

**Title:** "Breaking Open Utopia: Science Fiction as Critique in the GDR"

To begin at a beginning:

Es gibt eine Reihe von Fragen, die sich der Mensch wieder und wieder stellt. [...] Woher komme ich? Was bin ich? Wohin gehe ich? [...] Sind [diese Fragen] nicht nur Ausdruck des Fremdseins in einer Welt, die dem Menschen bald feindlich, bald freundlich gegenübersteht und die er sich mit Taten und Begriffen aneignen will? Doch wie könnte ich fremd sein in einer Welt, die ich selbst mitschuf? (Steinmüller 2004, 6)

Like an overture, these questions from the opening passage of a 1982 East German novel announce its key themes: human universality, the connection between past, present, and future, the end of alienation, the project of creating a new world. They also hint at the East German context, as do other motifs more latent in the quoted excerpt. The three questions – “Where do I come from? What am I? Where am I going? – form, in a strong sense, “eine Reihe,” a series implying a contiguity of past, present, and future. In the context of the cultural policy of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), a scientific understanding of past historical development would aid in the unfolding of the communist future, and the political role of literature was to identify salient dimensions of history in order to participate in and help bring about this future. As Wolfgang Emmerich describes socialist realism, quoting a 1946 Soviet edict, “Nach dieser Doktrin soll der Künstler ‘das Leben kennen, es nicht scholastisch, nicht tot, nicht als ‘objektive Wirklichkeit,’ sondern als die objektive Wirklichkeit in ihrer revolutionären Entwicklung darstellen. Dabei muß die wahrheitsgetreue und historisch konkrete künstlerische Darstellung mit der Aufgabe verbunden werden, die werktätigen Menschen im Geiste des Sozialismus ideologisch umzuformen und zu erziehen” (Emmerich, 120). In the passage from the novel, the questioning of the questions (“Sind sie nicht nur Ausdruck des Fremdseins”) adumbrates the relationship between the resolution of the subject/object dialectic (“in einer Welt, die dem

Menschen bald feindlich, bald freundlich gegenübersteht und die er sich mit Taten und Begriffen aneignen will") and the overcoming of alienation ("Doch wie könnte ich fremd sein in einer Welt, die ich selbst mitschuf?"). Finally, the dual use of "Mensch" as both universal ("wieder und wieder") and historically particular ("bald...bald") suggests the resolution of these two as the realization of the universal "Mensch" of the communist future: the particular *ich*, within a world that *ich* created, as the fulfillment of a non-alienated subjectivity and a universal, fully realized humanity. The future, humanity, and world-creation: this trio forms a key constellation of the Marxist discourse of GDR cultural politics; in creating the future world of communism, humanity would realize its vocation as the consummation of the universal ideal of liberated, no-longer alienated humanity.

Yet this trio is representative not just of a Marxist problematic, but of a science-fictional one as well. The full first paragraph of the passage I've selectively excerpted in fact reads as follows:

Es gibt eine Reihe von Fragen, die sich der Mensch wieder und wieder stellt. Das war schon auf einem Planeten mit Namen Erde so, der für uns kaum mehr bedeutet als eine phantastische kosmische Sage. Und das wird so sein bis in alle Zukunft unseres Planeten Andymon, über der genau wie über der irdischen Vergangenheit der Schleier der Zeit liegt. (Steinmüller 2004, 6)

The text in question is *Andymon*, a 1982 novel by Angela and Karlheinz Steinmüller.<sup>1</sup> The novel is about the settlement and biological transformation of a distant planet; it is also about the creation of a new society and a new kind of human being. This article takes this parallel project seriously in order to explore the function of science fiction in the context of the GDR, where it was both a highly popular and heavily censored genre. *Andymon* hinges on an analogy between spatial closure and temporal foreclosure, and thereby leverages the genre of science fiction to generate an immanent critique both of utopian literature and the cultural-political framework of

socialist realism. I want to be clear that by “socialist realism” I refer not to a body of literary texts but to the broad discursive framework within which writers in the GDR saw themselves. Likewise, I do not wish to imply that official socialist realism entailed a totalizing, monolithic policy; while it involved policy made at the party level, based on a particular articulation of the relationship between culture and politics, it is also difficult to pin down, mediated as it was through complex networks of literary texts, aesthetic theory, official policy, and an ever-shifting multitude of publishers’ reports, decisions to publish or not publish individual works, and, not least for the present context, the understandings of authors themselves of their own constraints, obligations, and possibilities. In this context, then, I wish to ask how *Andymon* models and reconfigures a relationship among time, cognition, and genre as part of a tacit theoretical dialogue among science fiction, utopia, and socialist realism.<sup>2</sup>

Subtitled “eine Weltraum-Utopie,” an “outer-space utopia,” *Andymon* relates the discovery, settlement, and terraforming of the eponymous planet Andymon by a group of humans bred by automatic incubators and raised by robots, after an interstellar voyage of unknown duration that presumably set out from Earth. Told from the retrospective perspective of Beth, named thus by alphabetic convention as the second born of the first group, *Andymon* narrates how, after a lengthy dormancy and with about twenty years to go until the rendezvous with Andymon, the systems of the huge spaceship kick into action and begin fertilizing and incubating its storehouse of human eggs, raising children in groups of eight. The first part of the novel chronicles their meticulous education aboard the ship in preparation for settling the planet, which is then narrated in the remainder of the novel.

