

Sustainability Foresight and Science Fiction: An interview with Theresa Hannig, author of Pantopia

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Theresa Hannig is a German author of socially critical science fiction who recently published the captivating and eye-opening novel [Pantopia](#). Recently, it received the Seraph award for the best book of the year 2023. Theresa Hannig has accepted our request to become a key influencer for the European Erasmus+ Innovation Alliance on “Strategic Foresight for Sustainability”. This interview conducted by Henning Breuer on January 10th 2024 welcomes Theresa to the Innovation Alliance, and covers some topics of mutual interest: Pantopia and sustainable business models to save the world, positive visions in science fiction and business, and narrative approaches to future scenarios.

Henning Breuer: Hello, my name is Henning Breuer. I'm a professor of business and media psychology at HMKW, the University for Applied Sciences of Media Communication and Management in Berlin. I also run a small innovation consultancy named UXBerlin, where we deal with innovation management, ethnographic research, sustainable business models, and future studies. Together with colleagues from Denmark, France, Slovenia, Finland, Estonia, and Germany, we started a project on strategic foresight for sustainability (Sf4S). It's an Erasmus+ Innovation Alliance project to support the transition to a more sustainable European economy. With me today is Theresa Hannig, author of socially critical science fiction, who recently published the captivating and really eye-opening novel, Pantopia, that just received the Seraph award for the best book of the year 2023. Having read Pantopia myself in 2023, I can very well understand this honour. So welcome, Teresa, and thank you for joining us here today.

Theresa Hannig: Hi, good morning.

Henning Breuer: Good morning. Maybe to start off, we are just in the first days of January 2024, right? How does a science fiction author, or how did you start into the New Year 2024? Did you already make or break some fancy New Year's resolutions?

Theresa Hannig: Well, I didn't really have fancy New Year's resolutions; I was thinking more about New Year's resolutions that were good for me. Therefore, I decided to work less and not do everything that comes into my mind. As an author and as a creative person, you are tempted to just dive into every project that a colleague offers you and say: "Well, this is a great project and I really like it." And because I love my work so much, I've been doing this a lot for the last years. But now I say: "No, unfortunately, I have to cancel a lot of projects" or not say yes to them. So, when you say resolution, it's actually saying "no" to a lot of things that I would have said "yes" to before and take more care of myself and my family and really focus on specific projects that are important to me.

Henning Breuer: OK, so for "Post-Pantopia", we will have to wait another two or three years?

Theresa Hannig: No. There is another novel coming out at the end of September. Unfortunately, it's not going to be a Post-Pantopia novel, but it's about climate activism and how climate activism can turn into climate terrorism. And it's a pretty harsh novel, I'm afraid, but it was very important to me, and maybe it was the logical step from Pantopia. Pantopia is a vision. It's a utopia. And then reality hits you. And you realize that the world is not going to be a utopian world in the end. And maybe there need to be other visions, other fights, other scenarios that are not as likable as Pantopia, but they need to be discussed nevertheless. So that's what I wrote last year, and that's what's going to be out this year.

Henning Breuer: OK, looking forward to reading that one. But let's stay with Pantopia and our project on Strategic Foresight for Sustainability (SF4S) for a second. That project is a European Erasmus Plus Innovation Alliance project, in which we seek to develop a new approach that combines corporate foresight with sustainability and innovation management. We seek to develop a new approach that combines corporate foresight with sustainability and innovation management. One question is how companies can not only prepare for future developments through their foresight, but also innovate to contribute to sustainable development. My hope for such an approach is that dedication to sustainability can become a normative frame for forward-looking decision-making and strategic foresight in companies. This brings me to your recent book "Pantopia" (published by Fischer). In Pantopia, you unfold a scenario where this already happened. Can you tell us a bit about this book and how it envisions to solve our great sustainability challenges?

