Anti Randviir

THE ART OF UTOPIA AND THE REAL CITY: BASIC PRINCIPLES

In the immense amount of literature written on utopia mostly attention has been paid at utopia as an arrangement of a better environment and living conditions for people to be carried out in the future, especially in the urban context. A second major trend relates to utopia as a fictional genre in diverse artistic discourses (literature, painting, film). The current article will rather avoid suchlike topics, and concentrate at the notion of utopia in its semiotic essence. Nevertheless, we are to repeat certain basic aspects forming the background of the utopian discourse as rooted in *Utopia* by Thomas More. This is necessary for our further tour into the semiotic functioning and the semiotic essence of utopia. Reiteration of the basics of *Utopia* will, however, also raise a harsh question: thinking about the book we know best in the genre, can we in the end talk about any other work – including both literary, architectural, and possibly other kind – as utopian?

From the etymology we know that *U-topos* comes to being and can only be understood in comparison with something else. Utopia is meaningful not just on its own, but in relation with another (usually the original) *topos* or other *topoi*. Utopia as a meaningful construct can start to function by a simultaneous articulation of its background system that typically consists (or should consist) of an existing sociocultural system. This, of course, has no news value, since obtaining meaning by comparison and relations with other meaningful units is a universal semiotic principle for all meaningful phenomena. The case of utopia, however, has an extremely interesting feature in contrast with the majority of other semiotic

issues: instead of setting up a relationship between a utopia and a clear and articulated realm of an existing sociocultural system, the latter is neglected. The conceptualisation of the existing system remains mostly undone, the principles of its functioning are left undescribed. Thus, utopia is a genre that can almost be characterised as the so-called minus-device. Traditionally, minus-device is a semiotic technique by which an idea or a conception habitually conveyed by a certain sign-vehicle or a set of semiotic units is evoked by markedly not using that customary sign-vehicle. Utopia is a similar kind of semiotic set often established for the description of an existing sociocultural system that cannot, for one reason or another, be described or cannot be fully described.

THOMAS MORE AND THE SEMIOTIC FUNCTIONING OF UTOPIA

It has generally been agreed that the notion of utopia came into being, or at least became loaded with associations taken for granted also today, by the emergence of *Utopia* by Sir Thomas More in 1516. This origin has led to the comprehension of utopia – if not mostly, then at least very often – as connected with a certain place. Commonly, this place supplies the concept of utopia with the quality of being civilized, while the latter feature usually entails the urbanized character of the utopia. Thereby utopia obtains its urban essence, if not even urbanity, that is located *somewhere else*. This has led to featuring novel or alternative sociocultural systems in (science) fiction as located in futuristic urban environments, and on the other hand also to envisaging future developmental plans for actual communities in the form of urban settlements (Plato, Aristotle, Claude Nicolas Ledoux, Benjamin Ward Richardson, Charles-Édouard Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright, etc., etc.); likewise – the latter designs are often framed into utopian associations. These associations are interesting as well as potentially misleading. Also, they open the meaning of utopia to be found in the original work by Thomas More. In the following, we shall approach the topic and notion of utopia exactly in the light of More.

The basic error that is easy to make is simple: it is the comprehension of utopia as a place existing *somewhere else*. Indeed, More's Utopia was an artificial island out there, cut off from the continent. Yet that land was not situated in a completely different space-time – it did not exist,

for example, neither on another planet, nor in an undefined temporality in a distant future. This means that More's Utopia was a *different place* located in the same space, even in the same geographic space as *ours*. However, that place was so different from the *our space* of More's time that this dissimilarity can even be regarded as qualitative. Such a qualitative distance from *our space* not merely geographically, but also – and even more importantly – conceptually, allows us to treat More's Utopia as located in an *alternative space* or a parallel reality. Those conceptual differences concerned life-style, social and societal organisation, economic system, political life on which Utopia had been built. It was by no means a non-space (or not-space, or no-space) like utopia as a *u-topos* is frequently interpreted. Instead, it was an alternative space that existed, in a certain sense, in parallel with ours. It was not an *empty* or *unreal* space, a fruit of imagination or anything similar. Being a *distant* place, it was not unreachable – one really *could* get there (otherwise it could not have been possible to take Utopia, even though on paper, in the manner as More did, amongst us and into our space), although it was not easy: one had to possess a special means and have luck with coinciding circumstances. When searching for common features of utopias, amongst them we can indeed note distance (either spatial or temporal), peculiar circumstances leading to a contact with a given utopia, specific means of accessing it, and a specific state of mind or change of consciousness. A Utopia (a) is frequently an island, (b) it is *far*, (c) the weather conditions extreme, (d) there is an accident as, for example, a shipwreck, (e) survived by one or just a very few, who (f) change the state of consciousness (unconscious after the accident, asleep) and (g) wake up again. Importantly, we have to notice, that all these aspects individually do not raise doubt in the possibility of their existence: they are common and belong to the sphere of common knowledge and reality, they are real and realistic. It is the accident and the stage of changing the state of consciousness that bring along a breach in reality and disrupt the continuity of time-space – but: that they do so, is *natural*.

