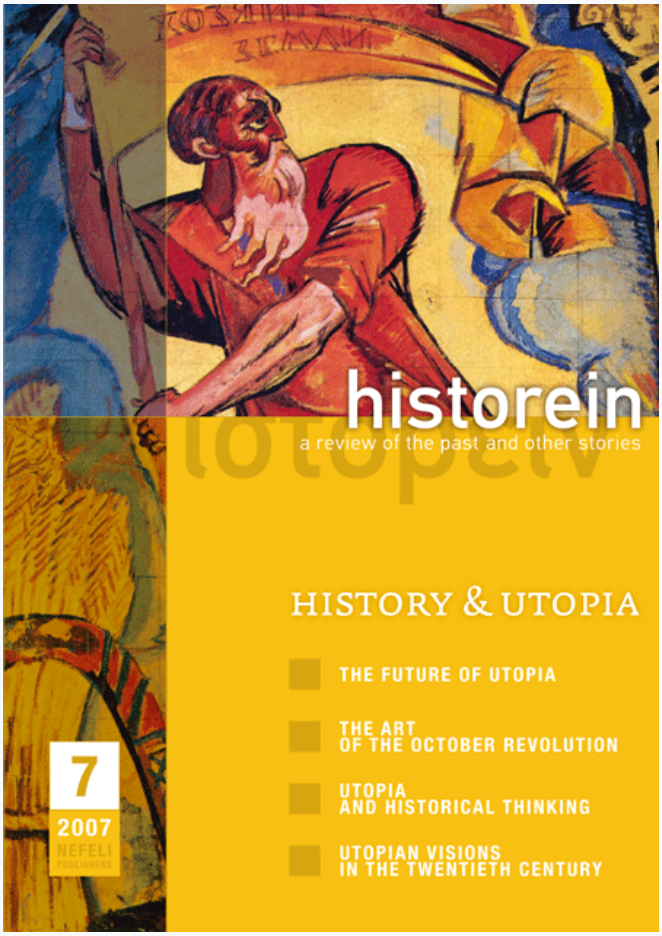
ePublishing

EKT ΕΘΝΙΚΟ ΚΕΝΤΡΟ ΤΕΚΜΗΡΙΩΣΗΣ NATIONAL DOCUMENTATION CENTRE

**Historein**

Vol 7 (2007)

History and Utopia




# Timely Utopias: Notes on Utopian Thinking in the Twentieth Century

*Ioanna Laliotou*

doi: 10.12681/historein.50

Copyright © 2012, Ioanna Laliotou

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0.

**To cite this article:**

Laliotou, I. (2008). Timely Utopias: Notes on Utopian Thinking in the Twentieth Century. *Historein*, *7*, 58–70. https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.50

https://epublishing.ekt.gr | **e-Publisher:** EKT | **Downloaded at:** 12/10/2024 07:06:06

## *1. "The Centaur Excavations at Volos"*

"Do you believe in Centaurs?" This question is presented on the showcase title plaque in a permanent display of archaeological fiction (Fig. 1) installed at the Jack E. Reese Galleria of the John C. Hodges Library at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UTK). According to the description provided on the university website,[1] the installation includes "one of the finest adult male centaurian specimens yet discovered". The display was installed in 1991 and since then it has become the centre for the organisation of a series of related workshops, lectures and special events. This exhibition is part of the library's extensive collection of epic literature on the myth of centaurs. As Beauvais Lyons, Professor of Art at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, has noted, "like other works of archaeologi

includes the mythical monster's skeletal remains buried along with various inscribed clay tablets. The text panel on the back informs the visitor that this is "one of three centaur burials discovered in 1980 by the Archaeological Society of Argos Orestiko eight kilometres northeast of Volos, Greece". Other objects of this exhibition include a map of Greece, drawings that depict centaurs, photographs of the man-animal depictions from the Parthenon and information on the anatomy of adult male centaurs.

