

# THE SPECTRE OF UTOPIA

UTOPIAN AND SCIENCE FICTIONS AT THE *FIN DE SIÈCLE*



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# Introduction

Ghosts of the future are the only sort worth heeding. Apparitions of things past are a very unpractical sort of demonology, in my opinion, compared with apparitions of things to come.

— EDWARD BELLAMY, 'The Old Folks' Party'

## I

In *The Story of Utopias: Ideal Commonwealths and Social Myths* (1923), Lewis Mumford pleaded with his readers to 'be convinced about the reality of utopia'. This was probably the first monograph on utopianism to be published, at least in English, in an epoch increasingly defined by dystopianism (Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*, banned in the Soviet Union in 1921, appeared in England in 1924). In the book, Mumford insisted that, despite inhabiting the 'pseudo-environment' of ideas, or 'idolum', utopia is every bit as real as history. He ended, in an appealing polemic, by affirming the importance of utopian thinking at the present time, emphasizing that 'if our eutopias spring out of the realities of our environment, it will be easy enough to place foundations under them'. 'When that which is perfect has come', he announced in biblical cadences in the book's final sentence, 'that which is imperfect will pass away.'<sup>1</sup> A generation later, in the grimly titled *Values for Survival* (1946), where he grieved for the death of his son in the Second World War, and deplored the devastation caused by the atom bomb, Mumford felt less inclined to celebrate utopia's reality for the collective

1 Lewis Mumford, *The Story of Utopias: Ideal Commonwealths and Social Myths* (London: George C. Harrap, 1923), 15, 24, 307, 308.

imagination. In the 1930s and 1940s, the social myth of the nation state had been violently realized, and the results of this, visible above all in the rise of fascism, didn't exactly resemble an ideal commonwealth. Here, Mumford lamented that 'the spirit of utopianism has not yet been exorcised'.<sup>2</sup>

So if 'in its ghostly way, utopia continues to haunt mankind', as Chad Walsh claimed in *From Utopia to Nightmare* (1962), it is not simply 'a good ghost that won't go away', as he maintained.<sup>3</sup> At times, it is manifestly a bad ghost that won't go away. In the course of the last century, in particular, utopia is generally thought to have been benign when it hasn't exceeded the ideational sphere and malign when it has; benign when it hasn't impinged on history, malign when it has. The prevailing assumption is that if utopia remains utopian, in the dismissive colloquial sense of the term, it is perfectly acceptable; and that if it acquires an ideological force, and can longer be dismissed as hopelessly unrealistic, because it is deemed to have encroached on politics, it is unacceptable.<sup>4</sup> In order to sidestep this assumption, then, perhaps it is productive to identify utopia as occupying a shifting, often contradictory space between the utopian and the ideological, between fantasy and reality. For heuristic purposes, this is my initial supposition.

Krishan Kumar has claimed that utopia articulates the 'tension between possibility and practicability'.<sup>5</sup> This formulation is as useful as it is neat, but

2 Lewis Mumford, *Values for Survival* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1946), 74.

3 Chad Walsh, *From Utopia to Nightmare* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1962), 16.

4 Of course, there have also been people, on both the left and right of the political spectrum, who have conflated all forms of utopianism with totalitarianism in the second half of the twentieth century, and hence dismissed utopian thought *tout court*. A statement made by Michel Foucault, in the course of a conversation in 1971 about the way in which, 'as a result of [its] Utopian tendencies', the Soviet Union 'returned to the standards of bourgeois society in the nineteenth century', can stand as representative of this libertarian critique of Utopia: 'I think that to imagine another system is to extend our participation in the present system.' See 'Revolutionary Action: "Until Now"', in Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, eds and trans, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977), 230–1.

5 Krishan Kumar, *Utopianism* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991), 3. The immediate context for this statement might be helpful: '[Utopia] is more than a

I prefer to embroider its dialectic slightly and summarize utopia instead as a form that articulates the tension between impossibility and practicability. Its solutions to those social contradictions that it overtly or covertly critiques are imaginable but, in the prevailing circumstances, unrealizable. Utopia, it could be said, inhabits a region that is at the same time possible and impracticable. Of course, the boundaries of this region are defined historically rather than absolutely, for the political imagination is contingent on the ideological conditions that predominate at a given time. But in general, utopia occupies a liminal space, in the precise sense recalled by Louis Marin, who points out that ‘the Latin *limes* signifies, in its etymological origin, a path or passage, a way between two fields.’ The *limes*, he reminds us, ‘is the distance between two edges’, and as such, ‘at every moment of its travel, it maintains the difference between the two edges of the limit.’<sup>6</sup> This is indeed descriptive of the interstitial status of utopia: in its movements, which track those of history itself like a shadow, it constantly maintains the difference between the impossible and the practicable.

