

## **Etopia, Or, After the Illuminist Imaginaries of Modernity**

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The links between utopian and dystopian imaginaries, computer mediated communication technologies and the “digital divide,” in its numerous forms, as well as the links between these things and science fiction, are relatively under-researched. It will be argued here that the tendency to view the internet in terms of utopian or dystopian imaginaries is problematic on a number of levels; it will also be argued that science fiction films which are framed in terms of informatics and computer mediated communication technologies, such as *2001* and *The Matrix* trilogy, actually problematise such imaginaries.

James Katz and Ronald Rice highlight some of the utopian imaginaries in relation to the internet, which is represented variously as a global source of emancipation, a catalyst of increased democratisation and a path to “an egalitarian, multimedia information society.”<sup>1</sup> They examine a kind of utopian imaginary in which access increases, participation increases (in the global net economy), fewer netizens are disenfranchised, and civic, political and community involvement increase. According to this imaginary, it will be easier for all to participate, more and more will become active and as a consequence more problems will be solved as more citizens will be empowered. The utopian trajectory is quite clear: this is a discourse of ongoing improvement or amelioration and computer mediated communication technologies will enable it.

What needs to be weighed against these kinds of discourses is the

dystopian discourse of a theorist like Baudrillard, who understood emancipation, or liberation, in the context of the digital or virtual world as a deregulated system which entails a “monstrosity.”<sup>2</sup> Emancipation is seen as an ideal in a “sort of illuminist imagining of modernity.”<sup>3</sup> The new paradigm, according to Baudrillard, is “integral reality” in which the very possibility of representing the oppressed subject vanishes and in which such beings are outside the order of representation; there can be no transcendence.

Technology is understood as integralist; it resembles a cataclysmic event that initiates the “code of the automatic disappearance of the world.”<sup>4</sup> We are no longer confronted with a monitor which reflects our image but a surface that resembles an abyss, where image and imagination are lost. “We” are subject to the order of “indefinite repetition.”<sup>5</sup> The nihilistic-dystopian connection is clear to Baudrillard: desolation and emptiness are the results.<sup>6</sup> With regard to the “haves” and “have nots,” or to the “digital divide,” Mark Warschauer points out (a statistic familiar to scholars in this area) that “up to 96% of the world’s population [is] without connectivity,” especially in parts of Asia, South America and Africa. Moreover, he points out that levels of connectivity do not seem to be improving in these parts of the world. He does not believe that social problems can be solved by the provision of computers and access to the Internet,<sup>7</sup> with some justification, since “access” brings into view many factors including “physical, digital, human, and social resources and relationships.”<sup>8</sup> More problematically, he argues that the “original sense” of “digital divide ... attached overriding importance to the physical availability of computers and connectivity”, though just what he has in mind when he speaks of such things remains unclear. He also finds the division between the “haves” and the “have nots” to be “inaccurate,” “patronising” and impotent,<sup>9</sup> but again for reasons that are not set out clearly or cogently. It is not clear what sources he has in mind or which scholarly works he is addressing. It is possible to argue that the “digital divide” allows a practical and informed analysis of the extent to which the global population participates in any meaningful sense in this “global” technology; the extent to which the technology is genuinely global; and the extent to which it helps to alleviate real communication and cultural problems in many parts of the globe. Although the relationship (which one finds articulated in the *Mondo 2000* discourse, for example) between high-technology and its middle-class appropriations, on the one hand, and the low-technology sphere manifested, for example, in the state of the oppressed in the *Matrix* trilogy, on the other, is a pertinent one here, Warschauer’s work on the “digital divide” serves to reinforce the sense of a state of privation that should not be forgotten in the context of dystopian imaginaries in particular. In other words, these imaginaries are often articu-

lated not just in terms of *differences of degree* (for example, in terms of high-tech and low-tech accessibility and penetration) but also, importantly, in terms of *differences in kind* – *it would seem that dystopia is in one sense about what it means to be in a state of privation*, or to echo the words of Warschauer quoted above, about what it means to exist in the relative absence or lack of “physical, digital, human, and social resources and relationships.”