*Andymon* revolves around the questions of the future, humanity, and world creation. On

one level, these are familiar SF elements of setting (science fiction novels often take place in the future), theme (the galactic spread of human life and intelligence), and the topos of terraforming (that is, engineering a planet's atmosphere, climate, and ecology to make it earth-like). Yet *Andymon* is interesting not because of the way it deploys such trusty markers of science fiction, but rather for the way it brings them into contact with one another, thus problematizing them. This is already evident in the first passage: while, on the one hand, the universal, perennial nature of the series of questions suggests temporal continuity, on the other hand, the very reiteration of this continuum ruptures it by drawing attention to how the "Schleier der Zeit" obstructs access to the past and future.

The narrator, Beth, is ultimately unable to answer the questions he has posed. The very questions – woher, was, wohin? – that might otherwise vouchsafe a contiguous relationship of past, present, and future, instead guarantee the uncertain openness of their relationship. "Kann ich die letzte Frage beantworten, solange mir die Umstände meines Todes ungewiß sind? Darf ich die zweite Frage mit einem sachlichen 'Homo sapiens,' einem einfachen 'Ich bin ein Mensch' beantworten, da doch mit uns eine neue kosmische Gattung geboren wurde?" (6). "Eine neue kosmische Gattung" can be seen as a science fiction inflection of the problematic of "Mensch" within East German socialist realism in which the new, galactic realization of humanity would correspond to the universal humanity of a communist world, beyond alienation. The final sentence of the first chapter – "Ich muß wohl glauben, daß aus diesen Fragen die Offenheit der Welt, die Unendlichkeit von Raum und Zeit zu mir sprechen" (7) – seems to augment the disavowal of alienation that immediately precedes it ("Doch wie könnte ich fremd sein in einer Welt, die ich selbst mitschuf?"); and to the extent that world-creation becomes an

open project, it indeed does. In this reading, the self cannot be alien to the world *because* the world is an open, ongoing project that requires the self's participation. Yet at the same time, the final sentence's refusal of spatiotemporal closure undercuts the assertive *doch* – if the world is open and space and time infinite, then the possibility of alterity, alienness, and even alienation between subject and object, self and world, is preserved. As we shall see, within the shifting topographies of *Andymon*'s open utopia, this rupture will come to constitute the strategy of its immanent critique, since it is precisely by destabilizing the past as an object of cognition that *Andymon* undermines the claustrophobic closure of the static utopia the authors associated with the cultural politics of the GDR.

By modeling formal questions of spatial and temporal closure on the diegetic level, the Steinmüllers' text is able to immanently explore (and explode) key aspects of both utopian literature and official socialist realism. Contrary to the full closure of the classic utopia and the epistemological fixity of a stable relationship between past, present, and future, *Andymon* privileges openness, incompleteness, and uncertainty, so that a lack of knowledge becomes something positive. In *The Powers of Speech*, David Bathrick has shown how the official cultural politics of the GDR privileged monosemia over polysemia,<sup>3</sup> favoring reflection that would generate representation as "a replica of preestablished modes of being and knowing" over ambiguity (97).<sup>4</sup> Because the model of temporal unfolding to which socialist realism was beholden thus necessitated an infallible knowledge of the historical development of the past in order to guarantee the revolutionary development of the future, any challenge to a transparent and total access to the past is also an implicit challenge to the epistemological and narrative strictures of socialist realism itself. While drawing on Bathrick's framework, my reading takes a

somewhat different tack. It is not only through a formal, stylistic, or linguistic challenge to monosemia that *Andymon* works as critique, but rather primarily by modeling logics of closure, openness, and alterity on the diegetic level. This difference, in turn, will come to illuminate key components and possibilities of science fiction as genre.

Ultimately I ask what *Andymon*, as a science fiction novel, might have to tell us about the cultural-political context within which it was written, and, conversely, how this instance of East German science fiction might be able to complicate prevailing theorizations of science fiction that themselves draw on German critical theory. What, for example, are the implications of the fact that the Steinmüllers compared classical utopias to the politics of the GDR? How might one articulate the relationship between spatial closure, authoritarian centralism, and the epistemological fixity of a prescribed temporal unfolding from past to future? What does it mean that a work of science fiction, the genre typically defined by some recourse to cognition, privileges a lack of knowledge? And finally, what do we learn by reading science fiction as an engagement with particular literary-theoretical problematics?

