

NOTES TOWARDS THE ROOTING OF UTOPIA IN THE IMAGINATION OF POLITICS THROUGH PERFORMANCE

*Notas para o enraizamento da Utopia na imaginação
da política através da performance*

RUI PINA COELHO¹ 

¹Universidade de Lisboa, Lisboa, Portugal.

E-mail: ruipinacoelho@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

One can easily argue that since Marx and Engels demise of nineteenth century Utopian socialism, characterizing Utopianism as an “idealism deeply and structurally averse to the Political”, utopia has migrated into fiction. With no surprise, Alain Badiou has famously declared the “passion for the real” as the twentieth century’s “major subjective trait”. The (early) twenty first century has also succumbed helplessly to the eruption of the real. But the times we live today seem to be claiming for something else. Over the past two decades utopian thinking seems to have resurfaced. The severity and monumentality of the issues that afflict the world today are inciting a central question for artists: in the face of an imminent catastrophe, what is the use of utopian imagination at the end of times? What is the purpose of artistic endeavours in a finite world. Utopian (or dystopian) fiction and has always dealt with the envisioning of a future anchored in possible or impossible scenarios, helping the world to correct its wrong doings, to improve, to transform, to threat with dreadful outcomes or to denounce present inequalities. However, if we consider that the world needs to start a new narrative, performing arts can help us to expand imagination, freeing political thinking from the constraints of the real world and wide open to “social dreaming”. In this paper, I aim to combine a speculative reflection grounded on utopian studies and in political theatre considering that performing arts are in a particularly good position to intervene in “social imaginary. This frame incites us to rethink the possibilities of political theatre today and its ontology, fighting for the rooting of (artistic) utopia in the imagination of politics, trusting that art and theatre will be able to help us to invent scenarios that today seem impossible or that we have not yet managed to conceive.

KEYWORDS: Visions of Utopia; Resistance; Political Theatre; Artistic Imagination; End Times.

EDITOR-CHEFE:

Rachel Esteves Lima

EDITOR EXECUTIVO:

Cássia Lopes

Jorge Hernán Yerro

SUBMETIDO: 27.09.2023

ACEITO: 25.10.2023

COMO CITAR:

COELHO, Rui Pina. Notes towards the rooting of Utopia in the Imagination of Politics through performance. *Revista Brasileira de Literatura Comparada*, v.25, n.50, p.137-143, set./dez., 2023. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1590/2596-304x20232550rpc>

RESUMO

Pode-se facilmente argumentar que desde o desmerecimento do socialismo utópico do século XIX por Marx e Engels, caracterizando o utopismo como um “idealismo profunda e estruturalmente avesso ao político”, a utopia migrou para a ficção. Sem surpresa, Alain Badiou declarou a famosa “paixão pelo real” como o “principal traço subjetivo” do século XX. O (início) do século XXI também sucumbiu impotentemente à erupção do real. Mas os tempos que vivemos hoje parecem exigir outra coisa. Nas últimas duas décadas, o pensamento utópico parece ter ressurgido. A gravidade e a monumentalidade das questões que afligem o mundo hoje suscitam uma questão central para os artistas: face a uma catástrofe iminente, para que serve a imaginação utópica no fim dos tempos? Qual é o propósito dos empreendimentos artísticos em um mundo finito. A ficção utópica (ou distópica) lidou sempre com visões de um futuro ancorado em cenários possíveis ou impossíveis, ajudando o mundo a corrigir os seus erros, a melhorar, a transformar, a ameaçar com resultados terríveis ou a denunciar as desigualdades actuais. No entanto, se considerarmos que o mundo precisa de iniciar uma nova narrativa, as artes performativas podem ajudar-nos a expandir a imaginação, libertando o pensamento político dos constrangimentos do mundo real e abrindo-nos ao “sonho social”.

Neste texto, pretendo combinar uma reflexão especulativa baseada em estudos utópicos e no teatro político, considerando que as artes performativas estão numa posição particularmente boa para intervir no “imaginário social”. Este enquadramento incita-nos a repensar as possibilidades do teatro político hoje e a sua ontologia, lutando pelo enraizamento da utopia (artística) no imaginário da política, confiando que a arte e o teatro poderão ajudar-nos a inventar cenários que hoje parecem impossíveis ou que ainda não conseguimos conceber.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Visões de Utopia; Resistência; Teatro Político; Imaginação Artística; Fim dos Tempos.

Utopia has always been a political issue, an unusual destiny for a literary form.

Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (2005)

But something's missing.

