro sets this eerie tale of transhumanist aspirations and horrors sometime in the near or not-so-near future. The paper investigates the consequences of this temporal setting in terms of both aesthetics and genre by testing the applicability of the concepts of altermodernism and ustopia.
Much attention has been given to the neo-authoritarian development of the posthuman society that is depicted somewhat in the background but affects the feelings and psychology of the characters at the centre of *Klara and the Sun*. Much less attention has been paid to the formal aspects of the novel, its (alter)modernist fascination with the idea of stylistic experimentalism – especially associated with the visual – at the dawn of a new technological age. Does the

(alter)modernism of *Klara and the Sun* – which garners creative strength from futuristic technologies – sit problematically with its dystopian landscape and its cautionary intent? And to what extent can the concept of ustopia illuminate this conundrum of concern combined with new possibilities in this brave new world of human enhancement and friendly androids?

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Asylum, surveillance, and nomadic erasure in Ali Smith's *Gliff*

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This paper offers a critical reading of Ali Smith's *Gliff* (2024) as an illustration of William Walters' concept of domopolitics (2004). The novel depicts a near-future dystopian society where the state functions according to the logic of a household, prioritising control, pervasive surveillance, and the entrenchment of existing social hierarchies. Within this framework, *Gliff* portrays a society characterised by significantly reduced social interaction and mobility, rigidly monitored environments, and exacerbated inequalities based on gender and class. This leads to the marginalisation and erasure of individuals and groups who exist outside dominant economic structures, with a particular focus on nomadic communities. Drawing a parallel to the exclusionary motivations and consequences observed in the Brexit movement (as analysed by Heinz, 2025), the paper discusses how *Gliff* traces the difficult experiences of a family as they confront cultural and class-based discrimination, revealing a social landscape where widespread inequality cultivates a sense of stagnation and where even emotions become commodified. Ultimately, the paper contends that Smith's novel offers a powerful critique of contemporary asylum practices, presciently anticipating recent governmental policies concerning the deportation of migrants, while also exploring potential avenues for resistance and the development of resilience within this oppressive societal context.

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The power of dystopian narratives at the crossroads between literature and media

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Since the second half of the twentieth century, a considerable number of critical studies have sought to offer a systematic framework for understanding the terminological and conceptual domain of dystopia in relation to utopia. Others have delved into the classics of the dystopian genre, with a particular focus on those from the twentieth century; still others have explored the category of female utopia and dystopia. It is not surprising that a substantial number of ground-breaking studies were published in the 1980s, when the now mythical year 1984 had arrived and we found ourselves coming to

terms with a reality that, as Margaret Atwood noted while writing *The Handmaid's Tale* in that same year, did not seem too far removed from the one prefigured by George Orwell. Although further studies have been published since then, the critical attention paid to the genre does not appear to correspond with the exponential proliferation of dystopian narratives, often blending with horror, fantasy, science fiction, or apocalyptic genres. Even in the case of seemingly utopian visions, as Krishan Kumar pointed out, it is often precisely the fearful heterotopic concretisation (Foucault 1984) of certain dreams that are not meant to be realised – as the very definition of *u-topos* as *non*-place would indicate – that arouses the dystopian writer's anxiety, indignation and upside-down dreams.

The crossover between literature and visual media is a distinctive feature of these narratives. This is exemplified by the sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale* (*The Testaments*, 2019), which was released following the success of the television production of the same name, itself initially adapted from the novel; or the TV series *Black Mirror*, with its *Literary Season* frequently announced to be published and yet to come. And it is also due to the urgent necessity for authors to intervene politically, with a view to ensuring the broad dissemination of the ethical and political messages underlying their narratives.

This paper seeks to identify some inter- and trans-media products that are contributing to the broadening of the field, with a particular emphasis on the strands of technological, political and ecological dystopia.

