Virtual heterotopias
Mirroring reality through speculative art practice
Hana Špendlíková

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Supervisor: Uta Reichard
Advisor: Garðar Eyjólfsson

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Abstract

One of the major cultural shifts of the last decades has been the redirection of our culture towards the past. Facing the environmental crisis it has become increasingly harder to dream of the future. How to dream of the future when ‘futuristic’ has become a style rather than a proposition?

This thesis examines imagination from the spatial perspective. In the first part, it explores theoretical concepts that can be used in the artistic practice of creating fictional spaces. Michel Foucault’s concept of heterotopia is applied to non-physical spaces created in artworks and the method is examined through a comparative thought experiment on cinematic examples.

The second part of the thesis examines the potential ability of fictional spaces to affect reality and revolves around the issue of their mediation. It introduces the concept of virtual heterotopia and uses its lens to examine the field of critical art practice using speculative methods.

Finally, the thesis positions the practice of creating virtual heterotopias, or ‘fictioning’, into political and activist context.

The thesis uses an interpretivist approach based mainly on literary review and analysis of case studies of literature, film and design fiction.

Keywords: heterotopia, utopia, island, critical, speculative, Michel Foucault, imaginary space, spaceship, future.
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Introduction

In his book *Ghosts of My Life* Mark Fisher describes the atmosphere of culture that has exhausted itself. Writing in 2014, he asks the reader to imagine any recently released record being played on the radio in 1995. In his opinion, the listener might be shocked not by the novelty of the music but, on the contrary, by its recognisability. The culture of the 21st century has been spinning in recursive loops, constantly referencing the past through its retro-manic language, unable to grasp the present or define the future. He goes so far as to say that there might not be any present to grasp anymore.¹

Fisher describes the 21st century’s feeling as living in the ruins of the previous one. It feels like our century still cannot start. But the situation is not entirely new. Similar feeling has been described as the experience of living through the 1970’s in the Soviet Union. By that time, the regime had abandoned most of its initial ideology and moved towards pure consumerism. This period is called stagnation, or normalization. History was thought to be over and it was obvious that the idea of the communist utopian future – the narrative the regime was initially built on – was not going to be reached anymore. On the contrary, ideas and ideology having been discredited, consumerism seemed to be the only option and with time passing, alternatives were more and more difficult to imagine.²

When the Iron Curtain fell in the end of the 1980’s, even the faintest possibility that any other form of society than the capitalist one could function on a large scale anywhere in Europe disappeared. The time of capitalist realism ³ came into full bloom. The initial optimism and the enthusiasm of this new era, the feeling that no better world than this one was possible, that we were living a kind of core reality free from all weights of ideologies and religion, veiled problems that resulted in several surprising events in world politics in the last decade.

¹ See the chapter Lost Futures: The slow cancellation of the future, in Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*, (Winchester: Zero Books, 2014)


³ Mark Fisher defines capitalist realism as ‘the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it.’ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009), p. 2
The impossibility of a better world seems to be imprinted in the word utopia itself. In his book *Utopia*, Thomas More points out the difference between the two Greek words: ‘utopia’ and ‘eutopia’, first meaning ‘no place,’ the later ‘the good place.’ In English, the pronunciation of these two words is identical, therefore their meaning also merged into one – ‘the good place that cannot be’.  

This situation is going to serve as the starting point for this text. I argue that in order to move forward, we need to question our ability to imagine. We need to imagine different scenarios, different political systems, different societies, different habitats, different ways of interacting with our environments – different worlds.

In this work, I am going to examine theoretical concepts that can be used in the artistic practice of creating fictional spaces. I am interested in the method of creating enclosed environments both physical and virtual, the way they can relate to the reality outside and how they can be mediated. The work does not revolve around any specific form of art, rather it examines theoretical concepts that are connected with this practice.

