

Call for Papers

The ‘Second World’ in Contemporary British Writing

‘A soul could be destroyed in one of three ways: by what others did to you; by what others made you do to yourself; and by what you voluntarily chose to do to yourself.’

Julian Barnes, *The Noise of Time* (2016)

Confirmed keynote speakers: **Richard Brown** (University of Leeds), **Ágnes Györke** (Károli Gáspár University, Budapest)

At a time marked by the congruence of dystopian anxieties and ‘the monotony of post-heroic’ liberal democracies (Krastev and Holmes 2019), post-1990 literary explorations of ‘really existing’ socialist systems of the Central and Eastern European past appear both at odds with the expectation that contemporary culture should respond to present-day concerns, and oddly significant. Since the end of the Cold War, an increasing number of British writers, including Julian Barnes, Natasha Walter, Martin Amis, Fiona Rintoul, Tibor Fischer, Ian McEwan, Mike Phillips, and Francis Spufford, have employed characters and settings of the so-called ‘second world’, whose states had claimed to have structurally established idea(l)s that were once considered utopian. Moreover, the apparent desire to review and imaginatively revisit past ‘utopias’ has been conceptualized by Zygmunt Bauman as *retrotopia*, the desire to retrieve – through creatively engaging with ‘genuine or putative aspects of this past’ – the utopian potential that it represented. While the ‘retrotopia derives its stimulus from the hope of reconciling, at long last, *security with freedom*’, this hope is no longer projected into the future, but now ‘located in the lost/stolen/abandoned but undead past’ (Bauman 2017). Different from mere nostalgia – the ‘sentiment of loss and displacement [that becomes] a romance with one’s own fantasy’ (cf. Boym 2001) – Bauman nevertheless considers the *retrotopia* another ‘member of the rather extended family of affectionate relationship with an “elsewhere”’. A retrotopian perspective is not discouraged but thrives on the ‘incompleteness and contentiousness of any attempt at a comprehensive and coherent narrative of the “as things actually happened” sort’, which ‘are precisely the advantages of the past when attracting people seeking defensible trench lines for their faith’ (Bauman 2017).

The growing body of contemporary British writing that engages with ‘second-world’ settings and characters draws on established motifs of imaginative East-West encounters, which have long featured in British literature and culture. From dystopian novels interested in totalitarianism and ‘what they considered the ideological failures of socialism and the aesthetic failures of socialist

realism' (Hammond 2017) to popular genres like the British thriller and the spy narrative (and their multimedia adaptations), literary-cultural representations of the 'second world' have provided both entertainment and a foil to post-imperial Britain's national identity in the twentieth century (Bradford 2009; Korte, Pirker, and Helff 2010; Frenk and Krug 2011). While there is considerable research on representations of the 'second world' in British writing during the Cold War period, and a growing body of scholarship on contemporary cultural representations of 'post-socialist' Central and Eastern Europe (Starck 2009), scholars have paid much less attention to the ways in which British writing in the three decades since the fall of the 'Iron Curtain' has continued to imaginatively engage with what had been, and arguably still is, viewed as a possible alternative to both capitalism and democracy for many in the West as well.

Building on and aiming to complement these debates with new perspectives, the symposium invites critical investigations of contemporary British writing published after the fall of the Berlin Wall, but whose narrative focus lies on the Eastern and Central European past of the Cold War period – the so-called 'second world'. We are interested in papers that explore the disturbing potentials, productive prevarications, and the general appeal and promise of imaginative appropriations of this historical setting.

We welcome abstracts (300 words) for 20-minute papers from researchers at all career stages. Contributions may address, but are not limited to, the following aspects:

- ❖ Utopia-Dystopia-Retrotopia: Imaginary (Re/De)Constructions of the 'Elsewhere'
- ❖ The 'Second World' as the 'Other': Potentials and Limits of Alterity
- ❖ Retrotopian Perspectives on Totalitarian Ideology
- ❖ Literary and Cultural Legacies of British Cold War Genres
- ❖ Poetics of the Past, Allegories of the Present
- ❖ Narrative Conceptions of the Private, the Political, and the Civil
- ❖ Motifs of Courage / Cowardice / Compliance / Complicity
- ❖ Imagining 'Class' in 'Really Existing' Socialist Settings
- ❖ The 'Second World' in Theatre: Global Drama on the National Stage
- ❖ Metabiography, Memoir, Personal History, and Biofiction

Please submit your abstract and a short biographical note (in pdf) to

secworld@anglistik.uni-halle.de

by 28 March 2022.

We especially encourage proposals from doctoral and postdoctoral researchers. There is limited funding (for reimbursement of attendance costs) available for adjuncts, unwaged researchers, and

scholars based in Central and Eastern Europe, whose abstracts have been accepted for conference presentation. For further information, please contact the organizers after having received notification that your abstract has been accepted.

Please note that the conference is planned as an in-person event, scheduled to take place at Martin-Luther-University Halle-Wittenberg (Germany).

Further information can be found at <https://secworld.anglistik.uni-halle.de/>.

Works Cited

- Barnes, Julian. *The Noise of Time*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2016.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. *Retrotopia*. Cambridge: Polity, 2017.
- Bradford, Richard. *The Novel Now: Contemporary British Fiction*. New York: Wiley, 2009.
- Boym, Svetlana. *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books, 2001.
- Frenk, Joachim and Christian Krug (eds.). *The Cultures of James Bond*. Trier: WVT, 2011.
- Hammond, Andrew. *Cold War Stories: British Dystopian Fiction, 1945–1990*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.
- Korte, Barbara, Eva U. Pirker, and Sissy Helff (eds.). *Facing the East in the West: Images of Eastern Europe in British Literature, Film and Culture*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010.
- Krastev, Ivan and Stephen Holmes. *The Light That Failed*. London: Allan Lane, 2019.
- Starck, Kathleen (ed.). *When the World Turned Upside-Down: Cultural Representations of Post-1989 Eastern Europe*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishers, 2009.