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The algorithm is watching: Surveillance, paranoia, and dystopian logic in Lucy Kirkwood's *That Is Not Who I Am*

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In *That Is Not Who I Am* (2022), Lucy Kirkwood crafts a paranoid thriller for the age of digital surveillance. Framed as a censored play "leaked" to the public, the performance follows Noah, a civil servant whose belief that the state is monitoring and manipulating him escalates into isolation and radical suspicion. Through meta-theatrical devices and unreliable narration, the audience is drawn into the logic of mistrust that the play interrogates.

This paper reads *That Is Not Who I Am* as a dystopia of mediated perception: a world where truth, fiction, and control are increasingly indistinguishable, and identity is overwritten by systems too diffuse to resist. Drawing on Krishan Kumar's (1987) notion of dystopia as a critical mirror of the present, the play reflects the authoritarian structures embedded in everyday life. It also resonates with Yuval Noah Harari's (2018) concern that liberal democracy is being eroded by algorithmic governance, datafication, and the loss of human agency. In the play, Noah's paranoia emerges less as delusion than as a rational response to a world in which behaviour is tracked, predicted, and shaped — what Harari terms the "hacking of humans". The enemy, in this dystopia, is not the state but the network: invisible, decentralised, and largely indifferent.

Kirkwood does not project future catastrophe. Instead, she reveals how dystopia operates, embedded in our habits of seeing, interpreting, and doubting. Her theatre becomes both critique and complicity, exposing the mechanics of mistrust and implicating the audience in the same feedback loop of paranoia that defines the post-truth era. The play asks not only "what is real?" but "who gets to decide?", performing the ordinary mechanisms through which dystopia is normalised and sustained.

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Posthuman empathy and affective simulation: The case of *Hotel Reverie*

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"Empathy is our ability to identify what someone else is thinking or feeling and to respond to their thoughts and feelings with an appropriate emotion" (Baron-Cohen, 2011, p. 17). Within the framework of posthuman theory, scholars such as Braidotti (2013) promote an ethical paradigm in which empathy extends beyond the human, encompassing hybrid, artificial, and virtual forms of life. Similarly, Hayles (1999) explores how subjectivity may emerge in non-biological systems, arguing that the human/posthuman binary is increasingly obsolete. In this context, empathy becomes a cognitive-aesthetic process that enables resonance with algorithmic others.

The *Black Mirror* episode *Hotel Reverie* (Season 7, 2025) provides fertile ground for exploring the dynamics of posthuman empathy, understood as the capacity to develop a meaningful emotional response toward non-human entities. The protagonist forms an affective bond with an artificial intelligence that, as the narrative unfolds, begins to display signs of agency. This emergence of autonomy complicates both the protagonist's emotional investment and the viewer's own ethical engagement, raising questions about the authenticity of emotion and the nature of sentient experience.

Within this narrative configuration, affective simulation emerges both as a structuring device and as a site of ambiguity, prompting reflection on how technologically mediated environments reshape emotional life and redefine the conditions of relationality both in real and fictive world. As Ryan and Thon (2014) explain, emotional credibility in storytelling does not rely on factual truth but on the internal consistency of the narrative world, which fosters immersion and affective engagement. Fiction thus becomes an authentic experiential space.

This immersive quality is central to Calabrese's (2017) argument that the reader's (or viewer's) empathetic response to fiction closely mirrors real-life experiences. *Hotel Reverie* operates as an emotional testing ground embedded in a media ecology shaped by algorithmic logic, where new forms of empathy are developed. Rather than offering a moralizing stance, the narrative foregrounds the complexities and ethical tensions inherent in posthuman affective experience. In doing so, it intervenes in contemporary dystopian discourse by depicting a future where emotional life is determined by technological processes, raising critical questions about relationality, agency, and the boundaries of the human.

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Re-storying the apocalypse in Indigenous speculative and science fiction

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Originating from the Greek *apocalypsis* (revelation), the word apocalypse is associated biblically with the end of the world (or the end of time) and secularly with a very serious event resulting in destruction or damage on a catastrophic scale, such as war or environmental disaster (Daschke 2014). Lawrence Buell has, in fact, argued that "[a]pocalypse is the single most powerful master metaphor that [mainstream] contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal" (1995, 285).

