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Bensalem, North Korea, and our inability to imagine a utopian alternative

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INTRODUCTION

The genre of classical utopian fiction raises some skepticism in the postmodern world. We prefer to entertain ourselves with (post)apocalyptic narratives, suggesting that the only fathomable hope for a new social order is in the total demolition of democratic capitalism, and through such an escape from capitalist realism, followed by a period of rebuilding.

Perhaps this discomfort with the antiquated genre is to do with its structuring, the narrator being foreign and excluded from utopian life, and, as such, less trustworthy to a contemporary audience familiar with the unreliability of the exported, propaganda-based “reality” of totalitarian rule(s). The stranger must be kept at arm’s length for the genre to be successful, his function being observational, rather than proactive. This is perhaps exemplified best in *New Atlantis* by Francis Bacon, in which the stranger is kept in a literal Strangers’ House, with limits constraining his capacity to explore the utopian society of Bensalem, so that he is only able to experience it through dialogue with representatives of the utopia. A contemporary reader need only compare this to the eerie footage of visits to North Korea, available through *Vice News*, to be skeptical of the legitimacy of unsubstantiated claims of a perfect social order. What would happen if the stranger were invited in? The rise of the dystopian genre implies that the answer to this question is, “nothing good,” and points towards the unsustainability of the utopian genre from a closer vantage point.

In this paper, contemporary discomforts with the early modern utopia will be interrogated, and it will be theorized that within our globalized world it becomes nearly impossible to imagine a never-before-seen alternative world order. What’s more, there is ample evidence that one should fear an upheaval of our modern democratic capitalism, be it fictionalized, or else rooted in reality, for

example the utterly isolated and regimented life within North Korea. As the world becomes more homogenous beneath a global rule, with those opting out of the global social order seemingly leaning into a totalitarian order, it is no wonder that the only imaginable escape from our current capitalist system seems to be through apocalypse and subsequent rebuilding.

NEW ATLANTIS AND THE STOCK CHARACTER OF THE STRANGER

The stock character of the stranger can be observed in classical utopian texts such as Thomas More's *Utopia*, Tommaso Campanella's *La Citta del Sole* and, perhaps most starkly, and as such most importantly for this essay, Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis*. The stranger is not meant to be strange to the early modern reader, but rather to the utopian society itself. An explorer, he encounters the utopia, but is never truly invited in, as there is always some sort of limitations imposed upon him. Take, for example, the stranger in *New Atlantis*. The stranger's experience of Bensalem is firstly mediated by a representative, in this instance the governor of the Strangers' House. Although the stranger is able to move around the utopian space, this movement is limited, and not reported upon in the narrative. Rather, the conversation between the stranger and the governor is what the text concerns itself with.

The conversation that makes up the bulk of the text reveals the limitations of the stranger's stay. Along with his team of sailors, he must stay in The Strangers' House, a space serving none but this very function. Furthermore, the stranger cannot stay indefinitely. He is told by the governor that, "The state hath given you license to stay on land for the space of six weeks" (Bacon 157) and although there is mention that the stranger could likely stay longer, this sets the expectation that the visitors are being tolerated as outsiders, rather than welcomed into the society as potential future citizens. During their stay, they are told that, "none of you must go above a karan, (that is with them a mile and an half) from the walls of the city, without especial leave." (Bacon 157-58) These restrictions

serve the utopian genre, with the utopia meant to function, not as a place, rather as a foil for the stranger's local community to juxtapose their own societal shortcomings against.

This juxtaposition is most evident in the ways in which the utopia is described. It is often not described in isolation, but in relation to what the stranger already knows. Upon his arrival, the stranger observes that, "The Strangers' House is a fair and spacious house, built of brick, of somewhat a bluer colour than our brick" (Bacon 159) and then later, after having tasted the food, that it was, "better than any collegiate diet that I have known in Europe." (Bacon 156) The use of comparative adjectives, such as "bluer" and "better" instead of "blue" or "good" gives a hierarchy to the different forms of governance, with the utopia unarguably in the more powerful place in this comparison. As such, these descriptors serve a dual purpose, both commenting on the exemplary nature of the utopian space, and also conversely giving attention to the inadequacy of the stranger's (familiar) world.

As the early-modern utopia served the purpose of commenting reflexively upon the reader's society, this distancing tactic of experiencing the text through dialogue rather than narrative prose makes it easier for this comparison to occur. Rather than concern himself with the quality of life of the utopian citizen, the stranger only wants to report back to his own society, in order to draw attention to those aspects of which he views as problematic.

