



Yvonne Delhey, Rolf Parr and Kerstin Wilhelms (eds.), *Autofiktion als Utopie // Autofiction as Utopia* (Leiden, Wilhelm Fink, 2019, ISBN 9783770564064).

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This volume, emerging from a conference, brings into conversation research on the two title-words *autofiction* and *utopia*. It focuses on what the introduction defines as the point of convergence of these genres or writing modes: the desire to shape reality according to one's individual vision, which, the editors note, can serve as critical commentary on society (1). In exploring this intersection, the volume takes up an important strand in the discussion on autofiction, namely the one about its potential functions both for individual authors and for society more broadly. Autofiction has been argued to not only allow individuals to express and transform themselves, but also to, for example, empower author and readers with narrative agency by challenging dominant cultural narrative models (Meretoja 2021) and work towards post-conflict reconciliation (Dix 2021).

The utopian potential of autofictional texts has been remarked upon, too, in particular in the context of discussions of post-postmodernism, metamodernism, or a new sincerity, which is usually understood as a politically or ethically oriented form of realism (see, for example, Gibbons 2021; Effe 2021). The exploration of how utopian and autofictional modes work together and interact is thus very timely. That it can be productively considered also in diachronic perspective is hinted at in some of the contributions to this volume. The first chapter, for instance, takes us back to eighteenth-century editor fictions, while a chapter on the interplay of lyric and photography in acts of self-representation concludes with a brief discussion of precursors of intermedial documentary-literary works such as Bertolt Brecht's *Kriegsfibel* and Kurt Tucholsky's *Deutschland, Deutschland*.

Neither the introduction nor the individual contributions (eight of which appear in German and four in English) get bogged down in detailed attempts to define autofiction, which, as has often been noted, is a contested term with multiple and diverse understandings (Mortimer, 2009; Jones 2010; Effe/Lawlor 2021). While the introduction (contestably) states that Doubrovsky's definition of autofiction as fiction of strictly real events and facts has been established as a sort of consensus, the editors helpfully note three aspects of the interplay of 'factual' autobiography and 'fictional' representation that the term encompasses: 1. life and text as intertwined, and text as performing or creating life; 2. the oscillation between an autobiographical and a fictional pact; 3. the merging of factual life and fictional work, important especially for writers. The editors offer a productive way of understanding these aspects, namely not as contesting definitions of what autofiction is, but as emphasizing different elements of autobiographical writing (2-3). The introduction therefore proposes to consider autofiction as an analytical concept, which does not see the relation between factuality and fictionality in autobiographical writing as fundamentally problematic (4). Some of the contributions start by delineating their own understanding of autofiction, while others leave it for the reader to figure out what is understood by the term, or indeed, wherein the autofictional dimension of a given text lies. At times, this can be disorienting, but there is value to be found in the critical reflections the different, albeit often unstated, conceptions of the concept spark.

Individual contributions range widely in the forms and media they analyze for their autofictional and utopian dimensions. The first two chapters focus on invented author or editor figures. Taking as his main example Johann Casper Lavater's *Geheimes Tagebuch. Von einem Beobachter seiner Selbst* (1771), Christian Sieg illustrates how the common eighteenth-century formal element of a fictive editor, who usually presents a text as if it were never intended for publication, creates an effect of authenticity. Sieg draws a comparison to Bernward Vesper's *Die Reise* (1977), published almost simultaneously with Doubrovsky's coinage of the term *autofiction*, and demonstrates that authenticity and sincerity, or an effect thereof, are of high value also in contemporary literature. By means of a discussion of Hermann Hesse's work Franziska Mader shows how the use of heteronyms can function in service of self-constitution. She helpfully distinguishes the heteronym from the pseudonym on the basis that the former creates an entire authorial alter ego which exists outside the text, whereas the latter merely masks the author's real name. Only the heteronym, as becomes apparent, allows authors to effect a transformation of their self, or at least of a public version of the self. Together these chapters shed light on two vital

dimensions for autofictional texts: first, how readers construct author images on the basis of textual but also paratextual material, and, second, how the construction of an authorial persona affects readers' experience of a text's authenticity and autobiographical value.

Sandie Attia turns our attention to language, especially poetic language, as a site of utopia for the autofictional subject of Günter Eich's poetry, and Tobias Schwessinger analyzes an intermedial collection of poems and photographs by Angela Krauß (*Eine Wiege*), in which she reworks her childhood and youth in Eastern Germany during the 1950s and 1960s. Schwessinger argues that Krauß's poetry functions as a utopian counter design of photographically documented reality, but also asks the important questions of how referential poetry can be, and how fictional photography. Ricarda Menn, through the example of John Burnside's serial autofictional works, describes how autofictional writing in general, and especially in serialized form, constitutes a way of negotiating the self, and can serve as a means for creating better, in a sense utopian, lives and worlds. Marcella Fassio investigates the particular suitability of the weblog for combining factual and fictional modes. The chapter contributes to a relatively new and vital field of research, namely illness narratives and narrative medicine. In her analysis of Wolfgang Herrndorf's *Arbeit und Struktur*, which chronicles the author's medicalization and the diverse treatments he received for a brain tumor, Fassio details how writing about illness can function to create a utopian space in which the writer can conquer illness and death by immortalizing himself as a literary character.

