Epistemological Warfare and Hope in Critical Dystopia, by Emrah Atasoy

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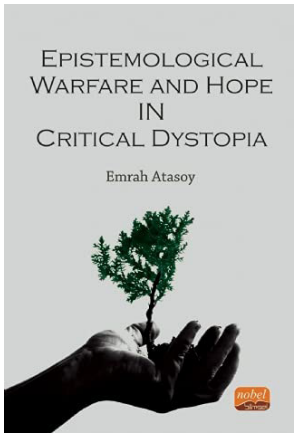
Emrah Atasoy. *Epistemological Warfare and Hope in Critical Dystopia*. Nobel Bilimsel, 2021. Ebook. 177 pg. $21.00. ISBN: 978-625-7589-05-5.



In his engaging, informative description of the birth and evolution of the utopian and dystopian genres, Emrah Atasoy explains why the dystopian genre overtook the utopian genre in the twentieth century due to international conflicts and the rise of totalitarian and fascist regimes. For those unfamiliar with utopian and dystopian literary theory, Atasoy provides a comprehensive overview of the most influential scholars and texts. In the introduction, Atasoy discusses recurring themes in utopian and dystopian fiction, such as power, surveillance, and social control. The journey of the protagonist and other key utopian and dystopian literary tropes are also explained. Undergraduate students and non-specialists will benefit greatly from reading Atasoy's introduction to the field of utopian studies and his overview of the utopian and dystopian genres not only because of his extensive research, which is abundantly clear, but also because of Atasoy's lucid writing style.

A wide range of theorists are drawn on throughout this monograph, but Atasoy's engagement with Rafaella Baccolini, Tom Moylan, and Lyman Tower Sargent is particularly significant because of their scholarship on the critical dystopia. Sargent coined the term "critical dystopia" to refer to a fictional place that is worse than the reader's world but which has some semblance of hope. Baccolini and Moylan similarly state that critical dystopias must maintain hope within the text, which is achieved through an open ending. The critical dystopia is often used to describe dystopias of the 1980s and 1990s but Atasoy, like Baccolini, claims that some earlier dystopian texts are critical dystopias. Through his analysis of Katherine Burdekin's *Swastika Night* (1937), Anthony Burgess' *The Wanting Seed* (1962), and P.D. James' *The Children of Men* (1992), Atasoy makes a convincing case for reading these novels as critical dystopias that maintain the utopian impulse, by examining these novels alongside their historical context.

Atasoy claims that the critical dystopia "does not only function as a warning, a cautionary tale, but it takes an active part in the possibility of radical transformation" (7). This is important as the possibilities of the dystopian genre to effect positive change are often overlooked by scholars, in favour of the utopian genre. This is because dystopian literary texts are seen by some theorists—most notably Ruth Levitas—as encouraging a sense of fatalism. Recently, scholars

from the humanities and social sciences have begun to argue that, as a political genre, dystopian fiction inspires critical thinking and activism, and that it can be used for utopian thinking. Adam Stock's *Dystopian Fiction and Political Thought* (2019), like Atasoy's monograph, focuses on the significance of twentieth century dystopian fiction and social change. Meanwhile, Annika Gonnermann's *Absent Rebels* (2021), Aaron Rosenfeld's *Character and Dystopia* (2021), and Sean Seeger and Daniel Davison-Vecchione's "Dystopian Literature and the Sociological Imagination" (2019) suggest that twenty-first century dystopian fiction has more potential to effect positive social change than twentieth century dystopian fiction. This is because twenty-first century dystopian fiction tends to be set either in the very near future or in the present, it is typically set in recognisable, real locations around the globe, it is explicit in terms of what is being critiqued, and many contemporary dystopias also depict collective rebellion, through the collaboration of multiple protagonists and/or characters. Atasoy demonstrates, however, that the texts he analyses are indeed political, hopeful, and extrapolative, and he illustrates the importance of revisiting twentieth century dystopias.

In the three literary chapters, Atasoy examines the primary texts—*Swastika Night*, *The Wanting Seed*, and *Children of Men*. Atasoy's choice of novels provides an illuminating discussion of gender roles, reproduction, and population control in twentieth century dystopian fiction. It is also refreshing to see two twentieth century dystopias by female authors, which differ from the current trend of twenty-first century feminist dystopias—particularly in terms of their portrayal of male protagonists—put in dialogue with each other. The novels complement each other well and the analysis makes the connections between the novels clear. Although these texts are fairly well-known, they have often been overshadowed by canonical dystopias such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), and they have been somewhat overlooked by scholars. By examining twentieth century dystopian fiction which is often given short shrift, Atasoy convincingly suggests that many twentieth century dystopias need further analysis.

Epistemological Warfare and Hope in Critical Dystopia is a key text for utopian and dystopian scholars. As Atasoy frames *Swastika Night*, *The Wanting Seed*, and *Children of Men* as critical dystopias, the connections and nuances between twentieth century and twenty-first century dystopias are drawn out further. As all three primary texts are by British authors, however, it would be interesting to see whether there are examples of critical dystopias before the 1980s beyond Britain. A comparative global approach to twentieth century critical dystopias could be an area for future research for Atasoy and other scholars to build on.

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