

# TOWARDS A SUBVERSE QUEER ATOPIA

## Beyond the Utopia/Dystopia Inversion<sup>1</sup>

*Piotr Sobolczyk*

How utopian must one be to think of a queer planet? Does utopian – and therefore also dystopian because one entails the other – thinking dovetail with queer theory? The (modernist) liberationist movements, including gay and lesbian rights movement and their academic double, were based on the enlightenment idea of a rational emancipation that brings gradually more freedom, especially through increasing visibility and positivity of image, leading eventually to the ultimate liberation of a defined group, in this case gays and lesbians. This optimistic narrative is certainly utopian, by which I mean both reaching the “paradisiac” state of freedom and the very progress accompanied by the belief that each step takes “us” into a gradually better world. The emergence of queer theory cast a gothic shadow on this happy-go-lucky ideal, much as the historical gothic novels questioned the dominion of rationality in the eighteenth century and in the incarnations that followed. Queer theory is gothic to enlightened gay and lesbian liberation. As Donald Morton puts it: “the return of the queer has to be understood as the result, in the domain of sexuality, of the (post)modern encounter with – and rejection of – Enlightenment views

concerning the role of the conceptual, rational, systematic, structural, normative, progressive, liberatory, revolutionary, and so forth, in social change” (Morton 1995, 376). Is queer, then, non-progressive? Does it merely cast shadows, demonstrate mistakes in thinking, criticize, mock, ape, but without any impulse of change? This article will assert the contrary.

I shall first discuss the idea of queer atopias in contrast to the inversion principle and utopia/dystopia pair. Then I shall examine Herbert Marcuse’s ideas of utopia and their latent influence on mature queer theory exemplified by the works of Leo Bersani, Lee Edelman, and José Esteban Muñoz. After this metatheoretical reading I shall offer a definition of subversion using Melanie Klein’s psychoanalytic ideas. In the final part of this essay I wish to illustrate the theoretical considerations with a brief interpretation of Anthony Burgess’s dystopian novel *The Wanting Seed*.

### **Inversion as the figure of utopia/dystopia dichotomy**

Queer, by rejecting the idea of a structural and rational progress, also rejects the inversion as a figure of thought. Inversion produces the utopia/

<sup>1</sup> The research was subsidized by the Polish National Center for Sciences grant nr DEC-2012/04/S/HS2/00561.

dystopia pair<sup>2</sup>, always ready for rotation, which makes it a double-edged sword. If, although oversimplifying it a bit, for a rational gay liberationist the experience of the heteronormative world is of a dystopia, then the program of social change would involve either an adjustment, adaptation – or an inversion, which places the homonormativity<sup>3</sup> in the place of heteronormativity, making the dystopian utopian (for some the “straight” experience of the new utopia probably is totally dystopian<sup>4</sup>). This is what in the end happened to mainstream capitalist gay liberation criticized in queer positions (these critiques are too familiar now so I will not repeat them) – at least on the intellectual level, not on the political one, for, as one might guess, utopias are never realized and such was the case here, too. Queer theory rejects the idea of normativity and this very idea of erasing or neglecting normativity shows that the theory in question points to a

---

2 Also Michel Foucault hinted on that: “Utopias are sites with no real place. They are sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society” (Foucault 1986, 24). “Direct and/or inverted” implies something I call utopia/dystopia axis and the inversion rule. Furthermore Foucault says the idea of “mirror” is “utopian” (“mirror” is a pictorial realisation of inversion figure certainly). However further comparison between the idea of “atopia” I discuss in this essay and Foucault’s “heterotopia” could not be made: Foucault mostly speaks at the same time of a place real and unreal which occurs mostly now. My idea of atopia places it in an undefined and undefinable futurity. This “futurity” is a general notion while Foucault speaks of “heterochronies”, i.e. breaks in the traditional time which is quite narrow.

3 By “homonormativity” I understand not only “gay rights movement’s adaptation to the neoliberal regime”, as in Lisa Duggan’s essay (Duggan 2002, 179) but all attempts at making the homosexual experience the central, moral, epistemological, or aesthetic etc. category of description and judgment.

