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Body Utopianism

Prosthetic Being Between Enhancement and Estrangement

Franziska Bork Petersen

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Palgrave Studies in Utopianism

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For Josefine and Pontus

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The Body and Utopia

In January 2019 the *Guardian* reported on a recent tendency in cosmetic surgery: the "phenomenon of people requesting procedures to resemble their digital image [which] has been referred to – sometimes flippantly, sometimes as a harbinger of end times – as 'snapchat dysmorphia'".[1] While patients used to bring in pictures of celebrities with their ideal nose or jaw, cosmetic doctors noticed that they "were now pointing to photos of themselves".[2] These images are typically edited with Snapchat or the retouching app Facetune and feature large eyes and pixel-perfect skin. The article quotes doctors referring to these images as "unrealistic, unattainable" and "without a single marking of a normal human face".[3]

Myriad human desires to instantiate what is physically impossible appear to be longstanding. People have altered their bodies throughout history by fortifying them with armour, moulding them with clothing or decorating them with makeup and other modifications. "[T]here seems to be a widespread human desire to transcend the body's limitations",

[1] Elle Hunt, "Faking it: How Selfie Dysmorphia is Driving People to Seek Surgery," *Guardian*, January 23, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/jan/23/faking-it-how-selfie-dysmorphia-is-driving-people-to-seek-surgery.

[2] Hunt, "Faking it,".

[3] Hunt, "Faking it,".

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ascertains fashion scholar Elizabeth Wilson with regard to how societies throughout history have "deformed, reformed or otherwise modified the body".[4] But instantiating radical changes of its appearance is far from the only area in which the body is a relevant topic of enquiry in relation to utopia. Mid-twentieth century philosophical anthropologist Helmuth Pleßner conceived of the existential human reliance on culture, more generally, as our being 'naturally artificial'.[5] With regard to the *body utopianisms* I investigate in this book, I argue that this makes bodily being invariably a 'being prosthetic'. As human existence socially tethers people to each other and their surrounding infrastructure, especially citizens of the Global North are physically tethered to an increasing amount of techniques and technologies to go about their working and social lives—to 'be a body' in a culturally meaningful way. But while this tether to clothing, stuff and technical devises is not new as such, it has arguably acquired a different quality in recent years. Techniques that transform the human body, that optimise it by enhancing its beauty and capacity, have seen a surge that puts all bodies in a state of constant potential improvement. If Pleßner distinguished between '*having*' and '*being*' *a body,* it is his notion of *having a body*, of forming and manipulating it as one would other materials, that is at the core of many of the utopian desires I will explore.[6] My study draws on Utopian Studies scholar Ruth Levitas' widely used definition of utopia as the expression of a "desire for a better way of being and living" and addresses such desires as current and historical issues of body culture.[7] The paradox that identifies the point of departure for my investigation is: How do *bodies*, blatantly 'there' and real, relate to *utopia* as something of the mind that is traditionally understood as an imagined projection into the future?

In scholarship and colloquial use, utopia/nism evokes the notion of a better *collective* life. What some authors see as a general—or at least widespread—human tendency to dream of a better existence is commonly associated with dreaming of a "radically different *society* than the one in

[4] Elisabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* [1985] (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2003), 3.

[5] Helmuth Pleßner, *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1965).

[6] On having and being a body, see Pleßner, *Stufen des Organischen*, 230ff.

[7] Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (1990) (Witney: Peter Lang, 2011), 8. Levitas adds the notion of the *expression* of desire on page 9.

which dreamers live".[8] But with the body's 'enhanced' appearance and capacity becoming key factors in defining social value and interaction for the individual, this does not need to be the case.[9] German philosophy scholar Gunter Gebauer's remark in this regard may seem as troubling, as it is perhaps logical. He supposedly refers to a privileged body when he argues: "The body is the focal point of our efforts to change something about the present. (…) The extent to which we improve it corresponds to the gain we get as social persons".[10] In the Global North, the body has long been absorbed into a capitalist logic in which it produces not only monetary, but also social value.[11] Bodies are key in social interaction; even—or maybe especially—as a lot of this interaction is happening online. While classic utopias dismissed the depiction of individual bodies in favour of fictional communities, according to Gebauer, the body has today itself become a powerful utopia.[12]

[8] Lyman Tower Sargent, "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited," *Utopian Studies* 5, no. 1 (1994): 3, emphasis added.

[9] Chris Shilling, *The Body* and *Social Theory* (1993) (London: Sage Publications, 2003), 188f. In this respect, Jones refers to skins, in particular, as "surfaces upon which meaning can be projected". Meredith Jones, "Expressive Surfaces: The Case of the Designer Vagina," *Theory, Culture & Society* 34, no. 7–8 (2017): 32.

[10] Gunter Gebauer, "Körper-Utopien. Neue Mythen des Alltags" *Merkur* (special edition *Zukunft denken. Nach den Utopien*) 9/10 (2001): 887. Unless indicated, translations from the German, Swedish and Danish original are my own.

[11] Mike Featherstone, "Body, Image and Affect in Consumer Culture," *Body & Society*, 16, no. 1 (2010); Shilling, *The Body and Social Theory*; Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993); Susan Bordo, *Twilight Zones: The Hidden Life of Cultural Images from Plato to O.J.*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997); Ana Sofia Elias, Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff, eds., *Aesthetic Labour Rethinking Beauty Politics in Neoliberalism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

[12] Gebauer sees a "fundamental difference between the classic utopias of former times, and the contemporary utopian fictions in the role played by the body and images" Gebauer, "Körper-Utopien," 886. Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff refer to a contemporary "current of individualism that has almost entirely replaced notions of the social or political, or any idea of individuals as subject to pressures, constraints or influence from outside themselves" Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff, "Introduction," in *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Identity*, eds. Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 7.

