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Utopia and Landscape:  
On the Convergence of Spatial Imaginaries

Abstract:

Utopia and landscape (re)present, in textual form, spatial phenomena that are at once real and imagined. Just as utopia draws on existing socioeconomic relations for the purpose of their critique and subsequent reconstitution, landscape provides an index to the condition of society, frequently attesting to the need of change. This essay traces the etymological and historical origins of utopia and landscape to a nascent form of capitalism in sixteenth-century England, and posits the legacies of land enclosure as a defining presence unresolved by spatial imaginaries. Further, utopia and landscape are situated in the context of theoretical designations of space and place. Insofar as utopia and landscape share a common commitment to space as a becoming and coexistence of stories, and place as a largely conflicted concretization of spatial relations, they produce (re)presentations of alterity that simultaneously stay within and go against, as well as beyond, the status quo. The essay concludes by discussing the functional interchanges between utopia and landscape. It contends that the two concepts deliver use value for spatial reconstitution, so long as this process is guided by a robust sense of the real in unison with an empowered and educated imagination.

Key words: utopia, landscape, space, place, representation

Utopia and landscape have conceptual, semantic and functional kinship. Primarily, they are textual (verbal, pictorial, cinematic, musical) phenomena, premised on an ascertainable idea of space, which makes them at once real and imagined. The convergence of utopia and landscape may be registered at several levels: etymology and historical provenance, theoretical designation and use value. Place underpins the etymology of utopia (from the Greek ‘topos’), just as the etymology of landscape pivots on land, area or region (from the Dutch ‘landschap’ or the German ‘Landschaft’).¹ Whereas ‘utopia’ denotes a place which is either non-existent or good, ‘landscape’ derives its meaning from an indivisible view of the land. In historical

perspective, the spatiality of said concepts is no coincidence. Both utopia and landscape evolved, in their own peculiar ways, as reactions to a nascent form of capitalism. The two words entered the English language in the sixteenth century, a time when England was developing a legal and economic framework of land enclosure, which, following the Reformation, continued to reconfigure church and monastic land ownership. The spatial legacies of those transformations still shape much of the English landscape. Some of them are celebrated as national heritage, while others play into the hands of new enclosing practices, and many remain what they have long been – off-limits.

Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516) provides a symptomatic and prefigurative exploration of the nexus between utopia and landscape. Recording the effects of land enclosure on the privileges of sheep over people, Karl Marx famously alluded to men-eating sheep in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859) and *Capital: Critique of Political Economy* (1867). The first part of *Utopia* contains the oft-cited reflection that English ‘sheep that were wont to be so meek and tame and so small eaters, now [...] become so great devourers and so wild, that they eat up and swallow down the very men themselves’. By contrast, the second part of the text mounts an alternative to what we may imagine as a depopulated and enclosure-riven landscape of England. Hythloday, *Utopia*’s main narrator, recalls the Utopian landscape:

They set great store by their gardens. In them they have vineyards, all manner of fruit, herbs, and flowers, so pleasant, so well furnished, and so finely kept [...]. Their study and diligence herein cometh not only of pleasure, but also of a certain strife and contention that is between street and street concerning the trimming, husbanding, and furnishing of their gardens, every man for his own part. And verily you shall not lightly find in all the city anything that is more commodious, either for the profit of the citizens or for pleasure. And therefore it may seem that the first founder of the city minded nothing so much as these gardens.

To be sure, Hythloday revisits an urban landscape, as gardens constitute a feature in Utopian cities. Such gardens exist within a wider infrastructure of communal, rather than private, land ownership. On this score, the passage above anticipates the work-pleasure principle, advocated in William Morris’s *News from*

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3 Ibid., 54.
Nowhere (1890), alongside a vision of England as a garden ‘where nothing is wasted and nothing is spoilt’. However, Hythloday’s view of the Utopian landscape equally reveals its imbrication with emerging capitalist relations. Utopian gardens may be communal, but they are maintained for the sake of competition and profit, rather than for the livelihood of all. If we accept the claim that Utopia, as well as utopia, prefigures and participates in the production of capitalist modernity, we should be ready to discern in More’s prefiguration a landscape that remains fragmented, yet involved in the overarching networks of competitive and profit-driven production. Utopia thus heightens a sense of socioeconomic alterity; yet it largely pleads allegiance to its self-consciously ‘witty’ tonality. The Utopian order struggles to think against and beyond an enclosed landscape, granting only a partial view of a (non-existent or good) place, which is utopia.

Theoretical enquiry into the convergence of utopia and landscape posits questions about their conceptual designation within current understandings of space and place. Further to these questions, the functioning of utopia and landscape as simultaneously real and imagined phenomena begs attention. Ever since the ‘spatial turn’ in the Humanities, inaugurated by Michel Foucault’s essay ‘Of Other Spaces’ (‘Des espaces autres’, 1967), the idea of space as a surface and empty container has been firmly rejected. Space has come to be theorized as always relational and constantly being made of a multiplicity of coexisting stories. Along these lines, any cross-section through space reveals not only a setting-up of new relations, but also a becoming of previously established ones. Place, in turn, has been seen as a concretization of spatial relations. Unlike space, place is geographically meaningful and practically valuable, so long as it marks a pause in the constant making of space. Most recently, David Bell has argued in Rethinking Utopia: Place, Power, Affect (2017) that utopia should be understood in close association with place, rather than space. A place-bound concept of utopia would permit us to concretize our transformative praxis, avoiding thus the deadlocks of both an indeterminate nowhere and a phantasmal elsewhere, yet