4 This suggests that this figure is also based on a cognitive metaphor of a game, but more precisely, of an institutionalized sports game (as opposed to a free “play”): someone has to lose so that someone can win. The game has a time limit, and it serves to sum up the score. Queer theory, as I also suggested elsewhere (Sobolczyk 2015, 25–27) is rather based on the romantic irony’s idea of a perpetual “play”, a *parabasis* of subversions.

future. The difference between “utopian gay and lesbian” and “atopian queer” thinking lies in methods and means of modalities of thought.

On the one hand queer thinking is more pragmatic and more realistic about the dream world of utopia, and on the other hand it is more kinky and, say, “irrational”. Instead of the “rational” figure of inversion, queer opts for the figure of subversion. Inversion is a rhetorical figure of thought, first employed in Havelock Ellis’s and John Addington Symond’s *Sexual Inversion* (1897) and instantly used as a definition of what was ultimately called “homosexuality”. By resignifying this figure of thought, I am not forgetting the linguistic figures of inversion, especially chiasmus which is described by rhetorists as having a symmetrical structure. We might paraphrase: “ask not what the homosexual can do for his society – ask what his society can do for him”. This would be a chiasmus of gay liberation from individualism to collectivity. Subversion, as I intend to prove, does not produce the utopia/dystopia pair. What is more, queer envisions a new, different mode of thinking which rejects such dichotomous figures, and therefore also normativity, and this, once again, shows that it points to a future. Is it possible to step out of the vicious circle and still see some horizon? Here the notion of “atopia” proves to be helpful. “Forward-looking gay theory had a historical vision of a future more just than the present. (...) Queer theory points not toward a differently ordered utopia but toward a nonconditioned and nonordered atopia”, claims Morton. However he suddenly jumps to a critical judgment: “When queer theorists envision a future, they portray an ever-expanding region of sensuous pleasure, ignoring the historical constraints need places on pleasure” (Morton 1995, 376). If it were so, this would be the program of a utopia, not atopia. To summarize briefly, Morton suggests that queer thinkers want to substitute the reality principle with the pleasure principle, which obviously is impossible. What is problematic in his account is that few queer theorists actually were so utopian (Butler nor Sedwick were

definitely not, to mention the names Morton could have had in mind in 1995). Queer theory – in most cases – assumes that there will be a future (which might be expressed as a “continuing moment”)<sup>5</sup>, but abstains from predictions, or, rather, from prescriptions; nevertheless it also assumes that utopia is impossible, therefore there will always be something to be done, that is, to be questioned, subverted. Annamarie Jagose diagnoses: “if queer lives up to its radical potential – and does not solidify as merely another acceptable (though oppositional) category – its ongoing evolutions cannot be anticipated: its future is – after all – the future” (Jagose 2001, 6).

Perhaps queer theory, consciously or unconsciously, challenges the Western idea of time? Is the Buddhist idea of “being here and now” and at the same time, outside time, in some “nowhere” and “nowhen”, atopian? Perhaps the atopia – utopia/dystopia conflict is based on the fundamental difference of timing in Samkhya, yoga, Buddhism vs. Christianity (and Judaism, and Islam)? I leave these questions open.

### **Marcuse’s idea of utopia: a hidden subtext of queer theory?**

To better understand the problem of possible utopias it is necessary to look up Herbert Marcuse’s *Eros and Civilisation* (1955), which I believe to be a hidden or latent source of inspiration for queer theory. “Hidden”, because this once famous work (perhaps “too famous”) is actually almost never evoked nor cited in queer theory. In “mature queer theory”, or “queer theory defined as such”, it should be added. Not all the works that were written under the label “gay and lesbian studies” before the term “queer

5 Compare Sedgwick’s introduction to *Tendencies* (1993): “Queer is a continuing moment, movement, motive – recurrent, eddying, *troublant*” (Sedgwick 1994, viii). Therefore her opening essay is entitled notably *Queer and now*.

