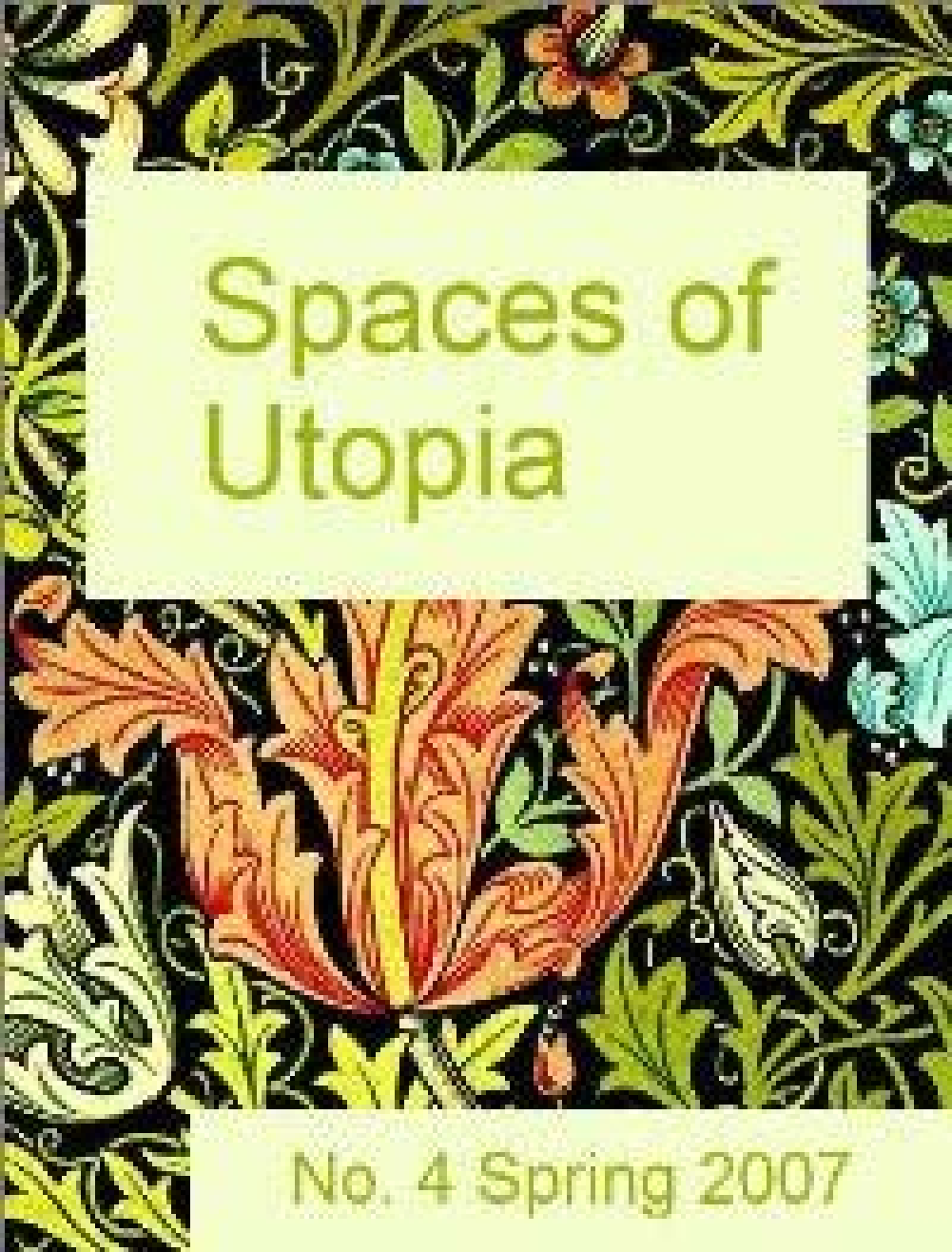
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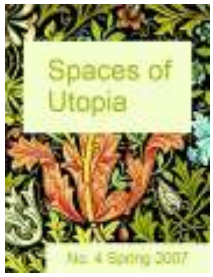
Ed. Maria Isabel Donas Botto



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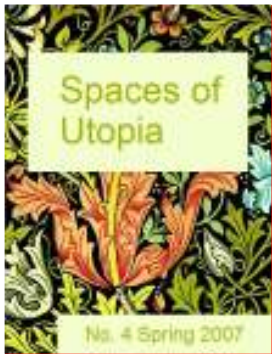
Cities as Spaces of Possibility:
An Interview with Saskia Sassen

By **Isabel Donas Botto**



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Saskia Sassen has just moved to Columbia University after a decade as the Ralph Lewis Professor of Sociology at the University of Chicago and Centennial Visiting Professor at the London School of Economics. She has written extensively on cities and globalisation. Amongst her publications are *The Global City* (Princeton, 1991, updated edition in 2001), *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages* (Princeton, 2006) and *Deciphering the Global: Its Spaces, Scales and Subjects* (Routledge, 2007). She was invited to speak at the International Architecture Conference – "The Heart of the City" (May 31st - June 2nd), which took place in Lisbon, and where, of the 27 speakers, she was the only one who was not an architect. The Conference was one of the main events of the Lisbon Architecture Triennale 2007 (May 31st - July 31st), whose general theme is "Urban Voids". Urban voids are defined by Spanish architect Ignasi de Solà Morales, quoted in *Vazios Urbanos/Urban Voids*, published to coincide with the Triennale, as "an area without clear limits, currently unused, hardly recognizable in the collective perception of citizens, usually forming a rupture in urban tissue. It is also an available area, full of expectations, strong in urban memory, with original potential: the space of possibility, of future".

Q: In a recent interview you said that we are poised at the moment "where the future begins" (in "The Ideas Interview", *Guardian*, July 4, 2006). I would like us to keep that in mind, as the present interview is to be published in an e-journal called *Spaces of Utopia*.

Let's start with your views on the contemporary city. From the publication of *The Global City* in 1991, you have researched the process of globalisation and its impact on cities. You have demonstrated that global cities are strategic sites in the global economy and argue that they have become central nodes in the new service economy, with gains in importance and power comparable to

nation-states. What is the impact of this process on the urban geography of old historic cities like London or Paris – to keep to European examples?

A: In my work I try to show that there are global systems which implant themselves in a growing number of places. This brings great prosperity to some places and devastation to others. But even within the most prosperous places, it can devastate particular communities and spaces. Thus a city like New York has both the largest concentration of riches and the largest concentration of poor (over 20% of the city's population) in the whole of the US. To a lesser extent we can say this about London, and about Paris if we take the larger Paris region (including the *banlieues*).

This is, of course not a new story. But in each era it assumes specific forms. It is also a tricky story, because cities, both in Europe and in the USA, had become quite poor by the 1970s, when the real action was in building suburbs, in mass manufacturing, in mass consumption. Globalization re-energised these old cities. In the 1970s London and New York for example had gone bankrupt (as had Tokyo), something many people do not realise.

Returning to the theme of the Triennale, what is really being signalled by the "rehabilitation" of the centres of major European cities (and major cities everywhere in the world!) is a transformation rather than a voiding – a totally different way of occupying urban space. With the expanded centres, you might have even more people. Thus Chicago's city as a whole did not gain much population, if any, over the last decade, but if you just take the downtown, the "centre", 90,000 more people live there today than 10 or 15 years ago. Mostly the centres of cities have modest growth in population even as they grow in surface. Yet another meaning, one less literal, has to do with the transforming of what occupies the centre. If you are not ready to detect what replaces that which has left, then you get the sense of voiding. But one has to be careful. Many see only what has left, especially the big firms, commercial banks, insurance companies and corporate headquarters. What they fail to see is that these have often been replaced by many very small firms, small but "state of the art", and somewhat invisible until it becomes clear they are the new content of the centre.

Some cities are going precisely through this type of transition. So they look voided but actually there is a whole new economy taking shape and putting its roots in their centre. It can take time, and conflicts, to detect the new content, for narratives to emerge about its meaning. We saw that in NY and in London during their vast economic crisis of the 1970s and into the early 1980s. Both cities went bankrupt. People thought they were finished as significant economic hubs. It took a while for the new economic reality to become part of the experience of people. That's my understanding of "urban voids". I like it, in an ironic way, because it has multiple meanings, it's very dramatic.

There are powerful logics that explain why particular actors need the centres, and then eventually may need it less and new ones emerge in the vortex of change and innovation that again reinhabit the centre, and on and on, in a cycle of death and new life. I developed this argument in my global city model. I disagree with the notion – very strong in certain theories – that the centre no longer exists, because everybody has left to the suburbs and edge cities, or that the centre has become mere simulacrum.

Q: Your research has focused, as far as I know, mostly on the big city, the metropolis. What about the medium-sized town? What is its place in a global economy? Aren't these towns, as more ecologically balanced communities, viable urban forms of the future? Should government policy protect and encourage the preservation of this kind of town, where it exists?

A: I think these are partly empirical questions. We need to do the research to get to the answers. But, yes, we do want to make sure smaller places, towns, survive, and that their full richness and potential and history are alive and well.

Q: I believe you have lived in London, a city which stands out as one of the examples of the global city that you have been studying for some years. Bearing in mind the theme of the Lisbon Conference, "the heart of the city", how do you see this metropolis? Does London have a centre, a heart?

A: Allow me to speak about cityness, rather than a specific city such as London. London is a good lens through which to get at these questions.

A critical feature of the urban condition, both in the past and today is the presence of vast scales juxtaposed with intersticial spaces. Cities such as London are spaces of massive structures, massive markets, and massive capabilities. We might wonder what options such urban spaces give urban designers, planners, and architects to express their interests and ideas about the future, about what is about to happen and hence needs to be factored into design. The issue here is not so much the few either exceptional or lucky designers who gain a global stage in their particular field. My concern is rather a more diffuse urban landscape of opportunities for "making" in urban spaces dominated by massive structures and powerful actors. It is not design per se that concerns me here, but rather the larger political economy of design in cities which are part of these new global networked geographies: what is this landscape within which design today needs to function. There are, clearly, multiple ways of positing the challenges facing architecture and planning as practice and as theory. Admittedly, in emphasising the crucial place of cities for architecture, I construct a problematic that is not only positioned but also, perhaps inevitably, partial.

One consequence of the patterns described in the preceding answer is the ascendance, partly objective and perhaps mostly subjective, of process and flow over fixity and place. Growing velocities render a growing range of urban experiences as one more of flows than things, notwithstanding the vast amount of thingness around us. One of my concerns in researching globalization and digitisation is to recover the fixity and the materialities underlying much of the global and the digital and obscured by prevailing notions that everything is becoming flow. The globalising of activities and flows is in good part dependent on a vast network of places, mostly global cities. These types of sites contain many kinds of fixed (and mobile) resources. Things and materiality are critical for digitisation and globalisation; and places matter for global flows.

Returning to London, it is just one of a large number of major cities that evince these patterns and potentials.

Q: London witnessed only a few years ago some intense and highly publicised street demonstrations on the part of "The Country Alliance". Do you think that the century-old debate on the opposition between country and city is a relevant debate today? Does it still make any sense given the gradual disappearance of frontiers between city and country as well as the impact of globalisation on urban geography?

A: There is much to be said about this, but let me just highlight an analytics that I think it captures something easily lost in the opposing of city and country.

A given geographic terrain can contain diverse spatialities. I think that much of what is still represented as the rural is increasingly occupied by novel spatialities, including non-rural ones. Thus in the UK, much of rural Britain, especially if not too far from London, is increasingly an extension of the urban economy, its markets, its demands. This new space economy that cuts across the rural-urban divide can exist along with some older, rural economies.

In some ways it is not new, but it is certainly much more prevalent than in the past.

Q: Again in Britain, there still seems to be a widespread interest in the concept of the garden-city. William Morris idealized a utopian future where "the town would be impregnated with the beauty of the country, and the country with the intelligence and the vivid life of the town". The garden-city utopia, idealised by Ebenezer Howard, was an influential notion in twentieth-century urbanism and it has kept its appeal, not only in Britain, but also, I believe, in other countries, including the United States. In the age of the global city, do you think that this utopia, even if modified, will retain an impact? Could it be a viable instrument of change?

A: Well, confronted with the massiveness of today's cities, vast infrastructures, vast corporate buildings, vast numbers of people, vast sprawl, the garden-city becomes finally a utopia. Most small towns and suburbs and exurbs were not that far away from the visual order (perhaps not the social order) of the garden-city.

Q: Suburbanisation is the other side of the coin of the desertification of the urban centre. Is this an irreversible process?

A: I like the juxtaposition of the voiding (desertification) of the urban centre and the growth of suburbanisation. I also think that it marks the preceding phase – the keynesian phase. As of the 1980s we see a whole new content and format for the urban centre. It emerges in the old grand cities – London, Paris, New York – out of the ashes of the destruction that suburbanisation meant for their earlier glories – your notion of desertification of the urban centre. But as of the 1980s we see a new phase. It is a mistake to think that suburbanisation is in play today as a factor shaping the character of the urban centre. The whole story of suburbanization which continues today with great vigour all around the world is really an older form. It is not the beginning of the future. The new, reinvented urban centre, brutal in its demands and power to impose itself on other claims, to summarily dismiss other claims on the centre, has no organisational relationship with the suburb, the way the old modern city did – what the suburb gained, the city lost. The future – the beginning of the future – is about another organi-city.

Q: In an interview last year (*Guardian*, July 4, 2006), you said that "we are becoming a planet of urban glamour zones and urban slums". Can you elaborate on this?

A: This is the marker of the current tension and organicity – the urban glamour zone and the urban slum. It has replaced the older tension of suburb versus city. As we move to a majority of people living in urbanised areas, these are the emergent sharp formats. They are not the only ones – most people continue to live in medium-sized cities, in town, in suburbs. New formats are rarely the majority condition.

Q: The 20th century has given us plenty of images, in literature and in the cinema, of a future portrayed in dystopian cities. Given the current huge problems faced by big cities – poverty, crime, inner city desertification (coupled,

in historic city centres, with their museumification) and unceasing suburbanisation (a process that Murray Bookchin has referred to as "urban cannibalism") – and the apparent incapacity of local governments to deal with it, the vision of the future that links the urban to the dystopian may prevail. Can we prevent this? Here I would refer to your earlier comment, that we are poised at the moment "where the future begins".

A: Yes and no. Alfonso Cuaron, the Mexican director, made a (Hollywood) film, Children of Men, where he looks at London in 2027 – so it is not the science fiction of a faraway future, but quite close. It is a very dramatic acocunt of the fear and hatred of the "other", and how terribly destructive this fear and hatred of people can be for a city. It explodes the container of diversity that is a city, and it becomes a war zone. The urban is lost. Cuaron also made a parallell documentary, for which I was interviewed. There I say that Cuaron's London of 2027 is the worst case scenario, but quite real. The good case scenario will take politics, because I am afraid that the "civic" is no longer enough. I do think that urban space, especially in large global cities, has become profoundly politicised. Politics is wired into urban space itself, it is not just a question of political actors and action.

See also the Tate's exhibition of Global Cities – the urban glamour zone and the urban slum being its dominant images. It is, by the way, quite interesting that art is engaging the urban in such frontal and unmediated ways.

Q: I suppose another way of putting this last question would be to ask you whether you think utopia is still useful in our world, not as a blueprint for a model society but as project for the rebuilding or regeneration of urban space(s).

A: We are clearly living an age of dystopias, not utopias. Utopias look neat. Neat is not part of the currency of the present. Positing Utopia as a project is a genuinely utopian move. Somehow I think that the rebuilding you allude to is housed in the dominion of politics, not utopia. I mean the making of the political

– or the re-making of the political as we have known it. Now there is a utopian project!

Q: The theme of your panel, at the Lisbon Triennale, was the redefinition of urban centres, a subject viewed with great urgency at the present time. Does the success of cities depend on the recovery of their centres? Can this recovery be orchestrated without adopting the homogenising urban responses dictated by the global economy?

A: This is a complicated issue. In a way I answered at the beginning of the interview, in some of the earlier questions.

Q: What about urban voids – these places generated by processes of decay and physical and social degradation in city areas – that are the focus of the Triennale? Are they, as "expectant places", spaces of hope? Do you think that they can, in any way, keep a utopian dimension, as places of intervention, for instance, as places where local inhabitants – citizens – can leave their mark, build a sense of place, strengthen their community ties?

A: Even as massive projects proliferate, these cities contain many under-used spaces, often characterised more by memory than current meaning. These spaces are part of the interiority of a city, yet lie outside of its organising utility-driven logics and spatial frames. They are the "terrains vagues" and urban voids that Ignnacio Soli Morales wrote about and that has inspired this Trienal. These spaces allow many residents to connect to the rapidly transforming cities in which they live, and subjectively to bypass the massive infrastructures that have come to dominate more and more spaces in their cities.[1] Jumping at these terrains vagues in order to maximize real estate development would be a mistake from this perspective. Keeping some of this openness, might, further, make sense in terms of factoring future options at a time when utility logics change so quickly and often violently, excess of high rise office buildings being one of the great examples.

This opens up a salient dilemma about the current urban condition in ways that take it beyond the more transparent notions of high-tech architecture, virtual spaces, simulacra, theme parks. All of the latter matter, but they are fragments of an incomplete puzzle. There is a type of urban condition that dwells between the reality of massive structures and the reality of semi-abandoned places. I think it is central to the experience of the urban, and it makes legible transitions and unsettlements of specific spatio-temporal configurations.

The work of capturing this elusive quality that cities produce and make legible is not easily executed. Utility logics won't do. I can't help but think that artists are part of the answer – whether ephemeral public performances and installations or more lasting types of public sculpture, whether site-specific/community-based art, or nomadic sculptures that circulate among localities.

And so are architectural practices located in unforthcoming spaces. There is a diversity of such spaces. One instance is that of intersections of multiple transport and communication networks, where the naked eye or the engineer's understanding sees no shape, no possibility of a form, just pure infrastructure and its necessary uses. Another instance is a space that requires the work of detecting possible architectures where there now is merely a formal silence, a non-existence, such as a modest terrain vague, not a grand one that becomes magnificent through the scale of its decay, such as an old unused industrial harbor. In addition to all the other forms of work they represent, architecture and urban design can also function as critical artistic practices that allow us to capture something about this elusive urban quality – going far beyond what is represented by notions such as the theme-parking of the urban.

Q: I would like to end by asking you to comment on an interpretation of the place of utopia in the modern world as proposed by Françoise Choay: "Utopia, nowadays, is about recovering a sense of place".

A: Not sharp enough… recovering a sense of place can happen through many vectors, and is happening. You do not need utopia for that. As I said before,

utopia might be coming through the venue of remaking the political, a project where cities are a strategic space.

Saskia Sassen is moving to Columbia University to join the newly established Committee on Global Thought, after a decade at the University of Chicago. She is also a Centennial Visiting Professor at the London School of Economics. Her new book is *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages* (Princeton University Press 2006). She has just completed for UNESCO a five-year project on sustainable human settlement for which she set up a network of researchers and activists in over 30 countries; it is published as one of the volumes of the *Encyclopedia of Life Support Systems* (Oxford, UK: EOLSS Publishers) [http://www.eolss.net].

Two of Saskia Sassen's most recent books have been translated into French, Spanish and Italian.

Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages:
Spanish: Buenos Aires Y Madrid : Ed. Katz 2007
Italian: Bruno Mondadori 2007
French: Paris: *Demopolis 2007*

A Sociology of Globalization (New York: Norton 2007):
Spanish: Buenos Aires Y Madrid, Ed. Katz, 2007
Italian: Einaudi, 2007
French: Paris, Gallimard 2007

Note

[1] For one of the best treatments of such "terrains vagues", see Ignasi Solá Morales, *Obra*, vol. 3 (Editorial Gigli, Barcelona, 2004). For an example of an intervention in one of these terrain vagues, in this case in the city of Buenos Aires, see Kermes Urbana, an organization which seeks to produce public space by reactivating such terrains vagues. (see at www.m7red.com.ar/m7-KUintro1.htm).

Fragments and Crossroads in Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring*

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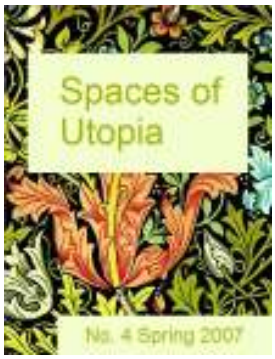

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Is it possible to think of utopia outside western cultural values? Technological advances are often identified as something outside postcolonial "tradition", and consequently, any utopia that leans on the future rather than on a nostalgic, Edenic past, appears to be outside the creative boundaries of any postcolonial author. This is particularly evident when we examine science fiction (henceforth *sf*). As Uppinder Mehan argues, there is a close relationship between sf and the power structures generated by technological development: "[Sf] is as Western as Coca-Cola, big cars, and computers (...) in the Orientalist scheme the West is rational and scientific; the East is mystical and fantastic. Technology is a cultural artifact: it is value laden as well as instrumental" (Mehan 1998: 54). Nalo Hopkinson, who co-edited the sf anthology *So Long Been Dreaming* with Mehan, referred explicitly to this article in her introduction to the stories – all by postcolonial sf authors. She added a significant comment she received from an acquaintance, a black scholar:

> He listened to my description of my story ['Riding the Red'], then asked, 'What do you think of Audre Lorde's comment that massa's tools will never dismantle massa's house?'
>
> I froze (…) To be a person of colour writing science fiction is to be under suspicion of having internalized one's colonization. (Hopkinson/Mehan 2004: 7)

At the end of the text, however, Hopkinson states that she is more interested in changing a system of values that perceives technological progress as something

outside non-western experience, and consequently, literature that deals with it as a surrender to western oppression: “In my hands, massa’s tools don’t dismantle massa’s house – and in fact, I don’t want to destroy it so much as I want to undertake massive renovations – they build me a house of my own” (*idem*, 8).

In fact, many speculative tropes appear often in postcolonial fiction even though they are hardly ever identified as science or utopian fiction. This is because some issues, such as environmental control, cultural clashes and imperialism, are actually relevant to both genres. Thus, when the ideology of cultural and racial confrontation is challenged, speculative fiction becomes particularly useful in the creation of what Homi Bhabha refers to as counter-narratives. Counter-narratives, in Bhabha’s words, allow authors to “disturb those ideological manoeuvres through which ‘imagined communities’ are given essentialist identities” (Bhabha 2004a: 213). Bhabha’s view on the construction national identities (which he considers arbitrary, “imagined communities”) can easily be extrapolated to our own constructions of the Earth’s future, if we see this future as the construction of a utopian global nation, and humanity as a whole as one of these “imagined communities”. In this way, the importance of finding future-oriented utopian fiction by non-western authors becomes a key issue in our political and social perception of how, and by whom, the Earth’s future communities will be constructed. As Philip E. Wegner explains:

> in the narrative utopia, the presentation of an “ideal world” operates as a kind of lure (...) to draw its readers in and thereby enable the form’s educational machinery to go to work – a machinery that enables its readers to perceive the world they occupy in a different way, providing them with some of the skills and dispositions necessary to inhabit an emerging social, political, and cultural environment. (Wegner 2002: 2)

A similar idea was expressed by Nalo Hopkinson in a 2002 interview, when she was asked to define speculative fiction ("spec-fic"), a label often used to comprise fantasy, utopian and science fictions. Her definition shows special concern with the human ability to control and change their environment. As in her introduction to *So Long Been Dreaming*, Hopkinson also uses here the concept of "tools":

> As to my definition of spec-fic, I describe it as a set of literatures that examine the effects on humans and human societies of the fact that we are toolmakers. We are always trying to control or improve our environments. Those tools may be tangible (such as machines) or intangible (such as laws, mores, belief systems). Spec-fic tells us stories about our lives with our creations. (Nelson 2002: 98)

Brown Girl in the Ring, Hopkinson's first novel, deals both with tangible and intangible "tools" to transform its original oppressive environment. Her choice to set the novel in a dystopian Toronto was both as a practical and as a political choice. There is no geographical distance and very little temporal distance between the city Hopkinson resides in and the future Toronto she describes. As she said in an article about the novel for LOCUS magazine, this was intentional:

> I left the setting in Toronto partly because I was writing so fast, it's set where I live. I didn't have to make up an environment. And partly because I don't know a whole lot about how people live in the suburbs. If I have to describe somebody surviving in a hostile environment, that's one I know (...) And it occurred to me that most post-holocaust novels happen outside the city. I wondered about the people who stayed – because people *will stay;* they always do. (Hopkinson 1999: 77, italics in the original)

The collapse of Toronto was most likely inspired by the decay of a great amount of urban centers of cities such as the nearby Detroit or the Bronx neighborhood in New York in the 70s (Rutledge 2001: 36). In *Brown Girl*, the city

has been abandoned by the Canadian federal government and left in bankruptcy. The near-future city is virtually in the hands of a criminal organisation named "the posse", which, as we will eventually learn, is controlled by no other than the protagonist's grandfather, Rudy. In the novel's prologue, Rudy is asked to go hunting for a viable heart to save the life of Ontario's Premier Uttley, whose chances of re-election depend on her demagogic opposition to pig-to-human organ transplants. The faulty heart of Uttley is, as we shall see, a parody of situation of the "Burn", the deteriorated urban centre of Toronto, which is occasionally referred to as the "core". The novel portrays two opposing struggles to survive: that of Premier Uttley and the materialistic suburban world she represents; and that of the downtrodden society of the "Burn", a society plagued by criminality and fear, but also where barter and community exchange have flourished.

