



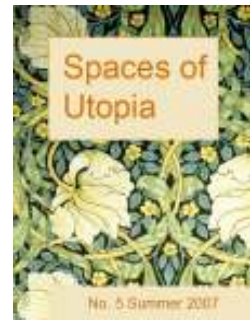
# Spaces of Utopia

No. 5 Summer 2007

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

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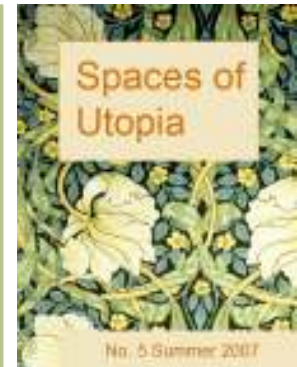
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## Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) and Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) as Possible Ecotopias<sup>1</sup>

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The purpose of this paper is to examine how Sir Thomas More and Henry David Thoreau confront the related problems of limited resources and sustainability in their respective utopias. I see this as a contribution to a much needed debate concerning what constitutes an ecotopia today. I use the term, ecotopia, which was first coined by Ernest Callenbach in his seminal, ecotopian romance, *Ecotopia* (1975), in a very basic way to describe an ideal society that takes into account the problem of limited resources and tries to create a sustainable economy based on this limitation. The definition is intentionally broad in order to include as many examples of ecotopias as possible, both past and present. Ironically, in this particular field of utopian endeavor, the number of successful, practical experiments far exceeds the number of speculative ones. Given the propensity for utopians to dream first and act later, and the relatively low success rate of actual utopian experiments, it is surprising that there is no lack of practical experiments going on throughout the world in the form of eco-villages, cooperatives, etc. These

practical experiments are of course enormously important when it comes to finding viable solutions to specific environmental problems. But I think we also need to formulate more general, speculative scenarios if we are to successfully imagine the type of society we would like to live in. Examining the way utopian writers have dealt with the issue of limited resources and sustainability in the past can help us formulate such speculative scenarios for the future.

I have chosen works from two very different periods in history to give a more nuanced picture of how utopian writers can deal with the issue of limited resources and sustainability. Sir Thomas More was writing in the beginning of the sixteenth century when new methods of production and changing ownership patterns were transforming the old, feudal economy into the new, capitalist one; with resultant strains especially on local populations traditionally dependent on access to common lands to make their livelihood.<sup>2</sup> Henry David Thoreau was writing 350 years later in the middle of the nineteenth century when not only industrialism but also new agricultural methods were threatening nature; especially wild, untamed nature, which was of special importance for Thoreau.<sup>3</sup> Both writers see the land as a limited natural resource and discuss ways of preventing undue pressure from being put on that resource. However, More and Thoreau have different approaches to solving the problem. More emphasizes the need for comprehensive social reforms, whereas Thoreau emphasizes the need for individuals to take responsibility for their interaction with nature.

In More's *Utopia*, agriculture is the basis of the economy. All citizens – men and women – work in agriculture; “with no exceptions” as More tells us (1992: 36).

All children are educated in agriculture, both theoretically in the Utopian schools and practically through work experience in the countryside. Utopian agriculture is very productive. According to More, the Utopians produce great quantities of “grain, honey, wool, flax, timber, scarlet and purple dye – stuffs, hides, wax, tallow, and leather, as well as livestock” (*idem*, 45). Utopians produce enough for their own nutritional needs as well as for creating a two-year reserve of food in case of hard times. Any surplus above and beyond this is exported.

More sees land primarily as an economic resource, but not one that is to be taken for granted. On the contrary, he is very conscious of the land being a limited resource and designs his economy in a way that will not put strains on it. The most important way he does this is by limiting the size of the population. This is not done by birth control, of which More does not approve. Instead it is done through movements of population, both within the island and between the island and the mainland if necessary. The basic social, economic, and educational unit of More's Utopia is the household; a unit consisting of from ten to sixteen adults and children. When the size of a household exceeds this number, the surplus population is moved to a household that has a lack of population. This is done to prevent one household from growing economically stronger and using more resources than another. The same policy is applied to the towns. Each town is to consist of no more than six hundred households, which makes a maximum number of some 9,000 inhabitants. If a town exceeds this stipulated limit, then people are transferred to towns that do not have enough population. Here again, the idea is to prevent one town from becoming economically stronger and using more resources

than another. By avoiding these concentrations of population, the Utopians ensure having even economic growth throughout the island. This in turn ensures that resources will be equally distributed between economic units and that not one piece of agricultural land will be subjected to more economic pressure than any other.

If the population of the island grows too large for its resources, then colonies are founded on the mainland, “wherever the natives have plenty of unoccupied and uncultivated land” (*ibidem*). This results in more land being brought under cultivation. If the local inhabitants of the colonized area of the mainland agree to work in concert with the Utopian colonizers, all is fine. But if they choose to oppose the colonizers, then the Utopians confiscate the land and cultivate it themselves. Thus, the Utopians avoid overpopulating their own land, but, ultimately, do so only at the expense of their weaker neighbors. It is easy to condemn More’s use of colonialism to solve Utopia’s population problems.<sup>4</sup> However, he does highlight the problem of increasing population in relation to land as a limited resource – something that is not always done in the contemporary debate on sustainability.

In addition to limiting the size of the population of Utopia, the location of towns is designed to prevent strains being put on agricultural land. Altogether, there are fifty-four towns in Utopia. These are placed at regular intervals, approximately twenty-four miles apart, throughout the island. This is done to prevent an undesirable concentration of the urban population that would put strains on the local, rural economy. In order to protect the economic viability of the countryside, each town is surrounded by at least twelve miles of farmland. Where

the towns are farther apart, even more farmland is available. According to More, “No city wants to enlarge its boundaries” for fear of using up valuable farmland (*idem*, 32). If towns were to grow larger, they would automatically attract both people and resources from the surrounding countryside. This would be detrimental to the economy as a whole, since it would lead to an uneven economic development of town and country. More does not believe that the countryside should exist primarily to supply the towns with food and cheap labor. He is aware of the social and economic problems an uncontrolled flow of population from the countryside to the towns would create for both.

In addition to advocating balanced economic growth between town and country, More creates social and economic ties between town and country. He does so to create a better understanding amongst townspeople for the land and the importance of agriculture. One of these ties consists of townspeople building houses in the country and furnishing them with farm equipment. These houses are then used by the townspeople as dwelling places when they work there. These are not summer cottages, but large-scale households, which hold even more people than their urban counterparts. No rural house has fewer than forty men and women living in them, including two slaves. This compares to the maximum of sixteen adults and children of the urban household. The large size of the rural households suggests that they are primarily economic units, rather than the family units that make up the urban household.

Another tie between town and country is the alternating farm labor system More devises. Each year twenty persons move from the countryside back to the

towns, after having completed two years of work there. These people in turn are replaced by twenty new people from town who are sent to work for a two-year period in the countryside. This results in the average adult Utopian having considerable experience of farm labor. The editor of the Norton Edition of More's *Utopia*, Robert A. Adams, calculates that a man who has spent half his adult life on the farm would have had between ten and fifteen years of agricultural experience by the time he was forty (*idem*, 32 n4). Besides creating a link between town and country, More tells us that this system has been "solemnly established so that no one will have to do such hard work against his will for more than two years". Despite this hard labor, many people stay longer, since, as More says, they take "a natural pleasure in farm work" (*idem*, 32). As a final link between town and country, at harvest time people from the town – the exact number needed, as is stated with typical Utopian precision – go to the countryside to help with the work.

Nature exists in More's *Utopia*, both in the countryside, which consists mainly of cultivatable land, and in the "large gardens" that are situated in the courtyards of the urban household dwellings (*idem*, 34). The people are very fond of these and spend considerable time working in them. They do this for two reasons: they delight in the work and the different streets compete with each other for the finest gardens. In these gardens people cultivate "vines, fruits, herbs and flowers, so thriftily and flourishing that I have never seen any gardens more productive or elegant than theirs", says Hythloday, More's narrator. According to More, one will find "nothing else in the whole city more useful or more pleasant to the citizens" (*idem*, 35). For this reason it is assumed that King Utopus paid special

attention to the siting of these gardens. The twofold description of the gardens being both “useful” and “pleasant” shows that they have both economic and non-economic importance. Their economic importance lies in their being production units for nutritious supplements – the grapes, fruits and herbs mentioned above – to the basic Utopian diet that comes from rural agricultural production. Their non-economic importance lies in their being sources of pleasure and inspiration for the town dwellers. By providing these gardens, Utopian town planners allow nature to be experienced within the urban environment. As controlled representations of nature, they seem, in fact, to be more important aesthetically to the town dwellers than the cultivated fields outside the towns. Further, one should not underestimate the aesthetic role these gardens play in a functionalist society such as More’s Utopia. Utopian society places little importance on ornamentation or the decoration of private or public buildings. Nor does it seem to value other types of artistic works, such as painting or sculpture, favoring training only in “necessary crafts” (*idem*, 39).

More and Thoreau have very different conceptions of nature. For More, nature is primarily an economic resource, consisting mainly of cultivatable fields. The only exception to this purely economic view is More’s attitude toward the enclosed gardens. As seen above, these have both economic and non-economic value, providing produce as well as being a source of pleasure and inspiration. Thoreau reverses this order of priorities. For him, nature primarily has non-economic value. To be sure, Thoreau accepts that land needs to be cultivated in order to produce food, but this is only one way in which nature provides for

humankind. More important is the role nature plays as a source of pleasure and inspiration.

This difference in approach to nature is illustrated in their respective definitions of what constitutes a garden. For More, a garden is the man-made, enclosed space in the courtyard of the urban household. For Thoreau, the entire earth is a 'cultivated garden'. It includes not only "cultivated fields" but also "prairies and forests"; the latter being examples of "wild nature" Thoreau so highly prizes and praises. All nature – cultivated land and wild nature – is "equally cultivated like a garden" (Thoreau 1992: 112); not by humans, according to Thoreau, but by a power greater than humans.

Because they have different attitudes towards nature, Thoreau chooses to interact with nature in a different way than More. Instead of rearranging nature to best suit human needs, as More does, Thoreau does his best to minimize the effect his activities have on the delicate ecosystem of the land. We see this in the way he chooses to build his house and cultivate his bean field while living at Walden Pond.

Thoreau builds his cabin in an environmentally friendly manner. He does most of the work himself, even if this means taking longer to build his cabin. He cuts down pine trees that are standing close to the location of his intended cabin, thus avoiding transportation costs and the use of manufactured boards. In addition, Thoreau uses recycled materials – planks and nails – obtained from a shanty in the vicinity that he buys and dismantles. When Thoreau cuts down the pine trees, instead of using a new axe, he uses an old one that he has borrowed.

When the axe needs sharpening he does this himself, instead of taking it to a blacksmith in town. Thoreau's ecological thinking does not stop there. When he needs a new wedge to fix the head of the axe on the handle, he finds a suitable piece of wood among the hickory chips that are lying close to his house. These are left over from his having made a clearing for his cabin. When it comes time to plaster his cabin due to the approaching winter, he makes his own lime from shells found on the shore of Walden instead of buying manufactured lime.

Thoreau wants to build a cabin that provides more than a bare minimum of protection against the elements but at the same time does not cut him off from nature. To this end he builds an "airy and unplastered cabin" (*idem*, 53). Thoreau does not fill in the cracks between the boards in the walls in order to let in fresh air and allow himself to remain in contact with nature outdoors. He brags that he does not need to go outside to get fresh air, since the air inside his cabin has lost none of its freshness. In an attempt to maintain this essential contact with nature, Thoreau delays plastering the walls, as long as possible, until the weather is freezing. His cabin becomes not so much a solid, imprisoning structure that cuts Thoreau off from the outside world, but a non-constricting structure that allows him to continue to engage with nature. Further emphasizing the transparent nature of his cabin, he says: "This frame, so slightly clad, was a sort of crystallization around me" (*idem*, 58). Thoreau likens his house to a birdcage that allows the maximum amount of interaction with his natural surroundings. At times he wants to get rid of even this minimal partition. When he moves his furniture outdoors for housecleaning, he imagines a dwelling without walls. He describes his desk and

chair as being happy outdoors and reluctant to go back inside. As opposed to the conventional “drawing room” of Concord houses, Thoreau prefers to entertain his guests in what he calls his “withdrawing room (...) on whose carpet the sun rarely fell”, which is in the pine wood behind his cabin.

Thoreau wants his home to be not only a home for himself, but for animals as well. He mentions the mouse who takes up residence beneath his floorboards whom he befriends when it comes up into his house. There are moles in his cellar “nibbling every third potato”, but Thoreau does not mind this since, as he argues, the moles have a right to his food as well. Later, the moles make themselves a snug bed from hair left behind after Thoreau’s plastering, which according to him shows that “even the wildest animals love comfort and warmth” (*idem*, 169). Thoreau even allows wasps to fly freely around him when it starts to get cold; stating that they did not harm him (*idem*, 160).

A final consideration in building his house is that it should be temporary. Thoreau only intended to stay in the woods for a limited period of time – two years as it turned out. Thoreau reminds us of the temporary nature of human structures in general by describing several former sites of human habitation he visited while living in Walden woods. These have all disintegrated and left little impact on nature: “These cellar dents, like the deserted fox burrows, old holes, are all that is left where once there was the stir and bustle of human life” (*idem*, 175). A sad scene, Thoreau feels; but one mitigated by the fact that nature in all its profusion has taken over; examples being “strawberries, raspberries, thimble-berries, hazel-bushes, and sumachs growing in the sunny sward there; some pitch-pine or

gnarled oak occupies what was the chimney nook, and a sweet-scented black-birch, perhaps, waves where the door-stone was" (*ibidem*). Thoreau knows that when he returns to Concord, his cabin will also return to nature; as indeed it did.

In addition to building his house, Thoreau cultivates a rather substantial area of two and a half acres of land. Thoreau uses most of this land to cultivate beans. However, he also grows potatoes, corn, peas and turnips. Cultivating the land constitutes a moral dilemma for Thoreau. First of all he has qualms about digging up the land at all, asking himself what right he has to uproot the "cinquefoil, blackberries, johnswort and sweet wild fruits and pleasant flowers" that grow there (*idem*, 104). Once he has cultivated the land, he has the same moral qualms about weeding. On the one hand he feels he must defend his crops against the intruding weeds, but on the other hand he sees this as an intrusion into a complex ecosystem: "Consider the intimate and curious acquaintance one makes with various kinds of weeds (...) disturbing their delicate organizations so ruthlessly, and making such invidious distinctions with the hoe, leveling whole ranks of one species and sedulously cultivating another" (*idem*, 108).

