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TOWARDS THE ROOTING OF UTOPIA IN THE IMAGINATION OF POLITICS

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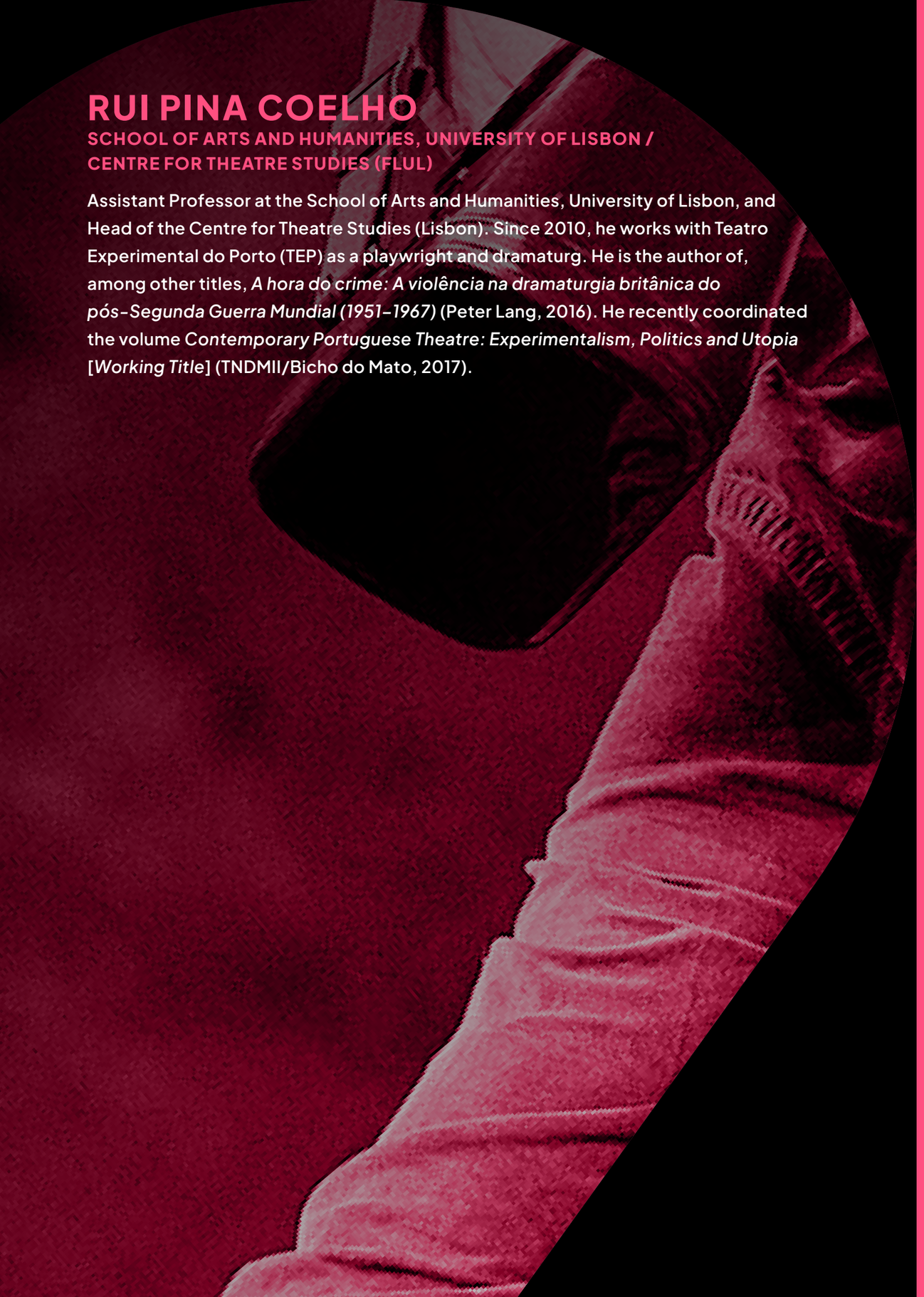

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ABSTRACT

One might claim that the times we live in today are defined by a growing notion of finitude. The COVID-19 pandemic and the outbreak of war in Ukraine heightened an already perennial sense of permanent crisis. The famous quote attributed to Fredric Jameson seems to have undergone a semantic twist: “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism” is no longer a slogan of anti-capitalist rhetoric; it's just a blunt truism. Indeed, today it is very easy to imagine the end of the world. The severity and monumentality of the issues that afflict the world today are inciting a central question for artists: in the face of an imminent catastrophe, what is the use of performing arts at the end of times?

