

An Academic Experiment in Utopia

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Abstract:

TWENTYFORTY. Utopias for a Digital Society (ed. Benedikt Fecher) comprises thirteen pieces of creative fiction looking at problems that arise in an ever more digitized world. Set in 2040 – sometimes utopian, sometimes dystopian – the texts reflect present problems in the relationship between the digital and the social. Written and published just before the COVID-19 pandemic, the book projects a future that now feels stilted. As an attempt by academics to think differently, shift genres and expand audiences, it is an interesting, if unlikely, experiment in imagining utopia.

Ein Akademisches Experiment der Utopie

German Abstract:

TWENTYFORTY. Utopias for a Digital Society (Hrsg. Benedikt Fecher) umfasst dreizehn fiktionale Beiträge, die sich mit Problemen befassen, die in einer immer stärker digitalisierten Welt auftreten. Angesiedelt im Jahr 2040 – mal utopisch, mal dystopisch – reflektieren die Texte aktuelle Fragestellungen im Verhältnis von Digitalem und Sozialem. Geschrieben und veröffentlicht kurz vor der COVID-19-Pandemie, projiziert das Buch eine Zukunft, die sich heute etwas gestelzt anfühlt. Als ein Versuch von Akademiker_innen anders zu denken, Genres zu wechseln und das Publikum zu erweitern, ist es ein interessantes, wenn auch unwahrscheinliches Experiment, Utopien zu imaginieren.

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“The year was 2020,” writes Preeti Mudliar in her chapter/story, “In Mangal’s New World,” of *TWENTYFORTY. Utopias for a Digital Society*, a volume edited by Benedikt Fecher and published by the Alexander von Humboldt Institute for Internet and Society. The aforementioned line encapsulates both the creative strength and the utter weakness of the book. *Twentyforty* is a collection of thirteen texts, the result – the Foreword tells us – of a four-day creative workshop held in May 2019 in a small town outside of Berlin. None of the thirteen participants or authors of the book, however, are what we would ordinarily call ‘creative’ or ‘fiction’ writers. Rather, they come from various fields within the digital humanities, such as a legal scholar working on data privacy, an expert on dementia, a digital policy expert, etc. What unites them is their determination to break academic rules in broaching the subjects and topics they deal with within their field, but through a medium and genre entirely outside it: creative writing. Only one of the essays (Dirk Baecker’s “Academic Complexity: A Sketch of the Next University”) resembles an explicitly academic essay, the rest take the form of short stories, a play, a diary, imagined epistolary exchange, etc.

The writing, it must be said, is clearly not of any literary quality, but that, it should also be swiftly added, is not the point. Within the constraints of scientific objectivity, academics understandably spend most of their time trying to comprehend problems, detailing the difficulties and complexities of the world as it is. On the rare occasions when they are asked to give their opinion on what the world will be like in the future or what the solutions are to their scientific problems, they are almost inevitably faced with the fact that the power to implement any solution and impact the world going forward is not in their hands. It seems that in breaking the rules of academic writing, as Benedikt Fecher, Bronwen Deacon, Timothée Ingen-Housz, and Nataliia Sokolovska explain in the Foreword, the authors of this volume are attempting to illuminate problems in digital humanities by looking back at them through the perspective of

an imagined future. Take Ruth Bartlett's "Living in Togadera": her protagonist, Hilde is 75, and because of Alzheimer's, her functioning in the world is impaired; fortunately, robots have developed sufficiently to be able to provide full-time care. The problem that appears is whether a robot caregiver will also chip away at its ward's control and how much? As a price for turning over (some of) our labor to robots, will humans be forced to relinquish some personal agency, a value we hold so near and dear? Or else, consider Claire Bessant's "What Would You Rather Be: A Privacy Have or a Privacy Have-Not?" Imagine humanity responding to the privacy issues social media have thrown up in the last two decades by simply allowing people to choose whether to participate in the online sphere or not. Bessant's chapter, only partially tongue in cheek, shows how quickly this distinction would devolve into vulgar, binary tribalism. Written from the perspective of a teenage girl, the line drawn between the Privacy Haves and the Privacy Have-Nots is so strong, the reader is forgiven for expecting it to quickly and tragically turn into a twenty-first century Romeo & Juliet. It does not, but it shines a strong light on the importance the notions of privacy and sociability play in our lives.

And yet, perhaps the misfortune of the book is that it was written in 2019 and published in 2020. When Mudliar writes that "the year was 2020," it only serves to underscore how immediately out of joint with time the book is. The COVID-19 global pandemic has made the problems presented in the book sound almost naïve. The story of our relationship to the digital world appears to have taken an unprecedented turn with a novel biological entity: The digital no longer serves the same purpose as in December 2019. The violent swerve in the imagined future pathway that took place in 2020 complicates the reading of *TWENTYFORTY: Utopias for a Digital Society*. The unprecedented year exposes the ways in which the text inscribes a continuation of the present into the future. In chapter after chapter, the reader bumps up against the hard limit of the 'creative Utopia' projected by its authors. Remarkably, even in 2040, the world will be fairly Eurocentric (Viviane Dallasta, "The Translators"), marriage will be monogamous and largely heteronormative (Kamel Ajji, "The End of Feelings"), families nuclear (Burkhard Schafer, "Digital Pharaohs"), money earned through labor sold on the market (Mark Graham, "Platform Socialism"), education corporatized (Grif Peterson, "Something I Noticed"), political landscapes corrupt and manipulated (Emma Beauxis-Aussalet, "From Dark Roots to Shared Routes"), etc. Admittedly, it is hard to think of any of these as being different in the future because they appear so natural and given to us. But is it not precisely the idea of writing

a utopia to imagine alternatives and make the reader imagine differently what at present appears impossible to change?

Nevertheless, perhaps it can be said that from their vantage point within academia, the step in the mental construction of a utopia that these authors did imagine sufficiently differently is the form of university literature. Academic writing too often suffers from being too narrow, too inaccessible, too disengaged from real-world problems. Writing in a different and unfamiliar form is not without its risks, but on the other hand, and more importantly, likely reaches out to a new audience for most of these authors. Just like many of our treasured institutions, it is difficult to conceive of academic writing as anything other than what it currently is, yet here is a group of authors ready to venture out and take the reader down a less-trodden path. Indeed, as part of that effort, *TWENTYFORTY* is much more than a publication that can be contained in a .pdf file. The editors broadened the horizons of their project by building a corresponding website, as well as curating a traveling exhibit. The engaging and visually pleasing website even had the result of making the reader recall the aesthetically well thought out design of the electronic copy of the book itself. Beyond the text, the editors produced illustrations, an audio book, a radio drama and fifteen short video sequences – in other words, they are taking full advantage of our multimedia digital world. One wonders (dare we say, hopes?) whether academic scholarly research will really look much more like this in 2040? In this respect, the project *TWENTYFORTY: Utopias for a Digital Society* is truly a trailblazer, and shortcomings aside, a valuable – however ‘unlikely,’ as the Foreword says – experiment.