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Melting Reality, Rising Utopia, or Why You Should Never Come Back to Reality

ABSTRACT

Starting with late modern literature, utopia and dystopia have rarely been found in a pure state. We usually encounter a mixture of utopia and dystopia in the content of one and the same story. Instead of canceling each other, they complement each other because they alternate on the simple principle of action and reaction inside a frame we refer to as fictional reality. This technique has surpassed the borders of literature, going into cinematography, and two of the most intense films that have used it are *Zabriskie Point* and *Easy Rider*. We shall take the track of utopia in post-modern times and we will learn its ways based on these two movies. We will see that utopia is nowadays mostly a state of mind and that after finding it, it would be better not to leave it, because reality kills.

KEYWORDS

Utopia; Dystopia; Reality; Society; Oppressive System; 1960s America; *Zabriskie Point*; *Easy Rider*; Michelangelo Antonioni; Denis Hopper.

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In literature and in cinematography, Utopia and Dystopia are concepts that respect a rule of time and space, meaning that those worlds are set in no identifiable time and space, against static backgrounds. But that is a strict and limited point of view over Utopia and Dystopia, because those are broader concepts and they rarely fit that narrow conception in modern or even post-modern times. The most important thing that has happened throughout the evolution of those concepts is that they have attempted to escape the imagined/fictional world, coming closer to factual reality or even melting into reality and acting as a litmus test, determining which parts of the reality can be seen as Utopian or Dystopian. The problem in this case is that transferring those concepts to reality means that the settings and the rules have changed. The settings are no longer static, but dynamic, and everything is easily recognizable. In this case, even if they are opposite concepts, the border between Utopia and Dystopia is often very fragile. In order to respect the dynamics, the changes, the fluctuations of the real world, Utopia and Dystopia have to adapt and to alternate (we should remember that as literary concepts, they were created for the use of static worlds, meaning that



they cannot function at full parameters outside this rule. *Ou topos*, in Latin, means no place).

The first works that contain elements of Utopia and Dystopia simultaneously are *The Life of Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1532-1564), by Francois Rabelais, and *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), by Jonathan Swift, because both Rabelais and Swift intended their works to be a direct critique of the regime in their time and, as such, they had to approach reality somehow, even through allegory.

In literature we have many other examples, most of them from the beginning of twentieth century, especially in Russia, where we had this paradox: the reality was itself pure Dystopia and the only accepted literature was Utopia. There were a few authors that fed on the sickness of that time and created dystopian worlds, direct or allegoric copies of the reality, with Utopian flavor given by hope. Yevgeny Zamyatin, Andrei Chayanov, Mikhail Bulgakov and Andrei Platonov are the most important names (as a short digression, while Aldous Huxley was one of the best-sellers in Europe, in Russia Chayanov was executed, Zamyatin was expelled and Bulgakov and Platonov were socially tortured, their main works being published only after their and Stalin's deaths). A perfect example of Dystopia based on Utopian settings and rules is *Cevengur*, by Andrei Platonov.

In the field of cinematography, there have been several attempts at mixing Dystopia and Utopia in the reality blender, and I mainly think of Charlie Chaplin's work (*City Lights*, *Modern Times*, *The Great Dictator*, *A King in New York*, etc.), but the obvious alternation of Utopia and Dystopia inside a reality look-a-like world was first explored in the cinema of the 1960s and 1970s. I have to mention the beautiful dystopian comedy *Catch 22* (1970), made after Joseph Heller's novel, but in this paper I

will only refer to Antonioni's first American movie, *Zabriskie Point* (1970) and Denis Hopper's directing debut, *Easy Rider* (1969).

