When the Gods Died: A Socialist Utopian Novel from East Germany

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"That science fiction is didactic hardly needs proof [...]" (Russ n.p.), affirmed Joanna Russ in her article, "Towards an Aesthetic of Science Fiction," published in *Science Fiction Studies* in 1975. This is achieved through a "cognitive estrangement" (Suvin 4) that stimulates the reader's mind and reflection. Especially in science fiction utopias, the reader can think about solutions for a new, better world or simply follow the solutions proposed by the author.

In the case of Günther Krupkat's *Als die Götter starben* [*When the Gods Died*, 1963], a *Paläoaustronautik*-science fiction[1] novel from East Germany, the author imagines a utopian world where everyone is equal and transfers the hope for this to the reader. While the text does not present a concrete image of a socialist society, the characters' orientation to the future (Schieder 923) and the value of equality lead the readers/critics to assume that the utopia is a socialist one. In fact, the novel imparts basic socialist values to the readers so that they themselves can construct a new order.

To create utopia, the writer uses several tools such as myths, philosophic references, and technological elements. This method of constructing utopia in the novel will be analyzed, but before this analysis, it is necessary to clarify some definitions and to present some historical information alongside the literary background of East German science fiction.

Definitions

Utopia, as is well known, is literally the description of a world that has no place, an ideal world. The myth can make this ideal plausible since it constitutes the collective memory (J. Assmann 56). This means that it can be used as a geno-text (Koschorke n.p.). The myth can thus legitimize a writer's creation, the utopian world. Therefore, myth is an important structural element in utopias. The ideal world does not only consist of myths, but also philosophical elements. The first utopias were written by philosophers such as Thomas More or Tommaso Campanella. At the beginning, this literary form was typical of philosophy (Lorenz 13). However, with the revaluation of this type of text as an instrument of political engagement in the early 20th century (Leucht 9), utopian literature evolved. Moreover, beginning with the Industrial Revolution, utopias began to incorporate technology and futuristic worlds, leading to the emergence of science fiction as a distinct genre.

As Darko Suvin has shown, science fiction generates a "cognitive estrangement" through the creation of a "novum" (Suvin 4). The novum is, according to Adam Roberts, the difference between the ideal and the real world (Roberts 28). Determining a bounding line between science fiction and utopia is hard since many utopias are part of science fiction. Despite this, people

commonly think that utopia is not rational, unlike science fiction. Utopia presents an inverted image of the real world, using philosophy and technology to create a world that is the opposite of reality (Ueding 22). By presenting a fantastic and ideal world, utopia is able to provide a commentary on reality. Science fiction and utopia are thus closely intertwined genres, with science fiction often reflecting our present reality. According to Suvin (Suvin qtd. in Esselborn 30), utopia can be considered a subgenre of science fiction, although it is important to note that utopia predates science fiction. We could say that towards the beginning of the genre, at the end of the 19th century, they were almost the same thing, but from the 20th century onwards, science fiction has become an autonomous mass genre (Schulz qtd. in Rauen 8) and technology started to play a more consistent role within it. In Germany, before the term science fiction was used for novels that described alternative possible worlds, the term *Zukunftsroman* was in use. Hans Esselborn distinguishes between a *Zukunftsroman* (novel of the future) and a *Staatsutopie* (State utopia). A 'State utopia' is an alternative to the real world, while the 'novel of the future' is a possible alternative. Esselborn thus links the definition of science fiction to the concept of possibility (Esselborn 32) referring to Jameson's utopian theory in *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005). In the case of science fiction utopias like the novel analyzed in this article, possible worlds and ideal alternatives to reality are blended.

Often, the utopian worlds are related to a precise political ideology. This article, for example, analyses a socialist science fiction utopia from East Germany and investigates the characteristics of the ideology it presents. The approach taken is not ideologically critical towards the author's political position. Science fiction is often stigmatized as propaganda,[2] but this analysis aims to avoid such misconceptions. Presenting the political and literary background of a text can aid in distinguishing propagandistic literature and identifying ideological elements in the novel.