theory” was coined were “normative” or “identitarian”. There is a “pre-queer” wing in gay and lesbian studies as well with examples such as Pat Califia and Dennis Altman. The latter uses Marcuse e.g. in his *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation* (1971) and in *The Homosexualization of America* (1982). His use of Marcuse’s theory changed much, since the early 1980s differed from the early 1970s, which Altman also notes in his personal conclusions (Altman 1982, 208). “In very different ways both Marcuse and some feminists pointed out that quite considerable relaxation of sexual restraints could occur in ways that would only strengthen the system” (Altman 1982, 94). If that were the ultimate conclusion drawn from Marcuse in the early 1980s, and it sounded similar to the so called “feminist sex wars” from the late phase of the second wave feminism (anti-S/M, anti-pornography, anti-cruising etc.), then no wonder that queer, returning to polymorphous-perverse pre-Oedipal sexualities avoided such an understanding of Marcuse. However this was a misapprehension of Marcuse.

Marcuse analysed Sigmund Freud’s ideas of “proximity senses” (smell and taste) as “unsublimated” (i.e., repressed) and finished with a political conclusion: “The pleasure of the proximity senses plays on the erotogenic zones of the body – and does so only for the sake of pleasure. Their unrepressed development would eroticize the organism to such an extent that it would counteract the desexualization of the organism required by its social utilization as an instrument of labor” (Marcuse 1992, 39). This is exactly Marcuse’s “agenda” for the “reality utopia” (Marcuse 1992, 201). In fact Marcuse’s reservations about the effects of rebellion against systems (as possibly reinforcing them, but I insist that “possibly”) is not very different from Michel Foucault’s balance when the latter noted how the repression of medical taxonomies applied to the creation of the concept of “homosexual”, while at the same time the enthusiasm about the new visibility of “homosexuals” would eventually get rid of its medical

connotations. There is a similar balance in Butler when she discusses successful performatives and misfired subversions.<sup>6</sup> As for the comparison of Marcuse's and Foucault's projects, Joel Whitebook says that actually the latter might seem more utopian than the former: "Whitebook claims that since Foucault seems to construe 'bodies and pleasures' as 'pure, unformed matter which can be shaped and reshaped without constraint,' his position is actually *more* utopian than Marcuse's. If utopia involves the 'omnipotent denial of our finitude,' then Whitebook wonders: 'what could be more utopian than the infinite malleability of the body and sexuality?'" (Whitebrook, cited in Renaud 2013, 77–78, emphasis in Renaud).

Perhaps Michel Foucault's critique in the *History of Sexuality* (in English in 1976) and the interviews from that epoch contributed to the forgetting of Marcuse, although scholars nowadays tend to think that Foucault misunderstood the German thinker (see a discussion in Renaud 2013); I sympathize with this view. Yet Foucault is not an unproblematic source (to avoid the word "father") of queer theory; the positions oscillate between total identification (e.g. David Halperin) and gradual apprehension (e.g. Bersani) (see more on that in Sobolczyk 2015, 15 and 21). In the first part of his book Marcuse consequently shows Freud as a dystopist. This critical and pessimistic moment offers many insights useful for the queer critique of gay and lesbian politics and knowledge production. "Intensified progress seems to be bound up with intensified unfreedom" (Marcuse 1992, 4), because Freud "establishes a correlation between progress and *increasing* guilt feeling. (...) as civilization progresses, guilt feeling is 'further reinforced,' 'intensified,' is 'ever-increasing'" (Marcuse 1992, 78, emphasis in original). Hence any "progress" has a "shadow", similarly, as I suggested, to the gothic shadow produced by the rational progress of gay liberation.

6 I analysed this "balancing idea" and inscribed it to my sociologised reformulation of Harold Bloom's theory as *kenosis* phase (Sobolczyk 2014b, 39–41).