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5 I have to state that I realize that my perspective is European and thus necessarily built on the history of Eurocentrism. I understand that what I consider real, objective and truthful is an invented concept of the Western philosophy and science. When I use the terms real world or reality, I talk about the reality of Europe, as my understanding of the realities of other continents is very limited, as was the focus of the institutions at which I received my education. For further reading on the concept of objectivity in the Western philosophy see Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity*, (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2007)
On origin islands

In September of 1835, after a nearly four year long voyage around the southern hemisphere, the boat Beagle with Charles Darwin on board reached the Galápagos islands. Initially, Darwin did not consider the Galápagos to be in any way a significant part of the long journey. His role in the voyage was that of a geologist. The geologically young islands of volcanic origin were not expected to hold any secrets or peculiarities. But in the end, they were the key to his most famous work.

Traveling from island to island, he noticed that the same species of birds had slightly different shapes of beaks on each of the islands he visited. He gradually spent more time on each of the islands, collecting specimens that he eventually used to illustrate his theory of the evolution of species, which he developed on his return back to Britain. What was it about these islands? The restricted environments of the islands with each of them conserving a parallel evolutionary branch allowed him to obtain understanding of a much larger system and he later developed a theory that was to be applied universally.

In his essay On Desert Islands Gilles Deleuze describes the significance of islands for human imagination: the feeling of separateness from the rest of the world is what stimulates our ability to create. ‘It is no longer the island that is separated from the continent, it is humans who find themselves separated from the world when on an island. It is no longer the island that is created from the bowels of the earth through the liquid depths, it is humans who create the world anew from the island and on the waters.’ The principle of creating anew is crucial. As the title of the essay suggests, he argues that all islands are always already deserted, either preceding or following human presence, because it is unimaginable for us to think of islands as stable ecosystems, as they are always in a state heading to another origin due to the everlasting struggle of land and water. The potential inhabitants found on such an island when reaching it are somehow

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8 Gilles Deleuze, *On Desert Islands and Other Texts*, (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004), p. 10
preceding humanity, they are ‘absolute creators.’ ‘There you have a human being who precedes itself. Such a creature on a deserted island would be the deserted island itself, insofar as it imagines and reflects itself in its first movement. A consciousness of the earth and ocean, such is the deserted island, ready to begin the world anew.’ The notion of the new beginning is also inscribed in the round shape of an island, similar to an egg or a seed. The metaphor does not end there. Like an egg or a seed, an island also represents the idea of a bare minimum, a shell containing all the necessary information and materials needed for a start, or to start over.

Geographically, an island is defined as an isolated piece of land that is surrounded by a completely different habitat, from which it is divided by a clear border. But an island is not only a physical space: it is also a mental construct. The concept of an island, or rather ‘islandness’, is not only limited to islands surrounded by water. It can be projected onto various other environments, such as an oasis in the middle of a desert or a village in high mountains. It is the idea of isolation and self-sufficiency that is defining the way we think about islands. Although the island, real or not, is never completely separated from the outside. The water that represents the clear border defining the island is constantly changing its shape; at the same time, the water that defines the island is also its bonding tissue that connects it with the rest of the world.

9 ibid, p. 11

On heterotopias

Islands are not only small sections of the world, but they can also be somehow positioned parallel to the world. In that sense, we can look at them and examine them through the lens of Michel Foucault’s concept of heterotopia. Contrary to utopias, heterotopias are spaces that exist in the real world. They are places which function under different laws (of access, interaction, organization, segregation, hierarchy) than the world that lies outside of them. What is significant is how the time flows somehow parallel to their surroundings; by virtue of this separation from the world, they create an atmosphere of a certain timelessness.

In his text *Utopias and Heterotopias*, Foucault defines six principles of thinking about heterotopias. The first principle represents heterotopias that are established by societies to segregate, either to protect certain groups of people (privileged spaces for adolescents, the elderly, the injured, pregnant or menstruating women) inside spaces, called heterotopias of crisis, or to exclude them inside heterotopias of deviation, thus protecting the people outside (prisons, psychiatric wards, retirement homes). As they move on the axis from what we might call ‘primitive’ (not industrialized) to ‘developed’ (or industrialized), societies tend to create more heterotopias of deviation that secure the people outside of them than heterotopias of crisis created in order to protect.