East Germany: historical, political, and literary background

Writing literature in the Eastern Bloc after the Second World War was challenging due to censorship and limited exchange with international literature from the Western bloc. The text under analysis was published in the 1960s. This section presents the historical, political, and literary background of the decade.

In 1949, the State of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) was established, replacing the previous Soviet occupation zone. The German socialist regime underwent various phases, similar to the Soviet regime. The *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands* (SED, Socialist Unity Party of Germany) was the sole political party. In the 1960s, the secretary of the Communist Party of East Germany was Walter Ulbricht, who was responsible for the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961. After some initial tension, this period was primarily characterized by a calmer atmosphere until 1965, when Leonid Brezhnev came to power in the Soviet Union. Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik* brought a rapprochement between the two German States at the end of the 1960s (Emmerich 246-247). The situation appeared to remain unchanged with the appointment of Erich Honecker as the new secretary of the SED party in 1971. In December 1971, he stated: "If you start from the firm

position of socialism, I believe there can be no taboos in the field of art and literature"[3] (Honecker qtd. in Emmerich 247). He believed that socialist art should not have any taboos. However, after a few years, the conditions for artists worsened, reaching a low point with Biermann's *Ausbürgerung* (expatriation) in 1974. Wolf Biermann had his East German citizenship revoked after he expressed his criticism against the GDR and he accepted to perform at a concert in Cologne, broadcast on West German television. Biermann's deprivation of East German citizenship led to massive protests, since he was not a GDR enemy and did not want to escape to West Germany. Many intellectuals signed a letter to protest against his expatriation, despite maintaining a distance from Biermann's actions. (Emmerich 252-255). From that moment on, the prospects for artists in the GDR became considerably more challenging and the intellectuals' trust in the party noticeably declined (Emmerich 252-255). The literary field also experienced the effects of these political shifts.

During the early 1960s, there were some tensions between artists and the regime following the construction of the Berlin Wall. Around 1965, restrictions on intellectuals and campaigns against Western art increased (Steinmüller n.p.). During certain periods, censorship was more difficult than others, but Western science fiction could only be published in East Germany towards the end of the 1970s (Steinmüller n.p.). The literary canon in East Germany, as well as in the Soviet Union, was characterized by socialist realism, which influenced many literary genres, including science fiction. Science fiction was called *wissenschaftliche Phantastik*, derived from the Russian expression *nauchnaya fantastika* (scientific fantasy). However, at the beginning, the genre was considered to be *Schund und Schmutz* literature (literally 'trash and smut') (Fritzsche 48) and was perceived as being useless for society. This situation persisted until 1962 when, at the *Konferenz zur Zukunftsliteratur* (Conference for the Literature of the Future), the aim of science fiction was recognized by the Writers' Union. The official ideology aimed to use the genre as a means of educating people in both ideological and scientific fields (Fritzsche 162). According to Angela and Karlheinz Steinmüller, the definition of the text form could reveal whether a literary work was in line with the regime's ideology. In the science fiction field, there were *utopische Romane* (utopian novels), *technisch-utopische Romane* (technological-utopian novels), *Science Fiction*, *wissenschatlich-phantastische Literatur* (scientific-fantastic literature), and *Utopie* (utopia). The term 'utopia' was often aligned with the regime, while the 'utopian novel' conveyed Marxist values to the reader without necessarily agreeing with state ideology (Steinmüller n.p.). Anti-utopia was not common in the GDR, as it was seen as being in direct opposition to the socialist utopia and was censored accordingly. Therefore, authors had to carefully choose how to define their texts and incorporate any criticism of the regime through narratological elements. The term 'science fiction' began to be used in the West during the 1920s and 1930s, while it only became popular in the Eastern bloc during the 1980s due to strong campaigns against Western science fiction (Steinmüller n.p.).