Theresa Hannig: Sure. The question that I asked myself before writing Pantopia was how can we save the world without superheroes? How could this really work, and how could we do this with processes and strategies that already exist so I didn't have to invent a superhero as such, or someone saying, "Follow me. I know what's going on", because then, it wouldn't be a utopia, but in a way, a dictatorship. So, I looked in the literature of my studies in political science, economics, and political philosophy. And I thought, how can we do this? It was very important for me to have basic human rights, that this is not negotiable and that we have a pure democracy at hand. And the question was, how can we steer the people to act globally, altruistic, and rational, without forcing them to do so? I thought the answer laid in the global market and in the principles of capitalism saying that people are already optimizing their actions and are, in a way, acting rational. But the rationality has been too short-sighted before because people just don't know what is rational for them. If they think, "Oh well, it's nice to eat this steak for \$10", this might be rational because they enjoy it at a value of, let's say, \$12. So, \$10 is a pretty good price for the steak, but they don't keep in mind that actually they will

suffer from natural disasters and from a shortage of food and water and clean air in the future. And they don't take into account that this is a cost that actually reduces their overall joy of this product. So, if you could take into account the errors and the negativity of the product, and relate it to the price, then maybe you would have to pay a much higher price for the steak to still be enjoyable. In this way, if you applied all these higher prices which I call the world-price, if you put it on the product, then the rational decisions of the people will be much more rational on a global level. And then in this way, everybody will steer its own decisions and, in this way, we could steer the whole economy in a way that is working. And that way we are exploiting our natural resources or saving them because we are not anymore willing to pay the price for exploiting.

Henning Breuer: Indeed, that's really fascinating, especially how this whole development is kind of based on values of human rights and democracy. And how it then compensates some of the shortcomings of the current market situation in capitalism that we have. Actually, it provides a new framework for what we also call sustainable business model design, right? Where we try to identify and describe and mainstream business models that do not only create an economic but also social and ecological benefits. In your book, a strong artificial intelligence calculates social and ecological costs into the prices of all products and services, and becomes an enabler of such sustainable business models that compensate resulting harms and reduce negative outcomes of business activities through higher prices. If we take this idea to something like mobility services, could you give us an example how you imagine that would play out in this domain?

Theresa Hannig: Well, I guess generally when thinking about mobility, I think the whole concept that everybody owns a car is old fashioned in a way. I can't imagine any future world where this is still a business model. If you think of altruism and my own rational behaviour, why should I have my own and why should I buy a car for a lot of money and put it in my garage where it stands for 23 hours a day? So, I think that car sharing or mobility sharing is part of the future, and I can't imagine any future where this is not the case because we still need mobility. There is already a shift in the companies and their decisions, saying they're not selling cars anymore, they are selling mobility. This way, they are selling more. The products come in a way later, and this sharing economy is one answer to this question.

Henning Breuer: Yes, actually sharing is one of the sustainable business model patterns we've been describing in our work on [Sustainable Business Model Design](#). And already talking about mobility services implies moving from products to services, or product-services systems, which is another big trend. I would also imagine what you're describing in Pantopia about green pricing, or green and social pricing mechanisms, where the social and environmental costs of certain services are calculated into the whole price. A highly resource-consuming way to move from here to Munich, for instance, would cost much more than a more energy-efficient and more sustainable way of transport, with cross-funding between these different modalities, right?

Theresa Hannig: Yes. This idea that everybody should only own his/her own car really impedes economic progress. And as you know, I'm in the city council of my city, and there is a lot of talk on how we could shape the city to adapt to climate change. How we keep the city from heating up and how we make it more sustainable and such. But then there's a big problem with the small businesses in the city because they don't want the city to become more available for pedestrians and to plant more trees, which would cool down the city. They don't want to reduce the space of the cars because they are afraid that if there are no parking places anymore, the people won't buy their stuff and they would lose a lot of money. Therefore, there's actually a lot of fighting for these car spaces, and we spend a large amount of time talking about these things. You think on the rational level, it makes sense to plant

trees and to create a parking space for bikes and bike sharing. And yet, all the businesses are still talking about car spaces. So that's pretty interesting for me to see, what are the real problems in the future and what are we actually still talking about? There is a big discrepancy between what futurists think, what businesses could do and the things that are taking place. For example, the butcher, the baker and the small business owner are not talking about the future; they're talking about how many people are going to park there tomorrow and buy their stuff tomorrow, not in 10 years or so.

