

Postcolonial Ecocritical Imaginings in Dystopian Picturebooks

MA Thesis

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Abstract

Recently, literary dystopias have experienced a considerable rise on the book market, especially in young adult literature. In this context, dystopian discourses have also entered the picturebook. However, dystopian picturebooks as such have not yet been conceptualized and analyzed as a (sub)genre in itself, although they constitute a particularly interesting version of the dystopian genre in which the dystopia is constructed via a multimodal text. In the first part of this paper, possible ways of defining dystopian picturebooks will be discussed, drawing on Darko Suvin's theory of estrangement and Miguel Abensour's concept of (radical) alterity. In the second part, the paper investigates two dystopian picturebooks that connect processes of colonization with negatively charged environmental and ecological developments like industrialization, urbanization, and pollution, which are attributed almost apocalyptic consequences: John Marsden and Shaun Tan's *The Rabbits* (1998 in Australia) and Helen Ward and Marc Craste's *Varmints* (2007 in the UK). The focus of the multimodal analysis will be how these linkages are constructed and how the representations of the colonizers, the colonized, and the environment in word and image transgress or perpetuate cultural stereotypes (such as terra nullius, the Vanishing Indian, or the Ecological Indian) and dominant binary oppositions (like colonizer/colonized, nature/culture, human/animal, human/machine). Within this poststructural framework the picturebooks will be interrogated via postmodern concepts of literary dystopias such as the Dunja Mohr's definition of 'transgressive utopian dystopias.' Informed by postcolonial and ecocritical theory, the paper will show how processes of colonization are constructed as determining destructive developments of industrialization, urbanization, and pollution in a transnational context.

Thesis Proposal

For several years, the genre of dystopia has been on the rise, especially in young adult literature. On a less frequent but nonetheless notable level, dystopian narratives have also entered the picturebook, a genre traditionally addressed to the youngest of readers that has recently experienced an expansion of its readership to include people of all ages (Beckett 2). While the manifold narratives of dystopia in picturebooks negotiate a wide spectrum of

socio-political themes, this master thesis focuses on two dystopian picturebooks that are situated at the nexus of postcolonial and ecocritical politics:

- *The Rabbits* by John Marsden and Shaun Tan (1998, Australia), and
- *Varmints* by Helen Ward and Marc Craste (2007, UK).

Both of them narrate processes of colonization – the first book with explicit historical/national/geographical references – that focus on their destructive ecological and environmental consequences, drawing on eschatological archetypes such as the apocalypse and the post-disaster motif. The paper is concerned not only with the form (*discours*) and content (*histoire*) of the selected dystopian picturebooks but also with their socio-political and ideological dimensions. Drawing on postcolonial and ecocritical theory, I will conduct a multimodal analysis of word and image, both conceptualized as text, within a poststructural, postmodern framework.

In a first step, I will discuss possible definitions of literary dystopias and dystopian picturebooks. While there is a rather consistent body of dystopian writing on the literary market, especially in young adult literature, the excessive use of the label ‘dystopia’ within the academic discourse has led to an obscuration of the term. The critical interrogation of the historical development of the dystopian genre within literature in general (and young adult literature in particular), as well as its interfaces with its twin-concept of utopian writing is expected to permit a more precise use of the term and the literary concept it describes. In this context, I will suggest conceiving dystopian picturebooks as a literary genre that not only exhibits certain prototypical features but is also characterized by specific genre expectations. Drawing on Darko Suvin and Miguel Abensour, the estrangement and alterity-content or quality of the literary dystopia are considered one of its most essential narrative devices. It can either be constructed by both word and image or via the visual text only, leaving the verbal text to describe the story in such a way that it does not necessarily place the scenario in a dystopian world but is open for different interpretations. Thus, the dystopian scenario is situated outside any form of synchronic, linear temporality rather than being oriented towards the future, as has been proposed by many theorists (Mohr, Bradford et al., Basu/Broad/Hintz, Levitas).

The second part of my thesis consists of the analysis of the three picture books, which will focus on the (post)structural dynamics of the dystopian picturebooks, i.e. the question whether and how the selected narratives construct and reaffirm binary oppositions such as colonizer/colonized, nature/culture, human/animal, human/machine, rural/urban, individual/society, or whether and how they transgress and deconstruct these dichotomies. The (hegemonic) power structures depicted as well as potentially subversive constructions of deviance and agency will be addressed. Literary dystopias deeply invest in the hierarchized dynamics of these seemingly antagonistic poles and draw on their cultural significance passed on in (Western) cultural memory, dominant symbolic orders and thought structures. In this context, the genre conventions and restrictions that result out of the didactic standards still widely demanded of picturebooks within the book market also have to be considered. For example, it will be revealing to see to which extent the narratives conclude on a positive hopeful note and to which extent they question, complicate, or perpetuate dominant stereotypes such as terra nullius (ní Fhlathúin), the Vanishing Indian (Dippie), or the Ecological Indian (Krech III).

In turn, this will show to which extent the dystopian picturebooks can be considered 'transgressive utopian dystopias' as defined by Dunja Mohr. By analyzing the correlations and differences between the intradiegetic dystopian scenarios and the extradiegetic (social, cultural, political, and ideological) orders articulated in the books, I will explore the transgressive potential of dystopian picturebook narratives. Related research questions will be: How are ecological, environmental, industrial, and technological discourses as well as colonial and postcolonial discourses mobilized by the dystopian narratives? How are themes like industrialization and pollution, urbanization and capitalism, colonialism and postcolonialism negotiated within the dystopias? And most importantly, in which ways are processes of colonization and colonialism constructed as correlating and intersecting with, or even as determining ecological and environmental developments like industrialization, urbanization, and pollution? By looking at books from and relating to different regional backgrounds (i.e. North America, Great Britain, and Australia), I will illustrate how linkages between postcolonial and ecocritical politics have been constructed in a global, transnational context.

References

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