

Utopia(s) and inequalities between men and women (from Antiquity to the 21st Century)

International multidisciplinary conference

Université Charles de Gaulle – Lille 3

18-20 June 2015

How do utopias represent, increase or resolve inequalities between men and women? This is the starting point for this international conference.

‘Utopia’ (*ou-topos*, meaning no place) is a term coined by Thomas More in his eponymous text, published in 1516. In the Bâle edition of the same text (1518), More uses the term Eutopia to designate the imaginary place he wrote about. This neologism does not rely on the negation found in *ou-* but in the prefix *eu-* meaning good. Eutopia therefore means ‘the place of well-being,’ in other words, an ideal society.

Often satirical and subversive, the aim of a utopia is to denounce the shortcomings of a given era through an imaginary (faraway or mythical) place: Plato’s Kallipolis, Marivaux’s *Slave Island* (1725), *Candide’s Eldorado* (1759) and so on; the spatial (and sometimes temporal) distancing is aimed at avoiding (political, religious) censorship. This tradition and literary genre goes all the way back to Plato’s *Republic* (c. 370 B.C.) and takes in Tommaso Campanella’s *City of the Sun* (1623), Francis Bacon’s *New Atlantis* (1628), Etienne Cabet’s *Travel and Adventures of Lord William Carisdall in Icaria* (1840) etc.

To the masculine literary utopias which were often misogynist right up until the 19th Century (Aristophanes, Swift, William Morris), where the only women worthy of any interest are wives and mothers (Bacon, More, Bellamy, etc.), an increasing number of feminine utopias were added (Christine de Pisan, Margaret Cavendish, Sarah Scott, Lady Mary Hamilton, Mary Livermore, Mary Howland, Martha Bensley Bruere, Ines Haynes Gillmore, Charlotte Haldane etc.), some of which ‘exclude’ the presence of men (Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Mary Bradley Lane, etc.).

The 20th Century saw the blossoming of dystopias or counter-utopias which indicate an increasing wariness of Grand Narratives and Marxist and Communist ideology. Orwellian dystopias encourage detachment from the ideal of perfection and political innocence which characterised positive utopias. But dystopias also encapsulate “negative utopias” in which the quest for happiness involves the suppression of suffering or inequality and often of gender and its oppressive asymmetry. What Jameson terms the principle of ‘world reduction’ becomes one of the strategies used by Ursula Le Guin in her feminist science fiction, for example, in which an ambisexual world (Gethern) devoid of all the problematic and violent aspects of sexuality and of capitalism is depicted. How should these paradoxical utopias which are based on penury be analysed and to what extent is this evolution of the utopia genre linked to the consideration of gender oppression or to specific sexualities? What does this evolution teach us about a feminine or feminist conception of power and the interaction that women and feminists can or must have with ‘power’?

Beyond utopias or the tension between utopia and dystopia, how can one consider a space and a different organisation of relations through the Foucauldian prism of 'heterotopias', other places which offer a simultaneously mythical and real contestation of traditional space? What role do these 'other spaces' of fiction play in reconstitution when literature becomes, as Sedgwick for example would have it, a sort of surface for projection of 'gender troubles'? (*Epistemology of the Closet* [1990] and *Between Men. English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* [1985]). Juxtaposing in one real space many sometimes incompatible spaces, heterotopias introduce a total rupture with habitual time; they are heterochronies, combining a system of opening and closing, creating a space of illusion which denounces as even more illusory real space, or presents another means of organisation. How should one consider these sorts of 'effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted, [these places which are] outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality' (Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces')? Can these perilous experiences where something of the subject and its relationship with the world, itself and others is at play be used as a paradigm to rethink, outside of habitual space and time, an exceptional scheme of sexualities and sexualities which would break with the point of departure that is sexual difference? To what extent do urban sexual utopias which reveal what Gayle Rubin has called 'sexual ethnogenesis' participate in successful heterotopias in so far as they produce non normative social and sexual restructurations and alternative power dynamics (with SM culture in San Francisco for example)?

If utopias are thrilling in their opening up of a marvellous space, heterotopias are worrying, subverting even language and imagination. What happens then to relations between and beyond the sexes, and what words can give expression to them? How can this topos be taken up to rethink these relations and to elaborate discourses which could incorporate difference and express the power of distortion? Something akin to this seems to play itself out in the alternative suggested by Foucault in *The Will to Know* (1976), between 'bodies and pleasure' and 'the deployment [*dispositif*] of sexuality' which constrains and limits the expression thereof. Isn't this rather an invitation to rearticulate sexuality and 'the use of pleasure', within the utopian dimension of an *ars erotica*?

In his work devoted to heterotopias ('other spaces'), Foucault insists again on the primacy of space over time in our contemporary era which is more and more 'heterochronic'. Can one, moving on from this, expand the spatial dimension inscribed in the very word 'utopia' to include cyberspace? This would involve considering the new modes of relation and networks constituting identities and provisional alliances evoked by Donna Haraway in 'A Cyborg Manifesto' (1991), internet having facilitated the simultaneous emergence of new logics of affiliation, belonging, affinities, pragmatic grouping together, new modes of action, beyond the opposition between public and private spheres.

Possible avenues to explore:

Areas where inequalities between man and women manifest themselves: education, celibacy, (mutual) choice of partner, conception of marriage (economic necessity etc.), birth control (even eugenics), right to judicial protection, property rights, right to work and so on...

Is it possible, within a utopia, to escape patriarchy and power relations (property, religion, marriage)?

Can one consider some travel writing or anthropological/ethnological writing as a form of utopia presenting other possibilities (Mediterranean patriarchy; texts by libertine travellers evoking painless childbirth in order to question the Bible...)

Utopias/dystopias and power

Utopias/dystopias and discrimination

Utopias/dystopias and sexualities

Gendered and degendered utopias

Feminist/Queer utopias/dystopias

Utopias/heterotopias

Utopias/dystopias and feminist strategies (separatism, communities, heterotopias)

Utopias/dystopias in the digital age

Utopias/dystopias and technologies

Utopias/dystopias and architecture, urbanism, literature, cinema, the visual arts (painting, graphic novels), popular culture, science fiction, performance, the arts, festivals

Communitarian utopias/dystopias and urban subcultures

Utopias/dystopias and bodies

Utopias, cinema and dystopian video games...

Abstracts for papers, panels or performances should be 400 words, accompanied by a short bio-bibliography, and sent as a Word document to Guyonne Leduc (guyonne.leduc@univ-lille3.fr) before November 30st. Proposals for panels and performances should also be addressed to Marie-Hélène Bourcier (mariehelenebourcier@gmail.com).

Notification of acceptance will be given in December 2013 after anonymous examination by the scientific committee.

It is hoped that selected papers from the conference will be published.