

*Contemporary Studies in Philosophy and
the Human Sciences*

**UTOPICS:
SPATIAL PLAY**

Louis Marin

translated by Robert A. Vollrath

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UTOPICS: SPATIAL PLAY

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To S. M. Paçuk

Preface

The present work has two parts. The first is a study of More's *Utopia*, where the noun "utopia" appears for the first time. It attempts to provide the elements for a theoretical reflection on utopic signifying practice. The second part can be seen as an application of the first: it is an analysis of utopic and pseudo-utopic spaces. The whole is preceded by an introduction that examines two generally valuable concepts...the neutral (or the indefinite) and the plural (or the field of dispersion of utopic discourse)...put to work by utopic practice and by the considerations on this practice by means of a *second* discourse.

The "thesis" of the project has three levels. The first is of a "categorical" or conceptual nature. Utopic discourse occupies the empty—historically empty—place of the historical resolution of a contradiction. It is the "zero degree" of the dialectical synthesis of contraries. It edges its way in between the contraries and thus is the discursive expression of the *neutral* (defined as "neither one, nor the other" of the contraries). Here is one example: More's *Utopia* is neither England nor America, neither the Old nor the New World; it is the in-between of the contradiction at the beginning of the sixteenth century of the Old and New Worlds. The *theoretical* expression of utopic discourse can be found in Kant near the end of the eighteenth century in the position of the third term, neither positive nor negative, of each group of categories. There one can read the zero degree of the Hegelian synthesis.

On a second "schematic" or imaginary level utopic discourse "works" as a schema of the imagination, as a "textual" figure, despite the antinomic nature of these two terms. It is a discourse that stages—sets in full view—an imaginary (or fictional) solution to the contradiction. It is the simulacrum of the synthesis. From this the remarkable connection between narrative and descriptive modes can be seen. These modes can also then be tied to the utopic discourse's relation to both myth (ritual) and theater (in its synoptic, closed, and centered form).

On a third, “aesthetic” or perceptive, level the utopic schema (or the signifying practice that stages the discourse) engenders *spaces* in the unity of a same project. It is a plural organization of spatiality. Within this discourse, which has been closed off by the synopsis of a totalizing (or totalitarian) gaze, this multiple production is signified by the incongruity of the produced spaces. This is a spatial play that can be defined as both imaginary (a productive figurative schema) and nonsuperimposable (multiple spaces), all within the most rigid *coherence* of a totalizing *discourse*.

These three levels will be explored from the basis of a double methodological preoccupation: structural and historical.

1. The structural analysis of texts tries to illuminate their narrative and descriptive modifications. It entails the hierarchic organization (surface and deep syntaxes) of the transformational procedures of the immanent semantic elements so that they become evident. This kind of analysis allows for the most rigorous exposure of the productive function of the figurative schema and the meaning effects resulting from the play among the spaces produced.

2. Historically, utopia functions as a twofold discursive practice—poetic and projective. At a precise moment in history utopic practice sketches out and schematizes, unconsciously, by the spatial play of its internal differences (incongruities), the empty places (topics) of the concepts social theory will eventually occupy. The play of spaces utopic practice produces (in both senses of the word “play”) constitutes its particular historical mode of being, the “aesthetic” mode of its historicity. And thus we note the remarkable relationship utopic practice maintains with ideology. It is an ideological critique of the dominant ideology.

The historical moments for the application of this “thesis,” texts from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, can be historically justified by analyzing them as the natural breaking point between the feudal world and its transformation into the world of capitalism. The contemporary examples have solely a “fixation” value, and thus are ideologically regressive. In other words the term “utopia” is used in a sense that is historically restricted to the formative period of Western capitalism.

I would also like to add here that the following texts are the result of a group effort that spreads over time and space, at Nanterre, Montreal, Oxford, and San Diego. I would hope that the participants find in these pages my personal gratitude for all that they have contributed. I also would like to thank Jean Piel for allowing these studies to be included in his collection, and for patiently waiting for their imperfect maturation.

Second Preface

The Neutral: Playtime in Utopia

A new examination of the neutral is not my only intention here, even though it is true that a reflection on the neutral opened my study of utopia and even affected its title. Instead I will speak of a deviation from and a critique of that study. There will be paths that cross over ones already cut by me or by others, but my new ones will contain other detours and switchbacks. I will try to point them out in passing. This new route may seem like a simple perversion of those already travelled; this time, however, the digression sketches out a bolder conclusion than that of its correlary, the principled discourse of just consequences. Here the perversion may constitute the essential element of what can be said.