Before starting to analyze those two movies, we have to take a look at the society they refer to. It is common knowledge that the 1960s and the 1970s were some of the most tormented decades in the modern history of the USA. The Vietnam war, started soon after the Korean war, the emergence of new forms of industry, brands and trade, the structural changes that took place in politics, the racial hatred problem, the students' and the trade unions' riots, the lack of trust and the lack of a fresh horizon, the lack of harmony, the danger of social uniformity, the need for individual freedom – all these worked together towards creating a soft ideological, capitalist Dystopia (very different from the Soviet one, which was more concrete), and this Dystopia called for countermeasures that came from hope and manifested themselves through a rejection of reality, encouraging individual freedom and non-conformism and creating alternative realities (the hippie movement, in our case, Utopia).

In literature, Richard Brautigan's *In Watermelon Sugar* (1968) was one of the most impressive mixtures of Utopia and Dystopia that arose from this "historical playground" and, when carefully read, it is obvious that it has a few solid connections with the two movies we will refer to.

Zabriskie Point, also known as *Death Valley*, starts with a college students' debate over the society and the students' riots (a real debate filmed by Antonioni, no acting involved). The society/the system is seen as corrupted and truly representative of Orwell's projections. The meeting slogan is the famous "Power to the people!" and the models meant to counterattack the corrupt



system come from the socialist ideological Utopias represented by Lenin or

Castro.

While Mark Frechette is leaving the meeting, Antonioni presents to us an obsessive showdown of American brands, almost suggesting that brands are taking over people. "Joining is not a matter of choice, but a matter of survival," says Morty, referring to the fact that if you do not adapt to society, society will kill you (we will see later, in terms of society/reality, that this is a turning point, the reality that kills its misfits). "People act when they need to, but I need to sooner than that. (...) Cops talking about stopping violence when the cops are doing it," replies Mark, suggesting that the hypocrisy of the system is so advanced that it will never bring you to an extreme point and that you have to escape sooner than that.

We have here the first signs of a struggle to create a mental Utopia by opposing human identity to the social Dystopia, creating this way an unstable balance. Neither Utopia, nor Dystopia can exist in a pure state inside reality, but always in a mixture. Ideological or mental Utopia is most commonly created as a response to violence and chaos. However, the system or the society has tools to prevent such actions, so it presents a ready-made Utopia on the social networks. We have the example of *Sunnydunes Land Development* in Antonioni's film, the ideal, worrisome, perfect city presented day by day on TV using dummies instead of people, selling a desert as an oasis. Eventually, this is the perfect mirage, an exquisite Morgana that serves the system and keeps the folks dreaming about something imagined by others, not by themselves. Even the radio is equally split between news about the Dystopia of the Vietnam War and the Utopia of *Sunnydunes* opportunities.

Real Utopia, not the one offered by the system, serves as a hiding place for Mark and Daria as they are escaping reality. The perception of this place as a secret den that protects from reality is a characteristic that makes Utopia unreal, separated from reality, but not completely: it is separate but incorporated within reality (a complete separation would mean the death of Utopia because it could not exist by itself).

Daria is following a personal dream, while Mark is running away from a mistake and they will meet and share a Utopia of their own. Still, what we have to point out here is the fact that Utopia is generally inhabited by misfits, by all those who cannot connect to the system. It is poetic, but malfunctioning, as seen in *Watermelon Sugar*.

The first man that welcomes Daria in her Utopia is the World Middleweight Boxing Champion of the 1920s. An old alcoholic, skeletal and forgotten by everybody, he asks her if she remembers him. This is a nice metaphor of Utopia turned into Dystopia over time (both *Zabriskie Point* and *Easy Rider* are road movies, resembling life, always in motion, not static as Utopia and Dystopia usually are, so the passing of time has an important role to play). But this is not the only metaphor about time that interests us. The name that gives the title of the film, *Zabriskie Point*, refers to an area created over millions of years, primarily a lake (so, once a living place) transformed, in time, into a desert (a dead place). This contrast resembles the contrast between Utopia and Dystopia and the movement from one to the other is influenced by the same elements: changes implemented by reactions to external forces (in nature's case) or by external systems/ideologies (in people's case).

