

Imagining the Impossible: The Shifting Role of Utopian Thought in Civic Planning, Science Fiction, and Futures Studies

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Introduction

Histories of futurism and/or futures studies tend to see the discipline as having its roots in the “operations research” paradigm of the mid-20th Century, which in turn emerged from what eventually became the RAND Corporation (for an exemplar see e.g. Bell, 1996). To construct futurism in such a manner is to ignore many other disciplines whose focus has also been on the development, description and analysis of imagined futures. The RAND-rooted history restricts “proper” futurism to a predominantly scientific (and frequently scientific), positivist, quantitative and rationalist paradigm, and excludes the more qualitative work of political science, sociology, social theory, architecture and urban planning, as well as the more nakedly speculative and/or imaginative futurist practices of artists and authors. To discard this history is, I believe, to discard some important lessons about what futurism can realistically hope to achieve as regards depicting normative or “preferred” futures.

A Taxonomy of Utopias

The longest precursor to futurism is the utopian literary tradition, which effectively begins with *Utopia* by Thomas More (1516, 1975). This well-known but little-read book is a work of both fiction and proto-political science. In the first section, More outlines what he sees as the political problematics of his time; in the second section, More tells a story set on a remote imaginary island, where the problems defined in the first section have been transcended by a new sociopolitical order.

Science fiction (SF) scholarship has paid much attention to the utopian form. To be clear, not all SF is utopian, and not every utopia is SF – but the two genres share numerous tropes regarding the representation of imagined sociotechnical regimes, and tend to rely on the same narrative device, namely a displacement in space and/or time sufficient to legitimise (or at least bluff) the possibility of the society being portrayed actually coming to pass. Edward James (2003) defines a tripartite taxonomy of utopian literary modes which unites the two genres in a single

historical tradition and traces the development of the form from the classical utopia, through the technological utopia, and on to the critical utopia.

The *classical utopia*, the dominant form until a point somewhere around the beginning of the 20th Century, is essentially descended from More's origin text, and defined by its attempt to describe a perfected society in which all problems have been definitively solved. As always with literary taxonomies, the borders of this one are fuzzy, and any given text may demonstrate properties from more than one mode, particularly during periods of transition; the classical utopia gave way to the technological mode gradually, growing in influence in proportion to the penetration of technological advances into Western civilisation during the 19th and early 20th Centuries.

The *technological utopia*, whose quintessential expression can be found in the short stories published by the renowned magazine editor John W Campbell, is defined by the writer's urge to create (in Campbell's own words, as cited by James, 2003) "a better world". As James points out, "[t]here [was] no contradiction there. 'A better world' is not the same as 'an ideal world'." This change is to be achieved principally through a sort of literary didacticism, "but also through the presentation of alternative possibilities"; however, "[m]ost of those alternate possibilities are about *technological rather than political revolution*: the construction of constitutions and political arrangements, the staple of classic utopia, have little appeal for most sf writers [of this type]". (James, 2003, emphasis mine) The technological utopia, then, focuses on the betterment of society through technoscientific intervention, and sees political action as an outdated impediment to radical change, rather than a crucial and unavoidable component thereof.

Drawing on the work of Tom Moylan, James labels his third mode the *critical utopia*, as exemplified by the canonical classics of the 1970s New Wave movement in science fiction. The authors of critical utopias, writing as they did in the aftermath of the failed utopias of the 1960s counter-culture, were "aware of the dangers of presenting a utopian blueprint, and used their novels to criticize not only the society in which they wrote, but also the possible utopian alternatives" (James, 2003). The critical utopia is invariably political – often, but not exclusively, in the post-feminist sense of "the personal being the political" – and critical not only of the *status quo* from which the writer is writing, but also of the writer's own utopian alternative, as well as *the very notion of realisable utopia itself*.

James's taxonomy is rooted in *telos* – the rhetorical purpose to which the utopian narrative is put, though all three modes use imaginary places and/or times as a sandbox within which new ideas might be tried out, without any of the risks involved in building actual experimental societies in the real world. But to talk of *telos* raises a troubling ghost: to return momentarily to More's *Utopia*, can we be certain that he intended it as a portrayal of an ideal and perfected society? Might it not possibly have been an elaborate and poker-faced satire of utopian ideals that ran directly counter to the prevailing orthodoxy of the church in which More held high rank? These dual interpretations are in fact implicit in the very title of the book: More coined the term *utopia* from the Greek, οὐ τόπος, which translates literally to "no place", but in English utopia is homophonous with *eutopia* – εὖ τόπος, which translates to "good place". Did More mean to emphasise the virtue (as he saw it) of his fictional state, or the fictionality of his virtuous state? Or was he perhaps deliberately conflating the two meanings?

