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Shaping the Present, Imagining Pasts and Futures in Two Recent Novels by Christian Kracht and Juli Zeh[1*]

This paper focuses on two contemporary German-language dystopian novels: one describing an imagined representation of the Past and the other a vision of the Future. In *Ich werde hier sein im Sonnenschein und im Schatten* (*I will be here in Sunshine and Shadow*) (2008), the Swiss author Christian Kracht depicts an alternative version of the history of the 20th century, thus deconstructing today's debates of postcolonial studies and civil rights. In *Corpus Delicti. Ein Prozess* (*The Method*) (2009), the German author Juli Zeh portrays a Germany governed by a dictatorial regime fifty years in the future, and depicts a society obsessed with health issues in which every kind of excess is criminalized. The relevance of both fictional narratives to our concerns today will be addressed through the lens of R. Koselleck's categories of 'space of experience' and 'horizon of expectation', opening new possibilities of meaning.

Keywords: dystopia, Christian Kracht, Juli Zeh, temporal categories, Reinhart Koselleck

In an article published in June 2017 in *The New Yorker* entitled "A Golden Age for Dystopian Fiction", the American historian Jill Lepore reviews the characteristics of the dystopian novel written over the past two centuries and describes the "dystopia-boom" of the last few years, which is represented in the growing number of television series,

[1] [*]A shorter version of this paper was presented at an International Conference organized by the Centre for the Study of Cultural Memory (Institute of Modern Languages Research, School of Advanced Study) and held at the University of London in 2019.

computer games, novels and films that people of all ages are showing a large interest for. In the final part of her article, Lepore notes that in the first year of Obama's presidency, Americans bought half a million copies of Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* (published in 1957), and in the first month of Donald Trump's administration, George Orwell's novel *1984* (published in 1949) "jumped to the top of the Amazon best-seller list". The analysis has led her conclude that dystopia is no longer a fiction of resistance. In Lepore's opinion,

> it's [it has] become a fiction of submission, the fiction of an untrusting, lonely, and sullen twenty-first century, the fiction of the fake news and infowars, the fiction of helplessness and hopelessness. It cannot imagine a better future, and it doesn't ask anyone to bother to make one. [...] It appeals to both the left and the right, because, in the end, it requires so little by way of literary, political, or moral imagination, asking only that you enjoy the company of people whose fear of the future aligns comfortably with your own.[2]

It cannot be denied that today's society is much more aware of the serious social, political and environmental problems threatening the planet and our future on it, but it is also true that society does not seem able to deal with them. Phenomena such as globalisation, terrorist attacks, the ever-growing laxity of data control, or more recently, the crisis in democracy happening in Europe, have caused increasing unease about the lack of safety and a feeling of helplessness as regards problems that have escaped local boundaries. The trend in dystopian fiction which has also become prominent in the German-language publishing market that concerns me here, has therefore appeared as a reaction to society's present-day shortcomings; in projecting them into the future, it has called attention to the dangers confronting freedom as much as democracy[3]. The start of a new century is also, as we know, historically propitious to the proliferation of futurology, which all too often slips into enthusiastic optimism or making terrifying forecasts.

[2] Lepore, "A Golden Age for Dystopian Fiction". This article also appears in the print edition of the June 5 & 12, 2017, under the headline "No, We Cannot".

[3] For fuller studies about dystopian literature, see Zeißler, *Dunkle Welten* (2008), and Lehnen, *Defining Dystopia* (2016).

Reflecting upon the future is the result of a wish to predict it but it always means explaining the expectations and choices that we have in the present, which in turn are also the result of past experiences[4].

This essay discusses the way in which the future, the past and the present are fictionalised in two recent dystopian novels written in German: *Ich werde hier sein im Sonnenschein und im Schatten* (*I will be here in Sunshine and Shadow*)[5] by the Swiss author Christian Kracht, published in 2008, and *Corpus Delicti. Ein Prozess* (*The Method*)[6] by the German writer Juli Zeh, published in 2009.

