New Hypothetical Continents: Experimenting With U/Dystopia

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The *New Hypothetical Continents* form the basis to an art project that probably didn't happen.

The phrase was created by a Melbourne based artist, Lucas Maddock, as a nod to Robert Smithson's work, and appropriated from his writings on non-place.[1] Here, it invites reflection on how the present is often shaped by utopian, or dystopian,[2] accounts of the past. This pattern is promoted by global digital communication networks where visual media are increasingly prevalent, and aesthetic modes of representation such as those associated with art play a leading role. In the digital age, unprecedented modulation of this theme has emerged. Picture the hidden swarms of intelligent agents that navigate the Semantic Web and inhabit digital platforms, reminding you to get a skin check that prevents the spread of a growing melanoma, or inviting you to a protest rally curiously aligned with your nascent, radical politics.

Similarly, what are we to make of the sudden iterative looping between nostalgia for a great past that never was and a data rich present that rushes by and virtually never is? For instance, the collapsing immediacy of Tweets that presage all and none, from global war to *Pax Americana*, or forest fires that prove mismanagement rather than a changing climate: gaslighting the planet on everything from misogyny to racism, motivating violent white supremacy with the press of a tropic button.

Mediating this pattern motivates the New Hypothetical Continents, which are based around an interactive website (newhypotheticalcontinents.com) that hosts an archive of responses to a utopian turn in the arts and contemporary culture. Visitors will be encouraged to browse, provide commentary and respond to the archive by offering works of their own.

THE RISE OF U/DYSTOPIA

The figure of utopia has emerged with growing frequency in recent art and culture. Vermeulen and van den Akker (2015) go so far as to describe what they see as a "utopian turn", where a "structure of feeling" that moves beyond the postmodern has emerged.

This "turn" is realized as a (paradoxically) ubiquitous and absent presence, such that 'there is no need to dig deep or look far and wide for the figure of utopia. It appears everywhere and nowhere across the arts and contemporary culture'.[3] Indeed, the ambivalent quality of utopia—evanescent, yet all about—the authors describe coheres with cultural developments during the 2010s, which have given rise to collective aesthetic and intellectual movements that engage with the impact of global flows of digitised capital and culture, and the expanded influence of related industries such as high-tech manufacturing.

Examples include "Vaporwave" (from music, but not really), "the New Aesthetic" (coined by James Bridle, and from design, but not so much), and "ruin porn" (from photography, sort of).[4] Each of these examples are only made coherent by presenting consistently ambivalent responses to the effects of technology, and very frequently these responses rely on high-tech means of creation and mediation.

Each movement is emergent, in the sense that they are not intended or centrally governed, but instead are spontaneous creations of extended networks of individuals. The participants respond to a broad set of themes and conditions via aesthetic means, rather than the particular circumstances and politic that tended to define the art movements of the 1900s.

Beauchamp writes, for instance, that 'Vaporwave arose in reaction to huge economic and social forces that are still very much a part of our lives: globalization, runaway consumerism, and manufactured nostalgia chief among them'.[5]

Like Vaporwave, each of these movements express dissatisfaction with the utopian presentation of technology and its impacts by the agents of late capitalism that dominated the period leading up to the end of the second millennium. Digital communication and media,

1 With his permission I have used the title, and Lucas' work is central to the concept – as Maddock writes 'In 1969 artist Robert Smithton appropriated an illustrated map from Lewis Spence's History of Atlantis and used it to form the basis for his installation Map of Broken Glass (Atlantis)'. See Maddock, Lucas. *New Hypothetical Continents*. Melbourne: Blackartprojects, 2015. Print.

2 I assume utopia to be in a dyadic relationship with dystopia—not necessarily contrapuntal with it, as in the circumstances of a simple binary, though this possibility is itself a powerful, generative utopia—but at least holding in common with dystopia certain traits. For example, the condition that people "have and know their place". This is an ancient philosophical theme: a structure one MUST know and yield to is both enabling and repressive.

high-tech manufacturing, and the computational devices and processes they rely on are the subject of direct or indirect comment.

Typically, this is achieved by removing and reframing the output from the circumstances of its production in the mode of appropriation that underpinned the art movements of modernism. These aestheticising procedures are executed with goal of participation in a self-corrupting joke: one intended to fail at all but the expression of ambivalence.

Vaporwave is a 'slowdown, remixed, and appropriative music genre defined at least in part by an obsession with '80s and '90s consumer culture.... a kind of musical parody of pop consciousness, [which] never strived for mass appeal'.[6] The first vaporwave album, *Floral Shoppe* by Ramona Xavier, AKA Vektroid, AKA Macintosh Plus:

> features a Diana Ross track, "It's Your Move," chopped and slowed to an awkwardly relentless zombie shuffle'... brought back from the dead with all of the slickness, the "product", completely sucked out of it ... the aesthetic of vaporwave is embodied on the cover of *Floral Shoppe*. Take a look at it: the retro computer graphics, the Roman bust, the pixilated city skyline, song titles in Japanese.[7]