Bertolt Brecht¹

Climate change, drought and floods, world pandemics, ongoing wars, the return of fascist sensibilities, the successive waves of refugees in Europe, the mass disappearance of birds and insects... – all of this has been heightening an already perennial sense of permanent crisis. Theatre and performance, unavoidably, have been testifying it. Kris Verdonk's *Conversations at the end of the world* (2017); Philippe Quesne's *Farm Fatale* (2020); Tiago Rodrigues' *Dans la mesure de l'impossible* (2021); Carole N'Guyen's *Fraternité: conte fantastique* (2021); *(Not) the End of the world*, by Chris Bush, directed by Katie Mitchell (2021); Tim Crouch's *Truth's a Dog Must to Kennel* (2022); Alex Cassal's *End of the world library* (2023); *Sunday*, by Chaliwaté & Focus (2002) – all these are examples of recent performances that, somehow, deal with a sense of the end of the world². Either it is through an intuitive approach, a literary or artistic experimentation, a philosophical perspective, an existential lament, or a metaphorical discourse, they all pervade the sensation that the times we are living might be the end of all times. P. Servigne, R. Stevens and G. Chapelle, in *Une autre fin du monde est possible* (2018) are more precise:

1 Ernst Bloch, in “Something's Missing: A Discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing”, in *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature* (Ernst Bloch, MIT, 1988) has observed that the starting point of all utopian projects can be condensed into a succinct formula, taken from Bertolt Brecht's libretto for Kurt Weill's opera *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*: “But something's missing”.

2 On this subject, it would be relevant to mention the Dossier coordinated by Julie Sermon on “La condition Écologique”, *Theatre Public*, n.247, Avril-Juin 2023 (particularly the text by Eliane Beaufils, “Penser la catastrophe et la dépasser ? Des spectacles galvanisants pour le Chthulucène »). On the topic “political theatre at the end of times”, I have been trying to find my way through some essays: “Social plays at the end of the world: considering some of Simon Stone's, Frank Castorf's and Tiago Rodrigues's performances” (presented at EASTAP 2022, Milan, Italy); “Political ethos in contemporary Portuguese theatre: on Tiago Rodrigues's performances” (presented at FIRT 2022, Reikiavik, Iceland); “Against the End Times: Towards the Rooting of Utopia in the Imagination of Politics” (presented at EASTAP 2023, Aarhus, Denmark); “Utopia in the Imagination of Politics” (FIRT 2023, Accra, Ghana) – this article departs from these presentations.

Les chocs monumentaux qu'ont été Fukushima, les vagues successives de réfugiés en Europe, les attentats terroristes de Paris et Bruxelles, la disparition massive des oiseaux et des insectes, le vote du Brexit et l'élection de Trump ont sérieusement fissuré le paisible imaginaire de continuité qui rassurait tant de personnes". (2018, p. 15).

This is precisely the starting point of Brian Kulick's recent work *Staging the End of the World: Theatre in a Time of Climate Crisis* (2023). Kulick departs from the notion that "[a]n alternate future is inching, every day, closer and closer, moving us, from the realm of science fiction to science fact" (10). Consequently, facing a plausible 'end of the world', "[h]ow do we, in the theatre, talk about tackling such an enormous challenge which faces humankind? How can our art form, perhaps the most ephemeral of its aesthetics siblings, impress upon audiences the necessity for action?" (2023, p. 11).

To attempt a response to this question, Brian Kulick's analyses particular examples from drama and theatre history, reading them with a critical apparatus taken from "activists, ecologists, environmentalists, ethicists, philosophers, nihilists, and scientists; all discussing how we got to this terrible place and how we might possibly reverse our perilous course" (Kulick, 2023, p. 25)³. Thus, "[e]ach chapter of this book takes a particular play and matches it with a particular thinker, putting the two in conversation with one another" (*Ibidem*). So, we can find chapters on Basha, the Sanskrit dramatist, in dialogue with Joseph Tainter (*The Collapse of Complex Societies*, 1988) and Jonathan Schell (*The Fate of the Earth*, 1982), Euripides with Hannah Arendt and Zygmunt Bauman, the "Doomsday Plays" of the Middle Ages with Jonathan Franzen (novelist) and Catriona McKinnon (philosopher); Chekov with George Marshall (*Don't Even Think About It: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Ignore Climate Change*, 2015); Brecht with Levinas, just to name a few. The "narrative" Kulick offers is a very compelling one. We can trace evidence, in western and westernized societies, of a retrieval from public sphere and a migration into individualism and to the "private comfort of our living rooms" (Kulick, 2023, 17). This retreat from the world has led us to an "age of denial". We all seem to agree that immediate and severe actions must be taken to prevent, reverse or mitigate climatic catastrophe with extreme urgency, but we simply don't address them.