Marcuse comments on the interaction between the pleasure principle and the reality principle (which is equated with rationality in the Western post-Enlightenment tradition) in Freud and seems to say – although the word "dystopia" is not a part of Marcuse's vocabulary – that the conformist subjugation to the reality principle closes up the possibility of a utopia. And utopia, Marcuse claims, is needed (Marcuse 1992, 150–151). It would be too naive, however, to think of it as a replacement of the reality principle with the pleasure principle which is, actually, what utopian thinking in the traditional meaning does. But Marcuse's move towards a program of a possible utopia by using a reformed reality principle, a new reality principle, seems to me only slightly less idealistic than the traditional utopias. "Evidently", Marcuse starts, "Freud's theory precludes the construction of any psychoanalytical utopia. If we accept his theory and still maintain that there is historical substance in the idea of a non-repressive civilization, then it must be derivable from Freud's instinct theory itself. His concepts must be examined to discover whether or not they contain elements that require reinterpretation" (Marcuse 1992, 131). This reinterpretation proposes the idea of a nonrepressive form of libido. This is a good starting point for queer theories of futurity. Yet it also shows that Marcuse is unable to get out of the structure of the utopia/dystopia pair, which I have called a vicious circle. It is an "all or nothing" way of thinking. This, I would say, paraphrasing Marcuse, requires reinterpretation towards atopia.

### Lee Edelman fucks the child against the future

Now I will address three projects that might be perceived as a queer adaptation and reinterpretation of Marcuse – in two cases, however, he is not mentioned at all. The first one is blind to Marcuse. Lee Edelman's introductory essay to his *No Future. Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004), *The Future is Kid Stuff* (1998), is apparently dystopian. On the

Freudian ground it seems to rearrange the Marcusean pair of utopia–dystopia: for Marcuse dystopia is the prevalence of the reality principle, and utopia would be the reformulation of the reality principle with some inclusion of the pleasure principle which would liberate the libido from repression. These terms are not exactly Edelman’s, although he refers to Freud, yet reinterpreted via Lacan. Instead Edelman seems to suggest that ultimately the libido, the pleasure principle, is identical with the death drive in the shape of the Nirvana principle, even if Nirvana principle is not a term Edelman uses. This ultimate equation of libido with the Nirvana principle was examined by Jean Laplanche (Laplanche 1990, 107–108), but Marcuse eluded to it by claiming: “The death instinct is destructiveness not for its own sake, but for the relief of tension” (Marcuse 1992, 29).

Apparently Edelman ascribes to dystopia – according to “classical”, i.e. “straight” criteria – by exalting this negation, pleasure-as-negation or pleasure-of-negation. I.e., the pleasurable gesture in a dystopian world is negation. He tries to give an answer to the political argument of annihilation, usually associated with the right, but in modified (sublimated) versions present also in liberal ideologies. It was probably formulated for the first time by Sextus Empiricus, who said in Jeremy Bentham’s paraphrase<sup>7</sup>: “No”, says he, “it is not in human nature to make a law that contradicts and outrages nature, a law that would annihilate mankind if it were observed to the letter.” (Bentham 1997, 20). Queerness will lead to the extinction of a mankind; the rectum is the grave of it; too often, Edelman says, gay activism and queer theory alike tried to prove the opposite (in fact, Bentham was the first to unmask it as a dystopia/utopia; of a world *after queer*). Edelman’s brilliant and sophisticated essay in a way is saying “so what?” The world will cease to exist? – so what; there will be no children

7 Bentham tried to reject this notorious and always-ready-to-come-back argument he found as early as in Sextus Empiricus.

– so what; our patrimony will die – so what. In a manifesto paragraph this gentle “so what” is represented by a more terse and familiar “fuck”: “Fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we’re collectively terrorized; (...) fuck the whole network of Symbolic relations and the future that serves as its prop” (Edelman 2004, 29). This is what queer theory should defend as a right.<sup>8</sup> Apparently this is inversion. Or, I should say, it is inversion as long as we consider this strategy a dystopia. Within this brief account of Edelman’s argument I’ve used the word “apparently” three times. I shall come back to this question in a moment, trying to show that his project actually situates itself outside utopia/dystopia by offering a subversion under the cover of inversion.