A brief digression may help illuminate the contours of these questions. A short fictional text by Soviet writer Nikolai Toman from 1966, in narrating a discussion among writers and publishers about what constitutes good science fiction, suggests the affinity between the constraints of science fiction and those of socialist realism. The range of positions represented in the debate recalls the shopworn distinction between “hard” and “soft” science fiction: some argue for cleaving to what contemporary science and principles of strict causality allow, while others argue that science fiction must be bold and go further, borne on flights of imagination beyond the limits of the present.<sup>5</sup> The way that the scientific discussion develops out of a literary

debate brings the conversation into the ambit of socialist realism, as questions of matter blur into questions of materialism. For some participants, science fiction not anchored in the current state of physics risks denigrating into “idealism and mysticism” (171), while others fear that too strict an adherence to contemporary knowledge will return science fiction to its “sad existence” during the Stalin years, when the genre was confined to making futuristic forecasts that fell within the limits of the five-year plan, and to the supposed limits set by objective laws of nature.<sup>6</sup> The proper depiction of the future was a dilemma for science fiction in the German Democratic Republic as well, with many early critics arguing that science fiction should confine itself to the foreseeable future. A 1957 article by East German critic Gerd Hauswald proposes setting science fiction novels not 100 years in the future, but five: “the novel of the future from 1962 that has not yet been written could give us the confidence and trust and . . . the strength for the present!” (Fritzsche 81). Here the “novel of the future,” or *Zukunftsroman*, has a dual meaning – it is both a novel about the future, a standard German designation for science fiction, and a novel *from* the future. As Sonja Fritzsche glosses in her seminal cultural history of GDR science fiction, “Hauswald thus limits any extrapolation to the ‘known’ future, which could be proven possible scientifically as well as ideologically” (81).<sup>7</sup>

Thus by challenging the epistemological fixity of socialist realism’s connection between the known past, present, and knowable future, science fiction could undermine the cognitive monopoly on the future as such. As the Steinmüllers write in *Vorgriff auf das Lichte Morgen: Studien zur DDR-Science-Fiction*, their retrospective study of East German science fiction, what was demanded of East German science fiction writers was *Perspektivbewußtsein*, an ambiguous term that could mean both awareness of perspective and awareness of the opportunities the future

may entail. *Perspektivbewußtsein* would allow literary writers to present a judgment on the present *from* the standpoint of the future.

Perspektivbewußtsein hieß die Überzeugung von der "Sieghaftigkeit" des Sozialismus, die angeblich wissenschaftlich begründete Lehre vom bevorstehenden geschichtlichen Übergang der Menschheit erst zum Sozialismus und später zum Kommunismus. Perspektivbewußtsein bedeutete die eine einigende, ideologisch und politisch Kohärenz stiftende Zukunftsvision und zugleich die Beurteilung der Gegenwart aus diesem "Wissen" um die Zukunft heraus. Damit war die Vermittlung von Perspektivbewußtsein auch Teil der "Methode" des sozialistischen Realismus. (51)

Here knowledge of the future, grounded in historical materialism, in turn facilitates an adequate assessment of the present moment. *Perspektivbewußtsein* entailed an epistemological certainty that links the past, present, and future in an unfolding line of development, and it is on this ground that science fiction is able to critique socialist realism. For if the two frameworks jostle each other over the relationship between present and future, sometimes colluding, sometimes colliding, science fiction is often able to mount its challenge to socialist realism, as well as to classical utopias, on the grounds of their epistemological certainty. *Andymon* privileges by contrast a particular kind of uncertainty in order to break open the restrictive closure of both socialist realism and utopian literature, thereby providing a utopian immanent critique of utopia.

*Andymon* was explicitly written as a 'dynamic' utopia, compared to the classical utopias of More, Campanella, and Bacon, whose normative, static orders the Steinmüllers compare, in a new afterword to their novel, to the "democratic centralism" of the GDR (Steinmüller 2004, 291).<sup>8</sup> After the "antiutopias" of Zamyatin, Huxley, and Orwell, the very possibility of writing a positive utopia becomes a dubious project. Added to this, the experience of East German socialism seems to have fully discredited positive utopias, and as they write, the "blanke Kommerz" of the west didn't provide a viable alternative. The Steinmüllers attempted to



overcome both the failings of classical utopias and the lack of existing utopian models in *Andymon*'s portrayal of "etwas völlig Neues": "Die statisch-starre Utopie mußte durch eine dynamische, offene abgelöst werden, eine Utopie, in der die unbegrenzten Möglichkeiten für das Individuum, sich zu entfalten, zugleich Garantie für die Entwicklung des Ganzen sind" (292). And yet what I want to suggest here is that the contribution of *Andymon* is to be found less in its depiction of individual freedom within a pluralistic collective realization and more in the spatial dynamics indicated by their use in this quote of the words "dynamic" and "static," "rigid" and "open".

