Utopia Now

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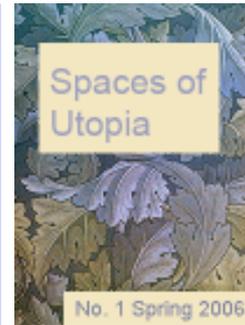
In the 1950s I did not do Theater of the Oppressed. I did theater like everybody else in that you call the spectator to come, you charge a price for the ticket and then you do plays, the best that you can. But soon I understood that I was doing good plays, wonderful plays for people that were good writers for an audience that came just to look at it and say, "Okay, it's nice." And then they went away and nothing else happens. And always for me theater should be more than that. Shakespeare…said in Hamlet *that the theater should be and is like a mirror in which we look at the mirror and then we see our vices and our virtues. I think that's very nice, but I would like to have a mirror with some magic properties…which…could – if we don't like the image that we have in front of us…allow us to penetrate into that mirror and then transform our image and then come back with our image transformed. The act of transforming, I always say, transforms she or he who acts. So to use the theater as a rehearsal for transformation of reality. This was my idea, but not my practice until the dictatorship was every time more severe on us and they started forbidding our plays, not allowing us to do our plays to do nothing. So when we lost our theater, we lost everything. We found theater.*

Augusto Boal, interview with Juan Gonzalez on *Democracy Now*

Utopia as we have known it belongs to the modern world of printed texts to which Thomas More's genre-founding *Utopia* (1516) was one of the earliest original contributions. In a period when, as Walter Ong has elaborately shown, printed texts (and I would add geographical exploration and colonial appropriation) led to a profound spatializing of knowledge, that text too is focused on space, and opens with a map (see Ong 1958). But More's fiction and its progeny have had a

problematic relationship with time – the historical time, especially, within which its readers and writers must not only read and write but suffer and act. For the verb tense of fictional narrative is the "historical past". One can see the problem even in the pre-modern precursor of More's *Utopia*, Plato's philosophical *Republic*, which was composed in the early days of European writing (a technology that Plato himself deeply distrusted): his Atlantis is delivered in what we can at least metaphorically call the conditional mood of the verb. When people think of Utopia without thinking, they think of a place outside of space-time, outside of this *world*: and *world*, if we move backwards down its etymological branch, comes to mean "a period in human existence", not the place we lead it in.[1] And so the great utopian philosopher Marx repudiates utopia – as do the quick-talking mouthpieces of global capitalism, which nonetheless depends on our displaced utopian longings for the brisk trade in luxuries and travel that floats its rising ship.

Now is where we live, act and suffer. The hopes that motivate our reading and writing of utopia, and evoke the disparagements of the powerful (about which Laurent Loty writes in his contribution to this collection), are hopes for an enactment of another sort: immediate and historical, collectively and not individually imagined, here and not no-place (see Loty 2006).

Utopia, No-place, was almost always – even as late as Margaret Meade's exoticised *Coming of Age in Samoa* – set in geographical reality, almost but not totally inaccessible to the European reader at home. America, Terra Australis, Tahiti, even the Moon (there was something of a "space race" between Germany and Britain in the 17th century, as both Kepler and John Wilkins felt the moon shot was technologically feasible). Gabriel Chappuys, author of the 16th-century geographical encyclopedia, *L'estat, description et gouvernement des royaumes* (1585), includes Utopia as the subject of his 24th and final section.

But this ambiguous spatial linkage has now become increasingly ineffective. Geography now is completely mapped and owned – even Antarctica, even the moon have become the terrain of "global capitalism" and its commercial *Lebensraum*. There is no place left for "no-place". Space, like the planet itself, is

contaminated. The US National Air and Space Administration (NASA) sells tickets on the space shuttle to the very rich, and John "Leavin' on a Jet Plane" Denver has bought one.

What does a hopeful utopian activist do? The written proposal of an alternately structured social space is not a dead genre, and offers a mental space for reflection to both reader and writer that is the special contribution of books. I am writing one myself at the moment. But as an *activist* I have been looking elsewhere as well: for an activist needs to awaken the dead.

