



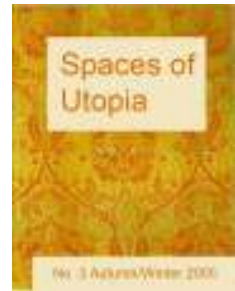
# Spaces of Utopia

No. 3 Autumn/Winter 2006

# ***Spaces of Utopia: An Electronic Journal***

**No. 3 – Autumn/Winter 2006**

Ed. Jorge Miguel Bastos da Silva



---

## **Contents**

---

### **I - UTOPIA MATTERS**

**Raffaella Baccolini**, “Dystopia Matters: On the Use of Dystopia and Utopia”, pp. 1-4.

### **II - ARTICLES**

**Lisa Garforth**, “Ideal Nature: Utopias of Landscape and Loss”, pp. 5-26.

**Alexandra Sippel**, “The Machine in the Pastoral Imagery of Eighteenth-century Utopias”, pp. 27-37.

**John S. Partington**, “‘There’s a Better World a-Coming’: The Urban Collectivism-Rural Individualism of Woody Guthrie”, pp. 38-56.

**Naobumi Hijikata & Kevin O’Duffy**, “Utopian Society of the Zen-Buddhists”, pp. 57-68.

**Juan Miguel Zarandona**, “The Biography of Vasco de Quiroga (1470-1565), Bishop of Utopia, by Benjamín Jarnés (1888-1949)”, pp. 69-83.

**Mariya Ivancheva**, “On Some Utopian Motives in Walter Benjamin”, pp. 84-104.

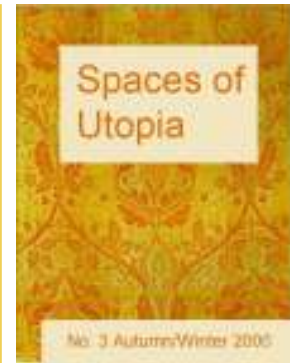
**Malcolm Miles**, “The End of Utopia: Imminent and Immanent Liberation”, pp. 105-113.

**Jörn Tietgen**, “Political Utopias in Film”, pp. 114-131.

**Andrew Milner**, “The Utopian Studies Project: A Report from Australia”, pp. 132-148.

## **Dystopia Matters: On the Use of Dystopia and Utopia**

**Raffaella Baccolini**  
University of Bologna



---

Citation: Raffaella Baccolini, "Dystopia Matters: On the Use of Dystopia and Utopia", *Spaces of Utopia: An Electronic Journal*, nr. 3, Autumn/Winter 2006, pp. 1-4 <<http://ler.letras.up.pt> > ISSN 1646-4729.

---

My first "significant" encounter with utopia was really one with dystopia, and with Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* in particular. I had read and studied, as part of my training in Foreign Languages and Literature at the University in Italy, Thomas More's *Utopia*, Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis*, and William Morris's *News from Nowhere* among others, but these, I have to admit, had left me lukewarm. I had also come across Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, the work of George Orwell, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, and Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*. The dystopian aspects of these novels and the political concerns of the twentieth-century texts in particular attracted my interest and I resolved that I would one day return to these works. I continued my education in the United States, where I re-encountered these texts and many more. Again, the utopias did not particularly stir me; dystopias, on the other hand, were speaking to me. And yet, I was completely absorbed by my research on H.D.'s late poetry and her re-visions of genres and literary traditions – her "dialogue" with poets like William Shakespeare, Ezra Pound, Dante, and St. John Perse – and again, dystopias would have to wait. It wasn't until 1986, when a friend gave me Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* for a present and a temporary distraction from my work on the dissertation, that my time for dystopia had come.

At that time, after reading Atwood's novel and having seen some negative reviews she had received – mostly accusing her of having written a novel that did not fit the dystopian genre – I went back to the conventions of

utopian and dystopian literature. What most reviewers seemed to imply was that since Atwood's novel bears in mind Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* but does not follow entirely the traditional conventions of the dystopian genre, it cannot be regarded as a proper, successful dystopia and needs to be labelled differently. This led some critics to consider Atwood's novel a failure, rather than an experiment with the dystopian genre. My experience was exactly the opposite: I found the novel refreshing, engaging, and intriguing. What others perceived as a failure, was to me – steeped as I was in the feminist notion of re-vision – one of the novel's strengths: a conscious intervention on genre writing. I started working on dystopia and its conventions, largely encouraged – once I was back in Italy – by the people and the work carried out at the Centro Interdipartimentale di Ricerca sull'Utopia at the University of Bologna.

My engagement with utopia has then come through dystopia. In my work I have time and again returned to issues of genre writing as they intersect with gender and the deconstruction of high and low culture. My work has been informed by feminist theory and criticism, but also by the political, geographical, and cultural circumstances that shape myself and the times in which I live. My encounters with the communities of utopian studies – the Centro Interdipartimentale di Ricerca sull'Utopia as well as the Society for Utopian Studies (U.S.) and the Utopian Studies Society (Europe) – have left me wondering why dystopia and not utopia. Most of my colleagues and friends were there because of utopia, because some of them *were* utopian. I was there because of dystopia. What did it say about me? A friend from SUS once half-jokingly told me it was because I had no use for imagination and dreams. Was it really so?

The question, and the remark about dreams and imagination, nagged me for quite some time, but it also urged me to think about the importance and the use of dystopia. Over the years I have worked on women's revisions of dystopia and science fiction conventions. It was immediately clear that women's condition placed them in a different relationship vis-à-vis the utopian tradition. The utopias envisioned by male authors had not been radically different places for women, and through history women had and still have often been citizens of dystopia. The collapse of western, patriarchal tradition was no big loss for

women writers, who at times would even employ irony and detachment to distance themselves from the more regressive and nostalgic views of male writers and to welcome catastrophic scenarios of destruction as a possibility for a clean start. But more often, women's dystopian visions exacerbated precisely those critical issues – for example, women's reproduction and the control of their sexualities and bodies – that lie at the basis of gender inequality, demonstrating to what extent gendered identities are not “natural” but are instead the products of an androcentric, totalitarian discourse.

So to return to the bothersome question of “why dystopia”, I think I started finding an answer in the specificity of women's critical dystopias. Their work showed me the importance of dystopia as one of the preferred forms of resistance for our times, one that maintained utopia on the horizon and *within* the pages of the text with a series of different strategies. Utopia has been for long under attack. When it is not questioned as a dangerous dream that can turn into a nightmare, it is devalued by its conflation with materialist satisfaction. Utopia is therefore often rejected or tamed. Our times need utopia more than ever, but they seem to be able to recover utopia mostly through dystopia.

But their work also provided me with the answer to my interest in dystopia. As I said, my work has been informed by feminist theory and criticism, but also by the political, geographical, and cultural circumstances that shape myself and the times in which I live. Being born in 1960, I have come of age, so to speak, in 1970s Italy. I have no direct recollection of the “mythical” 1968, whereas the “leaden years” (*anni di piombo*) of 1970s Italy are very much with me. I remember the bombs in the squares in Milan and Brescia; I remember the hundreds of people killed in terrorist attacks; I remember the bombs on the trains and in the Bologna train station. I have felt what it is like to live in dystopia.

This is not to say that we can only know what we have experienced, or there would be no use for imagination and dreams. But these political and geographical circumstances account, I think, for some of the reasons why the recent production of dystopian science fiction, in particular, speaks to me more than the utopias of the 1960s and early 1970s do. And, to a certain extent, this is also one of the elements that shape my approach to utopian literature. I find

in the recent sf production, in its content as well as in its formal features, a new oppositional and resisting form of writing, one that maintains a utopian horizon within the pages of dystopian sf and in these anti-utopian times.

Whether recovered through dystopia or not, however, what is important is the use of utopia, and dystopia, today – a use that perhaps utopia shares with literature and the imagination. We need utopia, as we need literature, because we still need to imagine better or worse worlds, and through those to think critically about and act upon our own world to change it. Eduardo Galeano's "Ventana sobre la utopía" aptly synthesizes why utopia still matters to us today:

"Ella está en el horizonte" – dice Fernando Birri – "Me acerco dos pasos, ella se aleja dos pasos. Camino diez pasos y el horizonte se corre diez pasos más allá. Por mucho que yo camine, nunca la alcanzaré. ¿Para que sirve la utopía? Para eso sirve: para caminar." (Galeano, 2006: n.pag. online)<sup>1</sup>

## Note

---

<sup>1</sup> "It is on the horizon" – says Fernando Birri – "I advance two steps, it goes two steps backward. I take ten steps and the horizon moves ten steps forward. No matter how far I walk, I will never reach it. What is the use of utopia? That's its use: to help us walk" (my translation).

## Work Cited

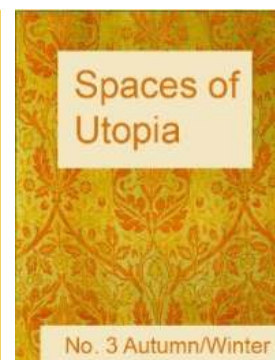
Galeano, Eduardo (2006), *Las Palabras Andantes*, 25 July, available at: <http://www.patriagrande.net/uruguay/eduardo.galeano/las.palabras.andantes/ventana.sobre.la.utopia.htm>

## Ideal Nature:

### Utopias of Landscape and Loss

**Lisa Garforth**

University of York, UK



---

Citation: Lisa Garforth, "Ideal Nature: Utopias of Landscape and Loss", *Spaces of Utopia: An Electronic Journal*, nr. 3, Autumn/Winter 2006, pp. 5-26 <<http://ler.letras.up.pt>> ISSN 1646-4729.

---

### Introduction

This is a story about entanglements between nature and utopia before and after the "end of nature". In this paper I map some of the ways in which ideas and representations of nonhuman nature are indissolubly caught up with utopianism, both in the conventional sense of blueprints for better societies, and in the sense of the less schematic and systematic utopianism conceived of as the critique and transgression of what is born out of the desire for "better ways of living and being" (Levitas 1990: 7). I focus on "external" nature, the natural environment with which societies and social actors are relentlessly and problematically articulated. In contemporary social and cultural theory the distinction between "external" nature and the "inner" natures of the body is seen as increasingly unstable, dissolving in the experience of social life in conditions of widespread environmental risk (to natures, to bodies) and the operations of global technoscience, so that the materiality of nature/bodies and ideas about selves and environments are imbricated in ever more promiscuous and hybrid relationships. Nonetheless, the imagination of a material and external nature, separate from and indeed conceptually constitutive of a distinctive human nature and culture, is of course deeply embedded in modern and postmodern Western societies.

The construction of that separate nature and its endless representation in text and as spectacle has a long and complex relationship with utopianism. The story of the shifting ways in which nature and utopia are bound up together, and how theorists have characterised the knots and connections, forms the structure of

my discussion. Examining the mutable and braided concepts of nature and utopia insistently unravels claims to universality and essentials. Indeed, one of the most interesting analogies between the concepts of utopia and nature is that both have appeared to offer very particular kinds of certainties and foundations that have proved to be increasingly precarious. Utopian visions have looked like concrete hopes and plans for future societies; nature has seemed to be a material reality that could ground truth claims and guarantee the authenticity or illegitimacy of social values and behaviours. Both, on further examination, prove to be fluid, contested and partial entities – not even, perhaps, entities at all. Rather, nature and utopia are increasingly seen to have given up – in theory at least – their status as objects or things and to have become processual or relational. Both have come to be analysed less in terms of their specifiable substance or content but in terms of their changing social construction and functions. This sense of the changing conceptualisation of utopia and nature means that the relationship between the desire for a better way of being and the idea of nature needs to be examined from different angles and in a range of historical and theoretical contexts.

In the light of the contingent and historically situated ways in which “nature” and “utopia” have operated together, I look at three clusters or constellations of utopia-nature alliances. I begin with *ecotopia*, using the term to refer to the formal and self-conscious ecological utopianism that became thinkable in the light of mid to late twentieth-century political environmentalism, albeit with roots stretching back far further. I move on to discuss the less explicitly political but perhaps more insidiously ideological idea of *landscape* to explore how critical theorists have seen in idealised literary and artistic representations of nature a disguised expression of utopian social values, sometimes argued to be transformative, sometimes compensatory, in function. The landscape ideal has been particularly associated with high modernity, but recent analyses continue to identify the cultural fetish for idealised, untainted nature with a kind of compensatory utopianism that undermines some of the radical claims of ecocentric discourse. In the final section I address the *postnatural*, tracing what happens to landscape, nature, ideology and utopia in “end” times, that is, the complex and contested ways in which cultural representations and even simulations of nature are caught up with utopian ideals and desires in a postmodern society that is arguably “after”

nature and yet simultaneously preoccupied with images and ideals of natural beauty and integrity as well as questions of environmental justice and ecological futures.

This is, then, necessarily a story which implies that we are postmodern – or, following Latour, that we have arrived at a point at which we can say that “we have never been modern” (1993) – and that postmodernity might involve the end also of nature as it has conventionally been conceived – as a material, organic, separate whole that also stands as the nonhuman, non-social or non-cultural “other” in the oppositional discourses that frame Western philosophy and society. As well as being postmodern, however, our historical consciousness is also indelibly marked by (contested and partial) knowledges of the environmental crisis announced in the late 1960s. In its aftermath, I argue that culture is shot through with the problem of how we might avoid or live with environmental apocalypse, and also with desires for a real, unspoilt and beautiful nature. This is, then, also a story about ecological philosophy and politics. At the beginning of this story, environmentalism looks like an inherently oppositional and utopian set of ideas and practices. As the story progresses, however, debates about the meaning of nature in the post-environmental crisis period have increasingly questioned the ideals and functions of ecocentric thought itself. Within a range of critical social and cultural theories, deep green philosophy is stripped of its privileged status as a critique of the alienating and exploitative culture of late modernity and authentic alternative, and becomes instead one more problematic narrative adding its voice to a range of dreams and anxieties about the natural. Specifically, ecocentrism is seen less as part of the solution to environmental problems and more as a discourse that reproduces untenable society/nature dualisms and holds up idealisations of natural environments as spectacles for contemplation. The status of ecologism as a self-evidently utopian (estranging, critiquing, transforming) discourse has been undermined and, in some cases, appears a nostalgic dream compensating for the loss of a nature that never existed. My conclusions, therefore, concern questions about whether and how a postnatural culture might optimistically envisage a future for natural-social relationships, as well as the significance of utopia in environmental epistemology and politics.

## Ecotopia

Questions of what role nature can play in plans or desires for an ideal *society* are examined in various ways in utopian theory (see for example Levitas 1984; Davis 1987; Sargent 1994; de Geus 1999; Sargisson 2000; Jameson 2004). One very clear answer has come from the explosion of ecological politics and theory in the period since the idea of an “environmental crisis” became common currency in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Environmentalist rhetoric has insistently framed its arguments about how societies do and should live with nature in relation to the twin tropes of catastrophe and ecotopia. On the one hand, dystopian narratives extrapolated issues of pollution and resource depletion into future scenarios of environmental degradation and social collapse, which challenged modernity’s ideological frameworks of progress and unlimited economic growth and urgently argued for the delegitimisation of the technocentric exploitation of nature. A clear “apocalyptic horizon” (Dryzek 1997: 37) emerged from widely read environmentalist texts such as Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1999) and the Club of Rome’s *Limits to Growth* (Meadows *et al.* 1972). On the other hand, hopes and visions of emancipated and unalienated futures in a right relationship with nature promised an alternative culture of ecological integrity and human well-being beyond growth and domination. Manifestoes for a green and sustainable society like the *Ecologist’s* “Blueprint for Survival” (Goldsmith 1972) and literary utopias like Ernest Callenbach’s *Ecotopia* (1978) envisioned a better way of life for human societies not in opposition to nature or limited by the need for ecological restraint, but liberated and fulfilled by a new holistic and relational conception of the natural world.

By the 1970s, environmentalism was shaping an idea of nature that appeared as part of the new content of utopian expression in explicit and politicised ways, emerging both in the form of closed blueprints for radical social-structural reform, and – with green ideas close to the heart of the themes of the critical literary utopia (Moylan 1986) – in the form of open, processual and reflexive explorations of green values. Ecotopian thought is of course plural and heterogeneous, but its visions of radically new ways of living with rather than at the expense of the natural world share a common core. This has been characterised in a range of ways (see for example Eckersley 1992; Merchant

2005; Dobson 1995; Kumar 1987; Pepper 2005), but for the sake of descriptive clarity I outline ecotopia here under three themes: ecocentrism, sufficiency, and embeddedness. Ecocentrism refers to the displacement of human consciousness from its privileged position at the centre of knowledge and value. Natural entities and systems are accorded intrinsic rather than simply instrumental value, and relational epistemologies supplant essentialist ones so that all living things, including human subjects and societies, are understood not in terms of inherent qualities but as constituted in their relationships with a multiplicity of others. Sufficiency means recognising that modern ideologies of human well-being and progress are predicated upon economic expansion and acquisition that exploit and despoil nature. Radical ecotopias reject the logic of “more” and articulate a philosophy of “enough”, proposing that human well-being and fulfilment should be sought not in material progress but in spiritual, cultural and intellectual growth, in community and connections with others, and in an enhanced and vibrant relationship with the natural world. Embeddedness refers to the ecotopian argument that late modern society has become progressively separated and alienated from its natural support systems, both materially and conceptually. Ecocentrism sees proximity to nature – both in the sense of physical closeness to the earth and in terms of cultivating an ethics of empathy and interconnection with all living things – as crucial to an authentically green society and to human emancipation.

Thus radical green ecocentric visions envision a world in which ecological respect, care and integrity expand and enhance rather than reduce and constrain the possibilities for human well-being. Ecotopian dreams of freedom and human well-being grounded in nature and the natural do not, of course, emerge from nowhere. They can be situated in relation to the history of traditions within utopian thought which resist technocentrism and the instrumental, productive rationalities of modernity and oppose control and domination over both the human and natural worlds. De Geus (1999), for example, theorises contemporary ecotopianism as a new version of utopias of “sufficiency” that can be traced from Rousseau to the Romantics and William Morris. There are clear links between contemporary ecotopias and Arcadian traditions in utopian thought, as well as the tradition of the “body” utopia outlined by Sargent (1994). However, as I have argued elsewhere,

recent ecological utopias should be seen as reconfigurations of rather than simple additions to an essential and enduring “nature utopia” (Garforth 2002 and forthcoming; see also Hollm 1998). They are responses to specific social and historical conditions which include the novel idea of a systemic environmental crisis and the new epistemologies and ecological politics that have grown up in response (Dobson, 1995; Eyerman / Jamison 1991; *inter alia*). The nature that is evoked or constructed by ecotopian visions is not identical to the nature vocabularies of the pastoral or the Romantic sublime, for example. Contemporary, ecological, political and philosophical positions constitute a distinctive ideological discourse (Dobson 1995), and their ecotopian visions cannot simply be read as nostalgic or conservative returns to either pre-existing traditions of anti-modern utopian thought or yearnings for a timeless, static, ahistorical nature. Rather, they are critical utopian explorations of the grounds for a genuinely post-industrial society (Kumar 1987), most powerfully expressed in the reflexive narratives of critical ecotopian fiction (Garforth, forthcoming).

In this context theorists of ecopolitical thought have begun to examine ecotopianism not simply in terms of the formal representation of green ideas, but in an attempt to identify the operations and function of utopia as part of the politics of contemporary ecologism. While nature can be seen as part of the content of utopias, green political theory seeks to understand utopianism as an intrinsic aspect of radical ecology. Built on the tenets of ecocentrism, sufficiency and embeddedness, radical ecological thought can be seen as inherently utopian – that is, critical, disruptive and emancipatory. Reformist, light green, environmentalist ethics ask us simply to find ways of moderating the worst excesses of social impacts on the environment – to embrace sustainable development, green consumerism, modest recycling, and marginal nature conservation. Radical ecologism argues for fundamental shifts in the culture that underpins technocentric, dominating and exploiting structures and practices, and offers an alternative set of values for human self-realisation rooted in an ecocentric and relational conception of nature. In essence, radical ecology can be seen as asking for a basic reconsideration of the meaning, value and significance of nature, which in turns means rewriting assumptions about human nature, culture, and society. In its capacity to provoke these conceptual shifts, ecological

and utopian theorists have identified in radical ecology a utopianism of process and critique that is as significant as the detail of its blueprints or reflexive dreams of a sustainable society.

Robyn Eckersley locates radical ecologism's utopianism primarily in its emancipatory qualities. In the wake of limited "survivalist" and "democratic" articulations of the environmental problematic, by the 1970s deep green philosophy had coalesced into a fully critical and liberatory discourse that saw the environmental crisis as an "opportunity for metaphysical reconstruction and moral development" (Eckersley 1992: 19). On this reading, ecocentric philosophy's exploration of new and better ways of living with nature constitutes a "new heuristic of future possibilities" (*idem*, 186). It functions as an ongoing reevaluation of nature, society and the subject, which Eckersley describes (following Levitas's work on Thompson and Abensour; see Levitas 1990, Eckersley 1992) in terms of the processual education of desire. At the heart of ecologism's utopianism is its distinctive model of relational ethics. Rather than adopting an abstract or "axiological" approach to ethical value, ecocentric philosophy is predicated on a lived or intuitive ethics (*idem*, 61), inviting us to cultivate a more expansive sense of self through identification with and empathy for other human and nonhuman beings. Its norms are not solely intellectual or cognitive but "ultimately experiential" (Devall / Sessions 1985: 66). This "processual ontology" is also the key to deep green utopianism for Lucy Sargisson (2001; see also 2000). Where Eckersley focuses primarily on its emancipatory qualities, Sargisson privileges its capacity for subversion. For Sargisson, the ecological self and relational ethics espoused by deep green theorists work to disrupt the conventional Western self/other relationship and transgress the boundaries that conceptually separate humans and culture from nature, opening up a potentially utopian space of estrangement and subversion.

Recent theoretical accounts of radical ecocentric thought's utopian qualities are not wholly positive. Sargisson is somewhat sceptical that the utopian possibilities of ecologism's transgressive ontology are actually kept open, noting a tendency within deep green philosophy to resolve the tensions it identifies between self and other, culture and nature, cognitive rationality and intuition/empathy into positions of identity and sameness – that is, to privilege

nature over culture and absorb other into self rather than maintain a transgressive tension between these binaries (Sargisson 2001).<sup>1</sup> From a different perspective, green political theorists Andrew Dobson (1995) and David Pepper (2005) acknowledge the necessity of ecologism's visionary elements and its intrinsically idealist and utopian qualities, but argue that ecological politics has not developed a convincing materialist model for political transformation.<sup>2</sup> In this respect theories of green utopianism reflect and overlap with contemporary debates within utopian theory (see for example Levitas / Sargisson 2001) over the value of settling for a critical, deconstructive or broadly cultural model of utopianism at the expense of calling for collective utopian models of structural transformation.

However, despite these differences of emphasis and cautionary notes as to the limits of the green utopian function, a range of theorists acknowledge the distinctive ways in which ecocentric idealism has both drawn on and refigured the utopian mode, in terms of the content of utopian visions, the transformation of their formal representation, and the unsettling and emancipatory "processual ontology" of ecocentrism. The urgent necessity to reconceptualise nonhuman nature and human social relationships with it in conditions of environmental crisis therefore constitutes one particularly important set of articulations between nature and utopia. Nonetheless, the claim that radical ecological philosophy is an inherently oppositional or transgressive discourse is problematic on two counts. Firstly, it only attends to explicit and politicised utopias of nature and the environment; the more diffuse, ambiguous and indirect ideas about nature and its future in the wider culture are overlooked or treated simply as manifestations of an ideology of domination and exploitation. Secondly, as Sargisson's doubts above intimate, ecocentric thought depends upon assumptions about the taken-for-granted stability and materiality of nature as a discrete cultural category or physical object that have been thoroughly deconstructed and declared untenable within recent social and cultural theory.

### **Landscape**

Thus in this section I ask what happens to the relationship between nature and utopia in theoretical contexts where nature's epistemological status is questioned and in cultural contexts where desires and anxieties about nature and its future(s)

are represented implicitly and symbolically. Social science and humanities theory increasingly argue that nature itself is socially produced and culturally constructed, and that representations of the natural are displaced articulations of social values. Like radical ecology, social constructionist approaches to nature highlight how the culture and dominant epistemologies of Western modernity have traded on a fundamental nature/culture opposition to make the natural available as an object of domination and instrumental use (see for example Pepper 1984; Evernden 1992; Merchant 2003). The ultimate roots of environmental crisis are located in nature's positioning as a reified, separate and devalued object rather than as a multiple and lively set of entities and relationships with intrinsic meaning and value. However, many theorists have argued that those same dichotomies have simultaneously produced nature as an object of aesthetic appreciation and appropriation, infused with both ideological legitimations of existing social relations and structures, and desires for other ways of being in the world. Whilst radical ecologism celebrates this aestheticised construction of nature, building on it an oppositional and emancipatory utopian project, other approaches have tended to see in idealised representations of nature debased utopias of mystification, refuge or compensation.

Cosgrove's work on the emergence of the idea or ideal of landscape (both in terms of "real" natural scenes and their representation, especially in fine art) exemplifies Marxist-materialist theorisations of the socialisation of nature and approaches to the iconography of nature that read landscape for its social and symbolic significance (Cosgrove 1998; see also Daniels / Cosgrove 1988; Williams 1973; Berger 1972). Here, the dominant "ways of seeing" landscape are essentially ideological mystifications that legitimate property and power relations and disguise a real or authentic nature behind them. The "real" nature that Marxist approaches invoke is not an essentialist or solely material category, but rather the nature that is brought into being through its dialectical relationship with the social, primarily through labour and dwelling. It is precisely these traces of human agency, politics and history in nature that, it is argued, are finessed away in the landscape ideal. Landscape, emerging in early modern Europe, encodes capitalist ideology through the development of linear perspective, representing nature from an external point of view in a static, "realistic" scene as an object of the gaze

rather than a site of lived relationships. The social is reified in hypostasised representations of “pure” nature recalling a mythical golden age and natural order, reinforcing the contradictions and lacks of modernity in the moment of offering a refuge from them.

Thus in the concept and history of landscape we see a very different set of connections between nature and utopia than those suggested by ecotopia. Ecotopia’s visions of social conditions explicitly politicise the natural and estrange and critique the social; landscape naturalises the social and mystifies nature. Insofar as nature-as-landscape is theorised as thoroughly social, however, it may also be understood as utopian, broadly defined; ideas of nature express desires for better ways of being. Like utopia, landscape’s function can be transformative, as part of the ideological project of the rising bourgeoisie, but is predominantly compensatory, offering visions of a harmonious and unalienated natural world that is desired at the moment of its loss. If utopian desires are in some sense always driven by yearning and lack (Bloch 1986; Levitas 1990), then landscape makes nature complicit in their displacement and ideological resolution.

The claim that modern culture is replete with idealised representations of nature that function as corrupt utopias – reactionary and nostalgic rather than progressive and emancipatory, compensatory and escapist rather than critical and transformative – has re-emerged in recent work on the cultural construction of nature, this time often focused on the natures produced by environmentalist discourse. A well-known statement of these positions was the collection *Uncommon Ground* (1996), edited by William Cronon and including essays by for example Donna Haraway and Carolyn Merchant. *Uncommon Ground*’s argument was that whilst nature is routinely taken to signify a foundational and universal reality, in fact it carries our deepest and most culturally specific values. How, Cronon asks, can the diverse and contradictory natures we encounter both physically and in discourse be reducible to a single monolithic entity – “One Thing with One Name”? (Cronon 1996b). *Uncommon Ground* was singled out for criticism by radical ecophilosophers (Snyder 1996; Sessions 1996) and generated a collection of critical essays in response (Soulé / Lease 1995). The general tenor of the criticism was that the Cronon contributors espoused a form of deconstructionist postmodern relativism that in effect “explained nature away” or

denied its intrinsic value. In fact, the majority of the essays in *Uncommon Ground* adopted a rather moderate position, focusing on problems of epistemology rather than ontology, with Cronon and Merchant especially insisting that constructionist approaches were born out of a commitment to environmental justice rather than a rejection of the grounds on which it might be based. This moderate constructionism did not deny but remained agnostic regarding nature's material reality, arguing instead that it can only be grasped via multiple, contested and irreducibly social discourses. "Nature itself" – as a pure, separate entity – is taken to be ultimately inaccessible; we can only understand through the lens of signification and culture, shaped by dominant epistemologies.

More contentiously, though, *Uncommon Ground* identified two discourses close to the heart of radical ecological thought, especially in the US, as particularly problematic in relation to environmental justice: the image of wilderness (Cronon 1996a), and the Eden narrative (Merchant 1996: 2003). Cronon argues that deep ecology's truth claims about protecting and conserving pristine nature depend on an idea of pristine wilderness that is in fact an elaborate and deeply "unnatural" romantic myth with a distinctive history (Cronon 1996; see also Nash 1982; Oelschlaeger 1992). Wilderness is central to the deep green utopia (Eckersley 1992); its essential otherness and separation from the social constructs it both as a material object of care and a signifier of what is important as a foundation for human well-being. For Cronon, "wilderness" is rather a wishful transcendent ideal of moral and physical purity that functions as a physical and symbolic refuge from modernity. The wilderness ideal articulates "unexamined hopes and desires" that conceal and compensate for the socialised and corrupted nature that it allows us to go on producing wherever wilderness has already been lost or damaged (Cronon 1996a: 81). Thus as Luke notes, commenting on Sierra Club-type images of beautiful, pristine, unpeopled wilderness, "[it] looks 'natural', but it is being denaturalised by vast industrial metabolisms even as environmental pressure groups cling to such photographic myths as utopian images of a place and a moment outside our (...) history" (Luke 1997: 137).

As in the materialist approaches outlined above, these arguments show that not only is the sphere of cultural representation suffused with discourses and imagery that work to naturalise or mystify nature and the social, but that such

representations produce or construct the external natures we see and know. More recent constructionist approaches, however, do not suggest that there is a “real” nature to get back to beneath its compensatory and utopian representation. Discourse replaces ideology as the key theoretical term, and “discourses do not reveal or hide the truth of nature, but, rather, create their own truths” (Castree 2001: 12). Cultural constructionist approaches do not make foundational claims about the natural, but seek instead a means of open arbitration between plural truths. In doing so, they offer another kind of nature utopia, most clearly visible in Cronon’s arguments. If dominant discourses of nature naturalise what is always already social and encultured, then environmental ethics cannot be grounded in “real” nature; rather, it must explicitly recognise the social and political values built into concepts of nature, and acknowledge that their plurality bespeaks multiple and heterogeneous social relationships with many “others”, human and nonhuman. Getting rid of the idea of wilderness and originatory myths of separate nature could thus initiate a process of democratic deliberation over social preferences regarding the future of humans and nature. For Cronon, the critique of deep ecology is necessary “precisely because we sympathise so strongly with the environmentalist agenda: with the task of rethinking and reconstructing the human relationship with the natural world” (Cronon 1996b: 26).

From this perspective, then, radical ecology is displaced as an intrinsically utopian discourse, its claims to transgression and critique revealed to rest on nostalgic, ahistorical and desiring yet ultimately compensatory visions of a separate and pristine nature. The approaches associated with *Uncommon Ground* do not fundamentally question the reality of nature itself. However, their scepticism regarding the issue of a single and separate nature does hint at the radical ontological deconstructions of the nature/culture binary and anti-foundationalist approaches that I discuss below under the theme of the postnatural. Can there be a nature utopia after the end of nature?

### **The postnatural**

Much has been made of McKibben’s argument that by the late twentieth century we had reached the “end of nature” (2003). In the catastrophe narratives of the 1970s the imminent death of nature functioned as a dystopian warning device; for

McKibben, we have already arrived at the end. Global climate change represents the final denaturalisation of nature. By polluting every particle of the atmosphere and being able to change the weather, “we make every spot on earth man-made and artificial. In so doing we have deprived nature of its independence... Nature’s independence *is* its meaning; without it there is nothing but us” (McKibben 2003: 60-61; emphasis in original). For McKibben the end of nature is both cultural and material, but the loss of nature’s material separateness is crucial. Stories about the death of nature or end of the real are of course rampant in accounts of postmodernity. In Jameson’s analysis of late capitalism, for example, postmodernism is precisely the historical stage at which culture supersedes nature, “when the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good” (Jameson 1991: ix). Critical theorists tend to read the end of nature in postmodernism as a consequence primarily of commodification, the colonisation of all aspects of nature – from genes to bodies to rainforests – under the sign of exchange value. Other approaches have followed Baudrillard in locating the death of nature in relation to the proliferation of simulation and spectacle. In the fourth order of simulacra, the natural becomes ontologically impossible in an explosion of culture and signification.

This situation produces debased or corrupted ecotopias whereby hyperreal or idealised representations of nature mask its disappearance outside the realm of simulation. The focus of Baudrillard’s scorn is Biosphere II’s microcosmic replication of global ecosystems in Arizona, USA – part scientific experiment, part tourist spectacle (Baudrillard 1994; Clark 1997). For Baudrillard, it represents above all the paucity of visions of the good life available in postmodernity, a testament to our desperate attempts to guarantee mere survival:

[t]he real planet, presumed condemned, is sacrificed in advance to its miniaturized, air-conditioned clone (...) which is designed to vanquish death by total simulation (...) Must this be our only hope? Having lost our metaphysical utopias, do we have to build this prophylactic one? (Baudrillard 1994: 87)

The nature ideals enshrined in environmentalist discourse represent yet more death knells. “Ecology”, Baudrillard explains, brings nature entirely into the realm of culture and meaning and in doing so constitutes it as a subject, granting it rights and intrinsic value in an extension of Enlightenment humanism. This process is

essential to radical ecology's visions of ecological integrity and human self-realisation. For Baudrillard, though, making nature a subject simply inscribes it in the hysterical sign-economy of the hyperreal, abandoning it to the logics of spectacle and virtuality. Thus Bartram and Shobrook argue that "eco-utopian" experiences like the Eden Project in Cornwall, England, confirm nature's irrevocable loss and our desire for temporary refuge from anxieties over the environment's vulnerability to human use and abuse. Perfected nature simulations are not testaments to our capacity to care for and conserve nature but nostalgic or redemptive illusions of "forestalling the end through endless duplications of nature" (Bartram / Shobrook 2000: 371). What separates these arguments about nature's disappearance in the explosion of simulation from Cronon's account of discursive construction is their relentless anti-foundationalism, from which no utopian alternative or critique is possible that has not always already been recuperated, whether rooted in nature itself or in the subversion of binary oppositions that are no longer available. All ecotopian representations are prophylactic resolutions of real problems gone too far to address; all utopian desire is channelled into the anxious, excessive production of endlessly circulating simulacra that merely confirm the end of nature they are supposed to deny. Nature cannot find or guarantee an emancipatory or oppositional ecotopian vision; nor does the prospect of a democratic green utopia of explicit values invested in environmental and social justice have currency in the face of an economy of simulation or hyperreality. The environmental crisis itself becomes discursive and depoliticised, another round of hysteria about the loss of the real.