More dualities and fragmentations appear throughout the novel. Thus, although *Brown Girl in the Ring*'s protagonist is Ti-Jeanne, the novel has a narrative composed of a multitude of points of view – among them, Rudy, Ti-Jeanne's boyfriend Tony, and Ti-Jeanne's grandmother Gros-Jeanne. In Hopkinson's novel the story's point of view does not belong to Ti-Jeanne exclusively, but rather, to the split narratives that oppose the complex social network of the "Burn" to the outside authorities who decide the city's future. The story, thus, is as much the story of the "Brown Girl" as the story of the "Ring" she is found in. Split or fragmented identities appear often as schizophrenia in the novel. In fact, one of the inspirations for the novel was Hopkinson's discovery of the great

incidence of this mental illness among the Caribbean immigrant population in the UK:

> [the researchers] had no real theories as to why, but part of their idea was that the imbalance that caused the schizophrenia was probably impelled in part by the culture shock of coming to such a different land and, being male, having fewer social resources.
>
> The image caught me. And because I usually start with a female protagonist, I started with a woman who had some of those symptoms, but had no idea how to explain them. (Hopkinson 1999: 76)

Schizophrenia is actually a recurrent metaphor in postcolonial environments. As Homi Bhabha argues, anxiety must be incorporated as a key element in "narratives of the borderline conditions of cultures and disciplines" (Bhabha 2004b: 306) for anxiety resembles, in his view, Samuel Weber's presentation of "a world [that] reveals itself as caught up in the space between frames; a doubled frame or one that is split" (*apud* Weber 1991: 61). Bhabha goes on to present Fredric Jameson's view of schizophrenia as a basic metaphor of postmodern life, since "it is the schizoid or 'split' subject that articulates, with the greatest intensity, the disjunction of time and being that characterizes the social syntax of the postmodern condition" (Bhabha 2004b: 307).

Bhabha speaks of Jameson's concept of postmodern time as a time where, in Jameson's words, there is "a multidimensional set of radical discontinuous realities, whose frames range from the still surviving spaces of bourgeois private life all the way to the unimaginable decentring of global capital itself" (*apud* Jameson 1991: 413).

It can be argued that this is particularly evident for postcolonial peoples, who must reconcile a past of western imperialism with various local traditions and somehow create a coherent present from these certainly "radical discontinuous realities". Of all, perhaps Caribbean literature is the most extreme example of these conflicts. As Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin argue in *The Empire Strikes Back,* the Caribbean is neither fully European nor African or American, and the region lacks even a language it can call its own; as the plantation economy made a strong effort to eliminate both the language and tradition of its enslaved Africans and the native Tainos, making them "subject to a tragic alienation from both language and landscape" (Ashcroft *et al*. 2001: 145). In the midst of an even more developed process of Jameson's "decentring of global capital", that of Caribbean immigrants transplanted once more, this time to western countries such as the UK or Canada, Hopkinson's quote indicates how schizophrenia, both as a clinical and as artistic expression, still appears as an apt portrayal of such unresolved dilemmas.

Like the narrative, the city of Toronto itself presents another example of a fragmented reality. The first glimpse we get in the novel of this near-future Toronto is a vivid description of its geography. One of the first things we can perceive from this description is the opposition of the two communities we are already acquainted with through Uttley and Rudy:

> Imagine a cartwheel half-mired in muddy water, its hub just clearing the surface. The spokes are the satellite cities that form Metropolitan Toronto (...) The Toronto city core is the hub (...) Now imagine the hub of that wheel as being rusted through and through. (Hopkinson 1998: 3-4)

The collapse of the city has been originated itself by a postcolonial conflict –

the fight over the land by the Temagami Indians, the original settlers of the area. At an exhibit made by the "self-appointed town librarian" (*idem*, 10), Mr. Reed, at Parkdale Library, we are made aware that the city has been trapped between an international embargo and the Canadian government's disinterest in solving the problem, which results in a downsized police force. This makes criminality rise to unheard-of levels and finally leads to the desertion of corporations, institutions, jobs and middle-class citizens. By the time the Temagamis win the lawsuit, Toronto has become a "doughnut hole", an urban space where the " 'burbs", the affluent middle-class suburbs, surround a dilapidated city centre, the "Burn" (*idem*, 11). The collapse of the Bronx in New York City, which shows some parallelisms with the story of the "Burn", is also a clear story of the devastating effects of fragmentation. The Bronx had been a middle-class neighbourhood (known as the "Beautiful Bronx"), but this changed during the fifties. Under the direction of Robert Moses, several new highways were constructed in the area, cutting across the borough. Among them was the infamous Cross Bronx Expressway, which literally split the neighbourhood in two halves and caused serious disruptions in its social fabric. The vast majority of the middle class fled to other neighbourhoods or to North Bronx, and further attempts for urban planning only managed to make the situation worse, to the point that landlords preferred setting their properties on fire rather than rent them (Birch 2001: 63-9).

While the "Burn" cannot be classified as a victim of urban planning in itself, the pattern of its downfall does reflect these issues at least in two major aspects: the flight of most of the middle-class white community and the ineptitude of

politicians to recognise and then stop the neighbourhood's decay, in great measure due to their lack of interest in what its citizens have to say.

Like the Bronx at its worst, the "Burn" is described later as a dangerous place where "pedicab runners" (as gasoline is not available and taxis cannot run) refuse to enter, and where the book's protagonist, Ti-Jeanne, must look around her constantly in order to defend herself from fights and the sexual advances of passersby (Hopkinson 1998: 9, 31). However, the "Burn" shows a strong sense of community and a strong will to survive, which can be seen in the collection of secondary characters Hopkinson introduces in the first chapter. Apart from the "self-appointed librarian", who we should assume took over the library as its original workers abandoned it, we can see a self-published newspaper that fulfilled the role of the main Toronto papers when they left, a man who reconditions bicycles and then sells them (*idem*, 12); and Paula and Pavel, two former University of Toronto professors that sell the products of their hunting and farming in the city's Allan Gardens park to the "Burn" community (*idem*, 11-13).

The strength of community collaboration is a theme dear to Hopkinson. It re-occurs in her second novel, *Midnight Robber*, and in her short story "A Habit of Waste", where one of its characters also re-discovers the possibilities of the hunting and gathering of his Caribbean childhood as an alternative to the inadequate official option, the food bank. This vitality of the inner city's inhabitants of *Brown Girl in the Ring* is the mirror image of the " 'burbs". The suburban gated communities are closed upon themselves and against the exterior, focusing on an individualism that causes uneasiness in Ti-Jeanne herself, in spite of its economic

and security advantages: “all she could imagine were broad streets with cars zipping by too fast to see who was in them, and people huddled in their houses” (*idem*, 111). On the other hand, the “Burn” enjoys a freedom very similar to what Mikhail Bakhtin identified in *Rabelais and His World* as the spirit of the marketplace:

> The marketplace was the center of all that is unofficial; it enjoyed a certain extraterritoriality in a world of official power and official ideology, it always remained ‘with the people’(...) Thus the unofficial folk culture of the Middle Ages and even of the Renaissance had its own territory and its own particular time, the time of fairs and feasts. This territory, as we have said, was a peculiar second world within the official medieval order and was ruled by a special type of relationship. A free, familiar, marketplace relationship. (Bakhtin 1984: 153-4)

It is useful to note that the values of the Bakhtinian marketplace resemble Jane Jacobs’s own vision of working, realistic neighbourhoods.[1] Jacobs successfully fought and defeated the Moses administration in a plan for Greenwich Village similar to the one made effective in the Bronx (Burns *et al*. 1999: 514-520). In her introduction to *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, a book where she presented an alternative to such as Moses’ plans, Jacobs criticizes what she considers the underlying undemocratic spirit of grand urban schemes, which she identifies with a sort of “utopia” that belongs only to a planning elite: “As in all Utopias, the right to have plans of any significance belonged only to the planners in charge” (Jacobs 1961: 17). Although Jacobs appears so critical about utopian works, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* could be classified as one in its aims. The great difference from schemes such as Moses’ is that Jacobs leans on micromanagement rather than on a master plan that must be followed to the letter. The author defends the utility of the small stores such as the ones we see in

the “Burn”, and the uses of sidewalks as “contact zones”, which she compares disadvantageously with the institutionalised “projects” where, as in the “ ‘burbs” (suburbs), spaces are organised for determined uses and yet, she argues, have consistently failed to work because of their alienating, impersonal character. The difference, Jacobs contends, is that while institutional figures can be perceived as intrusive and impersonal, the sidewalk and the store owner breach the “almost unconsciously enforced, well-balanced line between the city public world and the world of privacy” (*idem*, 62).

This interlocutor role given by Jacobs to the store owners and the public sidewalk, as well as Bakhtin’s marketplace spirit, appears in a mythical form in *Brown Girl in the Ring* with its most notable supernatural character, Legbara. Hopkinson’s choice of this *vodun* spirit is well calculated. Zora Neale Hurston describes the god Legba or Legbara as an African-Caribbean deity responsible for crossroads, cemeteries and the opening of gates, including the gate of communication with other gods (Hurston 1990: 128). Maya Deren, on the other hand, emphasises his sexual role as procreator. Endowed with an enormous phallus, according to traditions in Dahomey, this “limb” is not a symbol of aggression but as a counterpart of the womb and the umbilical cord, all of which, like Jacobs’s sidewalk and Bakhtin’s marketplace, are liminal objects in charge of connecting, not bringing apart:

> Whether as cord or phallus, Legba – life – is the link between the visible, mortal world and the invisible, immortal realms. He is the means and avenue of communication between them, the vertical axis of the universe which stretches between the sun door and the tree root. (Deren 1953: 97)

The three symbols Deren makes reference to (the womb, the umbilical cord and the phallus) can easily be identified in the novel as Ti-Jeanne herself, her baby and her baby's father, Tony. On the other hand, Legbara becomes in this way the ideal symbolic interlocutor between Ti-Jeanne's western, materialistic world and her family roots. The role of supernatural elements in this novel is intertwined with the complex relationship of its protagonist, Ti-Jeanne, with her Caribbean-Canadian identity, another of Jameson's "radical discontinuous realities" between the past and the present, the local and the global. Ti-Jeanne is the last of a line of supernaturally gifted women, even though she is reluctant to learn about her powers and their implications. Eventually, Ti-Jeanne is confronted by her grandmother, and after she agrees to learn about her faculties, her link with her patron spirit allows her to become an interlocutor not only for the traditions she has abandoned and her present life, but also for the disconnected worlds of mortals and spirits. Thus, for example, Legbara becomes instrumental in Tony's attempted escape from the city.

Tony resorts to Ti-Jeanne's grandmother as his last resort to escape his boss, Rudy, who has put him in charge of the hunt and murder of a heart donor due to his training as a nurse. His desire to escape it reverses the role of the city of Toronto as a land for immigration, and, by extension, of Canada as the end of the Underground Railroad that took slaves away from the US in the nineteenth century. For Tony, the city has become the opposite, a land of oppression, and his escape "out of Toronto and into the real world constitutes his only hope for an independent, safe life away from the "posse" and its criminal activities" (Hopkinson 1998: 111).

Gros-Jeanne invokes the spirits hoping that they might help her to smuggle him out of the city and into the suburbs without Rudy noticing him. Legbara intervenes by concealing his "spirit daughter" Ti-Jeanne from mortal eyes and, through her, her boyfriend as well. Hopkinson connects this episode with Afro-Caribbean tradition, as Legbara's strategy consists in hiding the young woman "halfway in Guinea Land" (*idem*, 95). Guinea Land is the mythical land of the ancestors for many Africans transplanted to the Americas, and, as a matter of fact, many African slaves committed suicide during plantation times in order to return to this mythical native land (Dayan 1995: 259).

Legbara, with his control over life and death and transition matters, can have the power to conceal his protégés, and, on the other hand, the episode locates Tony (and, to a lesser extent, Ti-Jeanne) in a reversal of the Middle Passage – if Africans were enslaved in "Guinea" and brought over to the Americas, Tony attempts, through his concealment "halfway in Guinea Land", a liminal contact zone, to escape to freedom from Rudy, the "posse" and his own drug addiction.

The figure of Rudy bears a large resemblance with a plantation overseer, not only in his complicity with the power structure of the Ontario government represented by Uttley, but also in his distortion of traditional knowledge in order to control the enclosed space of the "Burn". Ti-Jeanne's grandfather has actually received much of his knowledge from the same source as Ti-Jeanne herself, as they both have the same father spirit, Legbara. However, Rudy's thirst for power has led him to violate supernatural laws – he uses *vodun* to blackmail or mentally control others, Tony among them, especially during his search for the compatible

human heart Premier Uttley demands. When such heart finally appears, it turns out to be the heart of Gros-Jeanne. To obtain the organ, Tony, who is being threatened with supernatural torture by Rudy, is forced to kill the old woman. Her death symbolises the death of an irretrievable wealth of knowledge, and after her loss, the balance that existed between Ti-Jeanne's grandmother and her grandfather Rudy is broken. The need to stop his activities becomes evident, and the responsibility falls on Ti-Jeanne.

Hopkinson chooses an emblematic location for her confrontation with Rudy. It is hard not to think of Foucault's Panopticon when we see that the posse leader has set his headquarters on top of the CN Tower of Toronto, a tower clearly visible from most spots of Toronto's metropolitan area. He has done this mainly because of the feeling of overpowering control it inspires:

> He went to one of the windows to look down on the city that was thousands of feet below the observation deck of his tower. Toronto was in darkness now, except for the lights that picked out the malls with their independent power sources. To his left was the dark mass of Lake Ontario and the red glow of Niagara Falls on its horizon. This ruined city was his kingdom. (Hopkinson 1998: 199-200)

The transformation of the well-known landmark has a postcolonial undertone to it, as the tower has ceased to be a Toronto tourist landmark and has become, as a consequence of the city's abandonment, a watchtower for Rudy, marking the shift of power from the white middle- and upper-classes to Rudy's criminal organisation. Later in the novel, however, the tower will undergo a larger transformation, as it will be reclaimed to become yet another contact zone between worlds.

The second transformation, prompted by Ti-Jeanne, is related to power and cultural memory. Rudy's breaking of the spirit-human collaborative system we mentioned above is what brings his downfall through his granddaughter herself, who restores the traditions that her grandmother represented. As Legbara puts it: "Gros-Jeanne woulda tell you that all she doing is serving the spirits (...) Now Rudy, he does try and make the spirits serve *he*" (*idem,* 219). Only collaboration, not domination, will do. It is only after Ti-Jeanne understands this system that the tower undergoes its second transformation, from observation tool for a criminal organisation to a geographical link between the material and the spiritual worlds:

> She remembered her grandmother's words: *The centre pole is the bridge between the worlds.* Why had those words come to her right then?
>
> Ti-Jeanne thought of the centre pole of the palais, reaching up into the air and down toward the ground. She thought of the building she was in. The CN Tower. And she understood what it was: 1,815 feet of the tallest centre pole in the world. (*idem*, 221, italics in the original)

As Ti-Jeanne uses the tower to invoke the spirits of the dead and the heaven deities, the appropriation of the tower re-connects the past with the present, Ti-Jeanne's material world with the spirits, and the Toronto landscape with Caribbean traditions: "For like the spirit tree that the centre pole symbolised, the CN Tower dug roots deep into the ground where dead lived and pushed high into the heavens" (*idem*, 221). The tower's transformation is a parodic re-creation that opens what Homi Bhabha considers defines as the "Third Space":

> It is that Third Space (...) which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew. (Bhabha 2004a: 208)

It is this "bridge", a Toronto tourist landmark that has been, in Bhabha's words, "appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew" that allows Ti-Jeanne to summon both the higher spirits and the souls of Rudy's dead and tortured victims, and it will be with their help that she is able to defeat him.

And as the gap between worlds is finally bridged, so are the two hearts presented at the novel's introduction merged into one single body, as Premier Uttley receives her transplant. Contrary to what we might have expected, it is the heart (Gros-Jeanne's heart), and not the patient, which is portrayed as rejecting the transplant. The plea the unconscious Uttley makes to Gros-Jeanne's heart is ironically reminiscent of the discourse of governments towards minority groups: "*Stop that. You're here to help me. Just settle down and do your job"* (Hopkinson 1998: 236, italics in the original). The heart, however, will not merely submit, rather, it will find a satisfactory solution for both Gros-Jeanne and Uttley. Just like in the case of spirits and their servers, it will be symbiosis:

> *And then [Uttley] was aware again. Her dream body and brain were hers once more, but with a difference. The heart – her heart – was dancing joyfully between her ribs. When she looked down at herself, she could see the blood moving through her body to its beat. In every artery, every vein, every capillary: two distinct streams, intertwined.* (*idem*, 237, italics in the original)

Both Uttley and Gros-Jeanne will benefit from this new hybridized self. According to Baker, "[b]oth literally and figuratively, the body of the Canadian nation-state is fortified by the transplant of an 'alien organ'" (Baker 2001: 220). Uttley recovers her health soon enough, but more importantly, Gros-Jeanne's heart accesses Uttley's power and makes her seriously consider making substantial changes in the "Burn". This will not involve providing incentives to big business to

move in, as Uttley planned before the transplant, but rather, in a plan that Jane Jacobs would certainly approve of, the hybridised Premier will help the small entrepreneurs that have begun to bud due to the barter survival system the city's situation has fostered.

Brown Girl in the Ring moves, therefore, from the organ traffic ethics of exploitation to the symbiosis ethics of collaboration, and from a split, fragmented state to a state of reunion. This move, as we have seen, has strong political implications. Not only does it put the struggle for survival in inner cities front and centre, but also it allows us to glimpse an alternative future of re-birth and independence for them. This alternative future does not need to be obtained or validated by forces outside the community, but rather it is achieved through two means. Firstly, through Ti-Jeanne's reconnection of her past with her present, and the collaboration of different spheres of existence, both symbolised by the CN Tower at the conclusion of the novel. Secondly, by achieving a new hybridised body, Uttley and Gros-Jeanne overcome the conflict of polarised ethnic and economic identities in order to propitiate that "Third Space" that Homi Bhabha refers to, which would make possible "to begin envisaging national, anti-nationalist, histories of the 'people'" (Bhabha 2004a: 209). In this novel, the shift of perception needed to read supernatural and science-fictional tropes allows to discuss issues that may otherwise become blurred and hard to tackle with. Through this shift of perception, syncretism can appear as a solid presence in the figures of the CN Tower and the Gros-Jeanne/Uttley hybrid, and the dangers of surrendering to individualist ambition and suspending the collaborative system in the figure of

Rudy's downfall. On the other hand, the city, transformed geographically into a communal, global, multicultural and radically different world, embodies both the catastrophe of exploitation and the power of creativity and resilience.

Note

[1] Some of Jacobs's comments in *Death and Life of Great American Cities* have surprising Bakhtinian resonances: "There is a quality even meaner than outright ugliness or disorder, and this meaner quality is the dishonest mask of pretended order, achieved by ignoring or suppressing the real order that is struggling to exist and be served" (Jacobs 1961: 15).

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New World Literature?
Crossing Borders with Isabella Bird and Winnifred Eaton

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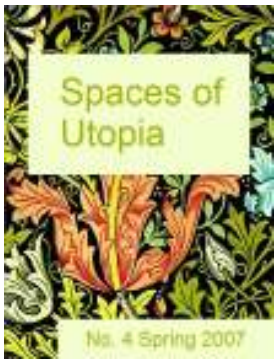

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Utopia, as journey in time and space, could only be a splendid metaphor for this adventure in a territory not yet completely explored by the female conscience.
Vita Fortunati, "Utopia Re-Interpreted:
An Interview with Vita Fortunati" (2006)

… the utopian element is ultimately a component of identity. What we call ourselves is also what we expect and yet what we are not.
Paul Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*
(1975/1986)

Stopping for the night at one of the first towns that lay on her route to the northern Japanese island of Hokkaido in 1878, Scottish traveller Isabella Bird soon became aware of close scrutiny. A large crowd had arrived at the village inn before her, and so, she had to accept whatever accommodation remained, a room barely large enough for her camp bed and collapsible rubber bath, and enclosed only by sliding windows with translucent paper for window panes. These "*shoji* were full of holes", she laments in her travel narrative, "and often at each hole", she continues, "I saw a human eye. Privacy was a luxury not even to be recalled" (Bird 2000: 50). Accessible spaces seem to present a particular problem for the nineteenth-century narrator who must account for a female

character's presence within them. American writer John Luther Long draws a distinction similar to Bird's between open Eastern dwelling and a Western desire for privacy in his 1898 novel *Madame Butterfly*. For Long's central male character Mr. B. F. Pinkerton, "clever Japanese artists (...) made the paper walls of [a] pretty house eye-proof". Then, "with their own adaptations of American hardware, the openings cunningly lockable. The rest was Japanese" (Long 2002: 30). This innovative adaptation performed by Japanese artists in service to an American owner defines a secure, private place where the American Lieutenant Pinkerton's marriage to the Japanese Madame Butterfly can be constructed. Pinkerton gives his wife the authority of keys, but he then refuses to allow her relatives into the house, thereby constituting what he calls a "modern" relationship and isolating a woman within it.

When Winnifred Eaton – writing from the United States under the Japanese-sounding pseudonym Onoto Watanna – revises the popular tragic story of the Japanese geisha in her 1901 novel *A Japanese Nightingale*, she constructs a house for her main characters Jack Bigelow and Yuki that is "a bit of art in itself". She describes the surrounding "green highlands", "the jagged background of mountain peaks," and "a lazy, babbling little stream (...) mirroring on its surface the beauty of the neighboring hills" (Eaton 2002: 106). Eaton indulges in lyrical descriptions of "pink, white, and blushy-red twigs of cherry and plum blossoms, idly swaying" (*ibidem*). I quote from various places in this scene to show how Eaton crowds conventional representations of Japanese landscape and Japan into this chapter that she appropriately titles "In Which the East and the West Are United". Eaton's attention to setting initially distinguishes her writing from Long's, but the pull of the tragic Asian female character is

strong. Japan's harmonious Spring masks only briefly what the narrator calls the "jealous snarls of winter" that threaten this cross-cultural union. One day, when Jack Bigelow is "poking among [his wife's] pretty belongings, as he so much liked to do", he discovers that she has secrets. She has been hoarding money and hiding it in her jewel-box (*idem*, 114). She has been lying to him, and he is shocked when confronted with this vision of his marriage as a financial transaction. He remains ignorant of his violation of his wife's privacy, assuming that objects within his home belong to him. As the narrative unfolds, his assumption is increasingly challenged yet never completely overturned.

Each of these three narratives imagines a relationship between gender identity and domestic space. The development of female agency turns space into place. In calling this space "domestic", I intend to recall a double meaning: these writers draw attention to the relationship between the *home* and the *nation* by focusing on the construction of female characters. Thus I also present these initial scenes to illustrate the domestication of Orientalism. The willingness to imagine and construct a foreign place in fiction can suggest a willingness to erase local culture and to disregard national boundaries. Read in this way, these fictional Japans reveal the colonizing impulse of modern Western travellers and novelists. Yet the modern nation also has been defined optimistically as an imagined community, a community of people not bound by ethnicity but by secular rituals and vernacular literature, among other things. Winnifred Eaton, writing as Onoto Watanna, imagines a modern Japan in which national differences can be reconciled by romance. Japan is a vehicle rather than a source or a reference, however. Eaton refers ultimately to the United States. She describes a place in which love triumphs over ethnic identity. In this

article, I am suggesting that Eaton borrows Bird's perspective on the Far East and challenges Long's subsequent tragic view. She extends the vision of both of these writers when she imagines beyond an initially uncomfortable contact between cultures to a new shared home, a utopian American home.

Utopia is metaphor, a comparison that renders the source word or source location unfamiliar. In Vita Fortunati's words, the utopian journey can open a territory "not yet completely explored by the female conscience" (Fortunati/Ramos 2006: 4). Fortunati's emphasis on the internal journey in itself utopian, allowing for the possibility that the imaginary is not always already colonised. Mary Baine Campbell recalls the historical link between so-called voyages of discovery and literary utopia. She reminds us that early utopias very often refer to an actual place. They are set in "geographical reality almost but not totally inaccessible to the European reader at home" (Campbell 2006: 118). Fundamentally, a literary or political utopia outlines a society that may be realised in the future. On a large scale, utopia confronts the nation as a construction, or confronts with what Fortunati calls "the culture tradition and the national history of the country towards which the author expresses his/her sense of belonging" (Fortunati/Ramos 2006: 8). In the scenes described above, inhabiting a foreign place disrupts a familiar sense of belonging. Isabella Bird's female traveller sets out to observe Japan and finds herself relentlessly observed, robbed of solitariness even in sleeping and, we can assume, in bathing. Privacy cannot be recalled or resumed in this setting. Bird's traveller must abandon this expectation. So too must the reader, and Bird thus excuses the spectacle she presents as lady traveller. Bird naturally must assume a new

character while abroad and, through the circulation of the narrative, this new character also makes a place for herself at home.

Perhaps the critical function of utopia must operate on the same small scale that Bird describes. Paul Ricoeur's attempt to reconcile ideology and utopia, passions and politics ultimately challenges us to shift scales in our analysis of the utopian. Like the political utopias that most interest Ricoeur, an individual or group identity is always a projection into the future. "The ruling symbols of our identity derive not only from our present and our past but also from our expectations for the future", Ricoeur argues in the final lecture of *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* (1975/1986). He goes on to explain: "It is part of our identity that is open to surprises, to new encounters. What I call the identity of a community or of an individual is also a prospective identity. The identity is in suspense" (Ricoeur 1986: 311). If, as Ricoeur concludes, "the utopian element is ultimately a component of identity", then does an examination of the ambiguously gendered, multi-national characters imagined by the Scottish writer Bird and Canadian American writer Eaton uncover a utopian impulse? I aim to explore this question and the critical limitations of utopian characters within a broader tradition of representing intimate contact – of turning foreign spaces into familiar places. In so doing, I focus on three key concepts: the domestic observation practiced by Isabella Bird, the alternative temporal logic that structures Bird's adventure narrative, and the technologies of identity that Winnifred Eaton exploits in order to patriate the Asian in America.