Thoreau reverses the conventional roles of Man as cultivator and Nature as that which is being cultivated. Instead of seeing himself as the agent upon whose efforts cultivation of the land depends, Thoreau sees himself as playing a relatively minor role in this process; emphasizing instead the role nature plays. He states: "This broad field which I have looked at so long looks not to me as the principal cultivator, but away from me to influences more genial to it, which water and make it green" (*idem*, 112).

In addition – just as was the case with building his house –, Thoreau argues that animals, as well as himself, should benefit from his interaction with nature. Thus, although in one place Thoreau complains about woodchucks eating one-third of the bean plants, and cautions prospective cultivators about this danger, he also realizes that the produce of the land he cultivates should not be for his own use only, but to provide for animals as well: “These beans have results which are not harvested by me. Do they not grow for woodchucks partly?” (*ibidem*).

Finally, he knows that his cultivated field, like his house, will not remain for ever. It too will return to nature. Thoreau is conscious while he cultivates his bean field that he is only a temporary part of a longer cycle of nature – cultivation –, nature that has been going on before him and will continue long after he has gone. With reverence he unearths the remains of the earlier Indian culture that has cultivated the same land; with reverence he carries out his own work of cultivation; and with reverence he lets his fields return to nature once again, perhaps at some time in the future to be cultivated once again by another group of humans. What links these different human cultures together through time are the ties with the land, producing what David M. Robinson calls “the commonality of the human experience” (1993: 336).

Thoreau gives us a highly individualized account of how we should interact with nature. The detailed account he gives us of his activities plus the minimalist approach he takes to interacting with nature, forces us to reevaluate the way we conceptualize nature and the kind of relation we would like to have with it. By looking at Thoreau’s example of building his house and planting his bean field, we

can come up with at least three basic guidelines for how to interact with nature. Two of these reinforce arguments that are being put forward in the contemporary environmental debate; the third is perhaps more “utopian”. The first guideline is that we should use as little of nature as possible when providing for human needs. The second is that human activities should have limited long-term effects on nature. The third – and this is the most utopian of the three – is that animals as well as humans should benefit from human activities.

This paper has examined the way two different utopian writers, who are writing three hundred and fifty years apart, confront the problems of limited resources and sustainability. They offer different approaches to solving these problems. Sir Thomas More emphasizes the need for social action; Henry David Thoreau, the need for individual action. If we see these two approaches as constituting two different strands in the current environmental debate, I feel that the emphasis today is very much on individual action, rather than integrated and comprehensive reform. In this respect the Thoreauvian tradition of individual responsibility is very much alive – as it should be. Unfortunately, broad-scoped and far-reaching social action seems to be less visible today. One reason for this can be the failure of governments to question the prevailing economic systems they are administering. Another can be the reluctance of people to change their consumption patterns. Even though the highly regulated society More designed in 1516 does not appeal to us today – as indeed it should not – his emphasis on the need for comprehensive, social change should remind us that we need collective as well as individual action. Creating new visions of ecologically sound societies

can be one way of highlighting both the importance of, and the need for, collective action.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> A shorter version of this paper was presented at the 8th International Utopian Studies Society Conference at Plymouth, England, 12-14 July 2007.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of these changes, see chapter three, "Farming for Profit: Pasture and Sheep-Grazing 1485-1558", in Ernle 1936.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of how changing agricultural methods affected farming in Thoreau's home town of Concord, see Gross 1982.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of More's *Utopia* in relation to early ideas on colonization, see Sweet 1999. For condemnation of Utopian colonization, see Adams' note 8 on page 41 of Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* (More 1992: 41 n8).

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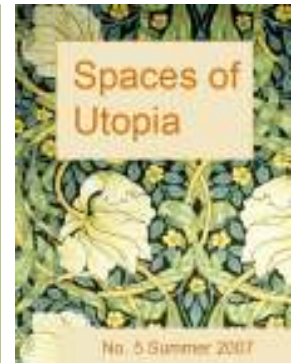
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## Art in the Fourth Dimension:

### Giving Form to Form – The Abstract Paintings of Piet Mondrian

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The aim of this paper is to explore the art and utopian ideology of early-twentieth-century Dutch artist Piet Mondrian. As an idealist, Mondrian believed that his art would be instrumental in establishing the utopia he conceived of, and his writings and art are the painstaking and eloquent manifestations of his efforts in this regard.

Mondrian is a key figure in Modernist art, as co-founder, with Theo van Doesburg, of the Dutch *De Stijl* movement (1917-1924), and as a pioneer in the development of twentieth-century abstraction – it was Mondrian who took non-representation further than even the revolutionary Picasso, with his cubist compositions, had.

The background against which Mondrian formulated his notions on utopia is markedly dystopian. The turn of the twentieth century was a time in which the gap left by loss of faith in the Church could be only partially filled by a belief in positivism. The result was a *fin de siècle* characterised by a pervasive nihilism (Tuchman 1986: 19). This ideological impasse was exacerbated by the outbreak of the First World War. The turmoil and cruelty engendered by this event created a

fertile basis for the development of new and radical ideologies (Long 1986: 206). Critic Mathew Shadbolt notes: “[M]any artists attempted ways in which to remove themselves from wartime activities [but] [t]he notion of transcending world disorder ... was arguably no better explored in these [inter-war] years than in the work of ... Piet Mondrian” (Shadbolt 1996: §7, 9). Mondrian’s thought and art were created in reaction to a world he found both brutal and brutalising – a pro-active attempt to establish a utopia on earth.

Mondrian named his ideology, and abstract style of painting, Neoplasticism (*Nieuwe Beelding*). An analysis of Neoplastic theory reveals a non-material, universalist utopia based on the balancing of archetypal opposites. In his writings Mondrian borrowed from theosophy, Hegel, and Plato, as well as mystical notions of a transcendent fourth dimension. It is, furthermore, possible to show that Mondrian’s conception of utopia shares aspects of Hindu, Buddhist and Daoist thought.

Mondrian dwells on the notion of the universal, and for him Neoplasticism is “the most direct *aesthetic manifestation* of the universal possible” (Mondrian 1918a: 51, artist’s own emphasis). In order to do justice to the universal, Mondrian felt it necessary to reduce natural appearance, in visual terms, to its essential constituents. Hence, Mondrian’s pure abstract compositions consist of straight, black lines placed perpendicularly to each other, delineating flatly painted rectangles of primary colour interspersed with white planes. In his attempt to discover and give form to the invisible elements which underlie everyday appearance, Mondrian is a Platonist. For Plato, as for Mondrian, these essences

(or Forms) are more real than the material world, and are the source of that which we perceive in our daily lives. The eighteenth-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant's conception of the *noumena* seems very close to Plato's Forms. The *noumena*, or 'things-in-themselves', are unfathomable, "the external source of experience ... [but] not themselves knowable" (Flew 1984: 251). Similarly, in the *Dao de jing*, the *Dao* is described as follows: "We look at it, and we do not see it ... We listen to it and we do not hear it ... it cannot be made the subject of description ... this is called the Form of the Formless" (Lao Tzu 1997: 11).

Mondrian equates the universal and non-material with the spiritual. In a letter written in 1909, Mondrian states: "In order to approach the spiritual in art, one employs reality as little as possible ... This explains logically why primary forms are employed ... Art must transcend [physical] reality ... Otherwise it would be of no value to man" (Holtzman / James 1986: 17).

In Mondrian's writings the Platonic essences converge with the Hegelian concept of the whole. For Hegel, "nothing can be really true unless it is about Reality as a *whole*" (Russell 1985: 703, emphasis added). The absolute, or whole, is the logical conclusion of the dialectical process, whereby the thesis is replaced by its antithesis, and where, subsequently, both are united and superseded in their synthesis. The dialectic is, by its nature, ever-widening, leading to the final conflation of everything into one, ultimate synthesis: the absolute. In this regard Bertrand Russell states: "[S]ince everything, except the Whole, has relations to outside things, it follows that nothing quite true can be said of separate things, and that in fact, only the Whole is real" (*ibidem*). Thus, the notion (and appearance) of

the world as constituted of separate and discrete elements is an illusion, and the reality of separate things consists solely in their relation to the whole. Mondrian's mature paintings, where the coloured planes are cropped off and the black lines seem to extend beyond the picture plane, are not meant to function as "objects in themselves", autonomously asserting only their material, delimited existence. Rather, they encourage thoughtfulness about their role as part of an infinite spatial continuum. This spatial continuum, as a manifestation of the absolute, can be related to *Dao*. Lao Tzu states:

There was something undefined and complete, coming into existence before Heaven and Earth. How still it was and formless, standing alone ... reaching everywhere and in no danger of being exhausted ... All pervading is the Great Tào! It may be found on the left hand and on the right. (Lao Tzu 1997: 21, 30)

What these systems of thought, namely Platonism, the Kantian *noumena*, Hegel's absolute, and the oriental conception of *Dao*, have in common is a belief in the trans-personal, as well as the conviction that to focus solely on the material is to be misled. (The Buddhist notion of the physical world as an illusion, and the Hindu goddess Maya who weaves a spell of illusion in the form of the physical world, also clearly pertain). For Mondrian, "deception follows ... [when] reckon[ing] only with the senses" (Mondrian [S.a.]: 382).

Mondrian's search for a utopian construct (predicated thus far on the non-material and universal) furthermore led him to assimilate theosophical ideas as well as mystical thought relating to the fourth dimension. From theosophy, notably H. P. Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled* (1877) and *The Secret Doctrine* (1888),<sup>1</sup> Mondrian adopted the notion of universal harmony as the balance of archetypal opposites.

Blavatsky traces the notion of the dual nature of the universe back to Phoenician thought, where the cosmos manifests itself as male Essence, or Wisdom, and where primitive Matter, or chaos, is defined as female (Blavatsky 1893: 61). Similarly, the Swiss philosopher Paracelsus states: “Everything is double in nature; magnetism is ... active and passive, male and female ... equilibrium is the resultant of two opposing forces eternally reacting upon each other” (*apud* Blavatsky 1893: xxvi). In Hindu philosophy, too, the union of Shiva, the male element, and Shakti, the female element, constitutes enlightenment, or “an actual resolution of the duality that constitutes the phenomenal world” (Cross 1994: 113).

Mondrian, seeking for a way in which to give form to balanced primordial opposites, lighted on the representation of the vertical and the horizontal meeting at a ninety-degree angle. Mondrian states: “[N]ature ... is governed by one relationship above all others: ... by duality of position, the perpendicular. This relationship ... expresses ... complete harmony” (Mondrian 1918c: 38). For Mondrian, the vertical line represents the male, mental/spiritual principle, whereas the horizontal, aligned as it is with the earth, represents the female, material principle. The correspondence with ideas noted in Blavatsky’s writings is clear.

The question arises as to how the concept of the dual nature of the universe may be reconciled with Mondrian’s preoccupation with the ‘whole’, or the universe as radically integrated. One solution is to consider dualism and monism as part of the same system, a notion found in Western mysticism as well as in *Daoism*.

Seventeenth century German mystic Jakob Böhme<sup>2</sup>, describes the creative principle of dualism as follows: “The being of all being is but a single being, yet in giving birth to itself, it divides itself into two principles ... and out of these two eternal beginnings into a third beginning, into the Creation itself as its own love-play” (*apud* Watts 1986: 245). Similarly, the *Dao de jing* reads: “*Dao* gives rise to one, one to two, two to three, and three to the myriad of things. The myriad of things shoulder *yin* and embrace *yang*, and mix the *qi* to achieve harmony” (Henricks / Lock 1998: 15). Thus, the absolute, or monist whole, comes to self-awareness through the dynamic of duality by means of which all phenomena are created. Mondrian echoes this precisely: “Unity, in its most profound essence, *radiates*: it *is*. The radiation of unity’s *being* wrecks itself upon the physical – and thus gives rise to life and art” (Mondrian 1918b: 90 n5).

In this way, Mondrian, in search of the primordial, universal paradigm, based his formulation of abstract painting and the conceptual basis of Neoplasticism on the notion of balanced duality – a duality which nevertheless forms part of an holistically integrated absolute.

The last school of thought pertaining to Mondrian’s notion of utopia relates to mystical explications of the fourth dimension, or so-called “hyperspace philosophy”,<sup>3</sup> as formulated by early twentieth century philosopher Peter Demianovich Ouspensky. The nature of an inscrutable fourth dimension was a prominent theme of discussion in artistic circles in early-twentieth-century Europe, and Mondrian was quick to respond to the non-materialist implications of a “higher” dimension.

Ouspensky's *Tertium Organum* (1911) is the summation of his thought on hyperspace. Here Ouspensky attempts to explain the fourth dimension as a spatial phenomenon, and, in order to achieve this, explores the relations between the three dimensions with which we are familiar as well as the relation between three- and four-dimensional forms. In this way, Ouspensky points out that a line consists of an infinite number of points, that a plane consists of an infinite number of lines, and that a solid consists of an infinite number of planes. By implication, a four dimensional body consists of an infinite number of three-dimensional bodies. Continuing his analogy, Ouspensky establishes that a line is the trace of the movement of a point, and a plane is the trace of the movement of a line. A three-dimensional solid is the trace of the movement of a plane, and by analogy, a four-dimensional form is the trace of the movement of a three-dimensional form (Ouspensky 1981: 22). The question arises: in which direction does the three-dimensional form move to leave an impression of itself as the trace of a four-dimensional body?

It is useful to keep in mind that a line moves in a direction *perpendicular to itself* in order to form a plane. Similarly, a plane moves in a direction *perpendicular to itself*, and at the same time not parallel to the first line, in order to form a cube. Hence, in a three-dimensional cube there is 'movement' in three directions, each direction perpendicular to each other direction and none of the directions parallel to one another. By implication, a four-dimensional body is a three-dimensional body which moves in a direction perpendicular to itself, and at the same time in a direction not parallel to its height, width or depth – in effect, the three-dimensional

solid moves “away from itself”. The answer to the question of which direction this could be, lies in visualising time as space (*idem*, 54).

In our common perception of time, what we experience as phenomena well up from nowhere (the future) and immediately disappear into oblivion (the past), never to be encountered again – non-existent (*idem*, 25). Contrary to this perception, Ouspensky states: “Reality is continuous and constant”, despite the fact that we represent it to ourselves as an endless series of separate moments, “as through a narrow slit” (*idem*, 26).