Figure 1: Permanent display of archaeological fiction installed at the
Jack E. Reese Galleria of the John C. Hodges Library at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville

This installation is of course a work of art. The skeleton is made from the tea-stained bones of a pony and a deteriorated human skeleton. The piece was originally created by Bill Willers, Professor of Biology at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh and artist. The project was exhibited at several college galleries in the 1980s, and in 1992 Neil Greenberg, of the UTK Department of Zoology, and Beauvais Lyons managed to raise the funds that enabled UTK to purchase the display. Those involved in the creation and exhibition of this work of art believe in the educational value of its display. The professor-artist wanted to convey the message that scepticism is the necessary presupposition of all learning and un-learning. On the other hand, the exhibition invites us to doubt, even tentatively, our belief in and knowledge of the mythical existence, or not, of the Centaurs. How do we get to know and discern between the factual or the fictitious nature of objects? What are the narrative tools, the conventions and technical means through which we distinguish art from science, fact from fiction, myth from reality, and monster from proper being?

Part of the importance and the strength of this exhibit lies also in its potential to foreground the very processes through which such distinctions are made possible. The choice of the centaur as the protagonist of this representation powerfully introduces ambivalence on various levels of meaning production. Indeed centaurs are extremely ambivalent figures: half man, half animal; half civilisation, half nature; half natural being, half monster. As deeply ambivalent figures, centaurs have been extremely popular in various genres of writing and visual representation and have captured the imagination of artists, authors and intellectuals who were willing to use the borderline between fact and fiction, or rather the inexorable relationship between the two, as

the locus of their creativity and production. By crossing many of the borders according to which humans have defined their real world, their present, their past and their future, the centaurs are also emblematic of many of the questions and issues that concern intellectual discussions and debates about reality, imagination, nature, humanity and bestiality, and history and utopia during the last decades. Thus, the meaning of the exhibition at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville is also that, paraphrasing Lewis Mumford's paraphrasing of William Morris, centaurs may not be real, but news about the excavation of Centaurs at Volos is real news!

In this article, I deal with the re-emergence of the concept of utopia, both on the level of academic discourse as well as in the field of popular culture and art during the last decade. I attempt to locate this re-emergence historically. I argue that the theoretical potency of utopia derives from the concept's commitment to the disruption of set rules and axiomatic assumptions. By tentatively uplifting the certainties of the real, utopian imaginings enact future possibilities within the present. The hypothetical and only tentative undermining of set boundaries and conventions, an essential condition of utopian thinking, is a genuine deconstructive gesture. I am particularly interested in the relationship between utopian thinking and the ways in which we understand history. Drawing on the philosopher Ernst Bloch and his idea of non-synchronicity, I argue that despite the overwhelming spatial dimensions of utopian imagination, imagining the future in the present presupposes radically different ways of understanding the temporal dimensions of past and present reality.

## *2. From Centaurs to Vampires: The Re-emergence of Utopia*

Utopia as a concept and as field of academic study has recently re-emerged. This re-emergence is partly explained as a response to the various ideological arguments that concerned the end of utopia – indeed the end of history – and had been voiced earlier in political as well scholarly forums as a reflection on political developments globally since 1989. Various scholars of utopia have attempted a periodisation of utopian writings by pointing out the periods when utopia flourishes and the ones when it seems to fade or become sterile and repetitive. Anthologies and chronologies of utopian writings agree that utopia is an essential modern phenomenon. The utopian intellectual tradition has a long history that some trace back to Plato's *Republic*, even though most scholars consider Thomas More's *Utopia* as the definitive starting-point of modern utopian thought in the Western world. The end of the twentieth century was marked by a dubious consensus that seemed to confirm the end of utopia alongside the end of a series of other intellectual dispositions that had been characteristic of the modern era.