Although the goal of the stranger is to explore, the exploration is constrained the moment the stranger enters the utopian space. Even the notion that the stranger is kept in a special guest-house reveals the totality of the control the utopia must impose upon its own narrative. However, to the contemporary reader, the utopia implies, rather than perfection, some sort of a propaganda state. What forms of governing benefit from strict propaganda in our contemporary world? Not capitalism, which, though flawed, allows at least for self-criticism through art and entertainment. Instead, totalitarianism comes to mind, casting a backwards facing shadow upon the naive trust of the stranger in utopian narratives.

TOTALITARIANISM: NORTH KOREA, ISOLATION AND PROPAGANDA

An attempt to analyze utopian narratives such as *New Atlantis* from a contemporary vantage point is to see parallels between the utopian city portrayed in the text and present day totalitarian political systems. Given the necessity of the total isolation of the utopia from global political structures, a parallel can be drawn between Bensalem and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

In *New Atlantis* Bensalem is able to improve itself by simultaneously looking externally at the world and keeping its own social structures hidden, revealed only in mediated and small doses to their occasional visitors. The governor explains, “that by the means of our solitary solution, and of the laws of secrecy which we have for our travelers, and our rare admission of strangers, we know well most part of the habitable world, and are ourselves unknown.” (Bacon 159) Again, it is worth bearing in mind that this is a representative of the state that is relaying this information. It is easy to imagine that this knowledge of the external world may not permeate all of the social stratospheres of Bensalem, all the more so if Bensalem is compared to the propaganda state of North Korea. Dukalskis and Hooker note when considering North Korea that “without access to the country and its people, achieving analytical subtlety is extremely difficult.” (53) Or that, because any access the rest of the world has to North Korea is in many ways mediated by the state itself, it is difficult not to have a simplified understanding of the structures within. In utopian fiction, this simplified understanding allows for an idealization of the unknown state to occur. However, here we see a perversion of the same interaction. Because we, as western media consumers, can only access two extremes, the idealized portrayal in what North Korean propaganda we can access through watching state-produced media, juxtaposed against the first-person testimonies of North Korean refugees, we must grow suspicious of any indication of an idealized utopian existence being constructed for us. When considering a contemporary reader's discomfort with the utopian genre, this again can be

contextualized when taking into account what allows any totalitarian society to be successful. It's elaborate that, "a totalitarian regime [...] because it is concerned with political participation and allegiance to its all-encompassing ideology, will tolerate very little activity that is contrary to its worldview." (Dukalskis, Hooker 55) Or, merely stating that a political structure is perfect is no longer enough to prove perfection to the modern reader, as such statements are in actuality one indicator of a state that controls the movements, behaviors, and ideas of its populace.

When watching Vice's documentary series on North Korea there is much made of the distinction between what is being curated for the visitor's experience, and what is believed to actually be the quality of life based on a western understanding of the regime. Similarly to in *New Atlantis*, the visitor is kept in special quarters. What's more, their movements are monitored and controlled, and their access is limited. Even gaining initial access proves difficult, Shane Smith reflecting that, "We tried to get in for a year and a half, but couldn't because North Korea does not let anyone in. They do not want anyone to corrupt their one-hundred-percent homogenous society." (Smith) Here, again, the similarity to Bensalem is evident in the self-isolating tactics of the walled-off society. When access is finally granted, it is evident that Smith is not having an authentic, unmediated experience.

Once granted access to North Korea, Smith visits the philosopher hotline located in The People's Library of North Korea, where philosophical Marxist dialectic problems can be asked to a professor who will then, "give them the correct answers immediately," according to Smith's North Korean tour guide. (Smith) The idea of the immediacy and totality of the knowledge resembles in some ways *New Atlantis'* Salomon's House, which is described as, "the noblest foundation (as we think) that ever was upon the earth; and the lanthorn of this kingdom," (Bacon 167) where all knowledge is being collected with some semblance of finality. Taking notice of the switch from comparative adjectives to superlatives, the description mirrors the tactics used by a totalitarian state, implying that the established order is undeniably and inarguably the best. Amongst the many things

the father of Salomon's House tells the stranger about, he boasts, "We have also precious stones of all kinds, many of them of great beauty, and to you unknown," (Bacon 182) "We have also sound-houses, where we practise and demonstrate all sounds, and their generation," (Bacon 182) "We have also a mathematical-house, where are represented all instruments, as well of geometry as astronomy, exquisitely made," (183) and so on and so on. The use of "all" in these sentences represents a totality of knowledge that is unrealistic, and as such suspect to the contemporary reader. Much as the professor in *The People's Library of North Korea* can be viewed as suspect because the claim is made that he can give all correct answers *immediately*, and with no caveat, the concept of a utopian state must be questioned if it presents itself as having access to *all* knowledge. As such, and without unmediated access to the lived experience of the citizens in any utopian state, it is easy for a modern interpretation of classical utopian texts such as *New Atlantis* to be one of skepticism.

