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Poetics of the Present: Rethinking Utopia in Science Fiction —A Review of *Science Fiction Utopia: Toward a Utopian Poetics* by Wang Feng and Chen Dan

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Abstract: Building on the Western tradition of utopian studies and integrating key works of Chinese and Western science fiction, the book *Science Fiction Utopia: Towards a Utopian Poetics* proposes that the current field of utopian studies is gradually shifting from the traditional political and ideological models to a more open and imaginative literary form. Centered on the core concept of the “Science fiction utopia” the book systematically explores how the utopian impulse is manifested in science fiction narratives and attempts to construct a reflexive poetics of utopia. It further proposes that utopia can be understood not only as a projective vision of the future, but also as a narrative function and a cultural dynamic embedded in the present, capable of actively engaging with contemporary technological realities such as artificial intelligence and post-human ethics.

Keywords: Science fiction utopia; Utopian impulse; Poetics of the present

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题目：当下诗学：科幻小说中乌托邦的再思考——评王峰、陈丹《科幻乌托邦：迈向乌托邦诗学》

摘要：《科幻乌托邦：迈向乌托邦诗学》一书在继承西方乌托邦研究传统的基础上，结合中西科幻文学的重要作品，认为当下的乌托邦研究领域正从政治与意识形态层面，逐渐转向科幻小说的叙事与诗学层面。该书以“科幻乌托邦”为核心概念，系统探讨乌托邦精神在科幻叙事中的体现方式，并尝试构建一种具有反思性的乌托邦诗学。同时书中指出，乌托邦不再仅仅是对未来的想象投射，更是一种存在于当下的叙事功能与文化能量，能够积极介入人工智能、后人类伦理等当代技术现实议题。

关键词：科幻乌托邦；乌托邦精神；当下诗学

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Science Fiction Utopia: Towards a Utopian Poetics (Peking University Press, 2023), by Wang Feng and Chen Dan, examines how the utopian spirit is manifested in science fiction. It builds upon Western utopian studies while drawing inspiration from significant works of science fiction across both Chinese and Western traditions. By reorganizing and reconstructing the genealogy of utopian thought, it proposes a shift in utopian studies from the political realm to the narrative and poetic domain of science fiction.

The term “science fiction utopia” (hereinafter referred to as “sci-fi utopia”) denotes utopia’s emergence as an important genre within science fiction, while “toward a utopian poetics” can be understood as a theoretical expansion of utopian discourse—from traditional political or ideological models to a more open and imaginative literary form. The book thus frames the sci-fi utopia as an inclusive poetic system. The proposed concept of utopian poetics reveals that utopia functions as a fundamental narrative force and formal strategy at the heart of contemporary science fiction.

Furthermore, the book highlights that the sci-fi utopia exists increasingly in the present tense. It not only stages possible futures through narrative imagination but also possibly intervenes with reflexive power. In the face of contemporary technological challenges, such as gene editing, artificial intelligence, and posthuman ethics, the ongoing vitality of the utopian spirit becomes ever more evident. Utopia is no longer a mere projection of the future; it now assumes a narrative function that actively shapes and transforms current understandings of cognition, ethics, and the ecological community.

1. Proposing a Poetics of Sci-Fi Utopia

Since Thomas More’s (1982) *Utopia*, the idea of utopia has been studied both as a literary genre and as a socio-political ideal. Darko Suvin proposes that travelogue-style works focused on constructing an ideal new society should be classified under the utopian genre, and that “utopia is not an independent category but rather a sociopolitical subcategory of science fiction.” (Suvin, 2011, p.68) Fredric Jameson (2014) further developed this perspective by describing science fiction as an “archaeology of the future.” *Science Fiction Utopia: Toward a Poetics of Utopia* not only traces the classical utopian tradition from Thomas More to

Edward Bellamy but also draws on the philosophical interpretations of the utopian concept by theorists such as Ernst Bloch and Fredric Jameson. The book identifies a series of key connotations central to the notion of utopia and develops this poetic shift by focusing on science fiction narratives and the mechanisms of utopian representation. While Suvin and Jameson link utopian literature with science fiction, their analyses emphasize its socio-political and ideological contexts rather than narrative of the science fiction. Suvin's approach frames science fiction as cognitive estrangement that often includes a utopian element. He is primarily concerned with how imagined worlds critique social and ideological structures. Fredric Jameson, from a Marxist perspective, explicitly regards science fiction's utopias as reflections of ideological, economic, and class relationships, highlighting the political side of utopia. As Wang Fengzhen (2018, p.8) summarizes, "Marxism has been a continuous thread in Jameson's work. Taking Marxism as his guiding thread, he employs a dual interpretation of ideology and utopia to analyze and critique the ideological components within cultural texts, while also pointing out their utopian connotations."

Wang & Chen's book proposes a reflective utopian poetics, suggesting a focus shift from political and ideological dimensions to cultural and narrative dimensions of utopia. As "the energy of real-world politics continuously diminishes, while cultural energy constantly increases,"^①(Wang & Chen, 2023, p.19), sci-fi utopia encompasses a far broader range of themes—technology, society, psychology, culture, and more compared with the narrower focus of political utopia. Utopia in sci-fi represents an open-ended poetics that inherits the futuristic impulse but unfolds it within the complex, technologically saturated narratives of science fiction.