Certainly, many utopian and dystopian imaginaries with regard to the Internet revolve around the notion of a “digital divide” or its overcoming in socially, culturally and/or politically interesting and significant ways and there have been many notable studies in this respect.<sup>10</sup> And certainly, Bloch’s writing on “the absolute light” that “still” burns “within,” the actual movement towards “the *cosmic* implementation of the principal concept of utopia,”<sup>11</sup> like his emphases on utopia in the light of the “inconstruable” and in relation to “restlessness,” “emptiness,” and “unknowing,” are apt in this context: “it is not questionable to say that it [the beginning] is enigmatic; ... it is we whose beginning remains enigmatic, since the darkness of the lived moment, so near to us, ... still contains the enigma of the beginning.”<sup>12</sup>

What then of the relevance of utopian and dystopian imaginaries with regard to informatics, computer mediated technologies and science fiction? It has been argued that utopian imaginaries in relation to the Internet and computer mediated communication technologies are problematic, to say the least, because of the *digital divide* and analogous problems and issues, some of which will now be explored further.

Science fiction films like *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *The Matrix* trilogy are also framed in terms of techno-mediated utopian or dystopian post-colonialist or postmodernist (post-human) imaginaries. *2001* frames its vision of transformation and transcendence within the context of a kind of neo-Nietzschean affirmation of self-overcoming or *Überwindung*; each phase of our evolution from the time of the apemen produces beings who are bridges to the *Übermensch*, who in turn is evoked in the final frames of the film in the form of the star child at the dawn of a new dispensation that evolution fashions out of the prior earthly informatics-based integration of culture, history, technology and emergent consciousness. This is a dispensation which is techno-mediated; it supersedes in a mysterious but affirmative way the union of astronaut and monolith in a heightened space-time manifold – a manifold which is realised by the narrative drive towards higher, integralist techno-cultural capabilities (Dave, once free of HAL and the ship that HAL controls – a metonymic representation of human culture and history in the grip so to speak of informatics and technoscience – drives further into infinity, a voyage that he seemingly cannot undertake

and survive without the techno-mediated leaps which the monolith signifies and impels). The film seems performatively to demonstrate the utopian belief that technology, or more broadly, technoscience, will aid transcendence and drive human culture to a hitherto unrealised potentiality, closely akin to that of the neo-Nietzschean *Übermensch* – in the context of informatics, and parodying Nietzsche's Zarathustra, one might say: technoscience as the bridge to the overman.<sup>13</sup> There can be little doubt that this demonstration is conditioned by the techno-centred dynamics and hopes of the present age, with the current emphasis on the transformative possibilities offered for example by our ability to connect human neurons to computers, or the fibres of human consciousness, so to speak, to computer hardware, and by the possibility of augmenting and extending bodies in virtual and prosthetic ways in the posthuman age.

But it is possible to discern in *2001* a critique of the ideological dimension of such transformations and of posthumanism in general; it is not at all clear in the film that the future in which transcendence seems imminent is one that can be shared by all or from which violence and warfare are absent, for the first three parts of the film have made clear the informatics-based connection not just between technological advance and cultural transformation, but also between technological advance and recurrent conflict, tension and violence. The symbolic order of the intersection, or the code of the integration of these elements, is one in which the "world," in Baudrillard's sense, does not so much disappear as reappear artificially, virtually or digitally on a platform that is inherently precarious because it is based on fragile alliances, affiliations and associations. This precariousness or instability concerning the acceleration and transformations at the intersections of technology and culture is not really resolved at all by the film's final thematic and narrative thrust.