The next metaphor that caught our attention was that of Daria finding weeds in the desert, "plants that make it in the sand,"



people that can survive dystopian societies. “I wonder what else is going on in the real world,” said Mark, making it obvious that they have abandoned “the real world” in favor of an illusion. Utopia is defined as escaping reality (including all oppressive social systems), while the others, the ones remaining in the real world are seen as being on “a reality trip,” which is defined by Daria as “the impossibility of imagining things.” Their personal Utopia becomes a work of the imagination, referred to as “peaceful” or “at home.” Daria’s idea of planting memories about great things into people’s heads to forget the unfair reality asks for a total transfer to Utopia, which can go badly, as we will see.

In the well-known and much discussed love-making scene (an expression of freedom and insubordination) that Mark and Daria fantasize about (in order to create a mental community), they all look alike, but they are not copies, indicating that Utopia can be inhabited only by those who are similar, who share the same principles. The whole scene is playful and joyful, suggesting the idea of Utopia’s pure happiness. Antonioni highlights that Utopia’s secret is not in the place, but in the state of mind, showing us the classic American family getting to the same place and not noticing anything else but the urge of having a burger drive-in there.

Mark escapes the system (police), Daria escapes the system (bureaucracy), she even leaves all her documents, everything that connects her to the system behind, but in the end they both escape not only the system, but reality. You cannot escape only the system because the system is the active part of reality. In order to escape that, you have to leave it all behind.

This is the tricky part of discovering Utopia. Once found, it should never be abandoned. Mark’s mistake was his good faith and the correct belief that one cannot

enter Utopia with a bad karma (we will also come across this idea in *Easy Rider*). He chooses Utopia, but he does not realize he is already in and wants to make things right in reality before entering Utopia for good. However, things cannot be done right in reality and leaving Utopia and returning to reality means dying. Once you have escaped reality, you cannot return to it. Reality will not have you back, it will kill you instead. Exactly the same thing happens in *Easy Rider* or in the novel *Watermelon Sugar*.

After Mark’s death, the last clash between Utopia and Dystopia, the last collision between reality and imagination consists in Daria meeting the businessmen and their wives in the villa, in her last attempt to return to reality. Daria’s dress is half wet, half dry, a symbol of the duality, of the struggle inside her. The first thing that implodes is her mind. There is a moment that suggests an implosion that blows away the reality the same way the villa she leaves is blown away by the explosion. She decides not to return to reality and to escape and by doing that she saves her life. She survives in her singular Utopia, while all the others die in reality. Mark was right after all, reality pays tribute to faith and karma, while Utopia is still, far away, out of faith.

Easy Rider was released in 1969, one year before *Zabriskie Point*, but there is little chance that Antonioni was influenced by the debutant Denis Hopper, so I think all the common ideas should be put on the account of the society they were inspired by.

The film starts directly with a bad karma scene representing Wyatt (Peter Fonda) and Billy (Denis Hopper) buying drugs from Mexico and selling them further in New York for a lot of cash, which they hide inside Harley Wyatt’s tank, as they set



off on the road to Mardi Gras in New Orleans, to lose their track and retire with the pot money on the coast of sunny Florida.

Wyatt and Billy are, like Daria and Mark, runaways. They try to hide and to escape society (police, corruption, etc.), but they also try to escape reality because Mardi Gras, the event they are heading to is seen as “out of this world,” with the magic attributes of New Orleans, as a place of total forgetfulness and enhanced mystical experiences. However, generally Utopia cannot be found at the end of a quest as the Grail should be, but at the end of an escape, of a flight, because Utopia is not a reward, but a refuge. They say the quest is the Grail, but in our case the escape is the Utopia.