Utopian (or dystopian) fiction has always dealt with envisioning a future anchored in scenarios based on “What-if” or “If-Only” premises (Thaler, 2022). In this paper, I aim to combine a speculative reflection grounded in utopian studies and political theatre. I am considering performing arts as a valid tool to defy the end of times and to fight for the rooting of (artistic) utopia in the imagination of politics, trusting that art and theatre will be able to help us invent scenarios that today seem impossible or that we have not yet managed to conceive.

KEYWORDS

Visions of Utopia, Resistance, Political Theatre, Artistic Imagination, End of Times

RESUMO

Os tempos que vivemos hoje, poder-se-ia afirmar, são definidos por uma noção crescente de finitude. A pandemia de covid-19 e a eclosão da guerra na Ucrânia acentuaram um sentimento já perene de crise permanente. A célebre citação atribuída a Fredric Jameson parece ter sofrido uma reviravolta semântica: "é mais fácil imaginar o fim do mundo do que o fim do capitalismo" já não é um slogan da retórica anticapitalista; é apenas um truísmo contundente. De facto, hoje é muito fácil imaginar o fim do mundo. A gravidade e a monumentalidade dos problemas que afligem o mundo de hoje suscitam uma questão central para os artistas: face a uma catástrofe iminente, para que servem as artes performativas no fim dos tempos?

A ficção utópica (ou distópica) sempre lidou com a visão de um futuro ancorado em cenários baseados em premissas "What-if" ou "If-Only" (Thaler, 2022). Neste artigo, pretendo combinar uma reflexão especulativa baseada em estudos utópicos e no teatro político. Considerei, pois, as artes performativas como uma tentativa válida em desafiar o fim dos tempos e de lutar pelo enraizamento da utopia (artística) no imaginário da política, confiando que a arte e o teatro poderão ajudar-nos a inventar cenários que hoje parecem impossíveis ou que ainda não conseguimos conceber.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Visões da Utopia, Resistência, Teatro Político, Imaginação Artística, Fim dos Tempos

TOWARDS THE ROOTING OF UTOPIA IN THE IMAGINATION OF POLITICS[1]

But something's missing.
Bertolt Brecht[2]

[1] A first draft of this article was presented at the 6th EASTAP (European Association for the Study of Theatre and Performance) Conference: "Dimensions of Dramaturgy", at Aarhus, Denmark, June 2023; and later published as "Notes towards the Rooting of Utopia in the Imagination of Politics through Performance", *Abralic. Revista Brasileira de Literatura Comparada*, 25.50 (2023): pp. 1–7.

[2] Ernst Bloch, "Something's Missing: A Discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing", *in The Utopian Function of Art and Literature*, Cambridge, MIT, 1988 has observed that the starting point of all utopian projects can be condensed into a succinct formula, taken from Bertolt Brecht's libretto for Kurt Weill's opera *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*: "But something's missing."

REMINISCENCE NUMBER ONE

At the stroke of midnight, a small group of spectators enter a public library. In various corners of the building, performers read and discuss many different literary authors. All the texts are about the end of the world: "A night to think about the past, the present and the future in the stories we create to brighten up the darkness while we wait for the dawn". That was the premise of *End of the world library*, a durational performance conceived by the Brazilian actor and director Alex Cassal (Má Criação, 2023).

REMINISCENCE NUMBER TWO

In a post-apocalyptic dystopic future, five scarecrows philosophize about the end of the world, about the future, about the past; they play amateur radio, they tell jokes. Five clownish scarecrows "search for a new beginning, in the utopia of a new and better world – a world without people". That is *Farm Fatale*, by Philippe Quesne / Vivarium Studio. 2020.

REMINISCENCE NUMBER THREE

Fraternité, conte fantastique, by Caroline Guiela Nguyen (Les Hommes Approximatifs). "On stage [after an undescribed event] an imagined place, a kind of court of memories (...), a centre of care and consolation. In this world, the loved ones are Absent – without any explanation – and the Remainders are left. These, hurt, seek the cure for this endless pain. Years go by and the question remains: where are the Absentees?" It is a performance about the next one hundred years, "an attempt to build an intellectual and affective affiliation between us and the future and looking at the way in which human beings stand beside each other" (2021).