The second principle elaborates on the changeable nature of heterotopias, which can quickly serve a very different purpose as the society changes yet seemingly stay unchanged themselves. He uses the example of cemeteries, which play a very different role in each society according to its beliefs, but on the universal level we can still share the concept of what a cemetery is and are able to recognize them.

The third principle defines the capability of heterotopia to represent and bring together several otherwise incompatible spaces. An example today might be a theatre or a cinema, places which, by using projections on the screen or performances on the stage, change

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11 Michel Foucault, Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias, in Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory, (NYC: Routledge, 1997), pp. 330-336
the meaning of the entire physical space. Historically, one of the oldest examples of this category might have been the ancestors of today’s gardens, the traditional gardens developed in the Middle East to represent the idea of a paradise. They were supposed to bring together and represent all parts of the world, converging in a central element. They were both the garden and the whole world at the same time.

The fourth principle describes two types of heterotopias that revolve around time. There are those that accumulate more layers of time in one space (museums and libraries) and those that are purely temporal (fairgrounds constantly operating in a festive mode).

The fifth principle brings the issue of borders and access. Heterotopias are isolated and penetrable in a way unique for each type. They are often accessible through specific rituals and gestures, examples of which can be the different kinds of public baths that exist in various cultures and that require the ritual of purification before entering.

The sixth principle focuses on the purpose of heterotopias as somehow being parallel to all the other spaces outside them. Either they create an illusion to expose the real space in comparison to them, or compensate for something not present outside. Compensating heterotopias include former colonies and enclosed communities created within societies that aim to be perfectly planned, securing themselves from the world outside. Another example, somewhere between the two types, is a ship, whose relation to the outer world can change with its position.

The principles are not defining clear categories, rather they are attempting to make sense of already existing phenomena. The second, third and fifth principles describe three significant qualities these spaces possess: their changeable nature, ability to juxtapose several spaces and the importance of them being isolated from outside; while the first, fourth and sixth principles use an imaginary axis that sorts heterotopias between two poles according to how these spaces segregate society, what role time plays inside the spaces and its agential position towards the outside world. It is the sixth principle that will be crucial for the second part of this work, as it revolves around the question of how these parallel spaces position themselves towards and communicate with reality.
On spaceships

I am going to stop here for a small thought exercise and examine the topic of a ship with two cinematic examples. The reason I have chosen these is that in considering more contemporary realities, a spaceship is a more relevant example of heterotopia than a boat, and the medium of film is probably most significant in mediating these spaces to the broader public. The first example is Stanley Kubrick’s film *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) based on Arthur C. Clarke’s novel of the same name, written simultaneously with the film. The second is Andrey Tarkovsky’s film *Solaris* (1972), based on the eponymous 1961 novel by Stanisław Lem. The reason why it makes sense to look at these two films in relation to each other is that Tarkovsky’s *Solaris* was to a certain extent a reaction to Kubrick. He considered Kubrick’s film sterile and too focused on technological invention. With *Solaris*, made 4 years later, he aimed to bring more emotional depth to the genre of science fiction.  

Foucault starts his text about utopias and heterotopias with a metaphor of a mirror, where he describes the space behind the mirror as a placeless place that we must be able to see in order to know what is real. ‘I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror.’ The metaphor of the mirror was also used by a character in *Solaris* called Snaut. In the famous library scene, Snaut comments on mankind’s endeavor to reach other planets, arguing that ‘We don’t need other worlds. *We need mirrors.*’ Although, as the film later shows, the mirror in this case is a planet

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13 ‘The mirror is, after all, a utopia, since it is a placeless place. In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror. But it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy. From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there. Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am. The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there.’ Michel Foucault, Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias, in *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, (NYC: Routledge, 1997), pp. 330-336

with a conscious ocean that can materialize the crew members’ memories, the spaceship itself can be viewed as a mirror, as it contains and reflects a fraction of the world. Metaphorically, it can be used, and has been used, as a tool of commenting on the world. Both films also examine the question of non-human forms of intelligence, which in both stories serve as a mirror of the human world.