Early in the novel, the children have access to the ship computer's vast library, a veritable totality of Earthly science and culture, as well as to human historical experiences, provided by a perfect virtual reality simulator called, fittingly enough, the Totaloscope. The Totaloscope stimulates the brain directly to provide an experience of reality indistinguishable from the actual thing; through it, the children explore full simulations of past human historical experiences on Earth, from war and discovery to music and childbirth.<sup>9</sup> All this is presumably designed to prepare the children to create a human society on a distant planet by the ship's unknown builders – 'die Erbauer,' which can mean both "the builders" and "the educators," a telling ambiguity. But the plenitude of virtual terrestrial experiences begins to make the ship's limits seem uncomfortably narrow.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, there's a catch – no information is available about the ship's construction, the fate of the Earth, or anything else after December 31st, 2000.

This obstructed access to their origins propels the children in various speculative directions, as they wonder what might have happened to Earth – global catastrophe, technocratic social harmony, or somewhere in between – and why the *Erbauer* could not or would not

provide them with the information that would connect them to their past. Cut off from Earth historically, their world – the vast, automatic spaceship – comes to seem increasingly confined, and they begin to act out their search for origins variously as a spatial search for an outside and a technological search for grounding. The children's early world, before their maturity grants them access to the rest of the ship, consists solely of a gigantic nature park, a literal Kindergarten; as they grow and begin to run up against the boundaries of their world, they hide-and-peek, dig, and climb to probe the limits of their closure only to discover that these limits, in the form of unopenable doors and the ship's impenetrable hull, are apparently absolute. Looking elsewhere for origins, one day they trap and somewhat brutally dissect Guro, their robotic Socratic pedagogue, in order to find his soul, or whatever else it is that makes him tick. Of course they find nothing: it's circuits and wires all the way down. In this claustrophobic closure, the children begin to fear that the ship literally has no outside; that there is not even the empty space of outer space outside the hull, but nothing at all; that the ship *is* all that exists (43). While this specific fear is allayed by the progress of their education and training, it is not resolved but merely transferred to other fears – what if there were no earth, but merely a recursive nightmare of past ships which built new ships which built new ships, with the lack of a known origin betraying the lack of a purpose, goal, or point? What if their world were merely a Totaloscope simulation? What if the *Erbauer* had predetermined *everything*, even Beth's resistance to predetermination? "Ich sah es, ich spürte es: Das gesamte Schiff war eine titanische Maschinerie mit seit dem Start festgelegten Bewegungen. Selbst unser Freiheitsdrang, selbst meine Gedanken in diesem moment standen im Kalkül" (86). In the part of the novel that takes place aboard the ship, the lack of origins is a source of anxiety and terror, linked to a total spatial closure that recalls the

authors' description of normative, static utopias. This closure, by restricting access to both a past and an outside, would also seem to preclude the possibility of anything new, to the extent that even the creation of a new world and new society from the literal ground up is captured in advance by the all-determining weight of the present. In this way, *Andymon* concretizes a central modal dilemma of SF, socialist realism, and utopian literature: what is the relationship between what was, what is, and what might, should, could, or will be?<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, by staging the search for temporal origins in part as the search for a spatial outside, *Andymon* establishes as its central gesture a linkage between the categories of the outside, the other, and the new, so that predetermination and the impossibility of change are made analogous to a claustrophobic spatial closure. Not only does this provoke ready associations with geopolitical features of the Eastern bloc, but by inverting the way that classical utopias were predicated on spatial closure or isolation in order to guarantee their visions of newness and otherness, *Andymon* is able to critique that genre on its own terms.

The ship's total spatiotemporal closure disintegrates when its passengers reach the planet *Andymon* and begin the project of transforming its stormy, toxic, lifeless atmosphere into one fit for human life. Specific problems of weather, genetic manipulation, rates of mutation, and the general unpredictability of biologic evolution and terraforming prompt Beth to revise his former view – "Die Macht der Erbauer, ihre Pläne und Kalkulationen reichte [*sic*] nicht über das Schiff hinaus" (158). Describing the process of creating microbes that would transform the primordial atmosphere of *Andymon* into an earth-like, breathable atmosphere within a matter of months, he admits, "Alles konnten wir nicht kontrollieren" (185), a concession whose frustrated uncertainty also strikes an optimistic note, given the previous context of total closure. The point is not just

that biological life and the process of evolution are fundamentally unpredictable and thus outside centralized, static control systems, but that they also represent the possibility of alterity. This is made especially clear when, just before the engineered deluge that will irreversibly transform the planet's atmosphere and surface, a form of life is discovered on what was presumed to be a lifeless planet.