REMINISCENCE NUMBER FOUR

In an art gallery, spectators discover several pieces (sculptures, video, sound installations) built and designed after the study of authors such as Dipesh Chakrabarty, Donna Haraway, and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro. The exhibition is an elaboration on the idea of extinction, conceived as a "laboratory of new possibilities of imagination and experience". *Mirage – a performative exhibition about the ultimate end – extinction*, by the Portuguese artist and performer Joana Magalhães (2022).

REMINISCENCE NUMBER FIVE

A group of people are invited to a party – an apocalypse party – to celebrate the end of the world, which according to an ancient prophecy will happen on that day. What would people do if they were told that they have one hour and eleven minutes to live? The world is going to end, is it true? That's the basic plot of *The Last Supper* [*A última ceia*], by the (young) Portuguese group Sui Generis Teatro, with text by Tiago Filipe, 2023.

REMINISCENCE NUMBER SIX

One man, alone on stage, sometimes with a VR headset on, remotely echoing a stand-up gig, plays the "Fool" from Shakespeare's *King Lear*, questioning the apparent death of theatre and representation. "What has theatre become since the pandemic, the lockdowns, and over-digitalisation? From Shakespeare to the metaverse and stand-up comedy, *Truth's a Dog Must to Kennel*, [by Tim Crouch] tackles the question of the death of live art" (2022).

All these are examples from recent performances (2020 to 2023) that, somehow, deal with a sense of the end of the world.[3] Those are just a few of a, I believe, general "trend". Whether it is through an intuitive approach, literary or artistic experimentation, a philosophical perspective, or a metaphorical discourse, they all pervade the sensation that the times we are living might be the end of all times.

I do not want to frighten anybody. I do not have access to any classified or secret information. I am not here to bring any more news than the ones that we all know. Climatic changes, drought and floods, world pandemics, ongoing wars, the return of fascist sensibilities, the Fukushima nuclear disaster, the successive waves of refugees in Europe, the terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels, the mass disappearance of birds and insects, the Brexit vote, and the election of Trump – all of this has been heightening an already perennial sense of permanent crisis. P. Servigne, R. Stevens and G. Chapelle, *Une autre fin du monde est possible* (2018: 15) are more precise:

> Les chocs monumentaux qu'ont été Fukushima, les vagues successives de réfugiés en Europe, les attentats terroristes de Paris et Bruxelles, la disparition massive des oiseaux et des insectes, le vote

[3] On this subject, it would be relevant to mention the Dossier coordinated by Julie Sermon on "La condition écologique", *Théâtre Public* (2023): n.º 247 (particularly the text by Eliane Beaufils, "Penser la catastrophe et la dépasser? Des spectacles galvanisants pour le Chthulucène". On the topic "political theatre at the end of times", I have been trying to find my way through some essays: "Social Plays at the End of the World: Considering some of Simon Stone's, Frank Castorf's and Tiago Rodrigues's performances" (presented in EASTAP 2022, Milan); "Political Ethos in Contemporary Portuguese Theatre: on Tiago Rodrigues's Performances" (presented at IFTR 2022, Reykjavik). Another good example, discussed by Peter Eckersall in "Radically Dead Art in The Beautiful End Times", is Kris Verdonk's, "Conversations (at the End of the World", *in* Peter Eckersall / Helena Grehan, *The Routledge Companion to Theatre and Politics*, Londres, Routledge, 2019.

> du Brexit et l'élection de Trump ont sérieusement fissure le paisible imaginaire de continuité qui rassurait tant de personnes.

I'm sure we are all aware and preoccupied. My point here is that there is a fringe of contemporary performance that is highly focused on dealing with the idea of the end of the world and interested in researching this growing notion of finitude. "Representations of the end of the world gain currency in moments of social crisis", argues the scholar Felipe Cervera, discussing "Theatre and Eschatological Politics" (2019: 297), adding: "But such representations are more often the product of political strategies than of uncontrolled social anxieties" (*ibidem*: 297). The famous quote attributed to Fredric Jameson seems to have undergone a semantic twist: "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism" is no longer a slogan of anti-capitalist rhetoric; it's just a blunt truism. Indeed, today it is very easy to imagine the end of the world.

This is precisely the "plot" of Brian Kulick's recent work *Staging the End of the World: Theatre in a Time of Climate Crisis* (2023). Kulick departs from the notion that "[a]n alternate future is inching, every day, closer and closer, moving us, from the realm of science fiction to science fact" (*ibidem*: 10). Consequently, facing a plausible 'end of the world', "[h]ow do we, in the theatre, talk about tackling such an enormous challenge which faces humankind? How can our art form, perhaps the most ephemeral of its aesthetics siblings, impress upon audiences the necessity for action?" (*ibidem*: 11).