Suchlike features can be detected ever since More until Daniel Defoe or contemporary superheroes. Naturally, in the course of time, some cosmetic adjustments have occurred: stormy weather has turned into, for example, extraordinary planetary stands, highly intensive sun-bursts; the simple ship has been replaced by an intergalactic nano-screen; shipwreck has turned into an unusual and unexpected chemical reaction in

a secret laboratory or on the orbit; change of consciousness is brought along by complex high technology; after waking up again the hero obtains a mutilated form or appears as an avatar, and so on. Yet – any five-year old child is able to grasp the reality of these circumstances and devices. A child of the 21st century is well aware that a star gate cannot be expected to be hidden behind every single attic door, and this is as natural as it was natural during the time of Thomas More that the special device in the shape of the ship was the privilege of a few. The reality of ships was not shaken by the fact that possessing one was unrealistic for the majority of people – still one could actually see them physically and also in a mediated form (e.g. drawings, paintings). Such reality of a specific gadget, as well as other factors mentioned above, supported suspension of disbelief also towards More's mediated realm of Utopia visited precisely by the help of a vehicle unattainable, although simultaneously common and known for the vast majority of people. Thus, while it was realistically impossible to use this kind of special means for personally checking the existence of Utopia, it was equally natural not to cast unnecessary doubt at the reality of the faraway country reported and described by More – all the more, since in this process More was just a mediator of his conversation with Raphael. The ship was as inaccessible as a spacecraft is nowadays, yet it is not common to set doubt in the reported achievements in the remote operations accomplished by the help of today's sophisticated technology. The complicated nature of exceptional tools and devices is a crucial factor that helps, in its unattainability and unusualness, to increase the reality of the alternative space described: the existence of the tools can be witnessed, but not individually described; this aspect definitely enhanced the credibility of More as a reporter.

UTOPIA AND THE 'REAL SPACE'

Somehow we consider it plausible that Albert Einstein's theory of relativity might make it easier for mankind to conquer space in the future. Yet it was Thomas More who implied that *faraway* places may be reachable for us under certain specific and favourable conditions. In other words: in principle, at a certain moment in time it should be possible for us to visit utopias or even start inhabiting them. Here we face the point at which utopia pleces itsself typologically in the same line with

Paradise, the Land of (the Fountain of) Eternal Youth, and other terrains of wonder and miracle. Mostly, an attempt is made to keep utopias typologically apart of suchlike constructs. For example, one may maintain that utopia really *is* attainable, even though in the future; the utopian space *is* reachable in real time, although in the future – via real time, we are in a manner connected with the utopian space, whilst the existence of Paradise may be hypothetical, doubtful and a matter of belief, being attainable only for a few.

In this manner, utopia, on the one hand, gains the quality of being quite real, it turns into a reality to be achieved, and a community may even design plans for achieving it. A neat example can be recalled from the 22nd Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1961 where Nikita Khrushchev announced the accomplishment of communism in the Soviet Union by the year 1980; the following very concrete and specific activities in the country were to be coordinated through step-by-step five-year plans. Similar are actual projects of reaching, via missionary work, terrorism or other actions a mono-religious mankind in the 21st century, and considerably vaguer, although maybe even more powerful and influential declarations of achieving happiness in the next generation.

On the other hand, it may seem as if utopia differs from the Land of Well-Being (including the version of Paradise) principally because, for example, Paradise is reachable only post-mortem. At the same time, passing into Paradise is also connected with requiring special conditions of transfer (death), and thus principally accomplishable. And from another aspect – in its existential status utopia is no less real than Paradise – at least in the Christian tradition. Indeed, Paradise was located into the post-mortem unearthly realm only recently – for the majority of its history, Paradise has existed in the same geographical environment and reality as cities, other settlements and countries of the world. Located in the east at the source of the very real rivers of Tigris, Euphrates, Pison and Nile, Paradise used to be just as real as Prester John's Kingdom, the Land of the Fountain of Eternal Youth and other similar countries. All these lands have required extremely high quantities of material, social and other resources to be found and managed in the real geographic space – definitely not less than the Land of Spices, the so-called El Dorado and other dreamlands that have, at times, remained utopias, and at times have turned out to really exist in the continuity of our own geographic