I. Bird's Eyes

The exemplary Western woman traveller Isabella Bird embeds herself within the domestic, as observer and observed. She does not place herself above the scene she describes and therefore does not assume the kind of authoritative position that Mary Louise Pratt calls "the monarch-of-all-I-survey". Bird's descriptions of people and places do not depend upon the "vivid imperial rhetoric" that Pratt identifies in the Orientalist writing of other British explorers, particularly those predominantly male adventurers searching for the source of the Nile in the Near East only a decade or so before (Pratt 1998: 201). Instead, Bird bases her authority and her writing persona on her ability to adapt to new locations. Lodged repeatedly in rooms without locks or doors, she describes her initial discomfort and optimistically predicts: "I shall acquire the habit of feeling secure" (Bird 2000: 46). Her narrative gradually transforms foreign domestic spaces into more familiar places and in the process gradually transforms her female narrator into a self-assured figure.

As the narrative proceeds, Isabella Bird seems to enjoy her developing authority over non-Western land and people; she seems to enjoy the spectacle of herself as traveller and author even more. Bird bases her narrative authority on her ability to prove that she has been somewhere specific, the same self positioning that supports the authority of the field anthropologist, what James Clifford terms "ethnographic authority". Both the travel writer and the anthropologist follow the cues established by utopia. In apparent but not actual contrast to the empirical observation of travel narrative and ethnography, the perspective of a utopian writer "is always the glance from nowhere", as Paul Ricoeur reminds us (1986: 266). This leads to a problem. "In creating itself as

the absolute 'elsewhere' of its historical moment, utopia thus detaches itself from the process of social transformation and effaces its relation to the process of history", Jennifer Burwell points out in the introduction to her book *Notes on Nowhere* (Burwell 1997: 2). Burwell writes about "the relationship between figures of subjectivity and conceptions of the social space" (*idem*, 3). She asserts that all social theory has some relation to the utopian impulse, predominantly because theories of social transformation (including Marxism and feminism) construct an "outside" figure who cannot be reconciled to society. The glance of this outside observer becomes crucial to effecting social transformation. Burwell accepts a general definition of the utopian as the impulse that "funds our attempt to imagine the 'other' of what is", a definition that echoes Ricoeur (*ibidem*).

In both Bird and Eaton, we find alien characters who glance from outside, outsiders who are inside a culture. Bird's travel can be read as springing from a utopian impulse, in other words. Bird undertakes her journey open to surprises and new encounters, and willing to test her sense of self and relationship to others, at least to some degree. "Having been recommended to leave home, in April 1878, in order to recruit my health by means which had proved serviceable before, I decided to visit Japan", Bird writes in the preface and goes on to say she was "attracted less by the reputed excellence of its climate than by the certainty that it possessed, in especial degree, those sources of novel and sustained interest which conduce so essentially to the enjoyment and restoration of a solitary health-seeker" (Bird 2000: xxiv). Like many travel writers and contemporary anthropologists, Bird emphasises the novelty and the solitariness of her journey abroad. When Bird published *Unbeaten Tracks in*

Japan in 1879, she could lay claim to being the first Western woman to write about rural Northern Japan. The well-known guidebook publisher, John Murray, published a guide to Japan in the nineteenth century as part of his popular series for English travellers, but "until Thomas Cook's first organized parties set out for Egypt in 1869 it was not easy to go much beyond the beaten tracks of Western Europe" (Sillitoe 1995: 152). Those who did needed "a great deal of money as well as enterprise and energy", as Alan Sillitoe points out in his popular account of "a century of guidebook travel", and most of them in the Far East were men (*ibidem*).

"As a lady travelling alone, and the first European lady who had been seen in several districts (...) my experiences differed more or less widely from those of preceding travellers", Bird points out by way of justifying her decision to offer to the public this volume of letters written "on the spot" to her sister and a circle of personal friends (Bird 2000: xxv). She admittedly sacrifices "artistic arrangement" – by which she seems to mean a coherent and pleasing narrative – because she preserves the immediacy of this account. Arguing in the next breath that this method of publication "places the reader in the position of the traveller", she further circumvents any criticisms of rough form or content (*ibidem*). The lack of artistry proves the authenticity. The scenes described are strictly representative, she argues, and the illustrations, with a few exceptions, engraved from her own sketches or Japanese photographs.

The authorial claim made in this prefatory sketch is supported by several now classic elements: Bird's identity as solitary European traveller, the novelty of her observations, the immediacy of the account and corollary authenticity, the narrative perspective, and the visual record of actual events. In reading Bird, I

focus on the question of identity in relation to the visual, a particular imagining of a character moving through space and observed in place, a character looking out from those *shoji* full of holes and human eyes. Each time Bird enters a new place, she observes and is openly observed. Her identity is constituted again and again through these scenes that register recognition of how she is seen by those she has come to see and how she is transformed in others' eyes. "When I arrived" at Takahara, she records, "a whole bevy of nice-looking girls took to flight, but were soon recalled by a word from Ito to their elders" (*idem*, 97). By the time she writes this letter, on June 24th, she has been travelling alone for two weeks, and seems now to enjoy these confusions. "I wear a hat", she admits, "which is a thing only worn by women in the fields as protection from sun and rain, my eyebrows are unshaven, and my teeth are unblackened, so these girls supposed me to be a foreign man" (*idem*, 98). Bird's guide and translator Ito explains to her that these girls have never even seen a foreign man, "but everybody brings them tales how rude foreigners are to girls, and they are awful scared" (*ibidem*). In the sentence following Ito's abbreviated narrative, Bird moves on to the mundane details of subsistence at the inn: "There was nothing eatable but rice and eggs, and I ate them under the concentrated stare of eighteen pairs of eyes", she says (*ibidem*). With an ethnographic feint – the addition of a specific domestic detail – Bird manages to assert her novelty and simultaneously establish her familiarity. By familiarity, I mean both her expert knowledge and her conventionality, an illusion perpetuated in all ethnographic writing.

An English woman alone in the East in the nineteenth century was as novel a figure for readers as for the locals who encountered her on the road.

Bird emphasises the uniqueness of her journey and her own uniqueness throughout her narrative, repeatedly documenting those scenes of arrival that underscore the experience of first contact. In these scenes, Bird effectively demonstrates how unfamiliar the figure she presents is to the rural inhabitants, and each time, she justifies her novelty and authorship again. She also reveals how heavily she depends upon her local guide Ito to translate not only her language but also her body.

II. Queer Crowds/Queer Time

When Bird records another scene of arrival late in her narrative and further north on her journey into uncharted territory, for example, she seems to have fully embraced her role as a curiosity and has developed strategies for controlling the stories told about her. She has travelled to the village of Yusowa which she calls “a specially objectionable looking place”, where “the people crowded in hundreds at the gate (...) got ladders and climbed on the adjacent roof” and “remained til one of the roofs gave way” (Bird 2000: 159). Although a government Transport Agent attempts to disperse this mass, they refuse to leave. “They said they might never see such a sight again”. Finally, “[o]ne old peasant said he would go away if he were told whether the ‘sight’ were a man or a woman” (*idem*, 159-60). Here the reader may well ask the same question. Is Bird acting as a man or a woman in her adventurous narrative?

As soon as Bird acknowledges that her sex and gender role is in question, she dodges the question. She demurs, in a true womanly fashion saying that the old peasant’s curiosity “awoke [her] *sympathy* at once”, (emphasis mine) and this sympathy necessitates a new narrative. She tells her

local guide Ito to tell the crowd "that a Japanese horse galloping night and day without ceasing would take 5 ½ weeks to reach my country – a statement which he is using lavishly as I go along" (*idem*, 160). Bird's use of the personal pronoun "I" is not surprising since this is a personal narrative. It is notable in this instance, however, in that it emphasises the solitariness of her journey at the very moment in which she reveals how much she depends upon Ito. Bird's story situates *her* in the modern world, and from this position, she negotiates her relationship to Ito and to her audience, both Japanese and European. Through her command of translation and translator, Bird can ground her identity in a difference of location rather than gender. She asks her dual audience to imagine a distant national space and redefines space by travelling time.

Bird clearly assumes that her audience can neither imagine the distance she has travelled nor imagine Japan and Europe as simultaneous spaces.[1] She thus foregrounds her superior ability to translate across cultures, portraying Ito as her willing accomplice. In fact, she gives Ito a narrative but not a voice. Remember he tells *her* story as *she* goes along. She masters her narrative in this moment and then directs her reader's attention to the observing crowd, describing the assembled men and women as "queer (...) so silent and gaping, and they remain motionless for hours". For Bird, queerness signals evasiveness, a quality that discomfits her, even as she acknowledges the necessary novelty it affords her narrative and its character. She admits, "I should be glad to hear a hearty aggregate laugh, even if I were its object. The great melancholy stare is depressing" (*ibidem*). Instead of making her the object of the hearty laugh that she desires, this crowd acts collectively to subject her to observation and speculation about her own queerness.

"The term transgender can be used as a marker for all kinds of people who challenge, deliberately or accidentally, gender normativity", Judith Halberstam contends in her recent analysis of the Brandon Teena murder and of transgender biography more generally (Halberstam 2005: 55). In recording her "imaginative life schedule", to borrow another phrase from Halberstam, Bird in some ways creates a queer narrative. The character development of a single woman abroad does not follow the temporal logic of family life organised around marriage and children. Bird writes about her adventures in letters to an actual circle of female friends and family – a temporarily-constituted reading community whom she addresses directly in the text. Publishing her letters allows her to travel again. Or as Dominika Ferens puts it: "For both missionaries and travellers, writing was a way to ensure the continuity of their respective enterprises (...) Travel was textualized, circulated among readers, and reenacted" (Ferens 2002: 23). Bird says herself that she puts the reader in the position of traveller, seeing and being seen by others: the position of traveller is the position of spectacle. In places so far from home, Bird safely ignores some of the dictates of true womanhood in the nineteenth century. The autonomy she gains remains dependent upon the "elsewhere" of Japan, however.

Presenting herself fleetingly as a transgender character within the narrative, Bird actually replicates some of what she has discovered in this "new Japan" which she insists is "not a fairyland". Observations of clothing and gender markers constitute her primary evidence for this anti-romantic statement. "The men may be said to wear nothing. Few of the women wear anything but a short petticoat wound tightly round them (...) From the dress no notion of the sex of the wearer could be gained, nor from the faces, if it were not

for the shaven eyebrows and blackened teeth" (Bird 2000: 91). This description occurs in the same letter and only a few pages before Bird's account of Ito's determination to learn "*good* English as distinguished from "common" English" and her determination to "manage him", chiefly because "I saw that he meant to manage me (...). He is intensely Japanese (...) and he thinks everything inferior that is foreign. Our manners, eyes, and modes of eating appear simply odious to him" (*idem*, 95, 96). At this point, Bird displaces the narrative commentary onto Ito, her cultural interlocutor. We see Bird's eyes through Ito's eyes, seemingly multiplying the narrative perspective. Yet, it is Bird who continues to direct her readers' attention with the imperative: "You will observe". She says that she wants readers to note how she is "entirely dependent upon Ito not only for making travelling arrangements but for making inquiries, gaining information, and even for companionship such as it is" (*idem*, 96). In spite of this attempt to soften her commanding narrative presence, Bird has already contained Ito: she has taken him under her tutelage and has learned to "manage" him herself.

"Besides providing the license to possess and command men, the scientific nature of [Bird's] expedition also allows her to gaze freely at male bodies", Dominika Ferens contends, adding that Bird's virtue remains "above suspicion so long as the men around her are depicted as her social inferiors (...). Women interested her little" (Ferens 2002: 39). As narrator, Bird enjoys a position of authority over her subject, Japan, and as traveller, Bird lives in close physical contact with her guide and her carriers. As the examples here demonstrate, her travel between cultures develops into occasional travels between genders, an ambiguity that underscores the novelty of her authorial identity as well as her authority while on the road. As a Japanese newspaper of

the time so aptly reported, Bird is a lady who spends her time in travelling. While travelling, Bird also assumes more freedom than she might otherwise enjoy as a Victorian lady at home. She experiences alternative places and alternative ways of inhabiting them.

III. Modern Spectacles

Bird, Long, and Eaton all publish during a period of general fascination with foreign countries, principally Japan. While Japanese immigration remained low in the late-nineteenth century, Japanese characters remained safely far away and *foreign* rather than threateningly present in the West or *alien*.[2] By the end of the nineteenth century, Japan had proven military power by winning wars with China and Russia and had demonstrated cultural refinement with contributions to the international exhibitions popular in Europe and the United States. This exhibition craze provides a context for understanding narratives of the foreign. The Japanese goods exhibited at the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, for instance, were "second in volume only to those exhibited by the British", as historian Peter Duus points out and they "attracted much public interest by their novelty" (Duus 1997: 37). Ultimately, Duus is interested in what he calls *The Japanese Discovery of America*. He emphasises a process of mutual contact and cultural adaptation and talks about "the opening of the [Japanese] ports in 1859" when "a piece of the outside world" was "transplanted to Japan, providing the Japanese with a small-scale model of what the West was like (...)" (*idem*, 21). Duus mentions scale briefly in the context of firsthand observation of the foreign. He argues that information about the large-scale

reached Japan through a small-scale reproduction. An American micro-culture of the Yokohama port helped to define modernity for a rapidly-changing Japan.

The modern nation was by no means a stable entity through the nineteenth century. Anne Maxwell analyses the struggle to construct and maintain European national identities, for example, when she analyses the growth of a spectacle in the mid- to late-nineteenth century. She asks a question related to Duus's preoccupation with a modern "discovery of America": "What were the sources of American's knowledge of their nation's origins, and their amnesia toward imperialism?" (Maxwell 2000: 94). Display of non-European people in photography and international exhibitions reinforced a sense of European identity, she argues, and she folds the construction of American national identity neatly into the same argument. She does not refer directly to David Harvey's similar attempt to understand more recent *Conditions of Postmodernity* in his 1990 book of that name, but she closely echoes his description of a crisis of representation that defines modernity and modernism. The familiar crisis of representation in the arts results, in Harvey's estimation, from the challenge that violent suppression of political revolution presented to ideas of progress, specifically the Enlightenment belief in an ideal society. Harvey briefly considers how nineteenth-century American realist and naturalist writers revise a utopian national rhetoric amid a broader struggle to construct coherent national identity. He begins, as does Maxwell, with the European model.

Citing the European political and economic crises of 1847 and 1848 as a turning point, Harvey explains how increasing globalism after 1850 both "rekindles capitalist growth" and leads to a loss of identity with place. The global

threatens to bury "locality" (Harvey 1990: 264). For this reason, the French novelist Zola predicts the end of the realist novel: it simply cannot represent the simultaneity of a globalised world. What primarily interests Harvey are various attempts to create place when space becomes abstract. Thus, he points out that the late-nineteenth century is characterized by the "labour of inventing tradition", within which he includes historical preservation, museum culture, and international expositions (*idem*, 272). These increasingly popular visual cultures "celebrated a world of international commodities", Harvey concedes, but they also, and equally importantly, "exhibited the geography of the world as a set of artifacts for all to see" (*ibidem*). Here again, Maxwell and Harvey agree.

Presenting Duus's argument in connection with Maxwell and Harvey, I intend to indicate the relevance of small-scale models of cultural geography within fictions of Japan, models also consistent with the scale of popular representations of foreign cultures in the West. After the 1876 exhibition and extensive positive media coverage of the Japanese contributions, as Duus reminds us, "middle-class American parlors and living rooms, especially on the East Coast, actually began to fill with curios, carpets, carvings, and cabinets imported from Japan or designed 'in the Japanese style'" (Duus 1997: 38). The unfamiliar could be incorporated into the American home. A serene Japanese Pavilion floating by itself on an island at the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 only increased public desire for "things Japanese". So, Winnifred Eaton is writing from within the United States in a period characterised by displays of national *and* foreign culture (often with the exposure to the foreign reinforcing a sense of modern nationality). Increasing industrialisation, urbanisation, struggles for women's rights and worker's rights

lead to an often-nostalgic regionalist reaction and a search for solutions to troubling elements of modernisation. Eaton thus plays to an audience eager for a glimpse of the exotic and an escape into a romance that still somehow reminds them of home.

Eaton's *A Japanese Nightingale* actually begins with a spectacle. At a banquet in honour of the full moon on a tiny island in Tokyo Bay, someone suddenly extinguishes the candles and throws a large mat in the centre of the garden.

> Out of the shadows sprang onto the mat a wild, vivid little figure, clad in scintillating robes that reflected every ray of light thrown on them; and, with her coming, the air was filled with the weird, wholly fascinating music of the koto and the samisen. (Eaton 2002: 86)

This first description of the novel's heroine reveals a wild creature. Captivated by the unusual performance, an American theatrical manager pursues this girl through the dark streets, dragging along with him his new acquaintance, our soon-to-be hero Jack Bigelow. The same character whom the American sees as beautiful and, by extension, profitable signifies something different to the Japanese proprietor of this magical island tea garden. He tells the Americans that they have been fooled into seeing an illusion, an image beyond the reality of this

> cheap girl of Tokyo, with the blue-glass eyes of the barbarian, the yellow skin of the lower Japanese, the hair of mixed color, black and red, the form of a Japanese courtesan, and the heart and nature of those honorably unreliable creatures, alien at this country, alien at your honourable country, augustly despicable – a half-caste. (*idem*, 89)

This remarkable catalogue of character traits borrows from popular receptions of scientific theories about race in the nineteenth century and popular images of the Caucasian woman in Asian dress.[3]

It has been argued that Eaton simply draws from the same popular sources of information about Japan and popular stereotypes of Asian women that shape John Luther Long's popular *Madame Butterfly*, but Eaton refuses this explanation. In a 1903 interview quoted in the introduction to the most recent edition of Eaton's novel, she points out that "to say (...) a Japanese woman copied the style of a man who probably did not see her country (...) is (...) absurd".[4] She suggests in this statement that *A Japanese Nightingale* is not complete fiction. Seeking a field of literature not already overcrowded, Eaton says that she "naturally turned to her native country" for "interesting copy" (*apud* Honey/Cole 2002: 11). Indeed, her style can be distinguished from Long's for its greater attention to landscape and setting, as the brief examples above demonstrate, but does Eaton's description seem real? Within late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century American literature, Eaton's work raises the question of what role romance plays in an age of realism. I am interested in how her female character, typically sentimental in many ways, comments on the instability of national identity more generally.

Eaton seems very much aware of the popular culture of spectacle that surrounds her and that allows her to play with the visual construction of character, linking the visibility of sex or gender to the stability of national identity. When we meet our heroine for the second time in Eaton's novel, she is bowing low at Jack Bigelow's feet, offering herself to him in marriage, and apparently making him very uncomfortable. In this moment of encounter, the reader follows Jack's lengthy examination of the girl, his dissection of her primary characteristics and behaviour. Her carefully smoothed hair has come loose from its pins, revealing a "tawny rebellious mass", and this hair, combined

with her blue eyes, renders her "an eerie little creature that made [Jack] marvel". Her appearance immediately presents a problem of classification that Jack struggles to resolve through observation.

> And yet the more he looked at her, the more he saw that her clothes became her; that she was Japanese despite the hair and eyes. He did not try to explain the anomaly to himself, but he could not doubt her nationality. There was no other country she could belong to. (Eaton 2002: 93)

She cannot be American, in other words, at least not yet, and she apparently does not wish to be. When Jack finally turns to her to confirm his suspicions, he simply asks, "You are Japanese?". She nods, and his lingering confusion provokes a smile and a demur glance that somehow reinforce her nationality in his eyes. The narrator concludes: "She was all Japanese in a moment, and prettier than ever" (*ibidem*). This image of Yuki, presented entirely through Jack's eyes, documents her excessively feminine behaviour as proof of national identity. Yuki's ambiguous nationality is stabilised by evidence of a traditional gender identity.

IV. New World Literature

The specific emphasis *A Japanese Nightingale* places on an indisputable, observable identity is contradicted by Eaton's deliberate construction of a false authorial identity. Born in Canada to an English father and a Chinese mother, Eaton begins writing fiction as Onoto Watanna after migrating to the United States from a brief stint as a stenographer in Jamaica. She settles in Chicago in 1896 and, in 1899, publishes her first novel and "the first known novel by an Asian American author", as Eve Oishi points out in the introduction to *Miss Nume of Japan* (Oishi 1999: xi). As these brief biographical details reveal, Winnifred Eaton violates at least one illusion of realism by assuming a half-

Japanese, half-English identity and later shedding it. She fabricates a biography, proclaiming Japan as her native country in promotional material and in interviews. She claims racial memory and personal experience as critical tools for successful writing. In some ways, Eaton's long and varied career makes hers a classic American immigrant success story. Yet, her work has been troubling for literary criticism. In tracing the reception of Eaton and her work, we also trace to some degree the development of ethnic literature in America across the twentieth century. Eaton inserts her fiction into the American literary market by producing and reproducing a national identity that is in many ways an imitation. Repeating the visual markers of a stereotypical[5] Asian female becomes a way for Eaton to negotiate and negate the messiness of national and ethnic identity.

In part because Eaton does not depict characters who share her exact family background, her work received little attention in the first wave of Asian American literary scholarship in the late-twentieth century. It is interesting to note that her older sister Edith, who wrote journalism and fiction under the Chinese pen-name Sui Sin Far, was less popular at the time but gained later recognition for her realistic portrayals of an urban Chinese immigrant community in California. Her contemporary reception as a woman regionalist and the first Asian American fiction writer precedes Winnifred Eaton's, in other words. Winnifred Eaton – more so than Edith – exhibits the kind of nostalgia for a place of origin that characterises women regionalists; it just happens to be a place Eaton has never visited. Ultimately, the foreign landscapes and the resolutions to Winnifred Eaton's narratives distinguish her from many of the

"New Women" writers who were her contemporaries, however. Eaton's characters find happiness only when they accept the inevitability of marriage.

Within this sentimental resolution, Eaton imagines a new kind of domestic union. Of course, the lovers in *A Japanese Nightingale* are miraculously reunited after a long, agonising separation, and they renew their pledges to each other, this time with additional emphasis on the convergence of travel and dwelling and the related convergence of domestic identities: "I will take you to my home", Jack assures Yuki. "I will follow you to the end of the world and beyond", she replies (Eaton 2002: 171). Their story concludes with promises to be wedded for ever and ever. "Yes, forever", Jack repeats after Yuki, and has the last word of the novel. In Eaton's imagined Japan, the romantic union between European American and English Japanese transcends time and national boundaries and overcomes the nasty characterisation of Yuki as a cheap, Tokyo girl. Thus, a Western romance incorporates the undoubtedly Japanese character, opening the possibility of a new shared American home in a way that a realist novel of the time perhaps could not.

On initial examination, Eaton's fictions seem to do little to further what Thomas Peyser considers characteristic of late nineteenth-century America and late-nineteenth century American realism: "Americans'highly self-conscious attempts to wrest a coherent sense of their national identity from the cosmopolitan realities that surround them" (Peyser 1998: 104). Then again, Winnifred Eaton might be the apparent anomaly that instead proves a rule – at least for American literature – that representations of national identities are fictions but not unsubstantiated ones after all. According to the Japanese literary scholar Yuko Matsukawa, Eaton actually researched her subject

thoroughly and initially enjoyed a favourable reception among late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Japanese writers and artists. Matsukawa reminds us that “in the decades after Japan ended its long isolation, much information about the country, its customs and its people became available to the public (...) We may assume Eaton took advantage of this proliferation of information in order to construct her Onoto Watanna and inform her stories” (Matsukawa 2005: 33). Eaton writes what her readers want to hear and see. She assimilates American popular culture, and she assimilates the EurAsian character into a broadly Western, expressly American domesticity. How then does her writing fit within the history of American literature?

Many scholars trace the beginnings of studies in American literature and culture to the 1950s when scholars began to formulate a canon of great American writers, and academics produced sweeping analyses of national culture. This first attention to the role literary imagery might play in shaping rather than simply reflecting a national culture and identity was then extended by Alan Trachtenberg and others who wanted to write “critical cultural history”.[6] Trachtenberg attended carefully to the growth of industry and metropolis, the building of railroads that linked the country and polarised it along class lines, to all of the varied features of what he calls the “the incorporation of America” during the mid- to late-nineteenth century. At the same time, feminists challenged some of the images central to American studies by pointing out, for example, the violent relationship suggested by the seemingly innocent metaphor of virgin land. More recently, scholars of American literature have turned to theories of transnationality, globalisation, and postcoloniality to query any facile embrace of American exceptionalism. Yet, the concept of an ever-

expanding frontier as a decisive factor in the formation of an American character remains compelling. Indeed the very question of American character seems more urgent in an era reaching for postnationalist understanding. In the preceding argument, I have analysed characters shaped by intimate contact on an imagined frontier, specifically the frontier of advancing modernity carved into the Pacific Ocean from the mid- to the late-nineteenth century.

In conclusion, I will suggest an additional context for understanding the construction of the female character as a new American in Eaton's *A Japanese Nightingale*, namely, the proliferation of utopias in American literature. "Utopia, No place, was almost always – even as late as Margaret Meade's [*sic*] exoticised *Coming of Age in Samoa* – set in geographical reality almost but not totally inaccessible to the European at home", Mary Baine Campbell argues (Campbell 2006: 118). I repeat Campbell's full quote in concluding in order to emphasise the example she selects as exemplary – an American woman anthropologist who travelled to the Pacific and brought back free love. In fact, as Campbell points out, utopia as a literary form first appears in an era of transAtlantic voyages, a period of contact between Europeans and cultures in the Americas. American literature begins in this moment when information about a New World is communicated back to Europeans at home.

