

Only the possible begets the impossible

Using our creative capacity to generate utopias is not a useless act, it is a way of analysing our reality and projecting ourselves towards a better future.

Neus Crous Costa

In November 2019, as covid began to spread, we were living in the era in which Blade Runner, filmed in 1982, was set. In some respects, the film is a far cry from our reality: we have neither flying cars nor artificially intelligent humanoids. On the other hand, there is a kind of anachronism in the future: there is no internet and smoking is allowed in offices. But there are also those aspects that are very reminiscent of our current landscape: a city as far as the eye can see under a smog-covered sky. Neon lights and industrial towers glow, blotting out the stars. There is a dense web of

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El jardín del Edén (1828)

THOMAS COLE

corporate interests, security forces at the service of the elite and a complete lack of respect for the environment.

A whole range of dystopias is often compared to the reality we are drawing. In 1921 Yevgeny Zamyatin wrote the novel *We* (Мы). In it, the One State conscientiously monitors all citizens, going to such extremes that all buildings are made of glass. Numbers designate people, and reason, shaped by the state, underpins all behaviour. The plot begins with the construction of a rocket in order to expand this form of organisation to other planets.

The film *Metropolis* (1927), directed by Fritz Lang and based on the novel of the same name by Thea von Harbou, sets us in a 21st-century metropolis, where the oppressed working class is confined to the underground, where the

industrial core is located. Upstairs, the upper classes enjoy life. This layout closely resembles the city of Midgard at the beginning of the video game Final Fantasy VIII (SquareSoft, 1997).

In Aldous Huxley's *A Brave New World* (1932), the state's control over the social mass is ensured at the root: a system of artificial reproduction guarantees that each individual will be perfect to occupy the position he or she should in society.

Various versions of the meme "[1984 should be taken as a warning, not an instruction manual](#)" are circulating on the web. At the very least, we must recognise that Orwell's dystopia (written in 1949) got it right when it once again speaks of authoritarian governments and a system that controls our every move, accompanied by strong repression. Certainly, in our reality, the whole complex surveillance system has been greatly simplified with the spread of smartphones and big data. In 1999, the Finnish band Sonata Arctica released the song Blank File, which warned of this possibility at the dawn of the computer age.

The plot of all these fictions includes a divergent as one of the central figures. Someone who, for some reason, whether intended, accidental or even forced, embodies opposition to the system. Perhaps the endings that most chill our blood are those projected by Huxley and Orwell. The other authors do not let the glow of the spontaneously human fade completely.

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We know dystopias well: possible but undesirable futures. Our contemporary culture (already dominated by large platforms) seems to rely exclusively on dystopias (always, or almost always, engendered by chance events). But [where are the utopias](#)?

Lost paradises, like the Christian Eden, were perhaps the first utopias. Some classical accounts, such as Plato's *Republic* (4th century BC), imagined what an ideally just state would be like, with each social class fulfilling its well-defined functions. Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) describes the society on the island of the same name, whose happiness lies in having achieved an organisation based on reason (we see that the same source can produce very different results) and in having abolished private property. In 1890, William Morris wrote *News from Nowhere*.

In the second half of the 20th century, Prabhat Ranjan Sarkar proposed a new order, distanced from both capitalism and socialism, based on a profoundly humanistic and holistic view of life, whose main objective is to care for all beings on the planet, regardless of their nature. Sarkar called it PROUT (Progressive Utilization Theory). Some of its bases: property is collectivised, minimum necessities of life (including education) are guaranteed, industry is based on a "no-profit-no-loss" logic, and it shuns patriotism, among others. Perhaps one of the most striking propositions is that the four social groups (workers, fighters, intellectuals and compradors) occupy government positions on a cyclical basis. This cosmovision has never been put into practice, and even the sociologist Johan Galtung dismissed it as "utopian", as PROUT shifted the focus from economic growth to human development.

Precisely, utopia refers to that which does not exist anywhere (u- negation; -topos, physical place). Despite this, between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, various social reformers, urban planners and architects materialised ways of living that sought to improve the quality of life of the society of the time, especially of the working classes.