After 1962, science fiction literature in the GDR reached its peak in terms of sales. With the launch of Sputnik in 1957, interest in science and space had already increased, and science fiction

literature often featured stories set on other planets. Walter Ulbricht's Scientific and Technological Revolution[4] (Fritzsche 103) marked the beginning of science fiction being recognized as a valuable tool for disseminating knowledge about science and technology. However, while the quantity of texts was at an all-time high, the quality of them had not yet peaked. This peak was only achieved in the 1970s alongside the emergence of new wave science fiction (Steinmüller n.p.). The 1960s marked a maturing phase for GDR science fiction, as important authors like Eberhardt del'Antonio began to incorporate social topics into their texts. Through explorations of other planets and *Paläoastronautik*-science fiction, which referenced both the past and present reality, interest in progress and socialist values was disseminated. In 1972, the *Arbeitskreis für Utopische Literatur* (Committee on Utopian Literature) was founded to outline the East German utopian canon. Günther Krupkat served as its director, although some authors chose not to participate due to the perceived political nature of the initiative (Fritzsche 187-188). This event is linked to the didactic role of science fiction mentioned earlier. How can science fiction be didactic? Is this didacticism itself part of the national canon?

The term 'didactic' can have a dual meaning. It refers not only to "propaganda or political leftism," but also to "teaching as a means of addressing significant changes in human life conditions" (Russ n.p.). As mentioned earlier, science fiction had to educate readers in accordance with the regime and the Writers' Union. However, a didactic text is not just a work that aligns with the State. This can be exemplified also by the typical Soviet (and East German) science fiction hero, defined by Elana Gomel as the 'New Man.' The 'New Man' is the result of the contrast between utopian ideals and historical reality and is representative of socialist humanism that is antithetical to the Western notion of the self (Gomel 358). This contrast can thus impart values to the reader or stimulate critical reflection. The next sections will demonstrate this dual meaning present in Günther Krupkat's novel *Als die Götter starben*, which is defined by the author himself as a *utopischer Roman*.

The Author

Günther Krupkat was born in Berlin in 1905. He was an engineer. After completing his studies, he began writing novels and worked with radio and press. In 1933, due to his active participation in the German resistance against National Socialism, he was forced to flee to Czechoslovakia (Frey n.p.). Following the end of the Second World War, he returned to Germany and settled in East Berlin, where he continued to work as an independent writer. Krupkat's literary works include science fiction and historical novels. He gained popularity through his science fiction novels, particularly with his first, *Die Unsichtbaren* [The Invisibles, 1958], which was inspired by the first landings on the moon (Frey n.p.). The novel *Die große Grenze* [The Large Limit, 1960] was also significant for the development of East German science fiction. In this work, the author explored social and technological elements. He later published other science fiction texts, such as *Als Die Götter starben* [When the Gods Died, 1963] and its sequel, *Nabou* (1968). This author is well-known for his invention of the Biomat figure (Steinmüller n.p.), a bio-robot,

which represents the protagonist, Nabou. He also wrote many short stories, most of which were moralistic (Simon and Spittel 185).

In 1972, he became the director of the *Arbeitskreis für Utopische Literatur* and was one of the best-known science fiction writers in East Germany, along with Eberhardt del'Antonio. He was a member of the Writers' Union and was highly regarded by the regime. Krupkat attempted to establish the defining elements of East German utopia while in the *Arbeitskreis für Utopische Literatur*. In 1978, he retired due to his age, and he passed away in Berlin in 1990 (Steinmüller n.p.).

The novel *Als die Götter starben*

The novel *Als die Götter starben* is divided into five parts: *Endymion*, *Phobos*, *Meju*, *Sodom und Gomorra*, and *Heliopolis*. Each section consists of short chapters. The plot unfolds on two different time levels: one part of the action is set in the future, where a group of travelers embark on a space expedition. The other part is set thousands of years earlier, when the inhabitants of the double planet Meju-Ortu were considered gods. The protagonist and main character is Erik Olden, an archaeologist who participates in an expedition along with several other individuals.