Henning Breuer: Some of these tensions and conflicts that are emerging from the transition to a more sustainable economy you're also describing very nicely in your book. I really appreciate that it provides some big picture kind of inspiration for how things could move on. Our colleague Dr. Karlheinz Steinmüller, who initially recommended the book to me, said that your book is one of the rare examples for a positive vision of the future in recent science fiction. Do you agree that science fiction over the last decades tended to cultivate a more dystopian outlook, imagining unsustainable societies leading our world into collapse rather than providing a positive outlook like you're doing?

Theresa Hannig: Yes, I do. And I think it's not only been in the last years but the last decades. I already had a pretty interesting discussion with Karlheinz about the difference between East German and West German science fiction history. Having grown up in West Germany, I wasn't familiar with East German science fiction. I realized this when I presented Pantopia two years ago at a conference in Dresden. People were all very sceptical and said, "Well, how can you do this? It's not possible. We've already done this." Then I realized that East German science fiction was already very utopian because there was, in a way, this state doctrine of "we are going to a better future. We just have to work together." This was already in their minds, and it was a very big thing. When East Germany collapsed, everybody was so disappointed that they said, "We never want to do this political token stuff again. It just never really worked." So, we just shifted completely to dystopia. In West Germany and also in English-speaking countries, they didn't have this utopian detour. They just went into dystopian fiction, and like 80 or 90 percent of literature and pop culture, science fiction is dystopian just because it's relatively easy to write. It's thrilling. It's interesting, and you have this kind of disaster porn: You like to see the world coming to an end in various styles, like with a meteorite hitting Earth or a giant wave, or aliens, or a zombie apocalypse, or a pandemic. Whatever. We have seen this all the time. Every time people are talking about the future, they are destroying Earth and telling us terrible stories of how everything's going to an end, and people still buy it. You see the streaming series and see how successful everything is because people like this thrill. I do think that science fiction has contributed to this trend as well. And I hoped that there would have been a shift a few years ago already. I haven't seen it, but now in the last year, I guess 2023, there have been some more utopian novels. It's not marketed under the name utopia, it's more under the name Solarpunk. There are a lot of novels now. And like cyberpunk is not really all dystopian and all terrible, just a little bit, Solarpunk is not all that utopian, but a little bit, so you have a glimpse into the future that is more hopeful about having a future as a human race. And I guess now there is a small blossom of utopian storytelling.

Henning Breuer: yes, definitely in the American tradition also, right? Some of these blockbuster movies that emerged from some of the famous science fiction novels tend to have this very dystopian or catastrophic outlook. It's difficult to write a utopian novel that does not sound naive, right? And it's not just a superhero or one big magic that brings the resolution to some of the problems we're facing today, right? What fascinated me in your book is that it's well written and that it captivates the reader. Through the eyes of the protagonists we can almost experience step by step how the new world comes into order. There are certainly big differences between this fine art of writing compelling science fiction and the everyday attempt to bring forward-looking thinking to decision-makers in

organizations. Still, these narrative approaches that science fiction also stands for are also used to facilitate future imagination and dissemination of new normative frameworks. How do you think that companies or public organizations could benefit from such storytelling or such more narrative approaches?

Theresa Hannig: Well, I do think they can profit from it a lot. I've been doing some of these science fiction prototyping projects in the last few years, and I liked it a lot because it was a mixture of creativity, but also the scientific foundation was there. Most times these projects dealt with either companies or government organizations. We were given a specific set of rules or a set of technological inventions or societal developments and then we said, "Well, just from this point on, I think that's what could be happening." It was not scientific, but we knew that the real scientific futurists couldn't reach out into the future more than five or ten years. Nobody knows what's going to happen in 10 years. So, they have to stick to their numbers and say: "Maybe or most probably in the next two years this and that is going to happen." But what's going to happen in five years? I can't say this without harming credibility as a scientist. But we as authors can just ask: "What's going to happen?" We can just ponder this question and think about it in a leisurely way that scientists are not allowed to. We can rethink the ways we think of the future. And because there were always several authors who worked in the same setting, as a result you had a cloud or an imaginative space of the future. When handing in the papers and then talking again to the scientists and then giving the feedback and having the discussion rounds, you could see how all these ideas that were based on more or less the same facts, played ping-pong together and created in this cloud of connections and new possibilities and these rooms of new thoughts. From this room of thoughts, from this plateau, you can move on to new scenarios and new thoughts. So, I think this gives companies and even government organizations new space, and allows them to think anew about the problems that they thought they already overthought scientifically. Plus, creative texts are not always, but probably sometimes more fun to read.

