
The Ethics of Unseeing: Exploring Utopia between Miéville and Agamben



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Introduction

This article is not grounded in sociological theory *per se*; however, it does argue that a contribution to the field itself may be found in otherwise strictly literary or philosophical texts. Recent sociopolitical uprisings have again demonstrated the tendency to think that genuine change can only be enacted through mass revolt. Critics and opponents of these movements have pejoratively declared them failure because they lack a “positive vision”. Is there a crisis in utopian thinking today? Perhaps. It is thought that mass movements constitute a power onto themselves capable of bringing about genuine change in the world. However, these movements are eventually met with what Slavoj Žižek calls “the proverbial morning after question” (What happens tomorrow morning?) (see Žižek, 2012). Maybe the masses are not the only valid conduit by which to change the system; what is needed is a personal comportment to the world which allows for continuous utopian potential to be lived through and change enacted through. Perhaps one ought to revisit the site of the individual for a possible analysis of overlooked utopian potential. To begin the return to the individual I propose a quasi-hermeneutic move to address the concept of utopia itself, originating as it did with the work of Thomas More in 1516.

Fátima Vieira writes that More’s imaginary island was originally to be called “Nusquama”, from the Latin word “Nusquam”, which means “nowhere”, “no place”, “on no occasion”. However, More wanted to convey a meaning that exceeded this notion. Inspired by the travel/imperial expeditions of his time (e.g., Amerigo Vespucci, Christopher Columbus, and Angelo Poliziano) and the then blossoming capitalist markets, More wanted

the name of his fictional island to reflect a sense of possibility and hope that the Otherness of these new lands (the New World) would bring for Europe. Furthermore, More wanted to convey the idea of an ideal society that “existed” somehow without being reified *qua* plan as in the *Republic* or *Laws* of Plato (Vieira, 2010: 3-4). As such the Western tradition was indelibly marked by what I will call – echoing Alain Badiou – the More-Event: the invention of the word “utopia”: “derived from the Greek ‘ou’ (‘non-’) and ‘topos’ (‘place’), means ‘no-place’ (with a possible pun on ‘eu’ (‘good’): ‘good-place’)” (Bruce, 2008: xxi). The use of the Greek over the Latin in the naming of Utopia was also intended as a homage to the Classical Ancient period of the Greeks that was thought by those Renaissance Humanists – of which More is counted – as the height of human achievement and culture.

But what of this no-place today? How might it to be interpreted today? I believe that insight might be gained if no-place (utopia) is thought of as an always-already being-in-no-place as opposed to no-place as such dwelling just behind the horizon (but close enough that one senses its presence) as it is commonly understood today. This amounts to a veritable involution of no-place from an “out-there” to an “interior” (i.e., subjective) comportment with respect to the world. Indeed there are some contemporary cultural markers which point to the gradual awareness of this involution of the notion of no-place. My argument can be sensed in the words of the nineteenth-century historian Jacob Burckhardt: “We would like to know the waves on which we sail across the ocean; but we ourselves are these waves” (qtd. in Blumenberg, 1997: 69). Here Burckhardt alludes to the limitless frontier that is the face of all that is possible and encourages the recognition that one is already that frontier. It is the responsibility of the subject to “float” upon the “waves” to the point where, like Burckhardt, “we ourselves are these waves”. Jacques Rancière helps clarify this sentiment when he tells of Wordsworth’s experience of the festivals of revolutionary France: “Wordsworth’s path is the poetry of the humble, dedicated to glorifying, in the language of the simple, the most modest of wildflowers that the walker ignores or steps on” (Rancière, 2003: 23). For Wordsworth, one was able to experience the utopian nature of the moment, the here-and-now. Wordsworth writes,

Not in Utopia, subterranean fields,
Or some secreted island, Heaven knows where!
But in the very world, which is the world
Of all of us. (qtd. in Rancière, 2003: 11)