The ghost is that of authorial intent: per Barthes, the author is dead, and we

have no privileged access to the meaning with which they imbued their work – which goes doubly so for an author such as More, separated from us by a deep ocean of time and concomitant social change. Even assuming that More was indeed attempting to portray a perfected society, his notion of perfection is coloured by the *Weltanschauung* of his time – and while it features elements even modern readers might consider progressive, it also features elements which look positively dystopian (such as the death penalty for adultery, for example). Absent any access to authorial intent, the interpretation of a utopian text is entirely subjective, which reveals a paradox: how can a utopia be truly utopian if it doesn't accommodate everyone's idea of perfection?¹

SF author and critic Samuel Delany attempted to address an SF-specific problematic of interpretation by introducing the concept of the “reading protocol” (1984). Rather than categorising a text as SF by identifying canonical tropes, techniques or styles, Delany suggests that a reader parses the story through a protocol which interrogates the text with reference to the set of interpretive conventions that have come to form the “science fictional discourse” (Delany, 1984) – which is to say that, while the reader may not know exactly how science fiction might be defined, they know it when they see it, and that knowledge is based on what they've already seen. By displacing “science-fictionality” from the text, and relocating it within the reading or interpretation of that text, one is able to generate science fictional “readings” of texts which were not necessarily intended as science fiction by their authors. The flip-side is that a reader whose protocols do not match up with the writer's may not recognise a text as having been intended to be read through a science-fictional lens. It seems no great leap to suggest that a similar mechanism may be at work in the interpretation of utopias: we're not sure what utopia is, but we're very sure we know it when we see it.

This ambiguity is further addressed by Michel Foucault's concept of the heterotopia (Foucault & Miskowiec, 1986). This concept is broad and complex, and subject to multiple interpretations – which is to say that the notion of the heterotopia is itself heterotopic, a space whose meaning is multiple, contested and (most importantly) unresolved. The heterotopia may be a “real” space, but the concept can equally be applied to textual or conceptual/theoretical spaces, and as such has a certain overlap with Delany's notion of the science fictional reading protocol. The sf text – indeed, any text – is a space whose meaning is multiple, dependent upon the particular protocols brought to it by particular readers; one reader's utopia is another's dystopia, which is to say that all *soi-disant* utopias are in fact heterotopian when considered in context.

The heterotopia bears resemblance to Peter Lamborn Wilson's notion of the “pirate utopia” (2003). On the basis of what little historical evidence was available, Wilson speculates that the Barbary Coast corsairs of the 16th to 18th Centuries may have founded what were effectively small, isolated anarchist proto-states, enclaves located beyond the political or military reach of the great powers of the day, and thus capable of establishing sociopolitical orders radically orthogonal to the orthodoxy of the time. Wilson concedes that there is little or no evidence for the validity of his conjectures, but argues that their *possibility* is evident; in doing so, he collapses the distinction between a history of utopia and a utopian history, which is another facet of the utopian paradox. Under the pen-name Hakim Bey, Wilson went on to elaborate the pirate utopia into the concept of the Temporary Autonomous Zone (Bey, 2003): chunks of space-time in which, however briefly, the orthodox sociopolitical

order is suspended, allowing radical new forms of non-hierarchical social relations to take hold.

Examples of actually-existing (or, more accurately, actually-having-existed) pirate utopias/TAZs are plentiful: Hong Kong's long-defunct Kowloon Walled City, for instance, or the unlicensed and spontaneous free festivals of the late 1980s and early 1990s rave culture in the UK both fit the bill. The core of the idea is that of the pirate utopia as *a temporary state of exception from some or all of the rules of the wider society in which it is embedded*. While the pirate utopia is usually in some sense illegal, it may be tolerated by the authorities, whether because of the difficulty involved in shutting it down, or its usefulness as a form of social "safety valve". As such, it bears noting that the only difference between a pirate and a privateer was that the latter got a free pass for their criminal behaviour so long as it was performed in the service of (and hence under the protection of) a state. Even (if not particularly) for the strictest of hegemonies, the pirate utopia has a certain utility or convenience, sustaining and justifying the order of the hegemonic state, even as it provides an illustrative figure for the evils of exception.