Many scholars and intellectuals saw the collapse the Soviet Union as synonymous with the collapse of utopianism and the end of ideology. The destruction of the Berlin Wall appeared as the symbolic illustration of the end of a collective promise that had been betrayed. The disillusionment with socialism and emergence of new notions of democracy in Eastern Europe was seen by many as the definite historical victory of the market economy and its cultural values and the end of any possibility to re-imagine the world in a different way. This political disillusionment was interestingly paralleled by the recognition of a crisis in so-called scientific utopianism. This

second account of the "end of utopia" scenario was often related to the crisis of the ideals of the European Enlightenment and to the disbelief in the potential of science to uplift all human suffering and solve all major social problems. The supposedly "destructive" potential of scientific progress led to a crisis in scientific utopianism.[3]

Historians of utopian-thinking know very well that there have been plenty of other periods in the past when the "end of utopia" was pronounced as fact. The point of course is not to verify or falsify such a statement, but rather to understand the historical and political reasons that enable the appearance of such pronouncements. On the other hand, periods of disillusionment, crisis and uncertainty are very fertile for new utopian imaginings, exactly because failure creates the conditions for the tentative dissolution of the certainties that define given and fixed forms of reality in different historical eras. Indeed concurrent with the lament for the "end of utopia" has been the strengthening of the utopian tone in a wide range of academic writing on culture and politics during the last few years. As Fredric Jameson has definitively argued with reference to the recovery of the validity of utopia as a "political slogan and a politically energising perspective" in the context of the discrediting of communist and socialist parties alike, the scepticism about traditional forms of revolution and the consolidation of the global market means "there is no alternative to utopia".[4]

Indeed, during the last decade the social sciences and the humanities have witnessed a return to utopian thinking. One of the most acclaimed instances of this development was the publication and the subsequent debate over books such as *Empire* by Toni Negri and Michael Hardt at the beginning of our decade.[5] The possibility of direct confrontation between the sovereign empire and the multitude in Negri and Hardt's philosophy exudes a philosophical and political utopian spirit. The book's popularity within the networks of the globalised "anti-globalisation" movements was, I believe, indicative of the utopian potential of the authors' philosophical contribution.

Concurrently, authors such as Susan Buck-Morss have addressed the history of utopia as a double-edged process taking place in different, albeit correspondent ways in the Western and the Eastern worlds. In *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia between the East and the West* Buck-Morss revisits twentieth-century utopian thinking and practices with the aim of rescuing utopia from the political demise of both communist as well as capitalist regimes.[6] Buck-Morss uses the history of utopia not in order commemorate the past, but to trace the radically different potential of reality that enabled people to experiment with the notion of future in art and imagination. She attempts to evoke the potential of forgotten past dreams by liberating them from the actual political projects and the failures of the past. This approach does not lead to a de-historicisation of the past, but it presupposes a particular understanding of the past as consisting not only of processes that led to the concrete realisation of pre-arranged projects, but also of processes that were interrupted, failed, doomed to failure. Similar historiographical endeavours to retrieve the histories of intellectual movements which did not necessarily materialise in concrete historical formations include Luisa Passerini's work *Europe in Love, Love in Europe*, an outstanding case of the recent return to the study of history of past utopias.[7] In this monumental work, Passerini proposes that we approach the history of Europe through the eyes of those who imagined Europeanness in ways that did not necessarily culminate in concrete political projects in the future. This historiographical project is not quite identical to the history of

failure, but it turns our attention to the importance of the study of how people of the past imagined their futures despite the outcomes of their endeavours.[8]

One could reasonably argue that the current re-emergence of utopia, as an intellectual interest and also as an element of popular culture and imagination, is concurrent with processes of general disillusionment with and disinvestment from powerful political visions and projects. The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the broad-range rearrangement of global and local politics and balances after 1989 have created the historical conditions and the intellectual atmosphere necessary for renewed interest in utopia. If we follow this line of historicisation, it becomes clear that the emergent concept of utopia has to be understood in the context of the various articulations of the memory of communism both in the East as well as in the West. The ways in which we discuss the history of utopia in the twentieth century cannot be analysed without an understanding of the ways in which communism – including both Western images of communism and communist images of the West – is remembered and evoked in political and academic debates today.

The relationship between the East and the West in the post-communist era is very central to our understanding of the current re-emergence of the notion of utopia in academic and political discourses and discussions.[9] This relationship is complex and multi-levelled as it takes place not only in the field of intellectual debates and exchanges, but also in the realm of popular culture and everyday life politics. In fact, one should take into consideration that the re-emergence of utopia as an academic concept is contemporarily accompanied by a similar re-emergence in the arts and popular culture. Literature and film are the two areas of cultural production where utopia has recently resurfaced. A great number of the most popular and successful films of recent years has come from the genre of fantasy and science-fiction. The cinematic return to the fantastic and the supernatural signifies a renewed interest in the possibility of alternative versions of reality.