Looking elsewhere I have found a new kind of No-place that is equally describable in most cases as a special form of *time*, the "Now" of my title. It is most immediately descended from the happenings and street theatre of the 60s and 70s, and has a parent too in the World Wide Web, which facilitates not only world-wide markets but sometimes spectacularly effective resistance as well. Although the last and most important case I'll discuss here has a great deal in common with Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, and particularly its offspring The Invisible Theatre (see below), the current development of performative alter-realities, to borrow from Laurent Loty's term *alterrealisme*, has roots as well, and importantly, in initially apolitical dance forms such as break-dancing and Butoh, which express the experience of death-in-life without any world-reordering pedagogic intent.

Butoh, which frequently took and still takes the street and other public places as its venue, emerged in Japan in the late 1950s. It was a time of high anxiety in Japan, culminating in the 1959 renewal of the US/Japan Mutual Defense Treaty, which made permanent the many American military bases in the archipelago and re-confirmed the American commitment to an imperial presence in the world.[2] Break-dancing is or was also a public art, for the most part, an African-American expressive form almost exclusively for young men (unlike Butoh), which in its unforgettable style – sometimes *like* Butoh – presents humans as puppets manipulated by invisible puppeteers, or the reanimated bodies of the dead. It developed in the late 70s after a decade or more of imperial militarism abroad, and rioting at home in the Black ghettos which provided so much of the cannon fodder.

Butoh's signature is the Hiroshima-body – many of which were unforgettably translated into stenciled ghosts on the sidewalks of that city by the heat of the atomic blast, but all of them recalling puppetry in the unnatural positioning of limbs whose ligatures and joints seem to have been shaken loose by super-violence of the blast. Break-dancing is more blatantly the dance of the broken body – as slavery more deeply breaks a body than does the sudden bomb, though it too recalls the human devastations of that more momentary blow. In both dance forms we are expected to appreciate the artistry with which the dancers represent the re-animation of the unjustly destroyed. The presence of these dancers on the street, particularly the slower-moving Butoh dancers, represents the darkest possible tone of utopia, but is nonetheless utopian. The motion and presence of the awakened dead, in whom so many cultures have traditionally rested their hopes for a more just society, is both a sign of hope and a case of the impossible. Their dance is the creation of an *alter-reality*: impossible and yet experienced, fictional and yet here in our midst. The dead are alive, and the living are dead: in the words of Butoh's founding genius Tatsumi Hijikata, "I may not know death, but it knows me".

In the decades after Butoh emerged in Japan, Brazil and Argentina saw the rise of Boal's "Theatre of the Oppressed" and the "Theatre of the Invisible". Boal countered the increasing censorship of his more traditional theatre work in Brazil by escaping the theatrical space altogether and bringing the transformational power of performance not just to the city streets of São Paulo but to farms, factories and churches in rural villages. The fictive spaces created by Boal's Invisible Theatre, as well as the public and minimally narrative dance forms I've been describing, had a number of features that separated them radically from the clearly marked heterotopia of the theatre's raised and darkened stage (see Boal 2000 and 1998). These spaces have become some of the ground for more contemporary events that project another world on the sidewalks and, as we will see, the conference rooms and television and computer screens of this one. They elaborate especially well

Boal's revolutionary notion of the "spect-*actor*" – the spectator who becomes an actor in the spectacle, a member, in my terms, of the utopian Now.

San Francisco's Butoh-inspired street theatre and dance troupe, Corpus Delicti, whose motto is "Deconstructing the Empire, one performance at a time", use Butoh movement and body-décor in a program of theatrical interventions of which the most recent is fetchingly entitled "Guantanamo A-Go-Go: A Night of Butoh Karaoke".[3] To make their ghostly co-existence with us a little more concrete, here is a photo-sequence by Randall Case of a recent event in San Francisco:

Note the evocations of Hiroshima flashes in the flour-stencilled Butoh bodies on the pavement, the corpse-like, Butoh-derived whiteness of the dancers' flesh, the tattered grave-clothes of zombies. Note regular old sidewalks and awnings, note local passers-by with expressions identical to those of the actors. As the Talking Heads would say, "*This* is not my beautiful home". And yet we are sharing a stage with our ghostly brethren. Their decision about what constitutes reality is, in the moment of this special Now, more powerful than our own. The people who look most out of place in this palpable No-place are those who are using the sidewalk for its expected commercial purpose.