### Leo Bersani: new relationalities

The second psychoanalytical and queer project that also never betrays the Marcusean inspiration can be found in Leo Bersani’s writings from the last two decades. In *Homos* (1995) he suggests the rearrangement of social relations towards a new relationality (which is a concept he borrows from Foucault) with a place for “homo-relationality”. Bersani is hypothetical and never uses the words “utopia” (nor “dystopia”), he just points to something possible in the future, something he recognizes on the horizon. Curiously enough, he justifies it on Marcusean terms. When Bersani says: “Since deconstructing an imposed identity will not erase the habit of desire, it might be more profitable to test the resistance of the identity from *within* desire” (Bersani 1995, 6), he tries to escape the same trap Marcuse tried to escape by using the same logic. It is not possible to erase the “reality principle” in Marcuse and “desire” in Bersani, so a “new reality principle” modeled on non-repressed desire (taken from the remodeled pleasure

8 The “child” as a figure of “family” and “civil order” has been studied before Edelman by Berlant and Warner 2013, 166–167.

principle) should be created in Marcuse, and desire reinterpreted so that it might serve a new social relationality in Bersani. This new possibility, absent in today's repressive world, is the value of sameness, which is to some point already accessible and known to gay subjects. Therefore, "homosexuality can become a privileged model of sameness – one that makes manifest not the limits but the inestimable value of relations of sameness, of homo-relations" (Bersani 1995, 6–7).

In his further projects Bersani advanced at least two new possible relationalities. In *Sociability and Cruising* (2002/2010b) he showed what some see as a gay utopia (I am sure Marcuse himself would see it in this light) – obviously, the others see it as a dystopia – namely, anonymous casual sex not as a narcissistic play and *jouissance*<sup>9</sup>, but as a possible new relationality, a sociability. The new gaze on it might be as *a training in impersonal intimacy* (Bersani 2010b, 60), i.e., leaving the "personality", the "self", and the "social persona" behind; it is a contact with a body without attributes, an identity-free contact, *the momentarily incarnated shock of otherness* (ibid., 61).

The second possibility for relationalities is the reconstitution of the couple on the basis of a non-paranoid sexuality after realizing the impact of what Jean Laplanche calls "the enigmatic signifier" (Laplanche 1992, 171). This "enigmatic signifier", enacted by the care-taker in the early infancy of the child, is the source of paranoid knowledge and sexuality as a perpetual mis-recognition of erotic mystification. Bersani suggests the direction, but not the means of achieving the goal of different relation: "to rethink the constitution of the couple in order to move to a different relation to otherness, not one based in paranoid fascination but one that might use the masochistic element in confrontation productively" (Bersani 2010a,

9 Unlike for Bersani, for Lacan *jouissance* which goes beyond pleasure principle brings eventually pain; here Marcuse aligns with Lacan.

177). If "paranoid fascination" and "sexual paranoia" are the products of the "reality principle" and its psychological representation, superego, then this project follows the Marcusean ideal – yet without the risky jump to utopia/dystopia. In fact, I would argue that "utopia/dystopia" is actually a part of this very sexual/cognitive paranoia. This might be due to creating an "ideal" as something that might be "realisable", "achievable". The bigger the gap between an "ideal" (be it "desire", i.e. "id", or "superego" alike) and the actual situation of a subject, the bigger the possibility of creating a "paranoia". I.e. subject's lack of grounding in "here and now" and the feeling of incoherence and shattering or dispersion might result in producing pseudo-reparative ideologies. To diminish paranoia, then, means to accept "here and now", or to understand "utopian gesture" as pointing to an undefinable horizon; which is what I define as "atopia".