Levitas, similarly, refers to a shift in utopianism, in which the body plays a central role. It has become "what is to be transformed (…) by ornament, diet, exercise and surgical intervention".[13] Levitas writes:

> If Utopian thought of all kinds is expressive of a desire for a better way of being, its projection onto the body, rather than the body politic, may be seen as an important retreat from hope, at least social hope, to desire. Furthermore, it is a retreat from understanding desire, as Deleuze and Guattari, Reich, and Marcuse did, in terms of a libidinal energy suffusing the realm of the social, and thus fuelling capitalism and fascism as well as their potential Utopian alternatives. For these writers, desire may emanate from the body in an essentialist, vitalist way, but it does not stay there."[14]

In this book, I look at bodily expressions of utopian desire in both of the understandings Levitas alludes to: solipsistic desires for the body's beautification in, for instance, cosmetic surgery or bodybuilding, on the one hand. And on the other hand, utopian practices in which (individual) bodies express broader societal desires for a 'better way of living and being'. In both cases they meet various instantiations of impossibility to embody their utopian desires. As such, the utopianisms I scrutinise are rooted in utopia's etymological conflation of the Greek *eutopia* (good place) and *outopia* (no place). In their quest to optimise the body, many of the techniques, actions and desires I refer to here and investigate in detail conform to and are deeply entangled with the status quo of contemporary capitalism. As a point of critique (and scepticism within the academic field of Utopian Studies) this is entirely valid. And yet, if something we often experience as so inescapable as our bodies can be changed into something inconceivable, this opens imaginations for how the world could be different; it educates utopian desire for change.

As mentioned, I draw on the phrase from Levitas' introduction to *The Concept of Utopia* that specifies utopian desire as the desire for a better way of being and living. However, my considerations highlight a small but—I think—significant change of emphasis that Levitas makes 200 pages later when she writes: "The essence of utopia seems to be

[13] Ruth Levitas, "For Utopia: The (Limits of the) Utopian Function in Late Capitalist Society," *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 3, no. 2–3 (2000): 34, https://doi.org/10.1080/13698230008403311.

[14] Levitas, "For Utopia," 34.

desire – the desire for a different, better way of being".[15] The added mention of 'different' emphasises a component that a number of Utopian Studies scholars elaborate on when they highlight the estrangement (from the status quo) that utopia evokes.[16] It hints at an implication of critique that Levitas and others see as a key factor in utopia. The other change in Levitas' later definition of the term is the omission of 'living' in what is bettered (or: different) in utopia. This leaves an emphasis on 'being' as what is desired as different and better; an emphasis that I understand as evoking a more basic, physical aspect of human existence.[17] Without regarding it as entirely separable from the perhaps more social notion of 'living', this 'being' is principally concerned in the material I turn to in what follows and I will now outline it a little further.

In order to explore a 'different, better' being, or the desire for it, this needs to be delineated from a current status quo of bodily being and the conditions that determine it. For the examples I investigate in the following chapters, which are primarily taken from the contemporary Global North, I identify this current status quo of bodily being as informed by and happening under the conditions of contemporary capitalism. The status quo of bodily being entails the body's (relatively unchangeable and unpredictable) material conditions, which I will comment on, shortly. But it is also determined by the preconditions it meets in a thoroughly capitalistic system of values and their production—values that often clash with bodies' stubborn physical immutability and uncontrollability. In the following chapters, I address instances of this, which include ideals regarding the body's 'fitness to work' and function, an idealised ability to 'become image' on social media and associated notions of bodies' specific value in an economy of gendered beauty. Throughout the text, I elaborate on how current iterations of 'prosthetic being' are informed by and grapple with the values that surround them.

[15] Levitas, *Concept of Utopia*, 209. In later publications, Levitas generally uses 'better way of being'. See Ruth Levitas, *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

[16] Such as Lucy Sargisson, Tom Moylan or Fredric Jameson. I address the estranging implication of utopianism specifically in part 3 of this book.

[17] Similarly, Gregory Claeys' understanding of utopia as an "ideal or vastly improved *state of existence*" does not seem to preclude explicitly *bodily* utopias. Gregory Claeys, *Searching for Utopia: The History of an Idea* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2011), 11, my emphasis.

I investigate examples of prosthetic being specifically in terms of the physical actions it entails. Beyond this focus on actions, I pay utopia what David M. Bell calls 'subversive fidelity' and explore body utopianisms with regard to their implied utopian 'no' and a 'good' in the respective parts of the book.[18] Finally, I investigate body utopianisms concerning what scholars often identify as utopia's key implication: that of estranging/critiquing the status quo. Like Bell, I am interested in how the concepts in question relate to and constitute each other. But, most importantly, I investigate how the utopian 'good', the utopian 'no' and utopian estrangement are affected *when applied to the human body*. This, crucially, concerns the fact that in proposing to look at bodies in terms of utopianism in this book, I am arguably suggesting to look at them as 'places': the 'topos' that is etymologically implied in utopia.

The Body as Topos/Place

In understanding the body as topos, I want to investigate it as a situated, performed compound (of movement, speech, dress, etc.) that is never finished in itself, but evolving through changing affective relations with its environment.[19] While on the surface, this focus on actions might not go with the idea of a 'body as topos/place', theoreticians such as Doreen Massey would claim exactly that: space is (also) made up of what it accommodates—of 'what is happening in it'.[20] "A 'place'", according to Massey

[18] David M. Bell, *Rethinking Utopia. Place, Power, Affect* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 5.