The novel, as Milan Kundera states in his well-known book *The Art of the Novel*, examines "not reality but existence", or rather, "the realm of human possibilities, everything that man can become, everything he is capable of"[7]. The present in narrative fiction is therefore taken to be the meeting point of all the possibilities in the past whether put into practice or not, and of all the futures whether promised or simply feared. In order to better equate this dialogical relationship among the three moments of temporality – Past, Present and Future – that these two novels labour upon fictionally, we shall be referring to the concepts of "experience" and "expectation" that the German historian Reinhart Koselleck put forward towards the end of the 1970s.

In his book *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (1979)[8] Koselleck built a concept of time as a "cultural construct"[9]: each Present reconstructs the Past that is, what is already known and tried, on the basis of conditions generated by its present existence, by

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4 See Furtado, "O Corpo no Espaço da Técnica Contemporânea", 283.

5 As this novel has not been translated to English all the quotations in English are my own translations. The English translation of the book's title was taken from the version retrieved from the *Goethe Institut* webpage.

6 Juli Zeh's novel was translated into English by Sally-Ann Spencer in 2012 with funding received from the *Goethe Institut*. The Vintage Books English translation published in 2014 has been used in this paper.

7 Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, 42. The book was originally published in French in 1968. I have used Linda Asher's 1988 translation here.

8 The book was first published in German by Suhrkamp. Keith Tribe's English translation was published by the MIT Press in 1985. I have used this translation in an edition published by Columbia University Press in 2004.

9 Jasmin, "Apresentação", 9.

its "space of experience". "Within experience", as Koselleck states, "a rational reworking is included, together with unconscious modes of conduct which do not have to be present in awareness."[10] In this process of up-dating the Past in the Present, the meanings of both one and the other are changed. On the other hand, each Present tells of a Future, which Koselleck calls a "horizon of expectation", within particular expectations that are likewise conditioned by the Present and so may be reviewed at each moment[11]. Therefore, the Present, which in itself is nothing more than a fleeting moment, ends up by allowing us to perceive in a new way, the binding relationship between the Future and the Past. Although these two temporal moments will never coincide, they mutually condition each other because experience opens a space for a certain horizon of expectations. In Koselleck's words, "the probability of a forecasted future is, to begin with, derived from the given conditions of the past, whether scientifically isolated or not"[12]. In this way, the perception of time as a human construct is simultaneously individual, whence it changes at the different stages of life, and collective, where collective perception overrides individual perception in the process of re-signifying the Past.

I.

It is precisely with this updating and re-signification of the Past that the Swiss writer Christian Kracht confronts the reader in his novel[13].

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[10] Koselleck, *Futures Past*, 259.
With regard to Koselleck's concept of time, see D'Assunção, "Rupturas entre o Presente e o Passado", 196 and D'Assunção, "Koselleck, a história dos conceitos e as temporalidades", 41-53. For further studies about Koselleck's concepts of time and space in the construction of historical meaning, see Niklas Olsen, *History in the Plural. An Introduction to the work of Reinhart Koselleck.*

[11] As Koselleck explains "Hope and fear, wishes and desires, cares and rational analysis, receptive display and curiosity: all enter into expectation and constitute it" (Koselleck, *Futures Past*, 259).

[12] *Idem*, 262.

[13] When referring to Kracht's novel, I shall be using the letters IW (for *Ich werde*) followed by the page number. The author Christian Kracht, born in 1966 in Saanen (Switzerland), has also worked as a journalist. He resides currently in Los Angeles but has lived in many different places around the world such as: Buenos Aires,

Kracht introduces us to an "alternative world" since it had never really existed before in the terms in which he describes it but it might well have existed. The plot in this dystopian novel may be summed up in a few lines: in 1917 Lenin did not travel from Switzerland where he was exiled, to Russia so as to carry out his political project; he decided to stay in Switzerland and embark upon his Bolshevik revolution, founding the Swiss Soviet Republic (SSR), whose domain stretched from Karlsruhe to South Africa. This communist Switzerland, the land of never-ending winter and snow, has been locked in a 96 year-old war with a fascist alliance forged between Germany and England (IW 27), and has in the meantime, become a powerful military might bolstered by black soldiers recruited from its African colonies. It should be noted that this fictional country is named Switzerland, in reality a European capitalist country well known for its neutrality, whose nature here is clearly inverted[14].