Based on the hypothesis that reality is continuous and constant, it would be more logical to assume that events do not come from and disappear into nowhere. Rather, everything, the past, present and future, exists as it is, in a continuous present, which we are inadequately equipped to see in its entirety. Our erroneous perception of time causes us to experience it as a series of segments of a line, rather than as a whole. In light of this, Ouspensky urges us to rise *above* this “line”, and to perceive time as a *plane* (*idem*, 28). On this plane the events of eternity coexist simultaneously, arranged serenely and motionlessly next to each other.

Upon seeing time as a plane, our “time-sense” is transformed into “space-sense”. The “now” which we experience as fleeting, expands into the ever-existing infinity referred to in oriental philosophy as the “Eternal Now”, “a universe in which there [is] no *before* and no *after*, but only the present, *known* or *unknown*” (*idem*, 95).

Ouspensky argues that this Eternal Now is the fourth dimension, but how is this explanation of time as space to be related to three-dimensional bodies existing

as traces of the movement of four-dimensional bodies? The direction, not contained in itself, in which a three-dimensional body must move in order to leave its trace as a four-dimensional body in space, is a direction perpendicular to *our line of time*. This means that four-dimensional bodies are the manifestation of three-dimensional bodies in their *entirety*, existing in perpetual time. We are (ordinarily) unable to experience phenomena (three-dimensional bodies) in their entirety, as four-dimensional bodies, and as we travel “through” four-dimensional bodies (on our time line), we experience only their three-dimensional section, as finite phenomena that come into and fade out of existence. It is also in this way that, according to Ouspensky, a four-dimensional body is made up of an infinite number of three-dimensional bodies.<sup>4</sup>

Ouspensky argues that these four-dimensional bodies are the Forms described by Plato, and the *noumena* addressed by Kant. Yet whereas, according to Kant, we can *never* experience things-in-themselves, Ouspensky posits ways in which we *can*, notably by means of artistic sensibility and mystic insight, but emphasises that positivist science and logic can not assist us in this regard. For Ouspensky, a positivist is like a savage for whom a book is a “thing”, and who will forever interpret it by carefully taking measurements of its appearance (1981: 117). Whilst contemplating the outer representation of the book, the positivist savage will never fathom its content, or *noumena*, nor even acknowledge that this content exists. Conceding that positivism was refreshing and progressive in its time, Ouspensky regrets the fact that it inevitably led to materialism, and feels that

positivism has become conservative and reactionary, arresting rather than benefiting thought (*idem*, 290). Ouspensky states:

[W]e do not realise that we rob ourselves ... of all beauty, all mystery, all meaning, and then wonder why we are so bored and disgusted ... we do not see that we understand nothing around us; that brute force or deceit and falsification always win, and we have nothing with which to oppose them. THE METHOD IS NO GOOD ... positivism wears a uniform ... It rules over thought ... and struggle against it is already declared a crime. (*ibidem*)

By the same token, logic, as first devised by Aristotle, proves obfuscating when it comes to the fourth dimension. Aristotle's laws of logical inference read as follows: *A is A; A is not not-A; Everything is either A or not-A*. Ouspensky remarks that this formula is "simply deduced from observation", and, given the conditioned nature of our perception, brings us nowhere as regards the fourth dimension. Perception, after all, proves misleading even within the realm of the three-dimensional world (Ouspensky 1981: 74).<sup>5</sup>

As a counter system, Ouspensky envisages transcendental logic, or logic of infinity and intuition, its axioms reading as follows: "*A is both A and not A, or Everything is both A and not A, or Everything is All*" (*idem*, 221). These axioms, Ouspensky points out, correlate with the central teaching of the *Upanishads*, namely *Tat tvam asi*, or "Thou art That" (*idem*, 229). Thus, in the fourth dimension, where "Everything is All", opposition is resolved in a mystical union of opposites, in accordance with Mondrian's conception of utopia.

In Mondrian's utopia, material reality is not the bedrock of existence. Rather, it is the non-material, the diaphanous, the eternal and invisible that constitutes true reality. In this non-material utopia conflict is resolved in the balancing, or ultimately the union of, all oppositional elements. Mondrian chose to believe that humankind

was slowly but surely moving toward such a state of tranquil balance, and his Neoplastic ideology and abstract compositions were created with the sole purpose of ushering in such a *dénouement*. His compositions can be interpreted as attempts to capture the Platonic essences, the *noumena*, the absolute, a monist whole, *Dao*, or the fourth dimension – the Eternal Now. In conclusion, these pure abstract works were created as Modernist icons, to encourage contemplation, and hence the creation, of an earthly utopia which was, above all else, harmonious.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> In her writings, Blavatsky drew from such diverse sources as the *Vedas* (which comprise four manuscripts that are the cornerstone of Hinduism and date as far back as 1500 BC), the *Pali* books, or *Jutakās* (accounts of the incarnations of Buddha), the Cabala, Egyptian mythology and the Old Testament, as well as modern and ancient Western philosophy.

<sup>2</sup> Böhme, “one of the great speculative mystics [and] ... an important source of inspiration for ... romantic idealists” dwelled, in mystic fashion, on the *unity* of creation (Mautner 2000: 71).

<sup>3</sup> The term ‘hyperspace philosophy’ was formulated by Linda Dalrymple Henderson in her thesis on the impact of notions of the fourth dimension on early-twentieth-century art. It is used to differentiate meta-physical, philosophically oriented inquiry into the fourth dimension from a mathematical approach to the topic. Henderson states: “I find this a useful means for characterizing writers from Hinton to Bragdon and Ouspensky, as opposed to authors of more straightforward mathematical expositions of the fourth dimension” (Henderson 1983: 25). Furthermore, according to Henderson, “many Theosophists became actively interested in the fourth dimension [and] Mondrian was naturally sympathetic toward the fourth dimension because of [his] Theosophical beliefs” (*idem*, 32).

<sup>4</sup> It is in this sense that the German mathematician G. F. B. Riemann, according to Ouspensky, “regarded the ... atom as the *entrance of the fourth dimension into three-dimensional space*” – i.e., not as something material, but as “the inter-section of a four-dimensional line by the plane of our consciousness” (Ouspensky 1981: 23, 35).

<sup>5</sup> An example of this is the way in which incorrect inferences can be made based on clearly observable phenomena, such as for instance the movement of the sun “around” the earth. As Ouspensky remarks: “The sun ... still continues, in all languages, to rise and set” (1981: 80).

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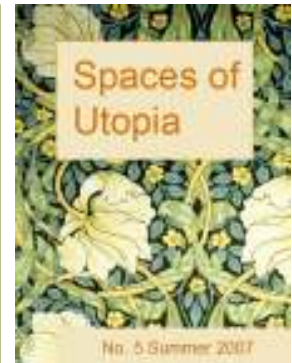
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**The House of Dreams:  
Program and Impulse within the Work of Ilya and Emilia Kabakov**

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In their remaking of a totalitarian scheme to increase the productivity of workers, Ilya and Emilia Kabakov have provided a promise of restorative slumber in their work *The House of Dreams* (2005), shown at the Serpentine Gallery in London between 19 October 2005 and 8 January 2006. The work burns with an intensity of imaginative possibility that can be traced back to Kabakov's time in the USSR. Kabakov recalls the necessity of imagining the audience for the forbidden work he and his colleagues would make. I would like to suggest that *House of Dreams* retains that imaginary relationship in the form of what might be possible with real and imaginary audiences. This might be read as the gulf between utopian project and failure.

Kabakov describes an "unofficial world" in which artists existed in total isolation in the Soviet Union of the 1960s and '70s in order to maintain any form of practice, communication, intellectual exchange, necessitated inventive and persistent strategies of survival. This was characterised by a "self-description". An

outside perspective was rendered impossible, artists isolated from any external world in order to get away with continuing their activities:

He became simultaneously an author and an observer. Deprived of a genuine viewer, critic, or historian, the author unwittingly became them himself, trying to guess what his works meant “objectively”. He attempted to “imagine” that very “History” in which he was functioning and which was “looking” at him. (Kabakov 2002: 8)<sup>1</sup>

Artists functioned through fantasizing about the world that lay outside of Soviet boundaries and influence. Implicit within this context were attempts to envision interpretations of this internal world from the outside. This required the artist to occupy two simultaneous positions: “The artist had already become not only the author of his own works, but also the “cultural observer” standing beyond the walls of the Soviet home and peering in through the window” (*ibidem*). An artist had to be both observer and object.

However, while wanting to retain this formative tension in thinking about *House of Dreams*, there is a more general formative approach that I would like to draw attention to here in framing this specific work. I would like to consider a particular conception of installation as medium. Ilya Kabakov moved to the West from the Soviet Union in the late 1980s and in an interview published in 1995, commented on an apparent desire to hear about how things were different there: “(...) I have often been asked about the differences in both lifestyles and artistic principles which are accepted in Russia and ‘here’. And whether I could formulate these distinctions in one sentence” (Kabakov 1995: 1175). Kabakov’s response is that he does have such a formulation. It is to do with a difference between how an

object correlates to its environment. In the West, the space surrounding an object is ignored, and attention is primarily upon the artefact itself:

This attention is all embracing. The object is being dissected and assembled, everyone is interested in how it functions, it is imbued with all inventiveness. The objects in their turn look beautiful, they are always new, clean, shining, brightly painted, each one has its own individuality, one could say that they are almost animated, they have an independent life. (*ibidem*)

However, the interrelationships these objects establish both among themselves and, more significantly, with their surrounding space are indifferent. Of that space itself, Kabakov argues that the only thing demanded of it is that it must not interfere with the object's existence and its demonstration of itself.

The environment must be protective, and visually it must not impede concentration on the object: "In principle, it's as though the space shouldn't exist at all" (*idem*, 1176). When created intentionally, the space around an object is shaped from the objects themselves. The Russian correlation between object and space is presented as the diametric opposite:

Items as real objects don't have any significance there, for a few reasons. In the first place, they are all old, dusty, broken, "previously used", and if they are still new, they are poorly made, don't work, ugly, shapeless. In the second place, they mostly don't serve pragmatic goals – to work, to help, to make life easier (they are not capable of doing this at all) – but symbolic goals: objects act as indicators of the social membership of its owner, his social status. Therefore, it's not important for us "what kind of thing it is" and how it works, but where and in what sense it is presented. For us, a thing doesn't speak about itself, but about the one who owns it and why he owns it. (*ibidem*)

This speaking about the owner is of course a reading of objects that suggests a return to Mauss's evaluation of the gift – that objects are inalienably bound to the subject – and is perhaps universal rather than functioning as a specific distinction

between “East” and “West”. However, I will not attempt to critique Kabakov’s account here, but rather use it to think of a relationship between materiality and utopia. This is made possible by the more general shifting of emphasis from object to environment in Kabakov’s argument.

Environment is also accounted for by the term “incidental circumstances”, forms of instantly readable information. It is an inseparable connection between material object and remote meaning that forms a dense contextual (and perhaps textual) substance around a thing. It is the circumstances that are important. Kabakov provides some obvious example: “The very same table in your home and in an office is two different tables. A conversation at the train station or a conversation about the very same thing in the office is two different conversations” (*ibidem*). Similarly, one finds oneself as two different people in different circumstances. And these circumstances are themselves, in Kabakov’s argument, repressive and stifling. This is all-pervasive. A medieval notion of spirit of the place seizes those within. But the spirit is oppressive. Kabakov goes through the qualities of interior space in Russia:

In the first place, the rooms are always deconstructive, asymmetrical to the point of absurdity or, on the contrary, insanely symmetrical. In the second place, they look dull, oppressing, semi-dark, but this is not so because the windows are small or weak lamps are on. The main thing is that the light both during the day and at night is arranged so excruciatingly, so awkwardly that it creates a peculiar discomfort distinctive to that place alone. (*idem*, 1176-1177)

Space is also affected by an inadequate or perhaps malicious attention, to the degree of absurdity, to construction from planning to realisation. All is crooked, unfinished, cracked and stained. Place is haphazard, based upon a low standard

that is just fit to pass. Everything is old, without any sense of when it was made. There is no patina of time, rather just a sense of useless decrepitation even if it were completed only yesterday, while dust and dirt appear to be everywhere. There is also an overwhelming sense of spaces, even private apartments, belonging to no-one. They are temporary places of residence.

There is something of a contradiction in Kabakov's argument. He makes a case for things not mattering, as they are decrepit, but then describes their environments in the same terms, as places one wants to ignore and will forget. They are perhaps akin to the invisible institutional spaces of the West (or at least its art). But Kabakov instead suggests an extreme sensitivity to place based upon these qualities of places, as they were places that he would be thrown into, and pass through, for his entire childhood. He tells how he lived in dormitories until the age of twenty-four, while his mother spent sixteen years without a living permit, constantly moving from one landlady to another. This sensitivity to place goes further, to become a pervasive socialisation of consciousness. External life seeped in to the pores of consciousness like thick syrup. Sociality was total and dominated everything. Sociality was Soviet government structure, but also community. Intersubjective relationships could transform surrounding space. At a small level, it can be a making "positive", but the model of family expanded to scale of state is catastrophic. Dissolute, space belongs to no-one, everything is transformed to "common-use", or "uselessness". There is in Kabakov's distinction between material cultures a possibility of hope, then, as well as despair. Hope is present at the level of a small-scale, accountable intersubjectivity, but lost in the saturation of

totalitarianism in the everyday. And at the centre of these possibilities, a space, or a no-place belonging to no-one. More's *Utopia* – which is of course from the Greek for “no-place” – was overseen by Ademus, whose name derived from “no-people”. We have in both *Utopia* and Kabakov's material culture, therefore, no-one as the mediator of the law of no-place. Independently of any Blochian analysis, Kabakov is describing utopian impulse and possibility within the totalitarian actuality of the Soviet Union. This is translated directly as a principle that determines an operational aspect of art. Not its function within society, but the way it functions in a more phenomenally-orientated and formal manner within institutional space. So Kabakov returns to the oft-asked question:

If we turn to the difference between artistic principles in our country and in the West in this sense, it can be formulated this way: if in the West the object is exhibited as the main hero and the surrounding space doesn't exist at all, “we”, on the contrary, should perhaps primarily exhibit “space” and only then arrange objects in it. (*idem*, 1178)

This exhibiting of space rather than object is what Kabakov describes as “total” installation. The term functions as a recognisable shorthand for the large-scale installation-based work that Ilya and Emilia, his wife and collaborator, have been making since the late 1980s. It has become something of a brand identity for their work, in has lost something of its critical impulse, hence necessitating an account of its specificity. While I have tried to suggest that utopia is at the core of total installation, *The House of Dreams* addresses both project and impulse, as explicit and implicit.