[19] Pointing to the entanglement of space and the bodies using it, Bingaman, Sanders and Zorach argue: "One of the flaws in utopias both past and present has been their neglect to consider not just places/spaces but also the bodies, indeed the inhabitants and users that *constitute* those spaces". The authors draw on Michel de Certeau when they construe space as a 'practised place': a "product of the social, sexual, and gendered activities that take place within it"—spaces are mutable, according to their use. Amy Bingaman, Lise Sanders and Rebecca Zorach, *Embodied Utopias. Gender, Social Change and the Modern Metropolis* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 12, my emphasis.

[20] Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994). Miwon Kwon similarly proposes that "our understanding of site has shifted from a fixed, physical location to somewhere or something constituted through social, economic, cultural and political processes". Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 10.

> is formed out of the particular set of social relations which act at a particular location. And the singularity of any individual place is formed in part out of the specificity of the interactions which occur at that location (nowhere else does this precise mixture occur) and in part out of the fact that the meeting of those social relations at that location (…) will in turn produce new social effects.[21]

These interplays with their surroundings are the bodily actions that I focus on in this book. Jonathan Crary writes: "Rather than being autonomous or self-sufficient, an individual cannot be understood except in relation to what is outside them, to an otherness that faces them".[22] In considering bodies through their actions and interactions, I investigate 'different, better' prosthetic being in terms of its constituting bodily doing.

As hinted at above, a 'body as topos' is not only specifically situated, but also materially specific. What a (specific) body can do, how it can be affected and affect others thus also significantly depends on the material reality of the specific human body: in terms of both physical and discursive determinations. Discursive elements of bodily being are techniques of moving, dress and adornment or manners of speaking and gesturing, for instance.[23] All these are in more or less reiterative or antagonistic relation and contribute to a culture's understanding and construction of gender, age, class etc. Further, to point to the live body's

[21] Massey, *Space, Place and Gender*, 169.

[22] Jonathan Crary, *24/7 Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London and New York: Verso, 2013), 21. Judith Butler turns the focus on embodied being when she elaborates on this relation as a dependency: "By theorizing the body as a certain kind of *dependency* on infrastructure, understood complexly as environment, social relations, and networks of support and sustenance by which the human itself proves not to be divided from the animal or from the technical world, we foreground the ways in which we are vulnerable to decimated or disappearing infrastructures, economic supports, and predictable and well-compensated labor. Not only are we then vulnerable to one another – an invariable feature of social relations – but, in addition, this very vulnerability indicates a broader condition of dependency and interdependency that challenges the dominant ontological understanding of the embodied subject". Judith Butler, "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance," in *Vulnerability in Resistance*, eds. Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti and Leticia Sabsay (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), 21.

[23] For accounts of these social practices as learned, see, respectively: Marcel Mauss, "Techniques of the Body," in *Incorporations*, eds. Jonathan Crary and Stanford Kwinter (New York: Zone, 1992), 455–477; Joanne Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Modern Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000); Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959).

ultimate unpredictability, my account insists on material bodies that are specific in their size, age, colour, ability; bodies that will get hungry and tired, might get ill or stumble. While all of these aspects can be manipulated with techniques that—again—are specific in their cultural form and meaning, a material body does exist that is not obviously and infinitely controllable.[24] Even if such material aspects of bodily being are not graspable in an independent, a priori way, eliminating them entirely only seems possible in the literal *construction* of bodies 'from scratch': in art and science's attempts and imaginations.[25] In this vein, abovementioned Pleßner made the case that human being is determined not only by characteristics such as bipedalism, our ability to communicate through speech or our customary wearing of clothes. Being human is also defined by our bodies' occasional unpredictability. Pleßner studied this in terms of the "loss of control (Beherrschung) of the body (Leib)" in laughing and crying.[26] The point I want to make is that human existence is tied to a material reality that both enables and disables certain ways of affecting other bodies and being affected. Some scholars understand this conception of being—as inextricably tied to and informed by specific physical factors—as 'embodiment'.[27] I refer to it throughout the book as forming

[24] Karen Barad deals with the relationship between discursive practices and material phenomena (in humans as well as nonhumans). Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Half Way: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007). Other important positions in the discussion are expressed in Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993); and in corporeal feminism, including Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994).

[25] Such creations are, of course, still specific in their appearance, but this appearance is then malleable by the body's creator. For examples, see Bianca Westermann, *Anthropomorphe Maschinen: Grenzgänge zwischen Biologie und Technik seit dem 18. Jahrhundert* (München: Fink, 2012).

[26] Helmuth Pleßner, *Lachen und Weinen. Eine Untersuchung nach den Grenzen menschlichen Verhaltens* (Arnhem: van Loghum Slaterus' Uitgeversmaatschappij N. V. 1941), 33.

[27] Thus, when I in what follows refer to the 'embodiment of a certain ideal', that indicates less a supposed disappearance of the body as medium behind the expressed ideal and rather the physical grappling with certain expectations and situatedness. Similarly, in Theatre Studies 'embodiment' no longer refers to the notion of an actor as the transparent medium that 'accurately' transports the meaning of the dramatic script, as was the case in the nineteenth century. Embodiment is, rather, understood as an actor's physical specificity: her individual phenomenological body without which no dramatic figure can

part of the 'status quo of being a body' that cannot be circumvented in obvious ways. While these specifics apply to live bodies, I will make the case in part 1 that 'prosthetic bodily being' in other media is determined by other medial possibilities and restrictions. My understanding of a utopian 'body as place', then, refers to prosthetic being in a variety of media. While the vast majority of the utopian embodiments I scrutinise are performed live, with this liveness constituting the body's medial preconditions, prosthetic being also happens in other media, with the specificities of, for instance, the page or online interaction determining 'what a body can do'.