This is a deviation from my own discourse on utopia and on the neutral; it is also an attempt to create a discourse of deviation and of the neutral, the place of “no-place” Utopia inhabits. I propose a utopic discourse within the discourse on utopia which will examine what is in the saying. I offer, in other words, a critical discourse.

The notion of the neutral finds its roots in my fascination in the signifier “U-topia” and in the detailed tension inscribed in this name that More accorded to the blessed isle, situated somewhere beyond England and the American coast back in the early years of the sixteenth century.

Because of its Greek etymology, the noun “utopia” is obviously inscribed in a geographic, or rather “thalasso-graphic,” reference. But there is also a play on words inscribed in this marine writing and in this name: OU-topia is also EU-topia. This word play is to be found in the margins of the book entitled *Utopia*. But given what has just been said about digression can the book’s borders point toward its center? Substitution of the first letter changes ou-topia to eu-topia. This word play prefigures the spatial play I tried to analyze previously as the very crux of utopia. It is spatial play in another sense, too. As writing play, a play of letters, one can interpret it as another play on words which, this time, points out the essential element in the book.

My first step toward the deviant path of perversion would be this: assume that the topographical, political and other spaces of utopia *play*, just as one thinks of the play between parts of a mechanism. They play in the same way that the elements in a system of the parts of a whole play. Imperfectly adjusted, empty spaces exist between the cogs and workings. My discourse about utopia had tried to adjust the spoken spaces. The utopic text signified them by filling the empty spaces with its own signifying substance. By explaining these different moments of play, the discourse on utopia froze them solid. The quasi-system of utopic construction thus became a true system: a structured whole in which, precisely, no more play occurred.

I would now like simply to restore play to the utopic text. I would like to *let it play*, first by displacing the play of the utopic quasi-system, of its inconsistencies, incoherencies and absences, toward simple fantasy: a playfulness of the text. I would then like leave to play with it, to extract every possible pleasurable benefit it gives with no speculative or practical interest in later asking of what this pleasure is the ephemeral manifestation.

Outopia—Eutopia: I would like to indulge in these terms. If on the way a number of allegories arise, consider them as part of our game. The no—the negation—inscribed within the name is *also* the most transcendent of values, the Good, because of the transparent inscription of an epsilon over an omicron. The name on the page's white space, here inaugurating the modern world, initially and simultaneously writes the monogram of nothingness and that lying beyond all being, of nothingness and of the good, of the good within nothingness.

Omicron, the circle. Epsilon traces out a fracture over it. If we let Democritus speak, as Aristotle reports, we can hear the rhythmic play: *ruthmos* was first a play of lines in a written letter. A graphic bar in movement created either a lambda, an alpha or a nū. If we let epsilon turn within omicron, omega will appear pointing toward a center in the circle, one which omega opens and omicron closes.

O: a fractured circle in the micro-space it enclosed by epsilon-omega. The O is also an open mouth and expiration of breath through this opening, and of which the omega is only an excess: surprise, astonishment and admiration, but also interference, noise and disorder. Recall the servant's noisy cough: it covered over Raphael's words, the very words which were to indicate the precise geographic coordinates of the unrecuperable loss of that place, because More forgot to have Raphael repeat his directions.

Both closure and opening, or opening within closure itself by means of a play in writing and in speech. All this is repeated in the interruption of a dialogue to which the most extreme attention was given. Forgetting was produced.

The O is also the center and the letter of the center designating the point around which, and from which, the circle is generated. The letter reproducing it also anticipates it in its inscription, even before the rule is applied to generate it. O is a letter which designates the central hole around which the compass traces; the hole weighs on the paper, and never fails to pierce it.

Let there be a center circle O: omicron, a well-named center which relates to the hole the movement of its trace, the wake of the force by which a space becomes drawn up and enclosed.

And into this elementary geometry epsilon inscribes the infinitesimal quantity, the negligible. Here we find a kind of limit, the surplus of a nothing. I speak here of geometry, and of elementary geometry, at that, only because the name into which utopia was inscribed and named—for the very first time in the history of the West—was space. It was the writing of space contained within a play of lines and points. Utopias, as you know, continually play between the figures of the circle and in the elements of circumferences and centers. In fact their destinies are *played out* in these images.

Now the supreme value beyond being, the *Good*, needs only the infinitesimal letter in order to be inscribed in the omicron of the negation, and of utopia's very name. By pointing toward and turning around the center, omega appears: the letter for the final goal and the infinite. Omega is the letter of excess within the designation of the infinitesimal.