Abandoning the monolithic Nature created by modernity's rationalist epistemologies and embracing instead the position that natures are brought into being as the contingent and temporary outcomes of simultaneously material and discursive articulations between multiple human, technological and natural "actants" is not without hope. Posthuman and postnatural theories have considered the prospects of radically processual, partial and plural utopias of connection; utopias without, in Haraway's well-known formulation, origin myths, and without any final vision, however reflexive, of the ecological good (1990; see also 1997). Vogel's commitment to environmental ethics "after the end of nature" asks us to take responsibility for our fragmented, cyborg selves and the multiple

natures we routinely interact with (2002). Merchant calls for a “partnership ethic” (2003) that parallels Sargisson’s hopes for radical ecocentrism in resisting holism and resolution and embracing an ethics of partiality, hybridity and creative tensions playing across self/other, social/natural, material/discursive. It is not clear, however, how well these approaches address questions of loss, desire and crisis, especially in relation to visual and literary representations of the natural. That is, posthuman theory’s forward-looking insistence on leaving “nature” behind offers very few resources for understanding the deep-seated sense of loss and mourning for a disappeared nature that are visibly at work in culture. Baudrillard’s hysterical nature simulations may be compensatory and prophylactic but they bespeak an apparently unquenchable desire for nature and conservation that is, culturally at least, “real” (and rooted in real environmental and social contradictions), and which may be inseparable from nature utopianism and ecological ethics and representation after environmentalism.

Frederick Buell argues that postmodern and postnatural culture and theory is a symptom of the failure to take McKibben’s “end of nature” seriously (2003). Here, the critical deconstruction of natural ontologies is seen as part of a wider “culture of hyperexuberance” that celebrates the end of nature and especially natural limits as an opportunity for human transcendence, unfettered ingenuity, and technological development.<sup>3</sup> Nature hasn’t, Buell suggests, died in an explosion of signifiers or as a result of the sober critique of its discursive construction, but rather “in a terrible abundance of sadism and indifference already accomplished” (Buell 2003: 303). In essence Buell argues that the apocalypse anticipated in the environmental narratives of the 1970s has become real and domesticated. Ecological apocalypse as slow, chronic degradation is, experientially and culturally, where we live now – literally in our homes, and where we dwell physically and phenomenologically. Hyperexuberance and crisis denial is one response to this situation, but Buell locates a more appropriate response in “realist” and elegiac evocations of nature’s loss.

On one hand this might be seen in the prophylactic ecotopian aesthetics criticised by Baudrillard – sublime, romantic images of nature’s beauty and integrity – and on the other by narratives of mourning and loss. Brereton has recently argued that the excessive visual representations of sublime nature that

saturate Hollywood film might be read in terms of their moments of estranging utopian consciousness (2005). Admittedly mainstream film's nature spectacles – in heroic eco-campaigner narratives, in the awe-inspiring scenes of nature's revenge in disaster films, and in the cosmic sublime of postmodern science fiction – frequently function in a “therapeutic” or compensatory fashion, but they figure at the symbolical level an irrepressible desire for a better social relationship with nature. In this sense, as Clark implies (1997), we need Baudrillard's identification of the proliferation of hyperreal nature as a counterweight to narratives of its end, and we need to consider not just its banal and compensatory aspects, but locate also the logic of its excessive semiotic production in relation to utopian yearning and almost libidinous desire.

In powerful readings of, for example, Janisse Ray's memoir *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood* (1999), Joy Williams' novel *The Quick and the Dead* (2000), and Terry Gilliam's film *Twelve Monkeys* (1995), Buell finds both landscape and loss in the reinvented nature writing and postmodern film and literature of the late twentieth century. Here, narratives of unstable, risky and thoroughly degraded environments are haunted by the semiotic ghosts of a pristine nature and the possibility of “biophilia”. Following Beck's account of the collapse of safety and environmental standards in an age of risk and uncertainty, Buell argues that elegiac visions of lost nature are not simply nostalgic, but keep alive a sense of ecological responsibility in its absence. Only through mourning for a dead nature can we recognise the deeply dystopian reality of the current situation and locate any sense of hope for the future. In this Buell's argument parallels Baccolini's arguments about the importance of memory in critical dystopian literature, whereby conscious historical remembrance is a necessary part of the process of an ethical utopianism, especially in contexts where utopian hope is framed by a dystopian reality. Memory brings us into a “living relationship” with the present and thus with utopian change (Baccolini 2003: 130).

Buell's conceptual vocabulary is troubling from a constructionist perspective, with its insistence on an unproblematically real nature that has been lost once and for all and its unreflexive use of Edward O. Wilson's concept of “biophilia” – the hard-wired human propensity to love nature. But his account enables a fruitful approach to the utopian dimensions of both idealised landscape

and postnatural loss. It allows the utopian elements of representations of nature in a culture deeply marked by environmental crisis to be identified and to be seen as estranging and unsettling – not because they work against dominant discourses or cultural simulation and spectacle, but because they work with and through them, entangled in them. The oppositional ecotopias of radical ecology are necessary to understanding the meaning and hope attached to nature in the early twenty first century, but as constructionist accounts emphasise, they are not enough. Attention to the excesses and losses marked in representational aesthetics of nature is also vital to understanding green utopianism in a situation where idealised visions of pristine wilderness may not only be compensatory, but may encode lacks and desires that urgently demand attention.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> For an interesting discussion of how these tensions have been addressed in ecotopian fiction, see Carol Franko's work on Kim Stanley Robinson (Franko 1994).

<sup>2</sup> Pepper argues that ecological utopianism has not been of the processual and estranging kind theorised by Sargisson and Eckersley; rather, environmentalism has tended to produce nostalgic and conservative blueprints that are universalising and prescriptive. I would note that Pepper might be looking in the wrong places for reflexive and transgressive ecotopian fiction; his primary literary utopia, Callenbach's *Ecotopia* (1978), is well-known but unrepresentative of the green utopian writing produced since the seventies. Ecotopias like Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* and *Body of Glass*, Ursula K. Le Guin's *Always Coming Home*, and Kim Stanley Robinson's *Pacific Edge* are best seen as critical and transgressive utopian texts (Garforth 2002 and forthcoming).

<sup>3</sup> In this respect Buell rather problematically sees postmodern and posthuman theory (as represented by Jameson and Haraway respectively) as essentially analogous to cyberpunk, *Wired* magazine's doctrine of posthuman/technological transcendence, and the neo-liberal "chaos" capitalism espoused by for example Julian Simon in the 1990s.

## Works Cited

Baccolini, Raffaella (2003), "A Useful Knowledge of the Present is Rooted in the Past: Memory and Historical Reconciliation in Ursula Le Guin's *The Telling*", in Raffaella Baccolini / Tom Moylan (eds.), *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, London, Routledge, pp. 113-134.

Bartram, Rob / Sarah Shobrook (2000), "Endless/End-less Natures: Environmental Futures at the Fin de Millennium", *Annals of the Association of Human Geography*, vol. 90 nr. 2, pp. 370-380.

Baudrillard, Jean (1994), *The Illusion of the End*, trans. Chris Turner, Cambridge, Polity.

Berger, John (1972), *Ways of Seeing*, Harmondsworth, Penguin.

Bloch, Ernst (1986), *The Principle of Hope*, trans. Neville Plaice *et al.*, Oxford, Blackwell.

Brereton, Pat (2005), *Hollywood Utopia: Ecology in Contemporary American Film*, Bristol, Intellect.

Buell, Frederick (2003), *From Apocalypse to Way of Life: Environmental Crisis in the American Century*, London, Routledge.

Callenbach, Ernest (1978), *Ecotopia*, London, Pluto Press.

Carson, Rachel (1999), *Silent Spring*, London, Penguin [1963].

Castree, Noel (2001), "Socializing Nature: Theory, Practice, and Politics", in Noel Castree / Bruce Braun (eds.), *Social Nature*, pp. 1-21.

Clark, Nigel (1997), "Panic Ecology: Nature in the Age of Superconductivity", *Theory, Culture and Society*, vol. 14, nr.1, pp. 77-96.

Cosgrove, Dennis (1998), *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*, Madison, Wis. University of Wisconsin Press [second ed.].

Cronon, William (1996a), "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Kind of Nature", in William Cronon (ed.), *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, New York and London, Norton, pp. 69-90.

\_\_ (1996b), "Introduction: In Search of Nature", in William Cronon (ed.), *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, New York and London, Norton, pp. 23-68.

Daniels, Stephen / Denis Cosgrove (eds.) (1988), *The Iconography of Landscape: Essays on the Symbolic Representation, Design and Use of Past Environments*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Davis, J. C. (1987), *Utopia and the Ideal Society: A Study of English Utopian Writing 1516-1700*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

De Geus, Marius (1999), *Ecological Utopias: Envisioning the Sustainable Society*, Utrecht, International.

Devall, Bill / George Sessions (1985), *Deep Ecology*, Salt Lake City, Peregrine Smith.

Dobson, Andrew (1995), *Green Political Thought: An Introduction*, London, Andre Deutsch [second ed].

Dryzek, John S. (1997), *The Politics of the Earth: Environmental Discourses*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Eckersley, Robyn (1992), *Environmentalism and Political Theory*, London, UCL Press.

Evernden, Neil (1992), *The Social Creation of Nature*, London, Johns Hopkins University Press.

Eyerman, Ron / Andrew Jamison (1991), *Social Movements: A Cognitive Approach*, Cambridge, Polity Press.

Franko, Carol (1994), "Working the 'In-Between': Kim Stanley Robinson's Utopian Fiction", *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 21, nr. 2, pp. 191-211.

Garforth, Lisa (2002), "Ecotopian Fiction and the Sustainable Society", in John Parham (ed.), *The Environmental Tradition in English Literature*, Aldershot, Ashgate, pp. 100-116.

\_\_ (forthcoming), "Green Utopias: Beyond Apocalypse, Progress and Pastoral".

Gilliam, Terry (1995), *Twelve Monkeys*, USA, Universal Pictures [film].

Goldsmith, Edward *et al.* (1972), "A Blueprint for Survival", *The Ecologist*, vol. 2, nr. 1, pp. 1-43.

Haraway, Donna (1990), "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s", in Linda Nicholson (ed.), *Feminism/Postmodernism*, London, Routledge, pp. 190-233.

\_\_ (1997), *Modest\_Witness@Second\_Millennium.FemaleMan<sup>®</sup>\_Meets\_OncoMouse<sup>™</sup>*, London, Routledge.

Hollm, Jan (1998), *Die Angloamerikanische Ökotope: Literarische Entwürfe einer grünen Welt*, Frankfurt, Peter Lang.

Jameson, Fredric (1991), *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, London, Verso.

\_\_ (2004), "The Politics of Utopia", *New Left Review*, nr. 25, pp. 35-54.

Kumar, Krishan (1987), *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times*, Oxford, Blackwell.

Latour, Bruno (1993), *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter, New York, Harvester Wheatsheaf.

Levitas, Ruth (1984), "Need, Nature and Nowhere", in Peter Alexander / Roger Gill (eds.), *Utopias*, London, Duckworth, pp. 19-30.

\_\_ (1990), *The Concept of Utopia*, London, Philip Allen.

Levitas, Ruth / Lucy Sargisson (2001), "Utopia in Dark Times: Optimism/Pessimism and Utopia/Dystopia", in Raffaella Baccolini / Tom Moylan (eds.), *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, London, Routledge, pp. 13-28.

Luke, T. W. (1997), "At the End of Nature: Cyborgs, Humachines and Environments in Postmodernity", *Environment and Planning A*, vol. 29, pp. 731-757.

McKibben, Bill (2003), *The End of Nature*, London, Bloomsbury [1989].

Meadows, Donella H. et al. (1972), *The Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome on the Predicament of Humankind*, London, Earth Island.

Merchant, Carolyn (1996), "Reinventing Eden: Western Culture as a Recovery Narrative", William Cronon (ed.), *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, New York and London, Norton, pp. 132-170.

\_\_ (2003), *Reinventing Eden: The Fate of Nature in Western Culture*, London, Routledge.

\_ \_ (2005), *Radical Ecology: The Search for a Livable World*, London, Routledge [second ed.].

Moylan, Tom (1986), *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination*, New York, Methuen.

Nash, Roderick (1982), *Wilderness and the American Mind*, New Haven, Yale University Press.

Oelschlaeger, Max (1992), *The Idea of Wilderness*, New Haven, Yale University Press.

Pepper, David (1984), *The Roots of Modern Environmentalism*, London, Routledge.

\_ \_ (2005), "Utopianism and Environmentalism", *Environmental Politics*, vol. 14, nr. 1, pp. 3-22.

Ray, Janisse (1999), *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*, Minneapolis, MN, Milkweed.

Sargisson, Lucy (2000), *Utopian Bodies and the Politics of Transgression*, London, Routledge.

\_ \_ (2001), "Green Utopias of Self and Other", in Barbara Goodwin (ed.), *The Philosophy of Utopia*, London, Frank Cass, pp. 140-156.

Sargent, Lyman Tower (1994), "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited", *Utopian Studies*, vol. 5, nr 1, pp. 1-37.

Sessions, George (1996), "Reinventing Nature, The End of Wilderness?: A Response to William Cronon's Uncommon Ground", *The Trumpeter*, vol. 13 nr.1, online at <http://trumpeter.athabascau.ca/content/v13.1/10-sessions.html>, accessed 20 October 2004.

Soulé, Gary / Michael Lease (1995), *Reinventing Nature? Responses to Postmodern Deconstruction*, Washington, D.C., Island.

Snyder, Gary (1996), "Nature Seen from Kitkitdizze is no 'Social Construction'", *Wild Earth*, nr. 6, pp. 8-9.

Vogel, Steven (2002), "Environmental Philosophy After the End of Nature", *Environmental Ethics*, vol. 24, nr. 1, pp. 23-39.

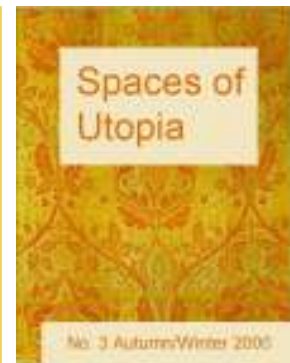
Williams, Joy (2000), *The Quick and the Dead*, New York, Knopf.

Williams, Raymond (1973), *The Country and the City*, London, Chatto and Windus.

## The Machine in the Pastoral Imagery of Eighteenth-century Utopias

**Alexandra Sippel**

University of Paris IV – Paris Sorbonne



---

Citation: Alexandra Sippel, "The Machine in the Pastoral Imagery of Eighteenth-century Utopias", *Spaces of Utopia: An Electronic Journal*, nr. 3, Autumn/Winter 2006, pp. 27-37 <<http://ler.letras.up.pt>> ISSN 1646-4729.

---

I am currently researching the representation of work and labour in eighteenth-century utopias, and this point raises several issues that led me to think about the nature and place of the machine in utopian societies of the time. The issue of labour is related to several ethical and practical questions. Dominique Méda, in *Le Travail, une Valeur en Voie de Disparition* (1995), questions the origins of labour and its painful or difficult aspect. In the prelapsarian world, labour existed since the first man and woman had to take care of the Eden garden. Work was part of the original, perfect picture of the beginning of the world according to the Judeo-Christian tradition. What changed with the Fall was not the nature of the work man had to do in the garden, but the conditions of this labour. From that time onwards, any labour (whether childbirth for women, or agriculture for men) became effortful and painful. As the aim of the invention of machines is first and foremost to make easier and faster the tasks that had to be performed by men, the question of the place and representation of the machines in utopias is a point that definitely needs to be raised in the reflexion over the representation of labour in these novels. Many utopian novels are, whether consciously or unconsciously, located in a prelapsarian environment, and therefore in places where work is both a necessity that allows them to earn their living and ensure the subsistence of the community, and a blessing insofar as anyone can work according to their gifts and wishes, and in this way develop their abilities and fulfil their personality. The prelapsarian utopian environment is typically represented by a rural, often pastoral landscape, as in More's arch-example.

Looking back on *Utopia* in 1516, we can see that More's characters are kept busy cultivating their garden and working at some particular crafts. In this way they are able to produce whatever food and goods they need and are taught not to desire more than that.

It is often the same in later utopias, but the appearance of the machine in the real world was necessarily mirrored and questioned in utopias at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. If a rural lifestyle and natural means of production guaranteed the virtue of the original utopian society as a whole, we may wonder what the irruption of the machine represents for later utopias.

I shall start this paper by a short reflexion on the importance of work and labour in utopias and the paradox that is created by the fact that labour is a part of utopian societies though it could be considered a constraint and therefore excluded from perfect worlds. I will then turn to some remarks on the utopian imagery of the city to see how urban centres are represented and try to understand how the rural milieu supposedly protects the virtue of men. In most utopias, the wonderful happiness enjoyed by individuals depends on their consideration for their country and community as a whole. Is virtue an innate quality of the utopians, or it is derived from their living conditions? Have they reached superior understanding or is it simply that they inhabit small rural zones that are kept away from the corrupt world?

My next point will have to do with the machines themselves. What kind of machines are used in utopias? Are they linked to the industrial world in the "real" environment of the authors or are they creations of the minds of the writers? In the real world, machines mean hard work made easier, but they often cause an increase in production. Besides, industrial manufacturing means standardised goods, which leaves no more space for imagination or variety. For economists in the real world, the machine means higher productivity and therefore more production of wealth. But wealth does generally not appear as a positive element in utopias, as the individual is not to desire his own wealth but that of the country as a whole. Besides wealth rather lies in virtue and happiness than in treasures of gold and silver. Very often this draws the line between eutopia and dystopia.

A final point that raises some questions about the legitimacy of the use of machines in utopias has to do with the relation of men to work. If work is a means of making men virtuous by the effort they have to produce to sustain their lives, the machine appears as a means of alleviating this effort, and thus as a possibility for man to fall into sloth and idleness, and therefore to enter a process of decadence. The introduction of the machine questions the entire idea of work as it aims at suppressing the notion of effort. It takes us back to the origins of work: was work painful in the prelapsarian world, which is often the background of utopias? Did it become painful after the Fall? And thus is alleviating the suffering caused by work a way of resisting God's punishment and curse? What is the place of the machine in the pastoral imagery of prelapsarian worlds in eighteenth-century utopias?

I chose to study the topic of work and labour because it is a surprising element in utopias. As the essence of the utopian genre is to picture a society that does not exist, it could be expected that such dreams would be free from the constraint of labour. Yet in most utopian novels, the inhabitants of imaginary places do work, though it is never a painful element but an opportunity to exert their talents corresponding to what they like doing. The difference between the several genres within imaginary societies actually accounts for the fact that there is a place for work in the utopia. The point of utopias, when compared to such tales as those of the Golden Age or the Lands of Cocayne, is to present organised societies that have rules and institutions. It is therefore possible to say that work and labour are a part of the definition of a utopian society, as compared with other types of imaginary societies. In most utopian texts though, labour is not painful, as the climate and the lands are beneficial to agriculture, so that men and women only have to take care of their land, and, just as in Eden, their task does not involve superhuman or painful effort. Besides, work is not imposed on them, but most of the time they are allowed to do whatever task they feel they are talented for. So that in More's *Utopia*, all the inhabitants of the island have to till the ground and their gardens, but they also exert some craft according to their talent or taste, often in a family tradition. The followers of More who wrote later utopias also follow this main pattern: predominance of agriculture plus some other job that fulfils the talents of utopians. So most of the

time there is no use for machines in utopias, as agriculture is still based on small tenures and therefore does not demand too much effort. The crafts are also mostly manual. Yet some utopias introduce machines, as we shall see later on in this paper.

Whether in England or overseas, utopias are most of the time located in rural areas where the towns are reasonably planned out and geographically limited. Most utopian texts follow the lines determined by Thomas More who went so far as to evaluate the ideal number of inhabitants to form the best possible combination of people. Some texts offer a stereotypical vision of the pastoral landscape. The most striking in this category is Sarah Scott's *Millennium Hall* (1762). The narrator and his young friend called Lamont get lost in Cornwall and discover a scene that takes them centuries backwards: a shepherd playing the flute with his flock and later on women working in the fields. The narrator gives the comments of his friends about their attitude: "In them, Lamont beheld rural simplicity without any of those marks of poverty or boorish rusticity which would have spoilt the pastoral air of the scene around us". And he concludes on the feeling that this landscape evokes for them: "We began to think ourselves in the days of Theocritus" (Scott 1762: 188). This antique reference and imagery appears as a mark of distinction. The care women have for their natural landscape mirrors the attention they have for themselves. Nature is curbed and architecture becomes part of it, in the same way as the women's character is educated in such a way that their learning embellishes their good natural dispositions.

G. A. Ellis offers another vision of such a society. In *New Britain* (1820) men and women live in a colony founded in Missouri by enlightened men who advocate life according to the principle of reason. They are educated so that all are wise and reasonable. They live in small towns and each family lives on the product of their garden, with the milk of their cows, the eggs of their poultry. It is interesting to realise that in the "Constitution" of *New Britain*, the garden comes before the house. It has to be there first as it is the basis of daily life and necessity. Furthermore, the narrator enhances their virtue as he describes them as "a people where everyone is an agriculturist and also a useful mechanic or

professional man, and yet as careless of accumulation as the savages” (Ellis 1997: 149).

This reference to the savages is quite interesting as the imagery of the noble savage was developed in that period. As urban centres were mushrooming in Europe, and in England in particular, they were perceived as the element that corrupted men. Towns were the places of decadence at all levels, social, moral and cultural. The “civilised” urban population of Europe was interested in accumulating material riches with no regard whatsoever to the notion of virtue or even of their nature. The “savages” on the other hand represented people living in perfect harmony with nature and therefore with their human nature too. They were more concerned with preserving their natural virtue and happiness than in pursuing deceitful goods. It is therefore not surprising that eutopian societies rely on individual agricultural production in a rural context.

Other stories show the decadence of human or animal societies. Animals are used in allegories, bees being the arch-example of social beings, industrious animals living together to produce something useful.

In the parable of the *Revolt of the Bees* (1826), by John Minter Morgan, social constructions similar to large, rapidly growing cities only appear after the revolution that introduces private property and interest. From that moment onwards bees are concerned with the growth of their personal wealth and well-being, and try to achieve higher and higher productivity. The bees used to live happily in a typical pastoral picture – in the middle of a quiet field – until the capitalist revolution took place and disrupted the whole social fabric. Machines irrupted into the beehive and industrial techniques ruined the so far peaceful atmosphere.

Other famous utopian characters show that they want to avoid the decaying atmosphere and influence of the towns and cities as they choose to end their lives in a quiet rural country. Gulliver and Candide both find the answer to their quest for happiness and morality in their garden. Happiness to them means producing whatever they need in close association with nature, and living away from the corrupt society of selfish people. The end of both these tales reveals the importance of individual responsibility. They have to live on

their own in order to escape the evil of the world. They find their way to happiness in the return to a basic social structure (family and/or friends) in a typically rural frame. In eutopias, on the contrary, virtuous communities live in a respected natural milieu and are characterised by the reasonable exploitation of gardens or of agricultural resources by and for all. The land has to be taken care of, either as a way of preserving the balance of society or as a means to discipline the men and women who are kept busy producing useful goods.

The education and leisure of utopians is part of the pastoral framework. As in More's *Utopia*, the inhabitants of Sarah Scott's *Millennium Hall* and of Ellis's *New Britain* enjoy a thorough education that guarantees their virtue. Reason is the guiding principle of New Britain. Both boys and girls are granted the same education, given by all adults, and the community thus lives by enlightened principles. Leisure is also directed towards this idea of encouraging reason for all as the New Britons spend their spare time in enlightened conversation or in country dances which allow them to make the most of their rural way of life.

The ladies at Millennium Hall are educated in the same way, with the same attention to intellectual development and artistic talents, especially music, that often characterise the pastoral universe.

In dystopias, on the other hand, there is no time either for education, as reason is replaced by superstition, or leisure, as intensive work causes men to be tired and depressed. *The Revolt of the Bees* offers a striking image of this situation.

Utopian contexts are therefore often very close to the land, and the inhabitants of these countries produce enough to maintain themselves and are satisfied with the bare necessities of life, which makes productivity an unknown notion. There is often a direct contact between the producer and whatever he wants or needs, and the machines appear as a rare feature of utopian production as it would introduce an unnatural medium between man and his task. The machines that are used in utopias are therefore often very different from those found in real-life Britain at the time. It is once more the distinctive sign of a dystopia when a machine belongs both to the real and the imaginary

world. These often emphasise the unhealthy and unnatural consequences of industrialisation in Britain.

From a theoretical point of view there are several issues that are related to the question of mechanical production. As utopias most of the time depict happy societies, one could expect many inventions and machines to be devised in these countries to spare work and effort for men and women. And yet, machines are fairly rare in those stories and when they appear in the context of industrial production, it is most of the time in dystopias rather than eutopias.

The positive aspect of the machine is that it reflects man's creative capacities. In this respect, it is part of his identity as a being created in the image of God and therefore able to use his imagination and create new devices by himself. On the other hand and still from a religious point of view, man acts in a challenging way when he uses machines to make his work more productive and less painful. The original sin caused the human race to be cursed and condemned to tiring and effortful labour and the use of machines can therefore appear as a desire of evading God's curse, and thus of defying His authority. Besides, it was often considered that a reasonable amount of effort or pain in work has a purifying effect on human character. Even in utopias most of the tasks that have to be accomplished are manual, sometimes difficult, but provide man with a direct link to whatever he is to produce. Effort means the refusal of idleness. Making work easier and allowing people to work shorter hours represents a threat for the community as individuals may lose some of the qualities which guarantee social stability. Even working shorter hours did not mean having much time to spend isolated for personal amusement as leisure was to be as useful as work in order to educate the population in many utopias, after More's example. Work and leisure are group activities that enable men to develop their social qualities and hence their virtue.

From an economic point of view machines represent another threat. Mechanization was celebrated by Adam Smith and other economists of the time as a means of increasing productivity, and therefore of building up British commercial exchanges. Manufactured goods were more valuable than raw materials and meant a larger accumulation of capital, thus personal and general increase in wealth. But the accumulation of capital or of personal riches does

not correspond to the utopian ideals. Private property is very rarely allowed in eutopias. No one desires either personal wealth or increase of productivity in utopian worlds. Personal or individual wealth would mean a disruption of communitarian happiness and equality, and an increase in productivity could be useful only in the context of a society linked to the rest of the world by trade. But as some critics have underlined, utopias are regulated on the basis of their separation from the rest of the world, and therefore there is very little or no communication with the outside world.

In Morgan's *Revolt of the Bees* machines only appear once the territories of the bees have been divided into private properties and individual bees begin to try and imagine ways of increasing their own wealth through the exploitation of the weaker bees who are condemned to work on the machines, and often end up mutilated by these new devices.

Jonathan Swift gives a fairly negative idea of the machines as unnatural elements in the academy of Laputa in the third book of *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). The scientists who live and work there try to lead absurd experiments such as inventing a literary machine supposedly able to write books. Letters are randomly assembled and any sensible section that could make a word or part of a sentence is written down in order to create a coherent book afterwards. Their scientific aim is to demonstrate that mechanisation can be used in the writing of learned or artistic literature. Swift's obvious target is the absurdity of believing that machines can replace man's intelligence and imagination.

So in both these instances machines appear as a further indication of the decadence of the utopia into a dystopia. The society that appears after the *Revolt of the Bees*, just as the Society of Lagado, is a fallen representation of a community that could have been an example, had the inhabitants become wise and virtuous.

In most utopias, there is not even the possibility for improved technologies as they are totally cut off from the rest of the world. When the utopian society feels threatened by the corruption of the outside world, it refuses any influence and thus remains in a state of supposedly preserved virtue, looking to the past as an ideal way of life, not to be turned away from. Hence the feeling of the narrator of *Millennium Hall* of being back "in the days of

Theocritus" (Scott 1762: 188). However, this also indicates that the virtue of these communities is not to be trusted as it is only maintained thanks to their isolation and strict legislation.

*New Britain* however offers another example of a happy utopia that still has links with the outside world. If all families are centred around their gardens that offer them whatever they might need to live, they have managed to reach such a state of enlightened reason that the outside world is no longer a threat to their morality and happiness. On the contrary they study the history of other peoples in order to avoid their mistakes and discover whatever useful element they could take up into their own world. They even leave their colony in order to visit other territories to see if anything good could be derived from their neighbours' technical and intellectual progress. They are thus familiar with techniques that were well-known in Europe and that the visitor already knows, as wind-mills and even steam engines. The New Briton who shows him around the country concludes: "with us, genius may pursue invention without the dread of its ultimately proving injurious to anyone" (Ellis 1997: 212). New Britons do not seek to produce more than they need or to accumulate wealth for selfish purposes, which makes all the difference with the European societies or with dystopias.

The pastoral imagery of eighteenth-century utopias is therefore most of the time characterised by small towns and families living from the produce of their gardens and crafts. Even leisure corresponds to the pastoral ideal with a particular emphasis on enlightened conversation, music and dances. Most of them look to the past for their ideals, and it is to be noticed that the prelapsarian world of labour based on the garden is the main background of many texts. They refuse the ideas of productivity or idleness that were derived from the introduction of new machines and new devices in the real world.

In the following centuries, the same question of the place and role of the machine in the utopian pastoral universe was asked again and again. William Morris provided an answer: "The wonderful machines which in the hands of just and foreseeing men would have been used to minimise repulsive labour and give pleasure, or in other words added life to the human race, have been so

used on the contrary that they have driven all men into mere frantic haste and hurry, thereby destroying pleasure, that is life, on all hands. They have instead of lightening the labour of the workmen, intensified it and thereby added more weariness yet to the burden which the poor had to carry” (Morris 1884).

The criticism is not addressed to the machine *per se*, but to the unwise use that is made of it, and to the selfishness of those who are ready to exploit the “workmen” in order to increase their profit. Besides, Morris also emphasises the satisfaction that man feels at making his own goods with his own hands. Creating useful goods is a way of fulfilling one’s nature and therefore of feeling happy. Earlier utopians also underlined the same idea.

The fear of extensive use of the machine was also voiced in later dystopias, by Aldous Huxley for example, who depicted the extreme danger involved. In *Brave New World* (1932), the machines are not used only to create useful goods, but human beings, and some are scientifically altered in order to create a genetic hierarchy in mankind. This text shows in an extreme way how machines could be used by a totalitarian state in order to brainwash the population and have them accept unnatural and degrading living conditions, suitable in the pseudo-balance of a standardised mechanised society.

## Works Cited

Claeys, Gregory (ed.) (1997), *Modern British Utopias (1700-1850)*. 8 vols. London: Pickering & Chatto.

Claeys, Gregory / Lyman Tower Sargent (eds.) (1999), *The Utopia Reader*, New York, London, New York University Press.

Ellis, Mr. (pseud.?) (1997), *New Britain, A Narrative of a Journey, by Mr. Ellis, to a Country So Called by its Inhabitants, Discovered in the Vast Plain of the Missouri, in North America, and Inhabited by a People of British Origin, who Live under and Equitable System of Society, Productive of Peculiar Independence and Happiness. Also, some Account of their Constitution, Laws, Institutions, Customs and Philosophical Opinions, Together with a Brief Sketch of their History from the Time of their Departure from Great Britain* [1820], in Gregory Claeys (ed.), *Modern British Utopias*, vol. 6, London, Pickering and Chatto, pp. 149-307.

Huxley, Aldous (1932), *Brave New World*, Garden City, Doubleday.

Méda, Dominique (2002), *Le Travail, une Valeur en Voie de Disparition*, Paris, Flammarion [1995].

Morgan, John Minter (1826), *Revolt of the Bees*, in Gregory Claeys (ed.) (1997), *Modern British Utopias*, vol.6, London, Pickering and Chatto, pp. 309-411.

Morris, William (1884), *Art and Socialism*  
(<http://facstaff.uww.edu/jaffej/britain/William%20Morris.pdf>).

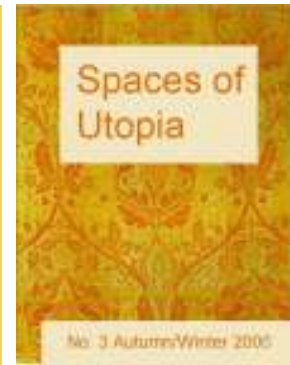
Morton, A. L. (1969), *The English Utopia*, London, Lawrence & Wishart.

Swift, Jonathan (1998), *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World: in Four Parts, by Lemuel Gulliver, first a Surgeon, and then a Captain on Several Ships*, ed. Paul Turner, Oxford, Oxford University Press [1726].

Scott, Mrs. Sarah Robinson (1762), *A Description of Millennium Hall, and the Country Adjacent: Together with the Character of the Inhabitants, and such Historical Anecdotes and Reflections, as May excite in the Reader Proper Sentiments of Humanity, and Lead the Mind to the Love of Virtue*, by a Gentleman on his Travels (pseud.), in Gregory Claeys (ed.) (1997), *Modern British Utopias*, vol. 3, London, Pickering and Chatto, pp. 183-328.