It is the figure of the ghost, I propose, that most productively enables us to conceptualize this dialectic of utopia. Terry Castle has explained that, since the eighteenth century, in an Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment culture, ghosts have existed ‘tantalizingly on the edge of possibility, somewhere just beyond the boundary of the real’.<sup>7</sup> They therefore unsettle neat epistemological distinctions between the actual and the imaginary, the present and the absent. ‘Ghosts are liminal, metamorphic, intermediary’, another recent commentator has observed; ‘they exist in/between/on modernity’s boundaries of physical and spiritual, magical and real, and

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social or political tract aiming at reform, however comprehensive. It always goes beyond the immediately practicable, and it may go so far as to be in most realistic senses wholly impracticable. But it is never simple dreaming. It always has one foot in reality’ (2).

6 Louis Marin, ‘The Frontiers of Utopia’, in Krishan Kumar and Stephen Bann, eds, *Utopias and the Millennium* (London: Reaktion, 1993), 9.

7 Terry Castle, *The Female Thermometer: Eighteenth-Century Culture and the Invention of the Uncanny* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 159.

challenge the lines of demarcation.<sup>8</sup> The same might be claimed about utopia, which isn't exactly ideal or material, spiritual or physical, impossible or practicable. Furthermore, if a spectre represents the intrusion into the present of a repressed historical past, utopia could be said to represent the intrusion into the present of a future whose historical possibility has been suppressed by the ideological limits that shape the political imagination. 'The Future as Disruption', Fredric Jameson calls it.<sup>9</sup> Utopia, then, insinuates a troubling sense of absence into the present, and so reveals that reality is not complete, that it is not identical to itself. Like ghosts, utopias momentarily make the unreal seem real, and at the same time make the real seem unreal. They are not real or unreal but fantastic; and 'like the ghost which is neither dead nor alive', as Rosemary Jackson once suggested, 'the fantastic is a spectral presence, suspended between being and nothingness.'<sup>10</sup> This is the ontology of utopia.

More precisely, perhaps, this is utopia's 'hauntology'. The term 'hauntology', which critics of deconstruction tend to regard as an absurd neologism, but which I believe is deeply suggestive, is the one Jacques Derrida devised in order to explore the dialectics of the ghost in *Specters of Marx* (1994). It is an ambitious attempt to think the 'logic of haunting' rather than of being.<sup>11</sup> 'Ontology speaks only of what is present or what is absent', as

8 Lois Parkinson Zamora, 'Magical Romance/Magical Realism: Ghosts in U.S. and Latin American fiction', in Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, eds, *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 498.

9 This is the title of the final chapter of Fredric Jameson's *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005).

10 Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Methuen, 1981), 20. If utopias constitute a mode of the fantastic, then, in contrast to 'much mimetic art', they too can be said to evince what Mark Bould has called 'a frankly self-referential consciousness (an embedded, textual self-consciousness, whatever the consciousness of the particular author or reader) of the impossibility of "real life", or Real life'. See 'The Dreadful Credibility of Absurd Things: A Tendency in Fantasy Theory', *Historical Materialism* 10/4 (2002), 83.

11 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994), 10. Hereafter

Warren Montag has commented; 'it cannot conceive of what is neither.'<sup>12</sup> Hauntology thinks and speaks of this neither, and this both, that is the spectre: 'neither soul nor body, and both one and the other' (6). The ghost, as Derrida describes it, is 'a paradoxical incorporation, the becoming-body, a certain phenomenal and carnal form of the spirit' (6). It is a liminal entity, or non-entity, neither living nor dead, suspended between being and nothingness.

In the present context, I am not especially interested in Derrida's 'spectropolitics' (107), as he calls it at one point, and not least because the historical moment in which his book intervened has passed, along with much of its political urgency.<sup>13</sup> I am interested instead in its possibilities for a 'spectropoetic' account of utopia (45). I propose to treat Derrida's book 'primarily as a *literary* text'; like Aijaz Ahmad, I believe it is most productive to interpret it as 'essentially a *performative* text in a distinctly literary mode.'<sup>14</sup> Derrida's book is not, it must be admitted, a meditation on the idea of utopia. He does at one point allude to utopia in passing, affirming that Marx thought 'that the dividing line between the ghost and actuality ought to be crossed, like utopia itself, by a realization, that is, by a revolution' (39) – but he doesn't develop the point, or even attempt to clarify the ambiguities that this analogy rather unhelpfully generates. So it

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references to this edition are cited in the text. For relevant discussions of Derrida and the 'utopian impulse', see Eugene O'Brien, "'Towards Justice to Come': Derrida and Utopian Justice", and Susan McManus, 'Truth, Temporality, and Theorizing Resistance', in Michael J. Griffin and Tom Moylan, eds, *Exploring the Utopian Impulse: Essays on Utopian Thought and Practice* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), 43–56 and 57–81 respectively.

- 12 Warren Montag, 'Spirits Armed and Unarmed: Derrida's *Specters of Marx*', in Michael Sprinker, ed., *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's Specters of Marx* (London: Verso, 1999), 71.
- 13 For a brisk critical account of the relationship of *Specters* to this moment, the aftermath of the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, see Terry Eagleton, 'Marxism without Marxism', in *Ghostly Demarcations*, 83–7 – a response to the book that infuriated Derrida!
- 14 Aijaz Ahmad, 'Reconciling Derrida: "Specters of Marx" and Deconstructive Politics', in *Ghostly Demarcations*, 90–1.