This is a play on words, but also on letters because the most serious play, "*serio ludere*," is on the surface, and like Nicolas of Cusa we can also extend it to infinity, beyond totality. I would like to quote the fragment from Bloch, "the Rococo of destiny," in turn also breaking it up to follow the plural measure of my quotations: "Everything is a sign, and of course the sign is realized only in the infinitesimal. *First*, a unit of measure is agreed upon, a well connected series ...therefore...measure exists and as soon as the measure has been met, a minute drop suffices to make it overflow. This is the *mechanical* function of the infinitesimal with respect to measure. It may make one think wrongly of a container, a measured bourgeois rationing...it transforms the infinitesimal—a sign—into the cause of a goal. Much more important is the qualitative mode of the infinitesimal, that it is the end of a process...it has nothing to do with a ration gone

beyond its limits, but rather the limit of a form... This infinitesimal is not the kindly appearance we have already seen. It is not...the refined force of a “loop-hole,” even less the magical land and true sign after which change is interrupted... Here there is no sign of an authentic “end” as with certain imperceptible experiments during which joy and terror are overcome by simple astonishment. The sign of the authentic “end” opening into nothingness is perhaps this: the pipe lying there, the light on the road from an electric bulb, or whatever. This feeling of abyssal depth, this sign instead immobilizes the pendulum. It is the absurd movement on to another series. The “infinitesimal” is not the forerunner of a new series; it leads out of the series, but not far. In any case, it is hardly possible to know where... There is no mistaking it, these have something to do with the infinitesimal of the true end, implied ahead of time in any true beginning, giving to this end its direction, inciting it to go in *our direction*... These signs... reveal that we have left the series and that we join the possibility of the non-fatalistic, or we at least enter into a modifiable destiny... The “rococo” and the astonishment in front of the barely imperceptible share at least the infinitesimal of the “end,” whether it be revolution or completion.” Thus the Good, transcending the transcendence of Being itself, is by means of the letter of the infinitesimal inscribed in the hole of the center, O, the perforated center of the circle. The Good is broken up within itself and through the rhythm set up by the letter points to the omega of infinity within this hole. Both the infinitesimal and the infinity of the end are to be found in the hole of the center: ou-topia—eutopia.

In fact, when I suggested the ideal of the neutral, I wanted it to aim at the fracture of totality by the infinitesimal—infinite of the Good, also called contradiction, distancing the parts of a totality from themselves. This is the differentiation that produces difference. Ou-topia: in the nominal signifier, the name creating it brought about a place and a distance, but neither before or after negation or affirmation. This is the place of the limit on which depends the disjunction that founds knowledge, or that is at the base of the founding of knowledge: either true or false. The Greek negation *ou* is coupled with the space the name designates. It is joined to the space of a name and opens up a whole field of possible aims, but which are not the possible terms of truth: neither yes nor no, true nor false, neither one nor the other. We acknowledge this place, rather than have knowledge of it. But even here this acknowledgment is practically imperceptible because it is only a line, containing neither width nor surface. It has only modal reality, as Descartes would say; diacritical, it is fathomable only from that which disjoins, “relatio” inseparable from its “relata.” The “posi-

tion" is, notwithstanding, unable to be occupied as such. "We" cross it to move from one to the other, from true to false, from false to true. How can we stop the swing of which Bloch speaks? In motion since the dawn of Western knowledge, this is also the movement of nature and science Pascal described in the same terms, by a single letter's play, capital and small, the first and original letter, A. According to him, it repeats unending as the ebb and flow of the ocean. The omicron with its center hole, with its zero's O, and the neutral have nothing in common with origin and end, and even less so with authority and power to which they so easily become attached. This "position" has nothing to do with the neutrality of institutional power, even if representative of common truth; nor is it associated with the obvious imaginary disconnection where utopic representation unfolds the architecture of its perfection by freeing itself from historical ties. The neutral could be the name given to the signal for exiting the series and for entering into a modifiable destiny, in Bloch's words. The neutral is the *threshold* limiting the inner and the outer, the place where exit and enter reverse and are fixed in this reversal; it is the name for all limits, provided by the thought of the limit: contradiction itself. Now it seems that dissolving and resolving contradiction in a change which would cancel and go beyond it is the destiny of knowable thinking and its action, at least when it doesn't confuse contradiction with the frozen logic of truth and falsehood. Then totality is reconstituted in another way, but identical to itself at every synthesized moment. The criss-cross of contradiction is perpetually effaced, the wound cauterized, the traces of differentiation's passage emerging only as the determining lines of the whole which has capitalized on them as its *own* treasury. This is the propriety of totality, and the differences are established and connected and combined in the growing complexity which totalizes them. This totalizing movement may be seen as the internal movement of the totality of being and of history. Totality may also be seen as an unending totalization. Neither of these interpretations affects the discourse of thought and of being. In their gathering up of differences, and in this very act, both of them cancel productive differentiation and contradiction by means of integration.

