
Volume XVI of William Morris’s *Collected Works* contains an uncanny typographical anomaly: the second part of the title of Morris’s ‘Utopian Romance’ is given as ‘An Epoch of unrest’ – the word ‘rest’ has somehow transformed into its opposite. As Marcus Waith comments in a 2002 essay on *News from Nowhere*, ‘[t]he error is remarkable both for its prominence and its descriptive accuracy’.1 This descriptive accuracy also extends to *The Spectre of Utopia*, in which Matthew Beaumont taxonomises forms of utopia that appear at the *fin de siècle* and argues that the concept of utopia itself contains an uncanny and spectral presence of dystopian horror which manifested itself more overtly in the contemporary genre of science fiction.

Beaumont’s characterisation of late nineteenth-century utopias is one which departs from a division of utopia into ideational and ideological expressions; in other words, from a view that defends utopias so long as they are (non)spaces of reflection but which interprets them as inherently harmful when harnessed to political projects. Instead, the investigation of literary and cultural formulations of utopia draws instead on a tradition of Marxist thought. This is a model which asserts the ‘concrete’ nature of ‘what ought to be’ (quoting Antonio Gramsci),2 the appearance of utopias in artistic expression as the ‘not-yet-conscious’ (quoting Ernst Bloch),3 and more generally (using György Lukács’s lens of ‘critical realism’) the way in which fantastical writers such as Kafka are read as the most accurate critics of the distortions that affect capitalist society. By combining these hermeneutic frames with the literarycritical tradition initiated by Darko Suvin of incorporating utopian and other literatures into science fiction (understood as ‘cognitive estrangement’), Beaumont turns to the texts with a diverse theoretical equipage of Marxist, psycho-analytical and post-structuralist tools at his disposal. The result, happily, is not to disperse the texts and their historical settings amid rival theoretical claims, but to draw out the shimmering aspect of utopia as an idea that resists schematisation by any single approach and possesses the inscrutable character of a ghost; or to think of utopia, in a sense that conflates the political and the psychological, as ‘a Marxian uncanny’ (p. 225).

Beaumont’s analysis of the temporality of Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*, in a chapter subtitled ‘Panorama, Paranoia’, demonstrates how particular moments or qualities from the primary texts are unpacked to arrive at equally specific and sometimes unexpected readings. Here, he concentrates on the section in which Dr. Leete takes the somnabulist West to the roof of his building to convince him of the brave new Boston that lies before them. This cool and removed perspective on the utopian city is contrasted with the experience of the nineteenth century that afflicts West when he dreams that he is back in the time
and place from which he has escaped, the labyrinth of streets ‘thronged with the workers from the stores, the shops, and mills’ (p. 46). Instead of drawing upon Michel De Certeau’s worn polarisation of the panoramic and street-level views of the city, Beaumont presents these panoramic and paranoid experiences as twin outcomes of the exercise of thinking the future, and this reveals a programme and purpose of utopian fiction: ‘to defamiliarize and restructure our experience of our own present’ (p. 48). The following four chapters that focus on Looking Backward adopt increasingly specific lenses through which to interpret and contextualise them: the utopian redemption of shopping in Looking Backward and News from Nowhere; the ‘epidemic’ of memory and identity loss in America as a way of reading West’s flight or ‘fugue’ from the nineteenth century; the restlessness of West as a case of agoraphobia in the socially empty spaces of the utopian city and the construction of a ‘Bellamy Library,’ or publication series, that successfully capitalised on the popularity of Looking Backward by using it to promote other books that interested readers might also enjoy (a technique that users of Amazon will be familiar with). This latter chapter throws up some of the dissonance between chapters that results from their super-specific foci.

The examination of this part of Looking Backward’s publication history illustrates how, in general, that work was read as a blueprint for a palatable form of socialism – hence its popularity. This analysis of the contemporary reception of the text, which read it straightforwardly as a programmatic utopia, is pointedly at odds with Beaumont’s inclination to read against the grain and to tease out the dystopian content of the novel. Likewise, the two chapters that depart from the nexus of Bellamy-Morris-Wells (on the feminist periodical Shafts and the connection of occultism to socialist utopias respectively) stand as set-pieces that illuminate different and specific milieux of late-century utopianism, but stand somewhat apart from the readings of the literary texts – perhaps a reflection of their having been published previously as essays.

The final two chapters fold science fiction into late-century utopian thought in a fascinating way, one which departs from Darko Suvin’s influential assertion that all utopias were SF avant la lettre and instead looks at utopia as a multi-valent presence with a horror dimension. Beaumont writes that the ‘finest utopian fiction and science fiction intimates that an inchoate future is secretly gestating in the present – like the alien incubated in John Hurt’s body at the start of Ridley Scott’s Alien’ (p. 221–22). Just as in the ‘Panorama Paranoia’ chapter where a temporal differentiation is established between the spatial perspectives of the rooftop (utopian future) and the pedestrian (defamiliarised present), here he spatialises the temporal remove of present and future by placing one inside the other: ‘the present is parturient with the future’ (p. 222). This enables a provocative reading of H. G. Wells’s The Time Machine that identifies its puzzle – overlooked by the Sphinx – as a reflection upon two utopias at the same time: on the one hand, Beaumont argues, it is a parody of Marx’s
dream of government by the masses; on the other it is ‘on the same historical continuum as [Wells’s] own utopia of an enlightened elect’ (p. 243). To (over)extend Beaumont’s sci-fi analogy, Wells’s novel is an enigma in which the opposed twins of two rival futures are locked in gestation. Against the tendency of literary utopias to alternate and co-exist with their dystopian opposites, the competing formulations of the future which are at work in Wells’s novel have more concrete and interesting identities.

One question this chapter provokes is why Beaumont does not say more about the reappearance of notional *pasts* in utopian and science fictions of the period: the feudal organisation of society in William Morris’s *News from Nowhere* and Richard Jefferies’s *After London*, and the devolved form of the human species that menaces the over-refined Eloi—themselves responses to Morris’s citizens of Nowhere. Susan Buck-Morss reflected on the idea of utopia in the writing of Walter Benjamin and Ernst Bloch: ‘The real possibility of a classless society in the “epoch to follow” the present one, *revitalizes past images* as expressions of the ancient wish for a social utopia in dream form’ (my emphasis). 4 Beaumont’s figuration of utopia as a latency haunting the present in order to defamiliarise it could also be applied to the irruption of the past transformed into an anticipation of an altered present.

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