Now let’s examine both examples through each principle of the concept of heterotopia defined by Foucault. The first principle does not have a clear implication in any of the two films. The spaceships in the films are neither heterotopias of crisis nor of deviation. But from a certain point of view, the idea of a spaceship always implies a crisis - a capsule carrying the bare minimum in order to save humanity. It evokes the questions about the state of the planet Earth, directly related to the second principle, which states that the purpose of the heterotopia can quickly change while its space seemingly stays unaltered. Spaceships are tools of exploration and expansion, characteristic for periods of prosperity and technological inventions. But the character of their existence is ambiguous. It is at the same time reassuring, as it constitutes a possible living environment outside of the planet Earth, and frightening as it connotes the idea of their eventual necessity. In the crisis scenario, the spaceship becomes a carrier of the world. It is simultaneously the smallest section of the world and, for the time being, it is the whole world (the third principle of juxtaposing several spaces within one).

Thinking of the third principle in relation to spaceships also alludes to the idea of the panopticon, as the whole spaceship can be considered to be such a framework. Panopticon is an architectural typology that Michel Foucault used as a metaphor for modern society in his book Discipline and Punish. The spaceship can be viewed as a machine environment designed to control its occupants. This is much more obvious in the 2001: A Space Odyssey than in Solaris. The spaceship is also (in its current use) designed to control the environment outside of it, therefore the control room becomes a dual-panopticon directed both inwards and outwards.

15 Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish, (NYC: Pantheon Books), 1977

The fourth principle is very significant in both Solaris and 2001: A Space Odyssey. The idea of time flowing differently inside the heterotopic spaces is directly represented in both films. The spaceship in Solaris has a futuristic, Space Age styled interior, quite similar to the one seen in 2001: A Space Odyssey with the exception of one room – the library. The library is a circular room with a crystal chandelier hanging over a central round table, not the typical equipment of a spaceship, and neither is the wood paneling of the walls serving as a sort of cabinet of curiosities filled with books, sculptures and figurines, framed paintings and photographs, glass and porcelain, candelabra, traditional masks, etc. It is there in the film where the time literally stops, during the scene in which the objects start floating in the room. It is a very fine example of a heterotopia that accumulates time, as described by Foucault, according to whom the idea of a museum as a general archive that is accumulating everything and aiming at somehow ordering the world is a concept of our western modernity. And here in the film, this collection of western modernity is shipped off the Earth and presented as the peak of civilization. As Foucault states, before modernity, the museums and libraries were private collections that reflected individual choices and authorship. It is debatable whether the library in Solaris is supposed to be an example of this archaic type of a library or a modern one, but Tarkovsky is known to have very meticulously curated all the objects in his scenes.

The final sequence of scenes in 2001: A Space Odyssey is set in an interior that is, again, unlike any other in the film. The location of the interior is not clear and its meaning is open to interpretation. The interior has an uncanny quality and as the key theme of the film is artificial intelligence, it is probably safe to assume that it is some sort of a rendering of what the intelligent entity (represented by the black monolith) considers to be a human dwelling. The bedroom interior is uncanny because it is filled with references that seem as they should be relatable (Kubrick’s obvious choice was neoclassical aesthetic), only they are slightly misplaced, beginning with the counterintuitive glowing floor. The interior is in a heterotopic manner disconnected from the rest of the interiors.

17 Andrey Tarkovsky, Solaris, Mosfilm, 1972, 2:12:00
in the film; it has museum-like qualities similar to the library in *Solaris*. It serves as a background to juxtapose the singular story of the character that watches himself in fast forward motion to undergo some sort of evolution, with a much larger story of the evolution of humanity that emerges in the finale.