Is it possible to think and to tell of the contradiction aimed at by use of the name neutral? Can a supplement that a synthesis fills be actively affirmed? It is a fiction rather than a concept or an image; it is a fiction that a play of letters brings out in a word, or a joke reveals as undecidable (this could be the only way to modify the destiny of the logos in which all is gathered up). The undecidable is lodged within a text where we read within a non-place of happiness, and in the

place of happiness, the non-place. Conceptual discourse will transform the undecidable into a well formed proposition: happiness is not of this world, the end of this world is happiness. Thus we encounter despair, or the opiate of the people.

If the present text is self-critical, it is so precisely in the sense that I had forgotten to give the original letter its play at the beginning of my former text, from the very beginning of its discussion of the neutral. I had forgotten to let it play, so that as a result I had repeated the recuperation that all of utopia dragged along with it. I had neglected to isolate the other within the exposition; then the unending contradiction would have been 'present': of course, it is nowhere more obvious than through word-play in language, or a play of letters in writing or a stutter or a quick flutter within signifying linearity. The fiction that utopia transformed into representation was transformed by my discourse on utopia into theory. The benefits of pleasure the textual word play triggered were capitalized into analyses and theses. An authoritative power settled at the very spot of what is not capable of interpretation; in the guise of a truthful objective position, the limit and knowledge took hold of the play and differences already existing among the surface elements. If ou-topia is also eu-topia (playing here with the monogram to divert it toward the logic of the neutral and its fiction, toward the theory of contradiction), the movement whereby thought and discourse regained its power showed up precisely in the place they forgot, forgetting its starting point and where I will again try to return now. But a new failure is inevitable, as it perhaps is with all discourse on utopia, just as were these descriptions which unfolded the spectacle of a perfect society right on the scene of the limit. It may simply be impossible to write and speak about utopia. Because both acts—writing and speaking—must be uttered or traced in the empty and white space-time I called the neutral, and thus they build semantic bridges between the 'relata' of the differences, endlessly conjugating them in order for them to be heard, read and understood. When spread out in discourse's representation, the structure (but is it really a structure?) of double negation that characterizes the neutral semantically becomes the double conjunction relating the formerly negated terms. Look at only one example of contradiction More invests into the utopian paradigm: the double negation of wealth and poverty produces the harmonious picture of a society both rich and poor, rich to corrupt and dominate its imagined outside, but poorly able to look after virtue and to raise citizens up as mortar, into the ethical and religious monument which is the State.

It is very possible that a discourse on utopia can construct, as I have done, the edifice for the critical analysis of the book *Utopia*. It may be able to discern within that totalizing and synoptic image—one born of aesthetic story-telling—the power of a pure schema of the imagination, and within the matrix of the schema, the communication of the concept and of history. A discourse on utopia can perhaps strive to reveal by what vertical relations, presented in the terms of recognition and misrecognition, these textual levels of utopic thought are engendered and create what J.-F. Lyotard has called a figure in discourse. As a figurative mode of discourse, utopia as a textual product of utopic practice is in turn produced by the critical discourse at the place of the limit as the figure of this empty place, a place where the productive difference of the possible synthesis will be read. It is here that the future reconciliation of a working contradiction will be seen. As a figure in discourse, utopia is written and imagined within the discourse which criticizes it. It is a discourse located within its own truth, giving it power and authority—but always after the fact—to show how a representation could be produced from the negative side of its contemporary history by discursive rhetorical and poetic operations. History is the absent term of the figure which refers to it. The utopic figure cutting through the textual levels of utopia to join them together is therefore not without a referent, but rather has an absent referent. The figure is projected into a reality that is not said; it is not itself taken into the figure as its signified. Rather critical discourse will provide it for a figure at the end of its historical moment as its true signified. It is in this way that this critical discourse could write: utopia as figure within discourse refers to that which is not discourse. It opens out onto its conclusion. It does not signify reality; it rather indicates it as its absent referential term. It is the figure of a practice that produced it but which dissimulates it by means of representations within which it is formed: social aspirations, imagined musings, political projects, and so on. These are various models whose criteria will always be the impossibility of their realization.

