Introduction

The French term *imaginaire* [English: imaginary], as opposed to the traditional concepts of "imagination" and "fantasy", is a seminal concept in the investigation of the cultural, literary, and artistic representations. It was proposed in the mid-20th century by Gaston Bachelard, Henry Corbin, Gilbert Durand and many others. While "imagination" defines the human faculty of creating random mental images, with no correspondent in the outside reality, that is, false, chimerical representations, the French term *imaginaire* designates the imaging or the imagining function of the psyche, its capacity to produce new, creative representations. For Jean-Jacques Wunenburger, it designates the "inner creative force of the imagination"[1].

Humans relate to the outside world not only through senses and ideas, but also through images and representations. Their understanding of the world and their ensuing reactions depend on these subjective images. As neuroscientists have recently shown, the simple fact of telling stories (i.e., organising our experience in narrative terms by means of brain maps) is one of the most elementary and archaic "obsessions of the brain" (António Damásio). Rather than a dimension at the margins of the material and physical order of the world (both visible and invisible), "the imaginary" is intrinsically intertwined with it, over-determining the way we feel, read and represent (through artistic, literary, scientific, historical, religious or mythical discourses) both the reality surrounding us, the way we interact with it, and transform it. In order to understand human behaviour, anthropologists have to tackle the complex system of representations that underlies mental activity.

The imaginary pervades all human practices. It applies to a vast range of domains, from sociology and religion to literature and the arts. Social imaginaries comprise narratives, mythical events, historical characters, collective symbols which serve to make sense of history, to organise cultural memory and to configure the future. Charles Taylor defines "the social imaginaries" as follows: "By social imaginary, I mean something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode. I am thinking, rather, of the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations"[2]. Images of the self (*autoimages*) and of the other (*heteroimages*) – the "other" being conceived as an individual or as a collectivity, worldviews and outlooks on nature, the universe and God, representations

of geography, history, society and culture, literary and fine arts fantasy, theatre and cinema, music and dance, advertising and media etc. are all products and instruments of the imagining function.

Since their creation, utopias have been designed as imaginary – *in vitro* – explorations of alternative worlds and societies. Utopian authors used them in order to make and unmake the current reality, to propose alternative models for the existing state of European civilization, and to investigate "les possibles latéraux"[3] of the history. Utopias can be seen as successors of the medieval topic of the Terrestrial Paradise[4]: if, during the Christian culture of the Middle Ages, the Garden of Eden was presented as a lost paradise, closed by God after the original sin, during the Renaissance, humanistic optimism led various thinkers and writers, such as Morus, to the conclusion that the lost paradise could be replaced with a city of men. Utopias are human-made ideal places, where people governed by reasonable and moral principles achieve a perfect society.

Nevertheless, utopian optimism was soon challenged by several theoretical critiques and institutional attacks, from the standpoint of Counter-Reformation theology, Cartesian rationalism and English empiricism. These ideologies addressed a series of decisive counter-arguments to the hope that mankind could by itself establish a perfect society and a paradise on earth. Starting with Joseph Hall (*Mundus alter et idem*, 1605) and Artus Thomas (*L'Isle des Hermaphrodites*, 1605), an important number of authors took on official and public censorship and reshaped their fiction into critiques of utopian visions. Instead of imagining ideal places, they began to conceive counter-utopian societies and terrestrial infernos.

Historians of the European literature have distinguished between two main species of utopias: classical (16th-18th centuries) and modern (19th-20th centuries)[5]. Within this historical blueprint, it is possible to make the distinction between several corpuses and sub-genres of the utopian genre: classical religious, rationalist or empirical utopias and dystopias, as well as modern scientist, social or postmodern utopias and dystopias.

With postmodern relativism and "irrealism" (Searle, Goodman, Putnam, Maturana), not only the human capacity of constructing ideal societies and perfect cities, but the concept of reality itself has been questioned and deconstructed. Possible worlds are becoming as real as everyday reality in literature, films, and the arts. These parallel worlds are either superior to the one we are living in (which is a terrifying place, like in *The Matrix*, *Dark City* etc.), or inferior, describing a nightmarish world we are heading to. Many dystopian (science-)fiction works imagine a future in which a disaster has already affected humanity. Efraim Sicher and Natalia Skaradol, for example, investigate the impact that September 11 had upon the conscience of the American public[6]. In this tragic terrorist event, reality became a reiteration, an acting-out of a series of catastrophic movies made in Hollywood (the headquarters of the hyperreal, as Baudrillard put it). Literary and cinematic experiences have undergone a "pictorial turn", to use Jacques Rancière's term, as images are no longer qualified in terms of deficient or excessive consistency. Utopian thinking becomes a powerful instrument in exploring, exposing and modelling the challenges of our contemporary society, the concerns, fears, hopes and projects targeting

topics such as climate change, natural ecosystem decline, global resource depletion, our planet's homeostasis, new social dynamics, migration and diaspora, fluid societies, race, gender, class, religious minorities and all forms of discrimination, the IT revolution, transhumanism etc.