CAPITALIST REALISM AND OUR INABILITY TO IMAGINE A UTOPIAN ALTERNATIVE

Gone is the notion that one might be able to sail a ship to a faraway land and come into contact with a more advanced unknown. With the only large-scale political alternatives seemingly more dystopian than utopian, it becomes difficult to imagine anything that could function smoothly while also existing external to the globalized social order of democratic capitalism. This sentiment lends itself to capitalist realism, defined by Mark Fisher as, "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible to even *imagine* a coherent alternative to it." (8) The death of the popularity of utopian fiction supports this idea. Reliant on the stranger, it is no wonder that, in a globalized world, it is difficult to imagine how such a narrative could possibly manifest. *Who* could possibly exist outside of this system, to be encountered and subsequently learned from?

Paradoxically, capitalism gains its power through its ability to conquer, implying that there was once some other, but it has since been subsumed. The different system must always be found and then dominated, made to bend itself to the capitalist world order or else risk global exclusion. As such, perhaps early days of capitalism were defined by a similar mode of exploration as is envisioned in the utopian genre. However, when applied in our contemporary world, the symbolic “stranger” must never have recognized the potential utopia as such, but rather must have concluded time and time again that the only way for global progression was through subsuming the other until it fit into the pre-established world order. As capitalism makes itself more ubiquitous, the question becomes, “having all too-successfully incorporated externality, how can [capitalism] function without an outside it can colonize and appropriate?” (Fisher 12) As evidence of capitalism’s global domination: only some 30 years after the Berlin Wall fell, symbolizing the fall of the Soviet Union, Moscow itself is saturated with craft beer bars and a McDonald’s is situated 1.5 kilometers from Red Square. This total encapsulation helps to explain why it is so difficult to imagine something external from what is already known and established.

Even internal modes of resistance don’t seem capable of withstanding the larger social order. For example, the notion of “punk” became a commodity almost as soon as it was a form of resistance, most famously with Malcom McLaren’s cultivation and marketing of the image of the Sex Pistols. The punk music of the mid-to-late-1970s concerned itself with being a removal from the capitalist infrastructure that enabled most music production. Rather than affiliate itself with big and expensive labels, the movement found other cheaper and independent avenues to gain exposure. Instead of sign on with one of the Big Six record labels, “punks reverted to ‘front-room studios’ and recorded their music relatively cheaply, using four-track tape recorders” (Thompson 51). This was in line with the punk ideology, which fancied itself to be more interested in DIY, both in style and in music production, than commercial and fiscal success. However, by eventually signing with larger labels,

early punk bands such as the Sex Pistols and The Clash gave away much of their agency, seemingly the price to be paid for inclusion in the capitalist market that the movement had initially eschewed.

In this way the concept of rebelling against the system was sold almost as quickly as it was established. In contemporary representations of UK culture, rather than the notion of “punk” being a radical reaction against commercialization, it has been almost entirely subsumed by the commodifying machine of capitalist realism. Consider, at the opening ceremony of the 2012 London Olympic Games, alongside Daniel Craig’s James Bond delivering the Queen to the arena, Arctic Monkeys’ rendition of “Come Together” by The Beatles, and Mr Bean playing the keyboard, can be heard “Pretty Vacant” by the Sex Pistols. Video footage of the lead singer Johnny Rotten leers behind masked dancers with cartoonish Mohawks atop their artificial bobble-heads. (Boyle) At the time of the performance, the Queen was in the audience watching. This is a far removal from the reaction in 1977, when the Sex Pistols track “God Save the Queen” was banned from play on the BBC. If the opening ceremony can be considered as representative of the idealized cultural heritage that the UK, and namely England, wants exported globally, then the Sex Pistols’ inclusion in the opening ceremony reveals the totality of the declawing and commodification of the original punk sentiment of anarchy and upheaval. By 2012, the Sex Pistols were palatable enough to be tastefully performed in front of royalty, and accepted as something aesthetic, rather than anarchic.