My use of the term 'prosthetic being' to conceive of bodies as places in terms of their interactive doings and their material reality emphasises two aspects: on the one hand, reflecting on utopia in relation to human corporeality invariably imposes specific possibilities and limitations. Whether embodied action is conceived as, or turns out to be impossible, desirable, utopian, anti-utopian, depends on the social and material specificities that being a particular body entails. On the other hand, and as in Massey's relational definition of space, bodies are always under construction—"always in the process of being made".[28] For theatre and performance scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte, "[t]he human body knows no state of being: it exists only in a state of becoming. It recreates itself with every blink of the eye, every breath and movement embody a new body. For that reason the body is ultimately elusive".[29] This becoming can mean a variety of things in relation to utopianism: in a Bergsonian understanding, it entails indeterminacy, and posits perpetual novelty. But such a becoming 'the body as topos' can also assume an entirely different meaning which is relevant to this investigation. In certain practices I enquire into (especially 'enhancement' techniques such as cosmetic surgery) bodies appear as 'topoi' in the sense of malleable places.

exist on stage. See Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance. A New Aesthetics*, trans. Saskya Iris Jain (New York and London: Routledge, 2008), 17.

[28] Doreen Massey, *For Space* (Los Angeles et al.: Sage, 2005), 9.

[29] Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 92.

The Body as Eu-Topia

Thinking the body in relation to the 'eu' of utopia—the good—does not seem far-fetched: some notion of a good/better body appears to be an omnipresent human desire.[30] In the following, I scrutinise instances of a 'good' in embodied utopian actions on two levels. On the one hand, understandings of what constitutes a body's 'better way of living and being' tend to be inherent in the specific actions and in their striving for idealised difference from the status quo. Understanding these conceptions of what constitutes a 'good' body (as blueprints or in a different way) is part of my analytical effort. But utopia is entangled with ideology and this manifests in both anti-utopian preservation of the status quo and dystopia as the results of utopian actions.[31] In order to reflect on whether a given utopian embodiment results in a 'good' or a 'bad' outcome, I thus operate with the notion of a utopian 'good' on an additional level.

On this second analytical level, I attempt to trace the 'good' of bodily actions in terms of their increasing the capacity of 'what a body can do'. This point is elaborated in Bell's (Deleuzian) distinction between 'good' and 'bad' which is based on the affects it produces on the body.[32] In this understanding of affects, in which Deleuze draws on Baruch Spinoza, affects are modifications or variations produced in a body (including the mind) by an interaction with another body *which increases or diminishes the body's power to act*. They are preindividual intensities corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body's capacity to act. While utopian actions conjure an *increase* in the ability to act, Bell refers to the *dys* of dystopia as comprising operations of power that *limit* what a body can do.[33] If, according to Deleuze "[w]hat a body can do corresponds to the nature and limits of its capacity to be

[30] Michel Foucault, "Utopian Body (1966)," in *Sensorium—Embodied Experience, Technology, and Contemporary Art,* ed. Caroline A. Jones (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).

[31] Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination* [1986] (Oxford et al.: Peter Lang, 2014), 18; Gregory Claeys, *Dystopia: A Natural History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 6.

[32] Bell, *Rethinking Utopia*, 38.

[33] Bell, *Rethinking Utopia*, 38.

affected",[34] then operations of power that bodies experience as 'sadness' or in which they are prevented from being affected, altogether, can be called 'bad/wrong/harsh': the dys of dystopia. 'Sadness' refers here not to an emotion, but to a body's fear, anxiety, emptiness or physical pain that restricts *what it can do*.[35] As a consequence, while bodily actions might live up to their internally identified notion of 'goodness' and meet the expressed desire, far from all of the instances of prosthetic being I investigate in what follows manifest as utopia in the sense of an increase of 'what a body can do'. While this approach is informed by Deleuze's reading of Spinoza and the question *what a body can do* in terms of how it can be affected and affect other bodies, I ask it somewhat more loosely: What scope of action do specific instances of prosthetic being create or prohibit?

The Body as Ou-Topia

It might be less intuitive to relate real life material bodies to utopia's 'ou'—the 'no', that makes utopia simultaneously a non-place; somewhere that does not exist. Sargisson writes: "Utopias are intentionally distanced from their presence".[36] The notion that utopia encapsulates an impossible ideal, while the body by its very existence is possible might explain why the two terms have not yet been explicitly related in a larger study.[37]

The potential I see in the live body understood in terms of its embodied actions as a utopian medium is that it, despite its engagement with impossibility, invariably brings utopia to the present. Utopian bodies play with or challenge what is possible, but there is no doubt about their being tethered in, sustained and limited by the real world around them.

[34] Ian Buchanan, "The Problem of the Body in Deleuze and Guattari, Or, What Can a Body Do?" *Body & Society* 3, no. 3 (1997): 80, https://doi.org/10.1177/1357034X97003003004.

[35] Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, trans. Robert Hurley (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1988), 26ff.

[36] Lucy Sargisson, *Fool's Gold* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 18.

[37] However, Foucault writes about bodies as 'inconceivable-obvious' utopias in Foucault, "Utopian Body". Jean-Luc Nancy, similarly, locates 'body' as familiar and strange at the same time: "Body is the doubtful, shattered certainty. There is nothing which was more familiar to our old world, nothing which was more strange to it". In Peter M. Boehnisch and Ric Allsopp, "Editorial: Bodyscapes," *Performance Research* 8, no. 2 (2003): 1.