### José Esteban Muñoz: utopia should be "cruised"

The third project not only discusses Marcuse, but also comments in passing on Edelman and Bersani. I must say do not agree fully with the late José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia. The Then and There of Queer Sexuality* (2009). I sympathize with most of his remarks and I appreciate his analyses of, mostly, modernist projects, and in some cases postmodern avant-garde projects, which are revealed not only in their queerness, but also in their utopian impulse, where the artistic mingles with the social. This supports my understanding of subversion as "the new avant-garde", a move that is indissolubly aesthetical and social (political). Since the vocabulary difference is not the most important part of it, I sympathize with Muñoz's description of the impulse he calls "utopian", but I opt for giving up the "utopia/dystopia" vocabulary. What I would rather call "subversion towards atopia" may appear much the same.

My point is that the utopia/dystopia pair that I am trying to deconstruct in this article is entangled in ideology that hardly coincides with queer ideals; Muñoz or others could reply that their “corrective” or (“reparative”) use of the word “utopia” might be subversive as much as the reappropriation of the very word “queer” was, which I would not contest. Muñoz employs Ernst Bloch’s differentiation of abstract and concrete utopias:

“Abstract utopias falter for Bloch because they are untethered from any historical consciousness. Concrete utopias are relational to historically situated struggles, a collectivity that is actualized or potential. In our everyday life abstract utopias are akin to banal optimism. (Recent calls for gay or queer optimism seem too close to elite homosexual evasion of politics)” (Muñoz 2009, 3).

Although Muñoz does not make this point, it is possible to translate this reading to Marcuse’s terms, namely assigning Bloch’s “abstract utopias” to the interplay of “pleasure” and “reality principles” as general, and read “concrete utopias” as historicized to a “performance principle”. The result in Muñoz is that the queer imperative is advanced against “gay pragmatists” who say “we must do what is possible now” – the imperative is to find new horizons of potentialities, “a horizon of possibility, not a fixed schema” (Muñoz 2009, 97).

These “concrete utopias” are impulses that result from dissatisfaction with what we have today. I could not agree more on what queer’s ideal is or should be and how subversion works (only that I propose not to call it “utopia”). Furthermore I sympathize with the short reading of Marcuse where he brings to light the queer character of Marcuse’s utopian impulse when the German thinker employs Narcissus and Orpheus as the symbols of the sensuous “new reality principle”. It is true that Marcuse notes the association of Orpheus, especially, with homosexuality (Marcuse 1992, 171), but this remark has no consequences in Marcuse’s further

considerations. It might certainly mean that for Marcuse the liberated Eros would not care for object-choice distinctions – yet he has not stated it clearly. Given the time during which he was writing *Eros and Civilization* in the 1950s, i.e. McCarthyism with its “lavender scare”, perceiving his non-specification as, say, “queer affirmative”, requires a bit of good faith. Muñoz’s gesture then is a kind of reclaiming:

“The pleasure principle can certainly envelop gay identities – especially those that are content to ape heterosexual social conventions and modes of being in the world. But there is a certain liberation of Eros that I am describing as not only queerness but also a queer utopianism that again, though not exclusively about gay or lesbian sexuality, certainly embraces experimental modes of love, sex, and relationality. The queer utopianism is a great refusal, and it is emblemized in the figures of Narcissus and Orpheus” (Muñoz 2009, 136).

There is a surplus, then, to the simple ascertainment that the liberation of Eros (in Marcuse) does not exclude homosexuality.

I must, however, come back to the problems I have with Muñoz’s work. I disagree with what the author has to say on Bersani and Edelman. Muñoz namely says that Bersani’s project is one of antirelationality (and therefore a dystopia with no future on the horizon), but it is unclear how he arrived at this conclusion. My previous reading of the Bersani quote shows quite the opposite impulse of Bersani – the horizon of new relationality. I think Bersani is clear when he says: “Perhaps inherent in gay desire is a revolutionary inaptitude for heteroized sociality. This of course means sociality as we know it, and the most politically disruptive aspect of the homo-ness I will be exploring in gay desire, is a redefinition of sociality so radical that it may appear to require a provisional withdrawal from relationality itself” (Bersani 1995, 7). The whole project points to the

redefinition of “sociality” and is “utopian” then, for it projects a future horizon, and the “provisional withdrawal” from relationality (as it has been commonly perceived), eventually opens up new vistas on a new relationality. What troubles me most is that Muñoz on more than one occasion speaks of cruising as a concrete utopia (e.g. Muñoz 2009, 36–37) more or less akin to Bersani’s idea (albeit without the psychoanalytical explanation), but does not refer to it in his essay. In the case of Edelman, Muñoz admits that he likes parts of the author’s argumentation, but not the closing of future (the triumph of the death drive) Edelman (allegedly) chants. In this case I think Muñoz reads Edelman too literarily, he puts too much good faith in what is, say, “superficially” declared as a manifesto, and overlooks its ironies.