It is as if the film appropriates a teleological form where sublation and synthesis are problematised by the persistence of alterity, that is, a kind of difference or otherness which haunts a systematic desire, a no less persistent global drive, towards a higher but not a synthesising or totalising telos. The images at the end of the film, with its opening towards a future pregnant with mystery and possibility, performatively raise the question of a goal that is yet to come, a kind of secular messianic promise, perhaps. The enigma at the film's end (not forgetting Bloch's insistence on the enigma of the beginning, again) – not so much a fatal strategy as a "foetal" strategy, one might say! – is in one very important sense a dramatic, portentous and heightened metonymic re-inscription of the multiple and non-synthesisable structure of potentiality. The Child is in no clear sense an embodiment of racial or ethnic unity or global harmony and cohesion, a point that seems

also to be metonymically inscribed and reinforced in its fair features and blue eyes (in themselves haunting metonymic traces of a traumatic, unforgettable, familiar and disturbing early twentieth century politico-cultural history and narrative concerning race, ideology, oppression and genocide) and of the desire that shapes this conception in the very space of the intersection between technology and the nascent cultures of the *Übermensch*. One is left awestruck and mystified in the very space of that intersection where ontology has become inescapably intertwined with technoscience. Or where the symbolic order brings together *ontos* and *techne*, where the ontological desire for and drive towards transcendence is rendered dual, multiple even, by traces of alterity (realised for example through violence within and around the symbolic order of evolutionary transformation and growth) that have been superseded in some forms but persist as traces or spectral elements which the order must bear with itself. One sees a kind of spectral archive, one might say, which the symbolic order that culminates in the enigmatic vision at the film's end cannot erase from view but rather sustains and bears within itself like some obscure but inherent mutation, that haunts the (virtual or digital) host throughout its (virtual or simulacral) evolutionary transformations. The meaning of the film, in its ultimate sense, is yet to be realised, but not in terms of a Hegelian dialectic. There is no indication in the film that the foetus is spirit; it seems very physical, very embodied, very material. In this sense the film's ultimate meaning is not so much deferred as already unfolding; it is framed as yet another transformation, now incorporating the (simulacral) body of the child, itself a metonymy of further evolutionary transformations to come.<sup>14</sup>

The evolutionary frame with its unfolding transformations of matter and energy should not be overlooked. In this context it is problematic to situate the film securely within a utopian or dystopian framework. It is not at all clear that the divisions that are instantiated in many of the film's earlier scenes or the tensions and conflicts between human and artificial intelligence have been conclusively overcome. Certainly, Hal has been left behind, but crucially, the subject, once again, has been impelled by the monolith's appearance – and the monolith has been linked throughout the film with technological advance. If the child is an immanent *Übermensch* of some kind, the overall trajectory would suggest that technology and culture will continue to evolve in an established, but not necessarily a utopian or dystopian, affiliation, and not necessarily in the absence of division or conflict or violence. Though the singularity of the image of the child may suggest a unity to come, there is nothing to indicate clearly that that unity will be all-encompassing: the internal dynamics and structures of the child's consciousness or of its phenomenal existence remain uncharted and mys-

terious due to their future orientation. In this context the digital divide takes on another guise: division is not just generated by the technology and its accessibility; here, the divide remains *internal* and is preserved, by implication and suggestion, in the unfolding archive that is the consciousness of the metonymic Child as it turns towards an uncertain future that may well feature some of the dynamism, at least, of its eventful and persistent past. The informatics question – that of the integrated or affiliated evolution of technoscience, history, culture and consciousness – constituted by this open futurity, is nonetheless sufficient to problematise any dogmatic affirmation of a utopia or dystopia to come.

*The Matrix Trilogy* also putatively explores technologically mediated, culturally heightened utopian and dystopian imaginaries that are overtly concerned with digitally divided multitudes. The “have-nots” in this world are numerous and, crucially, bear within themselves revolutionary impetus and fervour. But the films also appropriate a messianic frame and valorise messianic eschatologies.<sup>15</sup> Just as *2001* connects but does not totally synthesise technoscience and possibly redemptive evolutionary structures of transformation, *The Matrix* connects but does not fully synthesise a kind of post-humanist, redemptive neo-messianism (pun intended!) that cannot be divorced from the symbolic order of alterity.