An interesting case of such a film combining the fantastic elements with a post-communist view of the memory of utopia and the relation between the East and the West is *Nochnoy Dozor* (*Night Watch* in English translation), the first instalment of a trilogy (which also includes *Day Watch* and *Dusk Watch*) based on the best-selling Russian sci-fi novels of Sergei Lukyanenko. The film was an instant hit in its native Russia where, released in July 2004, it broke all previous box office records. Made for a mere $4 million, the film surpassed both *Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* and *Spider-Man 2* at the Russian box office. The film also earned great international acclaim. It was the Russian contender for the best foreign language film Oscar award in 2004, was nominated for the Audience Award at the European Film Awards and it won a Silver Raven Award at the Brussels International Festival of Fantasy Films.

The screenplay was written by Laeta Kalogridis and Timur Bekmambetov, who was also the film's director. *Night Watch* is a fantasy-thriller set in present-day Moscow where the respective forces that control daytime and night time do battle. Living among normal humans are the Others, who possess various supernatural powers. The Others are mostly witches, vampires and shape-shifters, divided into the forces of light and the forces of dark, who signed a truce several centuries ago to end a devastating battle. Ever since, the forces of light govern the day while the night belongs to their dark opponents. In modern-day Moscow, the dark Others actually roam

the night as vampires while a "Night Watch" of light forces, among them Anton Gordesky, the movie's protagonist, try to control them and limit their outrages.

According to the screenplay, an ancient prophecy foretells the arrival one day of the Great One, who can end the threat of an apocalyptic battle between the Light and Dark Others. That day has come, and the Great One, once he or she is identified, must choose whether to destroy the light within or battle the surrounding darkness. This choice will reveal mankind's destiny. In 1992, Anton, a broken-hearted man desperate to win back his fiancée, seeks out the black magic services of a witch. This Dark Other, about to use her magic for evil purposes, is arrested by the Night Watch moments before completing her spell. This cataclysmic event awakens Anton to the realisation that he is an Other. Now he must choose whether to become a protector of light or a warrior of darkness. Most of the action takes place in the present, where somewhere on the streets of Moscow the Great One wanders, oblivious to his or her powers. Anton, along with his Night Watch team, races to find and protect the Great One from Zavulon and his Day Watch vampires, who seek to plunge the world into darkness. Whoever reaches the Great One first will hold the balance of power in their hands and control the fate of humanity.

From its inception, the film was made to be a reflection on the interrelation between Russian and Western (mostly US) cinematic imagination. The film is consciously in dialogue with recent Western sci-fi box-office successes such as *The Matrix* and *The Lord of the Rings*. In one of his interviews, included in the recently released DVD version, Bekmambetov explains the genesis of the project, starting with the novel by Sergei Lukyanenko that neatly addressed his fascination with Hollywood fantasy movies. "We never had movies about vampires and witches in Russia because there was another culture", he says, alluding to the Communist regime. "Then in the last ten or fifteen years, Russian audiences began watching American movies." *Night Watch* was conceived as a distorted reflection of Western popular culture onto Russian cultural sensitivities and memories. The director insists that his film is a genuine Russian product, but he defines Russia in relation to the East's fascination with Western pop-culture as well as in relation to the images of Russia circulating in the West. When asked about his choice to shoot the entire film in Moscow, he responds:

> *It's a very cinematic and mythological city. It has a style, a simple style. It's not like Paris. It's ready to be discovered.* Night Watch *is the first step. We will shoot more movies in Moscow and international audiences will discover this new world. Because as I understand, the international audience think that in* Night Watch *everything was treated to be look better. But it's not, it's the city. They've just never seen it, it's their first time and it looks like* The Lord of the Rings*, very ancient. But it's a real city, it exists and all these characters exist.*[10]