"Performativity and utopia both call into question what is epistemologically there and signal a highly ephemeral ontological field that can be characterized as a *doing in futurity*".[38] In what follows, I reflect on the impossibility implied in utopia with regard to the different aspects that constitute the body as the topos of prosthetic being. These span instances of both social and physical impossibility—with death as one obvious and ultimate result of 'embodying something impossible'. Both social and physical death are frequently risked in bodily expressions of desire for a better way of being.[39] Yet, when the (alive) body with its material limits is the medium, this also means that there are limits to how radically different from the status quo a utopian practice can be.[40]

Clarification of Terms: Utopia, Dystopia, Anti-Utopia—and 'the' Body

I use *utopianism* to refer to practices that imagine, produce or advocate the production of utopia; they articulate utopian desire. The adverb that applies to this is *utopian*, and in the particular case of this investigation, what is explored are utopianisms that take the form of utopian bodily actions. This means that *utopian actions* are doings that engage simultaneously with differently defined notions of the 'good' and the 'no' to evoke or imagine change/transformation from the relevant status quo. From this combination often follows an estrangement from or a critique of the status quo.

[38] José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia. The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2009), 26. In this vein, Daniel Sack writes about performance art: "Since performance is always happening now, these concepts speak of a present moment's outlook toward the future not as a relation with a divorced entity, wherein the future might represent a remote island of time, but an extension of what is immediately before us. These futures belong to the present". Daniel Sack, *After Live: Possibility, Potentiality, and the Future of Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015), 6.

[39] I explore this 'impossible utopian body' in the first part of the book (Chapters 2–4) and provide a general elaboration on this issue in a separate introduction to part 1.

[40] This might open some of my examples to critique from the point of view of a position that holds any reconciliation with the present as not utopian. On this position, see, for instance, Bell, who sums this up in stating: "Utopia is not a holiday destination". Bell, *Rethinking Utopia*, 137.

Yet, depending on what definition of the 'good' we apply see above: implied in the logic of the activity or considered in terms of increasing 'what a body can do', far from all of the utopianisms or utopian embodiments I investigate manifest *as utopias*. Analysing the imbrication of utopias with utopianisms that result in something much closer to dystopia, anti-utopia or estrangement is a key objective of this book.[41] In drawing attention to more dystopian outcomes of utopian actions, I am far from entertaining the notion that utopianism, if attempted in real life, turns dystopian. But, as Gregory Claeys remarks, utopia and dystopia frequently run parallel.[42] In addition to dystopia, another risk for utopianism has been discussed as becoming particularly prevalent in recent decades: that of a utopian impulse being co-opted by capitalist ideology. Tom Moylan and others have convincingly argued that utopia is always entangled with (arguably anti-utopian) reiterations of ideology.[43] While utopian desires are at play and retain eu-topian elements in all the bodily practices I investigate—the analyses, overall, also point to strong negative implications. Often, these body utopianisms oscillate on a scale and certainly do not solidify into a blueprint of a utopian 'better'. On this basis, dystopian and anti-utopian elements weigh as heavily as eu-topian ones. With this inclusion of manifold instantiations of utopian desire, I acknowledge utopianism's historically colonial, misogynist and generally somatophobic impetus.[44] But turning dystopian or anti-utopian is by no means inevitable for actions that express a desire for a different, better way of being—while challenging what is and isn't possible. And while much contemporary utopianism avoids this, the risk still appears to be very present. Dystopia and anti-utopian reiterations of the status quo are

[41] In other words, what prevents me from assessing several of my examples of bodies 'as utopias' is that they do not appear to fulfil the criteria necessary for a nuanced use of the term if I take seriously that: "Utopianism without the 'no' is complicity with the status quo; utopianism without the 'good' is critique, or anti-anti-utopianism". Bell, *Rethinking Utopia*, 136.

[42] Claeys, *Dystopia,* 6. See also In Sargisson, *Fool's Gold*, 7.

[43] Moylan, *Demand the Impossible*, 18. See also Slavoj Žižek, *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle* (London and New York: Verso, 2005), 124; Darko Suvin, "Theses on Dystopia 2001," in *Dark Horizons. Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, eds. Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).

[44] Bell draws on Karl Hardy when he points out that "utopianism—in many guises—must be recognized as 'being predicated upon and, therefore, implicated in the ongoing naturalization of settler colonization' (2012: 127)". Bell, *Rethinking Utopia*, 113.

not 'utopia's others', but inextricable parts of utopianism. The argument this book makes is that focusing on bodies brings these entanglements to the fore.[45] Importantly, the point I am implying is not that utopia should therefore be neither thought nor attempted, but that it is challenged by risks—risks that appear to be particularly prominent in the Global North's contemporary body culture.

Finally, a note on 'the body': women have been historically associated with *bodily* being.[46] Due to this association, it has also been women who enacted myriad attempts at utopian bodily betterment and change. Although my focus on female examples risks reiterating the hugely problematic binary and attributions of value implicit in this tradition, the material is particularly rich and women's embodied actions thus constitute the vast majority of my examples throughout the book, although male bodies figure in the contemporary examples in, especially, Chapters 7 and 10.

Thoughts on Method

An important aspect of my method is identifying a number of primarily contemporary bodily acts as utopian. In selecting this source material, I have largely focused on the everyday and the popular—bodies from

[45] Furthermore, it could of course be argued that the mentioned shift in 'what is to be transformed' in utopias to the physical body is already part of such re-iteration of the status quo. Levitas, "For Utopia," 33.