The New Aesthetic adopts a similarly ambivalent pose, highlighting uncanny artefacts and back alleys inscribed by the collision of AI and media tech with the now. Battles writes the:

> New Aesthetic is a collaborative attempt to draw a circle around several species of aesthetic activity—including but not limited to drone photography, ubiquitous surveillance, glitch imagery, Streetview photography, 8-bit net nostalgia. Central to the New Aesthetic is a sense that we're learning to "wave at machines"—and that perhaps in their glitchy, buzzy, algorithmic ways, they're beginning to wave back in earnest.[8]

In a parallel, earlier engagement with these themes, Mark Fisher took up Derrida's concept of hauntology to describe a pervasive sense that contemporary culture (electronic music in particular) is haunted by the 'slow cancellation of the future' — or the 'lost futures' of modernity, which failed to occur or were cancelled by postmodernity and neoliberalism. Hauntology is a 'pining for a future that never arrived,' and Fisher's 2014 book, *Ghosts of My Life,* explores examples like the music of Burial and Joy Division, and the films of Kubrick and Christopher Nolan.[9] Fisher argues, with Fredic Jameson, this '"blurs contemporaneity" with elements from the past, but, whereas postmodernism glosses over the temporal disjunctures, the hauntological artists foreground them'.[10]

If the "new" quality in these contemporary aesthetic engagements with history is to be distilled, it is in part as a frustration with the utopian presentation of the role technology was to play in our lives. But more than this, they are a kind of protest against the morbidity this inspires. In Fisher's view, for instance, 'one function of hauntology is to keep insisting that there are futures beyond postmodernity's terminal time'.[11] Intentionally paradoxical, the participants express a distaste for the very process of appropriation that underpins the movements in the first instance — the uncanny sense that the remix culture they comment on and through is generative of modernist (psychological) nostalgia, postmodern (technical) nostalgia,[12] and the ineffable allure of utopia.[13]

3 Robin van den Akker et al., "Utopia, Sort Of: A Case Study In Metamodernism", *Studia Neophilologica* 87, no. 1 (2014): 55–67, doi:10.1080/00393274.2014.981964.

4 Less coherent practices, such as the creation of "dank memes" (from 4chan, at some point) also reflect the sensibility.

5 Beauchamp S, "How Vaporwave Was Created Then Destroyed By The Internet", *Esquire*, 2017, http://www.esquire.com/entertainment/music/a47793/what-happened-to-vaporwave/.

6 Beauchamp S, "How Vaporwave Was Created Then Destroyed By The Internet".

7 Beauchamp S, "How Vaporwave Was Created Then Destroyed By The Internet".

8 Matthew Battles, "But It Moves: The New Aesthetic & Emergent Virtual Taste", Metalab, 2012, http://metalab.harvard.edu/2012/04/but-it-moves-the-new-aesthetic-emergent-virtual-taste/.

9 Mark Fisher, *Ghosts Of My Life* (UK: John Hunt Publishing, 2014).

10 Mark Fisher, "The Metaphysics Of Crackle: Afrofuturism And Hauntology", *Dancecult* 5, no. 2 (2013): p46.

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This is why each movement engages with themes such as control and surveillance, corruption, decline, decay and ruin via high tech means that hypothesise dystopian visions of impossible, present day coherence. There is no such thing as the New Aesthetic or Vaporwave: they are dark comedy instead, parodic of coherency, and perhaps better understood as representing a sensibility than recognisable "movements".

11 Mark Fisher, "The Metaphysics Of Crackle: Afrofuturism And Hauntology", p53.

12 Fisher's (2013) hauntology is predicated on a distinction between '[p]ostmodernism's nostalgia mode, which is 'not defined by a yearning for the past. The kind of figure capable of exhibiting and expressing such longing belongs to a paradigmatically modernist moment.... [Fredic] Jameson's nostalgia mode is better understood in terms of a formal attachment to the techniques and formulas of the past, a consequence of a retreat from the modernist challenge of innovating cultural forms adequate to contemporary experience' (p45).

13 Along similar lines, Vermeulen and van den Akker's (2009) "metamodernism" maps the emergence of conditions that permit a liminal mode of aesthetic representation and experience that takes the form of unresolved oscillation between modern and postmodern sensibilities.

14 Ruth Levitas, *The Concept Of Utopia: Reissue With New Preface By The Author* (Oxford: Peter Lang AG, Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften, 2010): p9.

+ WTF IS UTOPIA??

This sensibility fits neatly with the contemporaneous definition of utopia offered by Ruth Levitas, who in her book on the topic conducts a thorough review of the many and varied applications of the concept, before concluding:

> [W]e learn a lot about the experience of living under any set of conditions by reflecting upon the desires which those conditions generate and yet leave unfulfilled. For that is the space which utopia occupies.[14]

The space of unfulfilled desires, and the weight of expectation it is freighted with fits the recent resurgent interest in utopia in the arts, and a broader ambivalent sensibility in contemporary culture, but also with the deeper history of utopia.

It has been variously defined as preoccupied with a past that never was, a future yet to be realised, or a forcibly imagined present in the mode of fiction. The last became orthodox in early modern utopias, where fictional islands became the site of seminal works that are now considered precursors to the modern novel.