American literature has been defined particularly by the habit of finding *oneself* in the process of finding new worlds. For William Spengemann and other recent revisionist literary historiographers, early American literature thus includes More's *Utopia*, Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, texts that "discover to modern readers the origins of their modernity" (*apud* Bauer 2003: 7). As the U.S. borders reach the

Pacific Ocean and continue to expand in the late-nineteenth century, American literature yet again becomes a literature characterised by the utopian impulse. In this context, Isabella Bird and Winnifred Eaton register the impact of globalisation on a small scale. Both Bird and Eaton explore the uncomfortable reality of cultural contact experienced by the modern character. Eaton extends Bird's exploration by presenting messy nationality as a problem that threatens intimacy and that therefore can be solved through intimate relationships. Her new American character belongs most clearly within a utopian tradition of new world literature.

Notes

[1] See Stephen Kern and David Harvey on space-time and space-time compression as a defining feature of Western modernity (Kern 1993; Harvey 1990).

[2] A perception more often associated with Chinese immigrants, many of whom built railroads from the mid- to the late-nineteenth century. See, for example, Young's *Mules and Dragons* (1993: 1-15). See also Matsukawa on "how Americans understood foreigner" (Matsukawa: 2005: 41).

[3] For more on images from Gilbert and Sullivan's "The Mikado", for example, see Matsukawa, who argues that "Caucasian features in Japanese dress represent the Japanese woman, especially since there were few competing images of Japanese women circulating within popular culture to compensate or correct this" (Matsukawa 2005: 42).

[4] Long's admitted precursors include Pierre Loti and Lafcadio Hearn, for example. See Honey/Cole 2002: 11.

[5] In its original definition from the world of printing – a duplicate impression of an original type.

[6] This is Trachtenberg's term. He says that he intends it to mean: "'history' in the sense of concreteness and temporality, 'cultural' in the sense of a totality of relations, a 'whole way of life' ('whole' not as a unified homogenous field but as elements interrelated even where divergent and conflicted), and 'critical' in the sense of skeptical, demystifying, contextual" (Trachtenberg 2003: 759). His struggle to justify the unwieldy term culture suggests a persistent problem with studies conducted under its auspices.

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Defoe and the Utopian City:
GIVING A Particular ACCOUNT of Whatever is CURIOUS and worth OBSERVATION in *A Journal of the Plague Year* and *A Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain*

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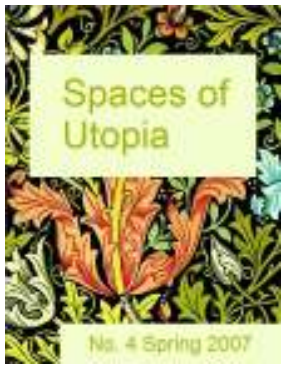

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To scholars of Defoe, my title may evoke, by contrast, one of Maximillian E. Novak's early essays (published in *PMLA* in 1977), a study of *A Journal of the Plague Year*, aptly named "Defoe and the Disordered City". I seem, at first sight, to be challenging Novak's view of Defoe's portrayal of a London riddled by the plague as a dystopian space where chaos, disorder and disintegration reign supreme, and where traditional utopian notions of the city as a space of order, harmony and perfection are doomed to failure by the intervention both of divine punishment and natural catastrophe.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Despite its title, "Defoe and the Disordered City" argues, as I will throughout this essay, that Defoe's notion of the city's potential for regeneration and rebirth transforms what might have been a tale of woe and despair into a celebration of the power of human agency over death and destruction. I take the view, as Novak does, that, for Defoe, "the paradigm of history" underlying London's predicament in 1665 "is not [that of] a Jerusalem destroyed from within before falling to Titus", nor, I might add, is it the biblical parallel of a Sodom and Gomorrah suffering the effects of God's

righteous anger (Novak 1977: 249). Defoe is an optimist, and his belief in the triumph of the human and the social over apparently overwhelming natural or transcendental forces ultimately reasserts the notion of the city as the site of utopia on Earth.

I invoke Novak's title because its suggestion that "City = Disorder" seems to me symptomatic of our view of the (post)modern condition, where the "cities of destruction" or "confusion" prevail over the "cities of the sun" or "built upon a hill", a post-lapsarian world of industrial rise and decline, of failed experiments that turned garden cities into coketowns, green belts into suburban wastelands, and circular, organic entities into decentred urban fields. And I do so also to make clear the perspective from which I will be looking at Defoe's utopia, a perspective inevitably coloured by the benefits – as well as the drawbacks – of hindsight and dramatic irony.

From a contemporary point of view, Defoe's optimism about the city's utopian potential may seem naïve at best, possibly misguided, certainly unfounded in the light of what has been happening to the country and the city over the last three centuries. History has taught us that we can no longer believe in the beneficent power of human achievement over brute nature and that we cannot – should not – take just pride in the usurpation of the divine right of creation. We have learned that the tale of Frankenstein may be true in more ways than one, and that the city has become the uncontrollable monster that rebels against its creator and runs amok in the world, spreading death and destruction. We have had to face the fact that the epitome of our civilising powers has turned against us and let barbarism return through the back door; nay, it has brought it into the very centre of our lives; the "heart of darkness", no

longer remote or easily isolated, has become an integral part of the everyday experience of millions of people living in inner city ghettos and urban slums. Language itself has had to be reinvented, its powers exhausted by the strain of having to represent and account for a dissolving reality, which quickly melts into air but leaves behind the solidity of poverty, alienation and destitution. We have recently had to rethink the vocabulary that we thought served us well to describe the centrifugal forces the city created, at a time when centripetal, decentred impulses put the very concept of the "city" at risk. The city can no longer be contained geographically, metaphorically or disciplinarily. It requires a coming together of the best of our discursive powers, from all areas of knowledge, to make sense of the interaction between the new phenomena of postmodern life and the age-old patterns that continue to exist alongside it.

Knowing all this, I will contend, nonetheless, that a study of Defoe's vision of the city can work as an antidote to the debilitating nostalgia and paralysing pessimism that often prevail in many contemporary discourses on the city. It can act as a tonic to invigorate a withered sense of social and political agency over the historical process and help alleviate the symptoms of the existential *malaise* first felt by the Romantic generation and from which we have arguably never fully recovered. Looking at Defoe from a postmodern perspective can be an exhilarating as well as a chastening experience. His unquestioning faith in the truth-value of empirical data and sensorial perception, his unfailing trust in the mimetic powers of language, and his unwavering confidence in the legibility of the world around him have been lost to us. But what bubbling energy and unbounded excitement they produced! His euphoria is contagious. You cannot read Defoe without feeling that the eighteenth

century opened up the world for our perusal, appreciation and appropriation, large vistas unfolding before the curious, adventurous observer, vast regions waiting to be mapped by a faithful, trustful eye-witness, who comes back to tell the tale of what he saw for our instruction and delight.

"In travelling to England, a luxuriance of objects presents itself to our view", says the narrator of *A Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain* on the very first page of the book, and "new matter offers to new observation" in a country that is changing from a land of romance and ballad to an empirical place of documentary discourse and realistic fiction, from an agrarian to a capitalist economy (Defoe 1979: 43, 44). This sense of rapid change, both in the object of observation and in the nature and aims of the observer, undoubtedly adds to the excitement of the task; and the notion that any account of a country in a state of flux cannot be permanent and definitive, "as no clothes can be made to fit a growing child" and "no picture [can] carry the likeness of a living face; the size of one, and the countenance of the other always altering with time", in no way gives cause for discouragement or defeatism (*idem*, 46). Rather, the necessarily provisional and partial nature of the project, the fact that "while the sheets are in the press, new beauties appear in several places, and almost to every part we are obliged to add appendixes, and supplemental accounts of fine houses, new undertakings, buildings, &c." only augments the urgency of the matter – and provides a good excuse for the prolixity of the writer (*ibidem*).

Excess and hyperbole seem to abound in the world around Defoe and they inevitably permeate into his prose. Everywhere he looks he finds "the most flourishing and opulent country in the world", an "increase in wealth", "a

luxuriance of objects", "improvements in the soil, the product of the earth, the labour of the poor, the improvement in manufactures, in merchandises, in navigations", and so on and so forth, continuing for the next 679 pages of his travels around Britain (*idem*, 43, 45). An excess understood as salutary and beneficial, which should be welcomed and encouraged, and not rejected as the disorientating, alienating excess of that "perpetual whirl of trivial objects" that "wear [ies] out the eye" of the observer (Wordsworth, 1980: l.725-6, 731). No "press/ Of self-destroying, transitory things" for Defoe in his contemplation of the urban landscape (*idem*, l. 769-770); no desire to escape, "as from an enemy", into some "sequestered nook" (*idem*, l.170). The "face after face, the string of dazzling wares", the "shop after shop" is precisely what attracts him to this new England, the new commercial order of a rising capitalist economy (*idem*, l.156-7). He can never get enough of it, omnivorously devouring the never-ending parade of surface detail in the city with the gusto of a bon-vivant before a sumptuous banquet. He gorges himself to the full, but never seems to suffer any ill effects from indigestion or surfeit. The excess is never unruly, but controlled, ordered, kept within the bounds of reason, and the infinite multiplicity and endless diversity of the real invigorate the writer and energise the tale he has to tell.

The image of the city as a canker, where the fast-growing malignant cells cannot be stopped by human means, belongs in the future, as do the "monstrous ant-hills" and the "great devouring Wens" which the next century will have to contend with. For Defoe, urban growth means progress and improvement, and the appropriate response of the individual observer before the rise and rise of the city is that of wonder untainted by terror or awe. Defoe's

protagonists – the autobiographical narrator of *A Tour*, the enigmatically named H. F. of *A Journal of the Plague Year* as well as a Moll Flanders and even a Robinson Crusoe – are eminently urban characters, the very first in the history of English literature. You cannot imagine them existing outside the thronged streets, noisy taverns, crowded parks, bustling markets and narrow alleys of eighteenth-century London; they would have to be shipwrecked before they went near a tree or a rabbit (and when they are, they proceed to build walled citadels, keep pets, acquire manservants, go out in their finery and, on departure, rent out the property for a profit).

Our post-romantic sensibilities shudder at the dismissal of the sublime beauty of a heath as a mere "Black Desert" from which the traveller escapes as quickly as he can to the "fertile country, enclosed and cultivated", where small villages announce a return to civilisation, and the next town provides him with the delights of a corn market to be inspected, the houses of the nobility and gentry to be gaped at, and the flourishing trade of goods and manufactures to be remarked upon approvingly (Defoe 1979: 187). Defoe's lack of aesthetic appreciation of landscape and natural beauty may shock us, and his view of the countryside as the last redoubt of the sub- or the pre-human is difficult to comprehend in an age that has recuperated the Romantic love of nature and transformed it into environmental concern. But to Defoe nature does not speak in any recognisable language; it has no words and no voice and therefore cannot compete with the strident din of the city, where the social and the human loudly proclaim their victory over barbarism. Raymond Williams would, I believe, agree that Defoe predates the "dissociation of sensibility" that separates the aesthetic from the social and political, a separation which results in the rarefied,

detached gaze of the onlooker who enjoys unpolluted nature but is blind to the labour that has been transforming it (cf. Williams 1985: 120-126). Not so with Defoe, for whom the palace, the church, the market, the hospital or the cultivated field are all products of the social and the political, and therefore amenable to change. The city speaks to him above all of the human labour that went into its creation and development, and his writings are a record of present achievement and a tool for plotting the path of victories to come.

The idea of the city as a labyrinth, where the weary traveller despairs of finding a way out of the conceptual, emotional or sensorial maze, would be totally foreign to him. London is Long Acre, Cripplegate, Bell Alley and Guildhall, the Chamber of London, the Monument and the Hospital of Bedlam; something mappable – mapped – instantly recognisable, immediately familiar to the community of his readers. Names, dates, figures, lists are the materials out of which Defoe builds his image of the city, empirically verifiable pillars that support the edifice of his writing. Facts are not, for him, "dull, dead, uninformed thing[s]", but the bricks and mortar he uses in the construction (Mayhew 1985: 448). His duty is not "to preach a sermon instead of writing a history", his task is not "making [himself] a teacher instead of giving [his] observations of things" (Defoe 1983: 255). He is "very little in debt to other men's labours, and gives but very few accounts of things, but what he has been an eye-witness of himself" (Defoe 1979: 45). Such trust in the individual power to arrive at a truth which is within the reach of our senses and reason, such confidence that the world is a *donné* waiting to be known and possessed by a reliable observer (who can then transpose it directly into words on a page) cannot be taken at face-value by an

age that identifies Defoe as the "Great Fabricator" of fictions passed off as truths we no longer believe in.

His is a visible city, which stands before us, as does the figure in the foreground of the picture, by virtue of its solid, material, unproblematic reality. The "unreal city" waits in the wings. Here, no fog in a winter dawn can obfuscate its glitter, and even when death has undone so many victims of the plague, "the prudence of my Lord Mayor and the Court of Aldermen within the city, and of the justices of peace in out-parts, was such (…) that the poor were kept quiet, and their wants everywhere relieved, as far as was possible to be done" (Defoe 1983: 113). And as soon as the disease was abated and its malignity spent, "a secret surprise and smile of joy sat on everybody's face", "all the manufacturing hands in the nation were set on work, and were little enough for several years to supply the market and answer the demands" (*idem*, 253, 233). Phoenix-like, the city rises again, its productive forces come back to life and the fragments are picked up from the ruins and re-glued together more securely than before. The centre holds again and the world did not end either with a bang or with a whimper. Industry pumps life back into the temporarily diseased body of the city, commerce is the blood that flows in its veins to restore it to health. Quacks and doctors may not have saved London from the plague, but the organic structure is resurrected by the collective action of an organised society that held together under the pressures of a disaster that passed understanding.

A "triumph of fact", indeed, is this city which still believes that "National Prosperity" and "Natural Prosperity" are one and the same thing, where any potential Josiah Bounderby is kept in check by the regulating forces of the social contract, and the individual does not feel "the imaginative power languish

within" him among the oppressive forces of the city (Wordsworth 1980: l. 468-469). The "true-born Englishman" may have the right to ask of his country why it denies him the liberty to escape a quarantined city and can still proudly affirm his "right to live [anywhere] in it if [he] can" (Defoe 1983: 139); but society will invariably answer that "it was a public good that justified the private mischief", and will remind him that a good "parley", and talking "rationally and smoothly" will go a long way towards the re-establishment of order (*idem*, 67, 158). Contracts voluntarily undertaken by both parties to their mutual advantage guarantee the ideal balance between the individual and society as well as between Man and God. "*Why has God done this to me? What have I done to be thus us'd?*", a solitary man on a desert island asks of nobody in particular (Defoe 1994: 68; italics in the original); and the answer lies within himself: "Had I done my part, *God had deliver'd me, but I had not glorifi'd him*" (*idem*, 70; italics in the original). Equally, fugitives from the plague will contribute to a collective kitty according to their means, and are "content that what money they had should all go into one public stock, on condition that whatever any one of them could gain more than another, it should without any grudging be all added to the public stock" (Defoe 1983: 141).

The horizontal and the vertical, the secular and the sacred are in perfect equilibrium. I know no better consubstantiation of Defoe's utopian vision than his design for a town to be built for a group of refugees (see Appendix), a plan which he put forward to the Lord Treasurer, "and others who were principally concerned at that time in bringing over, the poor inhabitants of the Palatinate; a thing in itself commendable, but as it was managed, made scandalous to England, and miserable to those people" (Defoe 1979: 201). The circle at its

centre, as is appropriate, places the sacred at the heart of things. But the squares and the straight lines bring in the human and the secular; they belong to an age of reason which imposed a linearity on the world that nature cannot boast of. The circle may be entered from all sides; inside it live the elect; you can walk around it and enjoy the protectiveness it affords. But sooner or later, in a gesture of defiance, you will want out, out into the large avenues leading to a wider world. The choice is yours: if you decide to stay within, nothing will be lacking; self-sufficiency is guaranteed by the little garden at the back of the house, a miniature nature put to human use; and whatever else you may require is within walking distance and available for purchase. The offices of a benevolent society are just around the corner from the abode of a benevolent deity. The four points of the cross tell of sacrifices both animal and divine, the two extremes of the middle where we exist, between the desires of the body and the needs of the soul. The square and the circle, the straight and the round, closure and openness, all work in unison; they complement and balance each other in a perfect synthesis of opposites. Only a cynic would say that this harmonious fusion of Religion and Commerce means Commerce has been turned into a Religion…

Defoe would not recoil from the duplicity. An age of wigs deals in artifice, enjoys masks and revels in disguises; loves to be in a play where the daughter of a convicted felon ends up as a gentlewoman, where rebellious sons become empire-builders, and trusted, reliable eye-witnesses turn out to be government spies and double-agents. Defoe knows as much about expediency as he does about metamorphosis. How else do you take the bull of Change by its pointed horns and live to tell the tale? Pragmatism never stands in his way; he even

manages to perform the difficult acrobatics of having both feet firmly planted on the boggy ground of a shifty society. Or, like an experienced sailor, he moves in sync with the rolling of the ship on stormy waters, allowing for the ups and downs, tilting left or right according to the rocking of the vessel, but somehow always landing butter-side up. Mobility is all.

His protagonists are people going places, *flâneurs* with a purpose, undeterred "men of the crowd", rogues elbowing and pushing their way forward through the throng in their rush to arrive at their appointed destination. They only stop to watch, voyeuristically, when curiosity gets the better of them and the inquiring mind wins over the instinct of survival. But it is no remote, alien jungle full of cannibals and wild animals that they have to trudge through and conquer. They belong to the city and the city belongs to them. They would not have it otherwise. This is no world of perilous encounters, no "darkest London" inhabited by primitive, dangerous tribes, but a community of respectable citizens going about their ordinary business, counting the pennies in their pockets. Besides, there is safety in numbers. The idea of the individual as a solitary consciousness wandering the streets, enclosed in a "semi-transparent envelope", an evanescent membrane separating it from the real, would gather no followers (Woolf, 1972: 106). Nothing stands between the I/eye and its object, no shadow falls between conception and creation, motion and act. You are what you do, and the city both bears witness and provides the evidence by which your actions will be judged.

Defoe always writes with posterity in mind. He is a chronicler of the Here and Now who surveys present locations with an estate agent's eye to future profits. And the nation he is promoting is immense: from London to Land's End,

from the “frightful” landscape of the Scottish Islands to the “rising peaks of nameless hills” in Wales, from remote Penzance to mountainous Northumberland. A whole country under improvement, a developer’s dream. The timing is also propitious: “the wars between the nations are at an end, the wastings and plunderings, the ravages and blood are all over” and the “lasting tranquillity” of the Union ensures the stability of the market (Defoe 1979: 637). And all being well, the business will expand, and “posterity will be continually adding” to the property and “every age will find an increase in glory” to augment the legacy (*idem*, 46). He can proudly assert: “(…) I am not writing panegyrics or satires here, my business is with the country” and genuinely believe he has done the product justice (*idem*, 664).

Defoe (quite literally) brings us News from Everywhere, from an emerging New Atlantis where in the unseen future Wigan Piers will die a slow, consumptive death, from sunny Oceanas where bleak houses will later be erected. His English journeys do not look backwards to green pastures and do not foresee the dark satanic mills that loom on the horizon. He could only envisage Brave New Worlds, their hour come at last, marching towards Bethlehem to be born. His tales are Elysian, not full of sound and fury, and he meant them to signify.

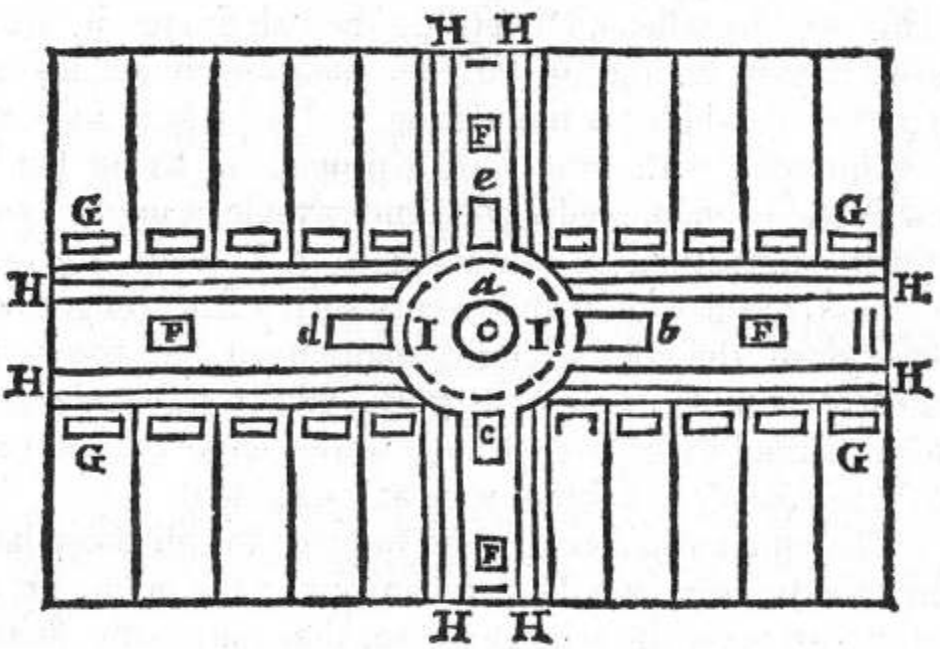
How can we match this today? Innocence lost cannot be regained, and anyway, our expulsion from Eden took place a long time ago. We cannot but agree with Orwell that “the ‘democratic vistas’ have ended in barbed wire” (Orwell 1998: 91). God-fearing, independent-minded tradesmen turned into exploitative capitalists; adventurous, self-confident explorers into acquisitive, arrogant colonialists; the city went from cosmopolis to metropolis to

megalopolis; picturesque towns have become theme parks, closed-up factories are now popular heritage sites and Green tourism is a fast-expanding industry. We live in a hyperreality which is "neither idyllic nor dystopic" (Barnes 1998: 256), where "spectacular commodities" (Debord 1994: 111-112) are dispersed over a diffused area which is no longer either urban or rural. We take the illegibility of the city for granted, and assume from the start that its nature is now unknowable. A "non-space" that cannot be read, against which metaphor collapses and before which narrative is powerless (Jones 1990: 142). A sense of dislocation and disorientation prevent the postmodern body from organising "its immediate surroundings perceptually", and from the ability "cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world" (Jameson 1984: 83). We are undergoing a "general process of dissolution which brings the city to the point where it *consumes itself*", in a cannibalistic ritual of self-destruction (Debord 1994: 124; italics in the original).

Possessed of this knowledge, Defoe's world may appear to us as irrecoverable and irreproducible, available only for naïve eulogising, nostalgic yearning or impatient dismissal. I have tried to steer away from all of these, preferring to regard my study of Defoe's utopian vision as a four-thousand word exercise in willing suspension of disbelief. With utopias (and dystopias) gone, Coleridge's "poetic faiths" remain, and "unreality", as Salman Rushdie has aptly put it, is still "the only weapon with which reality can be smashed, so that it may subsequently be reconstructed" (Rushdie 1991: 122). The "what ifs" of fiction can still work both as a safeguard against mythologizing impulses and as a stubborn gesture of refusal to accept the inevitability of the real.

APPENDIX

from *A Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain*



a - the church

b - the shambles

c - the market house

d - a town hall

e - a conduit with stocks, &c

F - the conduits, or wells

G - houses

H - the lands enclosed behind

I - streets of houses for tradesmen

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Nietzsche's "Architecture for the Perceptive":

From Sacred Space towards a Space for Reflection

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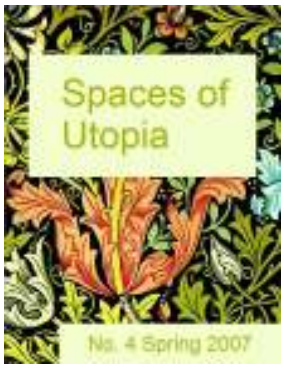

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> Architecture for the perceptive. *There is and probably will be a need to perceive what our great cities lack above all: still, wide, extensive places for reflection; places with tall, spacious, lengthy colonnades for inclement or unduly sunny weather where no traffic noise or street cries can penetrate, and where a finer sensibility would forbid even a priest to pray aloud: buildings and places that express as a whole the sublimity of stepping aside to take thought for oneself. The time is past when the Church possessed the monopoly of reflection; when the* vita contemplativa *primarily had to be a* vita religiosa; *and yet that is the idea expressed in everything the Church has built. I do not know how we could ever content ourselves with its buildings, even stripped of their ecclesiastical function; they speak far too emotive and too constrained a language, as the houses of God and as the showplaces of intercourse with another world, for us as godless people to think our thoughts in them. We want to have* ourselves *translated into stones and plants; we want to have* ourselves *to stroll in, when we take a turn in those porticoes and gardens.*
>
> Friedrich Nietzsche

Architects invent spaces and shapes of buildings made out of stones, concrete, steel, and glass. The designing and constructing of spaces and shapes by means of materials is the *praxis* of building. There are also complementary efforts to the practice of building, namely theoretical attempts to define the principles of building, the discipline's attempts for intellectual distillation of its own laws. Such promulgations are described as architectural theory. Friedrich Nietzsche is neither an architect of practice nor of the theoretical kind.