In order to attempt a response to this question, Brian Kulick analyses particular examples from drama and theatre history, reading them with a critical apparatus taken from "activists, ecologists, environmentalists, ethicists, philosophers, nihilists, and scientists; all discussing how we got to this terrible place and how we might possibly reverse our perilous course" (*ibidem*: 25). Thus, "[e]ach chapter of this book takes a particular play and matches it with a particular thinker, putting the two in conversation with one another" (*ibidem*). So, we can find chapters on Basha, the Sanskrit dramatist, in dialogue with Joseph Tainter (*The Collapse of Complex Societies*, 1988) and Jonathan Schell (*The Fate of the Earth*, 1982), Euripides with Hannah Arend and Zygmunt Bauman, the "Doomsday Plays" of the Middle Ages with Jonathan Franzen (novelist) and Catriona McKinnon (philosopher); Chekov with George Marshall (*Don't Even Think about It: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Ignore Climate Change*, 2015); Brecht with Levinas, to name just a few.

The "narrative" Kulick offers is a very compelling one. We can trace evidence, in Western and Westernized societies, of retrieval from the public sphere and migration into individualism and to the "private comfort of our living rooms" (*ibidem*: 17), where "we can forget the world at large (...) and focus on our own private interpersonal issues" (*ibidem*: 17). This retreat from the world has led us into an "age of denial" (*ibidem*).

We all seem to agree that immediate and severe actions must be taken to prevent, reverse, or mitigate climatic catastrophes with extreme urgency, but we simply do not address them. The Indian novelist Amitav Ghosh (quoted by Kulick), claims that future generations (if there will be such a thing) will call our times "The Great Derangement".

> In a substantially altered world, when sea-level rise has swallowed the Sundarbans and made cities like Kolkata, New York and Bangkok uninhabitable, when readers and museumgoers turn to the art and literature of our time, will they not look, first, and most urgently,

> for traces and portents of the altered world of their inheritance? And when they fail to find them, what should they — what can they — do other than to conclude that ours was a time when most forms of art and literature were drawn into the modes of concealment that prevented people from recognizing the realities of their plight? Quite possibly then, this era, which so congratulates itself on its self-awareness, will come to be known as the time of the Great Derangement. (Ghosh, 2017, kindle edition)

Thus, for Kulick, our present climate crisis reveals a crisis of culture and, most acutely, "a crisis of imagination" (*ibidem*: 10). In order to surpass this crisis of imagination, artists should act upon the "Social Imaginary", or as the French philosopher economist and psychanalyst Cornelius Castoriadis calls it, the "Imagination Institution of Society" (1998). Kulick's narrative anchors on Castoriadis notion, considering that:

> the social imaginary is what gives a specific orientation to each historical period; it is the singular agreed-upon manner of living, of seeing, and of conducting ourselves as we move through the world around us; and maintain our relations within it. (…) If any new social imaginary is to come into being, there must also be new signified that do not yet exist that must be thought, imagined, and given purpose. (*Ibidem*: 21)

The period from a pre-existing social imaginary and a new social imaginary is something of an *in-between* (or an *interregnum*, as though by Antonio Gramsci): "a period of time where the old ways of doing something no longer work, but the new ways have not yet been invented" (*ibidem*). Still recurring to Kulick's argument, what can happen in this period of *interregnum* is a process that he describes as *metanoia*, something that can be understood as a change of heart, the pursuit of a new path, a repentance. Or, more precisely: "the transformation from one social imaginary to another that speaks to the needs of a new historical moment" (*ibidem*).

> Such a formidable kind of cultural metanoia occurs, according to [the philosophers Armen Avanessian and Anke Hennig], perhaps once in a lifetime, and is able to bring with it certain far-reaching relocations in the thinking of human relations, radical/epochal changes in culture, and the potential collapse of previously prevailing points of view. Of is a thinking that *changes our very way of thinking*. *Metanoia* for these philosophers, doesn't just bring about change, it institutes a whole new reality. (*Ibidem*: 14)

This is precisely where my argument coincides with Brian Kulick: "Art is one of the forces that steps in during such historical *interregnums* and helps with the transformation" (*ibidem*: 21).