Contextualizing it in the theoretical history, this perspective offers a constructive contribution to contemporary utopian studies by its poetic reorientation. It is embodied through two aspects: establishing science fiction as the primary contemporary vehicle of the utopian spirit and extending Jameson's "archaeology of the future" through a dialectical lens to trace utopian impulses within sci-fi narratives. The book argues that science fiction utopia as a dialectics of hope where the imagined reality itself performs a critical function. Through the exploration of the semiotic transformation of sci-fi narrative and the dynamic relationship between sci-fi storytelling and the imagination of the future, sci-fi maintains an openness to possibilities of narrating utopia.

In previous utopian studies, the main approach often categorizes utopian literature according to its value orientation, into two forms: the positive utopia, which envisions an ideal society, and the negative dystopia, which presents a critical or pessimistic one. The research focus has typically centered on *what* utopia represents, such as the systems it depicts, the values it pursues, and whether those ideals are ultimately realized within its imagined future.

This book, however, proposes a different perspective: once the utopian spirit merges with the narrative framework of science fiction, *utopia* itself becomes a complex narrative strategy open to interpretations. It no longer presupposes a fixed, pre-existing utopian ideal waiting to be described; rather, it understands

① Wang Feng, Chen Dan (2023). *Science Fiction Utopia: Towards a Utopian Poetics*. Beijing: Peking University Press. (All subsequent citations will be given as page numbers only.)

utopia as “a dialectic of hope-based imagination grounded in textuality rather than in reality, where the (imagined) reality is, in fact, an expression of textual function.”(p.77) This narrative-oriented approach shifts the focus from utopia as an abstract philosophical or ideological construct to the ways in which it operates within science fiction — as a dynamic narrative function and a textual mechanism that explores the interplay between imaginations, forms, and meanings.

To reveal the “*multi-layered nesting of utopian narrative energy*” (p.45) within science fiction, the book analyzes the narrative techniques of several classical works. In Philip K. Dick’s *The Man in the High Castle*, an alternate history generates a deceptive “textual ghost.” Stanisław Lem’s *Solaris* employs a “zero-degree utopian imagination,” (p.100) producing narrative frustration through its vertical storytelling and internal contradictions. In *Ubik*, Dick challenges linear temporality through intertwined layers of time: the protagonist experiences an inverted utopian temporality and must decipher the scattered traces of utopia, generating a powerful sense of estrangement. Through the analyses, this book highlights how the utopian impulse is enacted through complex narrative structures, such as layered temporalities, recursive storytelling, and shifting perspectives.

2. Utopia in the Present Tense

The book offers a timely response to the challenges of the era. According to Wang Feng and Chen Dan, the significance of utopia does not lie in providing or defining a fixed vision of the future, but in constantly creating an open space for critique, dialogue, and imagination—a space that reflects and intervenes. The future imaginaries explored in science fiction narratives generate a powerful counterforce that challenges and reshapes contemporary frameworks of cognition, ethics, and value. Thus, what science fiction presents is not a definite coordinate of the future, but a potential coordinate of the present. Utopia is not written in the future tense; rather, it exists in the dynamic process of the present continuous.

Today, one of the most pressing realities is the challenge posed by artificial intelligence and posthuman existence. As AI increasingly serves as humanity’s “Other” in both fiction and reality, the themes of sci-fi utopia and dystopia have gained ever greater relevance to the real world. Through analyses of works such as *Her*, *The Terminator*, and *The Matrix*, this book shows how speculative narratives shape collective imagination and evoke profound anxieties about human subjectivity, agency, and value. In these stories, AI, portrayed as an alien “Big Other”, becomes a philosophical mirror, both reflecting and questioning what it means to be human, while foreshadowing a near future in which artificial intelligence may evolve from an external tool into an intrinsic part of “us.” Drawing on *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* and *Blade Runner 2049*, the book further illustrates how utopian narratives re-examine emotion, memory, and dignity through the figure of the replicant. These works engage with questions of ethical status, consciousness, and the very definition of life, moving beyond anthropocentrism to include non-human beings within the ethical community. Focusing on current debates on AI rights, animal ethics, and ecological value, allows science fiction to perform a kind of a moral and ethical examinations for the present. Within narratives of human–technology symbiosis, the utopian imagination finds new forms for expressing hope and

responsibility, prompting us to reflect on coexistence before the future fully arrives.

In sum, this book offers a new perspective for understanding utopia in our age. The sci-fi utopia forms a dynamic, multilayered, and reciprocal dialogue with cultural reality. It can be viewed as a complex system of coordinates in which elements such as textual layers, reality, and temporality constantly interact with one another. According to the authors, the primary function of the utopian narrative is not to provide definitive answers, but to open a space that remains both critical and imaginative. Through its visions of the future, it forges new ethical possibilities in advance, extending the function of “utopia” beyond the traditional domain of political philosophy into the ethical and existential dimensions of narrative. In doing so, it moves toward a truly open and poetic form of utopian thought.

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