But Nietzsche is an "architect" nonetheless. Bruno Taut titled his utopian play of architecture, in a more or less overt reference to Nietzsche, "Weltbaumeister", somewhat inelegantly translated as "building master of the world". While the relationship between Taut's play and Nietzsche's philosophy might be of the typical appropriation of the philosopher's thought for one of the many attempts to ground an architectural proposal for a renewed world, after the collapse of the old world order in World War I, with the seemingly necessary philosophical *gravitas,* it does provide, for the purpose of this essay, a way in which Nietzsche's engagement with building and architecture can be understood.

Nietzsche's proposal, then, is to build a world. It is not so much just his own world that stands in the foreground, not a megalomaniac and over-ambitious project in which Nietzsche would lead us to a perfect utopia according to his own taste, but more of a proposed conduct for every modern man. Nietzsche pointed the way for that modern man in his book *Thus Spake Zarathustra*: "The creative, the harvester, the triumphant will I want to join: the rainbow will I show them and all the stairs to superman" (Nietzsche 1980, vol. 4: 26; henceforth referred to as *KSA*). In that sense Nietzsche does not want to build *one* world, but he proposes to all of us to become architects, builders of our world. In other words, Nietzsche is the architect who constructs a world through representations and advises us to do the same for ourselves.

It is also important to establish from the outset of this essay an alertness that Nietzsche's references to building and architecture are not entirely metaphorical, as he indeed points to aesthetics, art, and architecture as forms with which man closes the gap between reality and representation, so that the quest to uncover reality and the quest to build representations are, indeed, aspects of the same process. The essay will return to this often overlooked aspect when Nietzsche invokes "building", "architecture" and "architects".

Of course, Nietzsche is much more famous, or perhaps more notorious, for being the philosopher-architect who called for the building of an "architecture for the perceptive", as he named it, for the new men treading the world in the epoch after God's death. It is here, at the point of modern man's metaphysical dilemma, that Nietzsche uses the act of building in its most fundamental way. It

is clear why he would do so if we witness what Nietzsche wrote about the absence of God. When Nietzsche seemingly proclaims the death of God, it reads much more like a sorrowful lament with an accompanying longing for a gravitational binding force for our lives than a joyous and triumphant proclamation that we have reached a nihilist state in our lives:

> Where has God gone? What have we done? Have we swallowed up the ocean? What sponge have we used to obliterate the whole horizon around us? How have we contrived to erase the fixed, eternal line to which in the past all lines and measurements were related, by which all life's architects did their building, and without which there seemed to be no perspective, no order, no architecture? Are we ourselves still on our feet? Are we not constantly *tumbling?* Hurtling down, back, sideways, in all directions? Have we not wrapped infinite space around us like cloak of icy air? And lost all gravity, because for us there is no up or down? And if we still live and enjoy light, seemingly as we always have, do we not do so – as it were – by the twinkle of stars that have ceased to shine? … God is dead! *And we have killed him!* This feeling, of having killed the mightiest and holiest thing the world ever possessed, has yet to dawn upon mankind: it is a monstrous, *new* feeling! How does the murderer of all murderers console himself, how will he cleanse himself! (*KSA* 9: 632f)

Despite all the fierce rhetoric that certainly can be found throughout Nietzsche's entire philosophical and poetic œuvre, often directed against the moral covenants of Christianity, it was never Nietzsche's attempt to seek a nihilistic world devoid of metaphysical constructs (*KSA* 13: 225). He simply explains to the world – or at least for those who were willing to listen to him, and many were ready to do so – the increasing internal weakness of the present ethical compass of modern man. The observant reader of philosophy knows that Nietzsche is hardly alone in pointing out that fact, although none of his German humanist philosopher colleagues from Herder to Heidegger equalled him in his powerful and sometimes shrill tone of argument.

Nietzsche increasingly invokes "architects", "architecture", and "building" and their respective specific characteristics of that art-form for his argument. It is no surprise, then, that he eventually comes to the conclusion that conventional sacred spaces, ecclesiastical spaces, too, are obsolete. He labels these ecclesiastical spaces "as the showplaces of intercourse with another world" (*KSA* 3: 524). It seems that Nietzsche, here, presents a double meaning when writing that these spaces belong to "another world". The first aspect of the critique could be described as a categorical disagreement on Nietzsche's part with the ethical model propagated by the institutions of the Christian Church in

the nineteenth century. The second aspect is historical in the sense that the said moral construct of the church is apparently unable to sufficiently capture man's imagination so as to afford him the necessary metaphysical grounding for his life. The ecclesiastical spaces once supported man in his quest to grasp, orient, and measure the position of each man in respect to the metaphysical world. Now they have lost their power to do so.

This condition does not exist only in the metaphorical appropriation of architecture Nietzsche offers us in his writings. Nietzsche is astute enough a student of architecture to know that the last great structure of the grand Christian church-building tradition, Balthasar Neumann's church for the Benedictine convent in Neresheim, had been completed almost one hundred years earlier, namely in the late eighteenth century. In this respect, it is not just the condition of overly critical philosophers, like Nietzsche, declaring the Church a weakening patient. The decline of the building program of the Church itself is the physical manifestation that the Church lost its "monopoly of reflection" in the epoch of modernity (*KSA* 3: 524). Even more important as an example to demonstrate that Nietzsche operates in a context when he stipulates these changing conditions of the modern world is the fact that the curia in Rome itself admitted its changing position in the world. Perhaps the most significant change in terms of how the Church positions itself in modernity can be found in a single word, namely in the change from the phrase "the Church and the World" to the phrase "the Church in the World". Ever since the Medieval age the Church described its relationship with the world as two separate entities, the celestial one and the earthly one. It is in Nietzsche's lifetime that the Church officially recognises that it is a part of the world, and that it is indeed "in the World" and not above it. Again, it is important to understand that this context exists when Nietzsche declares the ecclesiastical space obsolete and calls instead for spaces for reflection, *Denkräume,* through which modern man can build himself and a world around.

Of course, it is needless to say that the Church would not have agreed with the Nietzschean interpretation of what transpires on the World stage with respect to the Church's position in the modern world. But it is a truly grand, perhaps audacious attempt by Nietzsche, not to attempt any longer to centre

modern man's life – which seemed impossible to him at that point in history – but at least to solidify it in the disorienting jungle of the modern world. Nietzsche's project is to aestheticise modern life in order to give it back a stabilizing and binding force. In doing so Nietzsche declares life itself as the basic artistic phenomenon.

The act of building in Nietzsche's project of an all-encompassing "will-to-art" – art's task, here, is to produce a veil in front of the metaphysical abyss – assumes a supreme position in the philosophy of Nietzsche, in both a wider metaphysical sense and in a more narrow architectural sense. For Nietzsche, "building" is *the* fundamental process; building is a form-producing process with which man orders a basic system. Nietzsche coins this "the artistic base-phenomenon" and he characterises that phenomenon as "the building spirit" (*KSA* 11: 129).

It is justifiable to assert that the modern tradition knows two large streams of aesthetic thought: one has its roots in idealism; the other one is analytic in nature. The latter, with its roots in British empiricism and logical positivism, as Clive Cazeaux has described, "is committed to the belief that a problem can be clarified or brought out into the open through the careful and rigorous analysis of concepts as we understand them today" (Cazeaux 2000: xvi). Nietzsche, on the other hand, belongs to a Central European tradition that "pays greater attention to the historically rooted and culturally constructed nature of ideas; philosophy is recognized as something which is made and written and, therefore, as something which cannot be divorced from the contingencies of language and tradition" and strives for a certain rooted-ness, in which the building metaphor plays an important role (*ibidem*). Moreover, Germanic aesthetics has had its greatest impact far beyond that particular branch of philosophy. From the later parts of the eighteenth century until the first half of the twentieth century, one can reasonably speak of an aesthetisation of how the world was perceived in all its aspects. The art historian Beat Wyss has subsumed this modern epoch's striving as a "will to art" (Wyss 1997: 3).

The emphasis of aesthetics as a means for attempting to unlock the secrets of the world does not begin with Nietzsche. It is Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz who first counters René Descartes' absolute rational concept of

cognition that estranges man from his natural world of apprehension leading him towards a loss of reality and finally to a discrepancy between rational and sensible relation to the world (Scheer 1997: 46-52). Alexander Baumgarten follows by asserting aesthetics as the science of sensible cognition (*idem*, 53f), before Immanual Kant, "at a historic impasse, returns representations based in the senses to the discourse of philosophy" (Lacour 1999: 23). Claudia Brodsky Lacour further explains that Kant

> does this by making architectonics the only form within which sensory experience can be said to be known. Rejecting its exclusion a priori and a posteriori by dogmatic idealism and empirical skepticism respectively, Kant returns sensory experience to the realm of philosophically grounded science by making its representation an epistemological act. Representations are no longer conceived as error because they are first mediated by a mental *techne.* The means of this mediation are, of course, time and space, Kant's purely schematic a priori forms, but even such fundamentally *non*anthropomorphic representations would offer no basis for scientific knowledge if they were not subordinated to a systematic, overarching form. That form, with which Kant equates the 'nature of human reason itself,' is 'architectonics,' the 'art of [building] systems'. (*ibidem*)

After Kant had laid out this foundation, less formalistically conceived theories of art made truth claims for art such as in the writings of Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Arthur Schopenhauer. These writings preceded theories of art as so-called object-manifestations of truth with thinkers like Nietzsche and, later, Martin Heidegger, with his famous assertion that "poetically, man dwells on this earth" (Heidegger 1971: 218).

One of the more decisive steps in formulating such a sentiment of modern man is, then, of course, being found in Nietzsche's thought, namely that creative thought, and "building thought" in particular, fundamentally determines the world: "(…) one ought to understand the artistic base phenomenon that is called life – the building spirit that creates under most unfavourable conditions (…)", he writes (*KSA* 11, 129). A major step in this tradition of the aesthetisation of the world is the removal of the distinction of representation and reality altogether. The general thesis of this thought is that *"the world is constructed through representation*, that reality and representation are not in fact separate but mutually defining aspects of the same process" (Cazeaux 2000: xvi). It took very little time for art theoreticians such as Konrad Fiedler and Heinrich Woelfflin to follow this suggestion that the material with which we come into

immediate contact is, in fact, reality. But this position also led to misunderstandings in its appropriation that briefly need to be noted here, namely that the importance given to things that exist in the world lead to either a materialism, in which the material is taken without a further possible extension to a realm beyond the matter itself, or to positivist notions of aesthetics that have been developed towards the end of the nineteenth century in the works of Hermann Ludwig Ferdinand von Helmholtz, Gustav Theodor Fechner and others who had attempted to reduce the sense for beauty and art to a physiological response only. Opposing such materialist and positivist interpretations, Nietzsche stands in the tradition that views the modern world as constituted by a transcendental unity. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe describes this unity with the Faustian *"Einsgefühl",* a feeling of oneness, and Novalis (Georg Philipp Friedrich Freiherr von Hardenberg) already shares Goethe's sentiment of an absolute inward-certainty when he writes: "We search everywhere for the absolute, but we always only find things" (*apud* Hammermeister 2002: 68). Hegel declares that appearance itself is essential for the essence because truth could not appear in the world otherwise. Oswald Spengler defines this world-view with the paradigm of "form and actuality" (Spengler 1996: iii). Heidegger later adds that there is no representation from which we could deduce what reality looks like but that it is the work of art itself that lets reality be present. What binds all of those and many other thinkers of the German tradition from Leibniz right up to Nietzsche, Ernst Cassirer, and Heidegger is their certainty that beyond the fleeting phenomena of our world exist**s** a perennial realm that binds all existence. What distinguishes these thinkers from their pre-modern colleagues – and they stress this ever more forcefully – is that man has to respond to the divine creation, the divine creation being the artistic act of God himself, with aesthetic fabrications. Leibniz's brilliant theory of the monads is the anchor for this tradition of thought, as the monad is this self-contained entity that holds, on one hand, infinite possibility, but on the other hand also encompasses *everything*. With modernity firmly in place since the philosophical *tour de force* by Kant, it is now the obligation of the artist to re-create the original creation through art. The artistic act demonstrates the manifold insights and the infinite variety of the world under

one idea. In other words, “art, in this tradition of thought, is no longer confirmed to surface impressions. Art becomes the process through which we shape the world” (Cazeaux 2000: 12).

Nietzsche decisively contributes from the outset of his philosophical work to the understanding that artistic productivity *(poiesis)* becomes a theory of being *(Dasein).* Nietzsche’s unpublished texts leading up to “The Birth of Tragedy” and, of course, the “Birth of Tragedy” itself already emphasises the necessity to build an aesthetic veil. Cazeaux explains: “Gone is the conventional notion of truth as the ‘correct’ representation, the one which best corresponds to reality, since knowledge here is no longer understood as a binary relation between representation and object”, as Hegel still had conceived of it. “Instead, perception and understanding are akin to the creation and appreciation of art. In the absence of an external source, values and truths have to be made” by men (*idem*, 14f). However, Nietzschean thought never leaves the world behind. A “coherent theory of experience (…) still has to account (…) for the counter-pressure the world throws up against consciousness” because there is no Schopenhauerian escapism in Nietzsche’s world conception. Life needs to be asserted. The possibility to assert our existence in the world we find in artistic production, for example when an architect constructs a building, a pure invention of the human intellect without model in Nature. “It is to these ‘leaps’ in artistic creativity and to the demands they impose on interpretation” that modern man looks for “understanding of the tensions and resistances that constitute the individual’s experience of the world” (*ibidem*).

Kai Hammermeister in his book *The German Aesthetic Tradition* has listed how subsequent contemporary thinkers, theoreticians, and artists refer to Nietzsche’s attempt to construct the world through representation, in other words, for the artist to build worlds. We read of Heidegger’s essay “Building Dwelling Thinking” in which the philosopher famously uses the example of a bridge to demonstrate how a work of art “organizes the space around it and transforms it into a world. In other words, art lets us see something that remains hidden from view in our quotidian life” (Hammermeister 2002: 180). It is also Heidegger who asserts that “the work of art not only lets us see those things that have remained hidden so far; it also makes visible the world in which these

individual objects occur" (*ibidem*). The painter Paul Klee also uses the Nietzschean viewpoint when he "famously declared in exactly the same spirit that art does not reproduce the visible, but renders visible" (*ibidem*). And the aforementioned Konrad Fiedler formulates in Nietzschean terms the following: "We will cease to want to see nature through art; rather, we will submit to art so that it teaches us to see nature" (*ibidem*).

It is this valuation of the fundamental act of building that allows Nietzsche to distinguish the artistic as the original-creative *(das Ursprünglich-Einheitliche):* building creates worlds. Building becomes a metaphysical and an epistemological act that each man and woman is asked to participate in order to assert him or her a place in the world. Nietzsche reacts to an entirely new world in which modern man is asked to operate with the present detachment of religiosity in the fundamental structure of that world. Modern men and women, through their creative work and the beauty of their products, are the initiators of self-transcendence, of the growth of the self towards its utmost possibilities.

It is the fundamental world-angst caused by the recognition of men's own minuteness that is redirected into a sublime creative power. Nietzsche labels that power *(Kraft)* as "Grand Style" and contemporaneously establishes architectonics, architecture, and the architect to its elevated, not to say exceptional position, by declaring in his "Twilight of the Idols":

> The actor, the mime, the dancer, the musician, the lyric poet, are closely akin; in their instincts they are ultimately one. But they have gradually specialized and separated from each other – to the point of mutual contradiction. The lyric poet longest remained at one with the musician; the actor with the dancer. The *architect* represents neither a Dionysian nor an Apollonian state: what impels him to art is the great act of will, the will that moves mountains, the ecstasy of the great will. The mightiest men have always lent inspiration to architects; the architect has always lived beneath the mental sway of power. In a building, pride, the defeat of gravity, the will to power must manifest themselves. Architecture is a kind of eloquence of power conveyed through forms: now persuasive, even cajoling; now starkly commanding. The supreme feeling of power and assurance is conveyed by that which possesses the *Grand Style*. The power that has nothing left to prove; which disdains to please; which is oblivious of any onlooker; which unconsciously thrives on the existence of opposition; which remains *self*-contained, fatalistic, a law of other laws: *such* power speaks for itself as the Grand Style. (*KSA* 6: 118)

Here, the "I" comes to know himself as superior against the totality of being *(sein).* Nietzsche is not writing about *egomania*; for him this is metaphysical and

epistemological necessity in order to find men's possibilities in a godless world. In his plea that the world is in demand of form, he writes: "… to see and calculate forms is our biggest joy – it is also our oldest practice" (*KSA* 11: 94). Nietzsche does, in fact, propose a metaphysical solution for modern man by means of art, and the art-form of architecture in particular. The exact transition from Nietzsche's high esteem of the art-form of architecture to what it potentially can do for men's existential quest to assert himself in the world is beyond the scope of this essay but is discussed in the book *Der bauende Geist. Friedrich Nietzsche und Architektur*.[1]

Artistic work becomes, for Nietzsche, a function of the logical that stands prior to every existing world and as such reserves in that sense priority against the world of ideas and science *(Welt der Begriffe und der Wissenschaft).* Although Nietzsche himself still calculates the world along the paradigm of truth in the idealistic tradition, he denies the possibility that the search for truth in the sciences leads to the meaning of the world, following Novalis's dictum pointed out earlier in this essay. Against the scientific discourse, Nietzsche prioritises an aesthetic "sense of form" for obtaining a meaningful existence in the world. By means of constructing works of art, man is building an original-unified *(ursprünglich-einheitliches)* understanding of the world that stands prior to a division into man and world, prior to the distinction of object and subject, prior to all theoretical assumptions and concepts, and prior to the praxis of an operational understanding of the world.

That "sense of form", which now resides at the center, prefers the fundamental act of building against inward thinking *(Selbstdenken).* For this, with Nietzsche, the artistic and contemporaneously metaphysical work becomes a veritable building of *Zeichen,* a term that can alternatively mean sign, mark, omen, or landmark. What is important is Nietzsche's claim that there is an artistic ordering at work that he recognises as the oldest and most fundamental human task and, if achieved to our own satisfaction, brings to us our biggest joy: "Men is a form-shaping and rhythm-shaping creature; there is nothing in which he is not better trained and there seems nothing that gives him more joy than the creating of form (*KSA* 11: 608)." While this "creative power" (*KSA* 11: 203) operates according to criteria that Nietzsche calls "Physiology of Art", an

apparatus that bases aesthetic judgment on an inherent "body-order of all-encompassing reason" *(Leiborganisation der grossen Vernunft)* rather than on a moral order exclusively (*KSA* 11: 509), the primary task of building is of ontological nature, namely to document the form of the life-execution *(Lebensvollzug)* itself. This reality of the world is to be found in its formality. The "mastery of the chaos … the becoming of form" is an aesthetic object-becoming *(ästhetisches Objektwerden)* that Nietzsche designates with his famous paradigm of "will to power". That "will to power" is in regard to all comprehension of the world one of building: men are building "to master something" (*KSA* 12: 140).

Once the characteristics of Nietzsche's "Grand Style" are understood, one will have to set the famous aphorism 280 of his *The Joyous Science*, titled "Architecture for the Perceptive", into a correct framework. Aphorism 280 reads as follows:

> *Architecture for the perceptive.* There is and probably will be a need to perceive what our great cities lack above all: still, wide, extensive places for reflection; places with tall, spacious, lengthy colonnades for inclement or unduly sunny weather where no traffic noise or street cries can penetrate, and where a finer sensibility would forbid even a priest to pray aloud: buildings and places that express as a whole the sublimity of stepping aside to take thought for oneself. The time is past when the Church possessed the monopoly of reflection; when the *vita contemplativa* primarily had to be a *vita religiosa;* and yet that is the idea expressed in everything the Church has built. I do not know how we could ever content ourselves with its buildings, even stripped of their ecclesiastical function; they speak far too emotive and too constrained a language, as the houses of God and as the showplaces of intercourse with another world, for us as godless people to think our thoughts in them. We want to have *ourselves* translated into stones and plants; we want to have *ourselves* to stroll in, when we take a turn in those porticoes and gardens. (*KSA* 3: 524)

The aphorism presents us with an important glance into how Nietzsche creates that monumental sentiment that anchors a metaphysical existence of modern man in the world – a world in which he or she is faced with a fundamental metaphysical world-homelessness after "having killed the mightiest and holiest thing the world ever possessed" – by means of a new program for "building" at large and for the architecture of Modern man in particular.

There is no doubt here that Nietzsche does pronounce the end of ecclesiastical architecture. In spite of this, the fundamental task of building is not purely profane. On the contrary, the proposed "Architecture for the

Perceptive" overcomes, with its own pathos, the religious architecture that it just proclaimed obsolete. This new pathos comes alive through Nietzsche's attempt to "translate" the "godless" into "stone and plants" directly. He postulates the most radical object-becoming *(Objektwerdung)* that is imaginable with this turn: the human soul itself – his or her passion and thinking – ought to be manifested in stone. While he criticises his contemporaries whose passion seems unable to attain any kind of form by relentlessly criticising the state of *Gründerzeit* architecture as a "jumble of all styles" (*KSA* 1: 163), Nietzsche wants a new architecture that is built as an image of man whose primary quality he describes as being "*solid*" (*KSA* 3: 596).

Nietzsche points in the same aesthetic direction as does Kant's theory of the sublime stating that "we have made a world for ourselves in which we can live" (*KSA* 3: 477). It is this deeply felt and irrevocable opposition between the known and the brittle unbeknownst from which the elemental agony of a fundamental world-homelessness awakens in all of us. But it is exactly this deep world-angst, the angst of all things foreign, which carries man to his greatest achievements. The awe of the unknown, the timidity we experience towards the independent, the limitless, and chaotic is the source of all elemental form-giving.

This emphasis on the aesthetic mentality in Nietzschean thought is – as becomes increasingly clear - by no means a resignation from metaphysics. With his "seeing and calculating of forms", his "sense for forms", existing not in some world beyond but "in our world", Nietzsche discovers the highest metaphysical power which each human being can not only experience but, moreover, participate in its creation.

This is the way modern man can overcome the death of God and the nihilistic modern world. If religion, teleology and purposefulness step aside with Nietzsche, then, this should not be understood as a loss of our known world but as a gain towards our actual world: a step towards the "Beyond Good and Evil".

This is the reason why Nietzsche demands architecture for the "perceptive" with "extensive places for reflection" in which those perceptive human beings can "stroll" in "porticos and gardens", and by extension, figuratively, in stone-become-themselves. The demand for this new architecture

is even higher than for those who visit "the showplaces of intercourse with another world" because there nothing had to be built by man. Man could visit the church for a brief time but he did not have to build his own thought-space *(Denkraum).* The act of building was only available to God himself. Now the "perspective" is not only visitor of a liturgical spectacle but he can build himself and a world around. At this instance we recognise the potential elevation of the individual to God-like creative stature. The objective power of the "perspective" is to build space for himself in this world – not exclusively but foremost by means of architecture. Building, in this case, becomes a sacred and remedial act and – understood in this sense – it is something liturgical as such.

"Quiet, wide, extensive places for reflection; places with tall, spacious, lengthy colonnades" ought to be built by the modern architect according to Nietzsche's almost pamphlet-like wording of what is yet to be built by architects of the new epoch, "buildings and places that express as a whole the sublimity of stepping aside to take thought for oneself". He goes on the demand: "We want to have **ourselves** translated into stone and plants; we want to have **ourselves** to stroll in, when we take a turn in those porticos and gardens." These are the most grandiose of building-thoughts.

The shapes of built-up stone, steel or glass, for Nietzsche, ought to insure man against his fundamental world-homelessness, because only "along such beauty made out of stone can the longing heart cool down" (*KSA* 13: 567). Even if it is not serving religion directly any longer, architecture cannot be more mythical: it guards the "I" against the consciousness of his own weakness.

Note

[1] See Breitschmid 2001: 47-61. The chapter "Von der Kritik des 'chaotischen Durcheinander[s] aller Stile" zum 'grossen Stil'" describes Nietzsche's later valuation of the art-form of architecture.

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The City and the Plan:

Schuiten and Peeters's Graphic Meta-utopias

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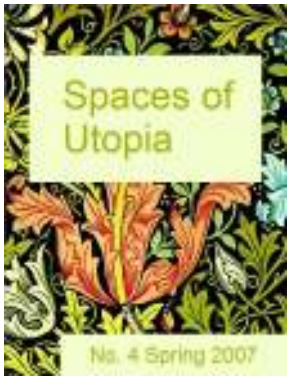

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1. Introduction

In 1983, François Schuiten and Benoît Peeters published a comic book story called *The Walls of Samaris* in the magazine *À Suivre*, a story which would afterwards be published in book format, marking the starting-point of a collaboration which has since then given us several graphic novels and related objects, all of them concerning the complex universe of the so-called *Obscure Cities*.

In this study I intend to go through this series, so as to try to determine and develop its already well-known connections to Utopian Literature. To do so, I will consider most of its albums and connected objects and will focus my attention on their spatial, textual and generic construction. I will first consider whether or not to substitute "graphic novel" for the term "comic book". I will then explore the spatial construction of the series, through the use of Spatiality Studies theory, which will already have generic consequences. These consequences will in turn be revised when I deal with the intricately self-referential textual construction of the albums, after which I will analyse in more detail one of the best-known albums of the series – *The Tower*. The last part of my essay will then consider several possibilities of classifying this universe within Utopian Literature and I will argue that only the category of *meta-utopia* is capable of encompassing and describing all these cities as a whole.

2. Comic book or graphic novel – a question of genre?

As comic strips began to be published in book format, the fact that many of them were aimed not at young but at mature audiences, while at the same time claiming aesthetic value, triggered the need to find a name less associated with children's entertainment. Hence the expression "graphic novel" came to be used, with the aim of giving more dignity to this still recent medium. The literary implications are obvious and the name was therefore also meant to express certain complexities absent from comic strips in newspapers and magazines, such as complex character psychology and a more developed use of time, mostly expressed in greater time-spans and lengthier albums. Bolder narrative strategies (verbal and/or visual) were also implied.