## **“There’s a Better World a-Coming”: The Urban Collectivism-Rural Individualism of Woody Guthrie**

**John S. Partington**



---

Citation: John S. Partington, “‘There’s a Better World a-Coming’: The Urban Collectivism-Rural Individualism of Woody Guthrie”, *Spaces of Utopia: An Electronic Journal*, nr. 3, Autumn/Winter 2006, pp. 38-56 <<http://ler.letras.up.pt> > ISSN 1646-4729.

---

Woody Guthrie is today known as America’s pioneering modern folk singer, popularising a genre of music in the 1930s and 1940s which had previously been limited in range to the Appalachian Mountains, and to pockets of traditional musicians, usually families or work-mates, in the American south, the former frontier and the old fishing communities of the north-east. By performing traditional songs as well as those of his own composition on radio stations in Los Angeles and New York (including nation-wide broadcasts for CBS [“The Life of Woody Guthrie”]), and at political rallies, union meetings and the urban night-club scene, Guthrie is also responsible for transforming American folk music into an urban phenomenon, and one immediately taken up by middle-class musicians such as Pete Seeger and by later folk revivalists such as Joan Baez, Bob Dylan and Phil Ochs.<sup>1</sup> As well as being a prolific songwriter, however, Guthrie also contributed articles to the local and national press, wrote several books, and wrote copious quantities of letters, diaries and notebooks directed at others in the music industry, his wives and his children. Through a reading of Guthrie’s lyrics and prose, it is possible to identify two social visions: a conservative one espousing the virtues of independent small-hold farming and the traditional family, in which traditional gender roles remain unchallenged; and a radical one espousing politicised labour unions, large-scale government projects, anti-racism, women’s rights and internationalism.

Guthrie presented himself as “of the people”, an authentic “Okie”<sup>2</sup> who had travelled to virtually every state in the Union and mingled with the poor

(hobos, farm labourers, sharecroppers, unskilled urban labourers and unemployed artisans) as well as with those workers fighting for better pay and conditions in the many union halls at which he performed. John Steinbeck said of him, “[h]e sings the songs of a people and I suspect that he is, in a way, that people” (Steinbeck 2002: 4), a sentiment echoed by Craig Werner, who wrote, “[i]n Woody’s voice, you can hear echoes of everything he ever heard; his songs reach easily across lines of race and class and region” (Werner 1999: 70). As part of this experience, which dates roughly between his migration from Pampa, Texas, to Los Angeles in 1937 and his hospitalisation with Huntington’s Disease in 1953, Guthrie became involved with the American Communist Party, writing for the *Light*<sup>3</sup> and the *People’s World* in California,<sup>4</sup> and the *Daily Worker* in New York, joining the Communist-supporting Almanac Singers and the musicians’ collective known as Peoples’ Songs and performing for party rallies and party-controlled labour unions across the country.

Although Guthrie’s sympathies with the working class were constant throughout his adulthood, his contact with different segments of that class resulted in the development of a different ideal for the urban and rural workers whose plight he supported on equal terms. In what follows I will present Guthrie’s two visions, focusing on his three main influences: the mass migration from the Dust Bowl to California during the mid- to late-1930s, his federal employment with the Bonneville Power Administration in 1941 and his labour union activism during the 1940s. In the conclusion, I will attempt to reconcile Guthrie’s seemingly divergent visions for the urban and rural working class.

### **Dust Bowl Balladeer**

Although the Guthrie family fell apart in 1926, with Woody’s mother Nora committed to an Oklahoma asylum, his father Charley, physically and commercially broke, living as a motel keeper in Texas, and his siblings either faring for themselves or living with other relatives, there is no evidence that Woody was radicalised by his childhood traumas. At the age of thirteen he was a full-time scavenger in his home town of Okemah, Oklahoma, living in a tree house or in the open air or occasionally with his older brother, Roy, for a few nights at a time. By the early 1930s, Woody had joined his father in Texas,

helping keep the motel and doing occasional sign painting for a living. Although Guthrie had already done a fair amount of hitchhiking and boxcar-riding during his travels between and within Oklahoma and Texas, his eyes were only really opened to the plight of the rural poor when, on 14 April 1935 at the age of twenty-one, he witnessed the Great Dust Storm and the resulting mass-migrations from the south of impoverished farm workers (“Timeline of Woody Guthrie (1912-1967)”). Between 1935 and 1937 hundreds of thousands of labourers and small-holders lost their land either through it being literally blown away or through it being repossessed by the banks due to the poverty caused by successive crop failures. It was during this period that Guthrie began writing his famous *Dust Bowl Ballads* (recorded in May 1940 [Garton, 1999, CD1]), a feat finally accomplished with his 1937 journey from Pampa to Los Angeles and his close mingling with dispossessed farmers, sharecroppers and other former workers in the rural economy, both black and white.

Something which marks Guthrie out as a distinctive witness of the Dust Bowl experience is the optimistic vein which runs through his music. As David R. Shumway has noted, “[w]hile Guthrie’s songs often deal with workers’ defeats, they are not defeatist in any sense. Many go beyond descriptions of oppressive class relations to support organized opposition to them” (Shumway 1999: 132). Indeed, for all the hardship and pain he observed, Guthrie’s songs contain both defiance and hope in the face of seeming catastrophe. No song better reflects that sense of defiance than “Blowin’ Down the Road”:

I’m looking for a job at honest pay,  
I’m looking for a job at honest pay,  
I’m looking for a job at honest pay, Lord, Lord, and I ain’t gonna be treated this-a-way.

My children need three square meals a day,  
Now my children need three square meals a day,  
My children need three square meals a day, Lord, and I ain’t gonna be treated this-a-way.

It takes a \$10 shoe to fit my feet,  
It takes a \$10 shoe to fit my feet,  
It takes a \$10 shoe to fit my feet, Lord, Lord, and I ain’t gonna be treated this-a-way.

Your \$2 shoe hurts my feet,  
Your \$2 shoe hurts me feet,  
Yes, your \$2 shoe hurts my feet, Lord, Lord, and I ain’t gonna be treated this-a-way.  
(Guthrie 2002c: 2.5)<sup>5</sup>

Although Guthrie wrote little about the fate of the deserted lands of the south, his songs were full of hope for the migrants themselves, to whom he would later declare in his most famous song, "This land is your land, / This land is my land. / (...) This land was made for you and me".<sup>6</sup> In "Oregon Trail" Guthrie sings, "Where the good rain falls a-plenty and the crops and orchards grow; / I'm gonna hit that Oregon trail this comin' fall" (*idem*, 1.7),<sup>7</sup> and in "Song of the Coulee Dam", he writes "I'll settle this land boys and I'll work like a man, / and I'll water my crops from that Grand Coulee Dam" (Guthrie 2000: 3).<sup>8</sup> Sentiments such as these almost suggest Guthrie as a Moses-figure, leading his people to a Promised Land. Indeed, in the first part of his interpretation of Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, entitled "Tom Joad Blues – Part 1", this role is virtually self-declared: "They stood on a mountain and they looked to the west and it looked like the Promised Land. / That bright green valley with a river running through, there was work for every single hand, they thought, / There was work for every single hand" (Guthrie 2002c: 2.1).<sup>9</sup> The promise of these lines is partially countered by an earlier defiance which states: "Now the twelve of the Joads made a mighty heavy load but grandpa Joad did cry; / He picked up a handful of land in his hand, said 'I'm staying with the farm till I die, / Yes I'm staying with the farm 'til I die'" (*ibidem*). Before assuming that grandpa's defiance shows a generational division in Guthrie's thought, however, it should be pointed out that while grandpa is buried with his eroded farm, grandma makes it to California.

Although these and other examples in Guthrie's lyrics demonstrate his refusal to accept the status quo of rural mass unemployment and socio-political apathy, his ideal vision for America's rural communities is far from radical. Indeed, although Guthrie had little direct experience of farm life or even of conventional family life, he frequently refers back to a rural "golden age" in his songs, usually dating to the mid- to late-1920s, during which farm production was profitable and rural life (including family life) was stable. Thus, in his "Talking Dust Bowl Blues" he writes, "[b]ack in 1927 I had a little farm and I called that heaven. / Well the price was up and the rain come down and I hauled my crops all into town, got the money, / Bought clothes and groceries, fed the kids and raised a family" (*idem*, 2.4).<sup>10</sup> In his "Washington Talkin' Blues",

the same scenario is re-enacted thus: “Along about 1929, I owned a little farm, was doing just fine. / Raised a little row crop, raised some wheat, sold it over at the county seat. / Drawed the money, raised a family” (Guthrie 1992: 7).<sup>11</sup>

Although it is unremarkable to find Guthrie recalling pre-Depression rural life in such glowing terms, it is perhaps surprising to note that his vision of future rural settlements is almost identical. In his song about the closure of the California borders to rural migrants, “Do-Re-Mi”, he suggests that the newcomers simply “want to buy (...) a home or farm” (Guthrie 2002c: 1.24),<sup>12</sup> and in his “Washington Talkin’ Blues” the travellers journey all the way to Washington State simply to find themselves in the same situation they had left behind in the Dust Bowl:

Hot old rocks and the desert sand made the mind run back to the dust bowl land.  
But the hopes was high as we rolled along to the Columbia River up in Washington.  
Lots of good rain, little piece of land, a feller might grow something.

We settled down on some cut-over land and I pulled up the brush and the stumps by hand.  
Sun burnt up my first crop of wheat, and the river down the canyon just five-hundred feet.  
Might as well have been fifty miles. Couldn’t get no water. (Guthrie 1992: 7)

Perhaps the most striking example of Guthrie’s conservative vision for rural dwellers occurs in his “New Found Land”, recorded as late as 1947.

Well, I just got up to ma’ new found land, ma’ new found land, ma’ new found land.  
I just got up to ma’ new found land, I’m a-livin’ in the light of the morning.

I built me a house of a new cut tree, a new cut tree, a new cut tree,  
I built me a house of a new cut tree, I’m a-livin’ in the light of the morning.

Well, I built my house on a new cut stone, a new cut stone, a new cut stone.  
I built my house on a new cut stone, and I’m a-livin’ in the light of the morning, livin’ in the light of the morning.

I lit my lamp with the new found light, new found light, new found light.  
Lit my lamp with the new found light, and I’m a-livin’ in the light of the morning.

Plant ma’ seed in the new dug ground, the new dug ground, the new dug ground.  
I plant ma’ seed in the new dug ground, and I’m livin’ in the light of the morning, livin’ in the light of the morning.

I brought my child from ma’ new found wife, ma’ new found wife, ma’ new found wife.  
I brought the child from a new found wife, a-livin’ in the light of the morning, livin’ in the light of the morning.

Well, I just got up to ma’ new found land, ma’ new found land, ma’ new found land.

I just got up to ma' new found land, I'm a-living in the light of the morning, living in the light of the morning. (Guthrie 2002a: 24)<sup>13</sup>

In addition to promoting the image of the traditional hardworking smallholder, building his house from scratch like the frontiersman of old and planting his seed in the “new dug ground”, this song also strongly presents the image of the dominant husband who “brought my child from ma' new found wife”. In his songs of rural life, as was seen earlier in “Talking Dust Bowl Blues” and “Washington Talkin' Blues”, Guthrie's picture is rarely complete without the male protagonist having a wife and raising a family, or otherwise lamenting the fact that he cannot achieve this, as in “Ramblin' Round” where the protagonist declares, “I wish that I could marry, / I wish'd I could settle down; / But I can't save a penny boys as I go ramblin' round” (Guthrie 2002c: 1.19).<sup>14</sup> In Guthrie's songs of rural life the family, and especially the wife, is both a symbol of stability and something to be protected,<sup>15</sup> and wives are expected to appreciate their positions, as in “Wreck of the Old '97”, when it is said, “[w]ell, ladies you must all take warning from this time now and on / Never speak harsh words to your true love and husband, he might leave you and never come home” (*idem*, 1.3).<sup>16</sup> Wives are even used by Guthrie to help transform outlaws into folk heroes, as when Charles Arthur Floyd, in the song “Pretty Boy Floyd”, kills a deputy sheriff who had “approached him in a manner rather rude, / Using vulgar words of language and his wife she overheard” (*idem*, 1.14),<sup>17</sup> or when, in “Two Good Men”, Nicola Sacco is presented as a respectable person because “Sacco's wife, three children had; Sacco was a family man” (Guthrie 2002a: 20).<sup>18</sup>

### **With the Bonneville Power Administration**

Although Guthrie's vision for the future rural population remained culturally conservative he did not expect farm production to be re-established through economic or political laissez-faire. With his recruitment by the Bonneville Power Administration (or BPA) in Portland, Oregon, in 1941, Guthrie's eyes were opened to the potential of state intervention in rural communities which could preserve the traditional smallholding run by a farmer with a traditional family, while seemingly ensuring long-term stability and prosperity for the rural community.

The BPA is a federal agency within the US Department of Energy. It was created in 1937 by the Franklin Roosevelt Administration to administer the Bonneville and Grand Coulee Dams, completed in 1938 and 1941, respectively, as well as a number of subsidiary dams along the Columbia River and its tributaries. The BPA provides hydro-electric power to four north-western US states and irrigates vast tracts of land in Washington and Oregon. As part of the great debate over whether consumers and businesses should receive federal or private electricity, Guthrie was hired by the BPA to promote federal power and demonstrate its benefits through song. Writing twenty-six songs during his thirty-day contract, Guthrie's creativity blossomed as he celebrated both the feat of engineering and the provision of resources to both the rural and urban populations.

The song which links the BPA most directly to Guthrie's conservative rural vision is "Washington Talkin' Blues". There Guthrie declares, "[n]ow what we need is a great big dam to throw a lot of water out across that land. / People could work and stuff would grow and you could wave good by to the old skid row. / Find you a job, work hard, raise all kinds of stuff. Kids too" (Guthrie 1992: 7). As supportive as he was of the BPA, Guthrie feared any limitation to the project's scope. He expressed his fears in "End of the Line", where he wrote:

We gotta hold of a piece of land fifteen miles from the Coulee Dam.  
Fifteen miles from the Coulee Dam, fifteen miles from the Coulee Dam.

Now the Coulee Dam's a delight to see, makes us-a e-lectric-I-ty, makes us e-lectric-I-ty, makes-a e-lectric-I-ty.

Well Oregon State is mighty fine if your hooked on to the power line,  
But there ain't no country extry fine if you're just a mile from the end of the line.  
(Guthrie 2002c: 1.22)<sup>19</sup>

The only solution to such a predicament was suggested in "Song of the Coulee Dam", where Guthrie enthuses, "Grand Coulee Dam, boys, Grand Coulee Dam. / I wish we had a lot more Grand Coulee Dams" (Guthrie 2000: 3). Bill Murlin of the BPA has said of Guthrie's enthusiasm, "I don't know that he was so interested in glorifying dams in the words that he was writing; but he certainly was interested in what the dams were going to do for the people who were here and the people who were moving here" (*apud Roll on Columbia*, 2001). Looking at Guthrie's BPA work within the wider biographical context, Joe

Klein has suggested that “The idea that the *government* was building all these massive dams was especially thrilling. It was what socialism would be like when it came to the USA” (Klein 1999: 202).

If the BPA’s provision of irrigation and electricity to north-western farmers was a statist facilitator of traditional rural life in Guthrie’s mind, its impact on the urban economy was the complete opposite. From 1937 onwards Guthrie had lived an urban existence, working on radio and as a newspaper columnist in Los Angeles and New York and travelling from town to town across America performing concerts for political rallies, labour unions and benefit shows for the unemployed. In songs such as “Ramblin’ Round” (Guthrie 2002c: 1.19) and “New York City” (Guthrie 2000: 2.9)<sup>20</sup> he voiced the frustrations of people willing and able to work but who could find no jobs. With his introduction to the BPA, Guthrie quickly came to realise that federal schemes such as this could be the catalyst for job creation, and could also offer a government challenge to private business, the latter frequently being demonised by Guthrie in such songs as “I Ain’t Got No Home in This World Anymore” (Guthrie 2002c: 2.16),<sup>21</sup> “Tom Joad Blues” (*idem*, 1-2.2)<sup>22</sup> and “Vigilante Man” (*idem*, 1.5)<sup>23</sup> for throwing people off their land and out of work, and then pursuing them for debts which they had no means of paying. In “Grand Coulee Dam”, Guthrie couples his admiration for the government’s harnessing of the Columbia River with a celebration of the industrial achievements produced thereby:

Uncle Sam took up the challenge in the year of '33 for the farmer and the factory and all of you and me.  
He said “Roll along Columbia, you can ramble to the sea, but river while you’re rambling you can do some work for me”.  
Now in Washington and Oregon you hear the factories hum, making chrome and making manganese and light aluminum,  
And there roars a Flying Fortress now to fight for Uncle Sam spawned upon the king Columbia by the big Grand Coulee Dam. (Guthrie 2000: 1.11)<sup>24</sup>

The same points are made in “Talking Columbia”, though the pace of the song gives it rather more power, and in its prophecy of consumerism (with references to electricity, plastic and atomic energy) it has the ring of a self-contained utopia about it:

You just watch this river though, pretty soon  
Everybody’s gonna be changing their tune.  
The big Grand Coulee and the Bonneville Dam

Will run a thousand factories for Uncle Sam, and everybody else in the world.  
Turn out everything from fertilizers to sowing machines and atomic bedrooms and  
plastic – everything's gonna be plastic.

Uncle Sam needs houses and stuff to eat,  
And Uncle Sam needs wool, Uncle Sam needs wheat,  
Uncle Sam needs water and power dams,  
And Uncle Sam needs people and the people need land.

'Course I don't like dictators none myself  
But then I think the whole country, it ought to be run by e-lectricity.  
(Guthrie 2002c: 1.8)<sup>25</sup>

The result of the BPA for urban populations was not simply job creation but specifically the creation of employment that required a concentration of labour; namely factory work. Whereas Guthrie promoted small-scale, family-centred units of employment in the rural economy, on the urban landscape he rejoiced in a future of factory work, providing thousands of jobs and mass-producing commodities of consumption from the imperative (in 1941) “Flying Fortress” and the fantastic “atomic bedrooms” to the more mundane sowing machines. Guthrie’s experiences with the Dust Bowl migrants had already made him an admirer of human solidarity,<sup>26</sup> and the thought of the large-scale industrial enterprises which the BPA made possible clearly impressed him. Guthrie’s bitterness, mentioned above, against heavy-handed or ruthless employers and creditors prepared him intellectually for the union movement which he discovered in New York in 1940. The types of industry the BPA made possible, therefore, encouraged Guthrie in his hopes for an organised workforce of the future.

### **The Labour Union Activist**

Although Guthrie began performing benefit concerts in the late 1930s in California, these targeted the Dust Bowl migrants or the Communist-inspired agencies which assisted the migrants and publicised their plight. Indeed, even with his move to New York in 1940 Guthrie remained active in fundraising for the “Okies” and “Arkies”, performing, for instance, at the “Grapes of Wrath Evening”, an event organised by the Communist actor Will Geer to raise funds for the John Steinbeck Committee for Agricultural Workers. Once in New York, however, Guthrie’s concerns shifted from the Dust Bowl migrants (many of whom were finding work in the new war industries and on the land in the north-

west) to the industrial workforce and, later, to those serving their country abroad. As war approached, and many people became aware of just how scarce freedom and liberty were around the world, Guthrie came to realise that the USA itself was far from perfect in these realms. As he wrote in 1942,

You dont have to go to Europe to find plenty to do to beat Hitler. Unions here working with Unions there will dig his grave, but your job is close to you, closer than your hands and feet... stick up for what's right, freedom of speech, press, radio, meetings, collective bargaining, the right to get together for decent pay, hours, rent, prices. (Guthrie 1990: 83)

From 1941 and America's entry into the Second World War, Guthrie expressed a deep anti-fascism alongside a radical patriotism that both promoted the export of American values abroad and sought their full implementation in the USA itself. In order to achieve American freedom and liberty, Guthrie campaigned for the newly-formed Communist-inspired Congress of Industrial Organisations (or CIO), which aimed to organise the non-unionised industrial sectors and to radicalise those sectors which were under the influence of the more moderate American Federation of Labor.

Guthrie's most concise statement of his commitment to organised labour and to the American war effort occurs in his "Talking Sailor", recorded in 1944 when he was a merchant seaman and a member of the National Maritime Union (or NMU): "I'm just one of the merchant crew, I belong to the union called the NMU. / I'm a union man from head to toe, I'm USA and CIO. / Fighting out here on the waters to win some freedom on the land" (Guthrie 1999: 3.20).<sup>27</sup> Guthrie's biographer, Joe Klein, tells a story of Guthrie's return from Europe with the merchant marine in 1944 in which his call for a better America took a practical turn amongst his fellow shipmates:

Woody [organised] a letter-writing contest among the bored, tired men, getting them to petition Congress for unemployment insurance for seamen, a GI Bill of Rights for seamen, and citizenship for alien seamen – all of which were current NMU demands. More than a thousand letters were allegedly written, and he claimed to have polished off 112 himself, telling each congressman: "I'm a voter from your home town. Not only that but right in your own neighborhood. I'm facing buzz bombs, magneto mines, torpedos, stukas and hauling nitroglycerine to save your neck; surely you can pass three bills to save mine". (Klein 1999: 291)

In "Better World A-Comin", a similar sentiment is expressed, though Guthrie makes it clear that victory in the war was to benefit not just the USA in

such lines as “We will beat ‘em on the land, on the sea and in the sky, / There’s a better world is a-comin’, I’ll tell you why”, and “When we’ll all be union and we’ll all be free / There’s a better world is a-comin’, don’t you see”, and finally “I’m a union man in a union war, it’s a union world I’m fighting for / There’s a better world is a-coming don’t you know” (Guthrie 2002c: 1.6).<sup>28</sup> Guthrie’s fight for freedom and labour unionism is complemented in his direct attacks on fascism in such songs as “The Biggest Thing Man Has Ever Done” (Guthrie 2000: 2.11)<sup>29</sup> and “Jarama Valley”, the latter being a tribute song to the Lincoln Brigade of American volunteers who fought in the Spanish Civil War. In the song Guthrie declares “[a]ll this world is like this valley called Jarama, / So green and so bright and so fair. / No fascists can dwell in our valley / Nor breath in our new freedom’s air” (Guthrie 2002a: 12).<sup>30</sup>

Guthrie’s support for union activism extended beyond the war, and when he wrote an album of songs in memory of Sacco and Vanzetti, two anarchists who were executed on a dubious murder charge in 1927, Vanzetti’s labour unionism received prominence. In “Two Good Men” Guthrie wrote, “Vanzetti spoke both day and night, told the workers how to fight (...) / Told the workers ‘Organise’ and on the ‘lectric chaired he died. / All you people ought to be like me and work like Sacco and Vanzetti. / And everyday find ways to fight on the union side for the workers rights” (*idem*, 20).

## Conclusion

Guthrie’s populism encompassed both the rural and the urban workforce. His experience of the Dust Bowl and the labour movement inspired him to sing about and generally campaign for measures to improve the lot of working people. Although he was actively involved with the Communist Party and employed communist rhetoric in some of his writings, his vision for the American worker was far from communistic. In fact, Guthrie clearly supported the liberal democratic state that America epitomised to the rest of the world, though with some differences.

In the rural realm, Guthrie did not wish to see collectivised farming or an end to the private smallholder but sought state support for the smallholder in such projects as the BPA and through social housing provision and regulations

to ensure a minimum quality of housing and to assist the unemployed labourer to find work. Guthrie gives the clearest vision of his rural utopia in the liner notes to his 1940 album, *Dust Bowl Ballads*:

They need a piece of land. You need a good house on it, with a coat or two of good paint, and three or four cows, and some chickens, and lots of stuff like that, farm tools, and stuff to eat, and some spendin' money in your pocket for a little good time once in a while, and a long time to pay your place out, about 40 years... and you need US Government Camps for the Workin' Folks, with nice clean place to live and cook and do your washin' and ironin' and cookin', and good beds to rest on, and so nobody couldn't herd you around like whiteface cattle, and deputies beat you up, and run you out of town, and stuff like that.

You could pay a dime a day for your place to live, and you could do work around the Camp to pay your bill, and you could have a nice buildin' with a good dance floor in it, and you could have church there, too, and go to Sunday School, and Church, and have all kinds of meetings and talk about crops and weather and wages, and no cops would make you scatter out.

You could meet there and have Singings and Pie Suppers, and Raffles, and Banquets, and Eats and Dks., (abbreviated), and have your own Peace Officers to keep down fist fights, and your own women to keep care of the kids, and they could have games and baths and good toilets and clean showers and – the governor of the state could find out where the jobs was, and keep you hired out all of the time, building Oklahoma, and the whole Dust Bowl over again. (Guthrie 1990: 44-45)

In this rambling piece of prose one finds all the ingredients of Guthrie's rural idyll: the smallholder with a house on a piece of land, keeping cows and chickens, and social housing for those aspiring to landholding or content to work as labourers. The simple but happy way of life is portrayed, with pie suppers, raffles, banquets and dances, and as the foundation of the rural community, the wife and mother "to keep care of the kids". In many ways, Guthrie's rural idyll is a return to the 1920s, though shored up by federal provision of housing and regulations to ensure "baths and good toilets and clean showers" and a kind of rural employment exchange to find work for the unemployed labourer.

In the urban realm, Guthrie sought something rather different. Through his support of labour unionism, he clearly did not wish to see an end to capitalism or to class division, but he did desire the reconstruction of class relations between the employer and the employed, and to achieve this he looked both to worker solidarity and to government intervention. As has been demonstrated, worker solidarity primarily meant the CIO and its affiliated unions to Guthrie, but there was much more to solidarity than this.

An issue of importance to Guthrie, though one too large to mention in detail here, was that of "race" solidarity. Guthrie's biography is full of instances

of his rejection of racial prejudice and discrimination.<sup>31</sup> Klein tells the story of a performance given by Guthrie and two black colleagues, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, at a fraternal organisation in Baltimore in December 1942 following which Terry and McGhee were led off to a “Negroes Only” table and Guthrie was told he could not eat with them. In rage, Guthrie overturned the buffet tables and the three musicians left for the train station (Klein 1999: 258-259). On another occasion, in December 1947, Guthrie was hired to perform for striking tobacco workers in North Carolina. When it became known that one of his songs contained integrationist lyrics,<sup>32</sup> the white members of the segregated union boycotted the event and Guthrie ended up performing for the black strikers only. In the communist *Daily Worker* he wrote, “It cut me to my bones to have to play and sing for those negroes with no other colors mixing in” (*apud* Klein 1999: 360-361). In a 1942 article Guthrie asserted that,

Jim Crow still makes the Negro people slaves to all kinds of things, mean and low treatment, hard work and starvation wages, and mistreated by all kinds of narrow minded bosses everywhere... so any talk about American songs, ballads or music has got to first shake hands with the Negroes, and find out why their music and singing is the best, longest lasting, and by far the plainest that has sprouted in our midst. (Guthrie 1990: 78)

Guthrie’s anti-racism was reasserted in 1956, just before his illness robbed him of the ability to write. In a letter to Marjorie Mazia dated 4 October, he wrote “Eisenhower can’t be my big chiefy bossyman till he makes alla my United States alla my races all equal. (...) I vote for my communist candidates anyhow that’ll be the only ones ta ever even partways tryta give birth ta my racey equality” (*apud* Klein 1999: 436).

Another area of solidarity which can only be mentioned briefly is that of gender solidarity, at least within the urban community. In a letter to his future wife, Marjorie Mazia, on the occasion of the birth of their daughter Cathy Ann in 1943, he wrote, “[m]en have enjoyed an artificial superiority over women for several centuries. I have got to work and fight and do all I can to break the old slavery idea of the woman being chained to her house which, in many cases, certainly isn’t a home” (*apud* Klein 1999: 264). This was followed by his advocacy of neighbourhood nurseries, equal pay and, indeed, complete equality for men and women.

Given the disparity between Guthrie's vision for the rural and the urban communities of America, to where can one look for a unifying trope? It seems to me that this clearly lies in the notion of cooperation, though given the different cultural experiences of town and country, Guthrie's was a pragmatic cooperation which respected the different traditions of rural and urban America. In the rural community, where the family was hailed as the social foundation, cooperation between the farmer and the state manifested itself in the supply of irrigation and electricity by the state in return for surplus production by the farmer. In the urban community, where affairs were complicated by the powerful interests of big business, cooperation manifested itself through labour unions bringing workers of varying ethnicity together and federal welfare schemes enabling women employment opportunities and / or assistance in child-rearing. In addition, federal regulations were advocated to improve housing, education and other conditions.<sup>33</sup>

Guthrie's ideology, far from being communistic, appears a simple humanism, where all look out for each and none make excessive demands. Interestingly, this ideal of cooperation is most clearly expressed in Guthrie's songs for children, and in particular his brilliant "Ship in the Sky":

A curly-headed kid with a sun-shiny smile heard the roar of a plane as it sailed through the sky.

To her playmates she cried with a bright twinkling eye, "My daddy rides that ship in the sky.

My daddy rides that ship in the sky,

My daddy rides that ship in the sky,

Mamma's not afraid so neither am I. My daddy rides that ship in the sky."

A pug-nosed kid, as he kicked up his heel, said "My daddy works in the iron and the steel.

My daddy makes planes so they fly through the sky, that's what keeps your daddy up there so high.

That's what keeps your daddy up there so high,

That's what keeps your daddy up there so high.

If you ain't afraid well neither am I, 'cos my daddy keeps your daddy up there so high."

Then a shy little girl pitched her toe in the sand, said "My daddy works in the place where they land.

So you tell your mamma don't be afraid, cause my dad'll bring your daddy back home again.

My dad'll bring your daddy back home again,

My dad'll bring your daddy back home again.

Don't be afraid if it gets dark and rains, my dad'll bring your daddy back home again.

My dad'll bring your daddy back home again,

My dad'll bring your daddy back home again.

Don't be afraid if it gets dark and rains, my dad'll bring your daddy back home again."  
(Guthrie 2002c: 2.15)<sup>34</sup>

In this simple story of an aircraft pilot's safe flight, we see cooperation benefiting the workers, consumers and the family; just exactly the message one receives through the whole corpus of Guthrie's work.

Guthrie was not offering his listeners or readers a revolutionary agenda but stating in his own way the New Deal philosophy presented by President Franklin Roosevelt.<sup>35</sup> Perhaps it is for this reason that Guthrie so flourished during his time with the BPA, a project that was Roosevelt's own personal initiative.<sup>36</sup> Guthrie's restatement of core American humanism is perhaps the reason why he never suffered as severely under the McCarthyite witchhunts of the 1950s as some of his folk-singing colleagues such as Pete Seeger and has maintained solid admiration in popular American culture, even having his signature tune, "This Land is Your Land" (Guthrie 2002c: 1.7), considered for a new national anthem in the 1970s (Klein 1999: 494).

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> According to Charles F. McGovern, "While Guthrie could not be involved with these postwar movements due to his illness, his own lifework had already shown the connections between folk movements and the mass society that the United States had become by the 1960s" (McGovern 1999: 120).

<sup>2</sup> Guthrie was, in fact, not an authentic "Okie". Robert Noakes has estimated that at the time of his birth his father, Charley Guthrie, an Okemah land speculator, was worth around \$35,000-\$40,000. By the time Guthrie was a teenager, however, the family was in penury and had broken up, and he lived as a scavenger for some years before joining his father in Pampa, Texas, working as a motel manager (Noakes [c. 1980s]).

---

<sup>3</sup> In the summer of 1938 Guthrie was appointed by the *Light* to investigate the living and working conditions of migrant workers in California (“Timeline of Woody Guthrie (1912-1967)”).

<sup>4</sup> Guthrie’s column, called “Woody Sez”, appeared from 1939 to 1941 (Garton 1999: CD1).

<sup>5</sup> First recorded in 1940.

<sup>6</sup> “This Land is Your Land” (Guthrie 2002c: 1.1). The song was first written in 1944.

<sup>7</sup> First recorded in 1941.

<sup>8</sup> First recorded in 1941.

<sup>9</sup> First recorded in 1940.

<sup>10</sup> First recorded in 1940.

<sup>11</sup> First recorded in 1941.

<sup>12</sup> First recorded in 1940.

<sup>13</sup> First recorded in 1947.

<sup>14</sup> First recorded in 1944.

<sup>15</sup> A notable exception to this rule occurs in the song “Ranger’s Command”, first recorded in 1944, in which the narrator asks a “fair maiden” if she will go with him to the cattle “round up”. Their herd is attacked by rustlers and it is the “fair maiden” who “rose from her warm bed a battle to fight. / She rose from her warm bed with a gun in each hand / Said “Come all of you cowboys and fight for your land. / Come all of you cowboys and don’t ever run / As long as there’s bullets in both of your guns” (Guthrie 2002c: 2: 22).

<sup>16</sup> First recorded c. 1944.

<sup>17</sup> First recorded in 1940.

<sup>18</sup> First recorded c. 1946-47.

<sup>19</sup> First recorded c. 1944.

<sup>20</sup> First recorded in 1944.

<sup>21</sup> First recorded in 1940.

<sup>22</sup> First recorded in 1940.

<sup>23</sup> First recorded in 1940.

<sup>24</sup> First recorded in 1941.

<sup>25</sup> First recorded in 1941.

<sup>26</sup> For examples of rural solidarity, see especially “Tom Joad Blues – Part 2”: “The Joads rode away to the jungle camp, there they cooked a stew. / And the hungry little kids of the jungle camp said ‘we’d like to have some too’; / said ‘we’d like to have some too’,” and, in Preacher Casey’s words, “us working folks must all get together ’cause we ain’t got a chance anymore; / we ain’t got a chance anymore,” and in Tom Joad’s closing remarks to his mother, “Everybody

might be just-a one big soul, well it looks that-a-way to me. / Everywhere that you look in the day or night, that's where I'm a-gonna be, ma; that's where I'm a-gonna be. / Wherever little children are hungry and cry, wherever people ain't free, / wherever men are fighting for their rights, that's where I'm a-gonna be, ma; that's where I'm a-gonna be" (Guthrie 2002c: 2.2).