Kracht's novel is narrated in the first person and the anonymous protagonist is a young black soldier coming from Nyasaland, a fictional Swiss colony in southeastern Africa[15]. Ever since he was a child, he was brought up to serve the colonising fatherland which had brought its civilisation to its African colonies and had taught them to respect all people regardless of the colour of their skin, as the narrator recalls: "There is no racism, there should be none […] We should be Swiss

Lamu (Kenya), Florence, Bangkok, Kathmandu, Munich and New Delhi, where he worked as *Spiegel*'s Indian correspondent. A controversial figure on the German literary scene, Kracht tries to distance himself from the pop author label assigned to him in the 1990's and rarely gives interviews or speaks about his work. His novels, a blend of history and fiction, are often located in a foreign nation or a different culture, and clearly show the influences of other works (on this topic, see Bauer, "Constructing Christian Kracht", 203-219).

[14] In Kracht's fiction, the world is dominated by Hindustan, Korea and the Great Australian Empire (IW 27), while Russia was destroyed when an asteroid crashed into it in Tunguska (in fact the Tunguska catastrophe happened in 1908), and the USA, referred to as 'Amexiko', is busy waging a war within its own borders.
A stage version of this novel has been performed at theatres in Basel, Stuttgart and Berlin.

[15] Nyasaland was in fact a British protectorate in Africa, established in 1907. When it became independent from Britain in 1964, it was renamed Malawi.

officers regardless of the colour of our skin or our origin" (IW 59)[16]. The Nyasa Africans are therefore educated to help the "Swiss soviet" in a "just war", a war that seeks to obtain "a fair world, free of racism and exploitation" (IW 61)[17]. The communist party continues to stress that the Republic's "strength" lies in "its humanity" (IW 20), as may be read in the novel's opening chapter, since the black protagonist strongly believes in this ideal. However the reader soon realises that it is nothing more than propaganda: racism is everywhere, even among army ranks[18]. The main character, who belongs to the Chewa people and rose through the ranks to become a political commissar in the armed forces, now has the job of arresting the dissident Jewish colonel Brazhinsky. He is a Polish physician in the Swiss army and has taken refuge in the Redoubt, a Swiss alpine fortification built with the purpose of preventing fascist Germany from invading Switzerland[19]. The military centre of this communist empire is now here.

Throughout his journey heading to the Redoubt, and taking him across snow-covered Switzerland, the protagonist takes note of the many difficulties that the country has to overcome in order to achieve the communism he believes is the solution leading to a fair and happy society (IW 52). But upon arriving at his destination, it dawns on him that the promised Swiss missiles, those "miraculous weapons" (IW 127) that will quickly end the war (IW 69), do not exist and they are nothing more than an "empty ritual" (IW 127). Only now does the protagonist understand that the communist ideology is not able to turn the crisis around in Western civilisation[20] despite the fact that humankind has

[16] "Es gab keinen Rassismus, es sollte keinen geben. [...] Wir sollten Schweizer Offiziere werden, ungeachtet unserer Hautfarbe oder unserer Herkunft" (IW 59).

[17] "In Blantyre erfuhr ich von der Existenz [...] des gerechten Krieges, der dort auf und *unter* dem Eis geführt wurde [...] um eine gerechte Welt, frei von Rassenhass und Ausbeutung" (IW 61).

[18] Officer Favre, for example, makes racist, anti-Semitic remarks (IW 36).

[19] The National Redoubt (*Réduit*) in fact exists. In Kracht's novel, it is described as the "Swiss work of the century" and consists of a "system of tunnels" (IW 98) housing the country's power centre (IW 109-110).