Thus far, I have rehearsed James's taxonomy of utopian modes in literature: the classical utopia, depicting a perfected social order; the technological utopia, depicting a world bettered by technoscientific intervention; and the critical utopia, which depicts the utopian project undergoing its inevitable failure. The critical mode undermines the notion of utopia as a deliverable project, but nonetheless clearly values the form as an experimental space for exploring its own consequences and failure-states. I have also introduced the related concepts of heterotopia and "pirate utopia", which reflect what actually happens when one tries to bring utopias into being in the real world: their realisation is always partial, compromised, unstable and ephemeral, utterly dependent on the exclusion of contextual forces which would otherwise extinguish it.

The Laboratory as Utopian Space

Having discussed the functionality of utopian concepts, I wish to argue that the scientific method is dependent upon the creation of utopian spaces which are known as "laboratories". The empirical scientific method depends on *the testing of hypotheses by the observation of reality*. However, reality is a problem for experimentalists, because it has an awfully large number of moving parts, many of which may be irrelevant or outright obstructive to the observation of the phenomena in which the scientist is interested; in order to ensure that one's causal conclusions are valid, one must eliminate as many extrinsic variables from the experiment as possible. The laboratory, then, as both a physical and conceptual space, is a blank slate, a simplified reality from which inconvenient exogenous factors have been excluded; it's a TAZ within which the experimentalist can call the shots. In their discussion of the labourisation of housing research and development, Strelbel and Jacobs (2014) argue that:

"the laboratory space enacts a withdrawal from the world at large. It creates a space of relative privacy that allows for certain kinds of experiments, including those associated with technological innovations, to happen in a controlled manner and with limited impact on the 'real'

(non-laboratory) world outside.” (Emphasis mine.)

Or, to use a term favoured by the renowned field biologist Robert Kohler (2002), laboratories can be considered as “placeless places”... which is to say *no-places*; utopias. The withdrawal from the world mentioned by Strebel and Jacobs describe is, as shown above, the strategy common to *all* utopian narrative modes; it is precisely this laboratorisation of narrative space which defines the utopian form. As such, both of More’s possible meanings are superimposed: Utopia is both *no-place* and *good-place*. The ideal society is, by definition, unrealisable – as the critical utopian writers understood from experience.

Utopian Urbanism

Having defined a taxonomy of utopian modes, and argued for the laboratory as a utopian conceptual space, I now turn to the urbanist and town-planning traditions, to which utopian modes of futurity have always been central. Town planning emerged as a response to the urban horrors of the Victorian era, as the geographical consequences of the industrial revolution became impossible to ignore. The architecture critic Jonathan Meades has often argued that architecture is an art-form that lacks a subject; deprived of the possibility of depicting the real, architecture and spatial planning hence attempt to reify social theories and ideologies in (if you’ll excuse the pun) concrete form.

The earliest planners were idealists and reformers, but very rarely architects; their practice was informed and motivated by the desire to build new societies, rather than new buildings. Peter Hall (1988) identifies Ebenezer Howard as central to the establishment of what we now think of as town planning and urbanism. Howard was at the centre of the influential “Garden Cities” movement, which assumed that the construction of a new social order could not be achieved within the existing architectural order of the Victorian metropolis, and proposed to build new communities in what we now think of as the “green belt”; its utopian thrust is clear to see not only in the explicit requirement of a blank slate on which to build, but in the social program which came packaged with the plans. As such, the project reproduced the naivete of the classical utopia parsed as a blueprint; a number of garden cities were built, but their utopian parameters were eroded by the economic and sociopolitical realities of the time.

Moving into the 20th Century, the idealism of architectural and urbanist Modernism – as exemplified by the visionary projects of le Corbusier – betrays its technological-utopian urges to simplify, quantify, and exclude the troublesome: strict and mechanistic order should be imposed on the messy reality of the extant city through the techniques of science and technology, and if that involves razing hectares of the architectural *ancien regime* to the ground and starting again, so much the better.