At its spatial centre there is a radial arrangement of oversize pedestals, complete with steps, at the top of which is situated a divan to rest or sleep upon.

Inside each large pedestal is a small chamber, again furnished for institutionalised rest. The adjoining rooms have become hallucinatory adaptations of a hospital ward. Beds are separated from each other by floating white curtains. The form here is derived from a scheme within the history of Soviet utopias devised by architect Konstantin Melnikov. After identifying the problem of fatigue as a hindrance to the growth and development of the Stalinist collective, he proposed a *Laboratory of Sleep* (1929), which would allow up to 4,000 workers to rest in order to restore them to their full productive potential. The plan of a central rotunda flanked by two wings is mirrored in the creation of the Kabakovs' installation, as is its promise of a restorative slumber. However, in its (re)construction, the *Laboratory* is detached from its pragmatic attempts to improve both efficiency and the overall functional productivity, as well as the operation of totalitarianism through mechanised forms of the cooperation and conformity of its subjects. What is on offer here, perhaps, is a chance to dream. There is more than a reflection of the (clumsy and slightly embarrassing) utopian project in facilitating a space of contemplative reflection. The dream in itself is not the object of interest here. Rather, it is that this is a state from which one will awaken that is more significant, as an analogy that depends on an ontological certainty that the dream/fantasy is not inimical to wakefulness/reality.

## Note

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that, as imagined and personal contexts, these histories were as diverse as the artists were numerous: “One artist might imagine a ‘world of contemporary Western art’, for others in was the ‘Pantheon of the great masters of the Renaissance’, and still others imagined this to be the ‘Russian avant-garde of the 1920s’. This is to say nothing of the fact that reproductions served as the material for these fantasies, and in the case of ‘Contemporary Western Art’ or the ‘Russian avant-garde’ these were extremely rare in those years. But this was no misfortune at all! What was important was that these images which had nothing to do with reality burned rather brightly and constantly” (Kabakov 2002: 8).

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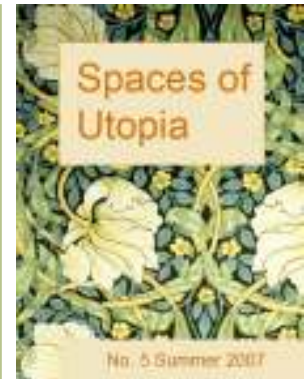
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## The Body as Utopia:

*Gattaca*, by Andrew Niccol (1997)

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A recent reality show on a Dutch TV channel raised an international uproar both among patients in search of organ donors and the medic community. The show, aired by the youth-oriented and often controversial Dutch TV-channel BNN, was called *The Big Donor Show*. At first sight, the show was meant to present several kidney patients trying to prove which of them most needed a kidney transplant from a donor supposedly ill with terminal cancer. As if the idea was not controversial enough, the show then turned out to be a hoax because while the potential recipients were real kidney patients, the donor was a perfectly healthy actress. All of them knew about the farce. Apart from the ethics involved, it seems clear that the show was just another turn of the screw in the maelstrom of reality shows in search of an audience. Laurens Drillich, BNN's chairman, later declared in a press release: "We wanted to make a statement. That worked. In the past seven days there has been more debate about organ donation than in the last seven years".<sup>1</sup> Whether the show actually had positive repercussions on the number of donors in the Netherlands, which allegedly was its main purpose, or actually scandalized away potential donors because of its

trivial format is yet to be seen. Even Prime Minister Jan-Peter Balkenende's contradictory reactions before and after the show appeared on TV seem to suggest that, despite the sought-for controversy of the format, the issue of organ donation is far from being an easy one, and that each country, each hospital and even each individual faces the matter differently.

The history of organ transplants began in 1954 when the American surgeon Joseph Murray successfully performed the first kidney transplant from an adult to his twin. Since then, transplant experimentation has included natural, artificial, and even animal organs. The perennial human fear of death, the ongoing search for happiness, the need to recapture the perfection of the body after the loss of Paradise, the Promethean challenge of medicine against disease, the improvement of surgical methods which often are only reserved to a few, or simple human curiosity are but a few factors which justify the ongoing research in the field. It is no secret that, much like Victor Frankenstein's messianic (i.e., utopian) impulse, transplant research is a thriving discipline. However, recent discoveries in genetics, the practical advent of clonation, and present-day research with core cells might soon relegate transplants to vintage medical treatises. That is precisely the starting point of this discussion, which will focus on *Gattaca*, a film directed by Andrew Niccol in 1997.

Set in "the not too distant future" [*sic*] *Gattaca* presents a world which is preparing to send manned spacecraft to the moons of Saturn. The Gattaca Aerospace Corporation is the conglomerate in charge of the task. Its name comes from the initials of one the most repeated sequences of bases in the human genome formed by Adenine, Thymine, Cytosine, and Guanine. The name, cryptic enough at the beginning, proves fully justified as the film

progresses and the spectator becomes entangled in the obsessive role assigned to genetic identity. Human beings of that time are not procreated, but produced through a careful selection of physical and intellectual features, a process which literally offers children *à la carte*. Prospective parents can thus choose sex, eye or skin colour. But technoscience also allows parents to eliminate negative features such as the propensity to alcoholism, depression or congenital heart defects. However, a number of people conceived in the traditional way still remain. They are referred to as *in-valids* or *sons of God*, and although class discrimination in the Marxist sense of the term does not exist, from the beginning of the film it becomes clear that a new social scale based on genetic “validity” has been established. *In-valids* are basically relegated to menial jobs on the grounds of their imperfect and therefore limited abilities, which produces a *de facto* scientific segregation based on genetics.

Vincent (Ethan Hawke) is an *in-valid* who works at the Gattaca Corporation as a cleaner. His dream is to join one of the expeditions about to take off for Titan, something which his genetic imperfection obviously prevents. Vincent is the genetic outcome of a traditional birth, the result of a genetic lottery which determined that he would have a propensity to cardiopathies and whose life expectancy would probably not go beyond thirty-three years. In other words, he is the dramatic result of a natural conception which convinced his parents to have a second child according to the new “natural” way. Through a mysterious go-between, he meets the former swimmer – now paraplegic – Jerome Morrow (Jude Law). Jerome has been in a wheelchair ever since he attempted suicide as he could not cope with coming second in a swimming event. Jerome is willing to sell Vincent his identity and all the elements which

make up for it: blood samples, urine, hair, dead skin cells and so on. Vincent then manages to cheat the system and is accepted into the astronaut training programme. Thanks to the genetic material provided by Jerome, Vincent is considered one of the most apt candidates. Unfortunately, one week before the launching, a murder is committed and he becomes a major suspect when one of his own eyelashes is found at the scene of the crime. Finally, with the help of a doctor who chooses to ignore Vincent's genetic fraud and with the acquiescence of Irene (Uma Thurman), who also feels frustrated for not being able to travel into space, he manages to depart for Titan. Vincent's brother, Anton, now a policeman in charge of the murder case, recognizes him and notices the fraud but also decides to let him go, astonished at his *in-valid* brother's endurance and will.

In order to understand my contention that the body in *Gattaca* may be seen as a utopian space, this paper will specifically focus on three characters. In the first place, Vincent's parents; secondly, Vincent himself; and finally, Jerome.

### **Vincent's parents**

The fact that Vincent's parents actually appear only once in the film does not diminish their relevance in the story. They appear for less than three minutes altogether and in retrospect mode. The most revealing sequence is Vincent's birth accompanied by his mother's screams of pain. Next, the focus is on his parents' absolute surprise on being told that their child has a strong risk of suffering cardiopathies and that his life expectancy is only thirty-three years. Finally, there is the way in which they approach a geneticist to conceive a *valid*

brother for Vincent and their unsophisticated request: "We were wondering if we should leave some things to chance".<sup>2</sup> Their resistance to use the new "natural" method to conceive children epitomizes a certain mistrust of technoscience, an almost religious awe which assumes that genetic uncertainty is part of mankind's written destiny as expressed in the Bible. Actually, it is only when they become aware of Vincent's hazardous future that they decide to resort to the new technology to conceive Vincent's brother.

### **Vincent**

Vincent's ambition to travel to space is relatively difficult to account for. The story faintly suggests a certain frustration due to his condition as *in-valid*, his wounded pride for being considered an inferior being, his bitterness towards a system which has rediscovered the caste system, or a combination of all three. In any case, his decision to cheat the system is a vital challenge which tries to show the inviability of a social organization based on the segregation between those "scientifically pure" and those "imperfectly human". At the end of the film, Vincent manages to demonstrate that qualities such as perseverance and cunning may counterbalance blind technology.

### **Jerome**

Jerome personifies yet another kind of frustration with the system. His disappointment and resentment stem from a crippled body, once meant to be perfect. Jerome blames the system for its inability to restore his glorious condition before he attempted suicide. Actually, he also blames the system for his failed suicide attempt, and for the reasons which led him to make such a

decision. All things considered then, Jerome is ready to cheat the system not because he thinks it is intrinsically evil, but because it cannot grant him what it had promised, namely, physical happiness and psychological peace.

*Gattaca* clearly recalls Huxley's *Brave New World*. The use of genetic niches – *valid*, *in-valid* – seems directly inspired in Huxley's classification by means of Greek letters. Unfortunately the film does not provide much information on life outside the *Gattaca* Corporation. At most, spectators are led to believe that life in the near future has become pretty standardized with individuals developing their activities within their allocated slot. No signs of collective rebellion or social unrest are perceived, though it seems clear that crime still exists. Perhaps one of the interesting features of the film is that it suggests that though collective happiness might have been achieved, individual happiness is far from being universal. A police force is required, murders still exist and so do informers, along with a certain *big-brotherish* feeling which pervades the whole atmosphere.

Much like *Brave New World*, *Gattaca* presents a world which revolves around genetic control, or rather eugenics. However, whereas in Huxley's novel social peace is achieved through pre-birth determining and post-birth conditioning, in *Gattaca* social peace looks vaguely universal, the only exception being the groups of remaining *in-valids*. The universalization of the system, it seems, would entail the complete extinction of *in-valids*, and consequently, widespread social happiness would appear as the final stage on the way towards utopia. In other words, the hypothetical perfection of individual bodies would eventually lead to the perfection of society. That is why at the *Gattaca* Corporation – and in the rest of the world, one must assume – there is

an obsession with body perfection. Curiously enough, in perfect *Gattaca* there is room for Darwinian principles and so, supposedly perfect individuals are still encouraged to strive for a higher degree of perfection, in a clear re-elaboration of the survival of the fittest principle. Yet, it is even more curious to notice that, unlike *Brave New World*, *Gattaca* pays no attention to the psychological happiness of the individual. No sleep-conditioning or soma seem necessary, a feature which might be understood as the conviction that human *unhappiness* (or at least a great part of it) is a consequence of body limitations. This interpretation, however, may sound flawed, as it plainly ignores the interface body-mind (or in other words, physicality *versus* spirituality).

Vincent, Jerome and Vincent's brother Anton all personify attitudes which denote an idealization of the body. Most often, their acts and psychological reactions are motivated by an urge to come to terms with their own body, a space which throughout the film becomes a physical battlefield. For Vincent, his obsession to travel to space may be seen as the desperate need to show that *in-valids* may go beyond the limits they have been set by the system. His battle is one to demonstrate that human will is stronger than genetic segregation, an idea which he will try to validate by achieving a physical goal reserved to perfect individuals. In the case of Vincent, he basically seeks revenge against a system that proclaims universal order, control and happiness, but which – like most utopias – is extremely sensitive to difference. Finally, Vincent's brother Anton is another peculiarity within this world. Conceived according to the new techniques, his standard body, however, is far from matching Vincent's physical achievements. Twice in the film it is shown that Vincent and Anton settle their differences by swimming into the ocean until one of them becomes exhausted

or too scared to continue. Shockingly enough (and contradicting the scientific expectations determined at birth), the *in-valid* brother saves his perfect brother's life on both occasions, thus proving that either there is something wrong with scientific predictions or that there are other components the genetic test was unable to detect. Perhaps the answer to this apparent contradiction can be found in Vincent's reply to his brother Anton when, tired and scared, he tries to find a logical explanation and Vincent replies: "You want to know how I did it? This is how I did it, Anton: I never saved anything for the swim back". It seems clear that Vincent is arguing for human will as an empowering force which may, if not substitute, at least make up for an inferior body.

Jerome's case is more pathetic as his vision of the body as utopia was turned into a dystopia when he only managed to win the silver medal. Again, we must allow room for elements other than the body; and again we must consider human will as a leading force able to modify the course of human events. In this case, though, given the perfect condition that is theoretically enjoyed by *valid* individuals, it must be concluded that the only process Jerome can aspire to is the destruction of the presumed utopia represented by his body. Therefore, he attempts suicide. After the unsuccessful attempt, he too becomes an *in-valid* (i.e., paraplegic); but what is worse, he enters a vicious circle of unhappiness, alcohol and sex from which the only escape will be the projection of his own body utopia onto somebody else's utopia (i.e., Vincent's).

Finally, Anton's decision to ignore Vincent's fraud may be seen as yet another example of body idealization. Brought up in and by a system where body perfection is the norm, where *in-valids* are considered scientifically inferior, and trained as a police officer, the only way for Anton to come to terms with his

disgust is by projecting his confusion onto his brother Vincent. Thus, in what may be seen as an act of generosity, he looks aside whilst his brother cheats the system. All in all, this is yet another acknowledgement that the *Gattaca* world is far from being perfect.

*Gattaca* raises many questions and deals with many thought-provoking issues. Perhaps one of the most challenging ones is the overlapping between the physical and social body. In this sense, the notion that perfect individual bodies will eventually bring about a perfect society is not to be dismissed. Actually, the very opening of the film immediately recalls some of the principles of the Transhumanist movement. Officially begun in the nineteen-eighties by the Oxford philosopher Nick Bostrom, Transhumanism

promotes an interdisciplinary approach to understanding and evaluating the opportunities for enhancing the human condition and the human organism opened up by the advancement of technology.

(...)