[20] This crisis has already been made apparent in the opening epigraph quoted from the novel *Women in Love* (1920) by D.H. Laurence. This novel speaks about a crisis in Western civilisation at the beginning of the 20th century; the epigraph

evolved a great deal, as may be seen in the characters of Brazhinsky and his wife Favre. They are both technologically modified: a tiny plug had been inserted under the skin of their armpits (IW 45-46), and they are able to speak in an innovating form of communication called "smoke-speak" ("Rauchsprache") which will be used by the "new man" in the forthcoming generation (IW 43). Nevertheless, this technological evolution doesn't seem able to help in finding a solution, as both characters perish. And the main character, the black man from the African colony, is not an ordinary man either: his heart is not situated on the left of his body but on the right, and his eyes change colour, becoming blue (IW 146). In the last part of the novel, he recognises that the Swiss socialism, which had done away with books and written culture (IW 121) in favour of exclusively using oral communication, is nothing more than a utopian dream. In this fictional socialist society devoid of literature, religion and human bonding the nature also follows this lack of feelings: here the winter never ends. The protagonist therefore decides to leave Europe, cast off his ideological beliefs and go back to his village in Nyasaland. This individual act will be copied by a multitude of inhabitants in the Swiss African colony who take leave of the city and its civilisational commodities[21].

The fictional present narrated here bears the stamp of past experience and, at the same time, projects it into the future leaving the reader with the co-production of meaning. Or in other words, the reader's previous

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is taken from a conversation about the future of humanity and reveals the main character's rejection of the unfolding Modernity project (cf. Baßler, "Have a nice apokalypse!", 264).

[21] Birgfeld and Conter interpret this as being the "disappearance of History, the gateway to an era beyond desire […] in a Post-Humanist era" ("Das Verschwinden am Ende des Romans erscheint als ein Verschwinden aus der Geschichte, als Eintritt in einer Zeit jenseits des Begehrens […] und damit in der Tat als freiwilliger, einsichtiger Übergang des Menschen in ein Zeitalter des Post-Humanismus") ("Morgenröte des Post-Humanismus", 268).

Note that as the title of his novel, Kracht had chosen a line from *Danny Boy*, a farewell song written at the beginning of the 20th century and based on a traditional Irish ditty. The line chosen for the title seems to show hope but the following lines destroy this apparent optimism. This song gained large popularity in the USA, being frequently played at funerals. For example, it was sung by Renée Fleming at the funeral of Senator John McCain in the Washington cathedral in August 2018.

knowledge and memory of 20th-century history – first and foremost on communist societies after their end –, together with his/her "horizon of expectations" enter into dialogue with the text and influence the way in which it is received.

At the end of the novel, the return of Kracht's main character to the world of his childhood makes it so that he withdraws from all kinds of totalitarianisms and ethnocentric and xenophobic attitudes that left their mark on the 20th century. We can even read in the novel, "a Jew, a woman and a black person, this is Switzerland, this is the new world"[22]. But this discourse of 'political correctness' is intended as ironic: the Jew and the woman die and the black person goes back physically and mentally to his African origins[23]. The world regains here its original form: the purity of the primitive. The much-praised new world is therefore condemned to extinction that not even the biotechnological hybrids are able to prevent. The open ending of the book doesn't allow an ethical stance and leaves to the reader the answer of the question: what comes after the escape to the African savannah?

II.

The writing of Juli Zeh, who is one of Germany's most influential intellectuals, is very different[24]. The plot in *The Method*[25] unfolds in a

[22] "Ein Jude, eine Frau und ein Schwarzer, das ist die Schweiz, das ist die neue Welt" (IW 124).

[23] In an interview which was published when this novel came out, Christian Kracht stated that it was a "very serious" novel and added that it is not a satire and "not in the least bit ironical" (Alexandra Kedves and Edgar Schuber's interview, published in the *Tages-Anzeiger* on 20.09.2008).

[24] Born in Bonn in 1974, Juli Zeh trained as a lawyer with a PhD about Kosovo's status in international law, in 2010. She has also studied at the prestigious German Literature Institute and has been awarded several literary prizes for her novels. A close observer of contemporary society, she is not afraid to express her opinions on sociopolitical and legal questions, as well as on issues to do with data protection, surveillance or even morality. Her essays appear regularly in the largest German journals and her views are often expressed on television (on this topic, see Herminghouse, "The Young Author as Public Intellectual", 268-284).

