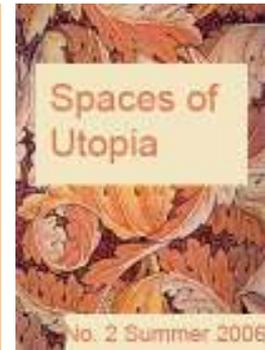


Are We Ready for Brave New Worlds?

Aristoi and the Society of the Spectacle

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Citation: Renata Koba, "Are We Ready for Brave New Worlds? Aristoi and the Society of the Spectacle", *Spaces of Utopia: An Electronic Journal*, nr. 2, Summer 2006, pp. 121-128 <<http://ler.letras.up.pt>> ISSN 1646-4729.

But certainly for the present age, which prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, representation to reality, the appearance to the essence (...) illusion only is sacred, truth profane. Nay, sacredness is held to be enhanced in proportion as truth decreases and illusion increases, so that the highest degree of illusion comes to be the highest degree of sacredness.
(Feuerbach, Preface to the second edition of *The Essence of Christianity* quoted by Debord in *Society of the Spectacle*)

Utopias as well as dystopias have always been a major concern for narratives written in the style of cyberpunk. Cyberpunk became especially significant in the 80s with the classic (now the "bible" of cyberpunk) *Neuromancer* by William Gibson. This visionary novel predicted the existence of the Internet and many of the high-technology inventions we use nowadays. Like Gibson's *Neuromancer*, *Aristoi* by Walter Jon Williams also depicts a futuristic society of supermen. Cyberpunk narratives are allegories and extrapolate us from the established system of values, which is the case of *Aristoi*. The word taken from Greek signifies "the best" and therefore the Aristoi are perfect human beings or cyborgs who survived the destruction of the Earth and developed a totally mechanised society, a society which Guy Debord would define as the *Society of the Spectacle*. If one reads this Debord's text which was published in 1967, one can become absolutely struck by his vision and the extent to which his prediction has become or is still becoming true for modern societies. It wonderfully describes the society envisaged by Williams. The novel asks why

the advances in technology have not made us perfect, more humane, happier citizens. As the novel illustrates, the villains and egoists abound.

In this short treatise I pose two questions the answers to which remain open and these are the following: “Are we Ready for Brave New Worlds?” and “Does utopia have to do with the creation of a new, better, more advanced society and perfect people or rather a recreation of old traditions in new environments?”. For Williams, utopia has to do with electronic or cybernetic advances. However, he seems to be rather sceptical about our possibilities of creating some utopian worlds. Let us see why.

Various theories of cyberculture claim that technology causes social change. It is not that societies simply adapt to, or accept, technological changes but they certainly evolve. Discourse constructs and subjects individuals, but how does the discourse of technology shape postcapitalist societies? The language of the protagonists is cybernetics, which might as well be redefined as metalinguistics. Since cybernetics deals with the principles of technology and communication the study of behavioural patterns becomes important. Thus, the Aristoi would ask the following questions when applying technology to their lives: “what do we do?” or “what can we do and to what extent?”. Since numerous systems in the living, social and technological environments might be understood in this way, cybernetics can be applied to transcend many traditional disciplinary boundaries and we might use some concepts to reshape our understanding of the world or the society we live in. Following Larry Richards, we might understand it as a new “dynamic set of ideas, a dynamics that is realized in dialogue among humans” (Richards 1987) and it might be inspiring not only for people interested in electronics but also for those focused on sociology, psychology, science, art or politics.

The relations among the protagonists of the Society of the Spectacle are characterised by a dichotomy. It is a dichotomy between reality and its copy represented as an electronic image. Reality is a complex entity since it is split