The *fifth principle* opens the question of access to a heterotopia. Heterotopias are never accessible the same way ordinary public spaces are. They depend on an exclusion or at least a need for rituals and gestures in order to gain access to them. With spaceships, the exclusion element is obvious: only a trained individual has a permission to enter. In the case of *2001: A Space Odyssey* the members of the spaceship crew seem to be trained almost to the point where they have lost their human character and are starting to act like robots. The matter of exclusion and access regarding spaceships can also have political connotations connected with crisis scenarios discussed above.

The *sixth principle* examines a heterotopia’s relation to the space outside it. Foucault places heterotopias on the axis between those which function to expose reality, heterotopias of illusion, and those that aim at creating a new form of reality that is somehow surpassing ours, heterotopias of compensation. The spaceship is an example of a perfectly planned space where all details, including the crew, are impeccably curated to be effective and functional, unlike the reality of the world. Foucault questions whether some colonies were not the representations of this principle - isolated capsules of the colonizer’s world brought in a ship onto a foreign continent that developed into absolutely regulated ‘perfect’ societies operated under the colonizer’s ideology. Here we see a distinction between the two films. The spaceship in *2001: A Space Odyssey* is an example of such a perfectly curated environment that stays that way for almost the entire length of the film. It can thus be considered a heterotopia of compensation. In *Solaris*, on the other hand, the spaceship is not meant to be a perfect environment. While it might be designed in that manner, the characters occupying it are not obedient and are creating a slightly chaotic, human atmosphere. On the other hand, the scenes taking place outside the spaceship, the memories of the planet Earth, seem to be depicted almost ideally. The film can be viewed as an example of heterotopia of illusion, a mirror positioned to reflect both the Earth and *2001: A Space Odyssey*. 
{Fig 1} A still shot from the film 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968) by Stanley Kubrick

{Fig 2} A still shot from the film Solaris (1972) by Andrey Tarkovsky

{Fig 3} A still shot from the library in Solaris (1972) by Andrey Tarkovsky
Fig 4. A still shot from the final scene of 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968) by Stanley Kubrick
PART II
Shaming reality

When Thomas More, once a Chancellor of England, wrote his *Utopia* in 1516, he used the book to comment on the current political situation and the state of the world he was living in. He divided *Utopia* into two volumes: in the first of which, set in reality and based on correspondence with real people, he lays down the problems and controversies of 16th century England. His critique is directed both at the moral integrity of noblemen and monarchs, and the unequal distribution of resources and material wealth caused by the early capitalist system. He also contemplates the duties of philosophers and intellectuals and advocates for their active roles in public life. In the second book, he describes a fictional island that was accidentally found by one of the men on Amerigo Vespucci’s voyages. There, he finds an island community founded by an enlightened king, the Platonic philosopher Utopos, who established a society that does not operate around the concept of private property, nor uses any currency; the society works for only limited hours a day, hosts multiple belief systems coexisting together and values human happiness above all else. The second volume in many aspects answers the problems laid out in the first, but in a revolutionary way that requires the reader to find the parallels for themselves. More does not offer concrete solutions for the problems of contemporary England, instead he stimulates the reader’s mind to create and imagine them by comparing the abstract world of *Utopia* to his reality.

Imaginary spaces can be used as tools to shake up our reality by making it distant to us for a moment. But most of the fictional scenarios are not straightforwardly shaming the present by positioning it next to a vision of a better world, as Thomas More did in his *Utopia*. They present worlds that are heterotopic, rather than utopian. They serve as an alternative, or a mirror, to reality and, just as the physical heterotopic spaces in the real world, they make certain aspects of reality more visible. These literary heterotopias contradict Foucault’s definition of heterotopia as a physical part of this world. They could

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be considered utopias, as they are no-spaces, but their nature is not utopian but disruptive; they are counter-spaces to the real world. Although they are not located in it, they can be as powerful in questioning reality as the physical heterotopias.