In the first phase, the group travels to the lunar city of Endymion and discovers some remnants of the ancient gods, including the ruins of a spaceship. These discoveries prompt Olden and the other travelers to relocate to the satellite Phobos in search of additional evidence. Olden is convinced that these ancient gods constructed the Baalbek[5] Terrace and the Babel Tower. In the second part, the travelers are on Phobos, and with the help of some robots, they discover inscriptions and a film about the past. Olden then begins to work on translating them. In the third part, he informs his comrades about the contents of the discovered documents. He recounts the story of planet Imra, where the population used to worship the Mejuanians[6] as gods. An evil god named Isu Dag impoverished the people from Imra and enslaved them. Moreover, a dictatorship was set up by Imra's governor, Assar. The people of Meju-Ortu were worshipped as gods, as they considered each and every individual in front of them to be equal. Some of the planet's inhabitants attempt to enter the forbidden Valley of the Gods, causing a catastrophe on the planet of Meju-Ortu. As a result, some Mejuanians—specifically, Termon and Gil—decide to escape to Earth, where they recreate a society that is based on the principles of egalitarianism and solidarity common to Meju-Ortu. In the fourth part, Meju-Ortu becomes the star of the gods. Olden describes the catastrophe and the death of the gods until the travelers decide to return to Earth to find more traces of them. In the fifth section, they visit the Baalbek Terrace and discover a depiction of the solar system. Meju-Ortu is portrayed as the planet located between Mars and Jupiter. This suggests that the presence of gods is real and inspires Olden to embark on further explorations, including a journey to Atlantis. The pursuit of knowledge and progress is unending.

In writing this story, the author was inspired by a visit to the Baalbek Terrace in present-day Lebanon (Simon and Spittel, 183). At that time there were several beliefs in circulation, according to which its construction (and also that of other ancient buildings) had extraterrestrial origins.

However, he had no intention of revising the real history, as Erik von Däniken, one of the main proponents of this pseudo-history, does (Both qtd. in Frey n.p.). These paleontological elements were used by science fiction writers in the GDR to illustrate the strength of a classless society that existed in the distant past. (Fritzsche 114). This is one of the reasons why Krupkat's text can be defined as a socialist utopian novel. The author employs mythical and philosophical elements to construct a utopia based on the values of equality and community that he wishes to convey to the readers. The following section will examine how these elements relate to science fiction.

Text Analysis

The novel *Als die Götter starben* can be classified as *Paläoastronautik*-science fiction because its narrative, as previously mentioned, involves two different timelines, past and future, and follows an archaeologist's search for ancient historical elements that are related to theories of a time in which astronautics did not exist. Technology, used by the gods in antiquity and enabling interplanetary travel during the expedition, plays a dominant role. Krupkat constructs a utopia through the deconstruction and reconstruction of myths and philosophical elements. The novel suggests that the ancient gods have left traces of an ideal socialist society, whose values are brought to Earth by the Mejuanians Termon and Gil. The pursuit of progress is necessary to create the perfect society after the gods' deaths.

In the novel, there are various mythologizing processes and mythological references used. In particular, the author mythologizes the construction of Baalbek by ancient gods through a narrative frame and the artifice of finding the aforementioned film. The film tells the story of the planet Meju-Ortu, enabling Olden and others to reach the Baalbek Terrace and discover that it was built by the Mejuanians. The catastrophe that destroys the planet is compared to that of the biblical cities Sodom and Gomorrah, as desired by god, but the text presents an ambiguous image of the ancient gods. While they are portrayed as good and having left behind important values such as equality, the utopian world is depicted as having been built on Earth through the belief in progress, rendering the gods unnecessary: "...There have always been dissatisfied people. You would have to be more than a god to make them satisfied"[7] (Krupkat n.p.). Additionally, the description of the Tower of Babel myth in the novel suggests god's failure. The city of Heliopolis (the Greek name of the ancient Baalbek), whose concrete description is not given by the author, was founded by Termon and Gil, who escaped from an apocalypse on Meju-Ortu. The city's foundation is legitimized through these mythological and religious references, which make the utopian city possible. This relates also to Tommaso Campanella's *The City of the Sun*.[8]