To take literary genre naming seriously is, however, to dwell on a false premise. The characteristics invoked, when applied to the novel as a literary genre are hardly defining, indeed they are misleading. Moreover, if one tries to define a novel by such standards, one will end up with a severely restricted notion of what a novel is. The same happens to the graphic novel. If one thinks that the French term for both comic book and graphic novel is *bande dessinée*, a much more neutral expression, one realises that "graphic novel" is more a way to reject certain connotations present in the name "comic book" than a generic description. By using the word "novel", the literary and hence canonical elements of textual production are immediately brought into mind, thus casting away the idea of low quality magazines with characters such as Spider-Man or Hulk, who go through more or less unconnected adventures.[1] To call a comic book "graphic novel" is then a strategy of legitimisation, of insertion into the artistic canon akin to publishing Elizabethan or Jacobean plays in Complete Works Folios. In the expression "graphic novel", one finds the traces of an aspiration at being literary rather than the name for a specific and autonomous genre inside comics (or outside, which is basically the claim made).

I go through this somewhat wearied discussion because Schuiten's and Peeters's albums have frequently been called graphic novels, so as to call attention to their artistic value and maturity of themes and references. As I think I have shown, the expression is equivocal and, even if one were to take it as a genre definition, it would moreover not fit some of the albums, which, while

spawning from the comic book universe, are already contaminated by other genres, such as the city guide, the newspaper facsimile or even the collection of conference papers, as we shall see. Finally, the artistic value of these albums is not an issue in this essay (comic books can be considered as artistic a form as any product coming from the established arts) and the maturity of their intended readership is sometimes unclear, many albums being enjoyed by both youthful and more mature audiences.

Despite all my previous arguments and similar objections (cf. Zink 1999: 10,15), I will use the expression "graphic novel" as an English equivalent to the French *bande dessinée*. The equivalence is rather oblique ("graphic literature" or "graphic narrative" could perhaps be more general as concepts), but "graphic novel" is not very attached to a literal meaning (the same being the case with the word "novel", which, pointing nowadays to a literary genre, has ceased to indicate its original sense of a novelty), and it is hence a somewhat devoid expression. By "graphic novel" I will then mean a general type of interaction between image and text in book format, sometimes directly and sometimes only vaguely connected to the tradition of comics (the comic strip, for instance), and not a generic type of text with clear and defining characteristics.

3. The heterotopic dimension

From the Art Noveau architecture of Xhystos to the fascist-like monumental buildings of Urbicande, one can see that the Obscure Cities have been in continuity with certain moments of our own style of urban planning, that is, until the mid-twentieth century. As Benoît Peeters himself puts it,

> [This universe] evokes, in fact, what would have happened, had there been a fracture in time, if instead of evolving towards what we now know, architecture and technique had switched tracks from a certain moment, so as to pursue until the end a path which, in reality, was abandoned at a very early stage. (*apud* Lameiras/Santos 1998: 93; my translation)

We thus have a fracture in our architectural past and a continuous development (in isolation) from that point on. This retro-futurism gives us the concept of another place in *another* time, a time of *heterochronia*, a place in a different time-line,[2] and therefore not a simple euchronia. In these stories, the

Obscure Cities take place in another world, with a different History and no direct connection to our world.

In this parallel universe based on the juxtaposition of several different cities, criticism (as a defining factor in considering them utopias) is to be understood as criticism of urban planning and of spatial organisation. Social, political and economic issues are usually not addressed in themselves, but almost always as connected to deficient or productive urban planning. We can then say that social conflicts are often expressed as spatial conflicts, in a relation of *mise en abyme*. This, as we will no doubt notice, is a common feature of these albums.

Many of these issues come to the fore as effects of urban planning: Urbicande is a sociably unstable city because the Southern Bank is highly developed, while the Northern Bank is not. Brüsel almost goes bankrupt with its plan of total rebuilding, a plan which is not even completed, leaving the city in ruins. But, of course, political and economic issues are frequently at the root of most of this urban planning: most cities undergo a total rebuilding as a result of competition and envy, each city wanting to be great enough to be considered the capital of the continent.[3] On the other hand, many of these cities have city-walls because their suburbs were not duly developed and became dangerously poor. Mylos is a purely industrial city, as it is run by a corporation of factory owners, who exploit children and workers in general. There is again the case of Brüsel, which is led into a misguided programme of complete urban renewal by the corrupt business-man Freddy de Vrouw, who simultaneously leads the construction and deals in real-estate, buying land at very low prices which he then sells at much higher prices to the city-council. These changes bring serious consequences and frequently wreck whole cities.

If political and economic issues are sometimes at the root of radical changes, it is also true that most of these changes, in the way they are made, have an aesthetic more than a political, economic or social purpose, such as when Blossfeldtstadt seeks to apply to its buildings the design of plants photographed by Karl Blossfeldt in his *Urformen der Kunst*, or when the Southern Bank of Urbicande is redesigned so as to be rigorously symmetric. Architecture, or, as it is sometimes called in the Obscure Cities, *Urbatecture*,

the art of designing and building whole cities, thus becomes stronger and more imposing than the cities themselves or their inhabitants: it becomes a thing existing in and for itself, or at least it so wishes, by creating a space which would be only indirectly social.

But, of course, as Michel Foucault reminds us, architecture ensures

> [A] certain allocation of people in space, a canalization of their circulation, as well as the coding of their reciprocal relations. So it is not only considered as an element in space, but is especially thought of as a plunge into a field of social relations in which it brings about some specific effects. (Foucault 1993: 169)

This connection is clearly made when one of the rulers of Urbicande says to Eugen Robick, the Urbatect:

> But you are an urbatect, not a politician. We know that both domains are close, but we fear that sometimes they are not close enough and that you do not always measure the stakes implied in your plans. (Schuiten/Peeters 1985: 24; my translation)

In this sense, as a field productive of certain social relations, one can understand that urban planning and building tend to create, as a reaction or as continuity, heterotopias in Foucault's sense.[4] Heterotopias, in many of the developments of such a general definition, as Kevin Hetherington notes,

> [H]ave more often been conceived as examples of sites of an ambiguous spatiality associated with identity formation in relation to acts of resistance, rather than panoptical ordering and social control. In general, the term has been used to try and capture something of the significance of sites of marginality that act as postmodern spaces for resistance and transgression. (Hetherington 1997: 42)

In this version of heterotopias as spaces of resistance, one can find the case of Monsieur de la Barque (cf. Schuiten/Peeters 2001: 14,15). In Urbicande, where everything tends towards symmetry, there is an Urbatectural Brigade, which insures that urban and architectural plans are followed. Monsieur de la Barque, so as to apply for a class B apartment, is forced to hide the existence of his third child, and thus has to adapt the apartment for more people than those for whom it was designed. This and the fact that the child is hidden cause him and his family to be expelled from the city.

Other versions of heterotopias in this universe are more official and not at all connected to resistance, but to control. As Hetherington notes, heterotopias are "spaces of alternate ordering" which means that they include spaces such as Bentham's Panopticon (Hetherington 1997: 41); that is, sites of control and of discipline, often carceral. Both my examples are entire cities. One is Samaris, which traps the foreign visitor, controls him at all times, until he realises that he is the only living person in the whole city, and that everything and everyone else are props and sets designed to maintain him locked inside it. The other example is the city of Galatograd, built as an enormous dome. Everyone can see the centre and the other apartments from their own houses, solely separated by large windows with no curtains, and this means that whoever is at the centre can also see into everyone's apartments too, there being a constant peering out of the window (cf. Schuiten /Peeters 2001: 16,17).

I have stressed the role of heterotopias, because I believe they are an important part of this universe, and cannot be ignored, but, as we shall see, they are not its major social and urban manifestation.

4. The space of the page

Most of these cities, starting off as normal villages which grow to become cities, show the consequences of a place which is constructed over a long time span for utility purposes: they offer a range of building types, usually not grand in style, mostly detached houses, just a few floors in height – in short, they show no signs of urban planning. What they then undergo, as they grow to become rich and important cities, is the imposition of a plan, a blueprint, for their complete and radical transformation: all buildings are torn down, and new ones are constructed, usually skyscrapers, or dome-like spaces, or even monumental yet geometrically simple buildings.

There is then a conflict between blueprint and the city prior to its refashioning. The blueprints and models are presented as perfect, as *the* total solution for all the cities' problems. Indeed, a frequent characteristic of scientists and architects in the universe of the Obscure Cities is that they understand no middle term: their solutions are always as revolutionary as they are extravagant, and their failures are no less grand, which, by a satirical treatment, brings us

close to the style of anti-utopia.[5] This is aggravated by the fact that science in the Obscure Cities is *not* "an exact science". It is constantly faced with inexplicable and uncontrollable phenomena, which disturb plans or the newly built cities: there is the case of the man with a coloured shadow, of the young girl who becomes bent in an abnormal direction, suspected of having fallen under the gravitational influence of another planet, and finally the case of the so-called *net* of Urbicande, a cube of unknown origin and made of an unidentified material, which grows and multiplies itself from the size of a book to traverse a whole house and then the entire city. It grows through all these spaces without ever materially displacing or destroying them, although one can build on it. This, however, brings huge consequences for Urbicande and for its chief-Urbatect, Eugen Robick: once the net becomes too big to be ignored, it shatters all symmetry, that is, it annuls the previous blueprint, as well as joining the two banks of the city, strictly kept apart before the incident.

This net then serves as a metaphor for the plan, or blueprint, which is imposed onto the city and its inhabitants in an almost arbitrary way, thus radically changing their style of life. At this stage, the blueprint becomes the part of the story which we can say is genuinely utopian: by showing the positive effects of the net, as a potential blueprint that literally projects itself upon the city, the reader sees that the net does what the adaptation of the plan to the city should have done. By simply growing from a mere cube (a potential net) without any mediation, one can say that the net is a blueprint directly turned into architectural object; it is a plan, as a material object, turned into a site, imprinted onto the city. What we find in this cube is a utopian object mindless of urbatectural regulations, an object that joins the two banks of the city and gives it life beyond its greyish blocks.

This cube also constitutes an interference by an external force which cannot be controlled by either architects or scientists, and, as an object metaphorical of a blueprint, a city on a page, it points to the fact that this universe is a construction, a narrative, not only a vaguely utopian universe, but a universe that includes in it a reflection on utopia, its variants, problems and solutions. By inserting problems which seem to transcend human effort as well as symbolise its difficulties, the implied authors of these albums not only show

the limitations, flaws and follies of social and urban ordering, but also indicate the textual net, the albums themselves in their self-reflexive games.

Indeed, as objects that we see and read, these albums are very close to a blueprint or a map. They share with the genre of utopia the compulsion to have us believe that these are real places, while at the same time spreading hints towards their status as constructs. In terms of intertextual play, there are frequent uses of Franz Kafka, Italo Calvino, Jorge Luis Borges, and most of all Jules Verne, who actually becomes a character in one or two books, besides numberless references in the field of architecture. But, more importantly, the authors go beyond the comic strip format and there are several albums which transcend it entirely. There is the collection of documents collected in a file and commented on by a librarian from our world pointing to the real existence of these cities; there is the facsimile of selections from a newspaper of the Obscure Cities; and finally there is a tourist guide to the Obscure Cities, organised by the authors of the series, who declare they have visited them and collected the information themselves. We there find information about history, ethnic diversity, language, the arts, geography, fauna and flora, a description of the major cities and of the major characters of their world, and even a list of recommended wines and a recipe for duck! All these albums remind us of what Diana Knight, while referring to Roland Barthes, calls "the fantasmatic formulation of the very detail of utopia" (Knight 1997: 9), after which she quotes Barthes saying

> [I]t's from these [the details of this society] that we deduce utopia, that we deduce desire. For utopia, and this is precisely its special feature, imagines times, places, and customs in minutest details. (*apud ibidem*)

As the main character of the album *The Archivist*, a character coming from our world, puts it, in what has become a commonplace of this series,

> One cannot keep hiding this any longer: in this net of exceptions and rules, of beautiful dreams and dramas, of projects and renunciations, which characterize the obscure universe, I can recognize only one thing: the indubitable traces of the Real. (Schuiten/Peeters 2003b: 46; my translation)

Moreover, there have been other even more convincing objects, such as an art-catalogue about a Belgian painter, Augustin Desombres, which actually fooled Belgian art-critics into referring to him as if he had really existed, while he was in fact a creation of Schuiten and Peeters, having become a character in one of their other more traditional albums (cf. Lameiras/Santos 1998: 102). But for me the most curious object of them all is of Portuguese origin: a book whose title translates as *The Visible Cities*, supposedly a collection of papers presented at a conference about *The Obscure Cities* in Coimbra, in November 1997. Besides the illustrations, the papers and some brief biographies of the participants, the book also includes an interview with the organisers, a collection of newspaper clips about the conference and an after-word by Benoît Peeters himself. Some of the papers and of the biographies are particularly extravagant, and one can be led to think they were later insertions written by the organizers themselves, in a continuation of the play with verisimilitude initiated by the authors of the series. This is confirmed by a fictional story which accompanies the whole volume, and which ends in a highly fantastical manner. Despite all these hints, one may yet dismiss them as incursions into fiction, which do not affect the whole book as the result of a conference, however different the conference may have been from this final object. What we learn, though (and this is something we only discover from searching the Internet and reading other texts about *The Obscure Cities*), is that such a conference never actually took place and that all texts were written by the so-called organisers of the event, João Miguel Lameiras and João Ramalho Santos.[6]

All fields, even the field of conference papers, are invaded. This phenomenon points to the status of these texts as simulacra, as representations of cities previously set to paper, which we get second-hand. The representation of the city which in turn is represented to us, readers, is the pattern we find in three albums at least: the newspaper facsimile, the collection of library documents and the city guide. These serve to highlight the role of mediation, the frame that reminds us of perspective, which can be forgotten when reading the comic-strip albums, in their supposed directness of unmediated communication. This is in keeping with a commonplace of utopian literature, where we are told by a narrator that he found someone who told him about a

utopia, except that here we are not only told but also shown. Because of this distance between initial observer and reader, these cities forever remain at a distance, unreachable, inaccessible, and therefore obscure.

5. The tower and the idea

As cities of paper, akin to blueprints and maps, the Obscure Cities have a fitting founding myth, told to us in the album *The Tower*. The story is very much like the one of the Tower of Babel, and it is considered to be a myth in the other albums, presenting itself as a chronicle, encased as if in a papyrus. It is worth quoting Elias Auréolus Palingénius, one of the characters, in length, as he tries to explain its origin,

> The universe (…) is composed of four levels. The first one, the material one, is the tangible world where we live (…). The second one, the spiritual one, is that of our thoughts, our dreams and our desires. The third one is astral (…): it is an equivalent in the cosmic order of the material universe (…). The fourth one is the divine universe: it is as untouchable as the spiritual, but it is so far away that it is hard to imagine.
>
> In the beginning, the tower was conceived in the image of the universe; a construction that ought to allow the abolition of the differences between the levels, so as to gradually approach the divine (…) [and which] should grow thinner and purer as it rose, casting away all weight, all impurity. That way, we would reach the soul of the tower, the true purpose of the building.
>
> All this was theory (…), symbolism used by philosophers so that people could understand them. But it was a terrible naivety, a horrible absurdity to have wanted to build this tower, which should have remained just an image. (Schuiten/Peeters 1989: 55, 56; my translation)

I cling on to this phrase, a tower "which should have remained just an image", which, after what I said about plans, blueprints and self-reference, should sound quite pregnant. This, however, should be taken further. What this character says, although quite anti-utopian, sounds reasonable: it is folly to want to reach spirituality through a tower, especially after the disasters we have witnessed happening to the other cities, once a new blueprint is imprinted on them. However, considering the logic of these albums, we should not be so sure of ourselves. The album is black and white, but the last few pages, once the protagonist has left the tower and reached the ground, are in colour. When he looks back at it, however, the tower is still black and white.

Bearing in mind the speech quoted above, I would advance the following interpretation. The tower, starting from a blueprint, which is now lost, was

supposedly the materialisation of the plan, *an idea turned into matter with the purpose of becoming idea again* (the so-called "soul of the tower"). The tower was, however, left incomplete, because all everyone wanted was to build the upper floors to reach divinity as soon as possible, leaving the lower floors in a very fragile state. But when our protagonist reaches the top of the tower, he sees only a plain material sky, no spiritual heaven. When he finally reaches the ground, everything is in colour, except for the tower, and we understand that the tower had already become an idea, its inhabitants living inside an idea, without being aware of it. As the tower is built, it materialises the idea and this reminds us of Louis Marin writing about the Holy City, when he says that "Geographic space is thus the transcription of the 'meta-physical', beyond this world, in the represented earth" (Marin 1984: 206). *As a transcription, the tower inscribes the ideal in the landscape*. But the tower falls, after the protagonist has left it, and one thinks of what David Harvey says in all its literality: "can any utopianism of spatial form that gets materialized be anything other than 'degenerate' in the sense that Marin has in mind? Perhaps Utopia can never be realized without destroying itself" (Harvey 2000: 167). What the builders of the tower managed, even if for a short period of time, was to implant a building in the soil, which then grew to become an idea again. Once materialised, once placed, the utopia, which is a no-place, had to once more idealise itself; it has after all become an image, as Elias wished it to have remained, a black and white utopia, before finally crumbling down, in an inevitable self-destruction. To this one should add the relation between the tower and the plan as compared to their material media and to both their places in the story. By this I mean that both are images constructed on paper, either a blueprint or a graphic novel. The status of the tower is further complicated by the fact that it serves a dual function which is proper of utopias: it is simultaneously the dwelling-place of a number of characters, the actual place inside the fiction of the graphic novel (and a potential blueprint for readers, who indeed look at it in the images) and it is also the blueprint inside the book, that is, it is not only a supposed model of unity (which would be fairly obvious), but most of all a plan inscribed into the landscape, twice removed from us, readers.

6. Conclusion: what are the Obscure Cities?

It is finally time to ascertain what, in the field of Utopian Studies, the Obscure Cities are. Their founding myth, with all its complications arising from the relation between ideal and materiality, functions as a prelude to a world where blueprint and construction always relate to each other in a problematic way. Moreover, as the two Portuguese critics I mentioned have noted, there is no lack of dystopian elements in these cities (cf. Lameiras/Santos 1998: 139-152): Mylos is a hellish industrial complex, Brüsel is deeply technocratic, the republic of Sodrovno-Voldachie is clearly totalitarian, and Eugen Robick has traces of an anti-utopian architect (a characteristic which he shares with the city council of Brüsel), who thinks he and his plans are too good for the undeserving population of Urbicande.

The fixation with gigantic awe-inspiring urban structures and the fact that these cities adulterate their historical records[7] are also telling of totalitarian tendencies. According to Lameiras and Ramalho Santos, although Schuiten and Peeters are interested in working with the concept of utopia, as a mode of social thinking, dystopia has received the most attention in these albums, some of its main cities falling into that category (cf. *idem*, 148). Although I would not deny that Brüsel, Urbicande, Mylos and the republic of Sodrovno-Voldachie are closer to the genre of dystopia than to anything else, one should also note that all of these contain heterotopias inside them and still have the possibility of becoming eutopias, which means that they must fall into the category of "critical dystopias", since "the ambiguous, open endings of these (…) [texts] maintain the utopian impulse *within* the work" (Baccolini/Moylan 2003: 7).

On the other hand, there are several cities which are presented as eutopias, happy places, such as Calvani and Alaxis, and other dubious situations, bordering on dystopia, such as Xhystos and Pâhry. And one should not forget that, according to the maps shown in several of these albums, there are many more cities to visit, and that the work of Schuiten and Peeters has not yet been considered finished.

One major obstacle against considering these cities utopias has been the cost implied by the realisation of blueprints, their failures and disasters being brought to mind. Nevertheless, after these sacrifices, success usually comes

along, and this takes us back to yet another version of utopia, the "flawed utopia", one of the categories of which, according to Lyman Tower Sargent, "poses the fundamental dilemma of what cost we are willing to pay or require others to pay to achieve a good life" (Sargent 2003: 226). The form of "critical utopia" might also be useful for the attitude behind the construction of some of these cities, because, as Tom Moylan remarks, a "central concern in the critical utopia is the awareness of the limitations of the utopian tradition, so that these texts reject utopia as a blueprint while preserving it as dream" (*apud* Baccolini/Moylan 2003: 2). Bearing in mind what has here been said of blueprints, the notion of "critical utopia" sounds quite reasonable, also because it serves as a neat counterpoint to the "critical dystopias" I believe to have located.

As such, we seem to have run into the final problem: we could go through each of these cities, one by one, fitting them into categories, but we would then miss the overall effect of the Obscure Cities as a universe. Utopia, dystopia, critical utopia, critical dystopia, flawed utopia, and heterotopia – all these lead us to another category which, although it is not above the ones I mentioned (it is not an arch-genre), crosses all of them and is able to contain them: it is *meta-utopia* (in this case, a graphic meta-utopia). As such, it is a type of utopia which is highly self-reflexive as a study about the possibilities and problems of the genre and its variants, constructing itself out of the immense field of utopian literature and thinking and pointing towards *it* and not so much to an outside against which it would be measured. This can be seen in the name of one of the main cities, Urbicande, the name meaning "city of cities" (cf. Schuiten/Peeters 2002a: 137), and its emblem being a great V (the city's name is occasionally written VRBICANDE), which reminds us of the crucial V in Utopia's Roman spelling (VTOPIA). I would then note two ways (in addition to and deriving from the previous views presented in this essay) by which this type manifests itself in *The Obscure Cities*, thus concluding this essay:

1. There is a clear notion of history. The *Guide des Cités*, for example, presents a chronology starting from the moment in which the construction of the Tower is initiated (cf. *idem*, 27-37). This means that

ideas of change, of historical becoming and of significant human action are always present (cf. Lameiras/Santos 1998: 96). Moreover, the creation of plans and their realisation show the Cities in progress, not as unchanging static entities, which we could then easily judge. This focus on the process reminds us that even traditional utopias had to contain a moment of construction and of change in their history and that such moments are hardly ever utopian. By thinking itself through history (that is, through the comparison between several spatial and social moments of a city throughout a temporal line), this dynamic meta-utopia reinforces the belief in the possibility of change and the desire for change, presenting "utopianism as process or moment of change" (Levitas/Sargisson 2003: 16).

2. If the first element has to do with a temporal dimension (which is also spatial, in that it allows us to see how one city goes through several stages, several other cities, to become something else), then the second element is definitely spatial. There are several cities in this universe, some closer, some farther from traditional utopia. Besides, utopias are not perfect places, only better than real ones. It is from this diversity, then, from the comparison between all these cities, that we see why a meta-utopia is at action here: as a plurality of hypotheses, none of them perfect, Schuiten and Peeters leave us the choice and encourage us to accept and/or criticise the models we are shown. By putting a plural utopian vision in front of us, the authors refuse to propose a single, total and all-solving form of society. Total blueprints, we have seen, do not often fare well in this world. The play of construction and of social thinking, we then see, is to be continued by the readers, in a continuous critique of what we have read and of what we project.

Notes

[1] In fact, were one to look for complex characters, temporal development, novelistic narrative devices and other such characteristics in comic books as, for example, *Spider-Man*, one would have no trouble finding them. The fact that comics with super-heroes have also been published in graphic novel format (book format) has also complicated matters further.

[2] Heterochronia is used here as a way of stressing the fact that the time-line is different in the universe of the Obscure Cities, as compared to ours. Euchronia is an insufficient concept here, since it presupposes a place ahead or behind our temporal moment, but inside our own time-line. Indeed, the Obscure Cities are heterochronic for two reasons: first of all they are anachronic (cf. Lameiras/Santos 1998: 93), because they are built out of a heteroclite mass of materials spread out through a long history of architecture, everyday objects, art, etc. These materials are then brought together into the same temporal moment. Secondly, the Obscure Cities are anisochronic (cf. Genette 1984: 85-87), that is, their time has a different speed from ours – it is considerably slower. Moreover, the temporal difference is given to paradoxical phenomena: for one, the subjective impression of time is apparently identical in both universes; on the other hand, the difference between times also allows for temporal reversals between both universes (a sort of bi-universal anachronism, akin to time-travelling) (cf. Schuiten/Peeters 2002a: 24, 5).

[3] As would be expected, theories about centre and margin would become useful above, while discussing the class struggles in the opposition between the inner city and its suburbs, but these theories, in their assessment of relations between geography and Eurocentrism, can also be applied to the dearly cherished discipline of geography in the Obscure Cities. Although, in this world, they are more of an art (a branch of philosophy) than of an exact science, cartography and geography are of great political importance. As the *Guide des Cités* tells us, "Each of the cities has engaged in its own representation of the Continent, presenting itself as the true capital. 'Around Samaris there are eight big cities', says The Great Book of Samaris" (Schuiten/Peeters 2002a: 9; my translation). This phenomenon is what Derek Gregory, referring himself to the discursive production of Eurocentrism, calls "the production of abstract space [, which] also required the prosecution of concepts through which European metrics and meanings of 'History' and 'Geography', each with their own imperial capital, were taken to be natural and inviolable, as making the single centre around which it was meet and proper to organize other histories and other geographies" (Gregory 1998: 75).

[4] "[T]hose singular spaces to be found in some given social spaces whose functions are different or even the opposite of others" (Foucault 1993: 168).