Frago Clois and Martínez-Rigol reviewed in 2016 [the ideas of the utopian socialists](#) of the 19th century. For all of them, the central point was welfare - at least human welfare - based on collective interest over individual interest.

Let us look at some examples. In 1817 Owen proposed the [parallelogram](#): a settlement for 1,200 people with a well-defined interior layout: three sides were devoted to living quarters and the fourth to children's quarters. The interior spaces would be occupied by public buildings (school, kitchen and dining rooms, library, etc.) and the exterior by self-supply gardens and other agricultural facilities. Both Tsar Nicholas I and Napoleon I tried to put it into practice, only to fail miserably. Owen set up his cooperative project in Indiana (United States) on a 30,000-acre plot of land. Three years later, internal tensions forced him to abandon the enterprise, and little by little, the other European colonies also broke up.

In France, the ideals of the revolution gave breath to utopian proposals. Fournier designed the phalanstery: it materialised with the construction of a production and residential building, with the particularity that the society would not be based on the traditional European family nucleus. The aim was to reach the definitive period of harmony. Again, the key to this model was the communality favouring human relations and the concentration of services. In the 1840s, Fournier's followers launched many experimental communities in the United States (up to 41), Russia, Romania and Spain. They all failed, and the phalanstery model never really materialised.

In 1860, John Ruskin published the first chapter of his treatise on political economy, ["Unto this last"](#). Very concerned about the situation of the working classes of his time, the book was a reaction to the recent theories of John Stuart Mill and others. Ruskin was deeply conservative in character while advocating state intervention. Perhaps his founding thesis was the most revolutionary: wealth could be obtained only by adhering to moral virtues, such as honesty and justice. His most famous phrase ("There is no wealth but life") is justified by the fact that consumption is the end and aim of production, and consumption is the end and aim of life. Although some commentators argue that it contributed nothing new to socio-political theory, [Gandhi mentions this book's profound impression on him](#). Soon after, he founded his Phoenix colony.

There are many other examples. However, in 2017, the Centro de Cultura Contemporànea de Barcelona hosted the debate [Old Europe, new utopias](#), which criticised the old continent's lack of energy and ideas. At the same time, some contemporary thinkers presented their utopias.

Broadly speaking, these utopias fulfil three main practical functions:

- Critical: they serve to identify what is undesirable in the society in which we live.
- Orienting: it sketches the perfect society towards which we would like to advance. Although we recognise it as unattainable, it is a direction in which to walk, a direction that can change organically according to the needs of the historical moment.
- Valuable: the utopia gathers what seems valuable to us in such a way that it allows us to get to know the author and/or his or her era.

Therefore, using our creative capacity to generate utopias is not a useless act; quite the contrary. It is a way of

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analysing our reality and projecting ourselves towards a better future, even if "better" is an adjective that will necessarily change as we move forward. However,

drawing a horizon takes us out of paralysis. Hence the relevance of imagining examples for the future.

This is why some activist movements have started to work on this issue. In 2022, for example, [the art group of the Milan node of Extinction Rebellion](#) organised the collaborative exhibition Dystopia/Utopia, whose aim was to reflect on how to communicate the climate crisis by transforming dystopian scenarios into utopian proposals. On the other hand, the Xarxa per la Justícia Climàtica (Network for Climate Justice) organised two editions of the event [Reclaiming the Future](#). The name is self-explanatory: in the face of the ecosocial crisis and the constant mistreatment of the territory (for example, in the form of mega-infrastructures), different groups came together to lay the foundations for a collective transformation.

The most recent example is the [Forum for Ecosocial Transition - \(Im\)Possible Futures](#). This is a summative effort of many collectives in Catalonia and the Balearic Islands, which have been working for several months, culminating in this meeting, which has just been held in Barcelona on 24 and 25 February, and which has proposed how to draw a hopeful future based on ecological realism and the degrowth model.

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 - Elizabeth Kolbert – Olaf Bruns: [“No Good Choices Left”: Our Dilemma Under a White Sky](#)
 - Simon Mair, Angela Druckman and Tim Jackson: [A Tale of Two Utopias: Work in a Post-Growth World](#)
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