<sup>27</sup> First recorded in 1944.

<sup>28</sup> First recorded in 1944. In "Keep That Oil A-Rollin", recorded in 1942, Guthrie had used the similar lyric "I'm a union man in a union war, it's a union land I'm a-fightin' for", though by 1944 it had been internationalised with "land" being replaced by "world" (Almanac Singers 2004: 14).

<sup>29</sup> First recorded in 1941.

<sup>30</sup> First recorded in 1942.

<sup>31</sup> Although evidence of racism is scant in Guthrie's biography, Klein documents a few instances from his early months in California (1937). Klein maintains that Guthrie was unaware of the offence his drawings of "jungle blacks" and his parody of "black English" caused to black people. When he was criticised in a letter from a black listener for singing "Nigger Blues" on his radio show, however, Guthrie went on air with an apology, reading the letter aloud, promising never to use the word nigger again and tearing all of his "nigger songs" out of his songbook. This incident is the last known case of racism in Guthrie's writings (Klein 1999: 95-97).

<sup>32</sup> "All colors of hands gonna work together; / All colors of eyes gonna laugh and shine; / All colors of feet gonna dance together; / When I bring my CIO to Caroline, Caroline" (*apud* Klein 1999: 360-61).

<sup>33</sup> There is one instance in song where Guthrie celebrates the solidarity of a united urban-rural working class lobbying the US government, "Farmer-Labor Train", first recorded in 1942 (Guthrie 2002b 2.15). While the song is about labour unionism in both town and country, however, it does not call for any blanket reforms, so my argument that Guthrie had different visions for urban and rural America is unaffected.

<sup>34</sup> First recorded in 1944.

<sup>35</sup> That Roosevelt's New Deal philosophy incorporated a sense of cooperation at its very heart is demonstrated by the text of the Bonneville Project Act which established the BPA in 1937, which reads in part, "[i]n order to ensure that the facilities for the generation of electric energy at the Bonneville project shall be operated for the benefit of the general public, and particularly of domestic and rural consumers, the administrator shall at all times, in disposing of electric energy generated at the said project, give preference and priority to public bodies and cooperatives". According to the Public Power Council, a lobby group representing the Pacific-Northwest's consumer-owned utilities, "[t]his Act created *preference*, a concept which ensured that public utilities received the power they needed at a cost-based rate" (Public Power Council 2005; emphasis in the original).

<sup>36</sup> In a presidential campaign speech in 1932 Roosevelt announced that "[t]he next great hydro-electric development to be undertaken by the federal government must be that on the Columbia River". Within a year work began on the Bonneville and Grand Coulee Dams (BPA 2000, 2).

## Works Cited

Almanac Singers (2004), *The Sea, the Soil & the Struggle: Original Recordings 1941-1942 (Volume 2)*, [n.p.], Naxos Folk Legends 8.120733.

BPA (2000), "A String of Events Led to the Federal System of Dams and Transmission Facilities We Have Today", *Keeping the Lights on for the Northwest*, DOE/BP 3327 (September), online, available <http://www.bpa.gov/Corporate/KR/ed/reslist/lightson.pdf>.

Garton, John (1999), "Biography", in Woody Guthrie, *The Woody Guthrie Story*, 4 CDs, New Malden, Chrome Talk ABCD 016 / 1-4, CDs 1-2.

Guthrie, Woody (1990), *Pastures of Plenty: A Self-Portrait*, ed. Dave Mash and Harold Leventhal, New York, HarperCollins.

\_\_ (1992), *The Very Best of Woody Guthrie: Legend of American Folk Blues*, Watford, "Music Club" Music Collection International MCCD 067.

\_\_ (1999), *The Woody Guthrie Story*, 4 CDs, New Malden, Chrome Talk ABCD 016 / 1-4.

\_\_ (2000), *900 Miles*, Milan, Nostalgia NST C 054.

\_\_ (2002a), *Hard Travellin'*, Enfield, Prism Leisure Corp. PLATCD 906.

\_\_ (2002b), *The Legendary Woody Guthrie*, London, "Music Club" Music Collection International MCCD 490.

\_\_ (2002c), *Woody Guthrie*, 2 CDs, EEC, Dejavu Retro R2CD 42-37.

Klein, Joe (1999), *Woody Guthrie: A Life*, rev. edn, New York, Delta.

McGovern, Charles F. (1999), "Woody Guthrie's American Century", in Robert Santelli / Emily Davidson (eds.), *Hard Travellin': The Life and Legacy of Woody Guthrie*, Hanover, NH, and London, Wesleyan University Press / University Press of New England, pp. 111-127.

Noakes, Robert [c. 1980s], *Woody Guthrie*, Manchester, BBC radio broadcast. Public Power Council, 19 April, online, available <http://www.ppcpx.org/Sidebar/History2.htm>.

*Roll on Columbia: Woody Guthrie & the Bonneville Power Administration* (2001), prod. and dir. Michael Majdic / Denise Matthews, prod. Knight Library Media Services, University of Oregon, Quantum Leap QL0197.

Shumway, David R. (1999), "Your Land: The Lost Legacy of Woody Guthrie", in Robert Santelli/ Emily Davidson (eds.), *Hard Travellin': The Life and Legacy of Woody Guthrie*, Hanover, NH, and London, Wesleyan University Press / University Press of New England, pp. 128-137.

Steinbeck, John (2002), sleeve notes in *Woody Guthrie*, by Woody Guthrie, 2 CDs, EEC, Dejavu Retro R2CD 42-37.

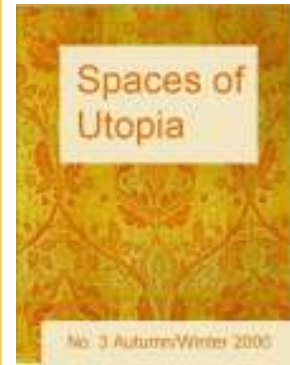
"Timeline of Woody Guthrie (1912-1967)" [n.d.], *American Memory*, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, online, available <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/wwghtml/wwgtimeline.html>.

Werner, Craig (1999), "Democratic Visions, Democratic Voices: Woody as Writer", in Robert Santelli/ Emily Davidson (eds.), *Hard Travellin': The Life and Legacy of Woody Guthrie*, Hanover, NH, and London, Wesleyan University Press / University Press of New England, 1999, pp. 69-82.

## Utopian Society of the Zen Buddhists

**Naobumi Hijikata**  
Chuo University, Tokyo

**Kevin O'Duffy**  
Chado Practitioner



---

Citation: Naobumi Hijikata / Kevin O'Duffy, "Utopian Society of the Zen Buddhists", *Spaces of Utopia: An Electronic Journal*, nr. 3, Autumn/Winter 2006, pp. 57-68 <<http://ler.letras.up.pt> > ISSN 1646-4729.

---

### I. Introduction

The present natural and social crisis urges us to re-examine human nature from a totally new perspective. It seems significant for this purpose that we present here a medieval utopia characterized by Zen Buddhism in Japan. This is because a different point of view from the Western way, which has been mainly responsible for developing our present civilization, should be used to re-consider a new type of utopia.

Zen Buddhism, as a point of view on human nature and as a doctrine of a way of life, is distinguished by those aspects drawn out of Western rationalism. "Chado", a Zen discipline or "way" based around the ritualised preparation and serving of food and tea to guests, will be argued as a philosophy competent to form a new type of utopia. On one hand, Zen Buddhism itself is not able to form a sort of social theory, suggesting only how each person should live individually. On the other hand "Chado", which shows its physical expression in a tea gathering, has the possibility of influencing social activities.

### II. A History of "Chado", or the Way of Tea

The tea-plant was known in southern China as early as 3000 years ago. In the

middle of the eighth century, a Chinese scholar called Lu-Yu wrote his treatise, “Ch’a Ching” (as a sort of Holy Scripture of Tea), and formulated the first Code of Tea. Kakuzo Okakura, the early twentieth century author of *The Book of Tea*, explains that the Tea Ceremony began in the Zen monasteries of ancient China. A tea gathering was not to be a mere poetical pastime, but one of the important methods of self-realization and it would be transformed into a ritual called “Chado” meaning “The Way of Tea” (Okakura 1990: 5; Sen 1990: 4).

The Buddhists of the southern Zen sect, which incorporated so much of Taoist doctrine, formulated an elaborate ritual of tea. The monks gathered before the image of Bodhi Dharma and drank tea, sharing it from a single bowl, with the profound formality of a holy sacrament. It was this Zen ritual which finally developed into the Tea-ceremony of Japan in the fifteenth century. (Okakura 1990: 36)

Tea was imported in the late twelfth century by the priest Eisai (1141-1215), who had studied Zen Buddhism in China, as a means of propagating Zen Buddhism in Japan. At that time, the samurai class, which embraced Zen with its tenets of simplicity and living in the “now”, began to dominate Japan. The merchant class was also rising in prominence through trade with Sung Dynasty China.

With such social changes, the samurai and merchant classes developed an interest in the tea gathering as a tool for acquiring culture. Their enjoyment of Tea prompted its gradual secularization. Also Zen Buddhism, the most influential among the various Buddhist sects, had close relations with the political power base. With these processes the Zen Buddhist ideal became inevitably corrupted (Sen 1990: 5). Thus tea gatherings changed and became mere entertainment in which stakes were wagered and participants vied with one another to distinguish different teas by taste. At the same time, among the wealthy classes, the ornamentation of tearooms became more lavish and gorgeous.

In the middle of the sixteenth century, the first opportunity came to engage with the Western world. Portuguese merchants suddenly appeared bringing with them more technically advanced Western goods, particularly guns; their trade

routes were also used by religious missionaries, especially the Jesuits, who introduced Christianity to Japan. The ruling classes were shocked by the emergence of this modern civilization. In a period of severe civil war, they wanted to import guns. Some feudal lords had contact with missionaries and were converted to Christianity.

The rise of the merchant class greatly influenced Japanese culture, as had happened in Renaissance Europe, and it developed into a brilliant and dazzling cultural era known as the Momoyama period. It is quite remarkable that the leading Tea Masters were from Sakai, a port city near Osaka, which was a municipal city governed by its citizens. There were many merchants of this city who thrived during the Civil War; these merchants could be called “bourgeois” in a modern sense. Like the merchants of other cities, they wished to collect expensive tea utensils and display them by holding tea gatherings.

However there were some Tea Masters who were repulsed by such ostentation. They considered such practices as frivolous and flippant in the progress of civilization. At some temples, tea drinking was developing into a solemn ceremony to pursue self-realization. In an appointed room, a picture of the Buddha was hung, flowers were arranged and incense burned (*ibidem*). “Chado” was devised by them to be held in a small room of only four-and-a-half tatami mats (nine feet square) with a limited number of guests. The room was in a tiny house called “Soan” or “thatched hut”. In this confined space they pursued the beauty of tea, using simple, imperfect Japanese utensils.

A wealthy Sakai merchant named Sen-no Rikyu (1522-1591) respected as the greatest Tea Master, made a fortune there as a fishmonger and became Tea Master to the two War Lords who unified Japan, Oda Nobunaga (1534-1581) and his successor, Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536-1598); Rikyu promoted the simple way of preparing and drinking tea in a “thatched hut”.

Sen-no Rikyu was very creative in building the independent thatched tea hut with walls of wattle and daub, separated from the mansion house. He

eventually established a style of “Chado” called the “tea of quiet taste”. This is clearly symbolized by the guests’ entrance. It is a small aperture, approximately 75 cm square which forces all guests to crouch and enter in a humble manner. If a guest were a samurai, he had to leave his sword on the rack outside before entering, due to Rikyu’s strong intention that all the guests should be treated equally. To leave his sword outside, which was symbol of his rank, meant that the samurai temporarily gave up his social position. In other words, Rikyu wished that social distinctions between the samurai (ranked higher) and the citizen (ranked lower) should be denied. His aim should be clearly accepted that the inside of the tearoom was a revolutionary change from the class-ridden society of the outer world. Rikyu might be said to be a pioneer of the bourgeois revolution; nevertheless he was a premature figure in a premature age.

Although both unifiers, Nobunaga and Hideyoshi, learned the “tea of quiet taste” under Rikyu’s instruction, they often preferred to have huge gatherings in order to flaunt their collections of precious and rare tea utensils. Apparently their taste for lavishness and glitter was to create a dilemma, which would be fatal for Rikyu in Hideyoshi’s age.

Toyotomi Hideyoshi, a despot, not only held an enormous tea gathering to which several hundred tea practitioners were invited, but also ordered Rikyu to design a golden tearoom in which only utensils of gold, such as a golden kettle, brazier, tea bowl and so on, were to be used. In his last few years, Hideyoshi conceived an incredible delusion to establish a great empire by occupying Korea and China. Indeed his troops did invade Korea but were soundly defeated.

The conflict between Hideyoshi and Rikyu was getting more severe, as predictable. As Rikyu’s philosophy grew more and more towards simplicity and equality, Hideyoshi ordered Rikyu to commit suicide by “hara-kiri”. Mystery still cloaks the nature of his crime and why he went without an appeal for mercy. It may be said that he proudly displayed his own position as a citizen by his resolute death (*idem*, 6-7).

### III. Zen Buddhism and Taoism: A Religious and Philosophical Background

As mentioned above, the spirit of “Chado” was inspired by Zen Buddhism and the origins of the Tea Ceremony were devised in Zen temples. Sen-no Rikyu, at the beginning of his memorandum (*Nanporoku* [Japanese]), confirmed that the “tea of quiet taste” should be mastered through training grounded on “the Buddhist way” before everything. Although “the Buddhist way” he pointed to here did not mention Zen, it obviously implied it. Before considering Rikyu’s idea of “Chado”, Zen Buddhism, much influenced by Taoism, will be explained (Rikyu 2003: 9).

Zen Buddhism originated in China around the sixth century AD as a mixture of the Greater Vehicle of salvation, which is the fundamental idea of Mahayana expounded in the Prajnaparamita, a development in Indian Buddhism in the first century BC, and Chinese Taoism, being a form of naturalism founded by Lao-Tzu as early as the fourth century BC. In other words, the idea of “Emptiness”, the essence of Prajnaparamita, and the idea of “Nothingness” of Taoism are combined in Zen (Suzuki 2004: 4).

A famous twentieth-century Zen philosopher, Daisetsu Suzuki, denied that Zen is a religion in the common sense, describing its features as follows: it has “no God to worship, no ceremonial rites to observe, no future abode to which the dead are destined and no soul (...) whose immortality is a matter of intense concern with some people” (Suzuki 2004: 9).

#### ***Emptiness***

The key concept of Zen is the “Emptiness” of Mahayana. It is directed that people who wish to practice “the profound perfection of wisdom” should perceive things in the following way: “form is empty; emptiness is form. ‘Emptiness’ is not other than form; form is not other than emptiness. In the same way, feeling, discrimination, conditioning factors, and consciousness are empty” (Lopez 1996: vii). Buddhists believe that all human beings would be salvaged if “they rely on and abide in

perfection of wisdom; because their minds are without obstruction, they have no fear" (*ibidem*). It is difficult to understand. Even Zen monks must endeavour earnestly to recognize "the perfection of wisdom" by a peculiar method of training or meditation, called the "Dhyana".

Although meditation is a strict and rigorous discipline, they are not directed spiritually by any transcendental *persona* such as God or the supernatural agency, but they carry it out by their own unaided conscious efforts to attain "the perfection of wisdom". An old priest said, "I am willing to help you in every way I can, but there are some things in which I cannot be of any help to you. / It will be nobody else but yourself that will carry your body along this highway" (Suzuki 2004: 60).

### ***Individualism in Zen***

Therefore Zen has nothing to teach us in the way of intellectual logic and analysis; nor has it any set doctrines (*idem*, 10). According to Daisetsu Suzuki, "[t]he foundation of all concepts is simple and unsophisticated experience". Because "the human tongue is not an adequate organ for expressing the deepest truths of Zen" (*idem*, 2-3).

In this sense, Zen depends more on intuition perceived by individual sensibility than on logical recognition conceived by language and reason. Supporting Suzuki's idea, Kitaro Nishida says: "To experience means (...) to know in accordance with the facts". He used the term "pure experience" as the foundation of "intellectual intuition" (Nishida 1990: 3). That is, "[i]ntellectual intuition is an intuition of ideal", as in one of artists or people of religion. He continues: "It is a grasp of life, like having (...) the aesthetic spirit, / it is actually the state of oneness of subject and object", for "[i]ntellectual intuition underlies thinking" (*idem*, 30-32).

Thus Suzuki with Nishida is proud that Zen understands things in the synthetic and comprehensive conception attained through human sensitive intuition, seeing a limitation of words or language (*idem*, 27). However Zen is too

individualistic to form a communitarian utopian or social theory, being weak in thinking logically.

It should be noted, though, that it is quite separate from speculative mysticism or spiritualism, which is a common misunderstanding. Zen meditation leads to a mental state which is not suspended, or at a standstill, nor is it trance inducing, but instead allows the participant to gain an insight into the “self” after long training. That is, a means to penetrate into the relationship between the human being and nature itself as Dogen, the greatest Zen priest in the twelfth century, emphasized. Here is a reason why the deeper the crisis of the natural environment becomes, the more Zen attracts our attention (Dogen 1996).

However there is a dangerous aspect to accepting everything without distinguishing between “goodness” and “badness”. For example, both Zen philosophers, Daisetsu Suzuki and Kitaro Nishida, setting their starting point of method not on the recognition by reason but in the conception by intuition, were utilised to justify Fascism by the super-nationalists before the Second World War. To avoid such a danger, it is significant to consider its connection with Taoism.

### **Nothingness**

The Taoism of Lao Tzu asserts that the source of the universe is the “Tao”, in Chinese meaning literally “the Way” as expressed in his book, *Tao Te Ching*. A translator, Ralph A. Dale, terms it “the Great Integrity”. It is neither God on the outside of the Universe, nor a certain idea directed by the transcendence, but a paradoxical concept. It is described that “[t]he Great Integrity is an endless abyss, yet, it is the inexhaustible fertile source of the universe” (Tzu 2002: 4th verse). Having an aspect of critical argument to Confucianism, that directed principles of “doing” as a governor of virtue, Lao Tzu suggests the best leader should take a simple and natural way that “[w]hatever is done happens so naturally that no one presumes to take the credit!” (*idem*, 17th verse). He advocates “what is not over what is”, that is, not doing over doing (*idem*, 11th verse).

“Nothingness” is one of the most important terms of the “Tao” in his idea. Nevertheless, it does not mean the absence of content, but rather the absence of aggressive doing. “Allow the heart to empty itself of all turmoil! Retrieve the utter tranquility of mind from which you issued” (*idem*, 16th verse). This idea, similar to the concept of “Emptiness” in Mahayana, is expected to bring tranquility recovering a process that sociologists call alienation. Therefore, “[t]o know tranquility is to embrace all. To embrace all is to be just. Justice is the foundation for wholeness. Wholeness is the Great Integrity” (*ibidem*). However Taoism is not asceticism, but notes clearly how to promote a happy life, pursuing positively, in a simple and natural way, as follows: “If you know when you have enough, you are wealthy. / If you find your roots and nourish them, you will know longevity” (*idem*, 33rd verse).

Thus, criticizing all kinds of progressivism and preceding Romanticism, it suggests returning to the primitivism of ancient times. As a matter of course, Lao Tzu remarks more on the intrinsic value than the appearance of things, calling our attention to the inner compared with the outer, the essential compared with the superficial. Also he warns us to be distrustful of language, a concept inherited by Zen Buddhism, saying that “Those who know don’t lecture. Those who lecture don’t know” (*idem*, 56th verse).

#### **IV. Rikyu’s Chado**

It is clear that the ideas of Lao Tzu are effective antitheses to modernization, which are directed by the works of reason, increasing competition in the market economy and the continual promotion of industrial engineering. In the workings of the Japanese mind and culture, there is something calm, quiet and traditionally silent, crystallized in Zen, and in particular in Sen-no Rikyu’s “Chado”.

In a tea gathering, called a “Chaji”, a host invites a few guests to spend a few hours in an intimate atmosphere of peace and mutual respect. The tearoom, devoid of rank, is without ornamentation except for that which may be placed in it

to satisfy some aesthetic and spiritual need of the moment. The setting is conducive to reflection and introspection. The first object to be viewed, once inside, is the scroll, usually containing a Zen phrase, which is intended to awaken the viewer to some reality of life (Sen 1990: ch. 5).

Each guest will silently approach this sanctuary passing along the garden path, which leads from the gathering place to the tearoom, signifying the first stage of meditation. Called “the dewy path” (a Buddhist reference), it is intended to break the connection with the mundane world and to produce a mental state conducive with the full appreciation of aestheticism in the tearoom itself (*idem*, ch. 2).

If it is winter, the host first lays charcoal under the kettle in the fire-pit, then serves a light meal followed by a sweet. (In summer, due to the heat, a small brazier is used with smaller pieces of charcoal, which are laid before the sweet is served.) After a brief interval the guests return to the tearoom and notice that the scroll has been replaced by a simple flower arrangement. The ephemeral nature of the flower reminds the guest of the briefness of life and the importance of living each moment. With total concentration the host prepares one bowl of thick tea, which is shared by all the guests. Then, in a more relaxed atmosphere, individual bowls of thin tea are prepared for each guest in turn.

The ceremonial sharing of a bowl of thick tea is the most important moment in a Chaji and is conducted in a quiet yet attentive atmosphere. Before making a bowl of tea, the host purifies the bowl and other utensils with a small silk cloth in a ritualized way. Certain aspects of this process of purification and sharing seem similar to the rituals of the Catholic Mass, in which a single cup is shared, but so far there is no evidence to support any direct influence (Sen 1990: 118-129).

Some soft sounds, especially during the preparation of thick tea, serve to heighten the guests’ awareness of the moment, such as the ladle hitting the lid-rest or the “singing” of the kettle. This sound in particular is likened to “the wind in the pines”, a Zen phrase. It is also a symbol of hospitality. Immediately before

the preparation of thin tea, which concludes a Chaji, more charcoal is laid under the kettle. This is not for the practical purpose of ensuring the water is hot enough for the thin tea but so that the kettle is still boiling well when the guests take their leave, meaning that they are welcome to stay longer should they so wish. For the kettle to become silent whilst the guests are still there would be the equivalent of telling them to leave! Such are the considerations of the host (*idem*, 102-109).

## V. Conclusion

Sen-no Rikyu eventually suggested an ethical and aesthetic way of life in “Chado” in which many Zen ideas and principles are contained, such as “simple”, “natural”, “asymmetric”, “profound and subtle”, and “tranquil”. Rikyu especially set forth the principles of tea stating that the host and guests should create a community in which “harmony”, “respect”, “purity” and “tranquillity” are their guides, even if only for a few hours. Soshitsu Sen summarized these tenets as Principles of Chado as follows:

Harmony is the oneness of host and guests, which follows the rhythms of nature. The harmonious atmosphere of a tea gathering depends upon the union of host and guests – a union that must be absolutely sincere and truthful.

Respect is the sincerity of heart that allows one to have an open relationship with the other participants, humbly recognizing their dignity.

Purity is removing the dust of the world from one’s heart and mind. Cleaning in preparation for a tea gathering, the host also establishes order within himself.

Tranquillity comes with the constant practice of harmony, respect and purity in everyday life. In this state of mind, having found peace within oneself, a bowl of tea can truly be shared with another (*idem*, 3-4).

With Rikyu’s guidance, his legacy, called the “tea of quiet taste”, lives on in the millions of tea practitioners in Japan and now, thanks to the work of the fifteenth Grand Master of Urasenke, overseas.

Over the centuries the aesthetic tastes of the Tea Masters have greatly influenced the arts, crafts and architecture of traditional Japan. Minimalism is a

good example. Should you buy a set of plates or bowls, more often than not the box contains only five items as this is the maximum number of guests recommended for a tea gathering. Often Japanese ceramics appear, at first glance, to be primitive or rough to Western eyes. However, upon closer inspection, an individuality and aesthetic beauty emerges which required some intellectual work on the part of the viewer to appreciate. This too is the result of the Tea/Zen aesthetic taking root in everyday culture.

It could be said that such a small society is a petit utopian world as the civic and egalitarian changes it espouses were revolutionary in the hierarchical society in which Chado emerged. We have had many utopian thinkers, historically, and they have presented their idealistic and fantastic ideas up to the present time. Many of them aimed at more or less forming a kind of communitarian scheme. Nevertheless, in today's enormously complicated society with its highly advanced engineering, it is difficult for such a scheme to avoid confrontation. A breakdown has occurred as if a miscarriage were predestined.

Even in the face of difficulties, the significance of a utopian idea should not be neglected. The concepts and practices represented by Tea/Zen demand that we be harmonious and show respect to each other. It may be effective to pursue "self-realization" in tranquillity, when many around us wish to behave individualistically, and to seek enlightenment without distinctions of race, religion, gender, economic or political class

## Works Cited

*Buddhist Wisdom Books Containing The Diamond Sutra and The Heart Sutra* (1958), trans. Edward Conze, London, George Allen and Unwin.

Dogen (1996), *Shobogenzo*, 5 vols., trans. Kyoji Ishii [Japanese], Tokyo, Kawadeshobo.

Inagaki, Hisao (ed.) (1995), *A Glossary of Zen Terms* [Dictionary], Kyoto, Nagata Bunshodo.

Lopez, Jr., Donald S. (1996), *Elaborations on Emptiness: Uses of the Heart Sutra*, Princeton, Princeton UP.

Nishida, Kitaro (1990), *An Enquiry into the Good*, trans. Masao Abe and Christopher Ives, New Haven, Yale University Press.

Okakura, Tenshin (1990), *The Book of Tea*, New York, Fox Dafield.

Rikyu, Sen-no (2003), *Nanporoku* [Japanese]. ed. Jitsuzan Tachibana, commentary by Matsunosuke Nishiyama, Tokyo, Iwanami.

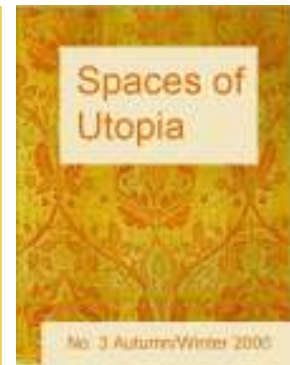
Sen, Sioshitsu (1990), *Chado: The Japanese Way of Tea*, Tokyo, Weatherhill and Tankosha.

Suzuki, Daisetz Teitaro (1998), *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, New York, Grove Press.  
\_\_ (2004), *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, New York, Grove Press.

Tzu, Lao (2002), *Tao Te Ching*, new translation and commentary by Ralph Alan Dale, London, Watkins Publishing.

## The Biography of Vasco de Quiroga (1470-1565), Bishop of Utopia, by Benjamín Jarnés (1888-1949)

**Juan Miguel Zarandona**  
University of Valladolid, Spain



---

Citation: Juan Miguel Zarandona, "The Biography of Vasco de Quiroga (1470-1565), Bishop of Utopia, by Benjamín Jarnés (1888-1949)", *Spaces of Utopia: An Electronic Journal*, nr. 3, Autumn/Winter 2006, pp. 69-83 <<http://ler.letras.up.pt>> ISSN 1646-4729.

---

### Introduction

In those years of the European Early Modernity an Old Castilian Spanish young man of sixty years of age, Vasco de Quiroga, born in Castilian lands of Ávila in 1470, left the Iberian Peninsula and sailed towards the New World. He arrived in the new colonial Vice-Royalty of New Spain and Mexico City in 1530. His Lord and Emperor, Charles I, wanted him there in the new territories. Vasco de Quiroga was a former student at Salamanca University, a proved humanist and a devoted son of the Renaissance. He probably travelled light but determined to make his favourite reading, Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*, a dream come true. He not only promoted, protected against the many abuses, and improved the Indian's life conditions from the very beginning, but started building his ideal plans. Between 1531 and 1535 Quiroga founded two utopian communities, both named *Hospital-Pueblo de Santa Fe* (Hospital-Village of the Holy Faith), in the outskirts of Mexico City and Michoacán. A few years after, he became Bishop of Michoacán and from this high position continued struggling for the abused and applying his utopian agenda firmly. Vasco de Quiroga died in 1565 at the venerable age of 95.

Centuries later, at the beginning of the twentieth century, a new Spaniard, Benjamín Jarnés, born in Codo (Aragón) in 1888, left the Peninsula and exiled in Mexico in 1939, after the end of the Spanish Civil War. Jarnés was a brilliant intellectual, avant-garde artist, and prolific writer. His many novels, short stories, translations, articles, essays and biographies prove the wide

scope of his talents. There in Mexico he could not avoid feeling the appeal of Bishop Quiroga. This attraction resulted in a biography: *Don Vasco de Quiroga, Obispo de Quiroga*, published in 1942. Benjamín Jarnés died in 1949.

The present article will comment on this biography by Benjamín Jarnés and his (mis)understanding and (mis)reading of a sixteenth-century utopian from the point of view of a twentieth-century intellectual also very fond of utopian constructions and ideal causes. For those of my readers interested in completing their knowledge of Vasco de Quiroga, Bishop of Utopia, according to Benjamín Jarnés, I highly recommend the study of the selection of sources listed in the final bibliographical section of this article. This article itself is highly indebted to these sources.

### **The Encounter of Quiroga and Jarnés's**

The existing bibliography on Don Vasco de Quiroga (1470-1565), also known as the *Obispo de Utopía* [Bishop of Utopia], is huge. It is quite difficult to add something new. However, this article intends to produce a small contribution to this impressive wealth of research and scholarship from a different approach. I am not going to study this outstanding historical character directly, but through the specific vision of a twentieth-century Spaniard who wrote a biography of him. Namely, Benjamín Jarnés, a leading cultural, intellectual and literary figure of pre-Civil War Spain. In other words, a man from those infamous and paradoxical decades of the last century for Spain, the 20's and 30's, historically disastrous but culturally brilliant.<sup>1</sup> A new Golden Age of Spanish literature and culture that was only second to the sixteenth and seventeenth-century first Golden Age.<sup>2</sup>

Jarnés was once the intelligent and talented son of a big rural family from Aragón, Spain, who could finally make his way to Madrid, where he finally settled down, and start a brilliant career within the most brilliant intellectual circles flourishing there. He also succeeded in becoming a disciple and collaborator of the reputed philosopher and pre-war leading intellectual José Ortega y Gasset.

As a member of this modernist avant-garde generation, Benjamín Jarnés was a great reader, a devoted and prolific writer, and a mind open to all current

European cultural and artistic movements, vogues and fashions: a fact that made him very fond of formal and subject matter experiments. For example, formally, he devoted much of his time to promote the hybrid sub-genre of the so-called *lyrical novel*. Or, as far as content is involved, he elaborated a fully revolutionary theory of womanhood, which makes him an almost feminist writer, and played extensively with the deconstruction of myths.

Besides, he was a very prolific talent who published nearly a hundred volumes during his short lifetime of only 61 years: novels, short novels, anthologies of short stories, plays, legends, biographies, literary criticism and research, etc., apart from innumerable articles and essays for different periodicals, journals, and newspapers, prologues and reviews. And all of them were very profound, polemical, advanced and committed renderings of his creative powers and of a modern humanist's soul.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, after the end of the Spanish Civil War in 1939, Jarnés had to follow the very path that many of his contemporaries opened before him. First he had to exile in France temporarily, from where he moved to Mexico, or the former Vice-Royalty of New Spain. Once in the New World, he never threw his return ticket away and finally came back to Spain to die in 1949, after a very short while.

As many exiles had done before him, while in Mexico, he typically struggled to identify with his new country and cultural environment. He was especially interested in the legacy of Spain, which made him develop a strong need to read about and to assess the conquest and the colonial periods. While in Spain, Jarnés had written some biographies<sup>4</sup> and now he turned to his old genre again most enthusiastically, as the following Mexican titles prove:

- *Escuela de Libertad* [School for Freedom] (1942), consisting of seven different biographies: two dealing with American *libertadores* [liberators] – Washington and Lincoln; and five glossing the life wanderings of some of their Latin American counterparts: Hidalgo, Morelos, Bolívar, Martí, San Martín and Sucre;
- *Manuel Acuña: Poeta de su Siglo* [Manuel Acuña: Poet of his Century] (1942), a mixture of biography and literary criticism on this Mexican poet;

- *Don Vasco de Quiroga, Obispo de Utopía* (1942), the work of his that better exemplifies his almost painful efforts to identify with his new world by means of this biographical method of self-expression and knowledge gaining.

The third of these biographies marks the point of encounter between our two men: Benjamín Jarnés and, back in time, Vasco de Quiroga.

### **Utopian Quiroga and Jarnés**

What did Benjamín Jarnés see in Vasco de Quiroga that made him write his biography? First of all, both of them were Spanish citizens who, after having spent almost their whole busy lives in their home country, had to leave many things behind and travel to Mexico, an unknown territory. But they had many more things in common.

As a vocational biographer, Jarnés was bent on dealing with exceptional lives – those lives that really made a difference. For him, *biography* was superior to *history*. The latter usually focuses only on the so-called “big history”, *i.e.* in the feats of kings and other outstanding leaders – not the real protagonists of history, according to Jarnés. The former, however, is more likely to focus on everyday life or “small history”. In other words, it provides access to the lives of those who were the real protagonists of history.

In addition, Benjamín Jarnés goes much further by listing the following dichotomies between history and biography:

- history is a cold patterning of human events, while biography is a live and authentic recounting of a real, unique human being;
- history is frequently a school for hatred and manipulation, while biography always sets high standards and good examples to imitate;
- regarding Spain, the general History of Spain has always been especially prone to failures and shortcomings and has never managed to provide very good examples, while it has always enjoyed the benefit of very fruitful lives of merit.<sup>5</sup>

All these ideas and beliefs led Jarnés to elaborate a theory of his own that he named *Theory of Sympathy*. He claimed that the times of proud and great figures were over. The new times were not for *idols to worship*. They demanded a new virtue: “sympathy”. In other words, people will only accept models that are sympathetic to them or to whom they can feel a kind of sympathy, identification, proximity, love. And Vasco de Quiroga can be termed one of the most outstanding examples of human sympathy in history. Probably this was the reason why Jarnés chose him.