Ruth Adams notes in regards to the Sex Pistols, “Arguably the band themselves have been complicit in the ‘Pistols Heritage Industry,’ staging their own ‘Silver Jubilee’ celebrations in the form of a(nother) reunion concert in 2002 and licensing numerous souvenir commodities from pencil cases to fridge magnets” (473) but one need not wait until the early 2000s to see this rapid commodification. Nearly as soon as the punk movement was started, it was perverted, as the sudden global awareness of the movement seemingly sapped all authenticity from the image of the rebellious outsider it had previously strived for. By 1979, “Punk was history, finished; the full story could now be told,”

(Adams 473) as evidenced by the biographies already published by that date, including: *Sex Pistols: The Inside Story* (1977) by Fred and Judy Vermorel, *The Boy Looked at Johnny* (1978) by Julie Burchill and Tony Parsons. (Adams 473) This “ending” of the movement, meaning its incorporation into the world of capitalist commodity exchange through “selling-out” as it has been criticized of doing, occurred a mere 5 years after what is understood to be its birth in New York City’s CBGBs, circa 1974.

This quick turnaround experienced by the punk movement, from resistance against to product of a capitalist culture, can be illuminated by Fisher’s concept of “precorporation”. Fisher explains, “what we are dealing with now is not the incorporation of materials that previously seemed to possess subversive potentials, but instead, their *precorporation*: the pre-emotive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations and hopes by capitalist culture.” (12) Punk may have been the first instance of this phenomena, being subsumed by the consumeristic machine so that the concept of independence from said machine could be oxymoronicly purchased and worn. In this way, the alternative became the mainstream, and the feelings of antipathy towards society became muted and controlled; the rebellion and dissent against commercial capitalism repackaged as something that would fit cleanly within the framework provided.

All of which leaves us with a dual problem. We cannot find the change externally, as any external system is demonized as either regressive or totalitarian, or else ultimately incorporated and forced to conform to the already established system, and yet we also can’t seem to enact change within, as any attempt to do so is swallowed up by the machine, repackaged, and then sold as acceptable, and ultimately aesthetic, dissent. The only option that presents itself easily is to burn the world down and begin again. There, the utopian state can be glimpsed, although it is ultimately post-apocalyptic.

POST-APOCALYPTIC FICTION: STARTING OVER AS THE ONLY MEANS OF RECONSTRUCTION

One genre of fiction benefits from our inability to imagine ourselves out of the contemporary global world order of capitalism. Although exact and up-to-date figures are difficult to locate, a study on the apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic canon conducted by Jerry Määttä suggests that, “In future, a similar study would likely show a sharp rise in interesting apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic disaster stories from the years 2000–2015, following a decade of slightly less important work in the genre.” (421) This rise in popularity is problematic in that it supports Fisher’s theory that we cannot imagine anything outside of our contemporary social order. Furthermore, if we cannot imagine a new global order as solution, how could we then implement it?

Capitalism continually refuses to solve the problem of impending disaster. Capitalism, and not capitalists. Returning to Mark Fisher, he makes the point that, “Instead of saying that *everyone* – i.e. every *one* – is responsible for climate change, we all have to do our bit, it would be better to say that no-one is, and that’s the very problem. The cause of eco-catastrophe is an impersonal structure which, even though it is capable of producing all manner of effects, is precisely not a subject capable of exercising responsibility.” (70) Given that capitalism keeps itself powerful by instilling the belief that individual decisions drive good or bad outcomes, it is difficult to imagine a solution to large and difficult problems such as climate change arising from it. Because it fixates on the individual rather than the systematic, much as novels do, we see these individual narratives follow the same path that we ourselves feel pulling us, that of being subject to the tides of history, rather than proactive in changing them.

Margaret Atwood’s MaddAddam series exemplifies this inability within our global society to imagine a solution. In *The Year of the Flood*, we are introduced to the Gardeners, a radical environmental group that styles itself after the Garden of Eden. This is arguably a utopian state within

the dystopian landscape. The society lives in near-total isolation, and does not let in just anyone. What's more, the individual has been subsumed by the collective, so that all women in leadership roles are named Eve, the men named Adam. This functions so that the members identify with the group, rather than with their own egos, mirroring the representations of early-modern utopias, which are more concerned with the larger societal dynamics than individual agency.

The Gardeners' idealized ecological acts of resistance, such as living as "strict-vegetarians" and farming their own produce, are still not enough to stall the end of the world. Although the Gardeners are living an eco-friendly, utopian life, their bubble is too small to enact any real change. They venture out in order to hold protests, described by Toby thusly, "The leader had a beard and was wearing a caftan that looked as if it had been sewn by elves on hash. Behind him came an assortment of children—various heights, all colors, but all in dark clothing—holding their slates with slogans printed on them: *God's Gardeners for God's Garden! Don't Eat Death! Animals R Us!*" (Atwood 66) but the Gardeners are dismissed immediately by the surrounding public. Utopian idealism, it seems, when attempting wider-scale impact, is met by distrust and skepticism. How, with a contemporary understanding of the world, can *these* people be trusted? With the knowledge of how closed groups oftentimes are riddled with their own internal power dynamics, resulting in them being much less idealistic than they present themselves to be, the Gardeners are working for change at a deficit, being forced to prove themselves as truly utopian, rather than just aesthetically so. As such, the Gardener's plead for change must be met by heckling, "'Shut the fuck up, ecofreak,'" (67) a bystander chides.