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The concept of the imaginary has therefore had various uses and roles in the way people looked back at their world or tried to envision its future, and this was precisely the focus of the 23rd Utopian Studies Society/Europe's Annual Conference, which was hosted by the Centre for Imagination Studies of the Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca in July 2023. Under the umbrella title of "Utopian Imaginaries", the conference addressed a generous list of topics that included panels about imaginary communities, central and East-European utopias/dystopias, post-apocalyptical, racial and gender dystopic societies, feminist utopias, utopian social, political or literary imaginaries, utopias and dystopias in contemporary popular culture, transhumanist and medical dystopias, ecological dystopias or fictional, secondary worlds that again functioned as an utopic alternative to a dystopian present. This volume represents a selection of the papers presented at this conference, one that aims to offer a complex perspective on the numerous utopian or dystopian imaginaries involved in the constructs of our society.

The volume opens with an article to which its author, Vita Fortunati, chose to give the form of a confession. As one of USS 2023 conference's keynote speakers and a researcher whose work has been dedicated to utopian studies to a great extent, she used this opportunity to describe both the development of utopia as a genre and her academic relationship with its changes, while also focusing her analysis on three of the most important utopian *topoi* (the journey, the island and the dream) and outlining some ways in which utopian thinking might solve some of the crises that the capitalist world is dealing with today.

Moving on towards a section dedicated to forms of utopian or dystopian social and political imaginaries, we first have Arthur Blaim's study about the essential role played by slogans and catchwords in the construction of utopian-in-theory but (potentially) dystopian-in-practice imaginary communities. He discusses examples such as the Third Reich, the Fourth Republic of Poland, China Dream and Brexit, all of which succeeded in becoming very popular precisely because of their "nebulous utopian" slogans which attracted the public without making it aware of the exact ways in which this ideal state of their society would be attained.

Jean-Jacques Wunenburger, another key-figure in the field of imagination studies, makes the recent pandemic of COVID 19 the subject of his article. Referring to a long tradition of governments that tried to gain total control over the body, will and life of their citizens, the researcher argues that this crisis marked the peak of an age characterized by concepts such as biopolitics and biopower, leading up eventually to the formation of a global transhumanist civilization. In a slightly similar manner, Ionel Buşe's

text contrasts two visions about humanity's relation to the afterlife: the transcendentalist idea of immortality, present in numerous myths or utopias about the Terrestrial Paradise, and today's transhumanist biotechnological revolution, considered in both its utopian and dystopian implications as product of the (post)modern immanentist scientific and positivist view.

As elements of utopian/dystopian social and political imaginaries are often portrayed in movies too, Barbara Klonowska selects Emanuele Crialese's *Golden Door* (2006) for the way in which its subject (Europeans immigrating to America at the turn of the 20th century) contrasts the diverse utopian projections of the ones searching for a better life there with the dystopian realities of the country. As it has historically been the case with the American Dream, the discrepancy between the New World's imagined and real truth testifies for the essential role of the imaginary in the construction and functioning of a space.

In the next paper, Francisco José Martínez Mesa chooses to interpret a series of recent dystopias from an angle which emphasizes the similarity of their subject to the mythical, universal themes that have characterised social and political states of fear since the beginning of times. Nowadays the fear of the future seems to be defined by its immobilising condition which no longer encourages intervention, but it still gets problematised through timeless ideas such as the destructive intruder, the confrontation between the old and the new or the individual's search for identity and meaning inside a labyrinth.

The following two articles bring forth examples of experimental utopian communities, real-life attempts to create spaces where the current state of things no longer clashes with the characteristics of an ideal society, but actually reflects them. The first one, the New Babylon urban utopia of the Situationists, sought to create opportunities that would reshape reality from within, its residents being also the architects of this new city-labyrinth. The New Babylon project is here presented by Hande Tunç with the purpose of revealing the diversity of new living possibilities produced by spaces which are shaped through their users' imagination. The second text represents Michel Macedo Marques's detailed description of the Brazilian Community of Caldeirão da Santa Cruz do Deserto's history, endeavour and unfortunate destiny. In this case, the experimental community was mainly a peasant, agricultural one with a religious leader and cooperativism, self-sufficiency and primitive Christianity as their core values, which were eventually perceived as a communist threat by Brazil's republican authorities and destroyed as a result.

The last study in this section follows the ways in which representative American movies from 2012-2015 portrayed and responded to its social, economic and political problems. Daniel Koechlin links the 2011 Occupy Wall Street Movement with some dystopian films made in the following few years, movies whose theme of class-war shed a new perspective on how individuals were personally affected by the recession, inequality and financial crises haunting their progressive capitalist society.