It may appear that what Wordsworth presents his reader with is the very thing Marx and his followers wanted to abject from the consciousness of man; that is, a form of utopianism which descends into idle daydream and lack of political efficacy. In the words of Žižek – and to reverse Marx – perhaps “the only way to stop the system from working is to stop resisting it” (Žižek, 2012: 108). One may rightly be skeptical of this proposition. However, there is a politically disruptive aspect or potential in perceiving utopia as embedded in the real of the here and now. M. H. (Behooz) Tamdgidi has perhaps argued for this point strongest in the recent literature. Tamdgidi’s claim is that utopia is not a (no-)place properly speaking, nor is it strictly speaking a “desire” for something better; rather, utopia is an “attitude”:

In contrast to reactive modes of anti-systemic behavior that concentrate on building a movement that instrumentally focuses on the destruction of the old order in order to reach a good life projected into the future (be that future distant or near, illusively or “realistically” conceived), the utopian attitude involves making effort, whatever their scope, towards imagining, theorizing and/or practically realizing that future goal in the here and now. (Tamdgidi, 2003: 131)

My argument is one that espouses a form of Quixotism, where “inns must be castles” (De Unamuno, 1954: 327), or, like the response to Billy’s questions “where am I?” and “how did I get here?” upon being abducted by the Tralfamadorians in Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse Five*:

It would take another Earthling to explain it to you. Earthlings are the great explainers, explaining why this event is structured as it is, telling how other events may be achieved or avoided. I am a Tralfamadorian, seeing all time as you might see a stretch of the Rocky Mountains. All time is all time. It does not change. It does not lend itself to warnings or explanations. It simply *is*. Take it moment by moment, and you will find that we are all, as I’ve said before, bugs in amber. (Vonnegut, 1991: 85-86)

Utopia is to be sensed and developed as such from the non-signifying experiences of the individual. This sensation is an affective quality inherent to one’s comportment with respect to the world that can then be emitted outward into the greater social body, continuing to balloon outward until “utopia” comes to affect all things in the cosmos. The catch, however, is that, much like Vonnegut’s Tralfamadorians, Tamdgidi’s seemingly expanding balloon of utopia does not begin in the individual and end with the cosmos; it simply *is*.

At this point I will transition to a working example or case study through which I hope to develop a more concrete interpretation of the conception of an interior foundation for utopia. I think China Miéville's *The City and the City* beautifully expresses the intimate connection between the cosmic and the non-signifying – “silent utopias” – which “never find expression in any tangible literary or communal forms” (Tamdgidi, 2003: 137) and yet no less constitute Utopia. This potential is located in Miéville's brilliantly weird concept of “unseeing”.

Unseeing/Seeing and Seeing/Unseeing: Miéville's “weird” topos

Keeping in mind Miéville's Marxian commitments, one must not automatically discount the insights to be gained from reading his novels that appeal to the more strictly psychological side of things. That is to say, insofar as utopianism in general is significantly influenced by the Marxism of many literary utopias (Moylan, 1986), an examination of the personal, psychic, and/or subjective conditions necessary for utopia must not be discounted. Indeed such aspects of utopia are rarely ever considered. I do not wish here to attack those Marxist utopians for “wrongly ignoring” the individual subject; rather, I as a more psychoanalytically-inclined thinker am more interested in the personal conditions of utopia, rather than the properly social. That said, my hopes are that my work on the personal might work to complement the social emphasis from the Marxist utopians with an eye to a more encompassing utopian project.

Justine Jordan's article on Miéville (Jordan, 2011) tells her reader that Miéville is often asked where his revolutionary politics and his fantastical world-building meet. Jordan reports that Miéville is wary of making too strong a connection between the two: “I'm not interested in fantasy or SF as utopian blueprints, that's a disastrous idea” (*ibidem*). Along the same line of thought, Marxian literary critic Carl Freedman tells his reader:

Weird fiction [which Miéville is the modern figure-head of; perhaps second only to H. P. Lovecraft] necessarily insists on going beyond the mundane, and (especially in its science-fictional version) may thereby create special opportunities for what Ernst Bloch called the utopian function of art by showing a world beyond the privation and violence of the actual to be conceivable; this function is, indeed, exercised with rare brilliance in *Iron Council*. By contrast, the genres of crime fiction tend to be deflationary and opposed to the idea of utopia. Especially since Hammett, the main tendency of crime fiction has been to assume that there is generally less, rather than more, to reality than may first meet the eye, and that the most ordinary, familiar, unsurprising, and petty of human motives are generally the most consequential. Though crime fiction indulges in overt socio-political speculation

far more rarely than science fiction, its default assumption is normally that nothing very much better – or very much worse – than the mundane world we see around us is ever likely to come to pass. (Freedman, 2012)

One can see this strange dialectic unfold in *The City and the City*. The story itself takes place in and between two fictional cities, Beszel and Ul Qoma, where a detective (Tyador Borlu) is investigating the murder of a graduate student who at the time of her death was conducting research in Ul Qoma but whose body was found in Beszel. As the narrative develops it becomes necessary that in order for Borlu to continue his investigation he must cross over into Ul Qoma. Herein lies the fantastical nature of the story that is so typical of Miéville: the two cities – Beszel and Ul Qoma – share the same physical space. The sharing of space in this story is not an East/West sharing insofar as “I am on this side of the divide and you are on that side of the divide”; the space is shared insofar as the two cities are superimposed. In the wake of harsh socio-political relations between the two cities, citizens of each respective city must conduct their daily affairs completely unsensing those from the other city – which at times are mere inches away. This “general” unsensing includes “specifically” unseeing, unhearing, unsmelling, etc. Any violation (a.k.a. breach) of this unsensing is quickly managed by an Orwellian thought-police agency known only as the “Breach”. The only way to legally move from one city to the other is by means of what is known as “Copula Hall”. The description of Copula Hall illustrates the weird topological understanding of the two cities:

pass through Copula Hall and she or he might leave Beszel, and at the end of the hall come back to exactly (corporeally) where they had just been, but in another country, a tourist, a marvelling visitor, to a street that shared that latitude-longitude of their own address, a street they had never visited before, whose architecture they had always unseen. (Miéville, 2010: 70)

The remainder of the narrative is not overtly critical to the points I am trying to work through in the present article. I am only interested in the superimposed cities, the one – if you are a citizen of the other – you have never seen (yet). With this literary schema of the unseen-of-the-here-and-now, I am interested in how it is possible to work the seeing of the unseen into a utopian project.

Consider the banality of the crime genre and the potential utopian nature of weird fiction: the latter evoking a sense of wonder, something beyond the here-and-now; the

former deflating us with the realization that the here-and-now is usually all we are ever likely to get. Miéville does indeed play with the ambiguity of these genres throughout the telling of his story. This might tempt a reader into hypothesizing that the murdered graduate student may have been murdered because of her stumbling upon the existence of the postulated secret third city – Orincy – whose existence the reader is never confirmed nor denied. If it exists at all, Orincy is thought to exist between the two cities in spaces Baszel takes to be Ul Qoma and Ul Qoma takes to be Baszel. Orincy is thought to have powers that go beyond that of Breach. So the possibility that the fallen student was murdered because she was creeping up on the heels of a lost civilization is deflated when it turns out that she was simply murdered because she was unknowingly interfering in an economic ring of selling ancient artifacts of Bezel to some American corporations for profit. She was killed for the sake of money. And Orincy never existed as such.

That *The City and the City* contains an implicit narrative which discusses the ideological blinders that so many of us (people and populations) assume in our various socio-political relations with one another and the world (thereby propagating a system that is poorly suited for our general well-being: utopia) is not what I want the reader to focus on (although that is an interesting and important narrative), nor do I wish to critique the apparent success of the one genre over the other (i.e., crime noir over weird fiction) and thus the mundane over the utopian; rather, I think there is value in the story to suggest that *there is nothing spectacular or extraordinary about seeing the unseeable in the here-and-now*. In other words: the extraordinary (seeing the unseen previously hidden – think of crossing over via Copula Hall) is ordinary. This thesis echoes the dictum of Raymond Williams in his essay “Culture is Ordinary” wherein Williams makes the claim that culture is not something high-brow and reserved for those who read Chaucer and listen to Shostakovich, or watch strange art house films; culture is the multiple and diverse ways that we make our way through the world. I would like to take this framework and do the same for utopia. That is to say, utopia is not something that is deferred in time or space; rather, utopia is something that is the “negation” of the now, or the unseen of the now. What can this possibly mean? I will hopefully clarify these statements in the following critical exegesis of Agamben.

