

Reflections

Governing the future: perspectives from literary studies – commentary to Jones

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Taking its cue from Rhys Jones’s article “Governing the future and the search for spatial justice: Wales’ Well-being of Future Generations Act”, this commentary reflects on some of the challenges attached to attempts to govern the future. It proposes perspectives from literature and literary studies to enrich how we imagine the future. This commentary maps out how literary fiction and other forms of future storytelling associated with qualia – the “how it feels” of future possible worlds – may provide an important complementary to other, more distancing, modes of envisioning the future.

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Rhys Jones’s (2019) article in this issue of *Fennia* starts out from the urgent need to consider attempts to govern the future, in particular from a perspective of geography. Examining a unique case – the Well-being of Future Generations Act in Wales – it argues that governance of the future will have to be informed by considerations of justice and wellbeing, and that a geographical approach can be beneficial to promote social justice in any attempt at governing the future. In this commentary, I take Jones’s article as a starting point to emphasize a view of the future as a site invested with embedded and embodied presence, and to argue that literary fiction and other forms of future storytelling that are associated with qualia – the “how it feels” of future possible worlds – may provide an important complementary to other, more distancing, modes of envisioning the future.

Jones’s (2019) article feeds into a broader shift towards future matters that has arguably come to define our current time. If in the final decade of the last century, there was briefly a sense, at least in the Western world, that history had come to an end (with a nod to Francis Fukuyama), a host of factors (including globalization, disruptive innovation, the spectre of mass extinction, lethal global warming and radical climate change) have since conspired to impose a perspective of out-of-control time racing forward with increasing speed toward multiple uncertain futures. Such a perspective has also set a moral imperative on citizens as well as on policy makers to make themselves acquainted with the future, and to let their tentative knowledge of the future inform their present action. But what kind of form should such engagement take, besides worrying? Rhys Jones’s article lays out some ways forward.

Attempts to govern the future raise important questions. A first question is what is meant with concepts such as “justice” and “wellbeing” in the context of governing the future. The importance of

an explicit assessment of what is meant with such concepts as “good”, “inclusive”, “democratic”, and “just” is also (and perhaps especially) important in the context of new governance practices that may draw on potentially skewed consultation of particular interests groups. One person’s idea of justice may well be another’s idea of injustice – and a particular society’s “spatial justice” will always be dependent on political decisions, values, and ideological positions. The question of (minority) language, which comes up from time to time in reference to the Well-being of Future Generations Act, is one such issue that is never a given, but always dependent on particular positions. In public space in the context of multiple languages with an official status, one person’s freedom to speak their minority mother tongue will be dependent on majority language speakers’ ability and willingness to understand and/or speak a second language, and if policy acts to protect a minority language, one person’s linguistic freedom may become another person’s linguistic obligation. The example of language is not trite: legislation for multiple language use is bound up with complex, culturally and historically specific contextualizations that cannot be easily transposed to other contexts in space or time (e.g. Robertson 2016, 72 ff.). At the same time, language use is inexorably tied to the body of the speaker, who can never fully dissociate themselves from an acquired mother tongue. Rhys Jones (2019) takes into account such situatedness by a focus on significant geographies and on different scales of governance, but other perspectives may be added.

Thinking of governance of the future thus also means considering the situatedness of particular positions across space and time. We only have to consider our current (very tentative and constantly shifting) consensus of what is just and unjust, sustainable or unsustainable, and compare this to ideas of one or two generations back in time, to consider the difficulties in trying to draw the outlines of future generations’ just governance from today’s perspectives. One era’s bright future may be another’s nightmare. One example from historical utopian literature that envisioned possible arrangements of future governance may well illustrate the fleetingness of particular future visions. Bellamy’s utopian novel *Looking Backward: 2000–1887* (1888) sets forth a future Boston governed in a just manner; the novel aimed in particular to envision means to alleviate the plight of the working poor in the late nineteenth-century United States. But in his reading of the novel, a reading informed by totalitarian experiments of the twentieth century, literary critic Frye claims that “most of us today would tend to read it [*Looking Backward*] as a sinister blueprint of tyranny, with its industrial ‘army’, its stentorian propaganda delivered over the ‘telephone’ to the homes of its citizens, and the like” (Frye 1965, 29). Many readers will still agree with Frye today.

All this should not, of course, be taken as an impediment to engage with the future, on the contrary, it further emphasizes the need to comprehensively consider futures in all their complexities, in a way that incorporates multiple scales and perspectives as well as various types of forecasting, future visions, and modes of conjecture.

Perspectives from literary studies

The reference to utopian literature brings me to a second part of my commentary: what can fictional texts contribute to our thinking of the future? The example of Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*, a literary novel that in its time was influential within urban planning and policy, provides one obvious reference, illustrating how utopian literature, nineteenth-century scientific romance, or science fiction can posit alternative societies. But literary fiction, in its various forms, has always been concerned with counterfactuality – with imagining the not-yet; with juxtaposing different possible worlds and with considering possible futures, from small-scale deliberations about whom to marry (the famous dilemma of Rastignac, in Balzac’s *Le Père Goriot* [1835]), to momentous changes in world history (such as in Dick’s *The Man in the High Castle* [1962]). Westphal (2007, 59, 63), in *Geocriticism*, considers literature as “experimental field of alternative realities,” and a “laboratory of the possible”. More generally, literature does not only *describe* possibilities, it is arguably also about *extending* an awareness of the possible into the world of the reader, providing readers with an expanded sense of possibility (Meretoja 2017). Literary studies has in turn long developed methods and frameworks to speak of possible worlds, also in relation to future possibilities (see Ameel & Neuvonen 2016).