Transhumanists view human nature as a work-in-progress, a half-baked beginning that we can learn to remold in desirable ways. Current humanity need not be the endpoint of evolution. Transhumanists hope that by responsible use of science, technology, and other rational means we shall eventually manage to become posthuman, beings with vastly greater capacities than present human beings have.<sup>3</sup>

Transhumanists (transitional humanists) see themselves as a logical evolution from humanists and as the logical stage prior to posthumans. They defend technoscience as the obvious vehicle to reach the posthuman condition, though they are not necessarily optimistic about the results of the indiscriminate use of technoscience. They even admit that a certain genetic divide may develop. Much like the Amish communities reject certain technological advances, some transhumanists even talk about a *Humanish* community which will reject body enhancement technology, which in turn may produce a society

where genetically modified individuals live along with the *Humanish*. This situation is precisely the leitmotiv in *Gattaca*. Vincent's parents are presented as a weird couple who inexplicably decide to engender a child in the traditional way. The use of irony to describe their decision is revealing, as when Vincent (as narrator) says: "I was conceived in the Riviera, not the French Riviera. The Detroit variety" (meaning his father's Buick Riviera); or when recalling his father's attempt to sell the car he says: "My father got a good price. After all, the only accident he'd ever had in that car was me." But irony becomes cynicism when Vincent (again as narrator) explains that discrimination is not a matter of skin colour or social class any more because now "there is a science for that."

That sort of remark suggests that Vincent – much like his parents – harbours serious doubts about the goodness of the new situation. Science is indirectly considered guilty of the process of de-humanization which has led to the genetic divide. However, Vincent does not choose to destroy the system. His attitude is much less heroic. One might even say that it is far more selfish: he basically wants to prove to himself that he is *valid* enough to do whatever a *valid* individual does. It might be argued that in so doing, and considering the help he obtains from other people, the system is doomed and that it will eventually implode. Unfortunately, his trip to Titan is a rather limited attempt to escape a social reality he does not like. The film ends with some apparently optimistic remarks:

We came from the stars so they say, now it's time to go back. If I was conceived today, I would not get beyond eight cells, and yet here I am. In a way they were right, I don't have the heart for this world. The question is, why am I having so much trouble dying?

It is doubtful that a group of well-trained *Gattacans* will admit an alien element in their structure once they find out about the fraud. But even more disheartening is the notion that the doctors may actually be right and his life may well terminate before he arrives in Titan. Therefore, if his body utopia comes to an end and, likewise, the Gattaca pseudo-utopia, what are we left with? Possibly nothing more – and nothing less – than the human will which took him that far. Not a bad prospect, after all.

## Notes

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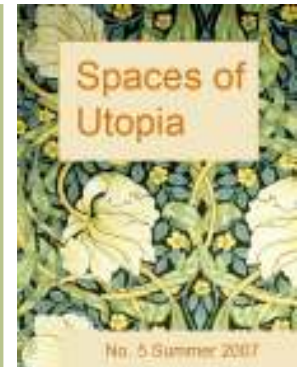
<sup>1</sup> <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1627591,00.html> (accessed on June 11, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> *Gattaca*, by Andrew Niccol. Script. [www.script-o-rama.com](http://www.script-o-rama.com) (accessed on July 3, 2007). All references from the film are based on this website.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.transhumanism.org/index.php/WTA/more/transhumanist-values> (accessed on July 8, 2007).

## Utopia and the Middle Ages in Popular Culture: A Reading of Ridley Scott's *Kingdom of Heaven*

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### 1. Introduction: *Kingdom of Heaven* as a large-scale multicultural production

Academic studies of utopia have tried to define their object of study in terms of either form or function, as Ruth Levitas suggests in the introductory chapter of *The Concept of Utopia*. When definition in terms of form is attempted, it governs, among other things, the subject-matter of the field, which tends to fall into two large categories: communal societies and utopian literature. While some academics have restricted their interest only to literary texts, cultural critics of other fields have nevertheless identified utopian elements within their areas of study. In our case, the film *Kingdom of Heaven*, directed by Ridley Scott and released by Twentieth-Century Fox in 2005, has its source in an original screenplay by the American author William Monahan. So, while we are discussing a cinematic narrative, as an object of study it is not far divorced from the literary texts academics of a more restrictive inclination have chosen to study until now.

Functional studies of a utopian text, on the other hand, tend to focus on the conscious or unconscious aims of the text, in terms of its author's intentions, and on the social, historical and political effect of the text as a means of criticising the current state of affairs or of proposing a blueprint for alternative social structures. If considered from a functional point of view, as a filmic narrative, *Kingdom of Heaven* offers the viewer images of collective utopian dreams which fail to be realized, perhaps because they are unrealisable. Set at the time of Saladin's siege of Jerusalem and the lead-up up to the Third Crusade, the film does not aim to attempt a deep historical analysis, or indeed to analyse history as a utopian entity, but rather uses historical elements as utopian and dystopian referents. The documentary on the preproduction process in the Director's Cut version of the film makes clear that the producers were at all times aware that these elements would be seen to allude directly to contemporary world events in the mind of the cinema-goer.<sup>1</sup> As such, *Kingdom of Heaven* is one of those utopian narratives which use the past to confer a certain apparent legitimacy on its vision, and to reinforce the idea that if an attempt to realize the vision had actually happened in the past, it could happen again in the future. Its interest in the past is therefore primarily as a source of historical justification rather than as historical criticism.

Cultural products for mass consumption such as books, films and even video games,<sup>2</sup> which idealize or reinvent the medieval past as a fertile site where utopian visions prosper, are a well-established and lucrative phenomenon. Part of their success surely resides in the power that the Middle Ages exercise on the collective imagination, where the preferences, dreams and desires of large sectors

of the public can be expressed. It is precisely in this process of idealization or reinvention that utopian visions prosper. According to one of the film's producers, interviewed in the Director's Cut production documentary one of the attractions for the financial backers of Ridley Scott's *Kingdom of Heaven* project was precisely that it was hoped that it would tap into the mass audience's penchant for medieval fantasy and so make a large profit. As it was, the film broke even at the box-office, but did not achieve the kind of enormous success of other epics by the same director, such as *Gladiator*. Considering that Scott had grossed over 100 million dollars with three of his previous films, such as *Bladerunner* (1982), the aforementioned *Gladiator* (2000) and *Black Hawk Down* (2001), the film was seen as a relative economic failure. Suffice it to say, at the production stage, the film promised to enjoy the same success as the other large-scale productions for which Ridley Scott was famous, with which it shared the sense of epic adventure and a similar recreation of a very different world from that of its primarily Western audience.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, *Kingdom of Heaven* is a clear example of Ridley Scott's interest in spiritual and religious questions, and in how the individual struggles to be true to their highest ideals when faced with the temptations of power. This theme is also pursued in a positive sense in *Gladiator*, and in a more negative sense in *Bladerunner*. It also fits into a long line of popular films which have combined religion and epic in historical settings, finding the Middle Ages to be particularly fertile for this purpose.

*Kingdom of Heaven* tells the story of a French blacksmith, Balian, who leaves his home after his wife's suicide and after killing the local priest, to join his father, Godfrey, Baron of Ebelin, on the journey to the Holy Land. While at Messina, Godfrey dies of his wounds, but not before initiating Balian into the knighthood and making him the new Lord of Ebelin. Balian survives shipwreck and a duel to the death in the desert on his way to Jerusalem where he is eventually recognized and meets the king, Baldwin IV, and his adviser, Tiberias. Together with the Muslim leader, Saladin, they ensure that Jerusalem enjoys a period of relative peace, despite the unprincipled behaviour of certain Christians, such as the Templars, led by Baldwin's brother-in-law, Guy of Lusignan, and the spectacularly unscrupulous Reynald of Châtillon. Balian has no interest in political machinations and retires to his castle at Ebelin. There, together with his knights and the people, he sinks new wells and works the land into a fertile property, and he receives the amorous attention of Baldwin's sister, the Princess Sybilla.

After the Templars' attack on a camel train provokes Saladin's revenge on Reynald's castle at Kerak, Balian and a handful of knights face impossible odds by charging the Muslim army headlong, in order to win time for the defenceless people to retreat within the castle walls. Balian, whose reputation precedes him, is captured by the Muslims but released. When Baldwin, dying of leprosy, offers Balian the crown and Sybilla's hand, he refuses, as this would require complicity in the murder of Guy of Lusignan, a crime in which Balian wishes to have no part. So the crown passes to Guy, who declares war on the Muslims and foolishly rides out with the Crusader army to a spectacular defeat at the Battle of Hattin. Balian, left in

charge of the defence of Jerusalem, manages to lead the people for six days in resisting the Muslim assault. Then, with resources diminishing and defeat inevitable, Balian negotiates to surrender the city in return for a free passage to the coast for all the Christian occupiers. Given the honour of both Balian and Saladin, the truce holds, and Balian accompanies the people out of the city. The final scene shows Balian back at his forge in France; and when King Richard the Lionheart rides through, searching for Balian, the heroic defender of Jerusalem, to accompany him on what will be the Third Crusade, Balian rejects the offer by refusing to identify himself as such, and insisting that he is merely the blacksmith.

The Crusades setting, and more specifically, the fact that the film culminates with the fall of Jerusalem to the Muslims and ends with the hero's decision not to join the new Crusade, the critical treatment of some Crusader factions in the film, and the respectful treatment of the figure of Saladin himself are indicative of the director's and screenwriter's desire to be fair to both the Christian and Islamic sides in their account of events. These factors presumably reflect the producers' interest in reaching a Muslim cinema audience as well as the traditional Western European one. In line with this policy was the casting of the Muslim characters, using Muslim actors, and especially the Syrian actor Massoud Ghassan as Saladin. This avoided the politically less sensitive solution of using Western actors in grease paint imitating foreign accents, and reinforced the impression of the film's respect for Islam, which was identified as a key value from the start, according to the production documentary in the Director's Cut.<sup>4</sup>

As it alludes to the beginning of the end of the presence of Crusading Christians in the Levant, the choice of the siege of Jerusalem as a setting and Saladin as one of the main characters would obviously have a strong appeal to the film's potential Islamic audience.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the warm reception given the film by a Beirut audience described by Middle East correspondent Robert Fisk, in his article for *The Independent*, suggests that the film managed to engage its projected Middle Eastern audience positively and successfully (Fisk 2005).

Arguably, the choice of setting and the ideological stance it takes in relation to the plot point to a marketing strategy which aims beyond traditional Western consumer markets at a product designed to be acceptable for the global consumption of entertainment. On the other hand, the positive image of the Muslims in the film is an important element in the plot, for, although Balian, a Christian, is the main defender of the utopian message, the way Saladin is represented paradoxically reinforces this message. At the end of the film, as Saladin enters Jerusalem, he picks up an ornamental cross that has fallen on the floor, and sets it upright again on the altar. If one takes the film's utopian message to be in favour of moral rectitude, defending the weak and against selfish material greed and acts of cruelty, then Saladin's gesture embodies a position of moral strength from which there can be respect for all faiths, and, specifically, a mutual respect between Muslim and Christian cultures.

There is, of course, an alternative reading which is more likely to satisfy the more fundamentalist Christians who expressed their concern during the production process in a series of media interventions that claimed Scott's film would play into

the hands of the “terrorists” by not defending a Christian position against the infidel. Such concerns may have been behind the Spanish Catholic Church’s refusal to allow filming in the Mezquita in Cordoba, which is now a cathedral, forcing the production crew to use the secular Alcázar building in Sevilla for the Jerusalem palace scenes.<sup>6</sup> Saladin’s final gesture could be seen symbolically as an unwitting unbeliever’s compliance with the inevitable final triumph of Christianity. Such a reading is opposed by the liberal position in favour of religious tolerance espoused by the protagonist and the film as a whole, and clearly was not the way Fisk’s Lebanese audience understood Saladin’s gesture, when they erupted into cheers and applause, as he describes.

The twentieth century has seen the development of dystopian artistic visions as well as the appropriation by dominant power of utopian forms related to the ideal state of happiness. According to Siân Adiseshiah, one of Western capitalism’s utopias has been closely related to commodities and well-being in consumer society.

In relation to the Western commodification of utopian aspiration, Tom Moylan describes utopia as “reduced to the consumption of pleasurable weekends, Christmas dreams, and goods purchased weekly in the pleasure-dome shopping malls of suburbia” (Moylan 1986: 8). Consumption becomes the panacea of unfulfilled desires, whilst yearning in excess of, or outside of, these consumer-focused requirements is stifled and recoded as socially abnormal (Adiseshiah 2005: 184).

Nevertheless, in recent years, there have been more frequent revindications of a spiritual or religious utopia, especially and notoriously in countries where Islam is the dominant faith. However, in the Western world, similar protests have not been absent. Recent neoconservative political aspirations in the U.S.A. have been voiced in Christian terms, and sometimes even used references to the Apocalypse. More extreme forms of expression have combined, for example, American libertarian principles with Christian fundamentalism, as in the case of the Branch Davidians in the 1993 Waco, Texas episode. These new styles of revindication have begun to replace the utopian dreams of a consumer society, and begin to represent a political force to be reckoned with.

At the start of the twenty-first century ideal or utopian images have reappeared in times of conflict, defined within the context of the so-called “clash of civilizations”, the confrontation between religions, and wars and other engagements which aspire to be understood as “just” or even “holy”. While, in contrast, universal peace is seen as a utopian reality and interreligious dialogue as one of the means to achieve it.

All these elements are alluded to or dealt with in Ridley Scott’s film, which offers a utopian understanding of mankind’s destiny. Indeed, the motif which returns over and over again is that of the creation of a “kingdom of conscience” which would lead to lasting peace. Beside this utopian vision which promises to overcome all the difficulties and weaknesses which impoverish societies, the film offers many dystopian elements. These serve as contrast, and reinforce the utopian message, although they also reflect the polarization between dystopian

and utopian visions present in much contemporary discourse and thinking, even, and perhaps especially, when it is religious in its orientation.

The film seems to argue that our world, the world we live in, must be overcome by another reality which is transcendent in character. It is no coincidence that this transcendent reality in the film, both curiously and significantly, is identified with Jerusalem, a city which has of course been the centre of one of the longest disputes in history, articulated in religious terms as Muslim vs Christian, and nowadays as Muslim vs Jew (with their Christian allies behind them) and in political terms as Palestine vs Israel. It is well known that the second *intifada* broke out after a provocative visit by Ariel Sharon, then leader of Israel's opposition, to the esplanade of the mosque at Jerusalem in September 2000. Further contemporary symbolism for the film's historical background is found in the fact that some radical Islamic voices readily refer to the Judaeo-Christian presence in the region as the "Crusaders". The film's plot takes us back to the past to witness once again the struggle for the possession of the city, and despite the fact that it ends with the city falling to the Muslims, peace still does not reign, as the final sentence of the closing titles announces. The implication is, therefore, that such a struggle, then as now, cannot propitiate a lasting peace.

## **2. The Middle Ages as a utopian referent in popular culture**

The Middle Ages emerged as a concept in opposition to Renaissance humanism's aspiration to be a new period of history. In its genesis, it was seen as an alternative, negative element in relation to everything that defined the *Nova Aetas*.