The director was also preoccupied with bringing the film into dialogue with many different audiences. That was the reason why the film was cut differently for its Russian, British, French and US releases. The Russian release contained a number of references to the Soviet past which were later taken out. For example, Bekmambetov recruited Soviet-era director and actor Vladimir Menshov to play the leader of the light forces. When many critics claimed that the film merely imitates American blockbusters, Bekmambetov reacted in the following way:

> *I heard a lot of this kind of thing in Russia. But I think that's just a wrong understanding of the movie.* Night Watch *itself is a very Russian movie. It's impossible to imagine this kind of mov-*

*ie somewhere else: a movie with a depressing ending, a lot of inexplicable storylines, strange characters. It's a Russian reflection of American film culture.*[11]

It is true that one the film's most utopian element is the intertwining of many different storylines and consistent co-existence of different temporalities in Moscow's present. The co-existence of differential temporalities and versions of reality within the same temporal dimension is a main characteristic of many present-day utopian imaginings and sci-fi visions. In this sense, utopia does not refer to a remote future or to a completely separate realm of reality, but to spheres and regions of reality that seem to intersect periodically either in piece or in conflict. In his own turn Sergei Lukyanenko, author of the novel on which *Night Watch* is based, noted in an interview that he married these fantasy elements to real life, because it was the only way he could believe in the story. "It's easier for me to imagine the wizard who is using the mobile phone," he says, "rather than the elf who rides a flying dragon."

As a reflection on the reflection between the utopias of the West and dystopias of the East, *Night Watch* is a film about the moment in history when the balance between powers has been broken, thus exposing all the different floating and changeable particles of reality which combine in numerous different versions and areas of our reality. Behind the blinds of what we all unquestionably recognise as our reality – the world of mobile phones and punk-rock music – lie completely different areas of reality, adjacent to and leaving their traces on each other as a result of the continuous movements of living subjects from the one to the other level of the present.

Present utopian thinking comprises past, present and the future in the one and the same historical moment, that of the action. What is the role of memory in this type of utopian vision? How can we define utopia not merely as a genre or literary mechanism, but as a cultural and political disposition? In order to begin addressing these questions I propose that we turn to early twentieth-century utopian criticism and theory.

## *3. Back to the Twentieth Century*

The notion of utopia cannot be strictly defined since utopians traditionally insist on maintaining a certain degree of abstraction in definitions and terminology. Despite this, the intellectual tradition of utopian thinking is well structured and utopian outlines are usually very insistent on referring to the genealogy of authors and books that preceded them. This intentional safeguarding of tradition, an indication of the self-reflexive character of utopian thought, presents the historian with a productive point of entry into this field of study. What is the relationship between history and utopia? Can we reconstruct the intellectual and cultural history of past societies by researching the ways in which they imagined the future? The recent turn of cultural and intellectual historians towards the study of memory has shed light onto the ways in which societies, and nations in particular, constitute themselves historically. But, what about the ways in which societies hope, imagine and anticipate their future? The central question that inspired my study of utopian criticism concerns the various ways in which history is related to utopia and vice versa.

The first half of the twentieth century was a time when utopian thought developed in new and dynamic ways, and some of the most important works of utopian criticism and reflection on the role of utopias in modern societies were written in that period. Anthologies and histories of utopian thinking often insist on a textual genealogy by tracing the various ways in which utopian plots are recycled in different texts throughout the centuries.

In his book *The Story of Utopias* Lewis Mumford relates utopia to history by defining it not as something that cannot be realised, or something that concerns the future, but as a vision of society that exists in the present in the form of a parallel intellectual reality.[12] For Mumford, the reality of utopia takes place in the sphere of intellectual production and desire. He divides utopias into two categories: personal desire and contemplation, and utopias of reconstruction. The former presents no interest for the historian, since it concerns matters of individual psychology. The latter has come to reckon with the world in which it seeks realisation. Mumford defines utopia as a "vision of a reconstituted environment which is better adapted to the nature and aims of the human beings that dwell within it than the actual one", adding that "by a reconstructed environment I do not mean merely a physical thing, but a new set of habits, a fresh scale of values, a different net of relationships and institutions ..."[13] Early twentieth-century criticism of utopia engaged in questions that concerned the interaction between different temporalities – past, present and future – in every given historical moment. Thus, Mumford and his contemporaries brought into the foreground an issue that is pivotal in the historical study of utopian thought and which concerns the relationship between historical time and the notions of time in utopia. A very important set of questions can be derived from Mumford's approach to utopia: what does the idea of the co-existence of different temporalities in any given historical moment mean for the ways we understand history? How can research in the history of hopes and future visions – most of which did not materialise – compliment our understanding of the past? To put it more provocatively, can we write a history of that which did not actually happen?