Peopling the future

Two important assertions can be made about the future. First, everything we can say about the future is non-factual (which does not exactly mean the same as fictional), or, in the words of de Jouvenel (1964, 15), a founding figure in futures studies: “the future is the domain of uncertainty”. Second, if there is a future to govern, this future will be inhabited by real human beings in real, embodied and embedded contexts. Both assertions gesture towards a role for fictional narratives in our thinking of the future, for which only narratives with no truth value are at our disposal, and for which an insight into contextualized experiences is an important complementary to distancing and quantitative modes of futuring.

In focusing on situated, embedded and embodied experiences of the future, I am indebted to *Future Matters* (2007) by Adam and Groves, in which the authors warn against an “emptying of the future” (ibid., 2), in which the future is “emptied of content and extracted from historical context” (ibid., 13). They emphasize the importance of approaching the future not in terms of “present futures” – “futures that are imagined, planned, projected, and produced *in and for* the present” (ibid., 28), but rather by way of “future presents”, a future that is already partly locked in by our current actions, and peopled with embedded and embodied presents we have the duty to imagine.

Adam and Groves (2007) foreground the importance of traditional forms of divination and imaginative methods from futures studies that would allow a focus on “future presents”. Literary fiction can be seen as one important complementary resource for imagining future presents. It has long been emphasized to be crucially about providing readers with *qualia* – about “how it feels like” to be in a particular, embodied and embedded situation. When so many of the dominant perspectives with which futures are currently imagined take a distancing view, with an emphasis on numbers and quantitative data, on abstract diagrams and on panoramic views of future flood plans or future ice sheet extension, literary resources may allow access to the exact opposite: a sense of what it feels like to be within a situated future present, embedded within particular context and tied to embodied experiences.

Insightful *qualia* in future narratives are bound up, for example, with experiencing recognisable settings changed almost beyond recognition, such as the experience of walking by the iconic Stockmann department store in Helsinki, turned into a militarized zone during a near future, climate-wrecked Christmas shopping period in Tuomainen’s *Parantaja* (2010). And narrative experientiality is tied also to the privileged access to individual thoughts and feelings made possible by literary fiction: the moral dilemmas faced by individual characters when disaster strikes, as in Rich’s *Odds Against Tomorrow* (2013); or the sense of loss and mourning in some of the more recent environmentally oriented future fiction. But even individual words in a literary storyworld can give intriguing insights into possible future presents. Several of the more gripping future narratives of the past decades have drawn the reader’s attention to how far removed possible futures will be, in material properties and cultural conceptualizations, by deliberately inventing a debilitated or convoluted language of the future. McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006) and its use of an ever sparser language to describe irretrievable losses in the natural and cultural world has become one standard reference. The momentous changes that have led to the future world of the final section of Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* (2004) are left largely untold, but the strange, distorted English used by the narrator and characters vividly suggest the radical transformations that have led up to the narrated point in time. Similarly, in Rimbereid’s *Solaris Korrigert* (2004), the strangeness of a future Stavanger is made tangible by the defamiliarizing language in which this epic poem is written, mixing various languages and dialects spoken today around the North Sea, suggesting the far-reaching cultural interaction that must have been involved in the historical developments leading up to AD 2480. Sometimes, a few mere words are enough to sketch such developments: in Smith’s *Doggerland* (2019), which describes two men working a wind farm in a future when much of the lands along the North Sea are drowned, little direct reference is made to drowned cities or climate migrants. But the characters sparsely use Dutch swear words, interspersed in their English, as if to suggest that, while the Netherlands may no longer exist, some substratum of the Dutch language will be preserved in the language of the future North Sea. These examples provide but some of the ways in which literature fiction can make us look at possible futures with a new awareness of the situated future lives that will inhabit them.

I would like to conclude with one caveat about the use of literary studies and literary fiction within the broader debate on governance of the future. As always, concepts, sources and methods that travel from one discipline to another come with certain baggage. Perhaps what defines literary studies most is that it tends not to attribute ready-made meaning, but aims to keep open different possibilities of meaning; to unpack complexities without resolving them; to let possible worlds exist simultaneously. Similarly, literature fiction evades easy fixation of meaning. Even when it involves some measure of closure at the end of the narration, its meanings always develop as part of the progression that takes places between the opening sentence and the final words, in an oscillation between various counterfactualities. And its narrative form – its language, rhetoric commonplaces, and plot structures, are always informed by shifting genre and period conventions. This makes it at first sight a daunting toolbox for the disciplines that are mostly associated with governing the future: planning and policy, which are aimed at fixing practices and meaning, rather than keeping things indeterminate. But it is perhaps also literary fiction's ambiguity and indeterminacy that make it – when applied in a way that also takes into account its specificities – an insightful resource for imagining the future, which is a field that is multiple and protean, indeterminate and ambiguous, but at the same time populated already with situated future presents that are in part locked in by our own present actions.

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