In a discussion of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Bruce Miller's TV-series adaptation, Ingrid Bertrand addresses differences between the combinations of dystopian, and to different degrees utopian, visions the novel-form and televised version respectively offer. This chapter is one of the more loose engagements with autofiction; the protagonist's attempt at narrative self-fashioning is argued to create a mental utopian space centrally dependent on her capacity for imagination, but there are no explicit or even implicit links to the author. The same holds for Lena Crucitti's reading of Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, another first-person novel in which characters, through the stories they tell themselves, create mental utopian refuge spaces in response to dystopian (fictional) reality.

An ethical-political dimension, which is characteristic of many literary utopias, becomes visible at a general level in these two chapters. Other contributors show how utopian visions emerge in response to concrete historical events. Kerstin Wilhelms takes as her starting point Vladimir Nabokov's own description of autobiography as personal truth and artistic selection, and reads Nabokov's *Speak*,

Memory as a refashioning of his childhood memories into a utopian (and u-chronian) vision. Wilhelms argues that Nabokov's autofictional memory (re-)construction works towards a life across borders, beyond limits of time and space, an endeavour which she reads in the context of Russian history and Nabokov's experience of emigration. Rolf Parr illustrates how, in works by Uwe Timm, Peter-Paul Zahl, and Bernward Vesper, all of whom belong to the activist and liberal movement of 1968 in Germany, autofictional elements and utopian political agendas work together in a new kind of realism aiming at revolutionary alternative thinking.

The final two chapters are devoted to the underresearched phenomenon of autofictional performances on stage, in specific to postdramatic theatre and opera performance. Eva Stubenrauch focuses on Milo Rau's *Kongo Tribunal* and locates an autofictional element in his decision to use agents involved in real societal processes. The performance mode functions to rewrite biographies of these agents, to negotiate actual occurrences and violations, and to experiment with utopian ways of being and acting. Her perceptive analysis shows how for author, actors, and recipients a fictional and a referential pact are simultaneously at play. Stubenrauch highlights that, in postdramatic theatre, performance is more important than text, and that this opens up potentialities for experimentation together with actors and audience, especially so where there is no script at all, as is the case in Rau's work. Stubenrauch links the oscillation between person and figure to that between reality and potentiality. She further highlights the immersive function of a theatre play, and sees this as the link between the utopian and the workings of autofiction. The chapter thus draws our attention to how autofiction (similar to postdramatic theater) often invites reader involvement, as does indeed all literature, but to a different degree. Yvonne Delhey closes the volume with an insightful analysis of Jonathan Meese's production of Richard Wagner's *Parsival* as *Mondparsifal* (first planned for the Bayreuth festivals, and, after their cancellation premiered as part of the Vienna and Berlin festival weeks in 2017). She sees Meese's transformation of Wagner's opera as an artistic engagement with German history, but most centrally as a mythological process of self-staging.

The section divisions are not entirely convincing, which however speaks to how the chapters are in dialogue with one another. While we begin with a section of chapters grouped under the title 'Utopische Autofiktionen' (utopian autofictions), followed by one on 'Utopische Zeiten / utopische Räume in der Autofktion' (utopian times or temporalities / utopian spaces in autofiction), the question of where and when, or in which uchronian and utopian realms, individual artworks create their alternative visions runs through most of the volume's chapters. The two chapters in

the final section, on 'Autofiktionales Theater und Utopie' (autofictional theater and utopia), appear a little dispersed as a section, but show that there is rich material for further research, perhaps for another book on autofictional performances, and on differences and commonalities between more textually based and stage-performed autofictional practices, which come to the fore also in this volume.

In establishing a link between autofictional and utopian modes and genres, *Autoficcion as Utopia* foregrounds an important dimension of much autofictional writing. The volume is particularly valuable also for showcasing many works and art forms not often discussed for their autofictional dimensions. The gains for autofiction research could have been stronger, however, had the genre status of the less traditionally autofictional forms been focused on in more detail. In view of the widely divergent autofictional and utopian elements featured, it would have been helpful for readers to find a description of all chapters in the introduction. This would have made navigation between contributions easier, and would have constituted an opportunity for highlighting the volume's overarching themes and insights. Lacking this, readers are invited to peruse the book in its entirety and to draw links between contributions themselves.

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