The Indian novelist Amitav Ghosh (quoted by Kulick), claims that future generations (if there will be such a thing), will call our times "The Great Derangement": [...] when readers and museumgoers turn to the art and literature of our time, will they [...] conclude that ours was a time when most forms of art and literature were drawn into the modes of concealment that prevented people from recognizing the realities of their plight? [...] (2017, unpaginated). For this author, our present climate crisis reveals a crisis of culture and, most acutely, "a crisis of imagination" (Ghosh, 2017, unpaginated). To surpass this crisis of imagination, artists should act upon the "Social Imaginary"⁴. According to Kulick:

3 Thus, "[e]ach chapter of this book takes a particular play and matches it with a particular thinker, putting the two in conversation with one another" (XX). So, we can find chapters on Basha, the Sanskrit dramatist, in dialogue with Joseph Tainter (*The Collapse of Complex Societies*, 1988) and Jonathan Schell (*The Fate of the Earth*, 1982), Euripides with Hannah Arendt and Zygmunt Bauman, the "Doomsday Plays" of the Middle Ages with Jonathan Franzen (novelist) and Catriona McKinnon (philosopher); Chekov with George Marshall (*Don't Even Think About It: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Ignore Climate Change*, 2015); Brecht with Levinas, just to name a few.

4 In this regard, Kulick's narrative anchors on the French philosopher economist and psychoanalyst Cornelius Castoriadis's notion of "Imagination Institution of Society" (1982).

[T]he social imaginary is what gives a specific orientation to each historical period; it is the singular agreed-upon manner of living, of seeing, and of conducting ourselves as we move through the world around us; and maintain our relations within it. [...] If any new social imaginary is to come into being, there must also be new signified that do not yet exist that must be thought, imagined, and given purpose” (2023, p. 21).

The period from a pre-existing social imaginary and a new social imaginary is something of an *in between* (or an *interregnum*, as thought by Antonio Gramsci): “a period of time where the old ways of doing something no longer work, but the new ways have not yet been invented” (Kulick, 2023, p. 21). What can happen in this period of *interregnum* is a process that he describes as *metanoia*, something that can be understood as a change of heart, the pursuit of a new path, a repent. Or, more precisely: “the transformation from one social imaginary to another that speaks to the needs of a new historical moment” (Kulick, 2023, p. 21).

This is precisely where my argument coincides with Brian Kulick: “Art is one of the forces that steps in during such historical *interregnums* and helps with the transformation” (Kulick, 2023, 21).

Thus, the task of helping to create a new social imaginary is, most certainly, the most fundamental task of theatre artists today. And, I believe, performing arts are particularly equipped to do so. Jill Dolan makes a very strong case for the idea that theatre and performance are particularly well positioned to intervene in “social imaginary” – or as I prefer to call it, the ‘political imagination’ – with what she calls “utopian performatives”:

Utopian performatives [according to Jill Dolan] describe small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense. (2005, p. 5).

This exciting concept takes on the writings of Marxist theorists such as Ernst Bloch or Herbert Marcuse – who both “see art as an arena in which an alternative world can be expressed – not in a didactic, descriptive way as in traditional ‘utopian’ literature, but through the communication of an alternative experience” (Ruth Levitas *apud* Dolan, 2005, p. 7), and the Brechtian notion of *gestus* and Augusto Boal’s radical political theatre. For Jill Dolan, “Utopian performatives persuade us that beyond this ‘now’ of material oppression and unequal power relations lives a future that might be different, one whose potential we can feel as we’re seared by the promise of a present that gestures toward a better later” (2005, p. 7).

However, one question remains: Reshape in which direction? It seems that disciplines such as political theory, environmental humanities, and utopian studies are trying to tackle this question. Mathias Thaler, political theoretician, in *No Other Planet: Utopian Visions for a Climate-Changed World* (2022) states that: “In the aftermath of the fall of communism, utopianism seemed to have been deposited on the ash heap of history” (2022, p. 8). However, “over the past two decades [...], utopian thinking and acting has been resurrected from its temporary deathbed. This resurfacing can be observed in various social and cultural arenas. From global insurgencies against autocratic regimes to science fiction narratives, from radical pleas to transform the built environment to exhilarating experiments in communal living – today’s public debate seems saturated with utopian ideas and practices” (2022, p. 9).

[...] there are specific reasons why social dreaming has become so prevalent at this precise moment in time, to do with the circumstances of our precarious existence on planet Earth, at the beginning of the twenty-first century. It is, I argue, because we feel deeply disoriented [...] (Thaler, 2022, p. 10).