Don Vasco de Quiroga was a disciple of one of those utopian thinkers who devoted their lives to disclose the real nature of men and women and make them lead a happier life pilgrimage on earth. He was also a disciple of those who showed us the way of the Gospel toward the City of God. He followed a double interest in an Earthly Christian Utopia and in a Heavenly New Jerusalem. The Mexican Indian people of Michoacán – the Tarascos – used to call him *Tata Vasco* (Daddy Vasco). No world power could give him a better title. His memory lives on in the hearts of his people, especially in the lake city of Pátzcuato, Michoacán.

Don Vasco was born in 1470 in the Old Castilian town of Madrigal de las Altas Torres [Madrigal of the High Towers],<sup>6</sup> in Ávila province, where Queen Isabella of Castile was also born. He belonged to a very noble family who was always in the service of Spain. It was also a very proud family, one of the Grandees of the Kingdom.

Eventually Vasco de Quiroga became both an outstanding judge and a brilliant humanist and man of letters, but, most unexpectedly, life granted him a second opportunity, *i.e.* the possibility to turn a rewarding and honourable life of service into a unique life of heroism and legend. From “lawyer”, “judge”, “Christian humanist”, “reader of the *Utopia* of Thomas More”, and “lay man”, into “adventurer”, “pioneer”, “forger of nations”, “founder”, “popular leader”, “hero”, “legend”, “mythical figure”, and “man of God” (Bishop of Michoacán). And this happened in the year 1530, when Vasco was *only* sixty years old – an age for a well-deserved retirement.

The Emperor Charles I needed desperately a fully reliable man to be sent to the new colony of New Spain, future Mexico, which was in a state of absolute

turmoil. And that man was to be Vasco de Quiroga, the old judge, the wise humanist.

The *Primera Audiencia* or first Government of the Crown in New Spain, led by the infamous Nuño de Guzmán and his tyrannical rule, turned soon into a reign of terror, full of corruption, greed, murder, abuse, exploitation of the Indians. The *Segunda Audiencia* or Second Government, appointed by the Emperor and led by Vasco de Quiroga, had the demanding and high utopian mission of healing the wounds, amending the wrongs, and repairing the damage. And the strong man of prestige, adorned with a very determined character, finally arrived in Mexico on January 1531. Against his many enemies, he was protected by two leading principles: the new brilliant European culture of the Renaissance and the teachings of the Gospel. And he soon proved to be a perfect man of action and a successful peacemaker.

From the very beginning he sought a cultural and racial fusion of conquerors and those conquered. He not only wanted to spread the European best values, but to promote respect for those of the Indians. He grouped his measures around a double mission, enterprise, agenda or programme – a social as well as a spiritual level. On the one hand, Vasco built a real, sensible and possible utopia, in firm contact with worldly realities, in order to empower his people. On the other, he went around the land performing good deeds as Christ did, as the Good Shepherd saving his creatures. Regarding the Indians, this evangelical utopian leader attempted a middle way or double liberation. He wanted to liberate them from the abuses of slavery and the system of the *encomiendas*,<sup>7</sup> imposed by the colonizers; and from their own subhuman ways of life and ignorance. Consequently, he strove both to free the natives and to make them Christians. How did he do it? What method was he to adopt? How to succeed? The answer was: “sympathy”, “love”, “patience”, “good examples”, “promotion of the new values”, “generosity”, “sharing”. And he was very successful.

His *mixta policía* (mixed policy), consisting of worldly tactics combined with spiritual ends, included the founding of ecclesiastical courts, where Indian grievances were heard; the promotion of education by means of a popular

school system; and a health and social programme in order to take care of the hungry, the sick and the homeless.

But his biggest plan was undoubtedly to be the promotion of communities of Indians from August 1531, only six months after the date of his arrival at the New World. The temptation to apply the new humanist ideas of European civilization in the New World was unconquerable. He based his projects on the lives of the first Christians, but, above all, on the works of Saint Augustine, Campanella, and his admired Thomas More.

The Indians, seen as a simple and naïve race very close to the first Christians of the *Acts of the Apostles*, were a kind of “perfect commodity” to build a new and more perfect Christian people.

His *Ordenanzas* or rules for his *Pueblos-Hospitales de la Santa Fe* (Hospital-Towns of the Holy Faith) included all the typical elements of a utopian construction. His first Hospital-Town was founded in Mexico City in 1531, and the second in the Michoacán region in 1534, but they were only the prelude to many more. It is very well-known that around 1580, fifteen years after his death, there were more than two hundred hospital-towns in the colony. And his pioneer interest in the Pacific Ocean region of Michoacán was one of the arguments in favour of promoting Don Vasco to the high position of power – a great push for his plans – of first Bishop of Michoacán. In a single day he stopped being a lay man, received all the Holy Orders together and became bishop, which constitutes one of the quickest ecclesiastical careers in the history of the Catholic Church.<sup>8</sup>

The *Pueblos-Hospitales* were hospital, asylum, church, school, and charity house at the same time. No private property of land was allowed. Everybody had to devote time to farming, on a rotating communal work basis, and to learning a trade or craft. Extended families were the rule. All had to work, but only six hours a day. Women had the right to work. Physical health was very important. A Christian life-style was promoted. No luxuries were allowed. These communities were kept isolated on purpose in order to protect them from the corrupting influences of the colonizers, and out of their own pagan traditional way of life. Education was universal and consisted of four main skills: “reading”, “writing”, “singing” and “playing music”. There was a very utopian hierarchical

social organization: every thirty families chose a *jurado*, every four *jurados* chose one *regidor*. There were also two *alcaldes ordinarios* (ordinary mayors) and one *alcalde mayor* (major mayor). Consequently, there was some kind of democratic practices because the lower magistrates were chosen by the people.

In general, it can be claimed that they were very successful.<sup>9</sup> The Mexico City Hospital-Town reached the peak number of 30,000 Indians living together under this system. But they were also very polemical and had to confront many attacks.

### Jarnés's View of Quiroga

Jarnés depicts his character, Don Vasco de Quiroga, Bishop of Utopia, and his "mission" in Mexico in very positive terms: "Un hombre, el inmortal Don Vasco de Quiroga, hizo por sí solo, en Michoacán, la obra de una legión de civilizadores" [A man, the immortal Don Vasco de Quiroga, did alone, in Michoacán, the work of a legion of civilizers] (Jarnés 1942: 80).

From my point of view, there is a contradiction between this devoted admiration and some of the claims made throughout the whole biography, especially concerning the Indians and their beneficial entry into Western civilization. The following examples are quite self-explanatory:

No acepta la crueldad en el trato del indígena, menos la humillación, el envilecimiento... Pero tampoco admite que se les abandone a sus modos de vivir: quiere hacerlos libres, cristianizarlos, porque no es precisamente libertad humana – a capricho o por ignorancia – poderse hundir en los mundos inferiores, subhumanos. [He could not stand cruelty toward the natives, even less humiliation, or vile treatment... But he did not accept either to let them continue with their old habits –willingly or due to ignorance –, to let them fall deeper in their subhuman, inferior worlds] (*idem*, 89)

Y él quiere convertirlos en ciudadanos que no sientan su miseria, que se vean incluidos entre los hombres, admitidos en la sociedad de los hombres. Porque, para Don Vasco de Quiroga, todos los hombres forman ante Cristo una sola clase. [And he wanted to turn them into regular citizens, not feeling their misery any more, regarded as men, accepted in human society. For Don Vasco de Quiroga, all men belong to a single class in the face of Christ] (*idem*, 95)

Quiere ser el gigantesco artesano que infunda en los indios la conciencia de la humana dignidad. [He wanted to be a giant craftsman infusing the conscience of human dignity into the Indians] (*idem*, 102)

Se acerca a ellos y los va convirtiendo trabajosamente en hombres.

[He approaches them and painfully turns them into men] (*idem*, 111)

Arrancar a estos hombres de la ignorancia.  
[He saves these men from ignorance] (*idem*, 124)

Cristianizar, humanizar, civilizar son para él una y la misma cosa.  
[To help them become Christians, to make them humans, to civilize them are the same thing for him] (*ibidem*)

Elevar de nivel humano a aquellos indígenas.  
[To raise those natives to human level] (*ibidem*)

Para que inviten al jefe de aquel país a abandonar la idolatría y a reconocer los providenciales favores del monarca español que con tal solicitud se preocupa de aquella tierra de promisión.  
[To invite the chief of that land to abandon idolatry and to acknowledge the providential favours of the Spanish monarch who worries so much about that promised land] (*idem*, 127)

Y destruyó los templos de los ídolos dejando extinguidos sus ritos y diabólicas ceremonias.  
[And he destroyed the temples of the idols, uprooting their rites and devilish ceremonies] (*idem*, 138)

Y en todas ellas habla Don Vasco paternalmente de las incomodidades y desdichas que resultan de la vida errante por las montañas y en los bosques, y de las ventajas que ofrece la “civilización”. También les habla de los altos consuelos de la vida religiosa, subordinada a leyes evangélicas.  
[In all of them Don Vasco speaks as a good father about the inconveniences and misfortunes resulting from living in the wild mountains and woods, and about the advantages of civilization. He also talks to them about the high comforts of religious life according to the laws of the Gospel] (*idem*, 149)

Y tras esta intervención, fueron los frailes buscando a los indios para convencerlos y reducirlos a buena policía.  
[And after this speech, the friars went in search of the Indians to try to convince them and make them accept the good ways] (*idem*, 152)

Fructuosa humanización, por completo desinteresada.  
[Fruitful humanization, absolutely generous] (*idem*, 153)

Alzar a los indios de nivel, situarlos entre los hombres.  
[To level the Indians, to find them a place among men] (*idem*, 156)

## Conclusions

I consider that there is something wrong in this twentieth-century biography of Don Vasco de Quiroga by Benjamín Jarnés, an intelligent intellectual, a committed writer and a very critical individual. He neither questions Bishop Vasco de Quiroga at all nor any of his deeds. His admired man is always depicted as a very positive historical figure. And all possible critical interpretations of his life and actions are missing. Indeed, Vasco de Quiroga

was a very controversial leader in his times and he still is in our days. He is frequently accused of being too rigid and of stereotyping the Indians.

It is impossible to deny that he was a very intelligent and very results-driven perpetrator of the strategies of the powers of his time to which he was a faithful executor. He also implemented a very effective policy of acculturation, imposing foreign models such as the utopian construction and foreign values such as the ethics of work to an alien people. As a true believer of the superiority of his culture and religion, he did not show much interest in the other culture either. This cunning politician, no matter how well-intentioned he may be, could not avoid the limits of his mental framework, time and ideology. It can be understandable for a sixteenth-century humanist, Vasco de Quiroga, but it is not enough for a twentieth-century modernist, Benjamín Jarnés.

The latter just trod along a too well-known safe discourse: that making of the Bishop of Michoacán a stereotyped myth. He neither studied his character deeper nor tried to find and disclose the real man behind the legend. As a result, this biography can be described as superficial, outdated and not satisfactory for today's readers. It is more a flattering hagiography than a balanced biography.

Many questions are left open: What happened to his hospital-towns? Did they last? For how long? What problems were faced by his real utopians at work? There is nothing about these intriguing points.

It was a failure and a pity for such a brilliant writer, that can only be explained in the context and purposes of a beaten exiled Spaniard who wanted to identify with his new country of adoption and vindicate what the Spanish conquerors did in the area so many years before. He had the talent to have produced something much better, but, probably, the circumstances did not let him do it.

However, the biography can be praised for many other aspects, especially all those paragraphs devoted to gloss a Don Vasco, bishop of a utopia made real in the New World:

He aquí de nuevo al buen forjador de utopías, al inquieto fabricante de ciudades maravillosas, empeñado en la faena de adaptar las ideas más fascinadoras a la pobre vida real, a la humilde vida cotidiana, mucho menos fascinadora.

[And here you have a good forger of utopias, the active maker of marvellous cities, the man devoted to the task of adapting the most fascinating ideas to real life, to everyday humble life, much less fascinating] (Jarnés 1942: 219)

Poco tiempo después Don Vasco de Quiroga expone por extenso el programa humanista, basado en la Utopía de Moro, que debe constituir, a su entender, “la carta magna de la civilización europea en el Nuevo Mundo”.

[Soon after Don Vasco de Quiroga made a detailed account of the humanist programme, based in More’s Utopia, which constitutes the “Main Charter of European civilization in the New World”] (*idem*, 98)

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Benjamín Jarnés can also be regarded as a member of the so-called *Generación del 27* [Generation of the 27], nowadays an almost mythical one thanks to big names such as Federico García Lorca (1898-1936) or Vicente Aleixandre (1898-1984), Nobel Prize for Literature in 1977, among many others.

<sup>2</sup> Indeed, this second Golden Age has been termed *La Edad de Plata de las Letras Españolas* [The Silver Age of Spanish Letters], to avoid any misunderstanding.

<sup>3</sup> Most of his fictional works deal with *human life* at all levels, from all points of view. As a devoted friend of philosophy, his theoretical views of literature, his aesthetic views and his views on literary criticism are founded on philosophical *vitalism*.

<sup>4</sup> *Mosen Pedro* (1924); *Sor Patrocinio: La Monja de las Llagas* (1930); *Zumalacárregui: El Caudillo Romántico* (1931); *San Alejo* (1934); *Castelar, Hombre del Sinaí* (1935); *Doble Agonía de Bécquer* (1936).

<sup>5</sup> Spain has always been known for being a country of saints and heroes, a land of ideals and bravery. This can especially be claimed of the times of Don Vasco de Quiroga and his Spanish contemporaries or of those foreigners at the service of Spain: that brilliant sixteenth century that witnessed the great deeds of unique navigators such as Columbus and Magallanes, humanists such as Luis Vives, or scientists such as Miguel Servet.

<sup>6</sup> In 2005 the town of Madrigal organized a public homage to Don Vasco de Quiroga, in which the Governor of Michoacán was declared “Honorable Citizen”.

<sup>7</sup> The *Encomiendas* was a system of land-tenure by which Spanish settlers were granted the right to own the land and to benefit from Indian free work, in a regime of semi-slavery.

<sup>8</sup> However, Don Vasco de Quiroga has never completed the long way to become a saint of the Catholic Church.

<sup>9</sup> Another very successful foundation of Don Vasco was the *Colegio de San Nicolás* in Michoacán in 1540. Originally, it was a seminary for Indians and Spaniards together. Later on it became a university that still exists and is one of the oldest educational institutions in America. Don Vasco himself donated his personal library of 266 volumes to this institution, which was an extraordinary number of books for that time and that place – the new wild colony of New Spain.

## Works Cited

Aguayo-Spencer, Rafael (1970), *Don Vasco de Quiroga, Taumaturgo de la Organización Social*, México, Ediciones Oasis.

Amor y Vázquez, José (2005), *Presencia de México en Tres Escritores Españoles: Jarnés, Moreno Villa, Sénder*, Centro Virtual Cervantes, available at: [http://cvc.cervantes.es/obref/aih/pdf/03/aih\\_03\\_1\\_010.pdf](http://cvc.cervantes.es/obref/aih/pdf/03/aih_03_1_010.pdf) [accessed: June 24 2005].

Andujar, Manuel (1981), "Benjamín Jarnés", in *Grandes Escritores Aragoneses en la Narrativa Española del Siglo XX*, Zaragoza, Ediciones del Heraldo de Aragón, pp. 11-92.

Arias-Solís, Francisco (2005), *Benjamín Jarnés: La Voz de La Novela Lírica*, available at: <http://www.islabahia.com/Biografias/Arias/BenjaminJarnes.htm> [accessed: June 24 2005].

Bernstein, J. S. (1972), *Benjamín Jarnés*, New York, Twayne.

Blanco, Gloria Elisa (2005), *Vasco de Quiroga*, available at: <http://www.kokone.com.mx/tareas/biografias/vdequiroga.html> [accessed: June 24 2005].

Boyd, Mildred (2005), *The Devil and Don Vasco*, available at: <http://www.chapala.com/chapala/oyo2002/donvasco.htm> [accessed: June 24 2005].

Callens, Paul L. (1959), *Tata Vasco: Un Gran Reformador del Siglo XVI*. México: Editorial Jus.

Cate-Arries, Francie (2005), "Re-Imagining the Cultural Legacy of a Sixteenth-Century Empire: Spanish Exiles in 1940s Mexico", in *Hispanic Research Journal*, vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 117-130.

Conte, Rafael (1994), "Introducción", in Benjamín Jarnés (1994), *Viviana y Merlín*, Madrid, Letras Hispánicas, Cátedra, pp. 9-98.

Díez-Canedo, Enrique (1964), "Benjamín Jarnés", in *Conversaciones Literarias. Tercera Serie: 1924-1930*, México, Joaquín Mortiz, pp. 172-175.

*Don Vasco de Quiroga*, (2005), available at: <http://www.ml.com.mx/patzcuaro/donVascoin.htm> [accessed: June 24 2005].

Fuentes, Víctor (1989), *Benjamín Jarnés: Bio-Grafía y Metaficción*, Zaragoza, Institución Fernando el Católico.

García de Nora, Eugenio (1973), "El Relato Literario de Benjamín Jarnés", in *La Novela Española Contemporánea (1927-1939)*, Madrid, Gredos, pp. 155-192.

Gómez-Escoto, Daniel (2005), *La Utopía Vasco de Quiroga*, available at: <http://serbal.pntic.mec.es/~cmunoz11/utopia1.html> [accessed: June 24 2005].

Herrejón-Peredo, Carlos (2005), *Educación y Socialización del Indígena*, Biblioteca Digital CREFAL, available at: [http://www.crefal.edu.mx/biblioteca\\_digital/CEDEAL/acervo-digital/herrejon.pdf](http://www.crefal.edu.mx/biblioteca_digital/CEDEAL/acervo-digital/herrejon.pdf) [accessed: June 24, 2005].

Iraburu, José María (2005), *Don Vasco de Quiroga, de Gobernador a Obispo*, available at: <http://members.tripod.com/~hispanidad/hechos13.htm> [accessed: June 24 2005].

Jarnés, Benjamín (1942), *Don Vasco de Quiroga, Obispo de Utopía*, Colección Carabela – Españoles en América I, México, D. F., Ediciones Atlántida.

Jiménez, Juan Ramón (1987), "Benjamín Jarnés", in *Españoles de Tres Mundos*, Madrid, Alianza Editorial, pp. 104-105.

Llerena, María José *et al.* (2005a), *03 de Febrero de 1470: Nacimiento de Don Vasco de Quiroga*, available at: <http://redescolar.ilce.edu.mx/redescolar/efemerides/febrero/conme3a.htm> [accessed: June 24 2005].

\_\_ (2005b), *El Obispo Vasco de Quiroga y la Protección de los Indígenas*, available at: [http://www-elmundo.es/especiales/2004/06/sociedad/rutaquetzal/expedicion\\_temas\\_3.html](http://www-elmundo.es/especiales/2004/06/sociedad/rutaquetzal/expedicion_temas_3.html) [accessed: June 24 2005].

Mainer, José Carlos (1975), "Benjamín Jarnés: ¿Deshumanización y Autobiografía?", in *La Edad de Plata (1902-1039)*, Barcelona, Los Libros de la Frontera, pp. 251-256.

*Mapa de Michoacán, México* (2005), available at: <http://209.15.138.224/inmomex/michoacan.htm> [accessed: June 24 2005].

Martín, Norman F. (1957), "Don Vasco de Quiroga y los Pueblos-Hospitales de Santa Fe", in *Los Vagabundos en la Nueva España: Siglo XVI*, México, Editorial Jus, pp. 140-147.

Martínez-Latre, María Pilar (1979), *La Novela Intelectual de Benjamín Jarnés*, Zaragoza, Institución Fernando el Católico.

*Plano del Centro Histórico de Pátzcuaro*, (2005) Universidad de Michoacana, available at: <http://www.umich.mx/mich/patzcuaro/patz-plano.html> [accessed: June 24 2005].

Robles Gil, Juan Manuel (2005), *Siervo de Dios Vasco de Quiroga: Venerables y Siervos de Dios de México*, available at: <http://www.oremosjuntos.com/SiervoDeDios/VascoDeQuiroga.html> [accessed: June 24 2005].

Tuck, Jim (2005), *Vasco de Quiroga: Notes on a Practical Utopian (1470?-1565)*, available at: [http://www.mexconnect.com/mex\\_/history/jtuck/jtvascoquiroya.html](http://www.mexconnect.com/mex_/history/jtuck/jtvascoquiroya.html) [accessed: June 24 2005].

Verástique, Bernardino (2000), *Michoacán and Eden: Vasco de Quiroga and the Evangelization of Western Mexico*, Austin, University of Texas Press.

Zavala, Silvio (1987a), "La 'Utopía' de Tomás Moro en la Nueva España", in *Recuerdo de Vasco de Quiroga*, México, Editorial Porrúa, pp. 11-34.

\_\_ (1987b), "Ideario de Vasco de Quiroga", in *Recuerdo de Vasco de Quiroga*, México, Editorial Porrúa, pp. 37-62.

\_\_ (1987c), "Letras de Utopia: Carta a don Alfonso Reyes", in *Recuerdo de Vasco de Quiroga*, México, Editorial Porrúa, pp.65-70.

\_\_ (1987d), "L'Utopie Réalisée: Thomas More au Mexique", in *Recuerdo de Vasco de Quiroga*, México, Editorial Porrúa, pp.73-79.

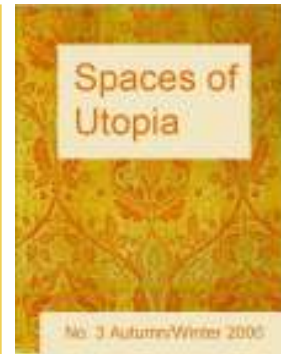
\_\_ (1987e), "Sir Thomas More in New Spain: A Utopian Adventure of the Renaissance", in *Recuerdo de Vasco de Quiroga*, México, Editorial Porrúa, pp.83-93.

\_\_ (1987f), "Nuevas Notas en Torno a Vasco de Quiroga", in *Recuerdo de Vasco de Quiroga*, México, Editorial Porrúa, pp.97-110.

## On Some Utopian Motives in the Philosophy of Walter Benjamin

**Mariya Ivancheva**

Central European University, Budapest (graduate student)



---

Citation: Mariya Ivancheva, "On Some Utopian Motives in the Philosophy of Walter Benjamin", *Spaces of Utopia: An Electronic Journal*, nr. 3, Autumn/Winter 2006, pp. 84-104 <<http://ler.letras.up.pt>> ISSN 1646-4729.

---

This paper will introduce some reflections on the concept of utopia in the work of the Jewish-German critical thinker and philosopher Walter Benjamin (1892-1940). In the first part we shall represent two distinct motives of utopian thought already interpreted in reference to Benjamin's writings. The first one is a redemptive utopian millenarianism which we shall illustrate with the figure of baroque allegory. The second one can be found in the project of revolutionary anarcho-socialist utopianism that we shall try to decipher through Benjamin's concept of "pure" violence. On the background of these motives Benjamin's utopian thinking will be reconsidered in relation to his use of the concept of utopia in the third part of our text. There the term "utopia" will be referred to as it comes to direct use in the blueprint of *The Arcades Project* and the essays related to it. It will be explored in the perspective of its appearance as the central hermeneutical figure of the project – the dialectical image of standstill. On the background of this third synthetic sample of Benjamin's utopian thinking, we shall outline both the importance of the concept of utopia as a critical tool to Benjamin's theoretical system and the significance of his writings to a new elaborate reading of the concept of utopia.

"Utopia" is not a central concept in the work of Benjamin. Yet, it appears in the focal point of one of the crucial debates on the legacy of the author. Many commentators outline the existence of different readings of Benjamin's works

(Habermas 1979: 30-31). Critics try either to attribute to Benjamin's Marxism the role of a mere intellectual game on the background of his Judaic mysticism, or to outline the former as a central concern of the author despite the theological motives of his work. What strikes the attention of the careful reader is the synthetic and original position of Benjamin who has similar basic intuitions, "elective affinities" with both traditions, without fully adhering to any one of them. More striking, however, is another sudden "elective affinity" that the impossibility of resolution of this debate reveals. On the threshold of the study of Benjamin's utopian thought one finds almost oracular instructions in the comments of Miguel Abensour on the existing readings of Thomas More's *Utopia*. The literary and philosophical interpretations of More's book are usually either radically socialist or fundamentally Christian.<sup>1</sup> As we shall see, however, Benjamin's utopian thought suggests this parallel from a peculiar position: that of the constellation, of the manifestation of the same meaning, of the same truth from unexpectedly different perspectives. Not only do More's and Benjamin's works manifest two important moments of utopia. In this sudden proximity, both authors enter the same category, the same constellation – that of the thinkers who use the figure of utopia not only to defend socialist or religious positions (Abensour 2002: 36). They both seem to think of it as a riddle-image, pointing to something different, having something more to say than a mere critique of reality or a mere depiction of an ideal (*idem*, 49).

### **Utopia as Abolition. Two Hypotheses: Allegory and Revolution**

Speaking of the utopian vision of Walter Benjamin in the broader context of his work, each commentator faces a difficult dilemma. Benjamin's philosophical system represents a complex inner tension between two seemingly incompatible perspectives: a positive optimistic utopianism, attributed to Benjamin's political writings, and a negative utopian pessimism, which the theological motives of his works suggest (Gur'ze-ev 1998). Their controversy is displayed in a figurative metaphor in his *Theological-Political Fragment*:

The order of the profane should be erected on the idea of happiness. (...) If one arrow points to the goal toward which the profane dynamic acts, and another marks the direction of Messianic intensity, then certainly the quest of free humanity for happiness runs counter to the Messianic direction. (Benjamin 2002: 305)

Following the Messianic axis of this constellation, one could read in Benjamin a redemptive chiliasm as a mere passive critique of mundane existence. In the anticipation of the appearance of the Messiah, some interpretations of Benjamin perceive a Judaic hope, or better hopelessness, anticipating the collective redemption. The latter would rather end, abolish, than improve the profane, forsaken post-lapsarian human existence (Gur'ze-ev 1998). However, the interpretation of the political texts of Benjamin from a Marxist perspective emphasises the activist, revolutionary potential of his social critique. Such reading is partially justified by the revolutionary motives in *The Critique of Violence*. Regarding this controversy, a variety of commentators seem to choose one of the two options and interpret Benjamin's work according to the chosen reading of the text (Habermas 1979: 32). Yet trying to answer the question whether Benjamin's utopian thought should be considered primarily in the modus of revolutionary, *i.e.* transformative political thinking, or in its allegorical, *i.e.* passively critical potential, the reader can discover a significant particularity. These two seemingly opposite utopian directions end up serving the same purpose: the final abolition of the status quo, of the existing social and world order. We can illustrate this statement using the figures of baroque allegory and of pure revolutionary violence.

Benjamin's essays often fall back on his highly speculative theological interpretation of human existence. In the essay *On Language as Such, and on the Language of Man* Benjamin depicts in consensus with the Judaic messianic vision of the world the God-forsaken state of human existence: after the Fall, people lost the language of Paradise that enabled them to give things their proper name. This loss led them to the endless cacophonous "prattle" of overnaming the creation with the delusion that they knew the difference between good and bad.

What Benjamin claims is that there is a potential for salvaging the human experience of these realities in an immediate natural approach to them. In the essay *On the Mimetic Faculty* Benjamin describes a "redemptive" behaviour as

embedded in the onomatopoeic and genuinely mimetic language of children.<sup>2</sup> There Benjamin speaks of the ability of children to discover anew things that are introduced to them even in a very sophisticated and technologically advanced form (Benjamin 1999b: 390).

Nature produces similarities – one need only think of mimicry. The greatest capacity of similarities, however, belongs to human beings (...) Children's play is always permeated by mimetic behaviour, and its realm is by no means limited to what one person can imitate in another. (Benjamin 1999a: 694)

Benjamin's theory of experience rests on the human ability to produce and perceive similarities, correspondences. For him the most palpable knowledge is visual and mimetic: mimetic-intuitive corrections are to assist even the abstractions of mere conceptual thinking (Tiedemann 1988: 281). Mimesis is the reproduction of correspondences of an image, redeeming the qualities of the environment. For this reason the mimetic faculty, which has deteriorated with historical development, is important for Benjamin's own project to redeem the experience of the so-called *Ur-phenomena*<sup>3</sup>: the objects as manifesting the laws of their existence in their very material embodiment. The experience of *Ur-phenomena* is the way of enacting the mimetic faculty in human communication. This mimetic faculty is expressed in children's language, as well as in the genuine language of nature in the language of art. For Benjamin the type of art that uses this mimetic language is not the uncriticisable, self-affirmative art in its romantic concept. He affirms the art forms alternative to the "auratic" art which claims to represent the totality of human experience. He envisages the subversive forms of art as redemptive since they display a fragmentary language or images that cause a shock effect through the use of allegories, repetition and montage. For Benjamin these images and realities seem to unlock the critical awareness in the human consciousness. However, as we shall see, where these motives of Benjamin's work appear as wedded to theology. They often express a rather passive critique of the state of affairs in the face of the final redemption.

### Baroque Allegory

In his early work *On the Origin of German Tragic Drama* Benjamin introduces the figure of baroque allegory. He uses it to underline the peculiar genre discrepancy between the German baroque tragic drama (*Trauerspiel*) and classical tragedy, re-established by late Romanticism. According to Benjamin, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Baroque drama is not an heir of the Greek tragedy as interpreted in Aristotle's *Poetics*. It is a unique dramatic form: a parody of tragedy, rich in expressive buffo means. The dramatic action is often interrupted by untimely predictions of the culmination: the death of the main character, the baroque sovereign. Thus, the action is deprived from secrecy, and the audience from the expected catharsis. Devoid of heroism, it represents an event in the "unfulfilled", empty time of profane history, as opposed to the "fulfilled" absolute time tragedy seems to expand over. The mourning over the dead corpse of the monarch is expressed in a cacophony of exaggerated gestures and onomatopoeic sounds. The sovereign's dead body represents a ruin of mortality on the persisting background of eternity of universal history, an allegory in itself. Thus, both in its form and its content *Trauerspiel* opposes the romantic understanding of art as a supreme translation of the language of nature into the language of men.<sup>4</sup> It reveals the transience and fragmentation of human existence in the God-forsaken world that gape behind the idea of a sacred continuum of human history.

Allegory is a central figure and a critical instrument of *Trauerspiel*. According to Benjamin the tradition of German Romanticism perceived allegory as a dogmatic, fixed means of representation, while the symbol was affirmed as a supreme expression of perfection and totality. However (as in the differentiation between *Trauerspiel* and tragedy), Walter Benjamin considers this pretension of the totality of symbolic representation problematic and false. It discloses the object of art in its unproblematic, perfect, distant, unapproachable auratic expression, and leaves no space for interpretation and critique. Allegory, on the contrary, never stands for a direct representation, hence shows historical reality in its crystallised moments, in its ruins.

[I]n allegory is *the facis hippocratica* of history that lies like a frozen landscape before the eye of the beholder. There progress is a sequence of moments (...). What is expressed here portentously in the form of a riddle is not only the nature of human life in general, but also the biographical historicity of the individual in its organically corrupted form... (Benjamin 1985: 166)

As a ruin, as a disintegrating human corpse, allegory does not serve the purpose of salvation, of immortality. It is there “to disclose in the ruined body the truth and hopelessness of the creaturely condition” (Gilloch 2002: 83) and to point in a still grotesque gesture towards the approaching abolition of this realm of existence. Thus it “surrenders to the contemplation of hopelessness”, to a mere redemption in the order of the sacred. It abandons any hope history to be resolved in a better way in the order of political (*idem*, 85):

an appreciation of the transience of things, and the concern to rescue them for eternity is one of the strongest impulses of allegory (...). [Thus, a]llegory goes away empty-handed... left to its own devices, [it] rediscovers itself, not playful in the earthly world of things, but seriously under the eyes of heaven. (Benjamin 1985: 232-233)

Despite being a transgressive means of representation, allegory “goes away empty-handed”, merely depicting the confusion of the post-lapsarian prattle. As such it remains a key for the Judaic mystical interpretation of the pessimistic motives in Walter Benjamin’s thought that does not suggest any project for positive action “under the eyes of heaven”: for this reading of Benjamin, the only utopian motif he envisages is the final dissolution of humanity in Judgement Day. In the face of the negative pessimism of Benjamin’s theological thought, other commentators of Benjamin’s works argue that he is still concerned with the need to create a political activity and awareness in his own generation (Buck-Morss 1989: 47). Benjamin’s essay *The Critique of Violence* displays the transformative tendency, his utopian impulse in the figure of a radical revolution; but does it display a positive political project?

### **Pure Violence: Revolution**

In *The Critique of Violence* – an outstanding sample of Benjamin’s political thought – Benjamin expresses a negative view of the institutionalized justice in the modern democratic states. Benjamin differentiates his critique of violence from those

embedded in the doctrines of positive law and natural law (Benjamin 1996: 236-237). The former rejects violence only as illegal means to its own ends, dogmatically predefined as just. The latter rejects it only as an end. Natural law does not, however, express attitude to violence in the cases in which it has to be used for the sake of peace. In the very act of signing the “social contract” the individuals declare that they seek protection from each other. For this purpose they delegate the state to regulate violence. To regulate violence between each other, they agree to use violence on behalf of the state. Benjamin’s critique of violence is an attempt to justify the means, which constitute violence, regardless of the criterion of justice, *i.e.* of its ends:

lawmaking pursues at its ends, with violence as the means, what is to be established as law, but at the moment of instatement does not dismiss violence; rather at this very moment of lawmaking, it specifically establishes as law not an end unalloyed by violence, but one necessarily and intimately bound to it, under the title of power. (*idem*, 248)

Benjamin argues that every regime which has come to power with violent mean justifies its emergence through an action of secrecy, as the Weberian charismatic power. Western democracies use legally acknowledged means of violence in both “law-making” and “law-preserving” function. The new ruler or constitution is established at a ceremony, as by fate. This fate is then represented in history as lawful regularity, as divine providence. In such a way violence “acknowledges” its means in world history and it infuses violence into its legal system in order to protect its statute. It also tries to establish control over all forms of violence which could question its power. Here violence becomes immanent to the state; every revolution or attempt to break with the status quo is reduced to the form of institutionalized strike; every reformative opposition and every “state of exception”,<sup>5</sup> declared if the state order is threatened is designed in support of the system.