[25] The novel was first conceived as a theatre play for the *Ruhrtriennale*, an annual music and arts festival in the Ruhr region. It was first staged by Anja Gronau in Essen in 2007. When referring to the English version of Zeh's novel, I shall

near future (M 6), and is set in Germany where a totalitarian regime, exclusively based on imposing healthy rules and regulations on its citizens, has been established[26]: here, the target is having a sound body even if it means paying the price of a loss of individual freedom and democracy. Citizens' health is controlled by the "Method", a governmental system of microchips implanted in their forearms storing all the data about each person's health; the chips even store and test data about waste water and garbage in order to avert all chances of contamination. Any minor breaking of the rules immediately goes to court and is severely punished. Even the choice of a romantic partner is monitored by the state so as to reduce the risk of disease[27].

The main character in this dystopian novel is a young biologist Mia Holl who backs the totalitarian state and its "Method" because she believes it acts as a guarantee to a long, safe life. Her brother Moritz does not endorse the system and opposes it passively by adopting behaviours that flout the law. He will be condemned for a crime he did not do and ends up by committing suicide in prison. It is then that Mia discovers that her brother has the DNA of his medulla donor owing to the fact that he had to undergo treatment for leukaemia during his childhood. Although she was unable to save her brother's life, Mia decides to wage a personal struggle against the health policy enforced by the totalitarian state.

Worth mentioning is the fact that the dictatorship was brought about with the aim of solving the social chaos that had gone on before.

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be using the letter M (for *Method*) followed by the page number. Quotations in German are taken from the following edition: *Corpus Delict. Ein Prozess*, 2010 (here abbreviated as CD).

[26] Although the country's name is not specifically mentioned, the action takes place in Germany: in the novel, it says that the fictitious journalist Heinrich Kramer's book was printed in Berlin, Munich and Stuttgart (M 87).

[27] In 2009, the same year this novel came out, Juli Zeh and Ilija Trojanow published *Angriff auf die Freiheit*, a book taking a critical stance against today's surveillance practices. In Western countries, because of our fear of insecurity mainly after the attacks of 9/11, democratic rights are in danger of being discarded. Thus, over the past years, a new field called 'Surveillance Studies' has emerged, and is scattered across different disciplines. The number of fictional narratives that endorse privacy and security, both in literature and cinema, is also growing in our post-privacy age.

During this chaotic stage in which values such as "nationhood, religion and family" (M 78) were lost, the outcome resulted in "chaos, illness and general uncertainty" (M 79). If in Kracht's novel we find the flip-side of a concrete historical situation, in Juli Zeh's novel we find the flip-side of the concept of a totalitarian state: this is normally taken to be a system which rests upon the irrational nature of its rules so as to conform to the ideology holding it up. On the contrary, Juli Zeh's "health dictatorship" rests upon rational assumptions that ensure a healthy society, and therefore a happy one. Heinrich Kramer, the system's ideologue, explains it in the following way:

> [...] We're not in thrall to the market or religion. We're not dependent on high-flown ideological beliefs. The smug, self-serving faith in popular democracy has no place in our system. Our society is guided by reason and reason alone [...] The Method was developed so that every individual can enjoy [...] a happy and healthy life, a life free from suffering and pain. (M 29)[28]

But in managing to do so, the State adopts inhuman traits and restricts freedom. Kramer goes as far as defending "the Method's vision of humanity" which is founded on the belief that the human body is superior to all other forms of foregoing states, because, as he says, "all men are equal in *body*, not in mind" (M 159-160)[29]. The scientific thinking

[28] "Im Gegensatz zu allen Systemen der Vergangenheit gehorchen wir weder dem Markt noch einer Religion. Wir brauchen keine verstiegenen Ideologien. Wir brauchen nicht einmal den bigotten Glauben an eine Volksherrschaft, um unser System zu legitimieren. Wir gehorchen allein der Vernunft [...] Wir haben eine METHODE entwickelt, die darauf abzielt, jedem Einzelnen [...] ein gesundes und glückliches Leben zu garantieren" (CD 36). Heinrich Kramer, the name of this fictional character, is also the name of a German dominican priest who was an inquisitor and died in 1505. He is the author of *Malleus Maleficarum*, a book published in 1486 that proves the existence of witchcraft and teaches how to deal with it (with torture and death penalty). Kramer's book was translated into English by Christopher S. Mackay. *The Hammer of Witches: A complete translation of the Malleus Maleficarum*, 2009.