In effect, Thaler's argument drives us through the idea that utopian visions can provide "orientation" around "a landscape that is both unknown and unsettling" (2022, p. 13), escaping "both fatalism and wishful thinking" (2022: 6). On what concerns specifically the "sites of utopianism", Thaler defends that "utopianism manifests in three domains, which shape one another – political and social theory; fictional narratives in various genres and media (novels, films, paintings and even music); and social movements and experiments in communal living" (2002, p. 7). And, on what regards *fictional narratives*, Thaler – who is specially interested in addressing the "interfaces between theory and storytelling" (37), deals most specifically with "speculative fiction"⁵. He makes a distinction between three types of speculative fiction: the *What-If*, the *If-Only* and the *If-This-Goes-On*⁶. Although this tripartite schema seems to be quite self-explanatory, it is a little bit more complex than meets the eye. But, for the sake of my argument and brevity, I will not go into its detail. But briefly⁷:

[...] *What-If question*: what would happen if we managed to reconceive our existence as deeply entangled with all kinds of planetary life forms? [...]; "*If only!*": what would happen if we were capable of taking on the current challenge [...]; *If-This-Goes-On inquiry*: what would happen to our efforts in these greatly deranged times if our species' irresponsible behaviour did not change at all, or if mitigation and adaptation measures simply gained momentum too late? (2022, p. 39).

This brief presentation of Thaler's book leads us to the point I am trying to make: I believe that contemporary performing arts can offer a fourth point to Thaler's tripartite schema: to the *If-Only*, the *What-If* and the *If-This-Goes-On*, I would like to add something like "*And now, for something completely different*" (or, more seriously, the *Now-What?*). This will constitute the endeavors to reshape, from a fresh start, the rules of engagement between humans and nature and redevising social dreaming.

Let us take for granted the notion that in performing arts, through the co-presence of actors and spectators, something that never existed comes into existence. Let us take from granted that we are always dealing with, simultaneously, a life experience, a bodily understanding, limited only by the frontiers of what is possible *to do* and to *imagine* on stage. Let us take for granted that a performance offers a liminal space, where everything is, simultaneously, real and artificial, possible and impossible. We are always dealing with the real thing (what is on stage) and the image of the thing (our perception of what it is).

So, our current "crisis of imagination" can be challenged by on-stage utopias, considered as attempts to defy the end of times and fight for the rooting of (artistic) utopia in the imagination of politics, trusting that art and theatre will be able to help us to invent scenarios that today seem impossible or that we have not yet managed to conceive of. Not by correcting the real, not by improving what is possible,

5 Speculative fiction includes fantasy, science fiction, and horror, but also their derivatives, hybrids, and cognate genres like the gothic, dystopia, weird fiction, post-apocalyptic fiction, ghost stories, superhero tales, alternate history, steampunk, slipstream, magic realism, fractured fairy tales, and more. (Oziewitz *apud* Thaler, 2022, p. 37).

6 Following the distinction presented by the science fiction author Octavia Butler.

7 Mathias Thaler will deal with a *corpus* of political and social thought and with a literary *corpus* (N. K. Jemisin, Kim Stanley Robinson, Margaret Atwood, among others).

not by menacing with scary outcomes – but simply by starting over. Thus, contemporary performance can induce an “education for desire”, in the way Miguel Abensour understands utopianism: “as the education of a desire for being and living otherwise” (*apud* Thaler, 2022, p. 3).

SOMETHING CLOSE TO A PROVISIONAL EPILOGUE

“Representations of the end of the world gain currency in moments of social crisis”, argues the scholar Felipe Cervera, discussing “Theatre and Eschatological Politics” (2019, p. 297), adding: “But such representations are more often the product of political strategies than of uncontrolled social anxieties” (2019, p. 297). Unavoidably, this pervasive feeling of finitude, is provoking a change in the ontology and practices of political theatre⁸. The old tropes and forms of the past are necessarily being reconsidered. Which political theatre do we need for the end of the world?

⁸ Peter Eckersall and Helena Grehan in *The Routledge Companion to Theatre and Politics* (2019) have sketched “eight galvanising themes as frameworks or rubrics to rethink the critical, creative, and activist perspectives on questions of politics and theatre, and theatre as politics. These themes are as follows: post, assembly, gap, institution, machine, message, end, and re”.

REFERENCES

- CASTORIADIS, Cornelius. *A instituição imaginária da sociedade*. Traduzido por Guy Reinaud. Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1982.
- CERVERA, Felipe. Theatre and eschatological politics. In: ECKERSALL, Peter; GREHAN, Helena (ed.) *The Routledge Companion to Theatre and Politics*. New York: Routledge, 2019. p. 295-298.
- DOLAN, Jill. *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater*. Michigan: University of Michigan, 2005.
- ECKERSALL, Peter; GREHAN, Helena (ed.). *The Routledge Companion to Theatre and Politics*. London; New York: Routledge, 2019.
- GHOSH, Amitav. *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. London: Penguin Books, 2017.
- JAMESON, Fredric. *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. London; New York: Verso, 2005.
- KULICK, Brian. *Staging the End of the World: Theatre in a Time of Climate Crisis*. London: Methuen Drama, 2023.
- SERVIGNE, Pablo; STEVENS, Raphael; CHAPELLE, Gauthier. *Une autre fin du monde est possible*. Paris: Seuil, 2018.
- THALER, Mathias. *No Other Planet: Utopian Visions for a Climate-Changed World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022.