[46] On the historical association of women with (their) bodies, see: Moira Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power and Corporeality* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996); Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); Caroline Walker Bynum, "Why All the Fuss about the Body? A Medievalist's Perspective," *Critical Inquiry* 22, no. 1 (1995); Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994); Elisabeth Grosz, *Space, Time and Perversion* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995). See also Bray and Colebrook's important critique of, amongst other aspects, what they see as corporeal feminism's unchallenged reiteration of Freudianism and "uncritical celebration of the body as an inherently liberatory site". Abigail Bray and Claire Colebrook, "The Haunted Flesh: Corporeal Feminism and the Politics of (Dis)Embodiment," *Signs* 24, no. 1 (1998): 56. And, for a more contemporary perspective on the role of the body in feminist theory, Ana Sofia Elias, Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff, eds., *Aesthetic Labour Rethinking Beauty Politics in Neoliberalism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Sara Ahmed, "Imaginary Prohibitions: Some Preliminary Remarks on the Founding Gestures of the 'New Materialism'," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 15, no. 1 (2008).

the Global North, that can be encountered live or as images in everyday settings, primarily on the street or online. This also means that there is a visual bias, because of that culture's visual inclination. As such, it is this contemporary visual culture I primarily investigate throughout, with an exception of Chapters 2 and 3 which serve as historical and thematic background chapters. Further, and as explained above, my academic background in Performance Studies determines the outlook of my investigation as a focus on what these bodies are *doing*; how they interact with and are affected by the bodies around them.

As a first criterium for selecting my examples, I draw on their common factor to express a desire for a different, better way of living and being—a changing of the status quo.[47] In the case of this study, expressions of utopian desire appear as bodily acts, as I have laid out. The chapters then span analyses of these enacted desires for variously defined change. Levitas herself has acknowledged that the breadth in this definition makes it difficult to operate with. In the different parts, I argue for my examples' inherent utopianism on the basis of their challenging notions of impossibility (the utopian 'no', part 1), their embodied desire for something 'better' (the utopian 'eu', part 2) and their proficiency in evoking 'affective estrangement' from the status quo (utopian estrangement, part 3). While I make the case that these characteristics render the actions in question utopian, whether or not a specific action's result qualifies as *utopia*—or can rather be seen as *anti-utopian* or *dystopian*—depends on the actions' implied increase or decrease of 'what a body can do' and on how they relate to the relevant ideology: Do they change, or are they ultimately reiterative of it?

Previous Work on the Body in Utopian Studies

Despite a certain neglect of the subject matter, bodies have of course previously figured prominently in utopias and Utopian Studies has not completely ignored this. The sixteenth- to nineteenth-century literary genre of what Darby Leves calls 'somatopia': "a pornographic text which

[47] See Levitas, *Concept of Utopia*, 8, 9 and 209.

presents women's bodies (as) a utopian sexual landscape", is a particularly obvious example.[48] Further, the fact that plentiful food and sex are not uncommon motives in literary utopias—and dystopias—illustrates the body's central role in utopianism.[49]

Existing research on the body and utopianism differs from this study in that it has largely considered bodies as rendered *in utopian fiction*. Contrarily, my study focuses on utopian bodily actions in real life and does not engage specifically with literary utopianism. However, to refer to the existing body of research and point to similarities in themes, I will begin this section with a brief introduction to Utopian Studies scholarship on bodies in utopian fiction.

Since More wrote his *Utopia*, innumerable authors have imagined innumerable kinds of bodies to populate their utopias. Robert Troschitz gives an overview in "Perfect Worlds Need Perfect Bodies: Utopia and the Politics of the Body" that addresses the body in (canonical) utopian fiction.[50] In his article, Troschitz suggests striking similarities—to each other and to the bodies imagined by More—regarding the health and 'shapeliness' of the utopian bodies in texts as diverse as Tommaso Campanella's *The City of the Sun* (1602), Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1627), Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888), William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890), Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia* (1975), Kim Stanly Robinson's *Pacific Edge* (1990) and even Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) or Cory Doctorow's *Walkaway* (2017).[51] While Troschitz acknowledges the diversity of these literary utopian texts, he suggests that "there are two fundamental ideas that are shared by most of them: the perfect society ought to be a society without squalor and one in which the human body has considerably improved".[52]

It needs pointing out, however, that the 'improvements' to being a body that several of the mentioned utopian fictions imply or spell out in detail are challenged in utopian sub-genres. The 1970s wave of

[48] Darby Lewes, "Utopian Sexual Landscapes: An Annotated Checklist of British Somatopias," *Utopian Studies* 7, no. 2 (1996): 167.

[49] Lyman Tower Sargent and Lucy Sargisson, "Sex in Utopia: Eutopian and Dystopian Sexual Relations," *Utopian Studies* 25, no. 2 (2014).

[50] Robert Troschitz, "Perfect Worlds Need Perfect Bodies: Utopia and the Politics of the Body," *Journal for the Study of British Cultures* 25, no. 1/18 (2019).

[51] Troschitz, "Perfect Worlds Need Perfect Bodies," 44.

[52] Troschitz, "Perfect Worlds Need Perfect Bodies," 51.

feminist utopian writing can be mentioned, in particular, as refusing More's conception of ideal bodies and as challenging their heteronormative gendering.[53] Adam Stock's reading of *dystopian* fiction of the early twentieth century likewise points to the critical implications of the imagined bodies and characters that he considers in the context of their contemporary (body) politics.[54]

As an important area of intersection between utopianism and the human body, Patrick Parrinder explores science fictions, speculations and utopian thinking from the point of view of scientific developments through history in *Utopian Literature and Science*.[55] Ralph Pordzik, more specifically, describes the desire "for the overstepping of given limitations" as a trope that animates (posthuman) dystopian fiction.[56] He sees this desire expressed in the treatment of evolutionary biology, information technology and bioscience in novels from H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895) to William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) and Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2004).

While inquiries into utopian literature such as Troschitz's, Stock's, Parrinder's, Pordzik's, Tom Moylan's or Angelika Bammer's are concerned with several of the topics I will be dealing with in the following chapters, I want to emphasise that this study is not about bodies in utopian fiction. After my introductory treatment of More's *Utopia*—read as a foundational document for the genre, rather than primarily a piece of literature—I will be turning to (real life) bodily practices, rather than the renderings of such bodies and practices on the written page. If my study

[53] See Angelika Bammer, *Partial Visions: Feminism and Utopianism in the 1970s* [1991] (Oxford et al.: Peter Lang, 2015); Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination* [1986] (Oxford et al.: Peter Lang, 2014). Troschitz, however, points out: "Though some utopias, like *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) criticize established beauty standards in terms of skin colour and body shape, utopian writings in general, and this includes *Woman on the Edge of Time,* have largely sustained and propagated the notion that the ideal body is the body that is healthy, strong and physically fit and that this, and no other, is the kind of body worth striving for". Troschitz, "Perfect Worlds Need Perfect Bodies," 46.