reality and time-space. The inclusion of the city as a designed environment does not bring any further clarity to the problem of relations between utopia and the so-called real time-space. Yet as often argued, one possible explanation of the very emergence of the city is seeing it not as an economic phenomenon, but as an embodiment of ideas; having been dedicated to deities, the city might have come into being as a means of bringing Heaven to Earth (see Mumford 1961[1]). Furthermore: if the city really emerged as a vessel of ideas and ideals, it turns the Garden of Eden through the conception of Heavenly Jerusalem into a basically urbanised Paradise that is achievable by a certain combination of actual building material. In a kind of a roundabout manner then, we might ask whether in such case the city would bring the utopia down to the existing time-space, although to the future, or constructs like Paradise would not be utopian at all? From yet another perspective, such a context explains the wide-spread association of the urban and the utopian, the urban life-style and the utopian chronotope.

Therefore – maybe it does not quite make sense to speak about utopian spaces and actual or real spaces, but instead to apply the notion of the utopian that would be a distinctive feature of diverse weight and thus be principally measurable and quantitatively characterisable. So, utopianism appears to be context-sensitive: what is utopian and/or how utopian something is, depends on a given community, worldview, time and epoch.

The Utopia of Thomas More was a settlement that was – as if – situated in an alternative space. Yet it truly had to be located in an as if imaginary space, because it was a work of societal criticism, and the descriptive style More used – which, of course, was amplified by the title – was rather a security guarantee for the author. Here we find another nuance in making sense of the utopia: when deciphering utopia, space is by far not of the primary importance. Space can even be of low significance or merely a means, or rather – a *device* by the help of which to create visions for planning or building a different, maybe even an alternative sociocultural system.

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1   Lewis Mumford, *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations and Its Prospects* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961).

UTOPIA: COMMUNITY AND STONES

Without novel, or just holistic sociocultural conceptions a planned utopia would most probably not start to function. This was the case with several novel settlement plans on the level of urban neighbourhoods in the Soviet Estonia (for example, Annelinn in Tartu or Lasnamäe in Tallinn) that were erected for the New (Communist or at least Soviet) Man. Dysfunctionality can also be noticed also in the case of larger so-called utopian projects as, for example, Brasília that became known as a 'fantasy island' (how compatible with More's *Utopia*!), since it never managed to connect with its contextual space (or spatial sociocultural context) of the rest of Brazil. Without paying attention to issues related to the sociocultural system, there is no real point in trying to give shape to a spatial-architectural utopia. Evidence of the relevant failures can be witnessed in, for example, several African cities built by the physical and visionary help of the Soviet Union (and other states) that have turned into mere slums by today. One can meet architectural installations of concrete buildings probably everywhere on that continent, but Ibadan, Lagos and other cities in Nigeria are outstanding examples that could exemplify the concept of dystopia as a space of spatial-architectural constellation without an integrated sociocultural content (for four types of spatial-sociocultural integration, see Sorokin[2]). On the other hand, we can draw a positive example of systematic understanding of treating a sociocultural system in a holistic manner in Marinaleda, a small town in Spain. For bystanders, Marinaleda may seem as a utopia, but it still is a real town in real Andalusia with real people in quite real Spain. If we cannot understand that utopia as a future (not quite futuristic) vision does indeed have to be connected with real people and the social dimension, or we just do not bother ourselves to deal with that dimension, we lose meaning in spatial (architecture, urban space) planning all over, since at a high probability purely spatial utopias simply would not work. Or more precisely – there is no reason to think of the utopian space as possessing less dimensions than the so-to-speak ordinary space: pragmatic or primitive space, perceptual space, existential space, sacred space, geographical space, architectural space and planning space, cog-

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2   Pitirim A. Sorokin, *Social and Cultural Dynamics: A Study of Change in Major Systems of Art, Truth, Ethics, Law and Social Relationships* (Boston: Porter Sargent Publisher, 1957), 4.

nitive space, abstract space.[3] Perhaps another well-serving example of seemingly utopian thought and transfer to both alternative spatial environment and alternative perceptual-cognitive universe can be brought by small communities withdrawn from the so-to-speak ordinary civilization. These are mostly religious communities who have erected their own settlements *somewhere* else in both geographical and conceptual space. For example, at Tiberkul in Minusinsk Hollow, Siberia, there is a community of Church of the Last Testament. It consists of people who are followers of Sergey Anatolyevitch Torop, a Russian policeman who became Vissarion or reborn Christ. Pursuing their leader's example, members of the new community became Vissarionites, and started off with a new life along with new (or alternative, if you will) goals and rules of living (including, for example, rejection of money), novel social structure, fresh original settlement structure and architecture. Yet, suchlike communities are not utopian in their own identity discourse, but rather follow 'the right way' of living. And this regularity seems to confirm our hypothesis that utopia ceases to exists at the very moment people start to give it a real form in real geographical environment, be the latter even concerning a remote spot and seemingly cut off from the so-to-speak ordinary civilization: the utopian becomes into the planned.