Im tiefen Inneren der Höhle stand übermannshoch und bizarr der Kristallbaum vor uns, ein Gebilde wie ein phantastischer Korallenstock, und strahlte je nach Einfallwinkel des Lichts in sattem Ultramarin, in hellem Kirschrot. Seine unzähligen spitzwinkligen Verästelungen gleißten karmin und violett, nur die feinsten äußersten Kanten und Spitzen umsäumte ein metallisches Grün. (127)

The shimmering tree-like form made of crystal they find deep within a cave might be alive, in its way, but if so, this would be a form of life that does not register within the inevitable anthropocentrism or geocentrism of the human characters (127).<sup>12</sup> Here a life form represents an unbridgeable otherness, and this alterity in turn is what prevented its original recognition as something alive. In the context of the linkage between outside, other, and new, the soon-to-be-extinct crystal tree indicates that, for *Andymon*'s utopian project, the truly new will always be in some fundamental sense incapable of being known or recognized in advance.<sup>13</sup>

If it seems trite or obvious to characterize life or biological evolution as a nexus between unpredictability and alterity, it is worth mentioning an earlier work of science fiction from the Soviet Union as a point of contrast. Ivan Efremov's 1957 novel *Andromeda* mobilized the idea of cosmic evolution to support a version of dialectical-materialist humanism. Just as the progress of history would inevitably result in communism on a galactic scale, so the course of evolution throughout the galaxy could only result in intelligent, civilized life that was also distinctly – morphologically and intellectually – human. In Efremov's novel, evolution and dialectics are

explicitly linked: during a paleontological expedition, we read the following description of a dinosaur skeleton: "Darr Veter could not take his eyes off the clumsy, heavy skeleton of the ancient beast that had been compelled to live as a prisoner of unresolved contradictions" (145-146). Indeed, it is noteworthy that Efremov's harmoniously resolved narrative treats non-human, wild nature with such savage, phylocidal frenzy, seen most clearly in the novel's descriptions of the "Destroyer Battalions," tasked with eradicating "relics of the past" such as sharks, poisonous fish, mollusks, and jellyfish.<sup>14</sup> The Steinmüllers were familiar with Efremov's novel, and explicitly favored Stanislaw Lem's take on alien alterity, in his novel *Solaris*, over Efremov's.<sup>15</sup> In *Andromeda*'s determined banishment of negativity and indeterminacy, and in its related epistemological yoking of the knowability of the future to the knowability of the past, Efremov's novel is a classically socialist-realist science fiction if ever there was one.

*Andymon*, on the other hand, uses biological indeterminacy to begin to shift the valence of unknowability. In the ship the unknowability of origins was a source of existential anxiety causing contradictory reactions ranging from doubts about the characters' very existence to fear that this existence is all too real and determined entirely in advance. On the planet Andymon, unknowability becomes a necessary component of terraforming as a work in progress. Neither is it lost on Beth, the narrator, that this necessarily contingent, dynamic, and open-ended process applies to the creation of society as surely as the creation of an ecology. Thus biologically as well as socially, the settlement of Andymon signals a shift from the static closure of the spaceship to the open, seemingly endless horizons of the empty planet.

Utopia is of course classically insular, however, and this applies to the insularity of a planet as well. Were *Andymon* a simple reversal of signs, privileging instead of the ship's

technocratic determinism the planet's biological openness and uncertainty, this would itself yield another sort of bad closure, a provincialism of the planetary local. *Andymon* could not effectively function as a critique of static utopias if it simply privileged insular space. This dilemma is staged in the novel as a social fracture between those who, like Beth, would preserve the ship's technology so as ultimately to build a new ship, and those of the younger generations who establish their own city based on a back-to-the-land ethos, rejecting the technology of the *Erbauer*, building affective, exclusive ties to the planet, and even having their own children biologically, in-utero rather than -vitro. Beth rebukes them for what he sees as parochial survivalist fantasies, calling them absurd "Robinsonades" – that is, fantasies of living like Robinson Crusoe (236). It is no accident that he accuses them specifically of "Robinsonades," a genre label that, after Defoe's original, brings J.G. Schnabel's 18th-century utopia *Insel Felsenburg* most readily to mind. The rebuke is that these space-Robinsons are laying the ground for another insular, static utopia. After the leader of these Robinsons is accused of erasing the ship's technological data banks, thus severing the group's link to humanity as a universal, and is found to have surveilled his own people in secret, one character opines, "Und das für die Zukunft Andymons. Ich kann das Wort nicht mehr hören" (253). The significance for both science fiction and socialist realism of a character declaring a visceral disgust for the word "future" should not be overlooked, especially in the context of *Perspektivbewußtsein*; here it marks a refusal to use the future in order to leverage the present. As in the ship, so on the planet: spatial closure is connected to the foreclosure of the future. Against this, *Andymon*'s society settles for dynamic tension between the two spaces – the freedom to pursue plural utopias as ongoing projects on *Andymon*, and the continuation of the ship-building project as a link to the universal, in both

senses of the word.