### Lee Edelman: inversion becomes subversion

Therefore I now propose to turn back to Edelman’s essay and treat it also as an exercise in how to dismantle inversions by means of subversion. It makes no big difference now whether a project was intended as an inversion or as a subversion. My reading of Edelman’s *No Future* is that it was originally intended as a subversion that on the surface uses inversion. If, however, this subversive potential gets overlooked, the subversive reading becomes necessary. However subversive readings as “reparative readings” (Kosofsky Sedgwick 2003, 149–150) – and, ironically, Muñoz also speaks of utopian readings as reparative readings (Muñoz 2009, 12) – can and I believe they should also be performed on texts that were intentionally based on the figure of “inversion”.

In his text Edelman left traces of distancing that point to an ironic modality, sometimes very explicitly. He says e.g.: “at the heart of my polemical engagement with the cultural text of politics and the politics of cultural texts lies a simple provocation: that queerness names the

side of those not fighting for the children” (Edelman 2004, 3). But the provocation is actually less simple, because it says apparently something quite obvious, namely that queerness names something conservatives both know very well and get provoked by. Yet at the same time it is a provocation aimed also at queer peers. To call them a side *not* fighting for the children suggests that until Edelman’s provocation queer subjects willy-nilly, as a mute assumption, had supported anti-queer politics of fighting for kids. (Furthermore, by his referral to the “politics of cultural texts”, he includes into his critique even fellow queer academics). Yet Edelman suggests that at least partially this mute assumption (that having kids is OK) might have been a kind of pragmatic strategy on the part of queer theorists.

Just a page later Edelman calls his project “impossible”: “When I argue, then, that we might do well to attempt what is surely impossible – to withdraw our allegiance, however compulsory, from the reality based on the Ponzi scheme of reproductive futurism – I do not intend to propose some “good” that will thereby be assured” (Edelman 2004, 4). Queer theorist’s attachment to this kind of thinking is equated with a tick, then, but most of all Edelman seems to propose thereby a utopian impulse. Yet the irony withstands the category, and dystopia respectively. Utopia based on a death drive? Is it a dystopia? The existing categories just do not apply. The Nirvana principle is impossible then, even without reproductive futurism. Therefore, by implication, conservatives have nothing, actually, to worry about. Their anxieties are false, but they might seem to be right if they are placed on a utopia/dystopia axis via an inversion scheme – and this is the Ponzi hoax. Just in case Edelman says it explicitly: the point is not that all those who wish to live up to their queerness should kill themselves right away: “To figure the undoing of civil society, the death drive of the dominant order, is neither to be nor become that drive; such being is not to the point. Rather, acceding to that figural position means recognizing and refusing the consequences of grounding reality in denial of the drive”

(Edelman 2004, 17). In this point, Edelman's project is as much "utopian", in Muñoz's terms, as Marcuse is, Bersani is, and Muñoz is, too.

