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Envisioning Utopian Spaces in the Future

The working hypothesis of our session revolves around the topic of the island, conceived of as a utopian space, re-conceptualised in temporal terms. More precisely, the concept of “future past” involves a re-discussion of the notion of time, future and past in utopias and dystopias. A starting point could be an assessment of crucial hypothetical questions raised by some utopian and dystopian writers: “What will have happened by that time?” “What would have happened if?” Such questions are inextricably connected with acts of figuring and recalling, of selecting, organising and re-shaping facts and events, both personal and collective. Looking back at the past in our post-modern age is often tinged with nostalgia. Arguably, utopian/dystopian fiction explores the possibility of re-tracing the past in order to critically find out the promises that have not been fulfilled.

I shall divide my contribution in two parts: in the first of these I will highlight how the *topos* of the island in literary Utopia is charged with a double value, and in the second part I shall concentrate my attention on the category of the “future past” and its relationship with nostalgia and the “déjà vu” category. In order to do this, I shall compare two very different texts: on the one hand the film *2046* and on the other Ursula le Guin’s science-fiction novel *The Telling* (2000).

In Magritte’s paintings the theme of the treasure island – *l’île au trésor* – is a recurring motif of his poetics, since it visually represents some contradictory elements in the imagery of the myth of the island. The title itself offers an insight into the possible interpretations of various versions of the same subject: *L’île au trésor* (1941, 1945) (picture 1) evokes not only the archetypal idea that a treasure could possibly have

been hidden somewhere on the island, but also the layered tradition of the literary *topos* with its rich symbolical implications. The azure colour of a calm, golden sea, which is reflected in the contours of the mountains, is in contra-position with the oniric, pervasive light and the earthy, stony, brownish soil of the island, on which exceptionally strange creatures thrive: several leaf-bird families, which Magritte ironically refers to as “les grâces naturelles”. These compound creatures symbolise the uncanny motif of the metamorphosis of genres and species which is typical of surrealist art. However, in these paintings it acquires a further, deeper meaning, as it becomes a metaphor which alludes to the intrinsic symbolic duality of the island.

Magritte’s revision of the myth of the island allows me to introduce my working hypothesis: in the utopian literary tradition the island is a structural metaphor for signifying the *otherwhere*: a metaphor which stresses the bipolar components of the myth itself. The island is in fact a necessary device for the construction of the concept of otherness, of *ou-topos*, in the double sense of nowhere and *eu-topos*, place of goodness. The positive elements are rooted in the concept of the island as a magic circle which encloses and protects, which contains a self-sufficient universe, a place of security complete in itself, where peace and serenity reign. In this sense, the island reworks the *topos* of the garden of Eden inhabited by good-natured natives, and enriched by luxuriant vegetation as well as prolific, tamed animal species. The negative components are connected with the dangerous cliffs of its coast, and especially with the hardness of the mineral soil which alludes to stagnation and paralysis. In this sense, the enclosure of the magic circle no longer offers protection but becomes a place of isolation and seclusion, a claustrophobic trap. Thus, the island is no longer blessed, but insidious, aggressive, full of deceptive lures.

The island, when no longer used as a physical space where a utopian or dystopian *otherwhere* can be placed, becomes, in twentieth and twenty-first century critical dystopias, a metaphor stressing the condition of isolation needed by their heroes in extreme conditions, such as those of totalitarian regimes, or in the presence of historical traumas. For example, in George Orwell’s *1984*, a room, and in particular the corner of the room in which the pervasive eye of television cannot reach,

becomes a sort of island where Winston Smith, the hero, manages to escape the totalitarian regime's control, in order to write his diary.

In the second part of my contribution I analyse the category of the "future past", which is intimately connected to those of the "déjà vu" and of "nostalgia". The working hypothesis is that the "future past" is a philosophical category that well reflects one of the features of our contemporary world: the obsession for the past and consequently the incapacity of projecting in the future alternative societies. I will start from the film *2046*, because not only has it provoked many reflections, but also because, in my opinion, it is the symptom of a widespread contemporary mood. The film is a creation of the Chinese director Wong Kar-Wai, who became a cult figure for the young with his *In the Mood for Love*, which was shown at the Cannes film festival in 2004. *2046* tries to visually render the disquieting possibility of being able to make the past relive in the future. The film is characterised by constant temporal displacements, by flashbacks, ellipses and the cinematographic technique of "jump-cutting". *2046* also presents formal solutions that are both gripping and impressive for the spectator, and which show how the director's talent in graphics and photography has become more and more refined.