Almost at the same time, other theoreticians of utopian thought attempted to approach the relationship between utopia and reality by addressing the issue of ideology. The relation between utopia and ideology runs through past and contemporary scholarship on utopia, ranging from Karl Mannheim to Fredric Jameson and David Harvey. According to Mannheim utopia is radically different from ideology since the former takes place at the margins of the historical process, whereas the later is predominantly manifest in political and social history.[14] Mannheim insists that ideology is symbiotic with the very reality that it attempts to criticise and to modify. Ideology exists within the social order that its supporters wish to abolish. Utopia, on the contrary, is not symbiotic. It cannot fit within the established social order and it requires the creation of space where the latter is, even tentatively, abolished. The elaboration of utopia requires the creation of a different temporality that would accommodate it tentatively. This distinction between utopia and ideology leads in yet another way to the question that concerns the relationship between utopia and reality. In his book *Spaces of Hope*, David Harvey argues that utopia relates to reality dialectically.[15] He suggests that every historical period creates the conditions for the emergence of ideas and values that include in condensed form the unrealised tendencies and the unfulfilled wishes of a given society. This "dialectical utopianism", to use Harvey's term, registers the historical potentiality that did actually exist, but did not necessarily happen in a particular historical

period. Can utopia then be remembered? How can one remember what did not actually happen? Is utopia historical? Can history be conceptualised in the future anterior?

### *4. Utopia and Hope: Ernst Bloch*

The philosophy of Ernst Bloch provides us with a huge repository of thoughts, ideas, elaborations and imaginative applications of utopia as a cultural phenomenon and a political disposition of the twentieth century. Bloch's life-span covers the largest part of the twentieth century as, dying in 1977 at the age of ninety-two, he was positioned by geography, descent, and politics at the centre of all major events of the twentieth century. Bloch's philosophy registers some of the most inescapable paradoxes of the modern condition.[16] Born a German Jew in 1885, he studied philosophy, psychology, music and physics. He was a leftist pacifist during World War One and became a Marxist in the early 1920s. Between 1919 and 1933, he lived in Germany, Italy, France and Austria. Fleeing the Nazis, he emigrated to the US in 1938 where he remained until 1949 when he returned to East Germany and received an academic position at the University of Leipzig. From 1961 until his death, he lived in Tübingen. His politics were often severely criticised by both sides of the political spectrum. In the West he was criticised for his Stalinist sympathies, whereas in the East he was condemned as a deserter and an idealist. His relationship with the Frankfurt School was always tense, both in Europe as well as in the US.

The range of Bloch's philosophical thought is so broad that it would be unproductive to even attempt to make a concise presentation of his major areas of interest.[17] His philosophy of utopia is based on a very particular understanding of the historical process that not only binds the past, present and future together into an inseparable whole, but also reveals the multiplicity of temporalities involved in each different historical era. Bloch consistently argues that the past contains all the elements that constitute the content of utopia. Heritage and tradition are instrumental for the envisioning of the past. At the centre of his understanding of historicity lies an evolved Hegelian concept of process that Bloch transformed into a notion of open-ended process that stresses the preconscious dimension of both past and future. Exactly because the past can never be finished and always includes elements that were not realised, it is considered to be a space of utopian creativity.[18] Seen by definition as not-yet-being, the past always contains a surplus of utopian thought in the forms of unrealised meaning resting in the works of the past.

