



THE UNIVERSITY
of EDINBURGH



Narratives of the Future: An Interdisciplinary Panel

Event date: Friday 1 May

Time: 13:30 - 15:30

Location: IASH Seminar Room, first floor, 2 Hope Park Square, Edinburgh, EH8 9NW and online via Teams

Register on Eventbrite at <https://narrativesofthefuture.eventbrite.co.uk>.

This panel:

- explores how we imagine the future through literary, cultural and political perspectives, and how narratives shape today's global challenges.
- brings together four speakers to explore how we imagine the future and the different approaches that shape our visions of tomorrow. Focusing on interdisciplinary perspectives from literary studies, cultural studies, and political theory, the panel will explore what these fields can contribute to discussions about the future and the challenges we experience in the world today.

The panel features:

Chair: Professor [Anna Vaninskaya](#) (School of Literatures, Languages and Cultures, University of Edinburgh)

Professor [Mathias Thaler](#) (School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh): *The Future in the Anthropocene*

Dr [Jarita Holbrook](#) (School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh): *Afrofuturism Futures*

Dr [Emrah Atasoy](#) (The Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities, University of Edinburgh): *The Future in Utopian & Dystopian Narratives*

Dr [Owen Holland](#) (School of Literatures, Languages and Cultures, the University of Edinburgh): *'The Everlasting Now': Visions of the Future in Edward Carpenter's Towards Democracy*

Together, these talks will open an interdisciplinary dialogue on how the future is imagined, interpreted, and represented across literary and cultural narratives, and how such visions shape our understanding of contemporary global complexities.

ABSTRACTS

1. The Future in the Anthropocene

Professor [Mathias Thaler](#) (School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh):

In our times, talk of ‘transitioning’ to a world without fossil fuels has become pervasive. Despite its prevalence in environmental politics, this paper argues that it is counterproductive to envisage the current conjuncture through the prism of a transition. I defend this claim by first outlining three respects in which the transition paradigm falls short: political corruptibility, historical inadequacy and conceptual confusion. Rather than recuperate the meaning of transitioning for progressive purposes, the constructive part of the paper then asks which analytical framework should take its place. My proposal is to take inspiration from Antonio Gramsci’s notion of an interregnum to illuminate the distinctive political challenges of the Anthropocene. Gramsci’s conceptual apparatus foregrounds the fundamental openness of the future and thus facilitates a better understanding of various ‘morbid symptoms’, whose proliferation today can only be explained through a theoretical approach that combines attention to both individual well-being and social pathologies.

2. Afrofuturism Futures

Dr [Jarita Holbrook](#) (School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh):

Who is given permission to imagine the future? To create the future? Holbrook reflects on these questions through their research projects in Africa. They share elements which define Afrofuturistic writings. Also, they share their current Afrofuturistic story still under construction. Holbrook’s presentation does the work of situating Africa into the discussions about futurisms, the future, and fictionalising the future.

3. The Future in Utopian & Dystopian Narratives

Dr [Emrah Atasoy](#) (The Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities, University of Edinburgh):

Utopian and dystopian narratives explore complex relationships between past, present, and future by imagining alternative worlds that often appear temporally or spatially remote. These speculative futures, however, function less as predictions than as critical mirrors of the present, revealing contemporary concerns, anxieties, fears, desires, hopes, and dreams. Rather than operating as mere speculation, such imagined futures reflect ongoing social and political challenges and invite readers and audiences to confront present realities through interpretation and critical judgment. In many futuristic dystopian narratives, resolutions remain deliberately open, with hopeful or pessimistic outcomes left to readers, viewers, and characters alike. This openness foregrounds the contingency of the future and emphasises the significance of engaging with current conditions in order to envision the possibility of

transformation. The confrontation with present challenges and their implications for shaping different futures lies at the centre of many utopian and dystopian narratives. This talk explores how futurity is imagined, questioned, and challenged through utopian and dystopian worldbuilding. Focusing on Alfonso Cuarón's film *Children of Men* (2006), it offers a critical reading of imagined worlds to examine how engagements with crisis, responsibility, and hope invite readers and audiences to rethink the present and their role in shaping possible futures.