Strong examples are works such as Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1627), and Henry Neville's *The Isle of Pines* (1668), which distilled critique of dominant ideology by offering fictive solutions to social contradictions of the time.

Each of these fictions hypothesise place, and present narrative portrayals of elements of the real world in a new, "ideal" configuration "as-if" they were real. This rhetorical as-if gesture contrasts the virtual dimension of utopia with the reality outside these imagined places, inviting reflection on each. For instance, More's defining name for the island society – Utopia – combines the Greek prefix "ou-" (οὐ), meaning "not", and topos (τόπος), meaning "place". This (very likely) satiric construct describes a model society founded on slave labour in a non-place, or a place that does not exist.

More's ideal construct seems intended as a comment on the dangerous quality of assuming ideal situations are ever able to exist. However, given their proximity with the world beyond the fictional construct, utopian narratives are ever in danger of collapsing into the real, and being mistaken for reality itself. They rely on reflection, and time taken to contrast the as-if with that which lies beyond it.

+ WTF ARE THE NEW HYPOTHETICAL CONTINENTS??

In recent history and the present, speed of information flows and mobile access mean permanent connection to large volumes of data in real time for many — and that the remainder of us are entangled with the effects of this connectivity.

Lev Manovich argues that rather than engaging with databases or archives, as we once did via the Web, we now live in the "data present", as is evident in the ubiquitous construct of social media, where feeds create a continuous flow of events he calls the "data stream".[15] Each event works to:

push the earlier ones from the immediate view. The most important event is always the one that is about to appear next because it heightens the experience of the 'data present'.[16]

15 Lev Manovich, "Future Fictions", *Frieze*, 2013, https://frieze.com/article/future-fictions.

Paul Virilio describes the influence of this ubiquitous digitising of experience in terms of the presence of a "sixth continent". Under these conditions, Virilio argues, the body becomes lost, creating a:

> confusion in feelings of belonging and with the drift of the five continents that make up geographical space towards the sixth continent of cyberspace, [such that] suddenly the morphological stability of reality is threatened with collapse.[17]

16 Lev Manovich, "Future Fictions".

17 Paul Virilio, *The University Of Disaster* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010): p86.

For Virilio this pattern is consistent with a history where the powerful shape narrative representations of the present, and now a 'neocolonial conquest of this "sixth continent", of a virtual space that replaces the real space of the other five'.[18]

But the sixth continent is also inhabited by the agents of resistant, radical groups. Indeed, networked individuals and collectivism are able to formulate alternate places that supplement the most visible territories and might foster and provide opportunity for the presentation of alternate continents: New Hypothetical Continents.

THE GROUND

Such reflexive myth generation intends to disrupt, and *paradoxically* stabilise bodies that intersect and become tangible via digital networks and that for instance, establish the database as a ("dank") stronghold: an archive to anchor against and participate in the destabilising speed of the data stream, and the data present.

In *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty*, Bratton captures this elegantly when he argues:

> Geographies that were comfortable and doxic are now transient and alien, inhabited uncannily. But even as strange geographies corrugate, fracture, and smear worldly scale and tempo, the ground isn't somehow evaporated into virtual information flux; to the contrary, we are brought to a certain end of nonplace. For this, a different kind of placefulness is reestablished, one that is not the organic inverse of artificial abstraction, but an experience of place as one resonant scale within a much larger telescoping between local and global consolidations.[19]

18 Paul Virilio and Julie Rose, *The Futurism Of The Instant* (repr., Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011): p77.

19 Benjamin H Bratton, *The Stack – On Software and Sovereignty* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2016): pp15–16.

Bratton's "placefulness" captures the reflexive essence of the New Hypothetical Continents, where an end to nonplace is celebrated through playful interactions with the consolidation of local with global phenomena.

For instance, in the seminal eponymous work by Lucas Maddock, Robert Smithson's Atlantis is mapped in vector points and rendered as 3D topoi then built as a welded steel frame that mimics joined vector points, which illuminated become a glimmering plateau, and eventually drab — if protean — once cast in bronze.[20] The phases are walked back as the media blur into the relation of utopias, to recuperated models that form the immediacy of a careful reconnaissance. Inspired by blur, in The New Atlantis (2019), Maddock's art has been appropriated again by Grace Barnes, Luke Ylias and Ben Crocker, its vectors unhinged, plunged into darkness and given a (paradoxically) neon make over.

The New Hypothetical Continents are those places we imagine and create, which autonomically resist the drift toward collapse into the u/dystopia of the data present, while playfully allowing moments and media to blur, one with the next.

20 This series can be viewed on the Project Anywhere website here https://www.projectanywhere.net/new-hypothetical-continents-benjamin-matthews/, and in the catalog here https://gallery.mailchimp.com/7fe1d990625362cc01df579c0/files/Lucas_Maddock_New_Hypothetical_Continents_Dome_01.pdf.



Benjamin Matthews Grace Barnes, Luke Ylias and Ben Crocker
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