Instead, Benjamin comes closer to the genuine definition of the state of emergency as “a return to an original pleromatic state, in which the distinction of different powers (legal, executive, etc.) has not yet been produced”, *i.e.* the return to the mere state of nature (Agamben 2005: 6). Here, namely, flashes the radical

impulse of Benjamin's political thought, the political stance which has saved his philosophy from being characterized as merely mystical. His attempt to redeem "pure" violence is developed in a vision of a revolution. Unlike the system supporting reformatory strikes, this revolution should appear in the form of a "general syndicate strike": as an urge of abolition, of a final break with the status quo of institutionalised violence (Benjamin 1996: 239, 246). Benjamin maintains this position when he writes in the twelfth thesis *On the Concept of History*:

Social Democracy thought fit to assign to the working class the role of the redeemer of future generations, in this way cutting the sinews of its greatest strength. This training made the working class forget both its hatred and its spirit of sacrifice, (...) nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren. (Benjamin 2003: 392)

In this critique Benjamin outlines the necessity of a revolutionary praxis. It should shatter the dialectic between law-making and law-preserving violence through the means of "pure" violence. "Pure" violence persistently remains out of any legal system. Only thus it is able to create a "pure" state of exception (as the one envisaged by the Marxian proletarian revolution) in order to abolish the status quo which has brought and maintains the oppressing class in power:

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the "state of emergency" in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realise that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency... (*ibidem*)

However, these political motives of Benjamin's thought fall short of building towards a positive (even if utopian) project. He does not instruct directly any concrete form of political organization and resistance. Even in his most radical political critique, he "adjusts" with an eschatological reading his own extreme political writings. In *The Critique of Violence* he performs a swift move from revolutionary politics to redemptive chiliasm. He calls pure, "law-destroying violence" "divine", as opposed to the "mythical" "law-making" violence (Benjamin 1996: 249). He speaks of the final decision which is to be made by God in an act of lethal, even if not bloody violence (*idem*, 250). This motive remains in the concluding final section of *On the Concept of History* in the sentence: "For every

second of time was the strait gate through which Messiah might enter” (Benjamin 2003: 400).

Not unlike allegory, the vision of pure violence does not provide humanity with any instructions, with any suggestion of the pillars of a coming society. It ends up at a standstill: there it merely becomes subject to the final act of redemption, to the “divine” violence that would come with the appearance of the Messiah. Despite their radically critical messages, these two figures leave humanity with the only alternative of an ascetic mode of mundane existence in an idle anticipation of the Final Day. Both the state of emergence and the surrender to the allegorical imagination seem to follow the same direction: the direction of a negative utopian pessimism.

Thus, neither a passive anticipation of Judgement Day, nor a purely political, transformative utopian project could be justified by the philosophical system of Benjamin. Both purely theological and purely political aspects of Benjamin’s thought serve the purpose of abolition of the status quo, subjecting human future to the coming of a Messiah. Yet, we argue that Benjamin’s thought does not generally lack a positive utopian dimension.

### **Utopia as Redemption: Dialectical Image of Standstill**

The figure of the ending of oppressive history in the radical rupture of Judgement Day is indeed a persistent motive in Benjamin’s writings. However, one could still argue that the hopeless anticipation of the abolition of the profane order does not represent fully Benjamin’s utopian vision. If all his works were only aimed to predict the final dissolution of profane history, Benjamin’s doctrine would have merely served the function of baroque allegory. Yet, in the final words in the *Trauerspiel* book about the surrender of allegory before the eyes of heaven, we could also read Benjamin’s critique of this passive anticipation (Gilloch 2002: 85). As we shall see, despite the cultural pessimism of his age, Benjamin’s project on “redemptive” critique of art and history undoubtedly ascribes transgressive means of representation an active, catalysing role. There the promise of a final redemption

seems to display a rather didactic function: it aims to guarantee the possibility of critique on the negative background of transcendence. There, exactly, in the act of redemptive counteraction against the oblivion of profane history, in the constant dialectic of new, aging and old, Benjamin discovers the *topos* of utopia. And there, in the “garbage heap of modern history”, in the redemptive recollection of dream images of every past generation, and in the collection of material embodiments of these desires with every next generation – there is where we could find the “container”, the receptacle of positive historical experience (Buck-Morss 1989: 217-218). Thus, we could base a third hypothesis of the positive and instructive utopian vision of Benjamin on the practice of historical and cultural redemptive criticism.

In his writings on the Paris arcades, two important developments of Benjamin’s utopian thought come forth: first of all, he discovers the concept of utopia as useful for his project; then, he emancipates its positive moments in the figure of the “dialectical image of standstill” – Benjamin’s hermeneutic tool for reading history (Olalquiaga 2002: 26). In *Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century*<sup>6</sup> Benjamin refers to the arcades of Paris. He sees them as an embodiment of the utopian visions of the citizens of the modern Mecca of bourgeois culture in the age of industrial heyday. What becomes clear from the *Exposé*, the completed blueprint of the unfinished project, is that *the arcades*<sup>7</sup> were important for their author both in their form and their content. On the one hand, Benjamin considered the peculiar constructions as a historical object that is rewarding for such a materialist historical analysis. On the other hand, the unfinished project should have served to display a method of writing cultural history. The immense number of quotations and references published were presented to reaffirm Benjamin’s belief that there was no need to mediate, to theoretically explicate the self-manifest truth cultural artefacts contain. The writings on the arcades had to be arcades themselves, representing semantic door-gates to a certain historical experience: the rough material of Benjamin’s theoretical “excavations”. As he eventually describes his method:

Our investigation proposes to show how, as a consequence of reifying representation of civilization, the new forms of behaviour and the new economically and technologically

based creations that we owe to the nineteenth century enter the universe of phantasmagoria. These creations undergo illumination not only in a theoretical manner (...) but also in the immediacy of their perceptible presence. They are manifest as phantasmagorias. (Benjamin 1999b: 14-15)

Depicting nineteenth-century Paris is not a random decision.<sup>8</sup> It contains the cultural artefacts and embodies the trends that attract Benjamin's attention as traces, as residues of a dream world of the ruling class of the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century this dream world has been forsaken, but exactly for this reason Benjamin does not want to allow the conditions of its emergence and existence to remain concealed. For the author they are preserved in dialectical images:

These images are wishful fantasies, and in them the collective seeks both to preserve and to transfigure the inchoateness of the social product and the deficiencies in the social system of production. (...) In the dream in which, before the eyes of each epoch, that which is to follow appears in images, the latter appears wedded to elements of prehistory [*Urgeschichte*] (...). (Benjamin 2002: 52)

that is, to elements of a classless society. And the experience of such society, which have their storage place in the unconscious of the collective engender – through interpretation of what is new, the utopia that has left its trace behind in a thousand configurations of life, from enduring edifices to passing fashions. (*idem*, 34)

The reappearance of the transfigured motives of pre-history in modern times has an important function for Benjamin's thinking of utopia. He perceives utopia as a vision en-coded, in-scribed in the remnants of each epoch, which gradually indulges itself into a cycle of endless repetition; in always recurrent projection of the Golden Age in the artefacts of past cultures. Benjamin is struck by the way samples of modern technology; architecture and design appear under the form and decoration of archaic images.<sup>9</sup> This re-emergence of classical images and their uncritical adoption and proliferation is just the visual expression: it represents the persistence of myth in modernity that repudiates the Enlightenment's self-confidence to have done away with it.<sup>10</sup> Fashion, the dwelling of these novelties, the very embodiment of the mythical reappearance, is where Benjamin recognises a permanent tension: people dream of more advanced forms of production and facilities, but their consciousness can not reconcile with these rapidly proliferating novelties. For this reason, the latter find their expression and explication in old and

familiar images and concepts (Buck-Morss 1989: 115).

But precisely modernity is always citing primal history. (...) this occurs through the ambiguity peculiar to the social relations and products of this epoch. Ambiguity is the appearance of dialectic in images, the law of dialectics at a standstill. (...) This standstill is utopia and the dialectical image, therefore, dream image. Such an image is afforded by the commodity per se: as fetish. (Benjamin 2002: 40)

Benjamin believes that the very phenomenon of commodity fetishism in its mechanism of rapid shift from one fashion into another is self-explicable in its manifestation. In his words, being a dream image, every utopia is indeed an image at a standstill. The dialectical image does not even need to perform a synthesis; unlike allegory it does not need to point helplessly to a different meaning, to a different world. In its fixedness it serves transcendence in the order of the profane: it is used in the transgressive means of representation in decadent modern art. Displaying with immediacy and urgency the ambiguous co-existence of new and old in fashionable commodities, it represents the grotesque, a paradox. The shock effect of the material appearance of such an image should have a redemptive function in ordinary, mundane life: it aims to tear down the mask of modern commodity fetishism, of the vicious ideology of capitalist production.

In its implicit reading of art and history the Exposé of *The Arcades* provokes much debate.<sup>11</sup> Benjamin's method of materialist analysis is opposed by the supporters of orthodox Marxism. His understanding of the derivation of wishful images from the collective unconscious is believed to be idealistic and delusive: he is criticised for negating the differentiations between the classes and of the structural conditions of life acting in the formation of dreams (Adorno 1990: 112). Yet – as it becomes clear in his later works on the critique of art – for Benjamin the fetish character of commodity has a different meaning than the one that the ideology critics of his generation invest in it, *i.e.* that “[i]t is dialectical in the imminent sense that it produces [false] consciousness” (Habermas 1979: 53). In his critical reinterpretation of the orthodox Marxist understanding of art Benjamin does not consider the phenomena of the superstructure – in Marxian terms – as a mere secondary reflection of the economic conditions of social existence. What he believes is that the former correspond to the latter as their expression.<sup>12</sup> The forms

of art, and the dialectical images represented by their subversive variations, express, embody the “correspondences” between base and superstructure. In the broader sense of the doctrine of Benjamin, this correspondence is a semantic category and not a psychological one (Habermas 1979: 53). This statement finds confirmation in the already explained method of *The Arcades* project: there Benjamin seeks for meaning not merely in the interpretation of the wishful dreams of each generation, but in the material expressions and manifestations of these dreams in the ruined artefacts of each epoch (Buck-Morss 1989: 114).

Benjamin does not need to step back from the use of the dialectical image of standstill (and hence, of utopia) as a central figure in his doctrine. Even further, he perceives dialectical images as a critical tool of the redemptive forms of art that he promotes. One of the distinctive features of these redemptive forms of art is their ability to present cultural artefacts to an immediate, shared, exoteric reading. Thus, they could contribute to the democratisation of the reception of the work of art in its modern appearance.<sup>13</sup> Benjamin wants to ascribe the dialectical images to the changes in the function of modern art that uses technology to perform a shock effect, representing things as stripped of their romanticist aura. Only in such techniques, could modern art approach the attention of the indifferent masses. The represented objects gain a more precise and realistic appearance through the technical medium which intervenes between them and the selective sensory organs (Habermas 1979: 37).<sup>14</sup> In this sense, in direct reference to his interpretation of the redemptive function of art, Benjamin is reluctant to merely mistrust the advancement of technique. Even further, he envisages a redemptive function for technique in its potential positive impact on the everyday life of people. In correspondence with the Hegelian notions of first and second nature, Benjamin believes that there is a differentiation between first [genuine, redemptive] and second [reified, alienated] forms of technique. An illustration of this statement we could find in Benjamin’s evocation of the utopian visions of Charles Fourier.<sup>15</sup> According to Benjamin, Fourier discloses “a kind of labour which, far from exploiting nature, is capable of delivering her of the creations which lie dormant in her womb as potentials” – unlike the evolutionist ideology, that “recognizes only the

progress in the mastery of nature, not the retrogression of society” (Benjamin 1968: Thesis XI).

The primary function of the employment of the utopian vision of Fourier is to express a possible nature-friendly revolutionization of the means of production “in the age of mechanical reproduction”.<sup>16</sup> Thus, in its “different utopian will”<sup>17</sup> modern art and technique could unlock critical thinking, and emancipate people from the manipulation of mass culture and enforced labour. It is namely in this sense that collective reception and enjoyment of art expressed through the new technological media is both instructive and critical. It enables the emergence of the forms of art that Benjamin cherishes: democratic and subversive (Löwy 1996: 211). In the discontinuous series of montages, the work of art divested of its aura releases experiences which formerly had been locked up in its esoteric style. And, for Benjamin, cultural critique commits destruction only in order to transpose what is worth knowing from the medium of the beautiful into that of truth, and thereby to *rescue* and *redeem* it (Habermas 1979: 37).

Parallel to the rediscovery of the redemptive powers of modern art and technique in the shocking, montage-like, immediate representations of cultural artefacts, Benjamin also critically examined the new function of history. He instructs the historian to turn towards the past in order to redeem its lost moments. In Benjamin’s words, “progress” is actually the eternal return of what is always the same: the disguised eternal catastrophe of human mundane existence.<sup>18</sup> To counteract it, to make people aware of its fraud, history should rest collected in a focal point, as in the utopian images. In this stance Benjamin uses the utopian standstill as a critical tool of his reading of history. He tries to escape from the position of orthodox Marxism: understanding history as progress, it conforms to the modern ideology, according to which history is a perfect law-governed causal sequence of events spanning over a homogeneous continuum of time (Benjamin 1968: Thesis XVIII). For Benjamin, it is precisely such understanding of history as a social evolution what enables the oppressive ruling classes to present their violent acts as predetermined by fate. It restricts historical science to the description of their own victories (Buck-Morss 1989: 58). Progress asserts itself as fate, but in

this claim it proves to be a mere myth. As such, its perfection can be brought to a standstill by a materialist analysis:

[a] historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a transition, but in which time stands still and has come to a stop. (...) Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad. (Benjamin 2003: 396)

The first stage is this voyage will be to carry the montage principle over into history. That is to build up the large structures out of the smallest, precisely fashioned structural elements. Indeed, to detect the crystal of the total event in the analysis of the simple, individual moment. (Benjamin 1999b: 461)

In the shock effect of historical materialism, performing an operation, a montage of historical moments, history could be read “against the grain”<sup>19</sup> (Benjamin 2003: 392), in its petrified condensed moments of truth lay the seeds of a new utopian intention: the realised need to collect and redeem the images of the past. There is where nature salvaged from its mythical interpretations and from its extreme rationalization could be redeemed as well. In the subversive forms of representation, history, as well as art and technique, could find its positive resolution distinguishing it from historicism: the second nature in which history was arrested by enlightened thought.

Benjamin’s work both theorises and enacts a positive project of redemption that could be read on the background of the project of abolition. In *The Arcades*, the quintessential, montage-like standstill of his unfinished life-work project, Benjamin follows exactly the mode of writing of cultural history described so far. Displaying arcade by arcade, and topic by topic, the peculiarities of nineteenth century thought and images, Benjamin’s crystallized, scattered illuminations achieve “shock effect” for his readers. His critique is redemptive: it orients itself towards historical moments in their ageing and ruination; it recognizes and collects the memories of what have remained repressed and unredeemed in the European nineteenth century. This task is of crucial importance because “every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns, threatens to disappear irretrievably” (*idem*, 390). Only in being presented with this knowledge, Benjamin believes, can the new generations live in a better world. This world’s

utopian ideal is the ultimate awareness. Only by being aware of the origins of the dreams of their ancestors and alertly critical to their own dreams for the future, can each generation be ready to contribute to the process of a redemptive collective awakening in the profane realm of human existence.

### **Conclusion**

Having examined closely the most vibrant utopian motives in Benjamin's philosophical system, we could definitely ascertain the existence of positive thinking of utopia and utopian thought in the work of Walter Benjamin. They are synthesised in the use of utopia as a dialectical image of standstill in both its transformative and in its critical function. As such it perpetuates a parallel movement: redeeming from oblivion the utopian visions of the defeated of the past, and redeeming the defeated in the present from the manipulation by the current state of affairs. Benjamin encourages a cautious and pedantic all-human project of collection and recollection of ruined artefacts and instances of history. He believes in the possibility of reconstruction of the moments when history might have taken a different, alternative direction.

In the face of this discussion, Walter Benjamin seems to find a place in the context of the utopian thought of the twentieth century. In his representation of utopia on the threshold between its transformative and its critical function, between the ideological dream of advanced capitalist societies and the collective awakening from this dream, Benjamin shows a rich and original interpretation of the concept of utopia. He puts it at stake as a central figure – and thus a critical tool – in the discussion about the relations of base and superstructure in Marxist social philosophy. He bridges it with a positive project for a human existence based on relations of concern between human beings, art, technology, and nature.

Finally, what remains peculiar in this rather simple expression of Benjamin's interpretation of utopia is the proximity that might be found between it and Thomas More's own understanding of "Utopia", as it is interpreted in recent readings. An example is the interpretation of Miguel Abensour, which was mentioned in the beginning of our study. The author gives predominance neither to the realist,

political, nor to the allegorical, redemptive reading of the prototypical text. Instead, Abensour speaks of the peculiar form of the writing, the emblematic repetitions, the paradoxes and contradictions implicit in the text. Even next to the critique of the British society of the sixteenth century, represented in the first book of *Utopia*, More's peculiar narrative does not indicate particular reforms in the second book. Neither does it represent the second book – describing the island of Utopia – only as an image of Judaic-Christian redemption. What Abensour suggests is that the text should not be read with the instruments of pure logic (Abensour 2002: 78). It should rather be observed as a revolutionary form of writing in its attempt to evoke critical awareness in the readers in the mere discussion of two different developments of history, neither of which perfect. And thus it seeks potentials of the future in the complex redemption for the lost solutions of the past – a project which, as we demonstrated with the present study, is in a peculiar elective affinity with Walter Benjamin's work on utopia.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> Even if he names his book *L'Utopie de Thomas More à Walter Benjamin*, Abensour does not make a parallel with the two possible readings of the utopian thought of the two authors. He is explicit in his will not to represent the authors as representative of the same tradition but of two different moments of utopia.

<sup>2</sup> As explored in his reading of Marcel Proust, in *Berlin Childhood around 1900* and in *The Doctrine of the Similar*.

<sup>3</sup> A term adopted from Goethe who used it to state that the objective regularities of living organisms are graphically visible in their structural forms, as the Platonic ideas in the world of shadows (Buck-Morss 1989: 71).

<sup>4</sup> As in the *Gesamtkunstwerk* project of Richard Wagner.

<sup>5</sup> Benjamin does not mention the term "state of exception" in *The Critique of Violence*: it appears in his latest work *On the Concept of History*. The First World War and the years after European states have represented "a laboratory for testing and honing (...) the state of exception as a paradigm of government" (Agamben 2005: 7). The concept of "state of exception" (suspension of the constitution when the judicial order is threatened) is of a paradoxical nature. It is a juridical measure which seeks to reject the existent system of law. As part of this debate Benjamin opposes Carl

Schmitt's conception of "sovereign" dictatorship, affirming sovereignty as "the place of the extreme decision" included in law, and as such excluding any violence outside the law (*idem*, 58).

<sup>6</sup> Preliminary *Exposé* of "The Arcades Project" from 1935.

<sup>7</sup> In the nineteenth century the arcades – cross-like corridors between the buildings, covered with a transparent roof of iron and glass – were used to expose the fashionable commodities of the age. In the twentieth century they languished in oblivion due to the restructuring of the surrounding urban space. The several arcades that remained in Paris became containers of the old-fashioned antiques of the former fashionable stores (*apud* Olalquiaga 2002: 24-26).

<sup>8</sup> Benjamin sees Paris as an embodiment of the bourgeois commodity fetishism in the variety of its manifestations. The dioramas, peculiar voyeurs' machines, show panoramic images of the glorious stages of the imperial victories as lawful culmination in the course of universal history. The World exhibitions, greedily occupying more fashionable spaces, display the unabashed splendour of bourgeois commodities cherished for their price rather than for their utility. The interior of the bourgeois flats becomes a dwelling of boredom where luxury accessories come to fill in the sudden abyss of surfeited urban experience. The Barricades, rendered impossible by the post-revolutionary building of the new boulevards, end up being built anew as a reminder that a revolution perpetuated by the ruling class is a mere affirmation of the status quo. These all and the streets and arcades of Paris, haunted by the figure of the poet-flaneur Baudelaire who depicts the crowd of the metropolis but pays the price of becoming an alienated part of it: they all show that Paris is the mere embodiment, the capital of nineteenth century splendour, lost in oblivion in the twentieth century (see Benjamin 2002: 32-42).

<sup>9</sup> Susan Buck-Morss presents exquisite illustrations of modern devices designed under the forms of nature or such of previously existent "fashionable" devices, e.g. trains designed like coaches, electric bulbs like fire, etc. (see Buck-Morss 1989: 110-111).

<sup>10</sup> This position of Benjamin seems to have influenced the interpretation of myth in modernity in M. Horkheimer's and T. W. Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

<sup>11</sup> The most important text that represents the possible critique against the *Exposé* is T. W. Adorno's epistolary response to its first version that Benjamin sent to his friend and disciple. Adorno criticised the "uncritical" examination of the "reappearance of the eternal myth" first of all in the entirely positive connotation of the return of utopia, and then in the linear representation of history implicit in this reading. He also criticised as "idealistic" the derivation of pre-historical images from the collective unconscious (Adorno 1990: 111-112). In response to the first set of critical remarks, in the later version of the *Exposé* (1939) the prisoner's writings of the nineteenth century "professional revolutionary" August Blanqui on astronomy assert the persistence of hellish motives in the reappearance of pre-historical utopian images in modernity: "Blanqui, revealed (...) the terrifying features of this phantasmagoria. Humanity figures there as damned. Everything new it could hope for turns out to be a reality that has always been present" (Benjamin 1999b: 16).

<sup>12</sup> "if the infrastructure in a certain way (in the materials of thought and experience) determines the superstructure, but if such determination is not reducible to simple reflection, how is it then – apart from any question of the originating cause – to be characterized? As its expression [*Ausdruck*]" (Benjamin 1999b: 393).

<sup>13</sup> Benjamin finds himself again in opposition to T. W. Adorno who defends the esoteric redemption of art in the individual contemplation (for a detailed comparison, see e.g. Habermas 1979: 43).

<sup>14</sup> For Benjamin, at the dawning of the nineteenth century, in the degeneration of the bourgeoisie, art gradually loses its esoteric, asocial mode of production and perception. Some genres

---

degenerate under the pressure of the new technology: photography and film proliferate images once restricted to private collections of paintings; printing and journalistic writing obliterate the practice of story-telling; literature finds always less space in the modern newspaper seized by advertisements; cinema fragmentises not only the experience of the audience but also that of the actor. (These ideas are developed in detail in Benjamin's essays *The Storyteller* and *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility*.)

<sup>15</sup> "According to Fourier, as a result of efficient cooperative labor, four moons would illuminate the earthly night, the ice would recede from the poles, sea water would no longer taste salty, and beasts of prey would do man's bidding" (Benjamin 2003: 394).

<sup>16</sup> A useful discussion of the first (*Technik*) and second (*Technologie*) technique in Walter Benjamin's project is to be found in Esther Leslie's reading of Benjamin (Leslie 2000: viii). Here we could also guess utopian socialism's adhesion to Benjamin's own understanding of technique as a free liberating child-like game (Abensour 2002: 174).

<sup>17</sup> This conception of Benjamin is condensed in his fragment *A Different Utopian Will*, supposedly a draft version of the essay *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility*.

<sup>18</sup> In Benjamin's famous allegory of Angelus Novus, the image of Paul Klee's homonymous painting, the angel is "swept away by a storm that is calling from Heaven". The author states portentously: The storm is called progress (Benjamin 2003: 392).

<sup>19</sup> For further discussion of this concept, see Löwy 1996.

---

## Works Cited

Abensour, Miguel (2002), *L' Utopie de Thomas More à Walter Benjamin*, Paris, Sens&Tonka.

Adorno, Theodor W. (1990), *Letters with Walter Benjamin, Aesthetics and Politics*, London, Verso.

Agamben, Giorgio (2005), *State of Exception*, Chicago, Chicago UP.

Benjamin, Walter (1968), *On the Concept of History*, trans. H. Zohn, Fontana ([www.tasc.ac.uk/depart/media/staff/ls/WBenjamin/CONCEPT2.html](http://www.tasc.ac.uk/depart/media/staff/ls/WBenjamin/CONCEPT2.html)) (access 21.10.2005).

\_\_ (1985), *On the Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. J. Osborne, London, Verso.

\_\_ (1992), *Illuminations*, ed. H. Arendt, trans. H. Zorn, London, Fontana

\_\_ (1996), *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, ed. M. Bullock and M. W. Jennings, trans. E. Jephcott *et al.*, Cambridge MA, Belknap Press.

\_\_ (1999a), *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, ed. H. Eiland, M. W. Jennings, trans. E. Jephcott *et al.*, Cambridge MA, Belknap Press.

\_\_ (1999b), *The Arcades Project*, trans. H. Eiland, K. McLaughlin, Cambridge MA, Belknap Press.

\_\_ (2002), *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, ed. H. Eiland and M. W. Jennings, trans. E. Jephcott *et al.*, Cambridge MA, Belknap Press.

\_\_ (2003), *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, ed. H. Eiland and M. W. Jennings, trans. E. Jephcott *et al.*, Cambridge MA, Belknap Press.

Buck-Morss, Susan (1989), *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press.

---

Gilloch, Graeme (1996), *Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City*, London, Polity Press.

\_\_ (2002), *Walter Benjamin: Critical Constellations*, London, Polity Press.

Gur'ze-ev, Ilan (1998), "Walter Benjamin and Max Horkheimer: From Utopia to Redemption", University of Haifa (<http://construct.haifa.ac.il/~ilangz/Utopia4.html>) (access 22.08.2005).

Habermas, Juergen (1979), "Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism: The Contemporaneity of Walter Benjamin", *New German Critique*, nr.17, Spring, Ithaca, Cornell UP, pp. 30-59.

Leslie, Esther (2000), *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism*, London, Pluto.

Löwy, Michael (1996), "Against the Grain: The Dialectical Conception of Culture in Walter Benjamin's Theses of 1940", in Michael P. Steinberg (ed.) (1996), *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History*, Ithaca, Cornell UP, pp. 206-213.

Olalquiaga, Celeste (2002), *Artificial Kingdom: On the Kitsch Experience*, Minneapolis, Minnesota UP.

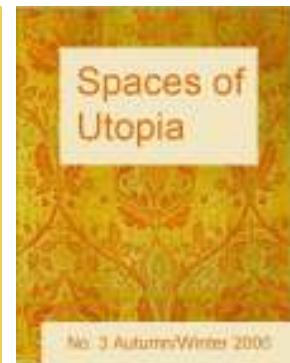
Tiedemann, Rolf (1988), "Dialectics at a Standstill: Approaches to the Passagen-Werk", in Gary Smith (ed.), *On Walter Benjamin*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press. pp. 260-291.

Wolin, Richerd (1994), *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption*, Los Angeles, UCLA UP.

## **The End of Utopia: Imminent and Immanent Liberation**

**Malcolm Miles**

University of Plymouth, UK



---

Citation: Malcolm Miles, "The End of Utopia: Imminent and Immanent Liberation", *Spaces of Utopia: An Electronic Journal*, nr. 3, Autumn/Winter 2006, pp. 105-113, <<http://ler.letras.up.pt>> ISSN 1646-4729.

---

### **Introduction**

My point of departure is Herbert Marcuse's lecture "The End of Utopia" in Berlin in 1967 (Marcuse 1970: 62-82). I recapitulate Marcuse's argument, and note a difficulty raised by a question from the floor as to how tomorrow's needs are established today. Marcuse finds himself unable to say how this happens, but in subsequent work seeks an exit from the impasse in a biological need for freedom, and emphasis on the role of an intelligentsia in the production of an imminent utopia. My question is whether it is viable to understand utopia as immanent – pervasive and inherent.

### **Marcuse in Berlin**

Marcuse's lectures at the Free University, Berlin, took place during a four-day event from July 12, 1967, arranged by the SDS (Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund). His lectures were followed by a paper to the Dialectics of Liberation Congress at the Roundhouse, London (July 15 to 30). In both events, he delineates a New Left which combines Marxism with new political, social and cultural currents.

Douglas Kellner, introducing volume 3 of Marcuse's *Collected Papers*, writes that "[t]he New Left includes neo-anarchist tendencies, is anti-authoritarian, and is not bound to the working class as the sole revolutionary force" (Marcuse 2005: 18). Other forces include the student movement, to a lesser extent the Hippies, and adherents of a counter-culture. Noting the influence of Maoism and

national liberation movements, Kellner adds that the New Left is distinct in its “total opposition” to “imperialism, racism, sexism, and manifold forms of oppression”, and in “the multiple forms of resistance it advocates ranging from peaceful non-violent sit-ins and demonstrations to militant opposition to institutions and practices of violence within the system itself” (*ibidem*). At the Roundhouse, Marcuse’s paper was delivered alongside a Living Theatre performance, a reading of mantras by Allan Ginsberg, and a call for Black power from Stokely Carmichael. But for Angela Davis the 1960s are “a point of origin (...) rather than an historical moment (...) a place that we evoke with wonder and joy, but one that is forever beyond our reach” (*apud* Marcuse 2005: 1).

In Berlin, Marcuse argues that utopia, as a non-realizable dream, has ended, and is now a real-possibility. A capacity for destruction reveals its opposite, “the end of utopia, that is, the refutation of those ideas and theories that use the concept of utopia to denounce certain socio-historical possibilities” (Marcuse 1970: 62). He foresees a rupture of the historical continuum, the inception of a qualitative difference in social organisation:

All the material and intellectual forces which could be put to work for the realization of a free society are at hand. That they are not used for that purpose is to be attributed to the total mobilization of existing society against its own potential for liberation. (*idem*, 64)

This leads Marcuse to propose qualitatively new human needs “as a biological necessity” (*idem*, 65).

I find this difficult, being wary of biological approaches in urbanism (as in E. W. Burgess’s use of anabolic and katabolic processes of metabolism in his account of transitional zones of migration). The shift into biology puts matters outside history and human agency. Marcuse argues that needs are historical, however, hence mutable, as if to say that biology, too, is *produced*.

This may (my reading is insufficient) link to reconsiderations of Darwinism by Elizabeth Grosz. It would suggest a gradual, incremental change, of the kind Grosz reads in Darwin’s use of linguistic development as analogy for evolution: “This inherent drift or movement of change within language (...) eventually results in the production of new dialects, which may eventually, over time, further differentiate themselves to become distinct languages” (Grosz 2004: 27). It is

unclear in Darwin what is meant by origin, but clearer that a process of minor and gradual differentiation takes place continuously. If, for the sake of argument, that occurs in a human awareness of needs, it is a lengthy process (longer than Raymond Williams' long revolution), and as if self-propelling.

To return to Marcuse, "the break with continuity (...) is not a mere invention but inheres in the development of the productive forces themselves" (Marcuse 1970: 65). This might appear a biological model, but reiterates the Marxist idea that conditions contain the seeds of their undoing. Among factors which produce new needs are technological advances which end toil and scarcity. But Marcuse then speaks of "the vital biological need for peace, which today is not a vital need of the majority, the need for calm, the need to be alone, with oneself or with others whom one has chosen for oneself, the need for the beautiful, the need for 'undeserved' happiness" (*idem*, 67). It sounds like the mythicised ivory tower. Elements of this are developed in Marcuse's later work on aesthetics (1978), but there is a reflection, too, of his 1945 essay on Aragon which sketches a literature of the intimate – love stories – as a refuge from oppression in darkest times (Marcuse 1998: 199-214). Marcuse retains the term socialism for a society in which he foresees a "convergence of technology and art and the convergence of work and play" (Marcuse 1970: 68). Is that which inheres also presented as having direction? Or does this re-state a leap of faith in an underlying capacity for freedom which, like hope for Bloch (1959), is latent and can be shaped (not least in culture)? The theme is extended at the Roundhouse: liberation from the affluent society is identical with socialism if socialism is defined as "the abolition of labour, the termination of the struggle for existence – that is to say life as an end in itself and no longer as a means to an end – and the liberation of human sensibility and sensitivity, not as a private factor, but as a force for transformation of human existence and its environment" (Marcuse 1968: 184).

He then introduces an old dream:

It means that the creative imagination (...) would become a productive force applied to the transformation of the social and natural universe. It would mean the emergence of a form of reality which is the work and the medium of the developing sensibility and sensitivity (...) And now I throw in the terrible concept: it would mean an "aesthetic" reality – society as a

work of art. This is the most Utopian, the most radical possibility of liberation today. (*ibidem*)

In Berlin, however, Marcuse ends with a call for a pragmatic opposition, and a refusal of defeatism. Among questions after the Berlin lecture was:

It seemed (...) the centre of your paper today was the thesis that a transformation of society must be preceded by a transformation of needs. For me this implies that changed needs can only arise if we first abolish the mechanisms that have let the needs come into being as they are. (...) you have shifted the accent toward enlightenment and away from revolution. (Marcuse 1970: 80)

Marcuse replies:

You have defined what is unfortunately the greatest difficulty in the matter. Your objection is that, for new, revolutionary needs to develop, the mechanisms that reproduce the old needs must be abolished. In order for the mechanisms to be abolished, there must first be a need to abolish them. That is the circle in which we are placed, and I do not know how to get out of it. (*ibidem*)

There are clues in Marcuse's paper at the Roundhouse for a partial exit. I would hold particularly to the idea of life as its own end, as the means which *is* the desired (but never completed) end – the means as the new society. More generally, Davis writes of “the obstinacy of maintaining that emancipatory promises are still entangled in the terrifying and ever-expanding system of global capitalism” and in continuing to expose present conditions as they are (Marcuse 2005: x). Then there is art's potential to fracture codes of perception, developed by Marcuse in *The Aesthetic Dimension* (1978).