4. 'The Everlasting Now': Visions of the Future in Edward Carpenter's *Towards Democracy*

Dr [Owen Holland](#) (School of Literatures, Languages and Cultures, the University of Edinburgh):

Since at least the turn of the century, a number of critical intellectuals working across a variety of disciplines have announced the end of the future. T. J. Clark, writing in 2011, urges for the left an 'anti-utopian politics' in a tragic key, not least because of the utopians' failure to 'look failure in the face'.^[1] Franco Berardi, meanwhile, suggests that the contemporary 'postfuturist mood' is premised on the widespread 'consciousness that the future is not going to be bright'.^[2] Elsewhere, Lee Edelman's polemical *No Future* (2004) forcefully argues that queer theory can have no truck with the very concept of the future, arguing for a refusal to sacrifice the present in the name of a compromised politics of reproductive futurism and elevating instead an anti-political 'negativity opposed to every form of social viability'.^[3]

In such a conjuncture, when the future has been so comprehensively written off, how should one read the works of those such as the fin-de-siecle poet and socialist Edward Carpenter who approached the future with hopeful expectancy? Carpenter's anti-political orientation towards the future offers a provisional answer, as expressed in his numinous free-verse poem *Towards Democracy* and its idiosyncratic philosophy of the 'Everlasting Now'. His utopian presentism, this paper argues, offers a way of thinking about the present that asserts the continued possibility of a utopian horizon, even in the midst of unprecedented and apparently insuperable challenges.

^[1] T. J. Clark, 'For a Left with No Future', *New Left Review* 74 (March April 2012), 73, 69.

^[2] Franco Bifo Berardi, *After the Future*, ed. Gary Genosko and Nicholas Thoburn (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2011), 25.

^[3] Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke UP, 2004), 9.

PANEL PARTICIPANTS

Prof Mathias Thaler

Mathias Thaler is Professor of Political Theory at the University of Edinburgh. His main research interest is in contemporary political theory. Thaler regularly teaches courses on democratic theory, populism, human rights and the morality of war and violence. Thaler is the author of *No Other Planet* (Cambridge University Press 2022), *Naming Violence* (Columbia University Press 2018), *Moralische Politik oder politische Moral?* (Campus 2008), and co-editor (with Mihaela Mihai) of *Political Violence and the Imagination* (Routledge 2020) and of *On the Uses and Abuses of Political Apologies* (Palgrave 2014). His papers have appeared in peer-reviewed journals such as *The American Political Science Review*, *Environmental Politics*, *The Journal of Politics*, and *Political Studies*, amongst others. His recent research has been funded through a Marie Curie Career Integration Grant, a Research Fellowship from the Leverhulme Trust, and an AHRC Networking Grant. Over the past 15 years, Thaler has held visiting fellowships at the University of Oxford, the Université de Montréal, KU Leuven, the University of Sydney, the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study and the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study.

Dr Jarita Holbrook

Jarita Holbrook holds a BS in Physics from the California Institute of Technology (Caltech), MS in Astronomy from San Diego State University (their first African American graduate in Astronomy), and PhD in Astronomy & Astrophysics at the University of California, Santa Cruz (their first African American graduate in Astronomy & Astrophysics). While active in astrophysics, Holbrook studied stellar death and stellar birth with a focus on the things between the stars: gas, ice and dust. As a postdoc, Holbrook transitioned to the social sciences through a National Science Foundation Minority Postdoctoral Research Fellowship in the Center for the Cultural Studies of Science, Technology & Medicine at UCLA and as a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science in Berlin, Germany. Slightly over a decade ago, Holbrook started including studies of astrophysicists along with film making into their research portfolio. Holbrook focuses on the lived experiences of underrepresented astrophysicists, identity, discrimination and the processes of inclusion and exclusion among astrophysicists. Holbrook has made two award winning films: *Black Suns – An Astrophysics Adventure* and *Hubble's Diverse Universe*. The Tenerife episode of their YouTube series, *The Science Tourists*, won a webisode excellence prize. Holbrook is a researcher at the University of Edinburgh in Science, Technology & Innovation Studies (STIS).