Another ancestral technique: the cord (usually a wire) used in orthodox Jewish communities all over the diasporic world by which, for the purposes of observance of the Sabbath the Jewish world is separated from its secular environment. This cord is called the *eruv*, and it is erected by special delegates of the local rabbi. Within the space it demarcates, thus designated as internal to the Jewish world, certain necessary movements and tasks (such as wheeling a baby carriage to services at the synagogue) are permissible on the Sabbath. Life can be carried on.[4]

This action imitates or perhaps is imitated by the utopian genre, which insists on negation (it is *No*-place, not *happy*-place) and consequently on the separation of worlds: Utopia is somewhere *else*, and we are reminded of that in its

fictional settings – ever since the canal dug by More's Utopians to separate themselves from the mainland – by astronomical distances, unnavigable mazes, lost coordinates and dislocations in narrative time. Corpus Delicti has transcended the physical border, but still represents a significantly other world, where living skin is an impossible color and all motion is significant and expressive rather than practical and instrumental.

The border between worlds is an important feature of Utopia, whether written or "performed", but the performative medium of the 21st century's newly interventionist Utopian experiments pressures this border most startlingly, perhaps, in the case of the Yes Men – who make their projects at least partially available in French, and conduct their "alterrealist" events in countries or language zones from the BBC to Austria, Finland, and Australia. My purpose today is mainly to let you know about them, if perhaps you haven't yet drawn a connection between the various utopian Yes Men pranks that have been covered in such mainstream news sources as CNN, CNBC, the *New York Times*, *The Financial Times, Le Monde, the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung,* and *La Reppublica* (not to mention countless less august venues like the *Texas Pagan News*, and a wonderful article by Dr.Thomas Schauer on "Perspektiven fuer die biologische und kulterelle Diversitaet in einer globalisierten Informationsgesellschaft" for the mysterious *Deutsche Gesellschaft fuer seltene Kulturpflantzen*).[5]

I had originally hoped to discuss many such groups in this article, including Britain's CRAPS (Capitalism Represents Acceptable Policy Society):[6]

Ladies and Gentlemen, an independent business!

How dare they!

Get to McDonald's!

and its American cousin Billionaires for Bush:

whose hoaxes are more transparently satirical and who help to alleviate the piety of the protest marches that have accompanied the Bush and Blair regimes'

escalation of American imperialism and British poodle-ism.[7] I'm leaving out as well a number of ingenious uses of the World Wide Web – in both cyber-space and cyber-time, although the Yes Men's actions have themselves been dependent on the new dominance of the Web as a forum for information-sharing, networking and practical arrangements.[8] The Web for instance brought to New Lanark for the Utopian Studies Society conference represented in this series of three issues from *Spaces of Utopia*. It also made possible the Yes Men's penetration of a number of organizations involved in the day-to-day domination of the "global village" by the multi-national corporations of the G-8 (which was meeting in nearby Edinburgh during the USS conference).

The Yes Men's project began with the prescient purchase by a friend of the domain-name GATT. A false GATT/WTO web page permitted the Yes Men's first intervention, intended as a more daring version of the "Invisible Theatre" performances of Corpus Delicti, CRAP, Greene Dragon, Rev. Billy and his Church of Stop Shopping, Code Pink for Peace and many others. Andy Bichlbaum, an American who lives in Paris, in cahoots with his friend the photographer Mike Bonnano, after setting up their faux-WTO web site, had the bright idea of appearing as a delegate from the WTO at an international trade law conference in Salzburg in May, 2000. Expecting to be hauled off by security guards in mid-speech, Andy ("Dr. Andreus Bichlbauer") delivered, as the Yes Men website (provided by the German groupThing.net) puts it, "an alarming Power-point lecture about removing hindrances to free trade. He suggests that violence is acceptable in banana trade so long as prices stay low and trade is free; that the siesta in Spain and the long lunch in Italy should be outlawed in the name of standardized business hours; and that a 'free market' in democracy should be encouraged by allowing the sale of votes directly to the highest bidder through voteauction.com." NB: all descriptions of their interventions, on their web site and in their book, are delivered in the present tense of Now.[9]