But the difficulty posed by the questioner in Berlin is, as stated, insurmountable: like needing a ticket to board a bus when tickets are sold only on board the bus; needing to enter tomorrow to fix its preconditions today.

In the aftermath of 1968, Marcuse works through the difficulties. He claims, in *An Essay on Liberation*, a biological foundation for socialism (Marcuse 1969: 17-30). From a fostering of interests vested in the system “in the instinctual structure of the exploited”, he asserts that radical change exceeds traditional Marxian theory in a biological dimension “in which the vital, imperative needs and satisfactions of man [*sic*] assert themselves” (*idem*, 25). This reads like an objectively given end of history, or Bloch's efforts to establish hope as

equivalent to a Freudian drive. The difficulty here is a requirement for faith in that redemptive (and Benjaminesque) possibility.

But if New Jerusalem does not magically descend from a Heaven in which human agency does not occur, the new society is produced in struggle; and in dialectics, in the conditions in which the subject is conditioned but in which the subject can intervene. Marcuse recognises that a revolution of the proletariat is “not on the agenda”, but sees a new political consciousness “among the nonconformist young intelligentsia; and the (...) very life of the ghetto population” (*idem*, 61). He realises that while democratic structures require defence against encroachment, they reproduce the status quo; and that radical change depends on a mass public from which the struggle as played out is isolated (*idem*, 71-72). Then there is the discussion of aesthetic form as autonomous, redeeming and transcendent; and the intelligentsia: “The development of a true consciousness is still the professional function of the universities” (*idem*, 49, 65). As it happens I agree. But I do not see that as an entirely adequate response to Marcuse’s aporia as it loomed in Berlin in 1967.

### **The Realisation of a Dream or Dreams of Realisation?**

Yet things happen. At the Roundhouse, Marcuse cited Benjamin’s remark that in the Paris Commune, Communards shot at clocks “consciously or half-consciously expressing the need that somehow time has to be arrested” (Marcuse 1968: 177). And in *An Essay on Liberation*, Marcuse notes the importance of subverting the dominant language: “If the radical opposition develops its own language, it protests spontaneously, subconsciously, against one of the most effective ‘secret weapons’ of domination” (Marcuse 1969: 77). Kellner notes Marcuse’s formative experience in the German Revolution, and admiration for Rosa Luxemburg’s idea of a totality of upheaval; but also his pessimism that there is more than a fragmentary opposition, devoid of remedy, lapsing into hopelessness (Marcuse 2005: 7-8). On his paper at the Roundhouse, Kellner remarks:

This unabashedly utopian notion articulated counterculture desire for an entirely new society and way of life with alternative values, sensibilities, relationships, and culture. Yet Marcuse used Marxist terminology to critique existing capitalist societies and insisted that

socialist revolution was the most viable way to create an emancipated society (...) Creating a freer, happier, and more just society (...) required education, political organisation, and solidarity with Third World revolutionary struggles and movements for radical change within the affluent society. (*apud* Marcuse 2005: 19-20)

But it did not happen as dreamed. In 1968, the project was left in mid-air.

A number of aspects can be drawn out. There seems no difficulty in using Marxian theory to critique capitalism, the purpose for which it was designed, though there is a need to update it now in face of globalisation and immaterial production. But the imagined sensibility raises the previous question as to how it occurs. If it is really new, not a reform, how is it produced? Is it – to borrow from Ernesto Laclau's 1996 essay on Emancipation(s) – a refusal of an existing sensibility, hence on its terms, or separated by a chasm? Laclau ends with this note:

the quest for an absolute freedom for the subject is tantamount to a quest for an unrestricted dislocation and the total disintegration of the social fabric. It also means that a democratic society which has become a viable social order will not be a totally free society, but one which has negotiated in a specific way the duality freedom/unfreedom. (Laclau 1996: 19)

This fits with Marcuse's call for pragmatic resistance. It means the project never ends, and never reaches its desired end. But there is more, and here Bloch – on whom I take Ze'ev Levy's commentary – is helpful.

Levy reads Bloch as describing history as “a totality that ought to be conceived and explicated by its end (in the twofold sense of this word) (...) a future which opens up ‘endless’ new possibilities” (Levy 1997: 176). As he also remarks, Bloch introduces a “real possibility” of utopia, which is unconditioned. That is, “what is conditioned (...) cannot be included in what Bloch calls utopia” (*idem*, 178). Excluded from it, then, is the inverse reproduction in which capitalism automatically leads to socialism as a product of its contradictions. As Levy writes, “Utopia can become an objective and real possibility only when it is not bound by predetermined conditions. Only an unconditional utopia can become a realisable utopia” (*idem*, 179). He explains that Bloch adds to Marxism a layer of a primordial hunger – “a more or less natural motive” which remains questionable – and a layer of hope – “atheistic religiosity” (*ibidem*). All this is problematic, but leads Bloch to the following considerations:

Freedom – the ultimate end of hope – is not an abstract, empty freedom, but one that is concrete and real. This means that it is possible to reach and realize it. It will be freedom from hunger and distress, from fear and anxiety; at the same time it will be freedom to develop, without restraints, the manifold inclinations, capabilities and potentialities concealed in humanity's inner being. (*idem*, 180)

I think that can be compared with Grosz's reading of Darwinism as the development, without restraints other than those of survival, of difference.

I still worry that it sounds like a natural history. But the issue is brought into focus by Bloch's writing on Joachim of Fiore's declaration of a dis-integrated social order:

He was not trying to purge the Church, or even the state, of their atrocities; they were abolished instead. And the existing gospel was rekindled, or rather the *lux nova* within it (...) Connected with this (...) was the complete transfer of the kingdom of light *from the other world and the empty promises of the other world into history*, even though to a final state of history. (...) Joachim's chosen few are the poor, and they are to go to paradise in the living body, not just as spirits. In the society of the third Testament there are no classes any more (...) The body too thereby becomes guiltlessly happy, as in the original state of paradise, and the frozen earth is filled with the appearance of a sacred May. (Bloch 1959: 509-511)

Laclau's pragmatism contrasts with Bloch's recklessness. Marcuse is poised between the polarities. His call for pragmatic intervention uses a different language but is not worlds away:

Only when [concrete philosophy] influences existence in the public sphere, in its daily being, in the sphere where it really exists, can it hasten the movement of this existence in the direction of truth (...) At the end of every concrete philosophy stands the public act. (*apud* Wolin 2001: 149)

Marcuse's lectures and his talk at the Roundhouse were such public acts, however, the means of an intellectual class.

Bloch is helpful in drawing attention to the continuity of hope. I would add to his millenarian examples that of the Diggers in the English Revolution (see Petegorsky [1940] 1999: 153-228); and alternative settlements today, in eco-villages and intentional communities where the means of living is the end, always extending, of revolutionary thought. At this point, suggesting a new society concretely exists, I wonder if Lefebvre offers another exit from Marcuse's aporia. Rob Shields views Lefebvre's theory of moments as overlooked compared to his work on space, by which Geography reinvented itself as an academic discipline

(while Sociology flirted with consumption) (Shields 1999: 58). The theory is not separate from Lefebvre's theory of space, but an earlier form of it. It says, briefly, that moments, like flashes of liberating consciousness, occur within the banal and alienating routines of daily life. Such moments are revelatory, in an ordinary rather than transcendental sense.

Shields glosses: "This would bring a revolution into the mundane and trivial details of everyday life" (*idem*, 58-59). He continues that Lefebvre formulated this idea in reaction against Bergson's emphasis on time, the moment interrupting the progression of time and its affirmation of a status quo. Moments are glimpses of utopian consciousness, everyday, everywhere, immanent, and inherent in the situation. What this might do – I do not know if it is a conceit – is to shift the ground of the problem from time to space.

Shields cites Michael Gardiner on a similarity between Lefebvre's moments, Bloch's *novum* and Benjamin's idea of an optical unconscious (Gardiner 1995: 118 n9). Gardiner writes later of Lefebvre's critique of everyday life as requiring attunement to every facet of human existence: "the poetic, irrational, corporeal, ethical and affective" and that, from Bloch, there is a possibility for a warm stream of creative speculation beside a cooler social analysis (Gardiner 2000: 19). I suppose it is like Joseph Beuys's over-cited assertion that everyone is an artist, by which he meant, not a salaried fine artist like himself, but able to imagine a future other than that prescribed.

I am left wondering if the turn to biology is irrelevant, as the turn to aesthetics reflects despair. If the new society is extant it needs no invention, only recognition, and of course to be understood in all its complexities, as a process which has no end and will never be completed. Perhaps, after all, the image of a society as a work of art is not entirely fanciful.

## Works Cited

Bloch, Ernst (1959), *The Principle of Hope*, Cambridge MA, MIT.

Gardiner, Michael (1995), "Utopia and Everyday Life in French Social Thought", *Utopian Studies* 6. 2, pp. 90-123.

\_\_ (2000), *Critiques of Everyday Life*, London, Routledge.

Grosz, E. (2004), *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution and the Untimely*, Durham (NC), Duke University Press.

Laclau, Ernesto (1996), *Emancipation(s)*, London, Verso.

Lefebvre, Henri (1991), *The Production of Space*, Oxford, Blackwell.

\_\_ (2000), *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, London, Athlone.

Levy, Ze'ev (1997), "Utopia and Reality in the Philosophy of Ernst Bloch", in Jamie Owen Daniel / Tom Moylan (eds.), *Not Yet: Reconsidering Ernst Bloch*, London, Verso, pp.175-185.

Herbert Marcuse (1968), "Liberation from the Affluent Society", in Douglas Cooper (ed.), *The Dialectics of Liberation*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, pp.175-192.

\_\_ (1969), *An Essay on Liberation*, Harmondsworth, Penguin.

\_\_ (1970), *Five Lectures*, Harmondsworth, Penguin.

\_\_ (1978), *The Aesthetic Dimension*, Boston, Beacon Press.

\_\_ (1998), *Technology, War and Fascism*, Collected Papers, vol.1, ed. Douglas Kellner, London, Routledge.

\_\_ (2005), *The New Left and the 1960s*, Collected Papers, vol. 3, ed. Douglas Kellner, London, Routledge.

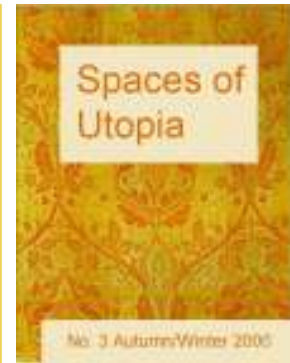
Petegorsky, David W. (1999), *Left-Wing Democracy in the English Civil War: Gerrard Winstanley and the Digger Movement*, London, Sandpiper [1940].

Shields, Rob (1999), *Lefebvre, Love & Struggle*, London, Routledge.

Wolin, Richard (2001), *Heidegger's Children: Hannah Arendt, Karl Löwith, Hans Jonas, and Herbert Marcuse*, Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press.

## Political Utopias in Film

Jörn Tietgen



---

Citation: Jörn Tietgen, "Political Utopias in Film", *Spaces of Utopia: An Electronic Journal*, nr. 3, Autumn/Winter 2006, pp. 114-131 <<http://ler.letras.up.pt>> ISSN 1646-4729.

---

Loads of films deal with days lying far ahead of us and depict how life may evolve in the nearer or farther future. These films may be glamorous space operas, joyous games with scientific future possibilities, encounters with slimy creatures or wise civilizations from outer space or even dark forecasts of horrifying events and terrifying regimes in a faraway time that nobody wishes for. The world may be saved, reformed, unaltered, doomed, destroyed, reborn or – whatever.

All films that present us a lively vision of what the future may be like could be called utopian if a very broad sense of the term is applied. But to apply such a very broad concept of utopia does not seem to be a feasible option for the task of trying to find out something about "political utopias" in film. As always when dealing with the difficult subject of utopias there have to be at least some parameters as a guideline to limit the enormous amount of possible sources.

In the first part of this paper I will therefore develop the concept of "political utopias" which is further deployed for a more detailed analysis of some films that forms the second part of this essay. Eventually, in the last part of this paper, I will try to fit filmic utopias into the general line of development of political utopias as a whole with regard to their historical evolution and present state.

**1.**

Obviously, when you start thinking about looking for political utopias in films it is essential to develop a framework that offers some guidelines on what to look for in the bulk of films that present a prospect of the future. A rewarding approach for a thorough analysis of formally very different sources is the concept of “political utopias” originally developed by Richard Saage around fifteen years ago. Even though it has originally been designed for the analysis of written texts it can also be adapted to new sets of source material like moving pictures (Tietgen 2005: 29).

According to Saage, a political utopia is a fictitious outline of an ideal commonwealth characterized by its distinctive criticism of reality, its rational and comprehensible design, its claim of being universally applicable and its commitment to the future. Moreover, for a political utopia it is requisite that the political system as well as the social mechanisms and workings of the depicted alternative society be discernable in some detail. For a text or a film to be called a political utopia it must present a comprehensive draft of an alternative society to the recipient. The reader or the audience must be given detailed information on the political system, the economy, science, religion, art and education in utopia (Saage 1991: 3).

Clearly, such a definition dissociates itself from the philosophical tradition of concepts of utopia linked with the names of authors such as Gustav Landauer (Landauer 1974), Karl Mannheim (Mannheim 1965) and Ernst Bloch (Bloch 1993) that distinguish utopian texts and movements from others by putting the stress on the intentions an author or political activist pursues with his texts and actions.

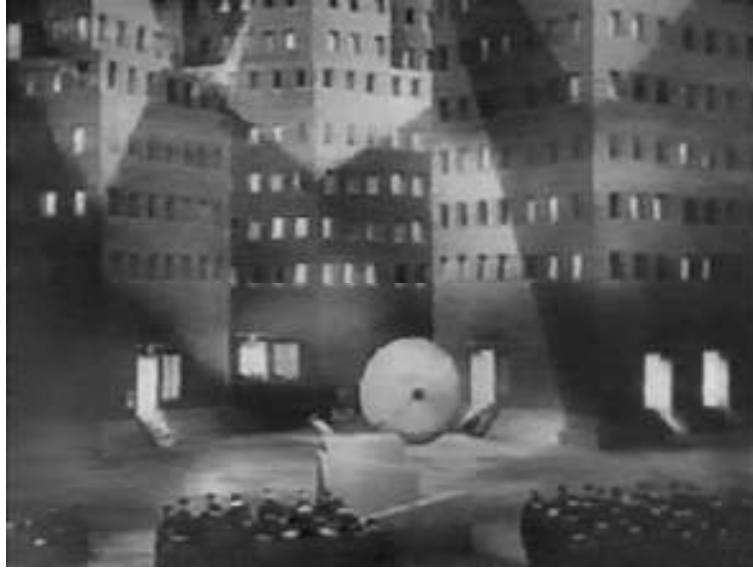
As long as the above-mentioned criteria are recognizable, a political utopia can thus be incorporated into formally very different works. It can, for example, take the form of a theoretical treatise or a novel, it might be outlined within a fantastic voyage or a TV-series. With the stress on the existence of a comprehensive design of the whole of a society as a prerequisite for a political utopia, filmic versions of a better future can enter the analytical focus in just the same way as written texts do. Even other works usually not mentioned in discourses on utopian thinking and its implications for political theory like

computer games or radio plays may then be considered as well as new sources for further research. Furthermore, and very importantly, a political utopia can be the description of a supposedly perfect society, but just as well an account of the worst imaginable world, hence, a negative utopia or dystopia.

## 2.

As film is a medium that was invented only 110 years ago, the filmic utopias happen to be coming up at a time when utopian thinking has long left the phase of utopias of space behind and utopias of time are the predominant form of political utopias. Moreover, they enter the screen at a time where the absolute optimism shown by most utopian writers during the age of industrialization has already become questionable. Whereas utopian thinkers like Saint-Simon, Fourier, Cabet or Owen considered their ideas as being the analogy to scientific laws of nature in the socio-political sphere that only need to be globally accepted and implemented, the atmosphere for utopian thinking had changed significantly by the time film was invented. In the first decades of the cinematic age the continuing poverty of the lower classes, the First World War and totalitarian hopes and fears left their marks on utopian thinking as a whole as well as on the first filmic political utopias.

The first political utopia in film is a real classic by now, namely, Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* that came to the movie theatres in 1927. Future society in *Metropolis* is characterized by its extreme class structure. The working masses are numbered and toil like slaves in the depths of the earth living in dark, standardized cave-like underground houses, whereas the upper classes live a life of luxury and leisure in the high-rise buildings of the upper city with their gardens and night-clubs.



The workers stroll back to their houses like an “industrial army” in a very low pace after a strenuous shift (*Metropolis*).

In *Metropolis* political power is performed by the industrial tycoon Joh Fredersen, who resides in a fancy high-tech office on the top floor of a skyscraper called “The New Babel”. From a control room he rules over politics and economy by means of secret services and technical control devices. He is, for example, able to zoom into areas of his economic empire with a camera-based surveillance system and can, thus, control his subordinates.



Joh Fredersen talking to the foreman of one of his factories via a camera-based control system (*Metropolis*).

The workers have no real option to revolt as the consequences of a strike would unavoidably be disastrous: if they stopped working, the machines would generate havoc as the whole underworld would then be flooded and thereby their houses would be destroyed and people most probably get killed.

Lang's film depicts an antihumanistic and antidemocratic political system dominated by a few men that, although challenged by the workers, in the end remains nearly unaltered. Fredersen can keep his place and the envisioned marriage between hands and heart, between capitalism and workers' interests, between magic and rationalism does not change the basics of society. The political status quo remains the same as in the beginning. This is shown by the last sequence of the film where the leader of the workers meets Fredersen for a highly symbolic handshake in front of a gothic church. Despite being the supposed victors of the conflict, the workers are still shown as before, namely, as a faceless, strictly symmetrically ornamented mass. Eventually, *Metropolis* offers no real political alternative but votes for a pacified totalitarian state.



The workers, led by their foreman, walk up the steps leading to a gothic church in a strict, symmetric order. In a few seconds the supposed reconciliation between capitalism and the workers' interests is taking place (*Metropolis*).

The same could be said about the British film *Things to Come* from 1936, a film directed by William Cameron Menzies that is based on a script by H. G. Wells, who had a very significant influence on the political ideas presented in

the film. Besides its enthusiasm and optimism, *Things to Come* cannot be called much else than a totalitarian dystopia.

In the film the world is reborn after it was nearly destroyed in a big war and most people got killed by an epidemic. Wells'/'Menzies' solution is the creation of a technocratic World State in the year 2036. Man has become a purely rational species that learned all the right lessons from history. Everybody has become a morally flawless creature that has internalized the new superior utopian order. There exists no more poverty and no illnesses. Everything is clean, ordered and pacified. Nature has been conquered by humanity and is dominated completely. Society is led by an elite of wise men whereas the rest of the population walks around the streets in uniform togas looking a bit bored and is presented as a floating mass that can easily be manipulated by their leaders. But, interestingly enough, the perfection is not without its critics. A famous artist tries to persuade the masses to revolt and to put an end to the prevailing ideology of progress.



The artists' speech is brought to the inhabitants as a live transmission (*Things to Come*).

The conflict centres around the question whether a first journey to the stars shall be undertaken or not, whether humanity should journey into space in the name of science and technology or be content with what it achieved on earth. In the end the existing political order – what a surprise – wins in this conflict. The opinions of the critics are taken into account but are rejected as being rationally not convincing, unscientific and unreasonable.



“Which shall it be?” – Looking at the sparkling stars in the sky the political leader of the society pictured in *Things to Come* asks a rhetorical question concerning the further path of mankind (*Things to Come*).

However, even if the positive aspects just mentioned are taken into account, a static political order is depicted and further developments are only to be wished for in the sphere of science and technological inventions. Political and social developments are supposed to have reached their final form and are therefore supposed to come to a halt. Moreover, an air of repression remains the predominant political feature of the film. Not only do the masses seem to be easily manipulated but also controllable by the elites. Architecture and technological means help the leaders to keep their people on the one and only, unquestionable utopian track.

Both *Metropolis* and *Things to Come* are examples of political utopias that present ideal commonwealths that have to be understood as the final point of human evolution concerning social and political matters. But, although they are intended as positive visions by their creators, they have a very dark edge to them as well. In the end an atmosphere of sterile perfection, fear, subjugation and definitely very little fun for the inhabitants of the ideal cities is created.

The same could be said not only for most of the filmic political utopias from the time of the so-called “Cold War”. Only now nearly always filmmakers clearly opt for the creation of horrifying negative utopias.

Typical films of this time include François Truffaut's *Fahrenheit 451* (1965), the science fiction classics *Soylent Green* (Fleischer 1973) and *Logan's Run* (Anderson 1976), or Jean-Luc Godard's *Alphaville* and George Lucas' *THX 1138*, two aesthetically very interesting films to which I'd like to turn now in some more detail.

*Alphaville*, from the year 1965, is a film that does not fit clearly into any genre. It is a highly original mixture of science fiction, spy movie, melodrama, film noir and comic strip. The film is an accumulation of references to other films and literary works, and is both a trivial story and a serious political essay.

In the film, secret agent Lemmy Caution is sent to Alphaville, the capital of a totalitarian state, in order to find out something about his predecessors as spies there. He encounters a dystopian world run by an omnipotent electronic brain called Alpha 60 and his inventor, the scientist Vonbraun. Everybody living in Alphaville is constantly under surveillance by means of cameras, radio-based apparatuses and an army of secret service agents. The central computer always knows where a person is and what he or she does. Every citizen has an individual number tattooed on the skin which instantly reminds the viewer of concentration camp inmates.



A tattooed registration number (*Alphaville*).

The basic political guideline in *Alphaville* is the idea of the existence of a mathematically calculable one and only human rationality, that can be established by electronic operations if it is not hampered by irrational human behaviour. For this reason, emotions are banned, people are sedated with pills

and politically incorrect words that might pose a threat to the stability of the social order are erased from the dictionary called the “Bible” that is published daily. Every sort of deviant behaviour or thoughts is brutally fought against. Persons who do not apply to the rules or who show signs of emotion are persecuted, re-educated and, if this does not help, driven into suicide or executed.



A dissident is executed in a swimming pool. On the left a row of convicted people, who will be the next victims, can be seen. From a gallery (top right), the leaders of Alphaville watch the scene that is staged like an entertaining show (*Alphaville*).

But in the end there is hope for Alphaville and the world as a whole. Our hero, Lemmy, re-introduces emotionality and moral categories to Alphaville. While being interrogated by Alpha 60, he manages to puzzle the computer with paradoxes to such an extent that in the end it collapses and destroys itself because it is unable to find a correct answer. Only those inhabitants of Alphaville who retained a residue of human feelings and behaviour survive, whilst everybody else who already got inhuman dies.

Interestingly, Godard does not opt for any political side of the opponents in the Cold War with his film. He is more concerned with tendencies that are inherent in both forms of political systems and his political statement is a critique of modernization and technical progress in general. Unfortunately, the film ends with the destruction of Alpha 60 and leaves the audience alone with the question what a positive alternative could be like in detail and what new commonwealth will be created in Alphaville in the future.

Very much the same applies to George Lucas' *THX 1138* from 1971. Again, the audience encounters a society where every human being has lost his or her individuality and has become a small part of the purely rational machine-like state that is electronically calculated and planned on the basis of efficient economic cost-benefit relations. Uniform clothes and haircuts, numbers instead of names (*THX 1138* being our hero) and the denial of all human emotions characterize this subterranean urban society. Cameras control life and there exists absolutely no privacy. Sex has become a criminal act, family structures are abolished, problems are dealt with by swallowing pills and religion purely aims at stabilizing the system which leaves absolutely no possibilities for political participation. The state itself remains faceless but is hierarchically organized, even though we do not see the actual leaders, who must be a kind of purely administrative elite (Lucas / Murch n.d.).

Again, like Godard in *Alphaville*, Lucas' criticism aims at both systems – capitalism and communism. He shows a totalitarian planned state based on a rigid market economy. And, again, the recurrence of emotions, especially love, is the key to overcome the dystopian state. Our hero revolts, gets caught, tortured and put into a prison that is a truly Orwellian “place without darkness”. It is a horrifying means of reducing individuality to a minimum: in a constantly lit white room the inmates wear white clothes and become nearly invisible, leaving their shaved heads, naked hands and feet to an abstract, dislocated form of life on their own.



Inmates of the constantly lit white prison (*THX 1138*).

All communication runs into dead-ends there as well. Nevertheless, THX 1138, with his willpower and the help of a hologram, succeeds in escaping, but, in the end, only because his hunt has reached the limit of the financial budget that has been allocated to this purpose by the authorities and so his hunters are ordered to stop chasing him shortly before they catch him!

Like in the case of *Alphaville*, the end is rather disappointing as the positive vision remains too vague. THX 1138 reaches the top of the earth and sees nothing more than a burning, setting sun. If there is anything else out there, any utopia, other dystopias or sheer nothingness, remains unclear. The fact that the sun is not only setting but is characterized by its immense heat and that the music accompanying the scene is a sequence from the *St. Matthew Passion* by Johann Sebastian Bach, moreover, does not suggest that there is much hope for mankind.

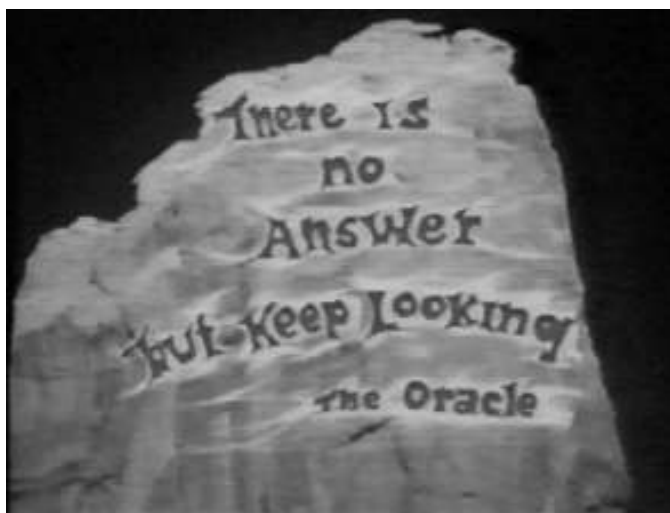
But, fortunately, there are also at least some films that portray a positive political utopia. Two examples for this category are Roger Corman's *Gas-s-s-s! Or: It Became Necessary to Destroy the World in Order to Save It*, from 1970, and Alain Tanner's *Jonas Qui Aura 25 Ans en L'An 2000* [Jonas who will be 25 in the year 2000)], from 1976.<sup>1</sup>

Corman, a master in shooting cheap horror and sci-fi B-movies, is much less known for his social criticism in some of his films from the late 1960s and early 70s. His film *Gas-s-s-s! Or: It Became Necessary to Destroy the World in Order to Save It*, as he characterized it himself, is the story of a "band of roaming hippies looking for utopia" (Corman / Jerome 1998: 155). The plot of the movie is pretty simple: due to a military accident a gas is set free in the United States that kills everybody over 25 years of age. This strange incident leaves the young generation with the chance and burden to create one or many new societies. A young couple, disappointed by the new reactionary structures that begin to take shape in their hometown, sets out on a trip looking for a "groovy old pueblo in Mexico" of which they have heard that a new utopian way of living is trying to be established there. On their way they pass through several places and thereby encounter different new forms of socio-political orders that have spread up in the aftermath of the disastrous events. In one town the local football team established a violent fascist terror-regime. In another place a

parody of the old order formed itself, dominated by a bunch of pacified Hell's Angels driving golf-carts and talking like politicians. In the end the couple reaches the pueblo. Here we find a sort of rural anarchist society with a grassroots democracy, no violence, no police and an eco-friendly barter economy. Technology and science are, nevertheless, not condemned, but seen as helpful means if used for a humane end. Also no divisions between the sexes, different ethnic groups or classes exist any longer.

But soon after its establishment this young society is challenged by the threat of the violent football gang we encountered earlier in the film that wants to rob them of their supplies. Even though they are seriously in danger, the hippies do not fall back into violent behaviour in order to protect themselves. In a meeting of all members of their community in which even children are allowed to raise their voices they discuss their situation and decide not to revert to military options. They start a peaceful dialogue and eventually convince the footballers to join their non-violent society. By this the young utopian blossom steps into a first phase of enlargement and stabilization. Other people join the experiment and the film ends with a big party of all film characters. The new order is definitely not perfect yet but it is a promising first step on the road to utopia. A road that might be infinitely long and winding but still represents the best imaginable way for politics today.

The "Oracle" to which the protagonists try to resort in their search for truth during their journey to the pueblo underlines the unfinished and fragile status of the envisioned utopian experiment. They are hoping for definite answers, but the oracle offers them the opposite and just responds:



The oracle's message in Corman's utopia (*Gas-s-s-s!*).

The same unfinished utopian perspective is offered by Tanner's film *Jonas Qui Aura 25 Ans en L'An 2000*, the most successful Swiss movie ever made. The film tells the story of eight characters looking for a new way of living beyond capitalism. Whereas *Gas-s-s-s!* is a satire, *Jonas* is a serious political essay without being an abstract avant-garde film. It is an entertaining film but all the same a call to act now and to start trying alternatives today despite the massive obstacles of the surrounding political circumstances in the real world.

Each of the protagonists has had bad experiences with the prevailing capitalist order. They meet by coincidence and during the film develop into a small community experimenting with an alternative political model and lifestyle on a farm outside Geneva. It is based on a holistic overall approach including the principles of self-determined work, solidarity, grassroots democracy, organic production and equality between the sexes. The end of the film is bitter-sweet: the utopian experiment is only partly stable and compromises with the imperfect political order of mid-seventies Switzerland have to be made in order to keep the experiment at least partly alive. The important point is that the experiment is not given up completely. Eventually, hope remains that better times for utopia are in store if more courageous people realise that they are able to change history by their own political actions.<sup>2</sup>

### 3.

I would now like to sum up the results and try to integrate them into the history of the development of political utopias as a whole during, roughly, the last century.

The first political utopias in film date from the time between the two world wars. They show many resemblances to written utopias like the famous ones of that time by Zamyatin, Huxley or, later on, Orwell. Thus they fit well into the dystopian tradition established since the 1920s without offering important new elements. The filmic dystopias from the 1960s and 70s in turn show similarities with written utopias but are also examples of a transitional phase in utopian thinking. As they date from a time when the fictional dystopia was already well established, they are formally not very original but they add some new topics that became prevalent in the contemporary positive utopias, namely, criticism concerning the relationship between man and nature, with special regard to nuclear power, genetic engineering, computerization and ecological problems. Furthermore, they quite often succeed in not taking sides with either communism or capitalism but raise their voices against the dangers that might lead to a degenerated and perverted political system in general. In doing so they not only have a warning function but are also a call for political action.

On the other hand, their positive outlooks offer some, if only very vague, hints that show analogies with predominant contemporary, positively utopian patterns. Especially a tendency towards decentralised, anarchist, peaceful and free socio-political arrangements can be stated.

In films and books of the last decades positive political utopias have become self-reflexive and open to different outcomes in the future. This “self-reflexive turn” has made them dynamic and open towards a history in the future. The utopian societies depicted are not the end of history like they were in most older utopias and, therefore, they do not have to be perfect yet. By this the older need to stabilize the perfect orders, to create a sort of *perpetuum mobile* that is *de facto* a socio-political *perpetuum immobile* has become unnecessary. Since they do not tend to employ terrible methods to ensure the further existence of the utopian society, they could be called “post-totalitarian”.

The nation state is always condemned as being an outdated, wrong and ineffective construction. As an alternative authors and filmmakers opt for rather anarchistic political systems. This can be said of the filmic examples mentioned above but it is also true of important written political utopias like Huxley's *Island* (1962), Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (2000) or Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1996). As a whole these anarchist utopias stand in the much older tradition of anarchist political utopias related with the works of de Foigny, Diderot and Morris.

Moreover, political utopias of the last decades, both written and filmic, are less concerned with time and return to the form of utopias of space. By doing this they offer a perspective to start working on utopia now, to struggle for the most perfect society within the existing structures in order to overcome them – here, and everywhere else. For in all cases some sort of federal, but decentralised global political arrangement is envisioned or remains the only logical consequence of the utopian provisions.

All contemporary political utopias are a sort of appeal to the reader or viewer to think about utopian alternatives now, to get up and fight for utopia in order to overcome our everyday dystopias. They aim at mobilizing the recipients for political action. As the hologram in *THX 1138* answers the question about where the exit from the white-out hell of prison is, pointing his finger at the audience: "That's the way out!"



"That's the way out!" (*THX 1138*).

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> Both films do not clearly fit into the category of “science fiction“ but are good examples for the fact that political utopias need not be incorporated into a science fiction-film or -text. Moreover, a couple of differences between “political utopias” and science fiction can be established:

1. technical solutions to varying problems are not an end in themselves in political utopias but are only devised in order to fulfil a social purpose;
2. political utopias are not concerned with extrapolations, prognoses or even calculations of their probability to be realised but offer a solely theoretical approach by means of a conceivable alternative;
3. political utopias are always anthropocentric;
4. they always offer an alternative for society as a whole, whereas science fiction need not provide this;
5. a political utopia doesn't have to be presented within a fictional text (Saage 1997: 48; Tietgen 2005: 35).

<sup>2</sup> In much the same way the two big science fiction TV-series *Star Trek* and *Babylon 5* offer a quite similar political perspective. For a discussion of these two, see Tietgen 2005: 271.

## Works Cited

Bloch, Ernst (1993), *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 4th ed., Frankfurt, Suhrkamp Verlag.

Corman, Roger / Jim Jerome (1998), *How I Made a Hundred Movies in Hollywood and Never Lost a Dime*, New York, Da Capo Press.