The central theme of the film is subsequently that of time and memory, the story in fact develops on different temporal planes which intertwine and interlock. *2046* is a complex work, the plot of which is impossible to relate, because it appears as a journey in the labyrinth of the mind, of the body, of desire and memory. Even the film's soundtrack, alternating between melodrama arias (*Casta Diva* and Bellini's melodies chase each other for the length of the whole film) and vintage pop songs, encourages dispersion, disorientation and the juxtaposition of contrasting sensations. *2046* is a fascinating work of art, a fluid, elusive and intricate object, difficult to pin down. The eponymous number 2046 itself has multiple values: it is the number of the anonymous brothel room where the hero Chow Mo Won, a 1960s journalist and writer of novels lives; 2046 is also the title of the erotic science-fiction novel that the hero is writing. The voice off, an important asset of the film, states: "Every once in a life a train leaves to a mysterious place where lost memories are remembered, but no one has ever returned from 2046,

except me... Was it a country, a date, a place of memory? People said that down there everything stayed the same, an assumption, because no-one had ever come back. With an exception, he chose to leave, to come back”¹. On this train, a sort of ghost ship of the future, the only passenger is Tak, a kind of “alter ego” of the hero, the only one to have chosen to “come back”. In the film, the past, the present and the future keep overlapping, just like life and art, dreams and reality, in a melange which is difficult for the spectator to disentangle, in order to find the slight thread of the story, because the director doesn’t want to recount, but to evoke the nostalgia for love that cannot be erased, nor forgotten. The initial futuristic and science-fiction images of the train to the future become a metaphor of an internal, existential journey through memory, a journey in search of a non-place, a nowhere (image 2). Memory becomes an actual place for reality, deserving a journey in the future-past in order to find it. In this film time is a cruel, indifferent element, because it causes people to miss chances, and obliges them to spend the rest of their lives searching for an unattainable synchrony. This means that one can miss the love of one’s life because of meeting it too soon or too late in life: “love is all a question of timing”, is more or less the final comment of the film. Thus nostalgia is not only a revival and regret of the past, but also the desperate search for an attempted recovery of the love object, with the heartbreaking awareness that the past does not return and that it is impossible to retrieve. It is this existential condition that generates disinterest and carelessness towards the present, a fixation, an obsession for the past, and subsequently an impossibility to envisage the future. The director declares in an interview. “The future is nothing but a way of fleeing the present, although remaining an extension of the past. And time is a circle starting where it ends, and *vice-versa*.”².

¹ 2046 Script. Dialogue Transcript. Online document http://www.script-o-rama.com/movie_scripts/n/2046-script-transcript-kar-wai.html. Retrieved 16th August 2006.

² 2046 Script. Dialogue Transcript. Online document http://www.script-o-rama.com/movie_scripts/n/2046-script-transcript-kar-wai.html. Retrieved 16th August 2006.

These characteristics of nostalgia in the post-modern age have been highlighted also by Linda Hutcheon in an interesting essay on the difference between nostalgia and irony³. In *2046* there is a presence of nostalgia as a “revival”, especially in the director’s reconstruction of the 60s, in the actors’ clothes, in the interiors, in the feminine glamour embodied by the silk dresses and high heels of the hero’s beautiful mistresses, in the exotic settings, of a rather poignant and melancholic exoticism. The film rather lacks a critical analysis of the historical present in which the hero lives (just a quick reference to student riots and to the Vietnam War by means of short cuts from black and white contemporary documentaries); there is only regret for the past, as the hero states, “he thought he had recounted the future, as a matter of fact, it was the past”⁴. Nostalgia is shown as a regressive return in the pointless attempt to retrieve lost love. All of the film is characterised by an erotic melancholy, a separating type of love that when unrequited becomes haunting. The future – despite the futuristic images of the train and of an android who recalls the only woman the journalist had utterly loved – becomes the past, since it is an excerpt of the present. The hero returns to the past not in order to understand the present, but because he wants to re-live it. It is for this reason that in the year 2046 the past, the present, and the future short-circuit causing the annulling of the flowing of time. Thus the theory of the “unending return”, that is one of the characteristics of the category of the “*déjà vu*”, is yet again presented, as Bodei states in his book *Le piramidi del tempo (The Pyramids of Time)*⁵. The hero continuously lives this “*déjà vu*” experience: he senses in the present experiences he has already lived; he perceives that he has already met the person he meets the first time. This situation provokes in him and in the audience a temporal disorientation, because it cracks the faith in a monolithic and intangible reality, whose solid structure and inalterable substratum can hold out against time’s innumerable mutations.