Secondly, philosophy, together with its interaction with myth, legitimizes the gods' deaths and the creation of a new society. The death of the gods is a Nietzschean element and represents a subversive moment that breaks with the past. In Krupkat's text, it marks the end of the past and the beginning of the future. The past is represented by the dictatorship of Assar on the planet Imra, which could be associated with National Socialism. After the catastrophe of the death of the gods (a clear allusion to the end of the Second World War), the future is socialism, equality, and

community. Equality is the main value left by the gods, opposing the slavery imposed by Assar on Imra: "'The meaning of the divine sentence is obscure. I am unable to interpret it. Should the slave eat the same as the master, the poor share in the goods of the rich? For the gods, people are just people...'"[9] (Krupkat n.p.). This fracture creates a mechanism of subversion and affirmation simultaneously. Sonja Fritzsche identifies this process as typical of GDR literature (16). The *Übermensch* advocates progress, which propels society "to the stars" (Krupkat n.p.). This kind of person is the ideal socialist 'New Man' (Gomel 358), like Erik Olden, who—even immediately after the discovery in Baalbek—is already thinking about the next mission: finding Atlantis. This is also an important mythological and philosophical reference since this island was imagined by Plato as a monarchy, whose failure is opposed to the victorious Athenian democracy. The island sinking into the ocean (the catastrophe) is also a way of conveying a message: readers will build a new order.

As stated previously, the attainment of this goal requires advanced technology. The novel depicts spaceships capable of travelling at light speed and robots aiding travelers in excavating tunnels to uncover traces of the gods. Rationality is a fundamental criterion for constructing a 'bright tomorrow' and is a key characteristic of science fiction. Technology serves as the bridge between myth and science fiction. Progress is indeed consistently portrayed as '*Helle*' (brightness) throughout the text. This also connects to the city of Heliopolis, which is named after the sun, symbolizing guidance towards a bright future. The protagonist's interest in legends and history, as well as his forward-thinking nature, positions him as a socialist 'New Man' for readers to emulate. The structured personality of heroes is crucial for the didactic purpose of science fiction, according to Angela and Karlheinz Steinmüller (Steinmüller n.p.). At the end of the novel, Erik Olden gazes at the stars, prompting readers to follow the light of the future: "Olden raises his eyes to the stars. Everything around him seems to be sinking. Only the murmur stays in his ear. Until it fades away in the dying wind. But Erik Olden stands on the terrace still for a long time. And looks up to the sparkling worlds, to the distant goal"[10] (Krupkat n.p.). This conclusion can be seen as an echo of the final verses of the *Divine Comedy*, in which Dante evokes god as the engine of the stars, while Krupkat praises the human who aims for the stars (Dante Par. 33. 143-45).

It is important to note that the elements described above not only serve to legitimize a utopian world but also inspire readers to build a new one. The past is behind us, the present is a moment of discovery, and the future is bright. People should strive for perfection, as exemplified by the stars. This is the novel's moral lesson. It is essential to note that this message is not propaganda, but rather a socialist idea of its time. The primary objective of the society was progress through equality and community without the necessity of supernatural gods. The educational aim, as previously mentioned, is a common theme in science fiction. The first period of GDR science fiction was indeed characterized by socialist didactic novels that aimed to promote progress, as with Krupkat's text.