Thus, 'utopian city' and 'real city', 'utopia' and 'actual culture' are principally alike, since in all of those constructs as meaningful entities we can see the meeting point of man, culture, society, and physical space – as reflected in the above mentioned diverse dimensions of space. Shortly, it means that utopias are regularly associated with 'something better', and they appear to embody a positive or positivistic vision of the future (otherwise we would be dealing with a dystopia, anti-utopia or the like) in the sense of creating positive harmony or isomorphism between the constituents (dimensions outlined by Relph) of the spatial semiotic system. This is the point where the theme of utopia hooks up with community's developmental ideology, and understanding utopia as a mere spatial alternative occurs, again, incomplete. Examples can be drawn from Estonian public information space where enhancing life in cities is a popular culture theme that recurs periodically. If we wish, for example, to make life better in a country, to 'facilitate life in Tartu' as the national university city, to 'ensure Tartu's sustainability', then there is

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3   Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion, 1976).

no actual point in dealing with suchlike questions only trying to solve spatial issues, for example the architecturalisation (or mere housing, in an even worse case) of Tartu's central parks. If the utopian space has the above-mentioned dimensions, then utopia is not achievable by a mere building exercise aimed at 'filling the geographical environment' (see Saar 2012 for Tartu's five 'official versions' of future developments[4]). Since, let us not forget: Thomas More's *Utopia* was a *device* with a specific task, it was designed *for a reason* – to offer a spatial environment for a sociocultural system built up in a specific manner and planned up to quite minute details only to meet the particular needs of the inhabitants. While More's utopian discourse was a vision cast into its specific form to overcome a disruption in the continuity of both time-space and the sociocultural system he was actually criticising, today we should rather create urban *visions* (not utopias) as they ought to aim for congruence with people's needs and their image of the ideal culture.

In order not to consider the so-to-speak natural future developments in utopian terms, we should probably be constantly aware that we are not dealing with a hypothetical dilemma of 'this city and the other', since visionary enhancement of city-planning alongside with the advancement of the sociocultural system indeed has rather to do with quite realistic and common *planning*. Social congregations can and have been distinguished in most general terms as organisations coherent in membership sentiment that is based on shared visions of culture and cultural well-being. Ideal culture and cultural ideals have been considered as defining features in understanding society as a community whose members share the vision of Good Life[5] that also determines the perspective of norms as standardised mass habits of behaviour according to the imagination of 'how things ought to be'[6]. In spite of their essence seeming vague at the first glance, it can still be maintained that the sociocultural visions that influence everyday behaviour form a basis on which the members of a sociocultural community can actually be quite exactly delimited and counted: according to Kluckhohn, 'society' refers to a group of people in which individuals interact with each other more

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4   Jüri Saar, „Kas klaastornidega city või kausikujuline kaluriküla?“, *Tartu Postimees*, 05.09.2012.
5   Robert Redfield, "How human society operates", *Man, Culture, and Society* ed. by Harry L. Shapiro (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 345–371.
6   Edward A. Hoebel, "The Nature of Culture", *Man, Culture, and Society* ed. by Harry L. Shapiro (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 168–181.

than they do with other individuals; it consists of people who cooperate in order to achieve certain goals[7].

And the other way round – if willing to treat the utopian discourse as representing not a single individual, in the case we would be dealing with just a singular fruit of imagination, fiction, or something alike, but as really having to do with the community, we should establish a relationship between the utopia and the community

Thus, if willing to talk about utopia in the context of designing a healthier future and making the world a better place, the first task for us to accomplish is to understanding the essence of the community we are centring at, and who or what are its constituents with their specific vision of development. The latter aspect may not seem to be of high relevance for the study of the utopian discourse and utopian texts in a community, but actually it is the other way round. Planning sociocultural developments and particular activities for achieving goals must be in direct connection with the units of our social organisation, for otherwise we would not be dealing with coordinated action with a particular public target. Social units may vary from one system to another, beginning from a single individual to diverse types of groups and institutions. This association of social units with utopia resulting in either targeted and coordinated action or more-or-less harmonised designs of future action is what separates utopian discourse from the production of other texts or cultural texts. In a way, this is the point where we could even replace the notion of utopia as a mental construction with 'ideal culture': which visions of the above-mentioned Good Life do the members of a given community harbor, what constitutes the motivational centre for their collective intentionality underlying their coordinated action (if there is any), etc. The determination of society and understanding (and also planning) people's visionary and purposeful interaction is, by far, not as difficult as the impression of, for example, the First Estonia and the Second(ary) Estonia cultivated in Estonian public space during the present century. This means that if, in that situation, instead of utopia the notion of ideal culture was used, it would not be possible for subdivisions such as First and Second Estonia to emerge inside the formally unified society. If the latter discrimination