into two simultaneous worlds: Persepolis¹ – the real, physical place, also called “The Realized World” – and the world of cyberspace referred to as the dream “Persepolis”, “Hyperlogos” or “Logarchy” (Williams 1992), which is dominated by appearance and abstraction, and can be accessed through a special machine called the oneirochronon. Thus, in the world of the Aristoi everything and everybody has their virtual equivalent. The existence of two equally meaningful realities results in “the schizophrenic subjectivity” (Bell 2001) with images playing a vital role and vision becoming one of the most developed of all the senses. In the light of Debord’s way of thinking we might infer that the society “(...) where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles” (Debord) or “unrealities” (Williams 1992). The oneirochronic reality becomes sacred and “(...) the true is the moment of the false” (Debord). “Everything that was directly lived has now moved away into a representation” or – if we use Baudrillard’s terminology – a simulacrum (see Baudrillard 1998: 166-84). Most of the novel takes place in Persepolis – simulacrum. Debord would define it as a “pseudo-world”, a “pseudo-nature” where nature becomes an artefact of the human will or “the world of the autonomous image (...). The spectacle in general (...)” (Debord). In the dream Persepolis images become real beings and are represented by skiagenos of each of the Aristoi. Skiagenos, the word is taken from Greek again, is a virtual representation of the people participating in the oneirochronon. The paradox of this type of society is that although it is based on illusions it “has become actual, materially translated”. It is “(...) not a supplement to the real world, an additional decoration. It is the heart of the unrealism of the real society” (Debord).

In this electronic utopia where Marshal McLuhan-type computers are seen as an extension of human beings, the Aristoi use nanotechnology to manipulate both their minds and bodies, there are no mortal diseases and the only cause of their death is “breakdown”. They die because they simply cease

to function. They can live hundreds of years and they all have microchips built into their skulls to access cyberspace. They all exemplify the highest and therefore the privileged rank of “humanity” because they are good in nature, strong-willed and extremely intelligent. In this mechanised world the motto is “Science and Discipline” with the stability and measured progress brought to humanity by the Aristoi. Ruled and chosen by Pan Wengong who has the right to choose the best of his inferiors and give them the name of “Aristos” at a special graduation ceremony, the Aristoi are responsible for the progress of the two remaining classes Demos and Theráp_ns. They all live in a happy galactic order till the moment when the main protagonist, Gabriel, discovers that one of them has been murdered in strange circumstances. Gabriel becomes sceptical about the goodness of his race and finds out that the whole system is insecure and failing.

Not only is the reality in Persepolis a complex entity, the Aristoi are all complex beings and they are all composed of various selves called “daimones”. Daimones are limited personalities which, in other words, might be understood as different parts or aspects of one personality. Some of them are extremely intelligent and good, some are bad or even psychopaths. “Technotopians” (Bell 2001) can talk to their daimones and use their knowledge and power whenever they need it. The split of personality into various selves undermines the Cartesian concept claiming that our human identities are fixed, stable and unified. Nevertheless, it is important to point out that it is not identity which has been rejected but rather certain theories of identity. Fast changing technology and information systems produce identities in constant flux. Thus, identity becomes destabilised and decentred. In the world manipulated by the media and consumerism the term “identification” rather than “identity” suggested by David Bell (2001) might prove more effective as it includes discovery and recognition as well as multiplicity. Such a view does two things: it offers us a critical view of all identities revealing the importance of a historical context of

their creation and it emphasises their arbitrary, subjective and transitory character. As Bell suggests, “it returns identities to the world of human beings, revealing their openness and contingency” (Bell 2001:136). And secondly, such a point of view makes human agency not only possible but also essential. “For if (...) identities are made in history, and in relations of power, they can also be remade. Identities then can be seen as sites of contestation” (*idem*, 137). In the Society of the Spectacle we become the other, we construct our personality through exclusion; and who we are is defined by who we are not.

In this postmodern spectacle, protagonists become bodiless actors and as R. U. Sirius once highlighted, “[w]e are less and less creatures of flesh, bone, and blood (...); we are more and more creatures of mind-zapping bits and bytes moving around at the speed of light” (Bell 2001: 137). Many critics have noted that it is impossible to leave “the meat” behind because our lives are lived through our bodies. When in cyberspace the Aristoi still remain embodied, however, they express themselves in new ways. Along with Bell we can talk about oneirochronic bodies as “cyberbodies”, “techno-bodies” or “technobodies” (Bell 2001) and therefore, we can talk about “prostheticisation” (*idem*) or “cyborgisation” (Gray 2001) of our bodies. This cultural disembodiment is portrayed when the Aristoi play mere objects, animals, monsters, samurais, kings or just remain who they really are. Gabriel, endowed with very good programming skills, tries to be represented as he really looks; he might be compared to ronin – cybernetic samurai. Trained in wushu (a mixture of martial arts and acrobatics) and fond of Chinese Buddhism he uses both as defence or meditation. I read Gabriel as someone who is extremely handsome and sexually attractive: a mixture of Bruce Lee and Brad Pitt!