My present discourse could then culminate in the following questions: Of what utopic practice and of what fiction, of what pure contradiction is theoretical and discursive discourse the product and representation in turn? To what reality or to what absent term does it finally refer? What figure—fraught with incoherencies of its own—traverses it? What discursive conclusion opens up as soon as the thesis of historical truth, from whose posture it speaks, is lacking? What happens if the authority and power giving it its “truth-end of history” thesis comes up short, or is simply put into question? What occurs if its founda-

tion is not firm ground but, as Bloch wrote, an abyssal depth? Nothing, except that we then are put to take seriously the game started by the first letter of the name outopia-eutopia. The game of pure contradiction must be played; the stakes are nothing less than the metalinguistic and transmetalinguistic status of Western philosophy and its political and ideological implications: the discourse of truth over ordinary languages, finding its starting point as a decision, one of radical mastery, being posited as its starting point from which it can be raised as such.

What then does this monogram of the first letter of utopia signify? What does this inscription of two letters into one single and unique letter mean? A contradiction is traced out here, and is always being traced out, between a no (a nothing), both point and circle, hole, closure and a whole that is the infinitesimal, the imperceptible but also the infinite. It is a unique and double letter that must be read in a single *instant*; it is the permanence of an irreducible number that must be written while it is read and traced. This is utopic practice, introducing the sudden distance by which contiguities and continuities of time and space are broken in historical narrative and in the contemplation of geographic space. It is by this fracture that we catch a glimpse—as if illuminated by a flash of lightning—of the free force of unlimited contradiction.

How can pure contradiction be thought, unless by fiction? There the question of an infinite polemic cannot be seized better than in the minute scratch or imperceptible fracture in the concrete totalities of current situations, instantaneously present where absolute difference occurs? How can we get a glimpse of this “between” of two contrary terms, unless we look at contradiction as an antagonism of forces, and its pure difference or opening as struggle and conflict?

Let us return to this game, and instead of considering it as a systemic strategy totalizing all possibilities, *uno intuitu mentis*, think of it as a game that is played in this space. Each “turn” of the game whose rules describe the system allows the conflict between the players to be reinvented and superior to it. With every turn, or throw, the whole system is brought into being; each turn nonetheless surpasses the system and its strategies. But if we ask the question in these terms, we then pose utopia in temporal terms. What exactly is the connection between utopia and time?

My work—down to its very name—had considered utopia in spatial terms. If utopia is a fantasy on the limit, a staging of the neutral quality of the limit which plays out in the imagination the contradictory terms it separates, the critical distance revealing this surprising construction is also constituted in a

system of hierarchical levels or moments that a central vertical figure articulates. As a limit between two spaces, such as the old and new Worlds in More's geography, the island of Utopia was born on this limit, within the window or framework that these spaces sketched out. Its very name calls up the spaces surrounding it by indicating that it is between them, in the separation it fills out by its imaginary presence. By speaking critically about the "neutral" spatial quality of the limit, the theoretical discourse was formulated within the terms of a "topic;" the future it revealed was only so in order to create a coherence from a spatial incoherency that the representation organized into its own totality. It is a "topic" of the utopic fantasy, but here I do not need to press the point because all the terms I used to characterize this space directly refer to it: frame, limit, representation, stage and staging. But it is also a fantasmatic "topic" within theoretical discourse because it had only been constituted—like a screen-memory in the dream—to fill the gaps, to articulate the empty spaces and holes and to produce those empty places in the space of the text *Utopia* and within the text of the utopic space, the systematic elements indispensable to its intelligibility. There are production, constitution and articulation which, as we just saw, could only be uttered after the fact from a place which is supposed to be true knowledge with the end of history in mind, and as a matter of fact also the end of utopia. Both the "topic" of the utopic fantasy and that of the fantastic critical and theoretical discourse on utopia are both anchored here.

Thinking about utopia dynamically is equivalent to thinking about the neutral of the limit, about pure contradiction, in temporal terms. It is perhaps surprising to learn how different this task is when the very existence of utopias lead directly to it. Don't they aim toward the future of human society, toward the parousia of a perfect reconciliation between man and the world? Critically speaking, don't they come up with a future that has no previous example? Don't they fabricate a future of desire with pieces of a nostalgic past? Whether we speak of the futurology of utopia or of its archeology, utopia is nonetheless seized and shot through with the category of time. We can perhaps try to provide a clarification for this surprising difficulty; this in turn may open up a way to reflect upon it. When we think about utopia in terms of space, it could be said that we are thinking about its essential nature "imaginatively," its present. The "hic" of utopia unfolded into its "topic," clarifying and systematizing it according to the conditions described, is its "nunc," that is, the insistence in the text and in discourse of its "now." Its map whose viewpoint is everywhere and nowhere sketched out by an observer everywhere present, nearby and far