No objections were raised in the question and answer session following Andy Bichlbaum's speech. At lunch, Andy defended the "'free-market' character of

Hitler's economic policy", again without stirring controversy. Surprised, he returned later that day, head shaved, as a journalist who announced that "Dr. Bichelbauer" had been "pied", and interviewed delegates and organizers to find out what in his speech might have provoked the attack.[10] No one had any idea, although one person said that, were he Italian, he might have been offended by the part about the long Italian lunch. Via e-mail, a faux-WTO secretary later announced to the delegates that the pie carried a bacterial infection and that Dr. Bichelbauer was gravely ill. Still no one could offer a suggestion as to why he might have been pied, nor did they after her announcement that Dr. Bichlbauer had died of the pie-borne illness. In the end the deception was unveiled, and the *New York Times,* among others, carried the story.

Each of the Yes Men's subsequent interventions increased the brutality of language and audaciousness of imagery (including a prototype inflatable golden phallus to hold equipment for tracking foreign high-tech workers by videocam!). Still no protest was encountered. Readers may be familiar with 2004's major stunt in which Andy, as "Jude Finisterra", representative of Dow chemical corporation (which manufactured the napalm used in Vietnam), announced that Dow was dissolving Union Carbide, which it has recently purchased, and paying the $12 billion of its value in reparations to the town of Bhopal for the 1984 chemical accident there that took 18,000 lives and left another 120,000 permanently ill or disabled. News of this announcement spread as far as Bhopal before Dow exposed the fraud. (Union Carbide has come in for trouble from inspired artists before. Until recently its most infamous action was the Depression-era "Gauley Bridge" case, in which WPA workmen hired to dig a tunnel in West Virginia found themselves unknowingly cutting through pure silica discovered during the initial conduct of the drilling. Union Carbide was eager to have the valuable substance, but most of the workers sickened or died soon after of silicosis from inhaling the glassy dust. A suit was filed on behalf of their survivors, but in the end Union Carbide paid less than $50 each to the families. The poet Muriel Rukeyser accompanied a filmmaker to Gauley Bridge, and produced her own poetic

documentary – a work of inspired formal innovation, including stock quotations and equations, "The Book of the Dead", published in *U. S. 1* [1938]).

Click next on the link below to see a video clip of the BBC interview.[11] You might want to consider how scary these events are for the perpetrator as you see one of them unfolding before your eyes, though I think the speeches given live at conferences were scarier. These men are not actors or economists or businessmen: they have no experience in the venues where they perform their "alterrealism": they are just brave and clever, as no doubt you are too.[12] Information on how to become a Yes Man yourself is plentiful on their website and in their book.

http://www.theyesmen.org/hijinks/dow/video.html

 The Yes Men climaxed their long adventure this year (2005) at a meeting in Sydney of the Certified Practicing Accountants Association of Australia. Andy (this time as "Kennithrung Sprat") explained at that meeting that the WTO had decided to shut down and launch itself as a new organization, to be called the Trade Regulation Organization,

> devoted…to making corporations behave responsibly towards *all* world citizens, not just the wealthy. The lecture includes nearly an hour of shocking statistics drumming home the need for this massive transformation. The accountants rally behind the plan with excitement…. At the luncheon, some of them give suggestions for insuring that the new organization will serve the poor. …After Mike and Andy send out a press release from the WTO announcing the imminent improvement, a Canadian member of parliament takes to the floor [of Parliament] to announce the good news. Andy and Mike receive hundreds of congratulatory e-mails.[13]

As was the case, perhaps more poignantly, for the people of Bhopal, this hoax created a good deal of disappointment – but this time the disappointed are the accountants of a G8 nation! And this disappointment is something whose consequences may be far-reaching. The theatricality of the Yes Men has consistently challenged the utopian border between the better world and the one we live in, between the No-time of fiction and the moral urgencies of historical time. Their effect *depends* upon this border of course: on the shock, shame and disappointment of its exposure.