Similarly, Bloch suggests a particular understanding of the role of memory in utopian thinking, based on the distinction that he makes between anamnesis and anagnorisis. The former is defined in Platonic terms of remembering and suggests that we have knowledge of something only because we formerly knew it. Following this definition, memory is a recollection of what exists in our knowledge capital. Quite differently, anagnorisis is about mostly about recognition. Memory traces are reactivated in the present, but there is never a simple correspondence between past and present because of all the intervening novelty. The power of the past is related either to its similarity or dissimilarity with the present.[19] Bloch is ambivalently disposed towards memory. On the one hand, he believes that memory is a safeguard against capitalist oblivion, while on the other he thinks that memory can be a drag on progress and change.

Bloch elaborated the concept of non-synchronicity in many of his books. The concept is pivotal in *Heritage of our Times*, where Bloch expands of the relationship between latency and tendency in the historical process.[20] Elsewhere in his monumental corpus of works he insists on excavating the traces of not-yet conscious elaborations of the future in past historical eras, in the works of art and in politics. For Bloch every age contains its own horizon that reveals the dormant potentialities for future developments. In other words, each past contains its future, or rather its potential futures. Bloch's notion of the future is not however tied to the definite materialisation of past and present horizons. Rather, the future – similar to the past and the present – is understood as a constellation of differential potentialities in becoming. The Blochean not-yet implies, or rather presupposes, the notion of co-existent, non-synchronous and often colliding worlds. If the future exists within the present as an affect, trend, or tendency, then utopia can be embedded in the everyday.

## *5. Utopian Traces in Contemporary Critical Thinking*

Bloch's principles of the utopian understanding of historical process resonate with current theoretical approaches to the issue of utopia. Contemporary scholars have related the notion of utopia to that of affect and desire. Drawing its inspiration to a great extent from Spinoza, the theoretical framework that appears in recent approaches to the potentialities embedded in any given reality stresses the affective component of the utopian imagination. From this perspective utopia is conceived as the "boundary condition" of the present since it is "a reserve of potential or newness or creativity that is experienced alongside every actual production of meaning in language, or in any performances of useful function – vaguely but directly experienced, as something more, a more to come, a life overspilling as it gathers itself up to move on".[21] Thus, Massumi makes a distinction between utopia and optimism or hope. By defining utopia as history's affect, he points out the double role of utopian traces. Subjectivity is affected by utopia and transformed into something beyond itself. But utopia is also the transformation of subjectivity through the elaboration of different horizons of potentiality within the past, present and future. Utopia is affective, but is also affected by historical process.[22] Utopia leaves its traces on different levels of social, political, and cultural processes of transformation. These traces constitute social mnemonic capital and represent the historical depth of subjectivity. In agreement with Bloch's take on memory, Massumi argues that memory does not only include what "happened", but expands to all that could have happened. Visions, hopes, expectations and dreams are also part of our mnemonic capital and they constitute the memory of utopia.

This understanding of utopia brings the interrelation between the possible and the potential into the foreground of our analysis. The concept of potentiality is addressed by many contemporary theorists, mostly with reference to the Aristotelian origins of the dichotomy. Giorgio Agamben has reflected on the distinction between potentiality and impotentiality and has argued that for Aristotle it is possible to consider the actuality of the potential to not-be. Accordingly, what is potential is defined not only by its ability to happen but equally by its ability not to happen. As Agamben puts it:

> *If a potentiality to not-be originally belongs to all potentiality, then there is truly potentiality only where the potentiality to not-be does not lag behind actuality but passes fully into it as such.*

> *This does not mean that it disappears in actuality; on the contrary, it preserves itself as such in actuality.*[23]

What are the implications for historical understanding of this inclusion of acts, deeds, relations, and developments which did not unfold into actuality? If what did not happen does not "lag behind actuality" then the historical horizon of its moment of time explodes into an indefinite number of directions. One of the very important implications of this conceptual shift has been the reintroduction of the notion of crisis into our explorations of the historical process. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has argued, perhaps the only way in which we can currently understand hope and utopia is to look at the means by which a historical situation is brought into crisis. In fact, Spivak argues, the natural and historical space of hope is defined by processes and acts of resistance that induce crisis in history.[24]