[54] Adam Stock, *Modern Dystopian Fiction and Political Thought: Narratives of World Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018).

[55] Patrick Parrinder, *Utopian Literature and Science: From the Scientific Revolution to Brave New World and Beyond* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

[56] Ralph Pordzik, "The Posthuman Future of Man: Anthropocentrism and the Other of Technology in Anglo-American Science Fiction," *Utopian Studies* 6, no. 1 (2012): 144.

neglects utopian literature, this also reflects my intention to investigate body utopias or utopian practices as not only *fictional* instantiations of utopian ideas and desires: on a micro-level, embodied utopian practices are operational in our everyday lives.

Beyond literary utopianism, Ernst Bloch repeatedly stresses bodily being in *The Principle of Hope,* and I will engage with this emphasis especially in the second part of this book. Bloch's focus is, to some extent, politically motivated. Distancing himself from the Freudian emphasis on libido—and its suppression—Bloch highlights bodily needs and desires that he deems relevant for the working class, rather than the bourgeoisie. I argue that the repeated rendering of an affective body in the examples in this seminal work for Utopian Studies—as sleeping,[57] hungry,[58] ill,[59] consuming drugs[60] or bodily functions and affects, more generally[61]—characterises Bloch's utopianism throughout.

In "Utopian Body", Foucault elaborates on his claim that "it is against this body (as if to erase it) that all these utopias have come into being".[62] The aspect of impossible incorporeality that also concerns me in the following chapters emerges as central when Foucault states:

> Utopia is a place outside all places, but it is a place where I will have a body without body, a body that will be beautiful, limpid, transparent, luminous, speedy, colossal in its power, infinite in its duration. Untethered, invisible, protected – always transfigured. It may very well be that the first utopia, the one most deeply rooted in the hearts of men, is precisely the utopia of an incorporeal body.[63]

[57] Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice and Paul Knight (Cambridge/MA: MIT Press, 1986), 78ff.

[58] Bloch, *Principle of Hope*, 288.

[59] Bloch, *Principle of Hope*, 454.

[60] Bloch, *Principle of Hope*, 92.

[61] Bloch, *Principle of Hope*, 103ff; 287; 290. Although Bloch uses 'affects' somewhat differently than I do here. For him, they are rooted in bodily sensation (as in my understanding), but (unlike the pre-subjective understanding of affects I use) with a clear 'I' behind them.

[62] Foucault, "Utopian Body," 229.

[63] Foucault, "Utopian Body," 229.

Troschnitz, similarly, suggests that "it is the limitations and weaknesses of the human body that have driven the utopian endeavour".[64] Lyman Tower Sargent places the emphasis on *physical*, as well *social* aspects of being when he elaborates on his seminal definition of utopia as 'social dreaming':

> If we are hungry, we dream of a full stomach. If we are sexually frustrated, we dream of sexual fulfilment. If we are frustrated by something in our society, we dream of a society in which it is corrected. Often we dream even though we, personally, are well fed and sexually fulfilled. We still dream at least in part because, content, we are capable of recognizing that others are not and feel that others should also be fulfilled. At its root, then, utopianism is the result of the human propensity to dream while both asleep and awake.[65]

Although Sargent specifically addresses "groups of people" arranging their lives and envisioning a "radically different society", this is entwined with a physical aspect.[66] Sargent sees what he calls 'body utopias' as historically foundational for utopianism: "Well-known examples are Hesiod's golden age, Eden, some versions of the millennium, and various Greek and Roman myths. For want of a better label I call them Utopias of sensual gratification or body Utopias. They are social dreaming at its simplest. Every culture has some such stories and I believe that they are the beginning of utopianism".[67] But being sensually gratified is of course not the only way in which bodies figure prominently in utopias. Political Scientist Philip Abbott writes of the utopian body as a "complex *site* that includes gender, birth, ageing, death, reproduction, sexuality, health and illness. Young bodies, old bodies, pregnant bodies, copulating bodies, male and female bodies, healthy bodies and diseased bodies, dead bodies are just some of the variations".[68] According to Public Health scholar Marc Chrysanthou: "the best available picture of utopia is a map of the

[64] Troschitz, "Perfect Worlds Need Perfect Bodies," 45.

[65] Sargent, "The Three Faces of Utopianism," 3.

[66] Sargent, "The Three Faces of Utopianism," 3. Some of Sargent's work addresses this entwinement specifically, see for instance Sargent and Sargisson, "Sex in Utopia.".

[67] Sargent, "The Three Faces of Utopianism," 11.

[68] Philip Abbott, "Should Utopians Have Perfect Bodies?" *Futures* 42 (2010): 875, emphasis added.

healthy human body".[69] Given the extent to which "the body is a site that includes major social practices",[70] and the fact that bodies are indeed the basis of every ideology[71]—it is puzzling that more specific research has not been devoted to live bodies in Utopian Studies.