The architecture critic Owen Hatherley recounts Jarvis Cocker, frontman of the Sheffield-based pop band Pulp, describing the band’s sense of growing up in the ruins of a failed utopia, the high-water mark of British modernism reduced to “half-arsed visions of cities of the future that turn into a pile of rubbish” (Hatherley, 2011). For Hatherley, this is “the lament of all true believers in modernism, holding the present to account for its failure to create a viable future, and the pinched vision

of the possible that then instills in those born after the future” (Hatherley, 2011); Hatherley laments not modernism itself, then, but *modernism’s failure to consider that its unreflexive utopianism might be the root cause of the failure of its project*. As noted above, reality can never be completely excluded from any utopian space – and the more utopian, the more like a laboratory the space, the greater the pressure of the messy reality outside. Modernist urbanism, like the technological utopia, assumed utopia would be a fire-and-forget technological fix, a project rather than a process. The nominal pariah status of modernist paradigms in town planning speaks as much to this myopia as to the much-maligned aesthetic which has become its synecdoche.

Modernism may appear to have passed, but in truth its technological utopianism has simply adapted to the ideology (and technology) of the times. This is exemplified in what architecture scholar Keller Easterling (2014) refers to as the “spatial softwares” of Free Trade Zones (FTZ), “global technology parks” and other such campuses of global commerce, which are designed as a sociotechnical regime that prioritises the free and unrestricted intercourse of capital. The FTZ overlaps with the maximalist iteration of the technological utopian mode known as the “Smart City”; as Adam Greenfield points out (2013), this overtly Taylorist utopia of a fully automated and algorithmically managed city is merely the latest marketing narrative with which global construction conglomerates and networking-logistics corporations might package and sell their wares. Note also that the FTZ and the Smart City are increasingly proposed as interventions in empty or brown-field regions of developing nations: blank slates, or as close as one can get to such in a world with no new territories left to be “discovered” (which is to say colonised).

The FTZ, then – like its cyborg cousin, the Smart City – is an aspirant privateer utopia, a deliberately constructed and licensed state of exception from the regulatory restraints not only of its host nation, but often also of the Western hegemony (Easterling, 2005), whether by fiat or by *fait accompli*. They are fantasies of finance, attempts to recreate theoretical economic phenomena in the messy and imperfect real world. These technological utopias are no doubt experienced as utopian by those for whom they have been optimised, but may look rather more like pirate strongholds to those whose territories they (re)organise and occupy; the technological utopia’s denial of the political can only be sustained by those for whom the political system has been designed.

We have seen the classic and technological utopian modes as they have played out – and continue to do so – in urbanism and architecture, as well as the inevitable shortcomings that occur when ideas developed in the utopian laboratory (or design studio) are applied unreflexively to the real world. Recent years have seen the rise of what looks rather like a critical utopian mode emerging in urbanism and architecture: an approach to imagining new cities which assumes neither that the city is perfectible, nor that technoscience alone can make a better city, but instead suggests that imagined cities of tomorrow might instead be used to critique the cities of the present at the same time as they critique the possibility of a realisable urban utopia. (A non-exhaustive list of such critical urbanist utopias might include the projects “Mercenary Cubiclists” and “New Mumbai” by designer Tobias Revell, “Power of 8” by Anab Jain and Superflux, “Slave City” by Atelier van Leishout, and Liam Young’s multi-collaborative “Tomorrow’s Sky”.) This is an explicitly experimental and speculative practice which, rather than assuming its delimited experiments might be realised outside the laboratory of the utopian narrative, deliberately exploits

the state of exception provided by the “blank slate” of the utopian laboratory to undertake extreme experiments whose failure might be instructive. Which is to say: critical urban utopias are not blueprints for a future to be reached for, but workings-out of futures which, while they look utopian from a distance, inevitably burgeon with unexamined pitfalls and consequences.

Utopianism & Futures

“Utopia lies at the horizon. When I draw nearer by two steps, it retreats two steps. If I proceed ten steps forward, it swiftly slips ten steps ahead. No matter how far I go, I can never reach it. What, then, is the purpose of utopia? It is to cause us to advance.” (Galeano, 2013, p. 36).