So the settlers of Andymon decide to build a new ship, identical to the one that was their first home, and send it to a distant star to settle another planet. Towards the end of the novel we learn that the text of the novel *Andymon* is Beth's retrospective chronicle of his life, which he has written to put on board the new ship for his descendant, an imagined Beth 2 at some point far in the future. Beth reasons that if Beth 2 has the knowledge he himself lacked, he could know his origins and avoid the existential panic of not knowing. Yet in the end Beth decides to withhold this knowledge, and not give the text to its intended recipient. He rationalizes this in the following way:

Ja, ursprünglich sollten [diese Aufzeichnungen] ein heimliches Geschenk für meinen Zwillings- und Nachfahren Beth Zwo im neuen Schiff werden, ihm durch rechtzeitige Information manche Schwierigkeit, manchen Fehler ersparen. Welche Illusion! Jeder muß seine Erfahrungen selbst machen. Und indem ich ihm die gleichen Startbedingungen gebe, erkenne ich die Notwendigkeit und Richtigkeit der Entwicklung unserer Gemeinschaft an. (287)

Uncertainty, a lack of knowledge, now has a positive function, and the recursivity of origins that had earlier been a source of vertiginous terror of purposelessness now becomes positively coded as part of the structure of an open project. Beth 2, not knowing his own origins any more than did Beth, will be compelled to ask his own questions, and engage in world-building, or rather utopia-building, as a necessarily open project. The formal conceit involved in revealing the frame narrative to the reader this late in the novel, drawing a text that had seemed to be a simple retrospective retelling of events into the novel's diegesis, also bears on the question of cognition, since in the very act of presenting his narrative to the reader, Beth is also revoking it as a historical document from his imagined *Nachfahre* and from the diegesis more generally. While the choice of "Notwendigkeit" might suggest the infiltration of determinism

after all, I read the emphasis differently: it is not the particular development of *Andymon*'s society that was necessary, but rather the freedom to start from scratch and develop a society outside of predetermination and a fixed narrative of historical development. The role of East German science fiction in the case of *Andymon* is thus to destabilize a present moment by interrupting the rigid continuum of past and future presumed by programmatic prescriptions of socialist realism.<sup>16</sup> *Andymon*, in problematizing a rigid temporal continuum, reopens time by reinserting the possible into the fixed diachrony of the necessary.

In this reading of *Andymon* I have tried to show that the novel constructs an extended analogy between space, time, and biology that brings different dynamics of closure, openings, alterity, and newness into productive contact with one another in order to destabilize and complicate both the epistemological fixity of socialist-realist cultural policy on the one hand, represented in the premiums placed on monosemia and *Perspektivbewußtsein*, and the static closure of classic utopias, on the other. As literature, it functions as immanent critique. In my reading of *Andymon*, I am therefore broadly following an underlying argument made by David Bathrick in *The Powers of Speech*, that literature of East Germany was unique within the socialist bloc because of the ways in which it was able to open up spaces for alternative critique within the framework of "the master code" of Marxism and state socialism (19). Yet, in distinction to the examples Bathrick draws on, the Steinmüllers' novel does not stage its immanent critique primarily on the formal or stylistic level.<sup>17</sup> Rather, *Andymon* explores logics of closure and opening by modeling them on the level of plot, in terms of actual dilemmas of closure, knowability, and difference faced in a conscious way by the characters of the novel. *Andymon* thereby insists upon utopian practice over utopian program, undermining



epistemological fixity and static closure in order to reopen the space and time of a utopian future.

In this way *Andymon* can be said to function as a thought experiment predicated on probing topologies of closure, and thus broadly fits into definitions of science fiction based on the category of cognition. While the valences of these definitions range widely, from situating science fiction as a rational genre opposed to the irrationalism of fantasy, to characterizing science fictional worlds as existing on a thinkable material, historical continuum with the reader's world, they tend to proceed from Darko Suvin's foundational definition of science fiction as the genre of "cognitive estrangement" (3-15). While I would certainly insist that *Andymon*'s complex and open-ended utopian commitment places it under the rubric of the literary thought experiment, more important in this context is the way it draws attention to the question of cognition by positively valuing a lack of knowledge. Sonja Fritzsche has persuasively analyzed how the literary question of utopia became a political site of struggle in the East German context between science fiction and socialist realism (73); I wish to extend this idea by suggesting that science fiction of the GDR can help reopen the question of the sometimes uneasy alliance of Lukács, Bloch, and Brecht that informs such work on science fiction by Marxist critics such as Darko Suvin, Fredric Jameson, and Carl Freedman. While Suvin, Jameson, and Freedman variously and productively link Lukács's narrative theory and conception of societies as complexly determined totalities, Bloch's work on Utopia and the idea of the "novum," and Brechtian estrangement or defamiliarization, the specific historical context of East Germany, in which all three were of course foundational cultural and aesthetic theorists, suggests the need to return to the articulation of such terms as narrative, utopia, cognition, totality, and popular literature. For one thing, doing so would give us the leverage to reconsider

the relationship between science fiction and utopian literature, genres which Suvin and Jameson often risk conflating. But beyond this, such questions around science fiction literature represent a local inflection of a longer debate within German critical theory about representation and form, and the adequate relationship between culture and politics.