Thus, the task of helping to create a new social imaginary is, most certainly, the most fundamental task of theatre artists today. And, I believe, performing arts are particularly equipped to do so. Jill Dolan makes a very strong case for the idea that theatre and performance are particularly well positioned to intervene in "social imaginary" – or as I prefer to call it, the 'political imagination' – with what she calls "utopian performatives":

> Utopian performatives [according to Jill Dolan] describe small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense. (Dolan, 2005: 5)

This exciting concept takes on the writings of Marxist theorists such as Ernst Bloch or Herbert Marcuse – who both "see art as an arena in which an alternative world can be expressed – not in a didactic, descriptive way as in traditional 'utopian' literature, but through the communication of an alternative experience" (Ruth Levitas *apud* Dolan, 2005: 7), and the Brechtian notion of *gestus* and Augusto Boal's radical political theatre.

For Jill Dolan, "Utopian performatives persuade us that beyond this 'now' of material oppression and unequal power relations lives a future that might be different, one whose potential we can feel as we are seared by the promise of a present that gestures toward a better later" (2005: 7):

> The affective and ideological "doings" we see and feel demonstrated in utopian performatives also critically rehearse civic engagement that could be effective in the wider public and political realm. (*Ibidem*)

Summing up, we have undertaken four steps so far: 1) the idea that we are living in the end times is very tangible today; 2) somehow, as a collective, we seem to be in denial, and we are not managing to take immediate actions; 3) the moment we are living can be understood as a moment of transformation from one worldview to another; 4) the performing arts are particularly well equipped to help reshaping our political imagination. Then, the question that subsides is: How to do it? Reshape in which direction?

The answer to these questions may define the role and scope of political theatre in contemporaneity. It seems that disciplines such as political theory, environmental humanities, and utopian studies are trying to tackle this question. I will try to sketch an approach anchored in utopian and performance studies. Mathias Thaler, political theoretician, in *No Other Planet: Utopian Visions for a Climate-Changed World* (2022: 2) states that:

> Today, utopias are everywhere: from popular TV series telling post-apocalyptic stories, to revolutionary plans for the built environment; from philosophical treatises on the technological enhancement of *Homo sapiens*, to intimate settings created by counter-hegemonic communities. Our collective appetite to conjure and inhabit other worlds appears to be insatiable. How can we explain this, given that only a few decades ago utopias were either derided as lofty castles in the sky or denounced as dangerous schemes for social engineering?

In his outstanding book, Thaler argues that "In the aftermath of the fall of communism, utopianism seemed to have been deposited on the ash heap of history" (*ibidem*: 8). However, "over the past two decades (...), utopian thinking and acting has been resurrected from its temporary deathbed. This resurfacing can be observed in various social and cultural arenas. From global insurgencies against autocratic regimes to science fiction narratives, from radical pleas to transform the built environment to exhilarating experiments in communal living – today's public debate seems saturated with utopian ideas and practices" (*ibidem*: 9). Thus, "this resurgence of utopianism represents more than just a short-lived trend" (*ibidem*: 10).

> (...) there are specific reasons why social dreaming has become so prevalent at this precise moment in time, to do with the circumstances of our precarious existence on planet Earth, at the beginning of the twenty-first century. It is, I argue, because we feel deeply

> disoriented, perhaps even paralyzed and terrified, when we contemplate an intrinsically uncertain and risky future, that we are drawn to utopian visions of what is to come. (*Ibidem*: 10)

In effect, Thaler's argument drives us through the idea that utopian visions can provide "orientation" around "a landscape that is both unknown and unsettling" (*ibidem*: 13), escaping "both fatalism and wishful thinking" (*ibidem*: 6). On what concerns specifically with the "sites of utopianism", Thaler defends that "utopianism manifests in three domains, which shape one another – political and social theory; fictional narratives in various genres and media (novels, films, paintings and even music); and social movements and experiments in communal living" (*ibidem*: 7). And, on what regards "fictional narratives", Thaler – who is specially interested in addressing the "interfaces between theory and storytelling" (*ibidem*: 37), deals most specifically with speculative fiction, including, here, "fantasy, science fiction, and horror, but also their derivatives, hybrids, and cognate genres like the gothic, dystopia, weird fiction, post-apocalyptic fiction, ghost stories, superhero tales, alternate history, steampunk, slipstream, magic realism, fractured fairy tales, and more" (*ibidem*).