There is a subtle scheme Hopper is following in his debut movie: he quickly passes with the camera through different hypostases of American men, the traditional family (still working the field), the urban family (already subjugated by brands), the American rebel or runaway (without a clear purpose) and the hippie village (the free zone), and at the middle of the film, he turns this scheme upside down, going back and destroying, imploding everything and allowing tradition to kill and suppress the rebel and his freedom.

Things start to change as soon as the Stranger (Luke Askew) makes his appearance on the highway and Wyatt picks him up on his bike. The Stranger acts as a guide that will lead the two lost rebels to Utopia, giving them a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to stay there forever. The Stranger would not say his name or where he is from. He would just say that he is from a city (a general symbol of the system) and that he is running away from it: “I’m a long way from the city, and that’s where I wanna be right now.” He shows Wyatt and Billy the way to a hippie village. When asked if he is sure about the route, the Stranger refers to the

hippie village as “the place we’re coming to,” not going, but coming, as if the place were waiting for them in a non-geographical place (a common topic for Utopias).

The village is a hippie heaven, free of inhibitions, full of joy and happiness and totally cut off from the system, a true Utopian space. But this space is continuously menaced by intruders. The ruler of the village is a woman (matriarchate is seen as a simpler, healthier alternative to the modern ruling system), the Stranger’s girlfriend, and she makes it clear that strangers may come and see them, but not all are welcome because they would destroy the balance. The inhabitants of this space are superior people from a cultural and mystical point of view: they play instruments, they know literature, they act on a stage of their own, they pray a lot, they believe in transcendence, unlike the corrupted city man they oppose, and they need “simple food for our simple taste,” conducting their lives after simple principles and working the land in order to feed themselves.

Like in *Zabriskie Point*, it seems that all the inhabitants of this rural Utopia are misfits and they all look alike. Even if they have a hard time because their crops are not growing properly and they have to work hard, they are happy and they get along as a perfect community.

Wyatt finds in his Utopia calm, joy, happiness, even love, but he still decides to quit it, as Mark does in *Zabriskie Point*, as he wants to put the things in order (to help Billy get to Florida, because Billy is more of a city man and he cannot be enchanted by Utopia) and return after that, but that will never happen. “When you get to the right place with the right people... Yeah, this could be the right place, but I just gotta go,” says Wyatt.

Before their departure, even if the Stranger insists that they stay, one of the hippie girls reads a fortune cookie that



somehow resumes the whole movie plot: “Starting brings misfortune. Perseverance brings danger. Not even demand for change in the existing order should be heeded. On the other hand, repeated and well-founded complaints should not fail to a hearing.”

The next target city is New Orleans and Mardi Gras. As we had the fake Utopia symbolized by *Sunnydunes* in *Zabriskie Point*, so is Mardi Gras for *Easy Rider*, a fake Utopia created by the system to misguide, a Utopia that brings no peace or equilibrium, but chaos and pain, as we will see.

One of the most profound characters of this movie is George Hanson (brilliantly acted by Jack Nicholson), an alcoholic lawyer that Wyatt and Billy met on a state prison not long after they left the hippie village. “You know, I must have started off to Mardi Gras six or seven times. Never got further than the state line,” says Hanson. As a lawyer, he stands for an agent of the system, destroyed on the inside by it. He tries to escape, but fails, because he is too deep inside the system and cannot pass the imposed borders. Hanson sees a chance in those two rebels and rides with them, but the Utopia is already behind.

Learning how to smoke marijuana, Hanson tells them a conspiracy story about aliens living on Earth, and talking about those alien worlds, he describes a perfectly utopian space, a standard model for the utopian society they all dream of: no monetary system, no wars, no leaders (every man is a leader for himself), plenty of food, clothes, houses and free transportation equally for all and with no effort. “Godlike control over his own destiny. A chance to transcend and to evolve with some equality for all.” This is the model, the aspiration, the pursued Utopia.

George Hanson will be the first to die. Why? Maybe because, for the system, the others were misfits, but Hanson was a

traitor. He had to be punished first in a symbolical and exemplary way. He never got to reach his Utopia, the secret brothel, the best brothel in New Orleans, but he passed the knowledge.