[29] "Ich bin überzeugt, dass ein System nur dann gerecht sein kann, wenn es an den Körper anknüpft – denn durch unsere Körper, nicht im Geiste sind wir einander gleich" (CD180).

underpinning the biological sciences may, in fact, explain the world more easily but from a human point of view, such an interpretation is absurd as it denies the spiritual dimension. This is what happens in Moritz's case: he is guilty from a scientific point of view because the DNA tests are completely sound. But Mia, the thirty-four year old scientist, never doubted his innocence because she was well acquainted with her brother's character, with his soul, something that science cannot explain. Only then does Mia Holl understand the consequences of this system:

> Science […] broke up the long-standing marriage between humankind and the transcendental. The soul, progeny of this union, was given up for adoption. It left us with the body, which became our main concern. The body is temple and altar; our highest god, our greatest sacrifice; sacred and enslaved. (M 141)[30]

In other words, the Method behaves like all the other ideologies going before it, and so the novel's heroine decides to carry on a political battle against it: before her arrest, Mia declares she no longer trusts society, law, politics, science and morality (M 165-166).

In an interview granted Johannes Gernert for *Stern* magazine when her book had just been published, Juli Zeh stated: "It was not my intention to write about a vision of the future nor to say: in few years' time, the world will be like this or like that. I merely transferred into a fictional world what is already happening and I exaggerated it a bit."[31] After all, Juli Zeh's novel tells us the following: when political ideology and religion no longer seem capable of gathering mankind together around common ideas and beliefs, the scientist emerges as

[30] "Die Naturwissenschaft [...] hat die lange Ehe zwischen dem Menschen und dem Übermenschlichen geschieden. Die Seele, Spross dieser Verbindung, wurde zur Adoption freigegeben. Geblieben ist der Körper, den wir zum Zentrum aller Bemühungen machen. Der Körper ist uns Tempel und Altar, Götze und Opfer. Heilig gesprochen uns versklavt" (CD 158).

[31] "Ich wollte keine Zukunftsvision schreiben und sagen: In so und so viel Jahren sieht es so und so aus. Ich habe tatsächlich Dinge, die jetzt schon da sind, in ein fiktives System übertragen und ein bisschen überdreht" (Gernert, "Plädoyer gegen die Fitness-Diktatur").

the only one who is able to herald a promising future as a result of the advances made in medicine, genetic engineering or in cyberspace[32]. Unfortunately, as the protagonist of *Corpus Delicti* experienced, science alone can't achieve it.

In trying to explain our "space of experience" by recalling what has already been lived through and issue a warning about future hazards, the two novels discussed here end up by introducing us to a "horizon of expectations" without any room for hope[33]. In Kracht's novel, the subject continues to be threatened by the totalitarian powers that left their mark on the first half of the 20th century in Europe; in Zeh's book, the subject's present-day obsessions end up becoming something negative that is taken to be the norm, limiting individual freedom and continued democracy.

Nowadays, there is no doubt that technological progress does not always mean social, political or moral progress. In the "post-biological" era depicted in both dystopias, human beings will be replaced by intelligent robots and humanism will cease to make any sense[34]. We may therefore conclude that the prognosis of the near future, that we have been discussing here, is nothing more than a distressing diagnosis of our present, devoid of ethics and solidarity. Both Kracht and Zeh take a critical stance against what has become a global problem: the wide control of technology in line with antidemocratic tendencies. No wonder the field of "happiness studies" has boomed over the past two decades.

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[32] Cf. David Le Breton, "O corpo enquanto acessório de presença", 78.

[33] Zeißler, *Dunkle Welten*, 31.

[34] On this topic, see the book written by the Canadian computational scientist, Moravec, *Robot: Mere Machine to Transcendent Mind*, 1990.

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