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7   Clyde Kluckhohn, *Mirror for Man: A Survey of Human Behavior and Social Attitudes* (Greenwich: Fawcett, 1961), 24.

is still used, then it refers to the division of a formally cohesive society in the manner where, for example, (so-to-speak) border crossing from the Second Estonia to the First one could really only be associated with the utopian discourse. On the other hand, if the determination of a society also included reference to goal-directedness, then (a) that Second Estonia could not be comprehensibly associated with the Republic of Estonia even (scientifically) formally, or (b) governmental efforts should be directed at clarifying overlaps of the goals, contents and problems of diverse societal units, to then start designing relevant action plans. In the very last case, we would be dealing with agents acting in the name of targets set through common ideal culture, which would make it possible to apply the notion of society to the Estonian population both formally and scientifically correctly; likewise the so-to-speak socialness or societalness of that community would probably be sensed also on the object-level, thus minimising the process of alienation. Due to the lack of conceptual and socially-based action plans on the governmental side, and the amplification of suchlike governmental ignorance (in more than one sense of the word) in the media, the image of the Second Estonia has emerged as descending to dystopia. Correspondingly, from its inner viewpoint, exiting from the Second Estonia even to the First Estonia can only be characterised as a utopian discourse. Therefore, in the logical end, all utopias as 'good places' are based on people's needs and their visions about the best ways of satisfying those needs. If the utopian discourse is somehow coordinated or regulated by whatever kind of authority of whatever kind of totalitarian nature, and the societal dimension is forgotten, any formally utopian construct turns into a dystopia.

If we take society to be the general holon on which the development of the utopian discourse should depend, then its constituents and their common interest ought to be characterisable as a communication and communicative network. Communication, in turn, adds an interesting nuance to our topic. When thinking about, for example, the Soviet Union, Hitler's Germany, or contemporary North Korea, this nuance becomes quite obvious. The case in point is that truth, reference, reality, semiotic reality are socioculturally negotiated phenomena that depend on the communicative situation. Therefore naturally also utopias, or more correctly – utopianism and the ascription of the utopian to certain phenomena or ideas depend on how truthfulness and factuality are assessed

and established. On the one hand, the notion of the situation of com-munication adds possibilities of determining the utopian discourse. Yet from another angle, communicative situation entails the problem of the utopian as, when putting it mildly – being distant from (the ordinary) reality. The communicative situation is directly connected with how, for example, the urban utopianism is shaped and what forms it takes (if there is willingness to talk about the urban utopia at all), since space – maybe even all kinds of spaces – is a so-to-speak a societal product or a product of socialness.

At this point, the treatment of the social situation by Talcott Parsons must be reminded. Parsons defined the *situation* as "[...] consisting of objects of orientation, so that the orientation of a given actor is differ-entiated relative to the different objects and classes of them of which his situation is composed", while the *object world* is composed of *social*, *physical* and *cultural objects*. Whereas a *social object* can be seen both as composed of other actors (*alter*) and as the one who has switched him- or herself into the referential reality (*ego*), *physical objects* are non-interactive empirical units that do not respond to the *ego*, and *cultural objects* are the symbolic elements of cultural tradition or value patterns. Importantly for our theme, cultural *objects* can, via internalisation, be included into the structural components of the self.[8]

In practical communicative situations it becomes vividly clear that the three types of objects change places, distort each other and alter their status. For our context it is important that these alternations take place in some kind of articulated manner, specifically in the physical space, while these alternations themselves depend on value systems, prefer-ence standards, semiotic structures that are based on the ideal culture and may already be shaping the collective intentionality in the utopian discourse of the given community. Often, quality transfers and alterna-tion of objects' status is executed by trying to embody cultural or social features in physical objects: the symbolic dimension forced upon them ranges from cult stones to Stalinist skyscrapers (for example Lomonosov Moscow State University) and other landmarks of the primarily sym-bolic value to perform as a scaffolding for a utopian discourse to guide collective identity (for example Ryugyong Hotel in North Korea, the Eiffel tower by now), not to talk about such objects in the city-scape

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8   Talcott Parsons. *The Social System* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1952), 4.

that nearly wholly lack of the denotative dimension (for the latter see Eco[9]) as is the case, for example, with monuments. Suchlike dynamism explains how architectural (or physical) objects in their functional-denotative status can be transformed into keys (or special devices in our above vocabulary) for the utopian discourse, and how interaction with the physical units (from ceremonies at specific spots in the city to wider cultural themes in public space) can serve as a window to alternative space and alternative sociocultural system.