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4 William Morris, News from Nowhere, in Selections from William Morris (Moscow: Foreign Languages, 1959), 367.
7 Ibid., 66.
privileging a place which is ‘within, against and beyond this (and any) present’.\textsuperscript{8} In locating utopia within the specificity of spatial relations, Bell demonstrates that place is an equally dynamic site of conflict and change, which demands an expansion of utopia. He concedes that place-bound utopia can face the problem of closure and, by extension, degeneration.\textsuperscript{9} However, an element of closure might be needed strategically in order to cultivate ‘an internal openness’ further.\textsuperscript{10}

This recommendation, along with contemporary theorizations of space, conduces to a revision of the concept of landscape. Historically, landscape emerged as a form of control. Being a framed and frozen view of the land, carved out from ‘nature’ and absorbed into ‘culture’, landscape was long thought to arrest space and deaden place.\textsuperscript{11} In other words, landscape would allegedly flatten out the texture of spatial relations into a surface, as well as neutralize the political that informs the dynamism of place. However, if seen as but one instance in the multiplicity of coexisting and becoming stories that constitute space,\textsuperscript{12} landscape acquires as much openness as is required of utopia. Like utopia, landscape (re)presents a specific and bounded place, yet this place always takes shape at the intersections of ongoing global-scale practices.

In \textit{For Space} (2005), Doreen Massey has dubbed said practices ‘stories-so-far’, construing their nature as both real and imagined.\textsuperscript{13} This construction finds its precedents in the earlier work of Henri Lefebvre and Edward Soja, who propose to treat space as a trialectics comprised of a perceived (real), a conceived (imagined) and a lived (real-and-imagined) order.\textsuperscript{14} Expanding on Lefebvre’s theory, Soja posits lived space, or the ‘Thirdspace’, as a combination of the real and the imagined. The Thirdspace deconstructs and reconstitutes the seeming totalization of socioeconomic practices occurring in space, as well as challenges the arrangement and design imposed on space. Subsequently, the Thirdspace produces ‘an open alternative that is both similar and strikingly different’, creating a site of hybridity with,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{8} David M. Bell, \textit{Rethinking Utopia: Place, Power, Affect} (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 63.
\item \textsuperscript{9} David Harvey, \textit{Spaces of Hope} (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002), 183, 185.
\item \textsuperscript{10} Bell, 122.
\item \textsuperscript{11} Cosgrove, 16, 22.
\item \textsuperscript{12} Massey, 28.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 9.
\end{itemize}
and resistance to, the dominant spatial organization. Utopia and landscape lend themselves quite productively to the latter designation. Unlike other forms of the fantastic, utopia rarely transcends the laws of gravitation and energy that govern space (provided these laws define what is real). Yet utopia seeks to undercut the order of socioeconomic practices, (re)presenting them in the form of alternate places. Landscape, in turn, registers the features of the land which may be real (in the sense of being governed by the laws of gravitation and energy), but these features become a landscape solely in our imagination. An alpine valley is no more real or imagined than its photograph, painting or poetic description. For such (re)presentations of landscape to produce a lived (real-and-imagined) space, they need to do justice to the constant becoming of stories-so-far, which brings out dissonance as a marker of place and opens up new possibilities for change. Utopia and landscape share a common commitment to space and place, in whose production they play a most active part. However, that part should adopt an even stronger self-questioning cadence, disrupting further the very terms on which utopia and landscape pretend to allow a panoptic view of lived space. Any such view reneges on the idea of space as a meeting-up of stories; it also muffles the hereto unresolved questions of race, gender and class, as well as the split of ‘nature’ from ‘culture’. As imaginaries of lived space, utopia and landscape should hold the panoptic view suspect, in order to avoid a reversal to the deadness of a framed representation.

Utopia and landscape converge in delivering use value for spatial and, by implication, socioeconomic reconstitution. Their wider convergence takes on the form of a functional interchange. Expanding on John Ruskin’s idea of a minatory vantage point, landscape supplies

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15 Soja, 61.
19 Bell, 143.
utopia with an index to the current condition of society. Utopia uses that index to articulate a sustained critique, which enables revision, search and, ultimately, change of the status quo. The process and outcome of this change affect the whole fabric of a place, finding a contained (and frequently dissonant) expression in its landscape. Even though landscape may gradually become an index of reconstitution, utopia should never give up on its ‘desire for a better way of living and being’, which is an ever open horizon. Living and being in such a landscape presupposes a constant balancing-out of distance and proximity, observation and participation, critique and action, solidarity and initiative. In order to ensure the continuing work of utopia in a landscape, a robust sense of the real must accompany an empowered and educated imagination.

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Abstrakt:

Utopia i krajobraz są pojęciami połączonymi przez semantykę i funkcjonowanie. Ich konwergencja podlega opisaniu na następujących poziomach: etymologicznym, historycznego pochodzenia, teoretycznego stosowania i wartości użytkowej. Autor niniejszego eseju stoi na stanowisku, że oba te pojęcia uczestniczą w rekonstrukcji przestrzeni i powiązanych z nią stosunków społeczno-ekonomicznych. Proces takiej rekonstrukcji musi kierować się solidnym poczuciem rzeczywistości w jedności z rozbudzoną i światłą wyobraźnią.

Słowa kluczowe:
Utopia, krajobraz, przestrzeń, miejsce, reprezentacja