But for several hours in Sydney the people who make their living managing and facilitating corporate globalization believed they could be, that they *were*, participating in the construction of a better world in real historical time. Sydney is not Utopia, nor was the meeting site. The Utopia of this collective effort to imagine just and equitable economic structures was a matter of time, an alter-reality, to play again with Laurent Loty's term. A very brief time, less time than it takes to read More's *Utopia* – which was itself set in the then-imaginary geography in which Australia would later be discovered, and so many prophetic 17th-century utopias set.[14] But for many of the disappointed accountants, that time is not over. In the words of the great post-Holocaust Jewish poet Allen Grossman, "The Work continues by another means". Here is the last sentence of the Yes Men's description of that Utopia Now: "Although clearly another world is possible, it will have to start from the bottom up". I would say it already has. Or rather it is, now and again, starting. Fellow bottoms, Arise!

Notes

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[1] *Oxford English Dictionary*: article on "world", introductory etymological derivation (from Germanic "Wer-" (man) and "–ald" (age or life); see also entry Ia in that article.

[2] There is a wealth of information on Butoh available on the web at http://www.butoh.net.

[3] For images and information see their website at http://www.corpusbutoh.org/.

[4] For extensive explanation of the *eruv* see http://www.lakefronteruv.org/letter.html. For a particular example in New York City, go to http://www.dziga.com/eruv/index.php.

[5] The article is available online at http://www.global-society-dialogue.org/dgsk/study-german.pdf.

[6] For images from CRAP events, see http://www.beyondtv.org/nato/crap/craps.htm

[7] For image see http://www.stratecomm.net/~fritz/gallery/bfb/0415q. For Billionaires for Bush website, go to http://billionairesforbush.com/index.php

[8] It's a particular sorrow not to be able to link you to the e-mail utopia of Andrew Albin, a doctoral student at Brandeis University, who created a penetrable false Yahoo e-mail account for himself into which he slyly tempted members of a list-serve in my 2004 course on "Alternative Worlds" – the e-mails in the Inbox there documented an ingeniously crafted dialogue between Albin and the coded messages, in apparently real commercial e-mail solicitations (spam), of a person in a utopian (cyber-?)world.

[9] The book: *The Yes Men: The True Story of the End of the World Trade Organization* (2004). The website: http://www.theyesmen.org/hijinks/sydney/. The film *The Yes Men* (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer 2005), dir. Chris Smith, Dan Ullman and Sarah Price, is available from several online venues on DVD in English, French and Spanish. (I prefer the book and webpage.)

[10] For non-anglophones, "pie" refers to the anti-authoritarian prank of throwing a pie in someone's face.

[11] For a follow-up story on the UK's Channel 4 (BBC's chief rival) see video clip of interview with Andy Bichlbaum at <http://www.theyesmen.org/hijinks/dow/movies/Channel4news-small.mp4>.

[12] Andy and Mike are really (really?) Jacques Servin, the writer and ex-computer programmer whose first appearance in the news was as the prankster who secretly inserted code that would display images of two scantily-clad men kissing in a computer game he worked on for Maxis, and Igor Vamos, a graphic and installation artist and Associate Professor at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in the United States. For more about Vamos's work (including the Barbie Liberation Organization and the Center for Land Use Interpretation ("dedicated to the increase and dissemination of knowledge about the nature of human interaction with the environment"), see his Rensselaer webpage, http://www.arts.rpi.edu/people/vamosi .

[13] I quote from the account on the Yes Men's webpage.

[14] For the strange tale of the seventeenth and eighteenth-century's geographically prophetic imaginary voyages based perhaps on real gossip, see Faussett 1993.

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