A concrete and acute bright example of suchlike dynamism and manipulation with the status of objects in the urban context is known to a wider audience from Estonia by the example of the so-called Bronze Night in Tallinn. The well-known Bronze Soldier, a monument celebrating the deeds of the Soviet army during World War II in Estonia ('liberation of Estonia, Europe and the world from Nazism', 'bringing the real or working people to power', etc.), was an item amongst the physical objects that was turned into an embodiment of cultural objects and Soviet symbolism, and finally switched into the realm of the social objects (even a name, Alyosha, was given to it). Thereby a metal monument became a catalyst for the identity discourse of people driven by the Soviet communist mentality, and communicative situations were defined and solved through associations related with the monument. At the same time, Russian propaganda was turning the Estonian state and Estonians into the physical constituents of the communicative situation bearing no social or cultural value or dimension. This classic tactics of objectifying subjects, communication partners or social objects (in the sense of ascribing them the status of things or physical objects) leads to the termination of communicative situations, or at least and at best to change-over to unilateral communication. Furthermore – as physical objects become practically fully dependent on the social agents or objects, their fate is in the hands of the latter. In our context it means that the likely alternation of the status of objects both in the semiotic and the physical reality in Tallinn in April 2007 loaded with utopian associations embodied by the Bronze Soldier was probably interpreted as a rare possibility to transfer from the existing reality (independent Estonia, democracy, capitalist economy, judicial system, etc.) to another

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9   Umberto Eco. „Function and Sign: The Semiotics of Architecture", *The City and the Sign: An Introduction to Urban Semiotics, ed. by* Mark Gottdiener, Alexandros P. Lagopoulos (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 56–85.

one (associated with values related to the former Soviet Union, Stalinism, communist economy and ideology, etc.). And again, in a pretty classic manner, in the eyes of a certain social group, 'saving the Bronze Soldier' became a key for a window to an alternative space and alternative sociocultural system of the utopian discourse.

In this way, cultural objects are connected with value patterns or, when using Abraham Maslow's notion – with metaneeds[10] as guidelines for the utopian. The social situation, or rather – the situation with objects taken as social – is what frequently brings up behaviour as if based on a utopia and leading to a culture change, for otherwise there emerges a danger for a dystopian future. And indeed, one of the easiest resorts can be found in placing the utopian imagery into physical objects to then be shaped according to a certain vision. So – there surfaces the same kind of situation as was the case with Thomas More's *Utopia*: a utopia cannot be a successful plan or vision of future without seeing the utopian space as merely an environmental or contextual device for satisfying the needs of a sociocultural system. Thus, reminding again of the context of More's work, one ought to ask first, especially from the semiotic viewpoint, whether or for what purpose do we need the notion of the utopia in the context of real settlements at all? One of the best definitions, although maybe a roundabout one,of the city in at least Estonian history and that of other countries influenced by German culture has been that 'the city-air makes free' ('*Stadtluft macht frei*'). That was a verbiage for referring to the peasants' opportunity to literally break free – free from slavery in the countryside manors after having lived in a city for a year and a day. Maybe curiously enough this description of the city (air) corresponds to our above-proposed key aspects of the utopia: for an enslaved peasant, (a) the city was an insular formation separated from the surroundings by defensive constructions and the city-wall, and it was inhabited by selected individuals. Respectively, (b) the city was *far* both physically, socially and culturally, and its semiotic reality was out of reach – although surmisable and imaginable – for a peasant layman or slave. The city could be reached only by escaping from the reach of the landlord (who simultaneously owned the peasant), and such a getaway could be realised only under (c) highly irregular circumstances as war, uprising or plague that was supported by (d) an additional irregu-

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10   Abraham H. Maslow, *Motivation and Personality* (New York *et al.*: Harper&Row, 1970).

larity as a fire accident, change of landlord or other attention diversion. At the same time it is clear that (e) the city could be reached by only a few survivors whose (f) mode of consciousness switched from a kind of interim state to (g) a completely alternative semiotic realm. Yet, even in the case of such a physical and semiotic relationship between the city and utopia, the former plays the role of a kind of intermediary space on the way to the latter, because the city rather exists as a container of an alternative sociocultural environment. Under such circumstances and specifically in the context of urbanity, added by the level of freedom in the same cultural space, it is not exaggerated to ask, why not to prefer notions as plan, vision, future vision connected with concretisation of action, to utopia dating back to More's quite specific context of reasoning.