The Zionites and their leaders are clearly post-humanist figures in a new and symbolically divided world order. They lead technologically augmented and mediated lives; they hack into the matrix; they destabilise its structures of oppression and enslavement; ontology has become connected to, and more fully intelligible in terms of, computer mediated communication technologies such as the Internet, or more broadly in the context of the technoscientific paradigm. Morpheus, Trinity and Neo are clearly positioned in an apocalyptic context: humanity needs to be emancipated and redeemed, not from technoscience, to be sure, but from the neo-imperialist realisation of technological capability. The overtly post-colonialist, neo-messianic eschatological frame is apparent in their quest for the redeemer, embodied through a process of gradual realisation in the hybrid figure of the new man, Anderson, and the awakened redeemer, Neo. But the films are quite clear on the nature of the redemptive task: the redeemer must join with the god of the machines in order to obliterate the virulent alterity of simulacral evil (configured digitally as a nihilistic rogue program and as a potentially infinitely replicating digital virus) embodied in the symbolic figure of Smith.

*The Matrix* films seem to be dystopian on one level: the “code” in the narrative is shorthand for global mastery, oppression and the illusion of freedom and fulfilment, amongst other things. But the dystopian possibili-

ties of our technologically mediated futures are only a pretext; these films inscribe simulacral evil in the forms of neo-colonialist oppression and of nihilistic self-affirmation and self-replication only to affirm the higher soteriological order of the triumph of the symbolic man of faith and emergent, virtual messianism. For example, in the penultimate scenes of the trilogy, Smith has been obliterated (almost sublated and transcended); the Zionites have been set free from their neo-Platonic cyber-cave, symbolic site of the wretchedness of the conscious and the free (as the cyber-colonised); the image of Neo has been linked to the image of the god of the machines, as the symbolic son is linked to the symbolic father in messianic eschatologies, and Neo's digitally configured death unfolds in a spectacular cruciform explosion of light through the eschatologically transformed virtual city of the host. The simulacral figure of the illuminated son, in his virtual agony, technologically augmented and heightened, sets the Zionites (virtual slaves, so to speak) free. In this way he instigates a kind of eschatological messianic cyber-code, a new symbolic order, a new kind of image of the ark of the covenant for the post-humanist age, in which a tentative peace is achieved and a tentative unity is inaugurated between the order of the transfigured but technologically augmented "son" and his followers, and the order of the god of the machines, or the symbolic "father," who is technologically mediated and realised. In the affiliation of the figure of the "father" and the "son," the inherent apostatic – Luciferian, one might say – elements are brought into the order of the father's dominion, at least for a time, by the heroic expulsion of Smith, and the hitherto anticipated and prophesied sacrifice of the new virtual "lamb," Neo.

Though it seems on the surface that a utopian imaginary governs the end of this narrative, this is by no means clear or straightforward. Just as the vision at the end of Kubrick's film inscribes an enigma and a question (a question of possibility, of an open but not entirely unknown horizon in relation to a Nietzschean discourse of transformation and self-overcoming, a day beginning and ending according to this kind of metonymic representation, a noontide and a night to follow), *The Matrix* trilogy inscribes an enigma and a question too but within a techno-soteriological code: the human (global) population, techno-culturally configured, virtually enslaved by the order of the machines, and digitally divided along the lines of something like a master-slave cyber-dialectic, a codified virtual father and son relation which is twofold and cleft (not "one," for it operates as a redemptive but also as an oppressive bond), is granted freedom. But this freedom, it is clear, is predicated upon agony and death (a kind of cyber-crucifixion) as pretexts of a transcendence that is anything but stable and eternal: the "peace" is open to negotiation and agreement, therefore also to the possi-

bility of disagreement, and is tentative, only just beginning, provisional and hence open to the possibility of alterity. This much seems to be embodied in the figure of the young girl who, like the Child of 2001, metonymically signifies a better but in some sense uncertain future, one that is not necessarily in the utopian register, but who, unlike the Child in 2001, exists in the shadow of the messianic narrative. She lives, she is free, the sun shines, the world unfolds, even as she articulates the hope of the return that forms such an integral part of the eschatological-messianic narrative.