By accepting the literary heterotopias as forms of heterotopia without requiring them to have a physical form, we must also consider virtual spaces that are created by other media than text, whether those are paintings, drawings, photographs and films, or digitally rendered images, as relevant ways of creating spaces with heterotopic qualities.

These spaces can serve as tools to question reality, to challenge the status quo, to discuss controversial topics, or contemplate possible futures and directions of societies. Art practices with critical approaches often actively work with these mechanics. They create speculations, small petri dishes that highlight certain aspects and issues. These scenarios and fictional realities don’t necessarily serve to denounce our present; on the contrary, they can serve to embarrass our visions or wishes for the future and make us appreciate the reality of now. They present us fictional worlds that can be truly heterotopic. They fulfill the heterotopias’ principle of being juxtaposed to all other places, without ever having a physical form.

If we look back at the two discussed examples of spaceships with the knowledge that Solaris was partly a reaction to 2001: A Space Odyssey, we can see Tarkovsky’s aim to juxtapose a more felt and human vision of the future to Kubrick’s fantasy as an example of this mechanism. What he was trying to unsettle was not reality, but a technocratic vision of the future dominant at the time. Solaris can be seen as the placeless place behind the mirror created for 2001: A Space Odyssey to see itself.
Virtual heterotopias

Physical heterotopias need gates, doors, ticket barriers, purification rituals, gestures, guides and guards as portals to be accessible and simultaneously create a clear barrier between the space inside and the space outside. Virtual heterotopias are naturally lacking the possibility of a physical experience of a body entering a space that is crucial to physical heterotopias. If we have agreed that virtual spaces can be heterotopic, what defines their borders?

We can think of the media used to communicate these virtual spaces as forms of such portals. It is the choice of the medium that determines the accessibility, the penetrability, or exclusivity of a heterotopic space. Such heterotopia is also under greater control of the creator, as they can, to a greater extent (depending on the choice of the media), control the ‘movement’ of the observer/visitor in the presented space, and thus can decide how much of the virtual space they will reveal and how much they will leave up to the visitor’s imagination.

We can place the practices used for mediating spaces on an imaginary axis leading from the ones that place the observer’s body (or eyes) inside the environment, to the ones that keep them outside of it and confront them with the representation of the space from the outside. An obvious example of the first pole of the axis is game environment which usually aims for a close to bodily experience. A visitor of such an environment is free to explore it on their own.

On the other end of this hypothetical axis we would find a method that mediates space only through objects. Let’s call them objects from other worlds. These objects can be represented physically or digitally, because they themselves are not as important as what they represent. At the same time, the question whether our bodies can occupy the same space as these objects or not can have significant repercussions. By presenting an object that seemingly has no purpose in our reality, the creator/designer is pointing at the one in which it has. It is the blank space that these objects create around them as they (or we) are unable to create connections with our reality that is the most important part of them. They are calling for the other world to emerge in our minds.
Objects from other worlds

The described phenomenon is present through a wide scale of art practices, rather than covering a specific field or genre, I will provide three examples to illustrate the mechanism of mediating virtual spaces through the above-described objects using various levels of literacy and realistic accuracy. All projects share a certain level of critical engagement with reality directed at the fields they explore. The explorations and research that are behind the projects are distilled into an object that becomes the carrier of the whole narrative.

An example of a work that has deliberately loose ties with reality is Pauline Rip’s *Riding Ghost* presenting objects materialized using irrational data of fanciful animals collected by cryptozoologist researchers. The two riding saddles, made of leather, one to ride Yeti the Snowman, another to ride Nessie, the Loch Ness Monster, are creating a world where these creatures not only exist but have been domesticated by humans.

Antoine Behaghel’s *The Workers of the Carbon Storage* is a project that is creating a fictional space inside our world. The project presents found objects of a fictional future-past island community that reveal an elaborate craftsmanship revolving around the aim to deflect an ancient prophecy by removing carbon from the atmosphere. The project consists of a series of found objects and a reconstruction of a dance performance revealing part of the ritual connected with the act of depositing the carbon-rich-objects into the bottom of the ocean.