Henning Breuer: Yes, though I have a slightly different perspective on that. I think there are even scientific approaches to dealing with a more far-reaching future, approaches that also involve creativity in their development. It is just important that you make the process of how you come to certain assumptions or propositions about future developments transparent. If they are based on the participants' subjectivity, and if you have relevant stakeholders that contribute to such a process, these are also scientifically valid approaches to foresight.

What I found particularly interesting is the second aspect you mentioned, that creative texts are more fun to read. I think this is also quite important not just to depict or pinpoint to certain key aspects or factors that may have changed in the future, but also to spell them out: How that feels like, what does that look like, how that smells like - also to enable a more emotional or maybe even physical relation to these future developments. Do you think this is something that science fiction authors or people who are professionals in writing these more captivating stories could contribute to?

Theresa Hannig: Yes. I had this project for Bosch-Siemens Haushaltsgeräte, in which I wrote a story about their future personas. It was 15 years into the future, and of course I had some basic things that I had to relate to, but then I could develop the story myself. By developing the story and by giving them flesh and a real background and a history and a conflict and relationships and adventures, you could really relate to the people and the problems, and see how the people related to the future and the future problems. Then, in the story that I developed, there were things for their designers and for their engineers to think about which we hadn't talked about before. In the creative process I developed several ideas of what they could contribute. I think it's a very interesting and a very important job or task to keep developing and keep imagining these futures, and then at each step of each new future, I

create a new scenario and the new scenario and at each step, you can feedback and link to other people and create new branches of this future. This is an amazing process. I like it very much.

Henning Breuer: I think this is great, really trying to create a new dimension or reference for communication that enables then also new topics to surface, topics that wouldn't surface if you just relied on the more academic writing or approaches that you already mentioned. Ok, let's already come to an end and let's assume that better cooperation between science fiction authors, futurologists, and corporate executives could make valuable contributions to sustainable development. What could be their unique contribution and what kind of collaboration would you like to see or participate in?

Theresa Hannig: As authors, we are not driven by profit for the companies. We are driven by profit for ourselves, but if I'm hired for a project and think of a problem or of a product or of a future customer, then I'm not driven by profit, but by creativity and by what's going to happen in the future. Maybe this is an approach that's only possible for outsiders of the company. Generally speaking, I just think that the collaboration of people from different fields, not only writing but also theatre, arts, and music, if you intertwine them with business questions, you can get completely new and beautiful results. I do think that this cooperation is very interesting and beneficial for all sides, and I do hope that there's going to be more projects like this in the future. I was at a conference about future work, it was in the Corona times, and there was a local politician, who said, how he was surprised by all this development. And then another science fiction author said: "Yeah, well, if you had read science fiction in the past, you wouldn't have been surprised". It is not that science fiction tells the future. But if you have read a lot of science fiction, then the future that's going to happen possibly has been in one of these stories. So, if you read a lot of them, you might be prepared for what's going to come in the future.

Henning Breuer: Yes, this is one of the main purposes of classical scenario management. Not to describe how the future will be but to kind of anticipate the space of potential developments to be prepared for different cases. The second aspect, you also described quite nicely is that you as authors could have a higher liberty to envision, not only probable but also more desirable futures that all of us would hopefully be happy to engage for. So, we have this aspect of having greater liberty to envision desirable developments, then a technical skill that is relevant also to convey these futures in more tangible and more vivid and captivating ways. And what you just added, I think that's also quite relevant and important having an independent standpoint that is kind of liberated from the economic pressures and interests of an individual organization and can provide a credible standpoint from the future to evaluate and compare current developments. These are all very interesting aspects that science fiction authors could contribute to such a collaboration. So, thank you very much, Teresa for this short interview here today. Let's see if we can uncover some more potentials for real collaboration within the Strategic Foresight for Sustainability project or in other contexts. And I thank you very much for your time and I want to recommend to everybody who has not read it yet to read Pantopia, the book by Theresa Hannig. Thank you very much and have a great day.

Theresa Hannig: Thanks to you, it was nice being here.

Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union



Project ID: 101056410 Duration: 1.7.2022 – 30.6.2025