Conclusion

The background and textual analysis show that 1960s science fiction in socialist East Germany was strongly influenced by the idea of the socialist 'New Man,' common in socialist realist literature. The texts aim to build a 'New Man' who can strive for progress and a better future. This didactic aim of East German science fiction of the time is ambiguous, as it could be a way of conforming to the regime, but also serves as a stimulus for readers to reflect on their world. In Krupkat's case, it is clear that his socialist ideology functions as the basis of the utopian construction, but it is wrong to argue that this utopia is a propagandistic one. The elevated values of equality and community are not only an important element of the (ideal) socialist society, but also of democratic thought. The moral could therefore be described as positive, even in relation to our contemporary world. This is what makes these texts so interesting. Thus, it can be emphasized that science fiction and its relationship to ideology deserve in-depth analysis in the academic field to explore the mutual influence between real and fictional worlds.

Notes

Unless otherwise stated, all translations from German to English are mine.

1. The German term *Präaustronautik* (in East Germany *Paläoastronautik*) is employed to designate all those theories and speculations concerning the presence of extraterrestrials on Earth in the distant past. Proponents of this speculation argue that such visits would have left some traces. In East Germany, these ideas began to emerge even before the publication of Erik von Däniken's theories (in: *Chariots of the Gods? Unsolved Mysteries of the Past*, 1968) and influenced science fiction. (Frey n.p.) It must be clarified that Günther Krupkat visited the Baalbek Terrace (part of Roman temples in Lebanon) before writing the novel and he imagined it to have some extraterrestrial origin, independent of what Erik von Däniken later affirmed (Simon and Spittel 183). The classification of the novel as *Paläoastronautik*-science fiction is solely based on the inclusion of paleontological elements, used to legitimize the higher origin of socialism.

2. In Germany, Manfred Nagl was among the first and most influential literary critics to conduct research on German science fiction. Consequently, his perspective has significantly influenced the development of science fiction studies in the country. In the 1970s, he viewed science fiction as mass literature utilized as a tool to disseminate racism and fascism. However, in the present era, his ideology-critical perspective is frequently rejected due to its limited comprehension of the global dimensions of German science fiction (Frey n.p.).

3. Translated from German: "Wenn man von der festen Position des Sozialismus ausgeht, kann es meines Erachtens auf dem Gebiet von Kunst und Literatur keine Tabus geben."

4. The term Scientific and Technological Revolution is used here to refer to the *Wissenschaftlich-Technische Revolution*, as proclaimed by Walter Ulbricht in 1961 in conjunction

with the introduction of the New Economical System (*Neues Ökonomisches System*), with the aim of expanding East German industry and creativity (Fritzsche 103-104).

5. Baalbek, located in present-day Lebanon, is a city with a long history. It has been inhabited by a variety of populations throughout ancient times. Greeks, Romans, and Arabs all contributed to the city's rich history. The city was renamed Heliopolis, likely in connection with the worship of the deity Ba'al, who was identified with the Egyptian and Greek sun gods Ra and Helios by the Ptolemies of Alexandria. During the Roman period, the city underwent a significant transformation, with the construction of numerous monumental temples (Leisten, n.p.).

6. Translated from German: *Mejuaner* inhabitants of the planet Meju-Ortu.

7. Translated from German: *Unzufriedene gab es immer. Man müßte wohl mehr sein als ein Gott, um Zufriedene aus ihnen zu machen*.

8. The Ancient Greek term Heliopolis means "city of the sun," that is also the title for Campanella's utopia, in which an ideal society based on equality is described

9. Translated from German: *Dunkel ist der Sinn des göttlichen Spruchs. Ich vermag ihn nicht zu deuten. Soll der Sklave das gleiche essen wie der Herr, der Arme teilhaben an den Gütern des Reichen? Für die Götter sind Menschen eben Menschen...*

10. Translated from German: *Olden hebt den Blick zu den Sternen. Um ihn herum scheint alles zu versinken. Nur das Raunen bleibt an seinem Ohr. Bis es im ersterbenden Winde verklingt. Erik Olden aber steht noch lange auf der Terrasse. Und schaut zu den funkelnden Welten hinauf, zum fernen Ziel*.

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