UTOPIA: FROM TEXTS TO CODES TO TEXTS

As mentioned above, in More's time-space to openly propose radical plans for the so-to-speak rightful development of the existing socio-cultural system was not without risk. This was exactly the reason for the emergence of Utopia in his book *Utopia*, but we have to realise that his mode of discourse was that of criticism and offering a vision for a better community, knowing that it was not realistic to actually call for radical changes in his contemporary epoch. From the above-mentioned minus-device as a technique to be found also in the functioning of the utopia, we move to seeing utopia as a critique of an existing sociocultural system without apparently or openly criticising it – via the presentation of a new or alternative system, the *own* culture and society were actually described. Were we to find a text comparable with More's prototypical *Utopia* (if such a text would be principally possible at all), we obviously can only answer the why-question about its emergence by looking for what was 'wrong' at the time of its birth with the given community. Evidently, More's views were so radically divergent from his surrounding life that he could not propose just additions for improving the system. At the very most, when keeping in mind the location of his Utopia on an island in-between Europe and America, we could surmise that *Utopia* was a vague suggestion for arranging at least the New World as quite distinctly separated from the Old both spatially and qualitatively. This is exactly the reason we treat his work as belong-

ing not into the so-to-speak traditional line of literary or fictional texts, but to a completely novel genre (not quite compatible with even Plato's and Aristotle's visions of 'good cities'). And, on the other hand, this is exactly why his work did not hook up with the discourse concerning the ideal culture, for the latter is a negotiated target, and its detailed contents and ways of achieving it are subject to minor, although negotiated modifications. Utopia cannot be simply an improvement of the existing culture, since suchlike enhancements are principally allowed as far as they serve the existing developmental goal associated with the (maybe vague, but maybe also quite verbalised) ideal culture and cultural ideals. From another angle – if there appears a possibility to create a completely novel sociocultural system in a novel space, then that space is filled physically and architecturally, socially and culturally according to certain visions of an ideal sociocultural system, and there would not be anything utopian about the enterprise (for example, establishment of new colonies, cities and communities ever since the beginning of the Age of Discovery).

In this light, More's *Utopia* was an interesting semiotic achievement built by a specific technique. Contemporary understanding of the utopia implies it to be a visionary text presenting a view of a better future to be achieved by developing a societal system according to certain instructions. Those instructions of building, for example, 'a better settlement' are given in a text by comparing a given future vision with the existing state of affairs; such a comparison has to make the instructions logical and acceptable, and brings thus the seemingly utopian into the same time-space sequence as the existing physical and semiotic reality. This is exactly the aspect leaving *Utopia* as a prototype to a singular and unique position since, as already noticed, cautiousness required More to leave out open criticism of the existing system. And so More's Utopia was principally and essentially disjoint from the so-to-speak normal or ordinary time and space. More skipped the level of instructions or codes for creating an improved society, for that would have implied his openly critical position; likewise he avoided the comparison of the existing sociocultural conditions and 'the other kind'; yet the text apparently requires the derivation of instructive codes out of the seemingly 'ordinary' or neutral fiction. In this sense, a utopian model in More's key is code-oriented (or grammar-oriented), similar to Juri Lotman's gram-

mar-orientated culture in which "the text is given to a collective before language, and language is 'derived' from the text".[11]

Such logic is precisely opposite to the so-to-speak utopias that offer reasoned instructions for repairing 'real cities' and communities according to cultural ideals (examples associated with authors mentioned in the beginning who presented *plans* for development). That is why More's *Utopia* was not just a prototypical text, but determined seemingly similar texts in the future to remain outside the sphere of utopia: in the sense of being the first in the genre, it remains singular precisely by virtue of its pioneering creation technique. Its appearance simultaneously suggested a new code for the interpretation of the following seemingly similar genres such as either fairytales, fiction, science fiction, sociocultural criticism, as well as visionary propositions for future development. We might recall Louis Marin's featuring the role and general status of the utopia as a genre – it is:" [...] a negation that all utopias take upon themselves, in their very name, since they find themselves denied even before they have come to be: they are the pure negativity of which historical discourse is secretly the carrier".[12]

The case with *Utopia* amplifies this fate of functioning of More's text. By the introduction of the term utopia characterising a utopian sociocultural system in the island of Utopia, presented in a sort of journalistic coverage of a story by Raphael, More reserved a unique position for his work. It is not merely an artistic oscillation between dissimilar worlds or semiotic realities, although this function is apparent in the *Utopia* as well. It is not merely about sociocultural criticism, although it serves as such through the minus-device technique and setting up a clearly dissimilar reality for the world More lived in. It is not an explicit proposal for improving the society of the Old World, but the reader is not denied the possibility of making the relevant associations. Indeed, the unique position of the *Utopia* lies in its location in an *alternative space principally at reach*.