[5] If the satirical treatment of these alternative cities (as a form of regarding them critically) is often an element to be kept in mind, it is by no means an attack on the whole idea of utopian thinking, it is not anti-utopia. We can perhaps find only one clear case of anti-utopia in this series: the album *Brüsel*. What makes this album special is the connection made between a total reconstruction of the city, its clearly traumatic effects, and the element of corruption. The ruling class is presented as hopelessly naïve and indifferent to the catastrophic effects of their urban planning, at least until they hear of corruption (cf. Schuiten/Peeters 1997: 36-39). Scientists, architects and surgeons are shown as complete clowns (cf. *idem*, 29, 50-54, 68-71, 80-84, 104), unaware of the harm derived from their experiments and considering that all criticism to what they do is a manifestation of backwardness, a resistance against progress. Moreover, the disaster that falls upon the city of Brüsel is even more explicit than in other albums. This can be explained by the fact that, more than with any other album, the purpose of this one is to denounce the process and results of a similarly disastrous urban reconstruction, which had taken place in Brüsel's corresponding city in our world, Brussels, where the authors of these graphic novels live. This intervention is then set against the clumsy and indifferent "urban planning" (if we can call it so) of Brussels, which went hand in hand with corruption, more than against all notion of progress, whatever forms it may take (cf. Lameiras/Santos 1998: 101, 146, 147, 164).

[6] The fact that the circumstances surrounding these essays are fictional is not, however, sufficient argument for us to deem the essays themselves fictional. In their dialogism, they show the multiplicity of approaches one can make to *The Obscure Cities* albums, while also showing a major characteristic of this series: a diversity which constantly escapes unification, also in their difficult classification within the field of Utopian Studies. They thus serve as a good (and/though sometimes unreliable and playfully provocative) introduction to this universe, as far as Portuguese readers are concerned.

[7] In the Obscure Cities, this falsification of history goes so far that the *Guide des Cités* complains how, despite the recent convention against archive falsification, the habit of rewriting history after each military victory had the following result: “knowledge about the past is extremely fragmentary and it rarely happens that a city is capable of going back more than two or three centuries in its own History” (Schuiten/Peeters 2002a: 25; my translation).

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Overthrowing Vengeance:

The Role of Visual Elements in *V for Vendetta*

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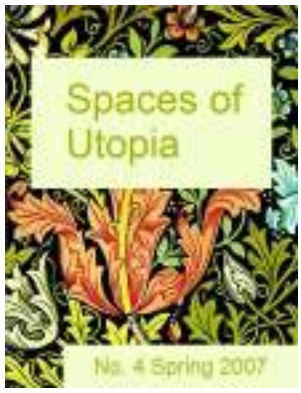

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Introduction

The emergence of the critical dystopia genre in the 1980s allowed for the appearance of a body of literature capable of both informing and prompting readers to action. The open-endness of these works, coupled with the sense of critique, becomes a key element in performing a catalyst function and maintaining hope within the text.

V for Vendetta, by Alan Moore, with illustrations by David Lloyd, first published in serial form between 1982 and 1988 and, later, in 1990, as a graphic novel is one of such works. Appearing during the political climate of Margaret Thatcher's conservative government, it became a cult classic amongst graphic novels readers and collectors. A film adaptation was released in 2006, from a screenplay by the Wachowski brothers, to different reactions from the graphic novel's creators; Moore withdrew his support and denied any involvement in the adaptation while David Lloyd publicly confessed his admiration for the movie. I first became interested in the series due to its gritty realism, and the enigmatic, cultured figure of the protagonist. In fact, *V for Vendetta*'s universe is quite distant from the comic book genre, which is dominated by God-like figures such as Superman or Spiderman. Also, the sheer scope of reference in the work, ranging from Blake and Shakespeare to the Rolling Stones and The Velvet Underground, added to my interest, making it the subject of this paper.

In this essay I will be discussing the graphic novel, focusing on identifying a "sub narrative" level composed of visual elements and its relation to the main narrative line, a relation based on the production of an ideological background that confers a wider significance to the actions of the protagonist. Ultimately the dynamics of this relation resolve themselves in an overthrow of the simpler motif of vendetta in favor of a more complex narrative about society's struggle against an oppressive regime, thus reaching a far more profound resonance and utopian function.

Critical Dystopia and Narrative Levels

The setting for Alan Moore and David Lloyd's graphic narrative is a near-future England, ruled by a fascist regime dubbed "Norsefire". The series' main characters are V - the protagonist – and Evey, a young girl struggling to survive in the dystopian universe of the book. I have classified *V for Vendetta* as a critical dystopia according to Lyman Tower Sargent's definition of the genre as:

> A non existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as worse than contemporary society but that normally includes at least one eutopian enclave or holds out hope that the dystopia can be overcome and replaced with a eutopia. (*apud* Baccolini/Moylan 2003: 7)

I will return to this definition further ahead in the essay, in order to bring forth the points regarding the "eutopian enclave" and also in relation to the open ending of *V for Vendetta*.

In order to understand the role of visual elements, I will now focus on the two main characters, distinguishing between their positions in the narrative so as to make clear the dynamics at play between main and sub narrative levels. Raffaela Baccolini and Tom Moylan's discussion of the critical dystopia, in "Dystopias and Histories", explores the genre's narrative devices as "the construction of a narrative of the hegemonic order and a counter-narrative of alienation and resistance", identifying the protagonist as someone "unreflectively immersed in the [dystopian] society" moving "from apparent contentment into an experience of alienation and resistance" (*ibidem*). This sheds a revealing light on *V for Vendetta*'s structure, as is noticeable at the

moment of both V and Evey's introduction. In their introductory panels, both characters are shown in the process of putting on masks. Evey is presented putting on make-up, a mask of the mundane, her face exposed in the mirror. A character, then, immersed in the dystopian society, and subjected to its order, having to step down to prostitution to survive. While it cannot be said that this is a character satisfied with her existence, Evey is at most in a first stage of alienation, with no resistance coming from her part to the hegemonic order.

V's introduction is, however, quite different. We do not observe an individual putting on a mask, there is not a clear subject to be disguised. V is still a shadow, a mere silhouette. The foreground of this scene is occupied by the objects in the room. What presents itself to be embodied behind the mask – in other words, to grant content to the shadow's form – are those visual elements, amongst which the bookshelf on which *Mein Kampf, Capital* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are grouped. From the moment of his introduction onwards, V transcends individuality and is a character in a stage of open resistance, to use Baccolini and Moylan's expression. It also becomes difficult to view V as an archetypal avenger, driven exclusively by the desire of personal revenge. His position in relation to main and sub-narrative levels can be thought of as that of an agent on a meta-utopian level, a position made clearer further ahead in the book.

The Significance of History and Theatre

Having explored the distinction between V and Evey as characters, I would now move to discuss *V for Vendetta*'s most featured visual object: the Guy Fawkes mask.

The mask becomes a symbol for a crucial recovery of history that not only is a key factor in the narrative as a whole but also allows for the critical aspect of the book to reach the reader with more impact. As Baccolini puts it,

> History, together with memory, figures prominently in the critical dystopia (…) and [its] recovery and knowledge (…) appear to be necessary elements to promote a utopian space. (Baccolini 2003: 116)

V's figure operates this recovery by linking history and theatre, and, playing to this role, by providing voice to the ideological currents stemming forth from the

visual elements of his universe. This accounts for his habit of speaking almost exclusively by quotation, remaining "in character" throughout the play: the first words that V speaks are from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Act I, Scene 2: "The Multiplying villainies of nature do swarm upon him…" (Lloyd/Moore 1990: 11). Also, his position as the "maestro" of a plan larger than personal revenge is also meaningfully stated by quoting William Blake: "I will not cease from mental flight/ Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand/ 'Till we have built Jerusalem/ In England's green and pleasant land" (*idem*, 48).

This specific scope of reference – history and theatre – is enhanced by the sub-narrative level. Again, it is the bookshelves in V's home, the "Shadow Gallery", that better present the importance of this bond. The presence of titles such as *Frankenstein, Gulliver's Travels, Don Quixote, Hard Times, French Revolution, Faust, The Odyssey, V, Iliad, Shakespeare, Ivanhoe, The Golden Bough, Divine Comedy* both extends and thickens the ideological cloth out of which V is formed.

The Heterotopic Space and Process in *VfV*

Going back to Lyman Tower Sargent's words, namely the "existence of at least one eutopian enclave" and articulating them with Baccolini's mention of the need of recovery and knowledge of history to promote a utopian space, the visual objects that compose the sub-narrative level can be seen as endowing V's home with necessary elements for creating a space of resistance and the hope of overcoming the hegemonic order. This space is meaningfully a negative version of the power structure of the dominant regime. This rendering as negative, enforced by its underground location, brings it close to Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopias, the places where "all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted" (Foucault 1986: 24). The presence of these elements in a space that juxtaposes both freedom and order endows the identity formed in them with a new found power of agency, granting, as Kevin Hetherington has argued in his discussion of the concept of heterotopias, "the means for the development of new modes of social ordering that are utopian in intent" (Hetherington 1997: 53).

What has to be thought of, then, in *V for Vendetta*, is not just the presence of this heterotopic space but the processes that can take place in it, since, as Foucault reminds us, there isn't "anything that is functionally – by its very nature – absolutely liberating. Liberty is a *practice*" (Foucault 1993: 162; original italics).

Again in *V for Vendetta* this is linked to theatricality: it is through the staging of plays, in a total theatre experience, that V enables the awakening of individual consciousness in Evey, and prepares her to take his place in the new social order. When Evey enters the space of the gallery as a character unknowingly part of V's "prison play", main and sub-narrative levels merge. She is put through a "rite of passage" that will take her to the stage of resistance and to the understanding of her responsibility as a member of society. At this point vengeance is entirely overthrown and we are left with a new V, contemplating the possibility of building a new, fairer social order. This turn in the narrative is accomplished by the role of visual elements, which establish the outcome of the narrative through their influence in shaping V, the space and processes of the Shadow Gallery, and as a legacy of history and memory to Evey in her role as the new V.

Conclusion

As readers we are constantly brought back to this ideological frame, reminded of the supreme importance of knowing the past and the need to be historically conscious and returned to the present with a new awareness of our responsibility in shaping society. However, Moore and Lloyd are careful to show that this recovery doesn't lead strictly to violence. By presenting two V's, one that in fact chooses a more violent path, and another one that, having been brought into existence by the same ideological background, chooses to keep a positive role, one of construction and not destruction, the graphic novel's final emphasis is on *consciousness*.

V for Vendetta leaves us with an open ending, the total possibility for the future in the image of:

> The people stand[ing] within the ruins of society, a jail intended to outlive them all. The door is open. They can leave, or fall instead to squabbling and thence new slaveries. The choice is theirs, as ever it must be. (Lloyd/Moore 1990: 260)

This ending enables the graphic novel to maintain the hope that dystopia has indeed been overcome and will be replaced by an eutopia. By opening the reader to this hope and possibility, it states the most crucial part of any social dreaming: the choice *is ours*, as ever it must be.

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The Architecture of Happiness:

Building Utopia in the Last Romances of William Morris

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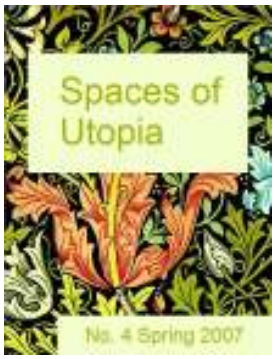

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i. Architecture and Utopia

> *Over that downland we may wend a four days, and then the land will swell up high, and from the end of that high land we shall behold below us a fair land of tillage, well watered and wooded, and much builded; and in the midst thereof a great city with walls and towers, and a great white castle and a minster, and lovely houses a many.*
>
> (Morris, May 1910-15, XX: 260-61)

In his 1881 lecture "Art and the Beauty of the Earth", William Morris asserted that "those who are to make beautiful things must live in a beautiful place", and in honour of these beautiful places the buildings people construct should be "ornaments to Nature, not disfigurements of it" (Morris, May 1910-15, XXII: 170). The City of the Five Crafts in his romance *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* (1897), described in the opening extract, exemplifies this potential for a harmonious interaction between built and natural environment. Gerard's description of the city engages both the protagonist Birdalone and the reader in an imaginative enactment of the journey there in which the sense of expectation engendered by

climbing the high land resolves into a vision of intense aesthetic delight. It is a delight which proves no less potent for being anticipated, for on approaching the city several days later Birdalone "cried aloud with joy to see the lovely land before her, and the white walls and the towers of the great city" (*idem*, XX: 264). Her response articulates what Howard Parsons describes as "the excitement of visual experience and wide vistas: the pure wonder of just seeing and revelling in the colours and forms of the world spread out before one" (Parsons 1973: 197-98). Significantly, the colours and forms of this particular scene are a combination of the natural and the man-made, with towers and houses co-operating aesthetically with woods and river in the generation of visual pleasure. The builders of the City of the Five Crafts have attained Morris's highest aspirations for architecture – they have made the earth "blossom with beautiful buildings" (Morris, May 1910-15, XXII: 208).

Architecture functioned for Morris as the consummate expression of man's triumph in artistic creation, and as Chris Miele notes, he tended to treat it "as a kind of shorthand for the totality of the man-made environment" (Miele 1996: 4). It was the master-art whose success was integrally linked to those subordinate yet essential modes of artistic activity which were at their finest in painting and sculpture but which also included what might be denoted the crafts or the lesser arts. "It is this union of the arts, mutually helpful and harmoniously subordinated one to another, which I have learned to think of as Architecture", Morris affirmed in his lecture "The Prospects of Architecture in Civilization" (1881), and this is "a great subject truly", he argued, "for it embraces the consideration of the whole external surroundings of the life of man" (Morris, May 1910-15, XXII: 119). Architecture was

thus fundamental to Morris's aesthetic vision as an artist and a craftsman – but Morris's aesthetic vision and his political vision as a revolutionary Socialist were, as his lectures and essays repeatedly demonstrate, inextricably linked. Architecture was, he emphasised, the art form that had the most immediate and widespread impact on people's daily lives – "we cannot escape from it if we would", he declared – and as such it inevitably acquired social and political relevance (*ibidem*). Hence the vision of a post-revolutionary society which Morris regularly revisits and re-articulates in his lectures incorporates not only ideas of how a communist mode of social organisation might operate, but considers how that society might shape its domestic and public spaces in a manner that reflects a new era of social cohesion and a new code of human values.

This article will consider the significance of architecture as utopian vision and practice in the work of William Morris, from his earliest writings and his association with the architect Philip Webb to his later years of Socialist propaganda. It will consider the importance of architecture as both social and aesthetic statement in Morris's lectures and his utopian romance *News from Nowhere* (1890) before considering in more detail the role of buildings in Morris's last romances – a series of extraordinary narratives he wrote from 1890 until his death in 1896. It will argue that the imaginative freedom offered by his last romances allowed Morris to explore most compellingly what it means to build both practically and beautifully and to recognise architecture as one of the most enduring celebrations of communal values and aspirations, concluding that Morris's final narratives might in fact be considered an architectural call to arms –

an inspiration and motivation to strive for a new society with its own architecture of happiness.

ii. The Glories of Gothic

Morris's own powerfully emotive and imaginative response to buildings is evident in his earliest published work in the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* in 1856. The awe and admiration he felt for Gothic architecture in particular is palpable in his article "The Churches of North France", in which Morris explained:

> I thought I should like to tell people of some of those things I felt when I was there among the mighty tombs of the long-dead ages. And I thought that even if I could say nothing else about these grand churches I could at least tell men how much I loved them; so that though they might laugh at me for my foolish and confused words, they might yet be moved to see what there was that made me speak my love, though I could give no reason for it. (Morris, May 1910-15, I: 349)

In attempting to articulate the nature of his passionate response to these buildings, Morris clearly anticipates the inadequacy of his vocabulary whilst trusting that the emotive power of his response might yet reveal itself amidst his potential linguistic failure. Undeterred by the challenge, he attempted to speak this love again over thirty years later in his lecture "Art and Industry in the Fourteenth Century" (1890), in which it is clear that Morris is still striving to communicate the tremendous visual and emotional impact of Gothic forms and structures. Evoking a deliberate contrast between the buildings of the Middle Ages and those of the nineteenth century, the lecture opens with a journey through the street of a contemporary provincial town with its "sickly yellow-white brick and blue slate" (*idem*, XXII: 376). Morris guides his audience through this oppressively unattractive environment, engaging them

visually and emotionally in a walk that culminates suddenly and with an unexpected thrill of joy:

> Then you take a step or two onward and raise your eyes, and stand transfixed with wonder, and a wave of pleasure and exultation sweeps away the memory of the squalidness of today and the shabby primness of yesterday (…) for there heaves itself up above the meanness of the street and its petty commercialism a mass of grey stone traceried and carved and moulded into a great triple portico beset with pinnacles and spires, so orderly in its intricacy, so elegant amidst its hugeness, that even without any thought of its history or meaning it fills your whole soul with satisfaction. (*ibidem*)

Whilst "thought of its history or meaning" could presumably only add to the wondrous effects of what is evidently a medieval church, these effects – "pleasure", "exultation" and profound "satisfaction" – are generated potently enough by the physical realities of its structure. The building "heaves itself up" as if conscious of its role in demonstrating the astonishing capacity of man to express his desires and aspirations in concrete form, simultaneously admonishing the current generation of builders for the shabby and demoralised offerings that surround it. Indeed, the very act of raising the eyes signals to the observer that this is something above and beyond man's ordinary achievement – that here is the structural embodiment of delight.

The particularly dramatic and affective influence of the great Gothic churches is a dominant motif across many of Morris's lectures on art and architecture, but it is an influence which he expressed just as potently in the realms of fiction. In his early narrative for the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, "The Story of the Unknown Church" (1856), Morris was able to explore his recent experiences of the French cathedrals free from the self-consciousness evident in his more

formal essay on the subject. His narrator, a master-mason of a large medieval church, recalls with increasing rapture the beauty of this large public edifice:

> I see it in autumn-tide clearly now; yes, clearer, clearer, oh! so bright and glorious! yet it was beautiful too in spring, when the brown earth began to grow green: beautiful in summer, when the blue sky looked so much bluer, if you could hem a piece of it in between the new white carving; beautiful in the solemn starry nights, so solemn that it almost reached agony – the awe and joy one had in their great beauty. (*idem*, I: 149)

Building and natural environment here combine in the generation of a pleasure so intense it grows almost unbearable. Through the detached perspective of a narrator who, the reader realises with a gentle shock, has been dead for six hundred years, Morris is liberated to articulate his own imaginative and emotional engagement with the Gothic structures that had stirred him so profoundly in Amiens and Rouen and which, thirty years later, he could still claim had given him "the greatest pleasure I have ever had" (*idem*, XXIII: 85).

In addition to its aesthetic appeal, however, the Gothic mode of building acquired an increasingly social and political relevance for Morris after he joined the Socialist movement in the early 1880s. Essential to the achievement of the Gothic builders, Morris asserted, were the conducive social conditions of the era in which these buildings had been constructed. He thus concurred with Ruskin's view that the Gothic cathedrals offered "signs of the life and liberty of every workman who struck the stone; a freedom of thought, and rank in scale of being, such as no laws, no charters, no charities can secure" (Cook / Wedderburn 1903-12, X: 193-94). And it was in this respect primarily that Morris acknowledged Ruskin's chapter "On the Nature of Gothic" in *The Stones of Venice* (1851-53) as "one of the very few

necessary and inevitable utterances of the century", because "the lesson which Ruskin here teaches us", Morris asserted, "is that art is the expression of man's pleasure in labour; that it is possible for man to rejoice in his work" (Morris, May 1936, I: 292). Furthermore, as Margaret Grennan notes, through his combined aesthetic and political interpretation of Gothic buildings Morris came to regard architecture as "the surest social record, since building, a co-operative act, revealed more than any other art the true state of society" (Grennan 1945: 73). "If we did not know how to dye or to weave", Morris claimed in his lecture "The Beauty of Life" (1880),

> if we had neither gold, nor silver, nor silk; and no pigments to paint with, but half a dozen ochres and umbers, we might yet frame a worthy art that would lead to everything, if we had but timber, stone, and lime, and a few cutting tools to make these common things not only shelter us from wind and weather, but also express the thoughts and aspirations that stir in us. (Morris, May 1910-15, XXII: 73-74)

Architecture as an essentially communal activity and a mode of expressing communal thoughts and aspirations thus captured for Morris what Pevsner describes as "the changing spirits of changing ages", in which buildings become documents in which the whole ethos of an age might be traced (Pevsner 1963: 17).

iii. Architect-tooral-looral Excrescences

The aesthetic disparity between nineteenth-century architecture and Gothic architecture was thus for Morris, as for Pugin earlier in the century, a clear reflection of the very different values and ambitions of each age. Writing in the last decades of a century in which, he claimed, people were "mostly compelled to live in houses which have become a by-word of contempt for their ugliness and

inconvenience", Morris readily associated what he perceived as a decline in the beauty of contemporary architecture with the rampant growth of nineteenth-century capitalism (Morris, May 1910-15, XXII: 38). Modern buildings were "base in idea and ugly to look on" (Morris, May 1936, II: 473), he complained, with the poor in particular condemned to inhabit "bare, sunless and grim bastilles, (…) embodied nightmares of the hopeless thrift of the wage-slave" (Morris, William 1884a: 4). Accordingly, Morris interpreted the architecture of the nineteenth century as one of the most emphatic signals of social injustice. "Let us on this matter be sure of one thing", he wrote in *Justice* in 1884, "that as long as there are *poor* people they will be poorly housed"; it was thus no surprise to find "huge masses of brick and mortar" filling the urban landscape in order "to compete for the workman's scanty shillings" (*ibidem*). Morris was particularly unflinching in his condemnation of the cheap and aesthetically abhorrent buildings constructed to house London's continually increasing workforce in the last decades of the nineteenth century; such buildings had resulted in "the sickening hideousness" of the metropolis, he complained, and were "a mark of disgrace" on the nation (Morris, William 1888: 2). As C.C. Knowles and P.H. Pitt note in their account of building regulations in London across eight centuries, the nineteenth century had, by its close, produced much in the way of building "that could only be described as undesirable and frightful", ranging from the early tenement structures "in which human beings were buried alive" to the "streets upon streets of monotonous dwellings", each sending up "its quota of smoke and soot" in the developing suburbs of the latter half of the century (Knowles / Pitt 1972: 95-96). But Morris also argued that buildings bereft of

both beauty and aspiration were not only imposed on the less affluent. The ugliness of nineteenth-century London, Morris emphasised, was as much the consequence of "the shops and dwellings of the bourgeoisie" as it was the slums of Bethnal-Green (Morris, William 1888: 1). And nor was this merely an urban phenomenon. Morris bemoaned the fact that there were equally dreadful attempts "to cockneyize the countryside", with many a village "turned smart but dull by architect-tooral-looral excrescences and changes" (Morris, May 1936, II: 476). This combination of blatant ugliness and dubious quality served for Morris as a visual and tangible manifestation of the corruption at the heart of nineteenth-century capitalism – it spoke of a society "which has worked out the sum of commercialism most completely" (Morris, William 1888: 2).

It was essentially the desire to restore a dynamic and constructive relationship between a people and its buildings that motivated Morris's repeated calls for a fundamental reassessment of the significance and value of architecture in his own age – and to achieve this would, he maintained, mean nothing less than the transformation of contemporary social and economic values. "No wonder our houses are cramped and ignoble when the lives lived in them are cramped and ignoble also" (Morris, May 1910-15, XXIII: 200), he explained, emphasising that a new age of building would be dependent on a new way of life, a life that could only be achieved by "the supplanting of the present capitalist system by something better" and "changing the whole basis of society" (LeMire 1969: 93). In many of his lectures on art and Socialism buildings thus function as crucial symbols not only of how people were currently forced to live, but how, in contrast, they might live.

Social revolution thereby becomes synonymous with architectural revolution in Morris's writings, in which the regeneration of society invariably betokens the regeneration of the art of building beautifully and co-operatively.

In his various visions of how human society might be organised after a Socialist revolution, buildings thus serve as structural affirmations of the values Morris believed would underpin a new era of social harmony and artistic achievement. When "sickened by the stupidity of the mean idiotic rabbit-warrens that rich men build for themselves in Bayswater", Morris admitted:

> I console myself with visions of the noble communal hall of the future, unsparing of materials, generous in worthy ornament, alive with the noblest thoughts of our time, and the past, embodied in the best art which a free and manly people could produce; such an abode of man as no private enterprise could come anywhere near for beauty and fitness, because only collective thought and collective life could cherish the aspirations which would give birth to its beauty, or have the skill and leisure to carry them out. (Morris, May 1910-15, XXIII: 23)

This ideal of the home as both architectural delight and shared communal space was one that Morris had himself briefly enjoyed in the building and decorating of Red House. Red House was in fact an early manifestation of Morris's comprehensive definition of architecture in practice – a building whose aesthetic effects exemplified a "mutually helpful" union of the arts (*idem*, XXII: 119). Designed for him by Philip Webb, and completed in 1859, it was a house, J.W. Mackail observes, whose "planning was as original as its material" with its distinctive L-shaped formation and its red brick reaction against the contemporary vogue for "stucco and slate" (Mackail 1899, I: 141). It was also, as Fiona MacCarthy notes, a "personally expressive building" compiled of "highly emotive" visual effects (MacCarthy 1994: 156). But just as significant as its overt visual and

material statements was the fact that the building of Red House generated a fellowship of artistic endeavour – "a gathering together of all the arts", as May Morris described it – which famously led to the formation of what was affectionately known as "The Firm", the precursor to Morris and Company (Morris, May 1936, I: 11). If the best buildings were, as W. R. Lethaby once proposed, "builded history and poetry" (Lethaby 1935: 128) for Morris and Webb, then Red House was an important contribution to this architectural legacy – a contribution acknowledged by Rossetti who concluded that Morris's home was "a most noble work in every way, and more a poem than a house" (Doughty / Wahl 1965, II: 436).