³ Linda Hutcheon, «Irony, Nostalgia and the Postmodern», <http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/criticism/hutchinp.html>.

⁴ *2046 Script Dialogue* Transcript Online document, *op. cit.*

⁵ Remo Bodei, *Piramidi di Tempo* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2006).

2046 foregrounds this fundamental question: why does the past become a problem in post modernity, why does the future appear more and more uncertain? The acceleration of historical times and the contemporaneous high development of technology have provoked a deep gap between the present and the past. Reinhart Koselleck, in his book *Vergangene Zukunft* (1979) states: “The acceleration of historical time shrinks, in the modern age, the ‘area of experience’ and simultaneously lowers the ‘horizon of expectation’”.⁶ In other words, because of the increased speed with which events chase each other, experience – the significant past, even that past which is the most deserving of being preserved – becomes evermore obsolete and meagre. This happens because on the one hand, the present no longer receives vital lymph from the past, and on the other because the image of the future becomes hazier and hazier, due to the lack of models resembling the past or the present on which to rely on in order to envisage the future. The quick evolution and acceleration of our post-modern society could, then, be the cause of the malaise that individuals experience in locating themselves on a temporal plane. The short-circuit between the present-past and the future has caused, in this contemporary age of ours, contradictory and paradoxical phenomena: if it is true that the hiatus between past and present has become more and more vertiginous, so that it is impossible to find reference models for the future, it is also true that the past has become an obsession. The beginning of the new millennium is characterized, as Huyssen declares, by a “hypertrophy” of memory and the nostalgic withdrawal into the past. Wong Kar-wai’s movie is a no-place where nothing ever changes, where the nostalgia for unsaid things and the regret for what could have been and was not becomes the obsessive function of remembering and of memory.

Ursula le Guin’s *The Telling*, is for many aspects a post-modern dystopic novel not only for the mingling of genres and styles but also for its intertextuality with the anti-Utopian 20th century tradition, (see for instance George Orwell and Ray Bradbury), and for the re-writing of the erasure of History and books in totalitarian regimes. *The Telling*

⁶ Reinhart Koselleck, *Zeitschichten* (Frankfurt:1979).

and *2046* are two works of post-modernity, but what makes them profoundly different is the different symbolic meaning and value that Le Guin bestows to memory and nostalgia. There are actually two central themes in *The Telling*⁷: nostalgia as the link binding individual to collective memory, and the word that becomes a telling, a tale as an indispensable tool to start the saving journey through memory. It is no longer, as it was in *2046*, a nostalgic regression to the past, but rather it is memory becoming an active force, igniting a critical dialogue with the past always starting from the present; a memory that must be continuously discussed and never crystallised. Suttu, who has been on a mission in order to find traces of the ancient Aka culture expresses this concept to a wise old herbalist, the keeper of ancient recipes: “the historians of Ekumen are interested in everything that our member worlds have to teach and we believe *that a useful knowledge of the present is rooted in the past.*”⁸

The Telling follows the vein of critical dystopias, or “flawed dystopias”: these new terms highlight how, in our contemporary age there is a historical awareness of the dangers underlying the conception of utopia as an abstract and totalising model of society. A need is felt to propose “imperfect utopias”, whose new inhabitants reflect on the ethical sense of their acts, on their responsibility towards the communities in which they live, because they are conscious that the perfect utopias of the past have always been paid for, generally by those who were not included in them, or in any case, a high price of suffering and exploitation was called for. Critical dystopia⁹ becomes the narrative space that, not only thematically, but even structurally, foregrounds the most urgent issues of our times, such as, in *The Telling*, for instance, fanaticism and terrorism. Critical dystopias reflect on the functions of literature, on its imaginative possibilities and on its risks of mystification. They prefigure a horizon of hope, expressing a tension towards change that classic anti-

⁷ U.K. Le Guin, *The Telling* (New York: Ace Books, 2000).

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 87.

⁹ Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini, *Dark Horizon* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003).

utopias refused, because beyond the black horizon they configured no hope, only a regressive desire of returning to the past.