Ultimately, then, I wish to ask what *Andymon*, by reclaiming Utopia, has to tell us about literary theory and various legacies of modernism. This may seem counterintuitive – after all, science fiction is not popularly credited with formal innovation, and *Andymon* is no exception in this regard. Here I wish to take up a hint dropped by Jameson, that science fiction transposes formal dilemmas of literary modernism to the level of plot,<sup>18</sup> and bring it into dialogue with the argument made by Julia Hell, Katie Trumpener, and Loren Kruger<sup>19</sup> that socialist realism, far from being a regressive rejection of modernism and formal innovation, must instead be understood as a continuation of key aspects of literary modernism on different terrain. Together, these ideas suggest a literary-theoretical importance of science fiction despite (or precisely because of) its *apparent* disinterest in formal or stylistic innovation. Thus it is not as a separate endeavor from proper, high literature that science fiction must be read – i.e., as a mass, popular genre, worthy in its own right – but as an inflection and reconfiguration of crucial questions of literature and theory of the 20th century linking narrative, closure, and history. In the exemplary case of *Andymon*, this necessitates a topological way of reading, attentive to apparently banal details of openings and closures on the diegetic level in order to raise questions about more formal and theoretical kinds of closure. Such a style of reading would need to consider closely the genre-specific strategies available to the literary text in its historical and political context, but would also seek to situate it along broader trajectories of literary-theoretical dialogues that

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disrupt the narrower constraints of period, area studies, or the study of mass culture. In *Andymon* we have a popular novel that, as if from its extraterrestrial Archimedean point, pries open a complex social dialogue among aesthetics, politics, and culture. Its task and contribution, as I see them, are not just to destabilize the relationship between its own past and future, but, as good science fiction ought, to help unsettle the relationship between our own pasts and futures; as readers, critics, and perhaps utopians.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Andymon* was the most popular science fiction text published in East Germany, according to a 1989 survey of science fiction readers and fan clubs (Steinmüller 1995, 173).

<sup>2</sup> In addition to Sonja Fritzsche's pathbreaking cultural history of GDR science fiction and David Bathrick's work on GDR literature as constituting an alternative public sphere, my understanding of the possible relationships between science fiction and socialist realism has been informed by Katerina Clark's recovery of ambiguity and polysemia within the "formulaic" genre of Soviet socialist-realist novels, Matthias Schwartz's reconstruction of the shifting political stakes and genre-specific possibilities for "science fantasy" in the Soviet Union, and Yevgeniy Zamyatin's preemptive 1923 critique of socialist realism.

<sup>3</sup> "[L]iterary dissidence in the GDR often began *not* as a philosophical or political challenge to the ideological principles of Marxist-Leninism but as a sometimes unintended fall into 'polysemic' modes of address that, by virtue of their multiplicity of meaning, were perforce understood and evaluated as negative, that is, as subversive of the official, 'monosemic' mode of discourse" (Bathrick 16). For an additional interpretation of the way that official SED policy entailed monosemia in the service of a desired *Parteilichkeit*, see Zima.

<sup>4</sup> "In two interrelated ways works of art in accordance with socialist realism are the result of *prefabrication*: as works reflecting "reality," they present a cognitive organization after the fact, that is, one that conforms and is subordinate to a set of "objective," "natural" processes. Second, the view of these processes is itself to be informed by an objective science that already "knows" certain outcomes by virtue of the categories it employs (the inevitable arrival of socialism after the inevitable collapse of capitalism, etc.). Once given these two interfacing premises (the inevitability of "socialist" history and the infallibility of the science that will know it), it follows that the Party can install itself as the omniscient mediator of the whole process" (97).

<sup>5</sup> "Fregatov's books are called science fiction, and they tell about distant worlds to which the inhabitants of our planet in the twenty-first and twenty-second centuries fly in spaceships. Their technology, science, and terminology have been thought up by Fregatov, and they seem pseudoscientific, since none of them rests on any of the existing sciences" (Toman 164).

<sup>6</sup> "What can the limits of science be? Have you really forgotten what a sad existence our science fiction eked out during the period of the cult, when fantasizing was allowed only within the limits of the Five-Year Plan for the national economy ..." (166).

<sup>7</sup> On the way that science fiction was recast as an educational genre in the Soviet Union with the task of preparing readers for the immediate future, see Schwartz, 244.

<sup>8</sup> As they describe their project in the new afterword to *Andymon*, "Wir hatten bei Ernst Bloch über den grundsätzlichen Gegensatz von Freiheit und Ordnung in Utopien gelesen, und wir gingen daran, den Widerspruch aufzulösen. Die klassischen Utopien von Morus, Bacon und Campanella kannten wir, und sie hatten in unseren Augen sämtlich einen Nachteil: in ihnen dominierte die Ordnung, um nicht Zucht zu sagen. Trotz dem grellen Licht der Vernunft roch die Sonnenstadt miefig. Ein Hauch von 'demokratischem Zentralismus' à la DDR wehte über ihren Mauern" (291).

