

# One person's utopia is another's dystopia

Dystopia is in great demand. It can be encountered in film, in literature and in world politics. Authoritarian regimes, the global power of internet corporations, ecological catastrophes and natural disasters – add them all up and they make for a terrifying vision of the future.

But aside from being disturbing, dystopia can also be fascinating. Like utopia, it is a »creation of a passionate imagination, though governed not by hope, but by fear.«<sup>1</sup> Currently, this fear seems to reflect the zeitgeist more than hope – as a conglomeration of fears of the ecological apocalypse, technoid control over body and mind, controlled consumerism or biosocial selection. But beyond all media-based fascination of fantasy and catastrophe, dystopia has a certain enlightening aspect and is »more realistic than utopia«, as stressed by the Hungarian philosopher Ágnes Heller. Precisely because it is fictional, it can be used to promote insight into contemporary developments, especially when it reinforces seduction in the guise of a utopian aspect, as observed in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* or Michel Houellebecq's *Submission*. For a dystopia has always been rooted in a utopia, as clarified by the British historian Gregory Claeys<sup>2</sup>: by striving for true perfection in a utopia, forcing the individual to restrictions and social conformity can not be avoided. Taken from today's perspective, the perfect society in Thomas More's literary work *Utopia* seems extremely oppressive to us. Utopia and dystopia are two sides of the same coin.

In sound art, topos – spaces and places – play a central role in their atmospheres, histories and potentials. The DYSTOPIA Sound Art Festival brings together 20 sound-artistic positions on the essential questions regarding dystopian thought by exploring locations with unusual history and future potential. That art has always incorporated a utopian potential, and precisely in dystopian negativity, this has been a common thought even before Adorno. Its ability to criticize reality lies precisely in its perspective from the outside,

<sup>1</sup> Ágnes Heller:  
*Von der Utopie zur Dystopie* (2016)  
Hamburg / Wien 2016, p. 17  
(translation)

<sup>2</sup> Gregory Claeys:  
*Dystopia – A Natural History*,  
Oxford 2017.



<sup>3</sup> Frank Apunkt Schneider/  
monochrom:  
*Die Gegenwart der Zukunft / Utopia*  
(2008), *Strategie considerations on*  
*parafflows 08: »Utopia«, Wien 2008,*  
no pag.

being a U-Topia—from the Greek *ou-topos*—meaning »no place«, that is in its distance from societal reality (and ideally also remote from commercial art reality). However, this commentary is certainly only relevant for society if art »comprises and forms a reference to the world which may be fictional [...] but at the same time comprises the desire for a different life.«<sup>3</sup>

With the composition of »atmospheres« (Gernot Böhme) and the performance at »non-places« (Marc Augé), sound art has a particular potential to make this desire, this ambivalence of dystopia and utopia appear in a sensory, non-narrative form. A total of 26 international artists have created sound scenarios for the DYSTOPIA Festival, in which they examine technological, biological and political dystopias as dystopian atmospheres. With many guest performers from Istanbul, the Dystopia Festival culminates in a topical, political focus on Turkey.

The *Society for Nontrivial Pursuits* (Alberto di Campo, Hannes Hoelzl et. al.) opens the festival with the network performance *UTopologies—A network of shared influences*. **Technological Dystopias** is also the central theme for Selçuk Artut's installations on machine learning (*Estranged Music*), and Candaş Şişman's feedback box (*Centralized*) that envelops the senses. In contrast, the theme takes on an ironic twist in the performance *Touch Amplifiers #3* by Steffi Weismann & Özgür Erkök and the video installation *Music Therapy* by Jeremy Woodruff. The theme of Kirsten Reese's performance *Creatures & Signals* on the dystopian Teufelsberg radar station, as well as Antje Vowinkel's sound-mutation installation *Galapagos-Kreuzblende* in the Meinblau Projektraum, centers around **Biological Dystopias**. Society as a theme emerges in the research work *Dystopic Mirage* of Peter Cusack and Katharina Bévand on the apocalyptic Turkish-Armenian city of Ani and with Alessandra Eramo's installation *Contemplation on Sarmiento River*. A performative version will take place on a three-part performance night (28 September) in the Kleiner Wasserspeicher, which will conclude with a topical ritual (*Time Walk*) by Liping Ting from Taiwan. **Dystopian Atmospheres** can be experienced, particularly in four installations in the Großer Wasserspeicher, alternating approximately every ten minutes in the different wings of this labyrinthine space: Sair Sinan Kestelli showing five stations of his

*Inhabited Neighborhoods*; Ipek Gorgun with a furious *Ode to Joy*; Jacob Kirkegaard allows us to dive acoustically into the Arctic Sea with *Melt* while Georg Klein lets us stumble around in a dystopian *Fog Zone*. **Political Dystopias** and utopias overlap in the participatory interventions of Gívan Belá & Geza Bobb (*Succour*) on the Tempelhofer Field and of Laura Mello & Wolfgang Musil (*Living Radio*) on the Kollwitzplatz square. Ines Lechleitner & Tuçe Erel draw a strong reference to the realpolitik of Istanbul in their research work (*Tracing Dystopian Dialogues*). ت, the American-Arab neon mobile by Georg Werner lets a single character speak, while Mario Asef invited Nihad Sirees (of Syria) for his *Acousmatic Lecture*, which plays with the invisibility of the speaker. The festival closes with Kirsten Reese's performance on the Teufelsberg and a lecture by the British historian Gregory Claeys on the delicate question: »Is my utopia your dystopia?«

In addition to public spaces, the DYSTOPIA Sound Art Festival brings together for the first time three neighboring sound art venues that have been in existence for many years: *Kunsthau Meinblau*, *Kleiner and Großer Wasserspeicher* and *Errant Sound Project Space*. Organized by Errant Sound e.V., its project space functions as an information point for the festival. This is where you can find books and CDs by the artists and enjoy dystopian soundtracks from cinematic history over a coffee at the *Sound Bar*. The festival is accompanied by *free berlin*, a special dystopia edition of *Errant Bodies* magazine by Brandon LaBelle.

We would especially like to thank the Senatsverwaltung für Kultur und Europa for their generous support far from the commercial art market, and our cooperation partners the DAAD Artists-in-Berlin Program (Julia Gerlach) and DeutschlandFunk Kultur (Marcus Gammel).