In *The Telling* Le Guin prospects two dystopias, on the one hand Earth, dominated by a fundamentalist theocracy, a fanatical and intolerant regime that has brought about the bombing and the destruction of the Library of Congress, in Washington: “The Time of Cleansing. The Commander-General of the Hosts of the Lord announced the bombing while it was in progress, as an educational action. Only one Word, only one Book. All other words, all other books were darkness, errors”.¹⁰ On the other, the extra-terrestrial planet Aka, where the “Corporation State”, a global corporation, in the name of technological progress, has founded a totalitarian, Orwellian-type state, completely erasing culture. A group of “Monitors” controls the behaviour, movements and thoughts of the inhabitants, in a world dominated by slogans and by a continuous and incessant propagandist aggression: “The government of this world, to gain technological power and intellectual freedom, had outlawed the past (...) To this government who had declared they would be free of tradition, customs, and history, all old habits, ways, modes, manners, ideas, pieties were sources of pestilence, rotten corpses to be burned or buried. The writing that had preserved them was to be erased”.¹¹ Le Guin, then, provocatively presents two types of fundamentalism, the first having a religious, the second a mundane nature: the future of these two totalitarian regimes consists in the negation of their history and their past. This theme, essential in the anti-utopian tradition, is revised by Le Guin, by foregrounding memory instead of history, a memory that is not only the cultural heritage of a people, to be preserved and transmitted, but also ‘the telling’ of each individual memory. Telling can express the affectivity and the emotions of the narrating Subject thus becoming a saving instrument for those who have suffered traumatic experiences. Recalling and remembering are the tools that can recompose torn and controversial memories and testify them.

¹⁰ U.K. Le Guin, *The Telling*, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 57.

In *The Telling* the writer uses the theme of the journey, that is endowed with multiple meanings: it is the long and perilous journey that Suttu, the Earth's envoy to Aka, undertakes in the search for the old Aka culture, significantly called "the Telling", a culture founded on a vast heritage of texts and also of oral tales. The texts of this culture were written, but open to multiple interpretations and re-writings, based on infinite versions, as in the epics, parables, and ballads of oral tradition. The journey is not, then, just the physical move towards mount Silog, which is the place where the books are physically kept, the highest peak of the Range of Springs of the Great Continent of Aka, but it is also an initiating journey of knowledge, marking an inner route of personal growth.

In the last pages of the book Le Guin highlights how the heroine Suttu, in order to understand Aka's past and thus help its people to save its culture, must rework her own painful memories. So, both Suttu and Yara, her antagonist, the Monitor, retrieve the story of their lives: sweet memories, childhood passed near to loved ones, but also bitter experiences, their traumas and controversial memories. It is only thus that they will achieve a better understanding of themselves, of their people, and a mutual acceptance of their diversity. It is a painful trip down memory, in order to allow those distressing memories that have been willingly buried in the deepest oblivion, to be retrieved and re-elaborated. The tale of their respective childhoods is charged with deep emotion and feeling. Suttu talks of her family, she describes the places of her childhood with their particular flavours and smells, and describes her lesbian love story, and how her lover, Pao, was cruelly killed during a terrifying fundamentalist terrorist attack.

Yara, the chilling Monitor who has been Suttu's enemy for the whole story, eventually finds the courage to open up to her and tell her about the traumatic episode that has marked his entire existence: his parents, having become supporters of Aka's totalitarian regime, obliged him as a child to attend the stoning of his beloved grandparents, publicly punished by the regime, because dissidents. Through the sharing of these painful experiences, Suttu and Yara start dialoguing and they create the bases for the building of a mutual understanding, eliminating feelings such as hate and revenge. Only after this saving experience, Suttu accepts the

difficult task of preserving the precious body of manuscripts, and thus becoming the keeper of the Telling, because she can't and won't forget Yara. That is, as a matter of fact, the way the novel ends "His life, that was what underwrote her bargaining. His life, Pao's life. Those were the intangible, incalculable stakes. The money burned to ashes, the gold thrown away. Footsteps on the air".¹²

It is not by chance that *The Telling* is a critical dystopia written by a woman. Le Guin highlights not only a critical use of nostalgia, but also the way in which memory becomes an ethical imperative in order to inspire concrete actions. If in the post-modernist movie *2046* the category of the *déjà-vu* stages a circularity of time that ends up by trapping the character in an endless return to a nostalgically touching past, because it foresees no future, nostalgia in Le Guin's novel means going back to the past in order to understand it, and to find in it the strength to build a better future. Nostalgia thus becomes a critical tool, because, through suffering and affectivity, it helps the painful work of mourning and recovering from traumatic and repressed memories.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 246.