From Whatever to Nowhere and Back: Giorgio Agamben's Utopia

When I speak of utopia as the negation of the now what I mean is something different than the old existentialist dictum “I am what I am not, and am not what I am” (e.g., Kierkegaard). The nothingness of which existentialism speaks, it is true, can be something “full” of potential; that is, to make something out of nothing. But it can also be all-consuming, and lead to nihilism, taking on the cultural cliché “if I am nothing, what is the point?” (e.g., Camus). The negation that I am discussing at present is not a negation defined by lack, but rather a negation in the open sense of the term: a negation which is in excess of itself. Empty with fullness. What in fact I am getting at is very much akin to what the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben calls the “Whatever Singularity”. To explain this concept and how it relates to Miéville’s unseeing (or seeing the unseen) I will use the example of the Lovers that Agamben draws the reader’s attention to at the beginning of *The Coming Community*.

Agamben’s example of the Lovers suggests that “I do not love you for the independent features that make you *you*” (e.g., brown hair, blue eyes, tall, etc.) but neither is it the case that “I love you because of something that subsumes you under its generality” (e.g., the Platonic Form of Love [Universal love]); yet, nonetheless, “I love you”. What can be made of this? Agamben claims that the notion of the “Whatever Singularity” – insofar as it is singular (that is, not within the domain of the particular or the universal) – frees one from the “false dilemma that obliges knowledge to choose between the ineffability of the individual and the intelligibility of the universal” (Agamben, 2009: 2). It would be wrong to think of this “Whatever Singularity” as that which radiates from “within” the thing in question, it is more a concern of the borders and limitations of the thing. It is neither the universal nor the particulars of the thing that cause me to love the thing, or that I simply love in and about the thing. It is that which escapes me and yet, simultaneously, that which I must participate within.

In another section of *The Coming Community* Agamben draws this point out further using a parable about the Kingdom of the Messiah that Walter Benjamin told to Ernst Bloch. The parable reads thus: “[I]n order to establish the reign of peace it is not necessary to destroy everything nor to begin a completely new world. It is sufficient to displace this cup or this brush or this stone just a little and thus everything” (qtd. In Agamben, 2009: 53).

Everything will be as it is now, just a little different. Digressing for one moment a returning to Žižek's suspicion that "the only way to stop the system from working is to stop resisting it", this parable as reported by Agamben closely resembles Žižek's quotation of Jean-Luc Godard: "*Ne change rien pour que tout soit différent*" (change nothing so that everything will be different) (Žižek, 2012: 111). But how is it that that which is perfect can be other than what *it is*? Agamben makes reference to Saint Thomas's treatise "On Halos" to answer this: "The halo is this supplement added to perfection – something like the vibration of that which is perfect, the glow at its edges" (Agamben 55). The halo designates the zone in which possibility and reality become indistinguishable. The halo, or the gift of supplemental possibility, is the gift that a being that has reached its end receives after having consumed all its possibility. The halo is a good illustration of the "Whatever Singularity".

In terms of how this aspect of Agamben's philosophy maps onto the literature of Miéville, one ought to consider the events at the end of the novel: following the revelation of the meaning behind the death of the fallen graduate student, Tyador Borlu is recruited by the Breach. The last paragraph of the story reads as Borlu's new-found role:

This is the end of the case if Orincy and archaeologist, the last case of Inspector Tyador Borlu of the Beszel Extreme Crime Squad. Inspector Tyador Borlu is gone. I sign off Tye, avatar of Breach, following my mentor on my probation out of Beszel and out of Ul Qoma [he was quarantined by breach for necessarily having had to breach the unseeing in order to conduct his investigation in Ul Qoma]. We are all philosophers here where I am, and we debate among many other things the question of where it is that we live. On that issue I am a liberal. I live in the interstice yes, but I live in both the city and the city. (Miéville, 2010: 312)