This notion of alterity has persisted among writers in general, and historians in particular, who have presented the period in a positive or negative light. It has depended on ideologies or clichés more related to the writers' contemporary reality than to the past historical moment *per se*. Often therefore, the image of the medieval which developed was partial, distorted and unreal, stereotyping it as "another time", distinct from ours, dark, and dominated by unreason and brute force. Such is the complexity of history, both reality in itself and mirror or contrast to the contemporary world.

It is precisely the apparent distance and greater differentiation in relation to modern times that have contributed to the Middle Ages becoming a frequent setting for contemporary utopias or collective dreams in the area of popular culture. This is, of course, no new phenomenon, given that since Romanticism novels and sagas revived interest in the medieval, an interest which has continued and grown in terms of social repercussion throughout the twentieth century, thanks largely to the rise of cinema.

According to K. J. Harty's critical study of the Middle Ages in film, more than six hundred films have been made that use a medieval setting. In light of this figure, Harty proposes that "medieval films" constitute a veritable genre of their own, similar to the more widely recognised category of Roman or *Peplum* films.<sup>7</sup> Harty's list witnesses in no uncertain terms to the powerful, almost obsessive, attraction that the medieval period exercises on the popular mind. However, this is not of course the historical period *per se*, so much as a fantasy based on it, and recognition of this distinction has led Umberto Eco to refer to this space in which

such fantasies are projected as the “New Middle Ages” (see Eco 1986: 62-3 and Nichols 2006).<sup>8</sup> In the nineteen-eighties Eco noted the growth in the success of literary and other works set in the period in question, offering a brilliant analysis of the uses and abuses to which mass cultural productions subject the medieval period, as pretext. Moreover, it would appear that since Eco’s article, if anything, the attractiveness of the Middle Ages in popular culture has increased even more, a fact which requires further reflection (see Nichols 2006: 143).

The interest or rather fascination with the Middle Ages was already evident in the work of the ideologues of nationalism, and even during the period of the birth of modern nations in the nineteenth century. This interest consolidated itself as a popular cultural form under the fascist regimes, at the time of the Second World War and its aftermath. Broadly speaking, the highly influential idealism of the nineteenth century and the first third or even half of the twentieth century rediscovered and reinvented the “Middle Ages”, with its kings and deeds, as part of the explanation of the origins of national identity, formulated as a political or even social or ethnic utopia.

This situation reached a paroxysm of idealization with dictatorial regimes such as German Nazism and Spanish Fascism, both of which found the medieval period particularly interesting, developing their own contemporary mythology based on the period.<sup>9</sup> Medieval films were an important element in Nazi propaganda. For example, Fritz Lang’s 1924 *Die Nibelungen* revealed the roots of the German, or Teutonic, nation (see Harty 1999: 5). In Franco’s Spain, the Middle Ages were, more than any other, a key period of history, especially due to the great event of

the period, the *Reconquista* or recovery of the lands occupied by the Muslims. The mythical figure of the knight reappeared as a powerful icon, as, for example, El Cid, just as did the idea of war as a context in which national purpose and valour receive their full expression, and images of a society's strong sense of national identity under a strong leader.<sup>10</sup>

In general terms, stereotypical visions of the medieval period, which first emerged during Romanticism or during the "Idealism" of the nineteenth century, were taken up and injected with new vitality by Fascist movements, but also in popular culture produced in the United Kingdom and the United States in the post-war period and well into the nineteen-fifties.

The image of the medieval knight, as hero and often saviour, is one iconic element that is particularly susceptible to moving fluently between settings in fantasy worlds and versions of medieval times. From the end of the nineteen-thirties and through the forties and fifties a number of novels and films popularised narratives which took their inspiration from medieval times. The moral depression following the Second World War, in particular, produced stories telling of heroes, saviours, dangerous missions and armed struggle in favour of justice, and which were set in a richly-signifying world. They were especially attractive to a public living amid the ruins of the post-war period.

A varied and heterogeneous range of cultural products developed these themes in medieval settings, or made extensive use of iconographic or idealized elements from the period. Comics for young people, and later animated films, and more literary works aimed at a young audience, such as J. R. R. Tolkien's *The*

*Hobbit* (1937) and the *Lord of the Rings* series (1954-55) are some examples.<sup>11</sup> This tendency is also evident in post-war Japan, in the rise in popularity of *manga* comics, which, if they did not share a European medieval setting, often tended to embody the values associated with a medieval knight in the figure of the samurai warrior, or other equivalents. To this period also belong the large-scale film productions, American and otherwise, which to a large extent have contributed to the contemporary popular understanding of what the Middle Ages were.<sup>12</sup> One of the aims of the plotlines of these narratives could be seen to aid the recovery of a sense of moral purpose, for young people who had been traumatized and disillusioned by the effects of the war, and national defeat, as in the case of the Japanese. Frequently, these narratives described attempts to reach a better world, or if not better, at least other, by describing spaces in which utopias could be created, such as Tolkien's "middle earth", between the higher world of the gods and the lower world of the demons and elves.

English nineteenth-century novels found their way into the cinema, as in the case of the medieval trilogy of films by Richard Thorpe, including *Ivanhoe* (1952), *The Knights of the Round Table* (1953), and *The Adventures of Quentin Durward* (1955), which recreated the eternal myth of the knight, and whose success with the US audience depended in part on the fact that the chivalric element is closely related to their own history, in the winning of the Wild West (Barrio 1995: 251-2). One of the prime examples here would be Robin Hood, a character mentioned in Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*, based on a figure from medieval ballads and other earlier narratives, whose first major cinematic success came with Errol Flynn's

performance in the 1938 film, *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, to be followed by many successive revivals up until recent versions of the 1990s.<sup>13</sup>

The story of Robin Hood in its film versions has generally been presented in accordance with nineteenth-century nationalist ideology, in its description of the struggle between the Saxon people and the Norman overlords, although the return of “good” King Richard at the end brings with it reconciliation of the feuding sides under the crown. Oppressors and oppressed, the abuse of government and social justice, Sherwood Forest as a place of freedom, in contrast with Nottingham Castle and the tyranny it symbolises, these are the familiar components of a utopian tale, although in the end all are subject to the image of the just king. The utopia glimpsed in the Robin Hood myth, which promises justice, brotherhood and common purpose, material needs resolved by living in harmony with nature, a more equitable redistribution of wealth, always acts finally to bolster hegemonic power. Given that under Richard I this power is shown to be more benevolent than under the unfortunate John, the plotline legitimates the reigning order, in the restoration of good kingship. In this way, it finally distances itself from the more radical utopian vision of Robin and his Merry Men, in their grass-roots rebellion against the crown.

*Kingdom of Heaven* makes use of some of these references. In the opening titles we read:

It is almost 100 years since Christian armies from Europe seized Jerusalem... Europe suffers in the grip of repression and poverty. Peasant and lord alike flee to the Holy Land in search of fortune or salvation... One Knight returns home in search of his son... France 1184.

The medieval world of France which Balian chooses to flee in search of “fortune and salvation” shares dystopian elements with the Robin Hood myth. Above Balian’s village there sits a castle which in the theatrical version of the film remains a gaunt, sullenly silent symbol of oppression from which no sign of authority or leadership emerge, except for Balian’s deceitful brother, the priest. In the Director’s Cut, Balian is imprisoned in the castle for refusing to manufacture arms for the lord, and the lord and his son speculate about claiming Balian’s rightful inheritance, should the latter die on the Crusade. The castle thus comes to symbolize a more actively repressive regime, incapable of any considerations other than its own material advancement.

In line with utopian elements in the Robin Hood story, Balian’s life takes a positive new turn when he joins the marginalized band of Crusaders as they camp in the woods and, after resisting arrest by the sheriff’s men, begins the journey to Jerusalem, becoming their leader along the way. At the defence of Jerusalem, Balian embodies the values expressed in the oath he swore when knighted by his father, Godfrey, and passes these on to all the defenders of Jerusalem: “Be without fear in the face of your enemies. Safeguard the helpless”.<sup>14</sup> And like Robin Hood, the story ends with a cameo appearance of the Lionheart, when King Richard rides through Balian’s village to invite him, unsuccessfully, to join him on the next Crusade. Furthermore, in the case of Balian, he rejects the King’s attempt to identify him with the title “Defender of Jerusalem”, preferring the more lowly description of “blacksmith”, while near the end of Chapter XL of Scott’s novel Robin

Hood prefers the Lionheart to recognize him as the “King of Outlaws, and Prince of good fellows”, and not by his noble title, as Robin of Locksley.

Balian, Robin Hood and other medieval heroes share values such as the will to save others, to “safeguard the helpless”, to always speak the truth, and a becoming modesty as an element of social resistance which relates them all to the figure of Jesus Christ. The parallel with Christ is appropriate in the sense that all these heroes embody a revolution/submission duality which is also present in Christ’s life. The possible social utopia alluded to in the Gospels is deferred indefinitely into the future after the crucifixion. From that point, it is understood that Christ will save humanity not through the revolt of the Jews against the Romans but with the Second Coming, at the end of history.

Returning to our discussion of filmic representation of the Middle Ages as one of the principal mass cultural products, when the bleak post-war period gave way to the sixties and seventies, a sense of social well-being and, with it, renewed interest in utopias emerged. The image of Saint Francis as an icon of the new times is reflected in Liliana Cavani’s 1966 film on the life of the saint. Even the less politicised film biography by Franco Zeffirelli, *Brother Sun, Sister Moon* (1972), shows the egalitarian and anti-materialist line of thought that was so popular during the period, in accordance with a “hippy” or socialist ideology.

The subsequent disillusion of the eighties, with its reactionary backlash, favoured the renewal of the heroic paradigm of earlier decades, and the regeneration of a contemporary mythological version of the Middle Ages.<sup>15</sup> The spreading of postmodern sensibility also enhanced the attraction that the “new

Middle Ages” exercised on popular culture. Questions raised by postcolonial studies and multiculturalism, and revindicated by gender studies, and postmodern relativism all make their mark on the underlying premises of Ridley Scott’s film, even if they are not thoroughly integrated as fundamental elements of its utopian discourse.

Recent concerns about ecological questions can also be seen behind the use of the Middle Ages in popular culture to represent a conservationist utopia, representing a time where human activity was more respectful of and less harmful to the natural environment. Contemporary films which employ medieval and other earlier settings tend to recreate natural landscapes, where there is relatively little evidence of human intervention. In the case of *Kingdom of Heaven*, the sweeping barren “French” landscape, which was in fact filmed in the province of Huesca in Spain, the deep dark woods where Balian joins the Crusader band, the raging ocean which shipwrecks him and the vast desert where he is washed up, are all iconic natural settings of large dimensions which, through the isolation they afford, allow the hero’s actions and the values he embodies to take on a primal quality, and his survival in them to become epic.

As well as the ideological referents mentioned above, the Middle Ages offer film-makers a setting in which the traditional plot elements of a popular film, love, friendship, intrigue, passion and war, can take on epic dimensions, and *Kingdom of Heaven* not surprisingly contains all these elements. In addition to the use of large-scale landscapes, to confer special significance to the human stories told against them, as just discussed, medieval warfare also provides plenty of opportunity to

express the heroic. Given its stage of technical development, medieval combat still implied men and horses coming into close physical contact in hand-to-hand combat, unlike fighting with firearms. Hence it represents a mode of fighting where sheer physical strength and dexterity were keys to survival, attributes which are commonly taken as heroic in popular culture.

Ridley Scott's film lovingly recreates single combats and vast battle scenes, like the Battle of Kerak and the Siege of Jerusalem, to present war as both a tremendously crude and yet magnificent experience.<sup>16</sup> If warfare in the film is taken as the dystopian pole of utopian projects, brought about by selfish actions of leading Christian players, such as Guy de Lusignan and Reginald of Châtillon, paradoxically it is also the context in which Balian and Saladin show their mettle as leaders. It is in warfare that they reveal themselves as potentially capable of realizing their utopian aspirations, both as individual and collective, intercultural endeavours.

One frequent negative representation of the Middle Ages is of a period of brutality, involving images of cruelty and superstition (Airlie 2001: 165).<sup>17</sup> Representations of such epic violence are one of Ridley Scott's specialities, as *Gladiator* and *Black Hawk Down*, as well as *Kingdom of Heaven*, make clear. Within the context of medieval film settings, Mel Gibson's *Braveheart* (1995) is one further example. This is of course consonant with other American film productions of recent years, where the crudity of warfare is often foregrounded. In fact, since the Vietnam War and other more recent conflicts, critical awareness and popular rejection of war have contributed to increasingly hard and realistic portrayals of

conflict.<sup>18</sup> In addition to the crude and graphic violence of *Kingdom of Heaven*, however, it could be argued that, here, the warfare associated with Balian and Saladin is justified in the sense that, in Balian's case, his declared motivation is to protect the helpless, at the Battle of Kerak and during the Siege, while Saladin's attacks are all in response to unjustified provocation.

Part of the attraction that tales of knights in shining armour exercise on the contemporary imagination is the way in which they embody values traditionally associated with masculinity, such as valour, fighting spirit, physical and moral strength, values which are less readily expressed in contemporary settings. The knight also embodies a spiritual dimension in his individual actions and as a member of a class, in contrast to the materialism which is often seen to impregnate all actions in contemporary society. The lack of clear affirmation of these values in contemporary contexts partly explains why a Middle Ages setting for contemporary mythologizing is so attractive.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the crusading context allows for the expression of a fear of the "Other" as a way of affirming a social or religious collective identity (Tyerman 2005: 33). The power of these two ideas could also explain the current fascination with military orders, which have been in vogue since at least the nineteen-nineties and which lurk behind the eccentric plotline of *The Da Vinci Code*.<sup>20</sup> The figure of the Knight Templar brings together the aforementioned ingredients, as he is brave, fights for ideals and was "unjustly" persecuted, as well as offering the fictive potential of certain still unresolved, esoteric mysteries.

This then is the mirror in which certain parts of contemporary society seem to feel comfortable with their reflection, and it ranges broadly from those nostalgic

for the way things were to those who seek ideals for which to fight, even if they know them to be unrealistic, even if despite their progressive veneer they often prove reactionary in their essence. These aforementioned values reappear in recent successful films which might be categorized within the genre of fantasy, but which undoubtedly take certain defining features, either plastic or contextual, from the Middle Ages. We refer, of course, to recent offerings such as the *Lord of the Rings* series, *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *Eragon*. These films are all set in other worlds, and even in other temporal dimensions. In productions such as these, and others set more specifically in the Middle Ages, with *Kingdom of Heaven* being a particularly apt example, the cinematic vision derives its strength from its representation of an ideal world being elsewhere. Our film shows a fight for an ideal world, in which the peace promised in the Beatitudes as accompanying the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven is shown to be unattainable. The plot suggests that this ideal world is not far from being realized in the real world, but in the end it becomes an ever more distant possibility. It is the evil of some people, the artificers of war, who finally put it fairly beyond the grasp of the world of the film, where, as the final titles point out, it still remains today.