I believe we can observe the same utopian modes outlined above at play in contemporary futures practice. Thankfully, much of the profession has moved beyond the classical mode; however, the dominance of the technological utopian mode in much foresight is hard to avoid, whether in the academic or professional spheres. (This is perhaps unsurprising, given the ubiquity of classic science fiction motifs in popular culture, and their reciprocal but non-linear relationship with the innovation cycle; see Bassett et al, 2013) It is my contention that the classic and technological utopian modes of futurism are long past their utility in a complex and highly interdependent world. The normative or positive future is deterministic, as impossible to realise as the perfected society of the classic utopia, as it cannot hope to replicate anything close to the stochastic messiness of the real world. Likewise, history is littered with utopian projects which failed to realise the betterment of society by technological means alone, whether in the form of Stafford Beer’s Project Cyberdyne, of uninhabited and half-built Smart City ghost-towns, or of the flood of solutionist business models that flow out of Silicon Valley.

This is not to recommend that we banish utopian thinking, or suggest that there’s anything inherently negative about creating representations of an ideal (or simply improved) society. On the contrary, I would see a thousand utopias bloom – not least because this would bring the intensely plural and subjective nature of societal “ideals” into the spotlight, allowing us to focus on finding common ground between them rather than, as at present, focussing on the differences. But I think it important to recognise that, by definition, *ideals are not realisable*. Ideals are things we aspire to; they represent moral or ethical directions in which we would like to travel. We might say that the difference between ideals and goals is rather like the difference between strategy and tactics: the former influences and shapes the latter, but the experience of the latter should also inform iterative changes in the former.

The general who does not adjust her strategy in the light of repeated tactical defeat is a fool – and this is the sense in which I argue against the normative “utopias-as-blueprint” model. A blueprint is a specification for an engineer or an architect: a rigid and carefully quantified plan which, if followed correctly, will result in a product that exhibits the specified design parameters. As a guidebook for assembling dumb matter into useful configurations, blueprints are invaluable; but when it comes to systems in which a significant number of components possess free will, or which are embedded in complex externalities (or both), a blueprint is useless, because it cannot bend and flex in response to unforeseen challenges along the lengthy route

to realisation. In a world as fast-changing as ours, the risk of the blueprint utopia should be obvious: how many political manifestos from even a decade ago – from any end of any political spectrum you choose – look even remotely cognizant of the real on-the-ground challenges of the present moment? This, of course, is why political manifestos are renewed so frequently, as they represent the tactical element of a political project; the strategic element, then, is the complex of ideals and values toward which the tactics of the manifesto are intended to advance, and which will (if the project is to last) be amended and reassessed in the light of those tactical challenges. It is in this sense – that of a contiguous but, crucially, unfixed and always-changing conceptualisation of a better society – that I see utopia as having value: not as a fixed destination, but as a direction of travel.

The easiest way to avoid failures is to exclude the unpredictable and uncontrollable actors and events that cause them. Laboratory scientists can produce results that are almost impossible to verify or reproduce “in the wild” precisely because the conceptual space of the laboratory is designed to exclude all behaviours other than those in which the scientist is interested. Likewise, utopian narratives are inherently idealistic, because any narrative is necessarily (far) less detailed and complex than the world it purports to represent; whether deliberately or not, an uncritical utopian narrative necessarily excludes those events and actors which would undermine the society they are intending to portray. The critical utopia, by contrast, not only recognises and foregrounds this internal contradiction, but also draws its rhetorical power from it: by portraying a utopian project in the process of collapse or undermining, the critical utopia can bring societal ideals into dialogue with the messiness of human realities, opening up a space in which metanarratives might be tested to destruction with few or none of the real-world consequences on the failure of large-scale social projects.

The critical utopia is not a strategy for a better world: it is a strategy for better strategies – and a necessary counter to the solutionist impulse that underlies all utopian thinking (including its own). The critical utopia further recognises that utopia is always-already subjective: that the good life, and hence the good society, is plural, contested, in perpetual flux – a horizon, as Galeano would have it, rather than a destination. As such, it is precisely through the portrayal, analysis and comparison of *many different* utopias that the true utility of the form emerges: it shifts the critical focus away from what a society is, and onto what a society aspires to; it opens up safe spaces in which those great ideals – social, technological or otherwise – may be (con)tested.

So let us leave the promulgation of normative futures to the marketers and politicians, and heed the lessons of failure – after all, there’s a lot of it out there to learn from.

Notes

1. This paradox is neatly captured in Ursula Le Guin’s famous and haunting short story “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas”.

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