But as Edward Hollamby notes, Red House always had something of "the appeal of the ivory tower" about it (Hollamby 1996: no page numbers), and after his later commitment to Socialism Morris's ideas of communal dwelling necessarily expanded to accommodate a more inclusive vision than that of a small brotherhood of artists living in a splendid but inevitably exclusive "palace of Art" (Kelvin 1984-96, I: 38). This renewed vision is glimpsed in his Socialist drama *The Tables Turned* (1887), in which one of the primary indicators of a newly revolutionised society is "the pretty new hall" the community builds for their parish, but it finds a more comprehensive expression in the post-revolutionary society depicted in Morris's 1890 utopian romance *News from Nowhere* (Morris, May 1936, II: 558). Whilst the Nowherians tend to live in "separate households" with certain "house-mates" of a similar temperament, any house is effectively open "to any good-tempered person who is content to live as the other house-mates do" (Morris, May 1910-15, XVI: 65). And importantly these houses have undergone an aesthetic as

well as functional transformation: a major process of clearance and rebuilding has resulted in a "whole mass of architecture" which "was not only exquisitely beautiful in itself" but which "bore upon it the expression of such generosity and abundance of life" that the narrator Guest admits he is "exhilarated to a pitch that I had never yet reached" (*idem*, 24). The Nowherians have learned once more how to give structure and expression to happiness and aspiration in their buildings, and, just as importantly, they have retained their delight in the architectural achievements of the past. The "many-gabled old house built by the simple country-folk of the long-past times" with which the narrative concludes is Morris's own Kelmscott Manor, his beloved country house by the river Thames, which has now been transformed from a personal to a communal heaven on earth (*idem*, 201). Ellen gives "a sigh of pleased surprise and enjoyment" when she and Guest approach the house, for it is a building which, she affirms, "is lovely still amidst all the beauty which these latter days have created" (*ibidem*). Indeed, it seems as if the now ancient Manor only fully achieves its architectural purpose amidst a regenerated humanity – "as if", Ellen says, "it had waited for these happy days, and held in it the gathered crumbs of happiness of the confused and turbulent past" (*ibidem*).

iv. The Architecture of Happiness

As the resurgence of Kelmscott Manor at the conclusion of *News from Nowhere* suggests, it was through revisiting the architectural past that Morris was ultimately able to envisage the architectural future – a process further inspired by his founding of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings in 1877. Indeed his

vision of the "noble communal hall" of a post-revolutionary society, the model to which the communal halls of Nowhere adhere, was inspired by the dwellings of a much earlier era than that to which Kelmscott Manor belonged – an era which, for Morris, was representative of true social integration and communal dwelling. These were the buildings recalled in Morris's admission to Yeats that he would like "a house like a big barn, where one ate in one corner, cooked in another corner, slept in the third corner, and in the fourth received one's friends" (Yeats 1926: 180) – buildings which, as Paul Meier notes, functioned as "a symbol of the human community" (Meier 1978, II: 405). But whilst *News from Nowhere* certainly provides striking examples, I would argue that Morris's most comprehensive and affective vision of such buildings is developed across the narratives he wrote immediately after *News from Nowhere*. Known most commonly now as the Last Romances, Morris's final narratives are as utopian in spirit as *News from Nowhere*, for whilst they are set in a pseudo-medieval past rather than an imagined twentieth century, they embody all the aspirations for architecture expressed in Morris's aesthetic and political lectures and intensify the sense architectural exhilaration experienced by Guest in Nowhere. In doing so they serve as validly as *News from Nowhere* as indications of how Morris envisaged the role of buildings in the communist society of the future – buildings which function as significant social symbols and in which practical, aesthetic and communal elements interact harmoniously.

By setting his final narratives in the past, Morris was able to revisit in imaginative terms those great Gothic structures that had so affected him as a young man and which had impressed him once again on another visit to France in

1891. Morris's own sense of amazement at these structures clearly informs Ralph's response to the Abbey Church at Higham-on-the-Way in *The Well at the World's End* (1896) which he began writing early in 1892, only a few months after his return from France. Surveying the townscape from a vantage point at the end of a stretch of downland, Ralph observes:

> From amidst its houses rose up three towers of churches above their leaden roofs, and high above all, long and great, the Abbey Church; and now was the low sun glittering on its gilded vanes and the wings of angels high upon the battlements. (Morris, May 1910-15, XVIII: 23)

Like the City of the Five Crafts in *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, the Abbey is set within an aesthetically appropriate environment: Higham is "overlooked by a white castle on a knoll", and has "a river lapping it about and winding on through its fair green meadows"; its market square is "very great and clean" and the houses that border it are "tall and fair" (*idem*, 23-24). Altogether, the location and general architecture of the town provide a worthy setting for its Abbey Church which showed "like dark gold (…) under the evening sun", its "painted and gilded imagery" shining "like jewels upon it" (*idem*, 24). It is a building deliberately designed to provoke a particular response from the observer, as acknowledged by the monk who guides the awe-struck Ralph through the town: "'Yea', said the monk, as he noted Ralph's wonder at this wonder; 'a most goodly house it is, and happy shall they be that dwell there'" (*ibidem*). Ralph's "wonder at this wonder" supports Philip Fisher's claim that architecture, perhaps more than any other art form, can make a "pervasive appeal to the experience of wonder" (Fisher 1998: 3) and, as the nineteenth-century historian James Fergusson noted, is often

specifically designed to "excite feelings of admiration and awe" (Fergusson 1874, I: 10). For Morris, the wonder and awe generated by such buildings made them potent statements of communal values and purpose and a spectacular demonstration of artistic endeavour – of the "habit of elevating and beautifying" the "material surroundings of our life" which he believed the nineteenth century had lost (Morris, May 1910-15, XXII: 329).

This habit of elevating and beautifying the man-made environment could, Morris believed, be achieved as successfully in the humble as the grand edifice. In *Child Christopher and Goldilind the Fair* (1895), for example, many of Christopher's happiest times of fellowship and love are spent at the house in Littledale, "a long frame-house thatched with reed", which has "long and low windows goodly glazed" and "a green halling on the walls of Adam and Eve and the garden, and the good God walking therein" (*idem*, XVII: 181). It is a house of simple beauty and craftsman-like construction, proclaiming in its fabric, as in its halling of the Garden of Eden, a primeval innocence of spirit which is reflected in Joanna's adorning of it "with boughs and blossoms" when Christopher first arrives (*idem*, 168). Free from all ostentation of design and decoration, it is a building of spontaneous and natural delight – qualities articulated in Goldilind's comment to Christopher that "it seems joyous to me: and I shall tell thee that I have mostly dwelt in unmerry houses, though they were of greater cost than this" (*idem*, 182).

Morris understood that even the simplest of structures could, in this quiet and understated way, generate their own particular delight and make an essential contribution to the daily pleasures of life at both the individual and the social level.

Indeed, in many of Morris's final narratives buildings function as celebratory as well as practical structures and assume a dynamic role for the communities that inhabit them. This is demonstrated most notably in Morris's 1891 romance *The Story of the Glittering Plain* in the communal hall on the Isle of Ravagers – a hall that stretches from "buttery to dais", with a "flickering flame on the hearth" (*idem*, XIV: 230), the sun shining through "clerestory windows", and a row of shut-beds over which "were many stories carven in the panelling" (*idem*, 234). It is a hall which happily accommodates both daily routine and communal festivity, a flexible and functional space which encompasses alike the needs and aspirations of its people. On the day Hallblithe first arrives at the hall, he observes the women preparing it for that evening's feast:

> Some swept the floor down, and when it was swept strawed thereon rushes and handfuls of wild thyme: some went into the buttery and bore forth the boards and the trestles: some went to the chests and brought out the rich hangings, the goodly bankers and dorsars, and did them on the walls: some bore in the stoups and horns and beakers, and some went their ways and came not back awhile for they were busy about the cooking. (*idem*, 235-36)

In their preparations, the women of the Ravagers signify the profound reverence and respect with which the building is regarded. They honour and dignify its structure through a combination of simple maintenance and aesthetic adornment, acknowledging its essential role in the provision not only of shelter and security but also of a ritual and celebratory communal space. It is a combination of roles acknowledged and praised in the "music and minstrelsy" (*idem*, 239) with which that evening's feast concludes, the Ravagers' valedictory song proclaiming:

> There safe in the hall
> They bless the wall,
> And the roof o'er head,

> Of the valiant stead;
> And the hands they praise
> Of the olden days. (*idem*, 240)

Far more than an architectural backdrop to the activities and history of the Ravagers, their communal building is integral to that history and those activities: it is, as Morris hoped buildings might once more be, a part of people's lives.

As an integral part of communal life, Morris believed that buildings should thus provide an organic link between the past and the future. Contemplating the building of a fourteenth-century labourer's house in his lecture "The Prospects of Architecture in Civilization", Morris explained:

> Though the new house would have looked young and trim beside the older houses and the ancient church – ancient even in those days – yet it would have a piece of history for the time to come, and its dear and dainty cream-white walls would have been a genuine link among the numberless links of that long chain, whose beginnings we know not of, but on whose mighty length even the many-pillared garth of Pallas, and the stately dome of the Eternal Wisdom, are but single links, wondrous and resplendent though they be. (*idem*, XXII: 126).

The buildings in Morris's final narratives function in just such a way, becoming focal points in a complex web of human relationships that extends across time. In *The Sundering Flood* (1897) the Great Hall of Sir Mark's castle is a wonder and a delight to the people of Brookside specifically because of its antiquity and the communal traditions that antiquity denotes. The narrator's description of it thus prioritises its age and symbolic resonance above any purely aesthetic considerations:

> Long was the said hall and great, but not very high, and its pillars thick and big, and its arches beetling; and that the folk loved better than flower-fair building, for very ancient it was and of all honour. Ancient withal were its adornments, and its halling was of the story of

> Troy, and stern and solemn looked out from it the stark woven warriors and kings, as they wended betwixt sword and shield on the highway of Fate. (*idem*, XXI: 220)

Despite its austere demeanour, the hall is celebrated as a space of social memory and a symbol of historical continuity, and its tapestries align the feats of the warriors of Brookside with one of the great mythical narratives of western civilisation as testimony to its status as a vital and continuing link between past, present and future.

In order to forge such continuous communal connections across time Morris aspired to an architecture that was "conscious only of exultation in the present and hope for the future" (LeMire 1969: 65) – an aspiration he fulfilled in his penultimate romance, *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* in which the castle built for Birdalone and her reunited companions at the end of the narrative testifies to an appropriate and enduring conjunction of architecture and human society. Importantly, it is a communal decision by "the chief men of the porte and the masters of the crafts" at Utterhay "to build a good and fair castle", both for the general good of the town and in honour of "the glory and hope that there was in this lovely folk", and indeed the building of the castle initiates a new period of social cohesion and communal happiness, for "from that time forward began the increase of Utterhay" (Morris, May 1910-15, XX: 385-86). The castle in this way stands as the consummate expression of a vibrant, functional and aspirational architecture – a symbol of communal integrity and human fellowship which affirms the happiness of the present and contributes to the joy of the future.

v. Conclusion

In the romances of his final years, Morris thus returned to the archetypal buildings of his own country's history as a means of re-visioning and regenerating the relationship between people and architecture. The churches, halls and cottages of Morris's romances are each inspired by a particular vision of life which renders them vital and relevant for the societies that occupy and use them. Furthermore, they are crafted with consummate skill and care to ensure they remain a continuing source of interest and pleasure to successive generations of observers, dwellers and users. These buildings thus offer their own social and aesthetic comment on a late nineteenth-century capitalism which, Morris believed, had failed to offer a vision of life inclusive and generous enough to produce its own vital and relevant architecture or artistic enough to produce structures of enduring beauty.

Contemplating what he believed to be the current evolution of his own society towards revolution and consequent social transformation, Morris confidently declared: "Under such conditions architecture, as a part of the life of people in general, will again become possible, and I believe that when it is possible, it will have a real new birth" (*idem*, XXII: 330). In his political and aesthetic lectures Morris repeatedly anticipates the regeneration of architecture under a mode of social organisation in which buildings can once more be a source of communal as well as personal delight, and in his final narratives he found the most persuasive context in which to conceive and articulate the nature of this new birth. In doing so, the buildings of Morris's final narratives become social as well as architectural statements – symbols of how we might build, rather than how we build now. And

whilst we still await the “new development of society” that the building of beauty and aspiration demands, they remain Morris’s most powerful vision of a day when architecture will once more “add so much to the pleasure of life that we shall wonder how people were ever able to live without it” (*ibidem*).

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Utopia and Ecology[1]

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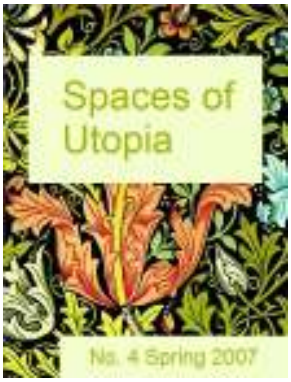

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To Hermínio Martins

A growing awareness of what is known today as ecological or environmental crisis has fostered a wider and better understanding of the complex and contradictory position of utopian discourse and utopian projects in the construction of modern identity.

In many contemporary intellectual milieus the utopian enterprise tends to be viewed with sympathy and condescension, as the projection of the best qualities in human condition. The truth, however, is that the critique of the contemporary world engendered by the emergence of the environmental crisis has made us aware of the "human, all too human" dimensions of utopian constructions, as well as of their close complicity with values that condition environmental deterioration, prolonging and intensifying it.

§1. The two utopias of modernity. As a rule, we resort to Thomas More's similarly named work (1516) to locate the genesis of a widespread utopian impulse deemed intrinsic to the constitution of modern identity. However, this perspective runs the risk of all excessively compact readings – it ignores its most interesting aspect, its richness of detail.

Indeed, one should not forget that amongst the most outstanding and influential works of the modern mind we find some powerful indictments of the utopian method, viewed as an idle escape from reality, an inability to face the

harshness of life's dictates. Such is the view adopted by Machiavelli, in Book XV of his immortal *The Prince* (written in 1513, three years before the publication of *Utopia*), as well as Spinoza's criticisms, in his *Political Treaty* (1677), a work left unfinished due to its author's premature death.

For the Florentine author, as much as for the Portuguese Jew of Amsterdam, political utopias revealed a double misconception. A cognitive misconception, inasmuch as utopias were incapable of dealing with the complex power play which is the essence of the fight for political power; an anthropological misconception, because they would not accept the objective data concerning human condition, thereby exiling themselves in the invention of ideal cities – cities whose inhabitants are not human beings of flesh and blood, but pious and virtuous creatures, who would never be found on the concrete level of existence.

However, if the political feature of modern utopia associated with More and Campanella, among others, is unfavourably viewed by certain key figures of modernity, the same does not apply to another facet of utopian thinking: the anticipation of the material means that might lead to a radically different future, to an altogether new way of life that would not require "social engineering" – since social engineering would be completely dependent on the notion of anthropological metamorphosis, and this was regarded, as shown in relation to Machiavelli and Spinoza, as an ontological alteration that only a miracle would allow – or, in other words, the disavowal of reason.

The work of Francis Bacon, *New Atlantis* (1624), stands as the perfect example of this second strain of modern utopia. In this essay, Bacon describes an insular society, located in the island of Bensalem, where the fundamental initiative lies in Salomon's House, in the description of which we find the embryo of what is known nowadays as scientific societies. This House, where numerous disciplines of learning are assembled and organised, was devoted to "the knowledge of causes and secret motions of things, and enlarging of the bounds of Human Empire, to the effecting of all things possible" (Bacon 1689: 71).

Descartes' project, which would be published thirteen years later, in his *Discourse on Method* (1637), was, therefore, definitely present and operational

in Bacon's utopia. In fact, Descartes' goals were exposed, with the clarity of a program, in that short work dating from 1637:

> (...) il est possible de parvenir à des connaissances qui soient fort utiles à la vie, et qu'au lieu de cette philosophie spéculative qu'on enseigne dans les écoles, on en peut trouver une pratique, par laquelle, connaissant la force et les actions du feu, de l'eau de l'air, des astres, des cieux, et de toutes les autres corps qui nous environnent, aussi distinctement que nous connaissons les divers métiers de nos artisans, nous les pourrions employer en même façon à tous les usages auxquels ils sont propres, et ainsi nous rendre comme maîtres et possesseurs de la nature (Descartes 1953: 168).
>
> [it is possible to reach understandings which are extremely useful for life, and that instead of the speculative philosophy which is taught in the schools, we can find a practical philosophy by which, through understanding the force and actions of fire, air, stars, heavens, and all the other bodies which surround us as distinctly as we understand the various crafts of our artisans, we could use them in the same way for all applications for which they are appropriate and thus make ourselves, as it were, the masters and possessors of nature].

This second front of modern utopia opens up a new perspective, and an extremely clear and efficient one. The key to that future, to that unrealised place, that *u-topos*, cannot be found in an (impossible) transformation of human nature; on the contrary, it requires a revolution in the relation between human culture and nature. That radical change is based on a deeper systematic understanding of the causal processes inherent to forces and phenomena and on its technical replication in order to achieve out of natural phenomena useful purposes for humankind. In the discourse of the great minds of the seventeenth century we find the prospect and the promise of the techno-scientific society in which we have long been submerged. That was the real utopia of modernity, the techno-scientific world view, establishing a vigorous chain of continuity between Renaissance alchemists, the new post-Copernican physicists and the research teams in modern-day state-of-the-art research laboratories. That utopia, and no other, was responsible for the powerful and violent transformations on the Earth's landscape leading to the present ecological and environmental crisis. An effective utopia, because rather than confining itself to *a-topia*, completely divorced from reality, it was able to transform itself into an achievable project, into material world.

This techno-scientific utopia would not, however, prove to be politically neutral. On the contrary, with the emergence of the industrial revolution – in

itself no more than the transference of Bacon's and Descartes' expectations into the realm of concrete existence – the programme of techno-scientific conquest of nature became the foundation stone of the political rebuilding of society. We find this political enlargement of the techno-scientific world view in the pages of, for example, young Auguste Comte, in his *Plan of Scientific Studies Necessary for the Reorganization of Society* (1822). In this work, Comte divides the history of humanity in "the military aim" (*but militaire*) and "the industrial aim" (*but industriel*). Only the latter, defined as "acting on nature so as to change it for man's benefit" (*action sur la nature pour la modifier à l'avantage de l'homme*), should constitute the teleological foundation of the new social and political order, leading to the fulfilment of the techno-scientific utopia (Comte 1972: 68).

And so a new social pact, with fundamental material clauses, seemed ready to replace the earlier one, exclusively based on intersubjective premises. Peace and order, or progress and emancipation, were seen as dependent on the capacity of societies for ecumenical organisation, not in fratricide wars over the scant available resources but in a common endeavour aiming at global domination of nature, employing the means afforded by techno-science. And one should not assume that positivism was its sole proponent. No one better than Marx offered an enthusiastic apology for the potential of capitalism, specifically with regard to the exponential development of productive forces as means to appropriate natural resources, thereby establishing this improvement in the productive powers of humankind as an essential measure of historical progress.

Francis Bacon's utopia had become reality. The island of Bensalem had taken over the entire planet.

§2. From utopian irresponsibility to the utopia of responsibility. Utopia is a central theme of one of the most important and most neglected philosophical debates of the twentieth century. I refer to the way *The Principle of Responsibility* (1979), a work by Hans Jonas (1903-1993), one of the most profound thinkers in the field of the environmental crisis, establishes itself against the organising perspective contained in the most important book written by Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope* (1959).

In his main work, Bloch defines and expands the leading categories of his thought, in different readings of history understood as the process of enactment of a utopian impulse, viewed as the essence of human condition.

These are a few of Bloch's central theses:

a) The mobilising nature of utopia, defined as "dreaming forward" (*ein Traum nach Vorwärts*).

b) The alert and inquisitive nature of consciousness, viewed essentially as "anticipatory consciousness" (*antizipierende Bewusstsein*).

c) The historical march of humanity as a succession of horizons devised by hope and implemented by force of action – meaning the human capacity to adapt the ontological structure of the real to the plasticity of utopian representations – reproducing, in a lay and secular fashion, the messianic desire to build a new homeland, a "Heimat", a kind of Just City of Men, a New Jerusalem. Hence Bloch does not hesitate to write, at the end of his cardinal book: "Der Mensch lebt noch überall in der Vorgeschichte[...] die wirkliche Genesis ist nicht am Anfang, sondern am Ende" [The human being is still living in pre-history everywhere (...) the real Genesis is not in the beginning, but in the end] (Bloch 1959: 1628).

Twenty years later, we come across Hans Jonas's criticism, whose work should be seen within a project of ethical reconstruction as new concerns are raised by the global advent of a technological civilisation. His central postulates, for the purposes of the present discussion, can be assembled around the following main points:

a) That a critique of utopia (and of Bloch) implies a critique of technology's extreme possibilities as well.

b) That the ethics of responsibility struggles against both scarcity of time and the euphoria of centuries of promethean and post-baconian expectations (including Marxism).

c) That the ethics of responsibility does in no way imply a system of teleological imprisonment of history, but rather removing from its path all the threats left behind by many eschatological systems, focused on representing the concept of progress, in its multiple angles and features.

d) Refuting utopian systems built upon the fruitful and multifarious impulse of hope does not entail a mere analytical exercise of deconstruction. Jonas does not reject the practical tasks raised by the inevitable unfolding of history. He writes: “Against the principle of hope we raise the principle of responsibility, and not the principle of fear” (*Dem Prinzip Hoffnung stellen wir das Prinzip Verantwortung gegenüber, nicht das Prinzip Furcht*) (Jonas 1984: 390).

e) That Marx’s and Bloch’s mistake was to keep the realms of necessity and freedom apart. Freedom does not begin after necessity. Freedom is only possible in a responsible alignment with necessity, namely that which reveals itself, vital, in the natural rooting of the human condition, in our belonging to a fundamental primordial nature that is simultaneously place of residence and ontological limit.

§3. The ecological critique of modern utopias and the open way ahead. For nearly two hundred years the achievement of the technological and promethean utopia that prevailed in modernity was adopted by almost all the major social movements with active political agendas.

From nationalist movements strengthened in their reaction against the Napoleonic empire, to the socialist and social democrat movement, rooted in the II International, and the communist movement built upon the Bolshevik October Revolution, in 1917, all the leading political movements that held hegemonic positions in the world throughout the twentieth century, whether within imperial metropolises or, later on, in the new countries formed after the dismantling of colonial empires, shared a set of values common to modern utopia(s), described in table 1.

On the other hand, one of the main features we can detect when considering the manifold schools of thought founded on the diagnosis and therapy of the environmental crisis – mostly since the Second World War, but more visibly from the 1960s onwards – is the awareness of a gradual break up with those traditional values, although a clear consensus over alternative positive values is not yet discernible.

Values of modern utopia(s)	Values of the ecological critique
Belief in progress and in its vertical hierarchy of objectives	Plurality of aims, rejection of vertical hierarchy
Scientism, science and technique as ideology	Critique of science and technology
Idolatry of the State and its powers	Suspicion towards the State and its actual powers
Ideology of the "end of history"	Perception of the future as an open route
Politics as *conflict (Feind-Freund*)	Politics as cooperation, even if achieved by compulsory means

Table 1

From minority trends, such as ecocentrists, and those more or less turbulent activists who keep pharmaceutical companies in a state of constant alert because of their plight for animal rights, to the large environmental NGOs that attempt to interfere with and improve the political system from within, both at national and international levels, all these diverse examples prove that a deep and more or less conscious breach has occurred regarding the axiological consensus that dominated the long genesis of modern technological society.

The great classic utopias tried to encourage the creation of a sort of new humanity, or super-humanity (not to be mistaken with the similar concept in Nietzsche's philosophy), resorting to unheard-of technological means enabled by the explosion of the scientific potential of societies as well as by the vitality of totally unregulated economic markets.

On a totally different plane, the discourse or discourses engendered while reflecting on and fighting the present global ecologic and environmental crisis, lack glamour and alluring prospects. In the literature and practice of ecological currents and movements we find not so much a new utopia, as a critique of the lack of sustainability lying at the heart of utopias. It is no longer a question of advancing a new version of the "assault on the skies", to quote Lenin's eschatological outburst on hearing the news of the success of the October insurrection, as much as a prosaic and urgent "return to the Earth": this constitutes the substance of the program of ecological and environmental

intervention, characterised by countless proposals advising restraint and moderation of the conquering urges of human beings.

If any utopia survives at all in the discourse of ecological crisis it will be in reminding us that, considering current forces and trends, the very survival of humanity with some measure of dignity in the next hundred or two hundred years is in no way guaranteed. It is, indeed, a feat that will require more than our present capacities; the question, therefore, is far from being solved.

Lastly, it is worth mentioning that there is little connection between the ecological critique of modern utopia(s) and the joyful deconstructivism of many a postmodern enterprise. For environmentalists and ecologists, the discourse of modernity has lost its attraction and legitimacy, but the tasks of modernity have not faded away into the mists of sheer representation. In this sense, the ecological discourse recovers a fundamental connection to the century of Enlightenment, in the crucial relevance attributed to sensorial experience, to the material nature of things, and to empirical reality.

To deal with the ecological crisis we need a body of thought that will not recoil from the clay of daily existence. We must be able to reason out of the mere prospect of indefinite continuance of life and history the strength to face the titanic confrontation that lies ahead, separating us from that difficult victory over civilisation's mortal enemies, those who once peopled our utopian dreams and now threaten to devour our future.

Note

[1] A version of this paper was published in *Ler*, nr. 48, Winter 2000, pp. 70-74, with the title: "Devouring our Future".

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