Thus, in the case of actual communities and cities, associating developments in real time-space with the notion of utopia, seems exaggerated. It might be possible to bring but a very few examples of 'utopian cities' matching the above-described logic presented by More. The most famous

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11   Yuri Lotman, *Statji po semiotike i tipologii kultury*, Izbrannye statji v 3 tomah, vol. 1 (Tallinn: Aleksandra, 1992), 150.
12   Louis Marin, *On Representation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 96.

of the kind, if not the only one, is Saint Petersburg (the above-mentioned Marinelada exemplifying planned actions taken to achieve an ideal culture). That city really was founded (at least according to the common legend, although nowadays we already have knowledge of a previously exiting settlement in the area), and not only founded, but created into an 'abnormal space' to embody and contain a visionary view of a lifestyle radically different from the centuries old traditional Russian. It is not enough to say that Saint Petersburg entered its cultural domain already as an embodiment of ideal(s) (see for example Tulchinskij[13]). Rather, alongside with building merely an architectural *environment* for those ideals, also the physical and the semiotic space was created out of what was, again both physically and semiotically, previously a swampland. The space of Saint Petersburg was novel and shared More's conception of the utopia by its fundamental insular character (for a deep analysis of the latter see Marin[14]) – it was an extraordinary space environmentally as well as for coming into being as an alternative space in terms of its relation to the existing Russian cultural space of the early eighteenth century. It was a 'window to Europe', a space in-between the European and Russian cultural spaces, a city in-between two different worlds; being a real, although alternative space, in relation to its so-to-speak motherland, it was simultaneously *in* and *out*, both *ours* and the *others* (the latter does not so much refer to for example the Europeans, but to an alternative or an utopian community). Yet, Saint Petersburg proves it again that the city as a set of combined building material cannot connect with the utopian without strong support from other creative and explanatory discourses (poetry, painting, fiction, etc.). And even then there remains the crucial question: can a utopian city exist in real environment or will the city, however thoroughly explained and justified, always remain 'the Bible in stone' as understood in the European Middle Ages?

So, in the end, we might ask about the possible functions of a city, we could set the quest about a city as such: is it a settlement, an embodiment of something, a function for embodying something, a mechanism for accomplishing certain visionary tasks, or is a city a mere means for containing a certain community in its purely pragmatic dimensions. Yet, taking into account the arguments above, it seems that we – at least in

13   Georgii Tulchinskij, „Gorod-ispytanie", *Metafizika Peterburga (Peterburgskie chtenija po teorii, istorii i filosofii kultury)*, ed. by Lioubova Moreva (Saint Petersburg, Eidos, 1993), 146.
14   Marin, *On Representation*, 99-102.

the so-to-speak real life – ought to speak about and concentrate at the planning of not merely architectural environments, but approach the topic in a holistic way, trying to view people in their physical surroundings as meeting their needs in the context of their semiotic reality based on the legitimised metaneeds. Then, in a nicely weird resemblance to Saint Petersburg, the city as such appears as a window to the utopian, marking and embodying a space in-between the existent and – through the futuristic – the alternative reality. Architectural designs obtain, besides their functionality, also other dimensions (see Eco referred above) that ought to be grasped in correspondence with holistic view on the nature, perception and cognition of space. Nevertheless, while real spatial structures as architecture can provide the utopian discourse with artifactual scaffolding, they need, in turn, some kind of back-up from textual discourse. Otherwise they remain or become into merely functional environment and dismiss any seed of utopianness that might have been the cause of their very birth in the first place. Whereas the city cannot principally be defined as utopian in our discourse, its importance lies in functioning as a space between parallel worlds. The artifactual dimension of the city can be used to surpass the functional significance of architecture and environmental design, and serve as a device to breach spatio-temporal regularities with the aim of opening at least a semiotic entrance to alternative sociocultural institutional networks.

SUMMARY:
The article addresses semiotic topics connected with utopia and the utopian. Even though the argument is based on the widely analysed text by Thomas More, it still targets the fundamental semiotic techniques and principles applied in *Utopia* that has established the universal logic for the utopian discourse ever since 1516. Simultaneously it will be evident

that it is worthwhile to raise the question of the legitimacy of describing certain cultural production as utopian in the light of More's highly singular prototypical text. The utopian discourse and consciousness is often an issue tied with the urban context and the city. The article will question such an association because of the status and functioning of the utopia as launched by More. Except from extremely particular specimens, urbanity in its sociocultural dimension in a specific time-space probably cannot be, and is not useful to be discoursed in utopian terms. The semiotic interpause is hard to achieve in the context of the physical environment. Yet this is the point where the utopia, the city, the society and the utopian come together. Thus it might be useful to review the notion of utopia in its connection with quite practical development of the (urban) sociocultural life in which even the status of objects in communicative situations is being continually re-defined.

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