“People are not scared of you, they are scared of what you represent to them. You represent to them freedom. Talkin’ about it and bein’ it it’s two different things. It’s real hard to be free when you are bought and sold in the marketplace. ‘Course, don’t ever tell anybody that they’re not free ‘cause the gonna get real busy killin’ to prove to you that they are. They’re gonna talk and talk and talk to you about individual freedom, but if they see a free individual it’s gonna scare’em. That makes’em dangerous.” Those were the last words of George Hanson before he was hammered to death.

Taking over Hanson’s legacy, Wyatt and Billy found and entered the secret brothel in New Orleans. This brothel was built inside an old monastery (again, the contrast of the coexistence of Utopia and Dystopia) and most of its walls were still covered in Biblical or religious quotes in general (the prison cells where they meet Hanson were also covered in quotes from Jesus).

“If God did not exist it would be necessary to invent him.” This is written on one of the brothel walls. Still, this does not refer only to God as perceived by Christianity, but can also refer to a general saving point or place. We can link this to our idea of Utopia as a saving place that has to be invented by means of the imagination (the same as in *Zabriskie Point*). Another quote sends directly to the revenge of reality: “Death only closes a man’s reputation and determines it as good or bad.” In other words, it is a matter of choice. It depends on which road you die, as well as on the direction you are heading for.

In *Zabriskie Point*, Mark’s key line before deciding to get back to reality was “I



wonder what else is going on in the real world.” In this case, the key line is said by Wyatt, who asks “What’s happening outside? Let’s go outside. We’ll all go outside.” That is the signal for the return to reality and, as we already know, this return kills. Wyatt is attracted by the deceptive mirage of Mardi Gras, the fake Utopia, and they all dive into reality using the same filter they used to run away from it, drugs.

Utopia becomes Hell, the drug induced delirium is extremely painful, like a rebirth to reality. But it is a rebirth only so that you can die. A man in Utopia is out of this world. A man out of this world cannot die because he is also out of time. In order to die you have to be reborn, to come back to reality (as in the Romanian fairytale *Youth without Age and Life without Death*).

The next day, Billy, who cannot sense the subtle meanings, says happily: “We made it. We’re rich,” but Wyatt, who knows that they have just missed Utopia, replies: “We blew it.” In a few hours, they will be both dead.

As a short and hasty conclusion, I think we can say that in these cases, Utopia and Dystopia coexist with reality in the same space and time because they do not have a space and time of their own. Dystopia is society/system based, while Utopia is mainly a state of mind or a mind projected territory that can be shared by several individuals or by small communities that have the same affinities or are running away from the same things. We have seen that Utopia is generally a hiding place, a shelter, and we have seen that once reached, it should never be left, because every return to reality means death.

Besides all this, we can now add that every Utopia, even if intimate, extremely personal, has to be an ideological one. It is based on an idea and on a concept. The

examples we have given are no exceptions to this rule. The problem with ideological Utopia is that it cannot really exist independently from society and from society-based dystopia. As I have already said, they have to take turns into reality, to alternate, to adapt. The moment Utopia separates totally from reality and becomes a parallel ideological reality, we know it from history, not just literature; it has no other chance but self-destruction. Even without self-awareness, as in the cases already presented (Mark and Wyatt persevere towards death without knowing, as the fortune cookie suggests) or in the case of BoilIn and his crew from the already mentioned novel, Richard Brautigan’s *In Watermelon Sugar*, when BoilIn and his gang choose to publicly and symbolically commit suicide in front of the others, just to draw their attention about the fake Utopia they are in, just to wake them up, to make them self-aware. However, we know that this sacrifice is in vain, for no one really understands anything and they keep moving on with their fake lives after cleaning buckets of blood like any other filth.

Thus, after all, if reality does not kill you, Utopia will.