The second section marks the transition of the critical discourse towards the very rich category of utopian and dystopian literary imaginaries. With a theoretical approach that centres on Hegel's Comic Consciousness, Andrew Bridges's paper puts it next to B.

F. Skinner's portrayal of a fictional behavioural scientist – as it appears in *Walden Two* (1945). The study examines both the similarities and the differences between these two forms of self-consciousness and how they give shape to ideas such as freedom and value, as well as Skinner's belief that a utopian community can be constructed on the basis of an effectively implemented science of behaviour.

Carmen Borbély takes us back to the 17th century by focusing on an example of early modern utopia, Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World* (1666), a book that stands out among the others of its kind due to how it subverts the formal conventions of both utopia and the rest of the genres associated with the female imagination in that period. As a result, the article puts the novel in relation to the anarchetypal works' lack of internal organisation, but it also ties it to the novelistic experiments that preceded the realist, strictly structured works of the 19th century.

Resulting from the collaboration of José Eduardo Reis and Chris Gerry, the next article investigates some utopian and dystopian aspects of James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1920), Yevgeny Zamiatin's *We* (1924) and the ideas of Fernando Pessoa's heteronym Alberto Caeiro. The study connects all three literary examples through the conflicting nature of modernism, a movement filled with crises that affected both one's identity or means of self-representation and the larger political and social scene, altered just as much by war and destruction.

The section then shifts its attention to postmodernity, as Maria Barbu's text follows again the theoretical concept of the anarchetype, but this time in Cormac McCarthy's post-apocalyptical novel *The Road* (2006). Focusing on the (lack of) structure that a journey across America acquires in such conditions, her study reaches the conclusion that the narrative episodes, no longer bearing a signification that needs to be deciphered chronologically, reflect the de-centred vision of the postmodern subject and thus its anarchetypal way of travelling and of living as well.

J. M. Coetzee's trilogy about *The Childhood* (2013), *The Schooldays* (2016) and *The Death of Jesus* (2019) is also addressed in the present volume, despite the numerous critical perspectives which don't consider it related to the utopian/dystopian literary genre. Georgiana Tudor's study underlines the trilogy's similarity to the meta-utopic characteristics of Russia's '70s – '80s novels by pointing out relevant connections between Coetzee's works, his life during apartheid censorship, his fondness of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's texts and the conditions in which Nicholas II's reign and the Soviet regime allowed Russian literature to be produced.

The next two articles take into account fictional dystopias that focus mainly on gender issues, specifically on women's rights and roles in the society they inhabit. On the one hand, Elizabeth Russell looks at the relationship between women and war in a number of relevant works selected from the 19th century until present day: starting from John Ruskin's ideal definitions of man and woman, she looks at novels by Mary Shelley, Charlotte Haldane, Montserrat Julió and Christa Wolf in order to portray women's essential yet often ignored connection to what is considered a manly activity *par excellence*. On the other hand, Hassan Nassour analyses Leni Zumas' *Red Clocks* (2018) through

a feminist discourse that emphasises the prophetic nature of such dystopias: the novel depicts an oppressive society where the female body is colonized by patriarchal laws that make abortions illegal, thus creating a medium of political anxiety in which the four main female characters try to maintain their autonomy.

Lastly, Elisabeta Di Minico enriches this section with an analysis that could be situated on the border between literary and mediatic utopias/dystopias. Her paper looks at the ways in which superhero comics reflect the prejudices, hopes and fears of their times, as their depiction of otherness – be it in the form of hypersexualized or abused women, mutants, aliens or other monstruous characters – often depicts society's racism, injustice, discrimination and violence towards its ethnic, sexual or racial minorities.

The third section of the journal is dedicated to the utopic and dystopic imaginaries of the Central and East-European space. Firstly, Kenneth Hanshew brings into the attention of non-Czech speakers two untranslated dystopias from this cultural space, Čestmír Vejdělek's *Return from Paradise* (1961) and Jiří Marek's *The Blessed Age* (1967). Both of these novels foretell aspects of what we are getting closer to experience nowadays in terms of artificial intelligence's impact on humanity, while also highlighting the thin line separating utopia and dystopia when it comes to apparently perfect futures ruled by technology.

Moving eastwards, Mariano Martín Rodríguez comments upon a very thought-provoking piece of speculative fiction written on Romanian ground, namely upon Ion Talpă's *Through the Smoke Rings* (1937). With gender role reversal and the projection of a feminist future – where women rule over men – as its central themes, the book is here subject to an examination that explores the internal rules of such a world, while also highlighting how the reader's subjectivity towards these matters becomes the element which labels the text as utopia or dystopia. Within the same literary space, but with a perspective that highlights the image of Romania's totalitarian period in literature, Ruxandra Cesereanu discusses three dystopian novels written during and about the Communist regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu, but officially published only after its fall: A. E. Baconsky's *The Black Church* (1990), Bujor Nedelcovici's *The Second Messenger* (1991) and Ion D. Sîrbu's *Farewell, Europe!* (1992-1993). Her analysis explores how these texts depict allegorically the relation between the oppressors (the secret police) and their victims, the former being portrayed in an occult light due to the manipulation and brainwashing they enforced upon the population.