<sup>9</sup> It should be noted in passing that this access to the past, far from reinforcing a common identity, in fact leads to semantic fragmentation. Where earlier the children, because of their communal lifestyle, had been able to communicate in a sort of shared shorthand, the Totaloscope introduces linguistic difference and gestural ambiguity: "Jetzt lernten wir sogar unterschiedliche Sprachen, eigneten uns Gesten an, die die anderen nie gesehen hatten" (51).

<sup>10</sup> "Mit Gefühlen und unauslöschlichen Erinnerungen fesselten uns die Totaloskope an die Erde.

Wir sahen die Welt des Schiffs nun mit neuen Augen, im Licht neuer Erfahrungen. Das Schiff, einst so unermesslich groß, wurde uns eng" (53).

<sup>11</sup> Katerina Clark has usefully characterized this as the "modal schizophrenia" of socialist realism (37).

<sup>12</sup> "Was, wenn nun dieses unirdische kristallene Gebilde lebte? Selbstverständlich hatten unsere Sonden auf Andymon nach Lebensspuren gesucht, aber nach Leben, wie wir es von der Erde her kannten. Was, wenn gleich unsere erste Sonde Leben auf Andymon vorgefunden hätte?" (127)

<sup>13</sup> For more on the relationship between aliens, alterity, anthropomorphism, and unknowability, see Jameson's essay on Stanisław Lem (2007, 107-118).

<sup>14</sup> A description of the purification of the oceans reads as follows: "The sea was transparent, shining, cleansed of the relics of the past, of predatory sharks, poisonous fish, molluscs and medusae in the same way as the life of present-day man has been cleansed of the evil and fear of past centuries. But somewhere in the distant corners of the boundless ocean the seeds of harmful life have survived and we have the Destroyer Battalions to thank for keeping our ocean waters safe and clean" (338). Thus Jameson's reading of the novel's displacement of negativity could be expanded to include its psychotically harmonious and rigorously maintained ecology. See Jameson (290-291).

<sup>15</sup> "Zu erwähnen ist insbesondere der Einfluß des Erneuerers der sowjetischen SF Iwan Jefremow. Ganz im Sinne des herrschenden Geschichtsbilds vertrat Jefremow eine streng deterministische Auffassung von der naturgeschichtlichen und gesellschaftlichen Entwicklung, gleich auf welchem Planeten. [...] Eine entgegengesetzte Position vertrat der Pole Stanisław Lem mit seinen kybernetisch inspirierten Spekulationen von einem vernunftbegabten Ozean (*Solaris*, 1961) [...] Die DDR-SF blieb jedoch mit geringfügigen Ausnahmen bis in die siebziger Jahre der Jefremowschen Theorie verpflichtet" (Steinmüller 1995, 89).

<sup>16</sup> The inability to imagine the future, the demonstration of which is the "deepest vocation" of science fiction according to Jameson, takes on a different significance in a cultural-political context that sought to guarantee the fixed, monosemic legibility of an unalienated future. See Jameson (288-289).

<sup>17</sup> But indeed, the role of formal ambiguity is certainly also present in *Andymon*, and has been theorized by Damien Broderick as the formal specificity of the genre of science fiction as such. Broderick, drawing among others on the theories and novels of Samuel Delany, argues for a semiotic, stylistic understanding of science fiction as a *mode* of writing characterized by an intensified intertextuality and a defamiliarizing recombinatory approach to language, a code requiring an apprenticeship of the reader. While I have chosen to focus on formal dynamics on the diegetic level in my reading of *Andymon*, I think that Broderick's approach to the language of science fiction could be very fruitfully brought into contact with Bathrick's account of GDR literature as constituting an alternative public sphere.

<sup>18</sup> "At the same time, however, closure or the narrative ending is the mark of that boundary or limit beyond which thought cannot go. *The merit of SF is to dramatize this contradiction on the level of plot itself*, since the vision of future history cannot know any punctual ending of this kind, at the same time that its novelistic expression demands some such ending" (283, italics mine).

<sup>19</sup> In the introduction to their dossier of articles, Hell, Kruger, and Trumpener describe their project in this way: "What emerges from the detailed readings and historical juxtapositions of these three essays is not only a surprisingly polyvocal socialist realism, but also new strategies for reopening discussion of the larger aesthetic and political problems raised by the literature of the GDR. The dossier opposes the newly fashionable and elitist aestheticism of Bohrer and Ulrich Greiner with a conception of German studies that emphasizes the investigation of cultural practices and focuses on the complex interplay of

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literary text, politics, and history by appropriating the most advanced 'formalist' reading strategies. This project has of course its own political subtext, in that it aims to uncover the silent and silencing network of aestheticism and the repression of Germany's pasts. By bringing critical textual and political strategies to bear on seemingly monological texts, the dossier hopes to demonstrate the productivity of approaches that refuse not only the dominant Western notions of literary excellence, but also the SED's definition of socialist realism as a closed artistic system."

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