One possible explanation for this is the cognitive bias that characterises Utopian Studies as a discipline (or: its primary constituting disciplines). Literature, literary and political theory have strong traditions in utopianism and Utopian Studies and Darko Suvin refers to utopia as "verbal construction".[72] While the body is tied to the present, utopia is—not least in Utopian Studies—associated primarily with something that can be thought (and artistically represented in other ways), but *not* necessarily be immediately acted out. Regarding what she understands as a key element of utopianism: estrangement, Lucy Sargisson illustrates this cognitive bias in Utopian Studies when she argues that while utopias "are not completely cognitively remote", they "always exist outside of our experience".[73] However, this appears to be changing and Levitas notes: "Utopia is not simply a thought experiment in the conventional sense, for it necessarily operates at the level of affect as well as intellect…The process of making and communicating imagined alternative futures must be both affective and cognitive".[74]

Contributions to Research

This book aims to begin addressing what I argue is a fundamental gap in Utopian Studies scholarship: that is if we accept 'the expression of the desire for a different, better way of being and living' as a widely used

[69] Marc Chrysanthou, "Transparency and Selfhood: Utopia and the Informed Body," *Social Science & Medicine* 54 (2002): 469.

[70] Abbott, "Should Utopians Have Perfect Bodies?" 876.

[71] Gebauer, "Körper-Utopien.".

[72] In Sargisson, *Fool's Gold*, 19.

[73] In Sargisson, *Fool's Gold*, 19. At the same time, live experiments in communal housing or urbanism, etc. are of course a fundamental strand of Utopian Studies, if without scrutinising 'bodily being', specifically. See, for instance, Lucy Sargisson, *Utopian Bodies and the Politics of Transgression* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000); Sargisson, *Fool's Gold*; Peter Kraftl, "Utopia, Performativity, and the Unhomely," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 25 (2007).

[74] Levitas, *Utopia as Method*, 218.

basic definition of utopia, then bodies play a key role in such expressing and desiring.[75] In taking a first step towards filling this gap, I explore instances of how the tension between ou-topia and eu-topia is articulated in bodily actions. Another area of Utopian Studies scholarship to which I hope to make a contribution is utopianism's entanglement with dystopia and anti-utopia. In this vein, I explore *prosthetic bodily being* as a likely site for utopianism's co-optation by dominant ideology. Yet, I also want to show that not all utopian actions that are carried out with a focus on individual bodies are escapist, as is sometimes suggested in Utopian Studies scholarship.[76] Furthermore, my study elucidates how understandings of utopia in terms of both function and process have problematic implications.

While Utopian Studies is a distinctly multi-disciplinary field, this book's focus on the body draws on disciplines that are as of yet relatively unexplored in Utopian Studies, such as Performance Studies, Fashion Studies or Body Studies. As bodies appear to become increasingly important sites for the expression of utopianism (even if these utopian actions often turn out dystopian or anti-utopian), this is an area of great potential for Utopian Studies.

In addition, the book draws its relevance from tackling social science issues such as human enhancement, cosmetic surgery, body modification or the body online in a humanities framework that highlights critical analysis. This scrutiny of bodies and their actions specifically with regard to utopianism invariably produces insights that concern bodies in visual culture, bodies and media and bodies as aesthetic objects. My investigations point to similarities in practices that define contemporary prosthetic being on the basis of their utopianism, while they may be distinct on almost every other level. By emphasising the imbrication of utopia, dystopia and anti-utopia, the study hints at the utopian impetus at work in practices that other scholarship often considers as unambiguously neoliberalist—with its stress on entrepreneurial subjectivity. More broadly then, *Body Utopianism* addresses the role of bodies in society. It reflects issues concerning the body's relation to identity and performativity and the dissolution of borders between the natural and the artificial.

[75] Levitas, *Concept of Utopia*, 8, 9 and 209.

[76] See Sargisson, *Fool's Gold*, 33; Slavoj Žižek, *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle* (London and New York: Verso, 2005), 124; Levitas, "For Utopia.".

Structure

The first part investigates foundational ideas for thinking about bodies in relation to utopianism. It specifically engages with the utopian 'ou', the 'no' of utopia, understood as a challenging of some form of impossibility. It begins with a chapter on the fictive bodies in Thomas More's *Utopia*. This investigation is meant to show that embodied doings, actions that are determined by their social and physical framings and restrictions, are central already in the foundational text for the utopian genre. How does More render these bodies in terms of what they eat, wear and how they work? I investigate how More's imagined bodies are marked as impossible, in the sense that they can exist on the written page, but are rendered as non-existent through their actions that ultimately do not seem imaginable for More. A utopian 'no' is directed to the existing world's inequality. Yet, internally, the explicitly fictive bodies in More's text are unable to instantiate equality as enacted. This is followed by a longer chapter that accounts for three attempts to 'escape' bodily being. I scrutinise the ascetic practices of Saint Catherine of Siena in the fourteenth century Italy, female slaves' embodied subversion of colonial rule on the U.S. Virgin Islands throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and the rationalised standard body as performed by the first fashion models around the turn of the twentieth century. The examined bodies perform an explicit 'no' against (or: as inherent in) the Christian, colonial and mechanical understandings of the body, respectively. They do so in impossible escapes from their respective determinations as social and physical bodies. In their ascetic, rebellious or compliantly mechanical bodily acts, challenging impossibility emerges as a sometimes tactical manoeuvre to negotiate the hostility towards specific bodies, or the more general somatophobia under which they live and work. I regard the concepts of the body these three relate to as fundamental for a Western understanding of 'being a body': a Christian, a colonial and a mechanical body concept. The chapter illustrates that there is a long history of attempts to embody utopia inherent in what are arguably key concepts of the body in Western culture: as both critique, transgression, but also as complicit with the status quo. And not least in utopian acts that turn into dystopias, rather than utopias. I draw on aspects of this situated understanding of 'being a body' in Western culture throughout the rest of the book. The first part ends with a chapter on encounters of bodies with technology. Techniques and technologies of the Quantified Self movement make bodies 'knowable' in a way that