“Etopia” – which is neither purely utopian nor dystopian, partly because it is constituted by the *question* of our evolution posed and explored in digital or simulacral environments, and generally in the context of informatics, by the question of what constitutes those transformations in consciousness at the intersections of technology and culture, and by the question of digital divides understood more broadly – is found in those virtual or simulacral spaces where informatics, technoscience and culture are connected and made intelligible, as representations, within narratives of transformation, self-overcoming, hope, emancipation, the promise of a possible return, and of another division transcended, perhaps. But such “etopian” concerns do not unfold *independently of another, and integral, order of questions*: the question of a representation of an evolution that is not entirely an enabling phenomenon, a representation of a possible difference that has not been articulated, anticipated or imagined (akin in some respects to Socrates’ or Derrida’s aporetics).<sup>16</sup> They represent a future that is genuinely open, complex, full of promise and therefore also with an integral element of uncertainty, and of anxiety too, but one in which the discourses of freedom, emancipation and deliverance can unfold as manifold, complex and illuminist, not just in the sense of the Enlightenment, but also in the sense of something that is configured, or better, enfigured – subject to tropeology, one might say: given light, emphasis, energy, vitality, rendered vivid, even radiant through the image or the sign, as in 2001 or The Matrix trilogy. In other words, etopia is not bound to the order of the affirmative or the negative alone but also, inescapably and generally, to the manifold order of the interrogative, or of heuristics more broadly, and their inherence in the replicable registers of discourse, narrative, the virtual, the simulacral, the digital and the imaginary.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> James E. Katz and Ronald E. Rice, *Social consequences of internet use: access, involvement, and interaction* (London and Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), p. xix.
- <sup>2</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Fragments: Conversations with Francois L'Yvonnet* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 43.
- <sup>3</sup> Baudrillard, *Fragments*, p. 44.
- <sup>4</sup> Baudrillard, *Fragments*, p. 67.
- <sup>5</sup> Baudrillard, *Fragments*, p. 69.
- <sup>6</sup> Baudrillard, *Fragments*, p. 57.
- <sup>7</sup> Mark Warschauer, *Technology and Social Inclusion: Rethinking the Digital Divide* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2003), p. 1.
- <sup>8</sup> Warschauer, *Technology and Social Inclusion*, p. 6.
- <sup>9</sup> Warschauer, *Technology and Social Inclusion*, p. 7.
- <sup>10</sup> See Pippa Norris, *Digital divide: civic engagement, information poverty, and the Internet worldwide* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Benjamin Compaine, ed., *The digital divide : facing a crisis or creating a myth?* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001); Lisa Servon, *Bridging the digital divide: technology, community, and public policy* (J. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002); Joel Cooper and Kimberlee D. Weaver, *Gender and computers: understanding the digital divide* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2003); Peter Day and Doug Schuler, eds., *Community practice in the network society: local action / global interaction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004); Jens Damm and Simona Thomas, eds., *Chinese cyberspaces: technological changes and political effects* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), among others.
- <sup>11</sup> Ernst Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 248.
- <sup>12</sup> Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, p. 227.
- <sup>13</sup> "Where the State ceaseth – I pray you look there, my brethren! Do you not see it, the rainbow, the bridge to the Superman?" Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, trans. A. Tille (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1960), p. 43.
- <sup>14</sup> See "The Child with the Mirror" in Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Second Part, XXIII, for parallels in this context.
- <sup>15</sup> See Raymond Aaron Younis, "Restlessly, violently, headlong, like a river that wants to reach its end...": Nihilism, Reconstruction and the Hero's Journey", in *Heroes*, eds. Angela Ndalians, Chris Mackie and Wendy Haslem (Washington: New Academia Publishing, 2007).
- <sup>16</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *Aporias* (Stanford, California: Stanford UP, 1993).