This section is concluded with the contributions of Boris Lanin and Constantin Tonu, both of whom discuss the Slavic space's relationship with utopia and dystopia. On the one hand, the former looks at a series of Russian post-communist dystopias from both a literary and a political point of view, linking Russia's recent state of affairs with how the concept of the "state of exception" is both foreseen in these books and present there today. On the other hand, the latter writes an extensive survey of the Pan-Slavic movements' utopic character: he starts from the middle of the 17th century with Juraj Križanić's desire to unite the Slavic Christian world and goes all the way to the second half of the 20th century, when Nikolay Danilevsky advanced his creed that the historical

necessity will have the young and powerful Slavdom replace the European civilization, already deep into its degradation and decline.

And finally, as another sub-section of the vast category of literary imaginaries, the last part of the volume consists in contributions that highlight the various connections between utopia/dystopia and the genre of science fiction. Corin Braga's paper about how SF and utopian extraordinary journeys are presented in two ancient Greek novels (Antonius Diogenes' *Wonders Beyond Thulé* and Lucian's *True Histories*) opens the section, while also making one last mention of the anarchetype concept. Here it is used to praise the innovation proposed by the books in both content and form: they bring such scenarios in literature long before the Renaissance peak of classical utopian form, but they also reflect a freedom of invention that ignores the Aristotelian principles of structure and thus creates random sequences of narrative episodes that fit the anarchetypal definition.

The subject of the next article is a science fiction classic, namely Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968). Mauro Pala's critical discourse revisits the novel – as well as its adaptation in film, *Blade Runner* (1982) – and connects them with the way in which Roberto Esposito understands biopolitics. Consequently, the paper links the fact that power revolves nowadays around body politics with Dick's ominous foreshadowing of society's posthuman transformation, present in the analysed novel long before the theorization of posthumanism as a concept towards the end of the 20th century.

Furthermore, the intersections between society, utopia, science fiction and their variations (especially during the 20th century) are also explored in Iren Boyarkina's study about *Last and First Men* (1930) by William Olaf Stapledon. The book has been historically situated at the intersection of multiple genres and has thus borrowed characteristics from all of them, a fact that gives complexity to how Stapledon fictionalizes the scientifical discoveries of his time while also revealing and satirising the vices of his contemporaries.

Yet another different perspective within the field of utopian literary imaginaries is proposed by Alexander Popov, who looks at key texts from Robert Shea, Robert Wilson, Philip K. Dick and Thomas Pynchon in order to define and delve into the two rhizomatically connected subgenres of utopian and paranoid SF to which these books belong. His punctual analysis of the selected fictional works is strengthened by a theoretical viewpoint as well, one that examines the similar conditions which determined the evolution of these SF categories in relation to concepts such as time, space and subjectivity.

Finally, a type of utopia which discusses the nonhuman well before the emergence of the nonhuman turn in humanities is considered in Ljubjica Matek's paper, focused on J. G. Ballard's *The Drowned World* (1962). With an ecological view that digs into the implications of a postapocalyptic future caused by global warming, the study actually invites us to see things from the reversed perspective as well: the characters are described as passively adapting to the circumstances of the new world instead of trying to change them, whereby this future is paradoxically perceived as a primordial utopia precisely because there will no longer be humans to inhabit it.

The 46th issue of *Echinox Journal* has thus gathered contributions from multiple research areas where the concept of the imaginary occupies a central place (social, political, literary and mediatic studies). As may be seen throughout the volume, each paper comes with a unique perspective upon the matter at hand, creating a network of significations which proves, time and again, the continuously developing complexity of the imagining function of the psyche.

Maria Barbu & Corin Braga

Notes

1. Jean-Jacques Wunenburger, *L'imaginaire*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2003.
2. Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2004, p. 23.
3. Raymond Ruyer, *L'utopie et les utopies*, Saint-Pierre-de-Salerne, Gérard Monfort, 1988.
4. See Corin Braga, *Du Paradis perdu à l'antiutopie aux XVIe–XVIIIe siècles*, Paris, Garnier, 2010.
5. See Marina Leslie, *Renaissance Utopias and the Problem of History*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1998.
6. Efraim Sicher, Natalia Skaradol, „A World Neither Brave Nor New: Reading Dystopian Fiction after 9/11", in *Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas*, vol. 4, no. 1, January 2006, p. 151-179.