A project that stays very close to the nature of our reality is Jacques Servin’s and Igor Vamos’ *4 July 2009*. The duo known as The Yes Men use a physical newspaper as an artefact from another world. Through ‘hacking’ this ordinary object that was distributed in thousands of copies in various places, they at the same time offer a glimpse from a mirror world that might be better than ours, while commenting on the medium itself.
Fig 5 Riding Ghosts (2019) by Pauline Rip
Fig 6] The Workers of the Carbon Storage (2021) by Antoine Behaghel
Conclusion

The examples above can be viewed through the lens of heterotopic principles. Each of the projects represents a mirror, a counter-space to reality, positioned so it reflects its specific layers. Most of projects that critically engage with reality can be classified as heterotopias of illusion rather than compensation. They do not aim to fabricate a better, more perfect version of reality, but create an illusion of it. The illusions that are so well integrated in reality that they are almost impossible to distinguish from it are usually the ones that hold the most critical power. But their illusory nature still creates space and freedom for fiction.

Returning to the metaphor of ship that Foucault uses at the end of his text about heterotopias, virtual heterotopias, speculations, can be viewed as such ships. Due to their rather loose connection with reality, they can change the position as reality develops. To demonstrate this using an example. It is hard to argue now, 500 years later, whether for More Utopia was a heterotopia of illusion or compensation, in other words, whether he was creating a deliberately absurd world or an improved version of reality. But for the sake of the argument, let’s assume that Utopia was an absurd illusion of the reality of its time (as it has been argued that More’s contemporaries could have hardly related the presented scenario to their reality, due to the many dogmas it was subverting). In the course of our history, during certain times, Utopia may have come closer to reality and seem less absurd and more plausible, and thus potentially be viewed as a scenario of a more perfect present. Likewise, the previously discussed virtual heterotopias, fictional spaces and scenarios, can be viewed as ships floating in the ocean of all possible realities constantly repositioning as the history develops.

This raises the question of how the existence of Utopia as a fictional scenario has affected the historical development. In their book What is Philosophy? Deleuze and Guattari argue that philosophy involves a ‘creation of concepts’ which ‘in itself calls for a future form, for a new earth and people that do not yet exist.’ In their book Fictioning, David Burrows and Simon O’Sullivan introduce the term mythopoesis to describe this

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performative quality of certain art practices, that are not directed to audiences that already exist, but to audiences from future that are now missing from the present. They define mythopoesis as ‘a summoning – or calling forth – of a people who are appropriate and adequate to those new and different worlds presented in art, films, performances, writing and other practices’. The term does not describe a specific method of creating, rather it observes that via ‘fictioning’ another world, fiction itself can be a performative act of producing a different mode of existence inside the real world.

The myth plays a role in positioning the fictioned world on the timeline of the real one. It is often a past myth that is used for fictioning a future scenario. The authors argue that exploring the pre-modern and residual forms of societies can reveal possible strategies of how to resist the dominant structure of capitalism. That brings us back to the starting point of this text and partly answers the problem of laid out in the beginning of this text.

As capitalism tends to create very homogenous environments, it becomes increasingly harder to imagine any other form of existence and thus any future that would be fundamentally different from present. Facing a series of intertwined crises, which will require major paradigmatic shifts in our societies in near future, the homogenous environment of our capitalist reality becomes increasingly vulnerable. Monocultural environments in nature have little ability of adapting to change and thus are proven to be less resilient than diverse ones. Similarly, our social imagination needs to be used towards enriching the environment of our reality with speculations of alternative systems of organizations of our societies and environments. As it has been argued throughout this text, placing the imaginary mirrors of virtual heterotopias into our world creates capsules of different realities that, like seeds, can sprout into existence when circumstances become suitable. By critically mirroring certain layers of reality, its unshakeable and flat nature can be estranged and shaped, and hopefully, the vast desert of our present can become a diverse landscape through which we can better navigate towards future.


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