As an agent of the Breach Borlu can now openly flit between the two cities, the two cities that I am using here as a metaphor for our own and that which is unseen everyday; that is, that aspect of the world described by Agamben in the two examples above: the halo to all being and the Whatever Singularity (i.e., the Lovers). There is, contrary to much of the criticism of Miéville's story, much utopianism pregnant within Borlu's becoming part of the Breach and living in both "the city and the city". His character metaphorically stands in for the subject who can have one foot in this mundane-world (i.e., the world of here-and-now) while simultaneously having the other in the unseen utopian-world of the here-and-now.

Response to Salzani and the Question of Ethics

Emmanuel Levinas reverses the metaphysics of Descartes by replacing epistemology with ethics as First Philosophy. Levinas's thought is anchored in what he denotes as "the call of the ethical" which comes from the Other; that is, from the "face" of the Other (hence the subtitle "An Essay on Exteriority"). Levinas's ethics (one might be tempted to say that his ethics is synonymous with his metaphysics), like all other conceptions of the good, can easily be read as utopian. Levinasian ethics is not a plan that needs to be engineered, for it already exists among us. In other words, where the ends of the utilitarian project are located somewhere in the future (and possibly deferred in space as well), the ends of the Levinasian project are located here and now. That is to say, Levinas's utopia begins and ends with the face of the other. He writes,

Peace (...) cannot be identified with the end of combats that cease for want of combatants, by the defeat of some and the victory of the others, that is, with cemeteries or future universal empires. Peace must be my peace, in a relation that starts from an I and goes to the other, in desire and goodness, where the I both maintains itself and exists without egoism. (Levinas, 1969: 306)

Levinas is arguing for a completely non-egocentric ethical structure, while struggling to find a way to keep the individual in the world. His is not a "mystical" ethics that might seek to do away with the individual altogether, but rather an attempt to find a way of interacting with the other (individual) that is not reducible to instrumental relations. That is to say, humans are always-already engaged in an open world with the Other, and are always fighting against the closure of that open relationship.

In a recent article on Agamben, published in the journal *Utopian Studies*, Carlo Salzani argues that Agamben's position is not a "yearning for a utopian future" but rather one that recognizes "a profound presentness, in the realization that within the present lies the possibility/potentiality of change and transformation" (Salzani, 2012: 224). The emphasis on the "profound presentness" is interpreted as promoting anti-utopianism insofar as the future as such is not privileged, thereby eliminating the major "dwelling" of utopia in a time to come. I agree with Salzani's interpretation of Agamben's argument, but I differ on Salzani's interpretation of Agamben's position as one that is "anti-utopian". Salzani writes: "We do not need utopias. What we need is to uncover that 'little bit' that lies hidden in the potentialities of the present" (*idem*, 230). On the contrary, I read Agamben's argument as

utopian precisely because he focuses on the “potentialities of the present”. Utopias do not need to be displaced in time and/or space for humans to be constantly approaching their shores; utopias can be and – indeed I argue – are here and now. Recall my use of “negation” above: the negation of the here-and-now world that we are common to and normalized with regard to *is* a constant process of learning to “unsee” that which is the world before us. I say that we must constantly struggle to unsee the world before us because the overtly reified culture that we live in so easily sneaks back into our lives – on an instrumental level – whereby we find ourselves disgusted by the mere thingness of things. Utopia, in this sense, is never as readily accessible as it is for Borlu when he becomes recruited by the breach to live in both the city and the city. Like Borlu, we always-already inhabit the other city (i.e., utopia *qua* no-place with respect to the here-and-now) simultaneously as we live our lives here and now.

These are the grounds upon which I interpret and understand Agamben’s statement: “The taking-place of things does not take place in the world. Utopia is the very topos of things” (Agamben, 103). Everything has a “topos” and a “topos”, just like Miéville postulates in his novel. Are we not capable of recognizing that we live in both “topoi” just like Borlu lives in both cities? I think we can. For learning to unsee the world around us is the necessary first step in becoming the right and proper subjects for utopia.

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