Dr Emrah Atasoy

Emrah Atasoy is currently a Heritage Collections Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Edinburgh's The Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities. Emrah, Advance HE fellow, is also an Honorary Research Fellow at the Institute of Advanced Study and Associate Fellow of English and Comparative Literary Studies at the University of Warwick, UK. He completed his PhD in English Language and Literature at Hacettepe University, Ankara, Türkiye in 2019. His research interests span futuristic narratives, utopian and dystopian literature, speculative fiction, science fiction, environmental and digital humanities, Anthropocene studies, and world literature. Emrah is the author of the monograph *Epistemological Warfare and Hope in Critical Dystopia* (Nobel 2021). He is also co-editor of *Utopian and Dystopian Explorations of Pandemics and Ecological Breakdown: Entangled Futurities* (Routledge Environmental Humanities 2024), as well as the critical forum "Cultural Encounters and Textual Speculations in the Mediterranean" (*Utopian Studies* 35.1 2024). His work has appeared in peer-reviewed journals such as *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* (with Marta Komsta), *Studies in the Novel* (with Thomas Horan), *Utopian Studies*, *Science Fiction Studies*, *Librosdelacorte.es*, *Methis*, *Studia Humaniora Estonica*, *SFRA Review*, and *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, as well as on platforms such as *The Conversation* and *The Institute of Art and Ideas*. He also contributed chapters to edited collections including *The Routledge Companion to Literatures and Crisis* (Routledge 2024), *Speculations of War: Essays on Conflict in Science Fiction, Fantasy and Utopian Literature* (McFarland 2021), and *The Postworld In-Between Utopia and Dystopia* (Routledge 2021). Emrah is currently co-editing *Beyond Ageism: Intergenerational Relationships in Utopia and Dystopia* to be published by Palgrave in their Palgrave Studies in Utopianism series in 2027. He is currently the section editor for utopian/dystopian studies, speculative fiction, and science fiction for *The Literary Encyclopedia*. His research has been funded through Marie Skłodowska-Curie Cofund Fellowship, the Georg Forster Research Fellowship (Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, awarded but declined), the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and The British Academy Knowledge Frontiers Symposium Participation Award (Berlin 2024), and TÜBİTAK International Research Fellowships. In 2022, he was awarded the official title of 'Associate Professor of English Language and Literature' by the Inter-University Board of the Republic of Türkiye. Over the past 12 years, Emrah has held visiting research fellowships at Harvard University, Pompeu Fabra University-Barcelona (UPF-Barcelona), the University of Oxford, and Penn State University.

Dr Owen Holland

Owen Holland is a lecturer in C19th Literature in the Department of English and Scottish Literature at the University of Edinburgh. His most recent book, *Literature and Revolution: British Responses to the Paris Commune of 1871*, was published by Rutgers University Press in 2022 and his recent essays are published or forthcoming in *Philological Quarterly*, *Textual Practice*, *ELH* and elsewhere.

This is a free event, which means we overbook to allow for no-shows and to avoid empty seats. While we generally do not have to turn people away, this does mean we cannot guarantee everyone a place. Admission is on a first-come, first-served basis.

You can also attend virtually - please click [here to register](#) for Teams Webinar.

Accessibility:

This event will take place at IASH, 2 Hope Park Square, Edinburgh, EH8 9NW. Please see a map here: <https://www.iash.ed.ac.uk/location>

The Seminar Room is on the first floor, and unfortunately IASH does not have a lift. If you have mobility issues and would like to discuss access, please contact iash@ed.ac.uk as soon as possible.