Running through these utopian visions there appears a vein of reactionary thought, in view of the fact that the solutions they provide to current crises are located far in the past, or distant from our own reality, just as occurred with certain medieval religious utopias. Reactionary thinking dominates utopia, as Levitas has warned us. The tendency to the negative occurs when, as her discussion of the concept of utopia indicates, “sometimes the positive connotations are missing

altogether and utopian becomes synonymous with unrealistic. Sometimes utopia is viewed even more negatively and equated with totalitarianism” (Levitas 1990: 156). But utopia also keeps hope alive, as happened with the transcendental vision of life during the Middle Ages.

In terms of the film’s image of the Knights Templars, the director has opted for the “alternative” image of the order, a negative view of its members and their function. At various points in the film, the Templars are shown to be involved in massacres and subject to punishment by hanging by their fellow Christians. Historically speaking, the renewal of hostilities between Muslims and Christians in the Holy Land around 1184 followed a massacre by the Templars under the orders of Reginald of Châtillon, who together with Guy de Lusignan, in the film, personify the misunderstanding, intolerance and eventual violence against the Muslims.<sup>21</sup> Other episodes in the film, such as the Templars under Reginald attacking a camel train as if it were a sporting activity, which provokes the first Muslim reaction, Saladin’s attack on Reginald’s castle at Kerak, and at one point an assassination attempt against Balian, on Reginald’s orders, have their basis in historical fact (Setton 1969: 581).

The film presents ideological issues such as the contradiction between Christ’s injunctions to love one’s neighbour and the official Church’s ability to sanction the death of the church’s enemies in the Crusades. This is embodied in the film for example when priests are shown exhorting the Crusaders in Messina with the words: “To kill an infidel is not murder; it is the path to Heaven”. Elsewhere in the film, a character notes that “the Templars die for what the Pope obliges them

to do ... but not for Christ or the King”, again showing the distance between the Church and the ideals of its main figure.

Other priests in the film confirm the official Church’s complete lack of scruple. When, for example, Jerusalem is about to fall, the Patriarch of Jerusalem is seen advising the people to “Convert to Islam... repent later!” as a means of saving their necks. This advice clearly confirms the superficiality of his religious convictions, which contrast so strongly with Balian’s. The distance between the Church and Christ’s message confirms the film’s identification of the Church with corrupt worldly political powers, and this hostility can be seen as the film’s ideological affinity with a long line of Protestant denunciation of the Roman Catholic Papacy. Hence, the film’s emphasis on the individual’s conscience as Balian’s touchstone, in his struggle to find faith and to act from his highest convictions, in contrast to the frivolous attitudes of the Church leaders.

While the ideological sympathy for Protestantism against Roman Catholicism seems clearly identifiable in the film, it must also be said that, despite the production’s “respect” for the Muslim characters in the film, certain comments suggest an intuitive implication that Christianity is superior to Islam, as we mentioned briefly before. Such a view comes across, for example, when Sybilla, Baldwin’s sister, differentiates between the two religions by explaining to Balian that “[Mohammed’s] god says submit, Jesus says choose”. The fact that the film was made with mostly US finance may go a long way to explaining the affinities pointed out above, for Protestant quietism *versus* Roman Catholic institutionalism and Christianity *versus* Islam.

Returning to the Templars, historically speaking, Reginald of Châtillon was the person who instigated the breaking of the peace conditions negotiated by the King of Jerusalem with Saladin (Setton 1969: 581). At that time, Gerard of Ridefort was the Master of the Temple and historians have characterised him as an unscrupulous adventurer who advised Guy of Lusignan to attack Saladin at the Horns of Hattin, thus leaving Jerusalem undefended except for what resistance Balian was able to summon up, as the film shows.<sup>22</sup> Other episodes in history darken Gerard's image, as he was famous for abandoning his men to their deaths.<sup>23</sup>

Such references show how Monahan's script is based on historical elements, such as the role of the Templars in the loss of Jerusalem, and the actual existence of Balian of Ibelin who was in charge of the defence of Jerusalem and negotiated the terms of its surrender, as well as other key figures. The film script opts for enhancing the Templars' negative image, as well as that of Guy of Lusignan. However, it is worth pointing out that these negative images are nothing new, but began to emerge in accounts of the period by authors writing shortly after the events had occurred.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, despite the effect of contemporary twenty-first century events on the way in which the past is reworked or even in some cases reinvented, it is interesting how modern scripts share certain details with accounts from the actual period. As we will show now, *Kingdom of Heaven* can be seen to reflect much medieval thinking on spiritual or moral utopia.

### 3. Utopian and dystopian elements in *Kingdom of Heaven*

The title of the film reveals the utopian orientation of its narrative, given the personal development of its main character and more generally of the Christians' defence of the city of Jerusalem. In it, we see that Baldwin IV identifies himself closely with the city, as when he orders Reginald to kiss his leprous hand with the words: "On your knees... lower. I am... Jerusalem. And you, Reginald, will give me the kiss of peace". Jerusalem, therefore, comes to symbolize the *locus* of Baldwin's will to work for détente between Christians and Muslims, and as such an earthly attempt to embody the peace and love that the realization of the Kingdom of Heaven would bring, according to Jesus' promises throughout the Gospels.<sup>25</sup>

After the King's death, Balian's defence of the city can be seen as a defence of Baldwin's highest values. However, with the fall of the city to Saladin, and Balian's return to France and final refusal to take up arms again to regain Jerusalem at the end of the film, it reinforces Balian's realization that, above all, the Jerusalem to which he aspired as the expression of Christ's Kingdom of Heaven was ultimately a state of mind rather than a material place. As Balian says to the dying Baldwin, when the latter is tempted to abandon his high ideals for some nasty politicking, "It is a kingdom of conscience, or nothing". Balian also makes clear that if Jerusalem can be understood as a utopian kingdom of conscience, then this understanding will set one free from being forced to take part in a

dialectical view of history. Exhorting the people of Jerusalem to its defence, he argues:

It has fallen to us, to defend Jerusalem, and we have made our preparations as well as they can be made. None of us took this city from Muslims. No Muslim of the great army now coming against us was born when this city was lost. We fight over an offence we did not give, against those who were not alive to be offended. What is Jerusalem? Your holy palaces lie over the Jewish temple that the Romans pulled down. The Muslim places of worship lie over yours. Which is more holy? *[pause]* The Wall? The Mosque? The Sepulchre? Who has claim? No one has claim. *[pause]* All have claim.

By understanding the historical processes which Jerusalem symbolizes and successive attempts to ascribe a definitive meaning to it, Balian effectively adopts a position outside history, a utopian position, which allows him to see the paradoxical truth, stated at the end of his speech, "No-one has claim... All have claim". Claims which can be both negated and universalised are equally meaningless and meaningful, and certainly not worth fighting about. In addition, this realization also appeals strongly to that part of the film's audience which does not identify with either side of the current Middle East conflict but yearns for a peace which would allow Jerusalem to be shared as a sacred symbolic site between Islam, Judaism and Christianity. Balian and Saladin are the two characters in the film who best understand the concept of the Kingdom of Heaven/Kingdom of Conscience as one of spiritual values, symbolized by Jerusalem. With this understanding, the film's critique of those who attach any symbolic value to the material city is reinforced. These main characters also understand how to do away with the fanaticism that this materialist/physical interpretation induces, as the following exchange makes clear:

Saladin: Will you yield the city?

Balian of Ibelin: Before I lose it, I will burn it to the ground. Your holy places – ours. Every last thing in Jerusalem that drives men mad.

Saladin: I wonder if it would not be better if you did.

Balian and Saladin speak the same language, as indicated by the reciprocity at the start of this parley:

Saladin: As-Salaam-Alaikum.

Balian of Ibelin: And peace be with you.

And they both have the same assessment of the ultimate value of the city over which they are fighting.

Balian of Ibelin: What is Jerusalem worth?

Saladin: Nothing.

*[walks away]*

Saladin: Everything!

From the point of view of the Kingdom of Conscience, the physical city is of negligible value; from the point of view of people living in a world of material priority, it is everything. Paradoxically, though they both know the ultimate value of material Jerusalem as a utopian symbol, as agents within the dialectic process of history they still find themselves fighting for it, and recognizing its all-importance to “the world”.

Within the film, as well as the King, Saladin and Balian, other characters express their understanding of the Kingdom of Heaven, and Jerusalem as its symbol. Near the start of the film, Godfrey of Ibelin explains to his son, and the audience, the promise of the Holy Land (“In the Holy Land, a new world awaits you...”) and the possibilities it opens up for an adventurous spirit: “You are not what you were born, but what you have it in yourself to be”. He it is who first

suggests the link between Baldwin's Jerusalem and a utopian vision, describing it as "A better world than has ever been seen. A kingdom of conscience. A kingdom of heaven". With Godfrey's words, conscience makes its first appearance as the guiding principle of right conduct, and peace as the aim of the Kingdom of Heaven.

The fall of Jerusalem, and Balian's negating King Richard's offer to the Crusade, suggests that the world was not ready for a kingdom of conscience. Nevertheless, the film does present the Crusade as providing the chance to find material fortune in a land of opportunity, and thus employs a rhetoric frequently used to describe the United States itself, as figured for generations of immigrants. The journey to Jerusalem is also a journey into one's spiritual interior, for those few who are receptive to such spiritual realities. Balian's journey is clearly one of this second order, being a voyage of initiation of a spiritual and transcendental kind, which allows him to emerge from a crisis of faith and to redeem his sins – which included killing his brother, the priest,<sup>26</sup> principally for robbing his dead wife of her necklace and cross – in order to fight for the kingdom of conscience.

Even one as spiritually blind as Reginald of Châtillon is capable of repeating the rhetoric, if not grasping the concept, when he describes in a mocking tone Baldwin's kingdom as one which "will be a place where all will be equal". This egalitarian vision, which was part of some Christian thinking, does not figure in St. Augustine's description of the City of God, which is clearly one of the historical and theological referents for the concept of the kingdom of conscience presented in this film. Other ideals not expressly linked to the Christian concept of the Kingdom of Heaven appear as unobtainable objectives in the film. For example, the better

world to which both Baldwin IV and Saladin aspire is one where peace and equality are available to everyone. This aspiration is based on contemporary intercultural or interreligious thinking, and is emphasised in the final affirmation of the film. As the last title card states:

The King, Richard the Lionheart, went on to the Holy Land and crusaded for three years. His struggle to regain Jerusalem ended in an uneasy truce with Saladin. Nearly a thousand years later, peace in the Kingdom of Heaven remains elusive.

In another dialogue, the dying king, aware that Guy of Lusignan represents a threat to the peace that he and Saladin have maintained, asks Balian to kill Guy and marry his sister. Balian, the perfect knight, refuses of course, and his response (quoted earlier) – “It is a kingdom of conscience, or nothing” – implies that the Jerusalem to which Baldwin and he aspire can only be attained through right action. Corruption is shown to be rife among the Crusaders on various occasions and is by implication connected with the abandonment of the struggle for the high ideals of the real Kingdom of Heaven to which Baldwin embodies. This abandonment leads to disillusion among the king’s loyal followers. For example, Tiberias (Jeremy Irons) describes this gradual replacement of high aspiration by lower needs when he says: “I have given Jerusalem my whole life. First, I thought we were fighting for God. Then I realized we were fighting for wealth and land. I was ashamed”.

Jerusalem, the film suggests, is nevertheless the place where a knight can best manifest his chivalric qualities, as a warrior fighting for an ideal. For example, when Balian is initiated into the knighthood by his father, the oath he swears is as follows, in Godfrey of Ebelin’s words:

Be without fear in the face of your enemies. Be brave and upright that God may love thee. Speak the truth always, even if it leads to your death. Safeguard the helpless and do no wrong. That is your oath.

Balian's spiritual pilgrimage in the Holy Land, as he learns to honour his chivalric oath at any cost and survives a series of tests and temptations, brings him ultimately to be the defender of Jerusalem, and of Baldwin's utopian vision of the Kingdom of Heaven. It is part of Balian's exceptional spiritual maturity that he sees more clearly than anyone, except perhaps Saladin, exactly what it is he is defending at Jerusalem. As he explains to the Christians there, "We defend this city, not to protect these stones, but the people living within these walls". Not only is he therefore honouring the oath he swore as a knight, he is arguably defending the essence of Baldwin's vision, protecting human life and exemplifying brotherly love.

Arguably the film suggests that if, during Baldwin's life, Jerusalem held out a hope for a utopian space in which the main monotheistic religions could live in harmony, then it could do so again in the contemporary world. However, in Balian's description of the aim of the defence, one could argue that the film alludes to the Jewish ethnic vision which refers particularly to its holy city as closely identified with its Jewish inhabitants.<sup>27</sup>

All these references to the holy city correspond to one of the main political and social theories of the Middle Ages, as proposed by Saint Augustine of Hippo in his *De Civitate Dei* (*The City of God*, 413-427). In accordance with the theories which developed from this book, and especially as a result of the changes effected in the period of the Crusades, Christian understanding of the celestial Jerusalem,

as described in the Revelation of Saint John, was to be identified with the city of Jerusalem, as a prelude to or potential image of the city of God.<sup>28</sup>

Augustine's well-known vision is based on the idea of the existence of two cities in the world, as set out in *De catechizandis rudibus*, 400:

Two cities, the one of sinners, the other of the saints, will last from the creation of man to the end of time. Now they are mixed physically but separate in their will, and on the day of judgement their bodies will finally separate. All men who love power and the spirit of dominion (...) are united in the same city (...) And, at the same time, all men and spirits who humbly seek the glory of God and not their own (...) belong to one city.<sup>29</sup>

As Augustine of Hippo says, "I have divided mankind into two large groups. One of them which lives according to man and the other which lives according to God".<sup>30</sup> The two cities were not cities *per se* but rather societies, and the ability to discriminate between them would depend on the conscience and will of each individual.<sup>31</sup> However, it is divine predestination which still determines the quality of the member of the city of God. In our film the idea of the city of God is formulated as the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth, which people can reach guided by conscience. Balian would be a perfect example of such a member of this city, owing to his impeccable conscience and exceptional will. Moreover, the element of predestination manifests through the fact that he is recognized continually through the film as an exceptional person, destined to lead this movement guided by conscience.

