

From cottagecore to solarpunk: politics and aesthetics of contemporary pastorals

Between the inconsolable loss of a terrestrial Eden that we are destroying and the utopian evocation of what we will have to find again, the stakes raised by the pastoral are brought to maximum intensity by our recent awareness of the consequences of human actions on a geological and therefore environmental scale (Lilley). We have noted the influence of these parameters in our own research unit. On a larger scale, our academic field has seen a multiplication of publications and talks on the subject. This is why we have decided to organize a symposium dedicated to a contemporary approach on the pastoral based on the specificity of our multi-disciplinary approaches.

In the opening paragraphs of his book *The Machine in the Garden, Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*, Leo Marx describes the arrival of Europeans in America:

With an unspoiled hemisphere in view it seemed that mankind actually might realize what had been thought a poetic fantasy. Soon the dream of a retreat to an oasis of harmony and joy was removed from its traditional literary context. It was embodied in various Utopian schemes for making America the site of a new beginning for Western society. In both forms- one literary and the other in essence political - the ideal has figured in the American view of life which is, in the widest sense, the subject of this book. (3)

Through a series of binary oppositions, Marx's thesis posits a relationship between the pastoral, a literary mode developing a nostalgic vision of a simple life in contact with nature (Alpers, Gifford), and a pastoralist political project, which organizes the world in conformity with the motives and values of this literary mode. This thesis has been extremely fruitful and has engendered numerous works that have illustrated the power of the pastoral imagination in the political field and, consequently, in the course of history in the West (Braun and Castree 1998). But it remains limited insofar as it considers only a one-way transmission between the literary and the political: embodiment ("embodied"). In this vision, the literary precedes the political, which reproduces it as faithfully as possible. In other words, "life imitates art" (Wilde). In contrast, a lot of recent literature on the British literary pastoral insists on the permeability of the mode to its context. Because of this, there exists a great diversity of forms and positions within the pastoral genre and, similarly, each pastoral lends itself to a variety of political interpretations (Hiltner 70; Williams 105; Gifford 8). In the context of the resurgence of the pastoral in reaction to the geological upheavals of the Anthropocene (Lilley 29), we wished to deepen our understanding of the phenomena at play at the interface between the literary and the political in order to better understand how they ultimately put forward a single ideal ("In both forms ... the ideal"). Our symposium will therefore approach the pastoral and the pastoralist political project to shed light on how they interact, how they evolve conjointly, and how they become one.

We are interested in cottagecore and solarpunk as they can illustrate the contemporaneity of the pastoral and its multiple incarnations on multiple media. The definition and delimitation of these two aesthetic forms is not very stable yet because they are very recent—2014 for solarpunk, 2018 for cottagecore. On the other hand, they mostly appear on social networks, populated by youths and minorities, in a kind of infra-pop-culture. Finally, they are both the locus and the

object of aesthetic and political debates that amount to the competition between contradictory definitions and practices. For reference, solarpunk is a science fiction genre that represents "a sustainable civilization and how to get there" ("A Solarpunk Manifesto"). Unlike steampunk, which is signaled by the steam engine and clockwork gears, the solarpunk motifs are solar energy and permaculture. It can be found in literature, film, graphic arts, fashion and political activism. Cottagecore is also a trans-media phenomenon, better described by this undefined yet productive Internet idiom: "aesthetics". It is a hashtag that went viral during the first lockdowns of 2020 and it brings together representations of rural life strongly inspired by romanticism. It influences fashion, interior design and housework. And it is also used as a branding tool in marketing. Although these two contemporary examples manifest the strong interactions between the poetic and the political that are at the centre of our reflections on the pastoral, our investigation will not be limited to the perimeter they delimit: other contemporary forms and discourses on the pastoral can also be addressed (such as poetry, eco-villages etc.).

Several lines of questioning will be explored during this symposium:

- The paradox of pastoral forms in the technological context of social media
- The transmediality of the pastoral mode, and the border between work of art and political work
- Engaging or disengaging from the world
- Romantization, idealization and fetishization of the so-called "natural" environment
- Convention, artificiality and the natural
- The city as a metonymy of culture and progress
- The differences between British and American cultural areas in the treatment of pastoral themes
- Mutations of the pastoral and pastoralism induced by the post-colonial context

Authors are invited to submit a 300-word abstract and a 150-word biographical note to theo.maligeay@univ-montp3.fr by October 2, 2023.

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