He makes a distinction between three types of speculative fiction: the *What-If*, the *If-Only*, and the *If-This-Goes-On*.[4] Although this tripartite schema seems to be quite self-explanatory, it is a little bit more complex than it meets the eye. But, for the sake of my argument, I will not go into detail. Still:

> Accordingly, the proposal to envisage planet Earth as a living being (my first utopian constellation) raises a *What-If question*: what would happen if we managed to reconceive our existence as deeply entangled with all kinds of planetary life forms? The ecomodernist wager in favour of a "good Anthropocene" (my second utopian constellation) urges us to declaim "*If only!*": what would happen if we were capable of taking on the current challenge, by harnessing science and technology to guide us through a climate-changed world? Finally, foregrounding collapse and apocalypse as likely consequences of our actions (my third utopian constellation) pushes the reader into the direction of an *If-This-Goes-On inquiry*: what would happen to our efforts in these greatly deranged times if our species' irresponsible behaviour did not change at all, or if mitigation and adaptation measures simply gained momentum too late? (*Ibidem*: 39)

Mathias Thaler will deal with a corpus of political and social thought and with a literary *corpus* (N. K. Jemisin, Kim Stanley Robinson, Margaret Atwood, among others). This brief presentation of Thaler's book leads us to the point I am trying to make: I believe that contemporary performing arts can offer a fourth point to Thaler's tripartite schema: to the *If-Only*, the *What-If*, and the *If-This-Goes-On*, I would like to add something like "*And now, for something completely different*" (or, more seriously, the *Now-What?*). This will constitute the endeavours to reshape, from a clean start, the rules of engagement between humans and nature and redevising social dreaming.

Let us take for granted the notion that in performing arts, through the co-presence of actors and spectators, something that never existed becomes into existence. Let us take for granted that we are always dealing, simultaneously, with a life experience, a bodily understanding, limited only by the frontiers of what is possible *to do* and to *imagine* on stage. Let us take for granted that a performance offers a liminal space, where everything is, simultaneously, real and

[4] Following the distinction presented by the science fiction author Octavia Butler.

artificial, possible and impossible. We are always dealing with the real thing (what is on stage) and the image of the thing (our perception of what it is).

So, our current "crisis of imagination" can be challenged by onstage utopias, considered as attempts to defy the end of times and fighting for the rooting of (artistic) utopia in the imagination of politics, trusting that art and theatre will be able to help us to invent scenarios that today seem impossible or that we have not yet managed to conceive. Not by correcting the real, not by improving what is possible, not by menacing with scary outcomes – but simply to start over. Thus, contemporary performance can induce an "education for desire", in the way Miguel Abensour, understands utopianism: "as the education of a desire for being and living otherwise" (*apud* Thaler, 2022: 3).

The first sentence in Fredric Jameson's *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (2005: xi) is: "Utopia has always been a political issue, an unusual destiny for a literary form." I think we can stretch this quote from 'literary form' into 'artistic form' or, more specifically, 'dramaturgical form'.

Thus, having arrived here, one last question endures: how can performance orient our contemporary utopianism? One possible answer can be sketched in the expanded concept of dramaturgy, broadly understood as "the inner flow of a dynamic system" (Trencsényi/Cochrane, 2014: xi), or, more accurately, in the notion of "dramaturgy of cultural activism", as presented by Peter Eckersall and Helena Grehan (2019), considering that in contemporary performance we can trace evidence of the "solidarity" that exists between "cultural politics" and "cultural activism", between politics and performance.

If we consider that, on *stage*,[5] each performance is creating a singular and unique cosmos, and if we expand the use of dramaturgy from 'the stage' to 'the world', dramaturgy will rise as a powerful tool to surpass our "crisis of imagination",[6] and as a weapon that can help us free from the constraints of the real world and open to social dreaming.

[5] I use "stage" here as the locus for performance, whether it is on an actual stage or on any other space or venue where a performative event takes place.

[6] An interesting follow-up to the discussion on "Imagination" would be Ulla Kallenbach's *Theatre of Imaging: A Cultural History of Imagination in the Mind and on the Stage* (2018).

FINAL REMINISCENCE

In Tim Crouch's performance the "Fool" reclaims, the truth must not be a dog whipped and kept in a kennel. To survive our menacing present, we must embrace the truth and start to imagine a new world.

> This is Act Four. In a five-act structure, Act Four is the Falling Action. It explores the aftermath of the climax and what other conflicts arise as a result. It's a foreshadowing of the final catastrophe. It prepares the audience for it. That's you. Be prepared. It's going to end soon. A catastrophe! But before then, some people will die. Here and here. This is a content warning of death which is hard to avoid. I hope you have nice plans for after this. I love you.
> (Crouch, 2022: 23–24)

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