Like all the other Aristoi, Gabriel built his own technological utopia called Illyricum, where he is worshipped like a god. He has access to everything and controls all the data as well as the people of his territory. The Foucauldian idea of enforcing discipline through the panopticon becomes a reality. Gabriel

represents an all-seeing institution that monitors his followers who end up policing themselves. This “super-panopticon” is characterised by “database surveillance” (Poster 1995) and computer technology. And as Mark Poster once suggested: “Databases are discourse (...) because they effect a constitution of the subject. In its electronic form, the database is perfectly transferable in space, indefinitely preservable in time; it may last forever everywhere. (...) The database is a discourse of pure writing that directly amplifies the power of its owner/user” (Poster 1995: 235).

Towards the middle of the novel Gabriel discovers that the utopian world of the Aristoi fails and it is because one of them, called Saigo, built a secret world for his own purposes. Whereas Gabriel’s utopia is based on the idea of protection and safety, Saigo’s world is much more traumatic and egoistic (a good definition for “capitalist”, I would say). He creates a dystopia where suffering, exploitation, poverty, hatred and hostility prevail among its inhabitants. Saigo and his followers believe that life is not based on affection only but has to do with making mistakes, killing, hating or destroying. He sees the Aristoi as part of the process only because they are too perfect and represent just one of the possible steps in humanity’s evolution.

Perhaps this “bad versus good” approach concerning the creation of futuristic worlds is too extreme. However, through the use of stereotypes Williams reminds us that when living in a society constant choices are to be made and sometimes a dichotomous vision of things might in fact provoke us to reconsider and rethink some of the values on which we base our existence. Since the computerisation of our lives means disrespecting nature to a significant degree, Williams juxtaposes such an attitude with references to Chinese culture and tradition, especially songs and poems – and this, I believe, deserves special attention and consideration too. Chinese culture has always interpreted life as a circle in a strong relationship with nature. Many centuries ago, one of the prominent Chinese thinkers, Lao Tse, suggested in one of his

best and extremely profound works known as *Tao Te King* (also spelled as Lao Tzu and *Tao Te Ching*) that, if human beings are left alone and are not subjected to the control of institutions, they tend to be happy and live in harmony with nature as well as with one another. We kill ourselves when we kill nature. So, answering the questions I asked at the beginning, any “healthy” society in order to bring up a “healthy” individual must try to maintain a balance between technological progress and the preservation of nature and tradition regardless of how difficult it is to be put into practice. Furthermore, as Dalai Lama in his *Ethics for the New Millennium* suggests, more and more people feel lonely, confused, anxious or depressed in the mechanised world and it is because they lack basic ethical or spiritual principles. So when incorporating technology into our everyday lives I certainly believe it is high time we called for an ethical and spiritual revolution.

I have recently read an article in the Polish magazine “Polityka” which claims that the West has gone too far and has become overdependent on computer technology. The article warns of the dangers of the Internet on young people. One young surfer interviewed admits that: “(...) playing games creates confusion in adolescent users who begin to think that life is like a game. If you die, you can get a new life and such an attitude more often than not results in young criminals underestimating the importance of life in general. Life is not a game, game is not life, unfortunately” (Winnicka 2005; my translation).²

Notes

¹ Here Williams refers to the ancient capital of the Persian Empire that was ruled by the Achaemenid dynasty before its conquest by Alexander the great.

² “Jacek zwraca uwag_, ze gry powoduj_ odrealnienie m_ odzie_y, której si_ wydaje potem, _e w _yciu tak jak w grze. Jak si_ umiera, to mo_na mie_ nowe _ycie i st_d te_ jest takie niskie poszanowanie dla _ycia innych u m_ odocianych przest_pców. _ycie to nie gra, gra to nie _ycie, niestety”.

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