How then is utopia related to the practices of intellectual and cultural resistance that attempt to bring history into crisis? By addressing the various appearances of the concept and the function of utopia in contemporary theory and culture, this article has attempted to point out the intrinsic relationship between utopian thinking and our understandings of the historical process. I argued that utopian trends can be explored in different fields of intellectual and cultural production and always in relation to attempts to undermine the rigid distinction between potentiality and actuality. As the "excavation" of the Centaurs at Volos shows, calling into question the conventions that separate reality from imagination can operate as a pedagogical means of unlearning, necessary for all educational processes. Unearthing the horizon of potentialities embedded in any given historical moment is a condition for the emergence of utopian thinking and imagination. Currently this emergence is taking place at the level of theory as well as at that of cultural production. The characteristics of the re-emergence of utopia are to a great extent determined by the post-communist conditions of contemporary memory of the twentieth-century past in the West and the East. Understanding the historical formation of reciprocal utopian visions between the East and West is not only a pivotal part of the exploration of the transformations of utopia as an intellectual tradition, but also represents a cultural and political disposition in the twentieth century.

## FOOTNOTES

1 http://web.utk.edu/~blyons/centaur.html (this and other internet links mentioned in the article were accessed on 13 March 2007)

2 Beauvais Lyons, " 'Do you believe in Centaurs?' Observations on the Process of Bringing "The Centaur Excavations at Volos" to the University of Tennessee, Knoxville's Hodges Library.", June 1994, http://web.utk.edu/~blyons/centaur.html.

3 For a critique of the "end of utopia" idea see Jerome Bindé, "Towards an Ethics of the Future", *Public Culture* 12:1 (2000), pp. 51–72; Greg Johnson, "The Situated Self and Utopian Thinking", *Hypatia* 17:3 (2002), pp. 20–44.

4 Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future. The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, London & New York: Verso, 2005.

5 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000.

6 Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass-Utopia in East and West*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000.

7 Luisa Passerini, *Europe in Love, Love in Europe: Imagination and Politics in Britain between the Wars*, London: Tauris, 1999.

8 For Passerini's take on utopia and its relation to subjectivity and memory, see Luisa Passerini, *Memory and Utopia. The Primacy of Inter-Subjectivity*, London: Equinox, 2005, and "Utopia and Desire", *Thesis Eleven* 68:1 (2002), pp. 11–30.

9 A similar approach to utopia has been put forward by Miglena Nikolchina in her treatment of the West as an intellectual utopia for people during communism in Eastern Europe. Nikolchina is particularly critical of the heterotopic understanding of the relationship between the East and West that has led in her view to grave misunderstandings between intellectuals on both sides during the post-communist period. Miglena Nikolchina, "The West as Intellectual Utopia" in Maria Todorova (ed.), *Remembering Communism: Genres of Representation*, New York: SSRC, forthcoming, and "The Seminar: *Mode d'emploi* Impure Spaces in the Light of Late Totalitarianism", *differences* 13:1 (2002), pp. 96–127.

10 Interview by Rachel Simpson with Timur Bekmambetov, BBC Movies, http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2005/09/19/timur_bekmambetov_night_watch_interview.shtml.

11 Ibid.

12 Lewis Mumford, *The Story of Utopias*, New York: Boni and Liveright, 1922.

13 Ibid., pp. 21–22.

14 Karl Manheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*, London: Kegan Paul, 1936 (1929).

15 David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2000.

16 Vincent Geoghegan, *Ernst Bloch*, London & New York: Routledge, 1996.

17 Jamie Owen Daniel and Tom Moylan, *Not Yet. Reconsidering Ernst Bloch*, London & New York: Verso, 1997.

18 Ibid.; Geoghegan, *Ernst Bloch*.

**19** Daniel and Moylan, *Not Yet*, p. 22.

**20** Ernst Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.

**21** Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual. Movement, Affect, Sensation*, Durham & London: Duke UP, 2002, p. 7.

**22** Mary Zournazi, *Hope: New Philosophies for Change*, Annandale: Pluto Press, 2002.

**23** Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities. Collected Essays in Philosophy*, Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999, p. 183 (emphasis in the original).

**24** Zournazi, *Hope*, pp. 172–90.