Elsaesser, Thomas (2001), *Metropolis: Der Filmklassiker von Fritz Lang*, Hamburg/Wien, Europa Verlag.

Frayling, Christopher (1995), *Things to Come*, London, BFI Publishing.

Huxley, Aldous (1962), *Island: A Novel*, London, Chatto & Windus.

Jacobsen, Wolfgang / Werner Sudendorf (2000), "Metropolis: Jahrzehnte Voraus – Jahrtausende Zurück", in Wolfgang Jacobsen / Werner Sudendorf (eds.), *Metropolis: Ein filmisches Laboratorium der Modernen Architektur*, Stuttgart/London, Edition Axel Menges, pp. 8-39.

Landauer, Gustav (1974), *Revolution*, Berlin, Karin Kramer Verlag.

Le Guin, Ursula (1996), *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia*, London, Harper Collins.

Lucas, George / Walter Murch (n.d.), *THX 1138*, San Francisco, American Zoetrope.

Mannheim, Karl (1965), *Ideologie und Utopie*, 4th ed., Frankfurt, G. Schulte-Bulmke Verlag.

Patalas, Enno (2001), *Metropolis in/aus Trümmern: Eine Filmgeschichte*, Berlin, Bertz Verlag.

Piercy, Marge (2000), *Woman on the Edge of Time: Social Fantasy*, London, Women's Press.

Rutsky, R. L. (2000), "The Mediation of Technology and Gender: *Metropolis*, Nazism, Modernism", in Michael Minden / Holger Bachmann (ed.), *Fritz Lang's Metropolis: Cinematic Visions of Technology and Fear*, Rochester/Woodbridge, Camden House, pp. 217-245.

Saage, Richard (1990), "Gibt es einen anarchistischen Diskurs in der klassischen Utopietradition?", in *Das Ende der politischen Utopie?*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, pp. 26-45.

\_ \_ (1991), *Politische Utopien der Neuzeit*, Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.

\_ \_ (1997), "Utopie und Science-fiction: Versuch einer Begriffsbestimmung", in Kai-Uwe Hellmann / Arne Klein (eds.), *"Unendliche Weiten...": Star Trek zwischen Unterhaltung und Utopie*, Frankfurt, Fischer, pp. 45-58.

Stover, Leon (1987), *The Prophetic Soul: A Reading of H. G. Wells's Things to Come Together with His Film Treatment, Whither Mankind? and the Postproduction Script*, Jefferson / London, McFarland.

Tanner, Alain (1978), *Jonas Qui Aura 25 Ans en L'An 2000: Un Film d'Alain Tanner*, Présentation – Découpage technique complet – Dialogues, Lausanne, La Cinémathèque Suisse.

Tietgen, Jörn (2005), *Die Idee des Ewigen Friedens in den politischen Utopien der Neuzeit: Analysen von Schrift und Film*, Marburg, Tectum Verlag.

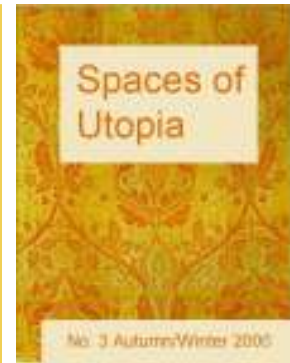
Weihsmann, Helmut (1992), "Things to Come: Die Welt in hundert Jahre?", in Hans-Arthur Marsiske (ed.), *Zeitmaschine Kino: Darstellungen von Geschichte im Film*, Marburg, W. Hitzeroth, pp. 126-145.

## **Meditations on the Impossible:**

### **A Report from Australia**

**Andrew Milner**

Monash University, Melbourne



---

Citation: Andrew Milner, "Meditations on the Impossible: A Report from Australia", *Spaces of Utopia: An Electronic Journal*, nr. 3, Autumn/Winter 2006, pp. 132-148 <<http://ler.letras.up.pt> > ISSN 1646-4729.

---

There is no equivalent in Australasia to the Society for Utopian Studies in North America or the Utopian Studies Society in Europe. But Australian scholars are clearly interested in utopianism: in December 2001 the University of Tasmania hosted a very successful conference on Antipodean Utopias, with most of its contributors coming from either Australia or New Zealand. Australians have also contributed to the proceedings of the North American and European Societies. Peter Marks gave a paper on utopianism in Terry Gilliam to the 2004 conference of the North American Society in Toronto. He had previously given one on Big Brother and surveillance to the 2002 conference of the European Society in Nottingham – where I also presented a paper on "Utopia and Science Fiction in Raymond Williams". At the 2003 conference, in Madrid, there were papers from five Australians, Amanda Cole, Jacqueline Dutton, Sung-Ae Lee, Kerry Mallan and John Stephens. Cole and Dutton also made an unsuccessful attempt to persuade the Society to hold its 2006 conference in Australia. As it turned out, in 2006 the conference returned to Spain, to Tarragona, but there were still papers from three Australians, Dutton, myself and Saul Newman.

### **1. Australian Utopianism: A Short History**

Moreover, there is a significant history of Australian utopianism, both textual – albeit mainly literary, rather than philosophical – and practical. There is an old tradition, dating from well before colonisation, of the European use of Australia as a site for its own utopian imaginings. Lyman Tower Sargent's pioneer

bibliography lists Peter Heglin's 1667 *An Appendix To the Former Work* as the earliest of these and, so far as I know, he is right (Sargent 1999). Much more influential, however, was Denis Veiras's *L'Histoire des Sévarambes*, first published only a few years later, in part in English in 1675, in whole in French in 1679 (Veiras 2006 and 2001). There is an indigenous aboriginal tradition of retrospective euchronia, dreamtimes of one kind or another, where the people belong to the land rather than the land to the people, before history and hence also before the Europeans. There is also a more contemporary aboriginal tradition of dystopian writing about the world the Europeans have made. Perhaps the best example of the latter is Mudrooroo's *Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the End of the World*, which takes as its referent the near-genocidal destruction of the native peoples of the island of Tasmania (Johnson 1983). And, from the late 1840s on, there is a developing tradition of literary utopias written from Australia by the European colonists and their descendants. The anonymous "Oo-a-deen or, the Mysteries of the Interior Unveiled", serialized during 1847 in the Geelong-based *Corio Chronicle and Western District Advertiser*, is probably the earliest published utopia written by an Australian (Ikin 1982: 7-27). Robyn Walton cites Robert Ellis Dudgeon's *Colymbia*, published in 1873, as the first Australian science-fictional utopia (Walton 2003: 7), though Joseph Fraser's 1889 *Melbourne and Mars* (Fraser 1889) – the diaries of a merchant able to travel between Melbourne and Mars far more easily than we can today between Melbourne and Europe – is much better known.

The most famous of nineteenth-century Australian utopias were either: utopian-socialist, like William Lane's *The Workingman's Paradise*, published in 1892 (Miller 1892); or anarchist, like David Andrade's *The Melbourne Riots, or How Harry Holdfast and his Friends Emancipated the Workers*, first published the same year (Andrade 2002-3; Sparrow 2002-3); or feminist, like Catherine Helen Spence's *A Week in the Future*, serialized in *The Centennial Magazine* during 1888 and 1889 (Dugdale 1883; Spence 1987). Utopian themes continued intermittently throughout Australian literary history, from Barnard and Eldershaw's socialistic and feminist *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow*, first published in 1947, to the contemporary science-fictional utopias of Terry Dowling and Greg

Egan (Barnard Eldershaw 1983; Dowling 1993; Egan 1997). This is to say nothing of the rich vein of Australian dystopian writing: from late nineteenth-century race-war dystopias like Kenneth Mackay's *The Yellow Wave*, published in 1895 and recently republished by Wesleyan University Press; through to Nevile Shute's *On the Beach*, published in 1957 and proclaimed "The Great Australian Novel of Our Time" in the Mandarin Paperbacks 1990 republication; and on to George Turner's 1987 novel of ecological catastrophe, *The Sea and Summer*, which won the 1988 Arthur C. Clarke prize (Mackay 2003; Shute 1957; Milner 1994; Turner 1987).

Practical, as distinct from textual, utopianism probably dates from 1852, when Australia's first recorded intentional community, Herrnhut, was established near Peshurst in Western Victoria by Friedrich Krumnow (Metcalf / Huf 2002). In the 1890s widespread socialistic agitation for state-assisted, communal settlement led to the settlement of over 300,000 acres of communal land, funded by governments to the tune of £224,000 across the southern and eastern Australian states. In South Australia, where this movement was especially strong, thirteen settlements were established between February 1894 and January 1895 (Burgmann 1985: 156, 154). But the single most important utopian socialist experiment was that led by William Lane, which, like many textual utopias, despaired of establishing justice in Australia itself. In July 1893 Lane and 219 others sailed from Sydney, aboard the *Royal Tar*, to found a communalist "New Australia" colony in Paraguay. It only survived until 1909, but has retained a considerable hold over subsequent Australian utopian and dystopian imaginings (Burgmann 1985: 19-34; Souter 1991; Wilding 1984; Whitehead 1997 and 2003).

Arguably, an equally activist version of utopian socialism is represented by the Industrial Workers of the World. The Australian IWW, or "Wobblies", were second only to their American original in size and influence, with a national membership running at about 2,000 during the First World War, that is, only slightly smaller in proportion to overall population than in the US (Burgmann 1995: 126). The Wobblies are conventionally depicted as syndicalist in European typologies of labour dissent. But, as Burgmann observes of Father Haggerty's "Wheel of Fortune", which was produced by the American IWW, but also widely

circulated in Australia: “No more elaborate blueprint for the future, no more detailed ‘fanciful picture in the air’ was ever devised” (*idem*, 51). In short, the Wobblies were amongst the more utopian of utopian socialists.

These earlier utopian traditions were progressively displaced on the Left by supposedly more “scientific” understandings of progress, both Fabian and Marxist, in the aftermath of the Great War. But inter-war Australia was nonetheless the site for at least one great utopian experiment, the design and eventual construction of the federal capital at Canberra. When the Australian colonies federated in 1901, they had opted to build an entirely new inland city as their capital, in part so as to circumvent inter-colonial rivalries between New South Wales and Victoria, but in part also as a quasi-utopian gesture, signalling both national unity and a collective resolve to expand beyond the coastline. An international design competition, announced in 1910, was won two years later by the American architect, Walter Burley Griffin (though unrecognised at the time, this was also substantially the work of his wife, Marion Mahony Griffin). The Griffin designs were formally adopted in 1925 and were followed, at least initially, at least in outline, during the slow process of the city’s eventual construction. Though the Parliament House was opened as early as 1927, the main stages in the city’s development post-date the Second World War: work on the artificial lake at the capital’s heart, now known as Lake Burley Griffin, began in 1957. As Proudfoot makes clear, some of this utopianism belonged as much to the Griffins as to the new federal political elite (Proudfoot 1994). According to Pont and Proudfoot, their design involved a visionary scheme for a “cosmic city”, based on the area’s natural topography, but also on Pythagorean geometry and esoteric symbolism (Pont / Proudfoot 2002).

Oppositional, as distinct from elite, utopianism remained scarce, however, during the middle decades of the twentieth century: the dominant political and literary forms were either dystopian or realist in character. But in Australia, as elsewhere, utopian politics re-emerged during the 1960s, both in and around the “new social movements” and in re-radicalised sections of the labour movement. In Western Europe and the United States the new politics found significant intellectual articulation in philosophical and literary texts, but their equivalents are

surprisingly absent from Australia. However, as Walton observes, “Australia’s contribution was at the grass-roots level”, rather than at the textual, “in numerous agrarian communes, back-to-earth gatherings and anti-development protests” (Walton 2003: 13). And it continues thus: an ABC Radio series, *Re-Imagining Utopia*, broadcast on Radio National’s “Life Matters” show, reported on Monday, May 5, 2003 that there were then “hundreds” of intentional communities in regional Australia, including “over a hundred” on the North Coast of New South Wales, which had been the site of the 1973 Aquarius Festival, the largest such counter-cultural event during the long “Sixties”. Walton might well have added that, at least initially, this kind of protest was as likely to come from radical labour as from the new movements themselves. This was especially so for what was arguably the most important instance of new social movement utopianism in Australia, that is, radical environmentalism, which was pioneered, in part, by militants from the building unions (Burgmann / Burgmann 1998).

## **2. Utopian Studies: The Personnel**

In 2004, the Australian Research Council set aside a grant of \$A 360,000 for the period 2005-2007 to fund a research project entitled *Demanding the Impossible: Utopianism in Philosophy, Literature and Science Fiction*. This project is being conducted by a team of researchers currently led by: Andrew Benjamin, a philosopher who is Professor of Critical Theory at Monash University in Melbourne and the University of Technology, Sydney; Roland Boer, a former Presbyterian minister, now Associate Professor in Comparative Literature at Monash; Ian Buchanan, formerly Professor of Cultural Studies at Charles Darwin University, but now Professor of Critical Theory at Cardiff University; Kate Rigby, a Germanist and currently Director of the Centre for Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies at Monash; and myself, also at Monash, but a sociologist of literature by trade. We come from quite different disciplinary backgrounds, but have all worked together, at one time or another, in comparative literary and cultural studies at Monash, which is where the project was conceived. None of us would have regarded ourselves as specialist utopianists, however defined, but we did come to recognise a certain overlap of interests around the connected

themes of utopia, dystopia and science fiction.

Andrew Benjamin is an internationally recognised authority on “continental philosophy”, especially aesthetics, whose work has been characterised by a sustained engagement with the work of Walter Benjamin, clearly one of the most important twentieth-century utopian thinkers. Two of Andrew’s books, *Art, Mimesis and the Avant-Garde* (1991) and *Present Hope* (1997), contain substantial chapters on his famous namesake. *Philosophy’s Literature* (2001) also includes a chapter on Walter Benjamin, but in addition uses the latter’s writings in close readings of Goethe, Lessing and Celan. Andrew has also pursued the question of utopianism in architecture in his book *Architectural Philosophy* (2000) and in two articles published in *Architectural Theory Review* during 2002 (Benjamin 2002a and 2002b).

Where Andrew is a philosopher by training, Roland Boer is a theologian. Since the publication of his book *Jameson and Jeroboam* in 1996, he has become increasingly interested in the Bible’s role as a vast storehouse of utopian and dystopian images, narratives and symbols, with a profound influence on subsequent literature and culture. In *Jameson and Jeroboam* itself, he had identified a shift from determinism to utopian politics in the two books of *Chronicles* (Boer 1996). He explored this question further in his *Novel Histories* (1997), which critically engaged with the work of Louis Marin, Darko Suvin and Georg Lukács on the historical novel, so as to conclude that *Chronicles* is in fact “euchronian” rather than “eutopian” fiction, insofar as it postulates a different past in order to set up a utopian future. He has also written on the interaction between popular culture and Biblical utopianism in *Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door* (1999), where he examines the intersections between heavy metal music and the prophetic material of *Ezekiel*. His *Marxist Criticism of the Bible* (2003) develops close readings of Adorno, Bloch and Walter Benjamin, all major theorists of utopia, finding the greater promise in Adorno, whose perpetual suspicion, he argues, suggests a way into the analysis of both the Bible and utopia. More recently, his *Criticism of Heaven* (2006) directly addresses the Biblical uses of both utopia and dystopia.

Ian Buchanan, by contrast, was trained in comparative literature, but has

become increasingly involved with cultural studies – he was President of the Cultural Studies Association of Australasia between 2002 and 2004 – and contemporary critical theory. His research has been characterised by a longstanding interest in Fredric Jameson, undoubtedly a key figure in contemporary utopian and science fiction studies (Buchanan 1998 and 2002). Ian is currently editing a collection of Jameson's interviews for Duke University Press and a collection of essays on Jameson for the State University of New York Press. He has also worked on Deleuze, whom he is inclined to read as a utopianist. To date, this work has resulted in one major monograph, *Deleuzism: A Metacommentary* (2000), and a continuing series of scholarly articles. His 1997 paper, "Deleuze and Cultural Studies", which was later published in *A Deleuzian Century?*, began to explore the possibilities of a Deleuzian mode of cultural studies (Buchanan 1999), a question pursued further in a series of three subsequent articles (Buchanan 2001a, 2001b and 2002). More recently, he has explored Deleuze's influence on Hardt and Negri's indisputably utopian *Empire* (Buchanan 2003). In combination, these various essays amount to a sustained reading of Deleuze as a utopian thinker.

Kate Rigby is perhaps the closest amongst us to a genuine utopian: her longstanding Green political commitments have gone hand in hand with developing theoretical interests in ecocriticism, ecofeminism and ecospirituality. She is co-editor of the journal *PAN (Philosophy Activism Nature)* and also currently President of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment, Australia-New Zealand. She has written on feminism and the feminine (Rigby 1996; Beinssen-Hesse / Rigby 1996). However, her more recent research has increasingly engaged with questions of utopianism and dystopianism and their bearing on humanity's relationship with the natural world (Rigby 1999, 2000, 2001a, 2001b, 2001c, 2003a, 2003b). Her latest book, *Topographies of the Sacred*, is the first comparative study of English and German Romanticism written from an ecocritical perspective. It may well turn out to be an important work, a philosophically literate study of the literary and ecological significance of place, which analyses Goethe, Herder, Schelling, Schiller and von Humboldt alongside Blake, Wordsworth and Byron.

If Kate's contemporary political concerns have turned her scholarly interests towards the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, then mine have been directed towards the science-fictional future. The connection between literature and utopian or quasi-utopian politics has been a recurrent theme in my work. My first book, *John Milton and the English Revolution* (1981), was concerned with the impact of mid-seventeenth century, quasi-millenarian, Protestant political radicalism on Milton's later poetry. In the first edition of my *Literature, Culture and Society* (1996), I began to explore the more specific connections between utopianism, dystopianism and science fiction, especially through readings of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*. These thematics became much more central to the second edition, published in 2005, which includes studies of Čapek's *R.U.R.*, Lang's *Metropolis*, *The X-Files* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. During the 1990s I had also become increasingly interested in Raymond Williams's cultural materialist approach to literary and cultural studies. Whilst researching my "Williams book", the misleadingly titled *Re-Imagining Cultural Studies* (2002), I had come to realise how much he had written on utopianism and science fiction and how little regarded this work is by Williams scholars. I made no attempt to rectify this in the monograph itself, but did subsequently publish a scholarly article, which was essentially an expanded version of my Nottingham paper, in *Science Fiction Studies* (Milner 2003). I've also recently published a number of loosely related articles on utopia, dystopia and science fiction (Milner 2004a, 2004b and 2005b). And, I might add, I've been teaching a course on science fiction more or less continuously since 1997.

### **3. Utopian Studies: The Project**

The project is intended as a critical appraisal of utopianism in politics, literature and science fiction, asking whether there is still a place for utopianism in contemporary thought and aiming to situate utopianism in relation to the wider comparative context of theology, philosophy and art. Its special academic significance is in the combination of a wide range of disciplinary approaches with a dual focus on Australian and international (or "overseas", as we say in Australia) materials. We have organised a series of reading groups and research

seminars around the themes of utopia and dystopia. We have established what we hope will be regular and continuing connections with the Utopian Studies Society in Europe, though not as yet with the Society for Utopian Studies in North America. We awarded two postgraduate scholarships for research in utopianism in 2005, five in 2006 and five again in 2007. The first of these were recently awarded their degrees: Mr David Jack for his Masters thesis on “The Political Absolute: Jameson and Utopia”; and Mr Keith Redgen for his on “Dialectic of Enlightenment, Dialectic of Utopia”. We hired Dr Robert Savage as a research assistant to help with the archival work and Dr Matthew Ryan as a contract lecturer (or assistant professor), to help with our teaching. Robert has been working his way through the major English, French and German language literary journals, searching for material on utopia, dystopia, science fiction and ecology; he completed a publishable English translation of Blanchot’s 1959 essay on science fiction (Blanchot 1959); and he has made detailed notes on the Monash science fiction collection.

One of the reasons Monash is peculiarly suitable as a location for this kind of research is its unusually strong library collection. Our Centre has been teaching and researching into utopianism, speculative fiction and SF for more than 20 years and, as a result, the University Library has acquired a very substantial collection of primary and secondary research materials, both philosophical and literary, written in English, French, German and Russian, which is almost certainly unrivalled in Australia. Moreover, the Library’s Rare Books section also houses a large collection of complete or near-complete runs of major American (and some British and Australian) SF pulp magazines, dating from the 1920s through to the 1960s. The American magazines include: *Science and Invention*, 1920-1923; *Amazing Stories* (and *Amazing Stories Annual* and *Amazing Science Fiction*), 1926-58; *Wonder Stories Quarterly*, 1930-1933; *Wonder Stories*, 1930-1936; and *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, 1936-1955. Each of these five titles was edited by Hugo Gernsback, the “father of science fiction”, who famously but infelicitously defined the genre as “scientifiction”. The collection also includes *Astounding Stories* (1933-1938), which was edited by John W. Campbell, who adopted and popularised the more manageable term “science

fiction" (Aldiss 1986; Bleiler 1998; Harrison 1974; Clute / Nicholls 1993: 978-980; James 1994: 44-53). The longest run of a British magazine is *Science-Fantasy* (1950-1960), of an Australian magazine *Planet Stories* (1948-1953). This is an important research collection, certainly the best of its kind in Australia and probably one of the best in the world – since, like other popular texts, pulp magazines have generally been very poorly archived. And we are beginning to explore it.

We also planned for – and persuaded the ARC to fund – two conferences around the themes of utopia, dystopia and science fiction. Neither of these is quite the conference Cole and Dutton were hoping for, but they might provide for the beginnings of an Australasian Utopian Studies Society. In our original grant application, we proposed to hold the first conference in 2006, with a big-name North American keynote speaker, the second in 2007 with a big-name European. But, when we learnt that Jameson's much-anticipated *Archaeologies of the Future* was to be published in 2005 and, moreover, that he was interested in a trip to Australia, we brought the first conference forward to December of that year. Organised around the theme *Imagining the Future: Utopia, Dystopia and Science Fiction*, with Jameson as the keynote speaker, it was held at Monash University in Melbourne on 6-7 December, in the southern hemisphere summer. Other speakers included each of the project team members and also Maria Elisa Cevalco, Jacqueline Dutton, Gregory Claeys, Peter Fitting, Eugene Holland, Lyman Tower Sargent and Robyn Walton. In all, there were something like 90 papers presented to the conference, with contributors from every inhabited continent other than Africa. An initial collection of conference papers was edited by myself, Robert Savage and Matthew Ryan and published both in book form and as a double issue of *Arena Journal* in June 2006 (Milner / Savage / Ryan, 2006). Further collections will follow in the journal *Colloquy* during 2007. Our second conference is scheduled for December 2007, with Professor Tom Moylan, author of *Demand the Impossible* (1986) and *Scraps of the Untainted Sky* (2000) and Director of the Ralahine Center for Utopian Studies at the University of Limerick, as the keynote speaker.

As academics our interest in this field is primarily scholarly. But, as

citizens, it is also necessarily political. For, as Jameson rightly insists, what is “most crippling” in our time is

the universal belief (...) that the historic alternatives to capitalism have been proven unviable and impossible, and that no other socio-economic system is conceivable, let alone practically available. (Jameson 2005: xii)

Utopia, he suggestively argues, “now better expresses our relationship to a genuinely political future than any current program of action”. It does so, he continues, “by forcing us to think the break itself (...) not by offering a more traditional picture of what things would be like after the break”. Hence, his memorable conclusion that utopia is “a meditation on the impossible, on the unrealizable in its own right” (*idem*, 232). Hopefully, we too will be able to play some small part in prompting such meditations on the impossible.

## Works Cited

Aldiss, Brian (1986), *Trillion Year Spree: The History of Science Fiction*, London, Victor Gollancz.

Andrade, David (2002-2003), "How Harry Holdfast Saved Humanity (An Arena Condensed Version)", Annotated by Mr Jeffrey Sparrow, *Arena Magazine*, nr. 62, pp. 47-48.

Barnard Eldershaw, M. (1983), *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow*, with a new introduction by Anne Chisholm, 1<sup>st</sup> uncensored ed., London, Virago Press.

Benjamin, Andrew (1991), *Art, Mimesis and the Avant-Garde: Aspects of a Philosophy of Difference*, London, Routledge.

\_\_ (1997), *Present Hope: Philosophy, Architecture, Judaism*, London, Routledge.

\_\_ (2000), *Architectural Philosophy* London, Athlone Press.

\_\_ (2001), *Philosophy's Literature* Manchester, Clinamen Press.

\_\_ (2002a), "The 'Place' of Cosmopolitan Architecture", *Architectural Theory Review*, vol. 7, nr. 1, pp. 26-36.

\_\_ (2002b), "Refugees, Cosmopolitanism and the Place of Citizenship", *Architectural Theory Review*, vol. 7, nr. 2, pp. 101-116.

Beinssen-Hesse, Silke / Kate Rigby (1996), *Out of the Shadows: Contemporary German Feminism*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press.

Blanchot, Maurice (1959), "Le Bon Usage de la Science-fiction", *Nouvelle Revue Française*, nr. 74, pp. 91-100.

Bleiler, Everett F. (1998), *Science Fiction: The Gernsback Years*, Kent, Ohio, Kent State UP.

Boer, Roland (1996), *Jameson and Jeroboam*, Atlanta, Scholars Press.

\_\_ (1997), *Novel Histories: The Fiction of Biblical Criticism*, Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press.

\_\_ (1999), *Knockin' on Heaven's Door: Biblical Limits*, London and New York, Routledge.

\_\_ (2003), *Marxist Criticism of the Bible*, London, Continuum.

\_\_ (2006), *The Criticism of Heaven*, Leiden, E.J. Brill.

Buchanan, Ian (1998), "Metacommentary on Utopia, or Jameson's Dialectic of Hope", *Utopian Studies*, vol. 9, nr. 2, pp. 18-30.

\_\_ (1999), "Deleuze and Cultural Studies", in Ian Buchanan (ed.), *A Deleuzian Century?*, Durham, Duke UP, pp. 103-117.

\_\_ (2002), "Reading Jameson Dogmatically", *Historical Materialism*, vol. 10, nr. 3, pp. 223-243.

\_\_ (2000), *Deleuzism: A Metacommentary*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh UP.

\_\_ (2001a), "Deleuze and American (Mythopoeic) Literature", *Southern Review*, vol. 34, nr. 2, pp. 72-85.

\_\_ (2001b), "Deleuze's 'Immanent Historicism'", *Parallax*, nr. 21, pp. 29-39.

\_\_ (2002), "Schizoanalysis and Hitchcock: Deleuze and The Birds", *Strategies: Journal of Theory, Culture and Politics*, vol. 15, nr. 1, pp. 105-118.

\_\_ (2003), "The Utility of Empire", *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, vol. 17, nr. 4, pp. 379-385.

Burgmann, Meredith / Verity Burgmann (1998), *Green Bans, Red Union: Environmental Activism and the New South Wales Builders Labourers' Federation*, Sydney, University of New South Wales Press.

Burgmann, Verity (1985), *"In Our Time": Socialism and the Rise of Labor 1885-1905*, Sydney, George Allen & Unwin.

\_\_ (1995), *Revolutionary Industrial Unionism: The Industrial Workers of the World in Australia*, Melbourne, Cambridge UP.

Clute, John / Peter Nichols (eds.) (1993), *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, London, Orbit.

Dowling, Terry (1993), *Twilight Beach*, Adelaide, Aphelion Publications.

Dugdale, Mrs H.A. Dugdale (1883), *A Few Hours in a Far-Off Age*, Melbourne, McCarron, Bird & Co.

Egan, Greg (1997), *Diaspora*, London, Millennium.

Fraser, Joseph (1889), *Melbourne and Mars: My Mysterious Life on Two Planets. Extracts from the Diary of a Melbourne Merchant*, Melbourne, E.W. Cole.

Harrison, Harry (ed.) (1974), *The John W. Campbell Memorial Anthology*, London, Sidgwick and Jackson.

Ikin, Van (ed.) (1982), *Australian Science Fiction*, Brisbane, University of Queensland Press.

James, Edward (1994), *Science Fiction in the Twentieth Century*, Oxford, Oxford UP.

Jameson, Fredric (2005), *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, London, Verso.

Johnson, Colin (Mudrooroo Narogin) (1983), *Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the End of the World*, Melbourne, Hyland House.

Mackay, Kenneth (2003), *The Yellow Wave: A Romance of the Asian Invasion of Australia*, ed. Andrew Enstice and Janeen Webb, Middletown, CT, Wesleyan UP.

Metcalf, William J. / Elizabeth Huf (2002), *Herrnhut: Australia's First Utopian*

*Commune*, Melbourne, Melbourne UP.

Miller, John (William Lane) (1892), *The Workingman's Paradise: An Australian Labour Novel*, Brisbane, Edwards, Dunlop & Co. and the Worker Board of Trustees.

Milner, Andrew (1981), *John Milton and the English Revolution: a Study in the Sociology of Literature*, London, Macmillan.

\_\_ (1994), "On the Beach: Apocalyptic Hedonism and the Origins of Postmodernism", in Ian Craven (ed.), *Australian Popular Culture*, Melbourne, Cambridge UP, pp. 190-204.

\_\_ (1996), *Literature, Culture and Society*, London, UCL Press.

\_\_ (2002), *Re-Imagining Cultural Studies: The Promise of Cultural Materialism*, London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi, Sage Publications.

\_\_ (2003), "Utopia and Science Fiction in Raymond Williams", *Science Fiction Studies*, nr. 90 (vol. 30, part 2), pp. 199-216.

\_\_ (2004a), "Darker Cities: Urban Dystopia and Science Fiction Cinema", *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 7, nr. 3, pp. 259-279.

\_\_ (2004b), "When Worlds Collide: Comparative Literature, World-Systems Theory and Science Fiction", *Southern Review*, vol. 37, nr. 2, pp. 89-101.

\_\_ (2005a), *Literature, Culture and Society*, second edition, London and New York, Routledge.

\_\_ (2005b), "Postmodern Gothic: Buffy, The X-Files and the Clinton Presidency", *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, vol. 19, nr. 1, pp. 103-116.

Milner, Andrew / Robert Savage / Matthew Ryan (eds.) (2006), *Imagining the Future: Utopia and Dystopia*, Melbourne, Arena Publications. Also published as *Arena Journal*, new series, nr 25/26.

Moylan, Tom (1986), *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination*, London, Methuen.

\_\_ (2000), *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia*,

Boulder, Colorado, Westview Press.

Pont, Graham / Peter Proudfoot (2002), "From Cosmic City to Esoteric Cinema", in Kim Williams / Jose Francisco Rodrigues (eds.), *Nexus IV: Architecture and Mathematics*, Florence, Kim Williams Books, pp. 195-206.

Proudfoot, Peter R. (1994), *The Secret Plan of Canberra*, Sydney, University of New South Wales Press.

Rigby, Kate (1996), *Transgressions of the Feminine: Tragedy, Enlightenment and the Figure of Women in Classical German Drama*, Heidelberg, C. Winter.

\_\_ (1999), "Making Connections: Towards a Spirituality of Immanence", *1999: A Social Ecology Journal*, pp. 209-224.

\_\_ (2000), "Goethean Science and the Blindness of Faust", *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment*, vol. 7, nr. 2, pp. 25-42.

\_\_ (2001a), "The Goddess Returns: Ecofeminist Reconfigurations of Gender, Nature and the Sacred", in F. Devlin-Glass and L. McCredden (eds.), *Feminist Poetics of the Sacred: Creative Suspicions*, New York, Oxford UP, pp. 23-54.

\_\_ (2001b), "Recovering from the Fall: The Greening of Modernity", *AUMLA* (Journal of the Australasian Universities Language and Literature Association), vol. 96, pp. 35-48.

\_\_ (2001c), "The Discovery of (the Other) Place in European Romanticism", *European Romantic Review*, vol. 12, nr. 2, pp. 165-174.

\_\_ (2003a), "Tuning in the Spirit of Place", in J. Cameron (ed.), *Changing Places: Re-imagining Australia*, Sydney, Longueville Books, pp. 107-115.

\_\_ (2003b), "The Rebirth of Nature in Romantic Thought", in Helmut Heinze / Christiane Weller (eds.), *Worlds of Reading: On the Theory, History and Sociology of Cultural Practice, Festschrift for Walter Veit*, Frankfurt, Peter Lang, pp. 387-397.

\_\_ (2004), *Topographies of the Sacred: The Poetics of Place in European Romanticism*, Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press.

Sargent, Lyman Tower (1999), "Australian Utopian Literature: An Annotated, Chronological Bibliography 1667-1999", *Utopian Studies*, no. 10, nr. 2, pp. 138-173.

Shute, Nevile (1957), *On the Beach*, Melbourne, Heinemann.

Souter, Gavin (1991), *A Peculiar People: William Lane's Australian Utopians in Paraguay*, third edition, Brisbane, University of Queensland Press.

Sparrow, Jeffrey (2002-2003), "Horror! The Melbourne Riots of 1992", *Arena Magazine*, nr. 62, pp. 44-46.

Turner, George (1987), *The Sea and Summer*, London, Faber.

Spence, Catherine Helen (1987), *A Week in the Future*, Introduction and Notes by Lesley Durrell Ljungdahl, Sydney, Hale and Iremonger.

Veiras, Denis (2001), *L'Histoire des Sévarambes*, ed. Aubrey Rosenberg, Paris, Champion.

\_\_ (2006), *The History of the Sevarambians: A Utopian Novel*, ed. John Christian Laursen and Cyrus Masroori, New York, State University of New York Press.

Walton, Robyn (2003), "Utopian and Dystopian Impulses in Australia", *Overland*, nr. 173, pp. 5-20.

Whitehead, Anne (1997), *Paradise Mislaid: In Search of the Australian Tribe of Paraguay*, Brisbane, University of Queensland Press.

\_\_ (2003), *Bluestocking in Paraguay*, London, Profile Books.

Wilding, Michael (1984), *The Paraguayan Experiment*, Melbourne, Penguin.