Compare these efforts to the current UK-based movement Extinction Rebellion. Arising in the UK circa 2018, they have three key demands: Tell the truth, zero emissions by 2025, and the instillation of a Citizens' assembly to address the crisis. Although it is inarguable that their efforts have made a global media ripple, the question remains: How effective can these protests be to enact

change? As of September 2019, their successes have been mostly superficial, and based on rhetoric, rather than truly radical societal change. On May 1, 2019, members of the UK parliament declared a climate and environment emergency, followed by the convening of a citizen's assembly in June, with this later concession being only a partial victory, due to the fact that the recommendations deriving from the assembly will not be legally binding. (Knight) Notably, the demand that has been most ignored by those in power, being zero emissions by 2025, also requires the most concrete and systematic governmental action. Consider how capitalist realism is enabled by 'interpassivity,' or the performance of anti-capitalism which eventually functions as a cathartic act that ultimately allows the participants to remain within the capitalist system, all the while pacified by knowing in their hearts that they are not the problem. (Fisher 16) The fight is ongoing, and the next action seems to be a withholding of taxpayer money until demands are met. This opting out at least appears as something new, a refusal to participate in the system as long as it remains as it is. However, due to the fact that the demands are aimed rather broadly at one small aspect of capitalistic governing, and considering that the efforts of both the Gardeners and Extinction Rebellion exist within a system dominated by capitalist realism, it is suggested that these efforts, both fictional and non-fictional, will be ultimately aesthetic, rather than truly world-changing.

At the climate march in Berlin, Germany on September 20, 2019, the images evoked were those of apocalypse. Placards were illustrated with images of the Earth burning. As has been seen in other major cities throughout Europe, a girl stood before Brandenburger Tor on a block of ice with a noose around her neck, waiting for the ice to melt away and hang her where she stood. As one theorist observes, "Arguably, modern environmentalism has been infused with a strong current of apocalyptic sentiment from its very birth, being distinct from earlier forms of conservationist or preservationist activism – and from social movement activism in general – through its invocation of impending global

doom as a tool to rouse action and mobilize support.” (Cassegard, Thörn 562) The debate seems to be whether this forward-looking pessimism is rallying, or debilitating.

Returning to the girl at the climate march who stood atop the block of ice with her hands positioned as if tied behind her back and a noose around her neck, the image becomes all the more poetic when considering the idea of someone having their hands tied. Having one's hands tied meaning having the will to do something, but not the power, due to some invisible force which stops the person from acting freely. There is the disaster happening right in front of us, but there is also this hands-tied feeling of 'interpassivity'. We recognize the problems but, beyond building awareness of the depth and breadth of them, feel an inability to enact real societal change, which is keeping us from the revolutionary upheaval that is likely required to actually save the planet, and ourselves.

CONCLUSION

Long gone are the days when utopias could be used to instruct and warn the public. Where in the early modern period utopian texts might have been used as a foil to comment upon preexisting social structures, in our contemporary world they instead seem to share traits with totalitarian regimes. Furthermore, the hope that one might stumble upon some other society that is both exemplary and removed from our own, as the stock character of the stranger does, seems to have disappeared as capitalism tightens its global chokehold. Though still dissatisfied with the current social order of democratic capitalism, trends in fiction seem to indicate that we are unable to imagine anything that could challenge the accepted world order. In the place of utopian dreams, we are left with grim narratives centralized around our impending societal collapse.

The death of human society has been constructed and reconstructed, however today's speculation feels different. The antinuclear activism of the 60s and 70s, which concerned itself with warnings against a sudden apocalypse, has been replaced by the protest of today, described as,

“Neither to be nourished by a strong sense of hope, nor of a future disaster, but a sense and an idea that the catastrophe is already ongoing.” (Cassegard, Tho’rn 562) There is an overarching feeling of being too late, without the capacity or the time to imagine an alternative global order. As such, the question becomes not how we could remove ourselves from this global rule, but rather what we can do once capitalism has finally run its course. The only hope left is in the imagining of an apocalypse with the capacity to wipe out the capitalistic beast. With any luck, this apocalypse might spare a few, and allow for rebuilding once there is a fresh slate to work with.

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