This paper engages with the notion of the apocalypse with reference to settler colonial/Indigenous contexts and asks: what does apocalypse mean for Indigenous peoples? How do Indigenous writers engage with and represent the apocalypse? Since the publication of *Walking the Clouds* (2012) – a seminal anthology edited by Anishinaabe author

Grace Dillon – it is possible to observe a growing number of Indigenous science and speculative works, warranting a reflection on the extent to which Indigenous writers distance themselves from mainstream science fiction and Western understandings of the apocalypse to foreground Indigenous perspectives, traditional knowledges, and temporalities (Blaire Topash-Caldwell, 2020). As Danile Heath Justice (Cherokee) emphasises, when "the apocalypse or environmental catastrophe appears as overt theme in Indigenous writing, it's more than speculation – it's experiential, even in its most fantastical, because in a very real way it hasn't ended" (2018, 168).

Focusing on Waubgeshig Rice (Anishinaabe)'s *Moon of the Crusted Snow* series (2018 and 2023) and Claire G. Coleman (Wirlomin Noongar)'s *Terra Nullius: A Novel* (2017), this paper examines how Indigenous authors reinvent the speculative and science fiction genre to challenge assumptions and expectations of the real, providing a way of re-shaping understandings of the past, present and future. As my analysis shows, these novels reconfigure the apocalypse as an experiential phenomenon rather than a cautionary metaphor that is often used in dystopic, futuristic narratives. More specifically, the discussion of these novels demonstrates how Indigenous fiction can become a powerful site of decolonisation, bringing to the fore the apocalyptic impacts of the settler colonial logic on Indigenous communities, cultures, and relations, while simultaneously regenerating Indigenous knowledge systems, traditional ways, sense of kinship and relationality.

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Companion species in a pandemic dystopia: humans and/as hybrids in the TV series *Sweet Tooth* (2021-2024)

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The TV series *Sweet Tooth* (2021–2024), adapted from the eponymous graphic novel by Canadian author Jeff Lemire (2009-2013), presents a post-apocalyptic dystopia in which a man-made ecological catastrophe precipitates the end of the human species and the rise of a new hybrid generation. These young beings, something more than critters but not quite humans, blend animal physical characteristics such as antlers and tails with unmistakably human traits and symbolize the hope for survival in a world marked by the scarcity of natural resources and a mysterious virus decimating humanity. The narrative is therefore to be intended as pandemic dystopia (Bulleid, 2023) within the contemporary genre of eco-science fiction.

The presence of hybrids evokes ongoing debates around non-normative subjectivities, the limits of humanity, and the possibilities of posthumanism. Their troubled coexistence with humans unfolds against the background of wild landscapes and apocalyptic settings, which makes them nearly protagonists of the story. Existing studies have thoroughly explored the series' most apparent dystopian features using a variety of frameworks, ranging from an ecocritical perspective which focused on extractive resource exploitation, to a postcolonial lens attentive to the representation of indigenous mythology and spirituality; however, less attention has been paid to how the TV adaptation stages human-hybrid relations, at times diverging from its source material. These relationships are enacted within spaces that are far from neutral, but rather marked by power dynamics that shape and influence them: the Preserve, where young Gus bonds meaningfully with other hybrids; the biopolitical nightmare of Dr. Singh's laboratory, where the scientist himself is trapped within the technocratic delusions of 'old humanism'; the Alaskan outpost refuge; and the paradisiacal mirage of Yellowstone National Park. Each place serves as a site where identities, relations and hierarchies are constructed, contested and negotiated.

Focusing on the centrality of interpersonal relations among the characters, which resonate with Donna Haraway's concept of companion species, this paper proposes to analyse the construction of space in the series through the theoretical frameworks of heterotopia, biopolitics (Foucault, 1984), and liminality as a site of resistance (hooks, 1990).

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