Augustine's theories take up propositions which were already present in the Gospels, when Christ makes the distinction between a worldly kingdom – often understood as recognized as worthy of respect, in his command to "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's" – and his idea of the Kingdom of Heaven – "My kingdom

is not of this world". For Augustine, however, the kingdom referred to in the Gospels is developed as an earthly reality, which, though utopian for the time being, may be achieved within history.

As well as being the source of a fundamental political theory during the Middle Ages, above all because of the concept of the divine origin of power, Augustine's *City of God* was read in other ways. If previously the city of God was understood to be scattered through the world, at the time of the Crusades the idea of Augustine's city became more specifically identified with the celestial Jerusalem. Therefore, the first Crusade, the one which captured Jerusalem and the Holy Sepulchre, was even considered apocalyptic in some sense. For all these reasons, this Crusade has been taken as *the* model Crusade, even arguably for some scholars the only one which meets the basic criteria for consideration as such (Flory 2003: 343, 349).<sup>32</sup>

The Crusade movement was always understood to provide spiritual benefits to its participants and Scott's film reflects this search for salvation through violence in the name of the Church. Moreover, *Kingdom of Heaven* suggests that the loss of Jerusalem is a result of another holy war, a *Jihad*, with its corresponding spiritual benefits, aimed at attaining its holy city of *Al-Quds*.<sup>33</sup> In the end, the destruction of Baldwin's multiethnic city is the loss of utopia, both as the end of peace and the end of the kingdom of conscience. Perhaps, in Scott's appreciation, interreligious understanding is still a first step to the achieving of both goals, even though, as indicated above, in the quote from the final title card Scott considers that peace

and the kingdom of conscience which makes the endurance of peace a possibility are still, one thousand years after his story, as elusive as ever.

Ridley Scott's film, *Kingdom of Heaven*, is an excellent witness to the range of utopian referents which have been applied to or recognized in the medieval past in popular culture. Spiritual utopia must bring peace to mankind, while at the same time renewing the conscience of individual people. The desires of masses of people in contemporary society find expression and reflection in referents of medieval origin, such as religious wars, the knight as saviour or redeemer, celestial Jerusalem, the journey to the Crusade as almost a rite of initiation. These visions often range in character from dystopian to utopian on the grand scale, a range which the film successfully manages to allude to in its account of the fortunes of Jerusalem. The protagonist's apparent refusal to pursue any collective utopian endeavour at the end of the film suggests, as in many other manifestations of utopia in popular culture, that it is ultimately unattainable. In which case, the film can be understood to imply that effective utopian movement only ever manifests in a transitory fashion. Therefore the idea of utopia basically seems to serve to maintain the status quo, by containing the populace's present aspirations under the illusion that the future is full of promise.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The Director's Cut version of *Kingdom of Heaven* was released in a four-disc box set in May 2006, and contains a version of the film which is 30 minutes longer, as well as documentary material about the production process on two further DVDs.

<sup>2</sup> For example, at Box Office Mojo's website listing the genre "Medieval Times", it names 29 US and UK film releases since 1981, which together have grossed almost a thousand million dollars; among the plethora of computer games set in the Middle Ages are Sega's *Medieval: Total War Gold Edition* (2006), Monolith's *Get Medieval* (1998), Zakren's *Medieval Britain: Volume One of the Middle Ages Trilogy* (2006), *Knights of Honour* by Black Sea Studios (2005), Sierra's *Lords of the Realm III* (2004), Firefly's *Stronghold Crusader* (2002). To our knowledge no-one has yet attempted to calculate the current total of video game productions with a medieval setting, so it is difficult to estimate the true extent of the phenomenon. However, the fact that "medieval" is a generic indicator in games' catalogues suggests its current popularity.

<sup>3</sup> Settings for the other Scott films mentioned being respectively: Los Angeles in the year 2019, now only twelve years in the future, Imperial Rome in the second half of the second century CE, and civil war-torn Mogadishu in 1993.

<sup>4</sup> Englishman Laurence Olivier as the Mahdi in *Khartoum* (1966) and Welshman Huw Griffiths as the Arab horse trainer in *Ben Hur* (1959) are, in our opinion, but two embarrassing examples of the "greasepaint" solution to casting Arabs in epic war films.

<sup>5</sup> C. Tyerman, an expert on the crusades, has highlighted the attraction the crusades exercise on popular culture. For example, he notes how President Assad of Syria, the father of the current president, raised a sculpture of Saladin in Damascus, representing the defeat of the Christians, as "part of his own imperialist game". This is a testament to the mythical status the figure of Saladin enjoys in the Muslim world, as saviour and hero, especially in the Middle East area. Even in Western popular culture, as for example the Ladybird books' history series, Saladin's sophistication is contrasted with Richard the Lionheart's brute strength (Tyerman 2005: 16-19).

<sup>6</sup> *The New York Times* reported on the fears of religious activists and ideologues about Hollywood's dealing with a theme which might provide arguments for justifying contemporary conflicts with historical antecedents, according to Nichols 2006: 144.

<sup>7</sup> K. J. Harty provides a thorough repertoire of films which use a medieval setting (Harty 1999: 1-9). For closer studies of the cinematic use of medieval history see Barrio 2005 and Airlie 2001.

<sup>8</sup> The transformation of the past is so marked in the filmic treatment of the past that G. Duby claimed that "film did not yet possess a form or language capable of transmitting historians' ideas of past society" when he wished to make a film of the Battle of Bouvines (*apud* Airlie 2001: 163).

<sup>9</sup> As an indication of the attraction of the medieval period for politicians, consider Hitler's particular interest in Parsifal and the search for the Holy Grail, and even the anecdote that he was painted dressed as a medieval knight (Fontana 1998: 219).

<sup>10</sup> The director of the CSIC, the principal Spanish centre for historical research, affirmed that historians should not concern themselves with recent history, according to Fontana (1998: 219; 2002: 88-89) and Manzano (2000: 48-56). And of course, the term "crusade" was used by Franco's followers to describe the war subsequent to his military uprising.

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<sup>11</sup> In Spain the comics *El Guerrero del Antifaz* (1944) by M. Gago and *El Capitán Trueno* (1956) are two well-known examples dealing with medieval adventures and warfare, following the style of Hal Foster's *Prince Valiant* published from 1940 onwards, although the Spanish comics were freer in their treatment of the historical content, according to Jorge Sobrado at <http://muchocomic.com/guerreredelantifaz.html>. As the author indicates, these comics were escapist stories for young readers.

<sup>12</sup> Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky* (1938), MGM's *Ivanhoe* with Robert Taylor (1951) and an eponymous late 50s TV series starring Roger Moore, *El Cid* with Charlton Heston (1961) are among many examples.

<sup>13</sup> US film productions on the theme of Robin Hood include *The Bandit of Sherwood Forest* (1946), *The Prince of Thieves* (1948) and *The Rogues of Sherwood Forest* (1950) among those mentioned in K. Harty and J. A. Barrio, and it was not until the 1990s that Hollywood returned to the theme. In the meantime, however, other countries had continued to produce series for television based on the subject (Harty 1999: 225-241; Barrio 2005: 261-2).

<sup>14</sup> In the film, the oath continues: "Never lie, even if it leads to your death". At this point, the comparison between Balian and Robin Hood breaks down, because unlike Ridley Scott's noble hero, Robin is also in the long folklore line of tricksters, who use disguise and cunning to further their aims.

<sup>15</sup> Nichols mentions among others *The Rule of Four*, the screen adaptations of *Lord of the Rings*, Clive Donner's *Stealing Heaven*, Kevin Reynold's *Robin Hood*, and Richard Donner's *Ladyhawke* (Nichols 2006: 143).

<sup>16</sup> It is well-accepted among medieval war historians that medieval warfare was chiefly characterized by skirmishes, sieges and other activities designed to wear down the enemy's resistance, rather than large-scale battles. However, within the tradition of twelfth-century historiography, the loss of Jerusalem and the preceding battles of Kerak and Hattin were given a lot of emphasis, because of their potential symbolic character.

<sup>17</sup> A key film in the public's perception of this epoch is Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* (1950), as well as other European films of the nineties.

<sup>18</sup> Hanson defends Western supremacy in the military field, in a book of questionable quality (2004: 38). He justifies it because war as waged by the West is lethal precisely because it is amoral and rarely constrained by considerations of ritual, religion, ethics or tradition. Its guiding principle is military considerations alone. This argument can be reversed, as in the case of suicide attacks, which justify their mission on religious grounds, for example. All things considered, it is an interesting point as it reflects the duality that has always existed in how warfare is understood, as the film shows.

<sup>19</sup> The redefinition of chivalry as a model of contemporary behaviour goes back to the nineteenth century with the recuperation of Malory as part of the English Gothic Revival (Harty 1999: 4). Generally speaking, the knight symbolizes the dominion of the natural, not only through his physical strength but also in his skill and determination in the mastery of his horse. As he strives for the benefit of social power and control, he gives an image of power in plenitude. The recent film, *Eragon*, offers a suggestive and revealing variant on the above theme, as it is men who ride dragons in order to protect and serve their fellows.

<sup>20</sup> Directed by Ron Howard for Columbia Productions in 2006.

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<sup>21</sup> Contemporary writers of the time were very critical of Guy of Lusignan, as the person accused of losing Jerusalem, as they were of his follower Reginald of Châtillon and other ambitious and unscrupulous individuals. However, the modern version of events suggests that their behaviour was not exceptional in any sense, and that the difficulties were largely due to the situation of virtual civil war which afflicted the kingdom at the time (Setton 1969: 603).

<sup>22</sup> In the court of Jerusalem, records show that there was a nobleman called Balian of Ibelin, who participated in the major confrontations of the period and managed to escape from Saladin after the Battle of Hattin. He also was in charge of the defence of Jerusalem and negotiated the conditions of surrender of the Christian defenders (Setton 1969: 613, 616). In order to achieve those conditions, Balian in fact threatened Saladin with the destruction of the city and the murder of its Muslim inhabitants.

<sup>23</sup> After the Battle of Hattin, Saladin executed 230 Templars, leaving only twenty in the Convent of Jerusalem, figures which give insight into the numbers involved at the time, notably different from the impression given in cinematic versions of such military events. However, it is worth noting that even in works such as Setton there are references to as many as 20,000, a figure which seems more typical of chroniclers of the time, in order to give importance to the army as a presence (Setton 1969: 609).

<sup>24</sup> At the end of the twelfth century Walter Map criticised the Templars in the Holy Land for “tak[ing] up the sword for the protection of Christendom, which was forbidden to Peter for the defence of Christ. There Peter was taught that peace should be sought by patience: I do not know who taught these to overcome force with force” (Forey 1992: 204-241). See also Nicholson on the liability of the Temple to criticism from contemporary writers at the time (1995: 129-135). The poor reputation of the Templars as defenders of Jerusalem is especially due to more recent authors, who present the loss of the Holy Land as indicating God’s displeasure and as the beginning of the end of the Templars’ reason for being. Such blameworthiness, veiled or not, certainly is strongly alluded to in the film.

<sup>25</sup> The Kingdom of God or Reign of God is a foundational concept in Christianity, as it is the central theme of Jesus of Nazareth’s message in the synoptic Gospels. The phrase occurs frequently in the New Testament, and is defined almost entirely by parable. According to Jesus, the Kingdom of God is within people, it is approached through understanding, and entered through a spiritual rebirth, and by doing God’s will. It is a kingdom of the righteous and contrasts the kingdom of earthly things, under the command of Satan.

<sup>26</sup> This relationship only emerges clearly in the Director’s Cut.

<sup>27</sup> The Old Testament books of Ezra and Nehemiah reflect these ideas, not only as regards the Jews’ effort to repopulate but also to rebuild the city-wall, and the reference to Jerusalem as the Holy City established by the leaders of the Jewish people, as in Nehemiah (11,1). For Islam, of course, Jerusalem is also the second most important religious site, because Mohammed ascended into heaven from its holy mount.

<sup>28</sup> “Even after the loss of the city, in the contemporary imagination, the place of Jerusalem and the Holy Land remained stubbornly entrenched in Western medieval mentalities” (Tyerman 2001: 144).

<sup>29</sup> *De catechizandis rudibus*, 31 PL 40: The original states: “Duae itaque civitates, una iniquorum, altera sanctorum, ab initio generis humani usque in finem saeculi perducuntur, nunc permixtae corporibus, sed voluntatibus separatae, in die iudicii vero etiam corpore separandae. Omnes enim homines amantes superbiam et temporalem dominationem cum vano typho et pompa arrogantiae,

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omnesque spiritus qui talia diligunt, et gloriam suam subiectione hominum quaerunt, simul una societate devincti sunt; et si saepe adversum se pro his rebus dimicant, pari tamen pondere cupiditatis in eandem profunditatem praecipitantur, et sibi morum et meritorum similitudine coniunguntur. Et rursus omnes homines et omnes spiritus humiliter Dei gloriam quaerentes, non suam, et eum pietate sectantes, ad unam pertinent societatem. Et tamen Deus misericordissimus, et super impios homines patiens est, et praebet eis paenitentiae atque correctionis locum". From [http://www.sant-agostino.it/latino/catechesi\\_cristiana/catechesi\\_cristiana\\_libro.htm](http://www.sant-agostino.it/latino/catechesi_cristiana/catechesi_cristiana_libro.htm)

<sup>30</sup> *De Civitate Dei*, XV 1 CCL 48, 453. The original: "ipsius generis humani, quod in duo genera distribuimus, unum eorum qui secundum hominem, alterum eorum, qui secundum deum vivunt".

<sup>31</sup> Previous to Augustine, these ideas were thoroughly formulated in other works, like the anonymous *Letter of Diogenes* (second century) and Origen's *Contra Celso*. For, according to Origen, "inside us there exists a certain natural law which recriminates each and every one of us and suggests the evil things we have done" (Origen, 185-255).

<sup>32</sup> This medieval historian affirms that a crusade was a holy war which aimed to liberate Jerusalem, a comment which shows how even in the 21st century the term "liberation" is still used to describe the brutal and blood-thirsty conquest of Jerusalem in 1099.

<sup>33</sup> Even though it is not an aim of the current article, it is worth pointing out that contemporary Muslim chronicles on Saladin's attacks in Palestine presented them from a profane point of view and that even in a Christian source such as William of Tyre religious motivation for the attacks remains unclear (Kedar 1996: 349). However, some Muslim sources of the period exhorted fellow believers to follow the Christian example, who had given up their worldly goods, in order to wage war on Islam.

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