Managing to change thinking would help reshape society and relationality. This is a task for a critical theory – which queer has been and should be. Perhaps it is not "atopia" insofar as it sustains the opposition "they" and "us", and insistence on the difference of "queers" (which is one of the positions suggested by queer theory, but certainly not the only one). "Atopia" would not only dismantle the utopia/dystopia pair, but also the "assimilation–differentiation" pair; if one said it was not necessary to stress differences from any "them", it wouldn't automatically mean the will to adjust, or, in Edelman's words, to give up the "resistance to a Symbolic reality that only ever invests us as subjects insofar as we invest ourselves in it, clinging to its governing fictions, its persistent sublimations, as reality itself" (Edelman 2004, 18). But, obviously, there are those who would say that the atopia I am sketching is "utopian". Perhaps "atopia" is never possible if people cling to the idea of "utopia". Edelman sketches in a meta-gesture the relation of the death drive to irony, especially romantic irony, "the queerest of rhetorical devices" (Edelman 2004, 23). Edelman's essay should not be read too literally (and this is what I think Muñoz did). If we look now on the "fuck" exclamations, especially "fuck the child", we might read it not only as an ironic evocation of manifesto genre rules, but also... as a (consciously) childish cry. You want kids? Then have them. Annoying, stubborn, noisy, thumping. Using "obscene words" which are originally prohibited ("fucks" should perhaps be avoided by academics and kids alike?) has a particular twist, since in some psychoanalytical practice, and then in pop culture, at least in the 1950s, there existed an association of queer people with arrested development, immaturity and childishness. So culture does not indeed appreciate too much child(ishness). It wants the child only insofar as it can "make" it, "shape" it ("it", indeed!), nothing of the openness towards the shock of difference it might represent. And,

on top of it, if queer equals childish, "fuck the child" reads also "queers go fuck yourselves", but in (utopian?) cruising nonrepressive ways. Why, after all, would the "fuck" in "fuck yourself" be an insult, would it not refer to the reality principle as dull and gloomy, instead of the pleasure principle? Haven't we come back to Marcuse and Bersani?

### **Subversion between paranoid and depressive positions**

I shall now propose a definition of subversion as surpassing the utopia/dystopia pair, with reference to Melanie Klein's language.<sup>10</sup> I propose to consider it as a controlled (in most cases) and planned process of a sadistic oral-urethral-anal attack on the projected "bad object" (external), such as "bad breast" or "bad (social) penis", where the orality means biting, gnawing, and urethrality and anality means throwing poisonous urine or faeces. The attack is instantly followed by a reparation with the "good object" ("fondling the breast by sucking", "good penis", "faeces as a gift"). The difference between the child in Klein's analyses (Klein 1997, 8) and the artist (or a queer agent) as an adult-child, is that the child cannot plan the process of adopting positions. Although taking the paranoid position to perform the attack on "bad objects" is strategic, the attack is instantly stopped when the subject manages to create a path of entrance into the object, a path for projection. The subject then moves to the depressive position and tries to repair "bad objects". Albeit it has to be said, subversion is not fully controllable. Thus with the destruction of "bad objects" also "good ones" might be destroyed, but it is a calculated risk. E.g. after "biting into the body" the subjects starts to let drip the pharmacon, both poison

---

<sup>10</sup> One of the reasons that Klein is a good psychoanalytic choice for queer theory is the way she uses "positions" as being in constant move, which matches well with a fluid queer performative.

and medicine. Subversively understood, making breaches and repairing parts, does not fall under the criteria of inversion and utopia/dystopia. Because this action takes place in a consciousness, it means it cannot destroy the “reality principle” (which would be the utopian wish), but it still is possible to regulate doses of the “pleasure principle” after “biting into” parts, and thus to transform the “reality principle” (or, in Marcusean terms, the performance principle).

With this reparative move to subversion in mind, I would like to distinguish current queer theory and gay and lesbian liberation movements, without withdrawing the topic of utopia/dystopia and atopia. The (failed) utopian impulse based on the figure of inversion could be described in Kleinian terms as the difference in psychic positions. Queer would adopt the depressive position where the distinction between “good” and “bad” objects might be established, and therefore also reparative attempts. Gay and lesbian liberation, and their academic double, the so-called gay and lesbian studies, I see as situated rather on the paranoid position, in which the paranoia cannot be controlled and where successful reparation is not possible. If the queer reparative answer is subversion, then the gay and lesbian’s is mania. According to Klein mania results in some cases from the denial of, firstly, the psychic reality, and secondly, the external reality.

Another defensive mechanism is the illusion of total control which interests me the most in this case:

“What to my view is quite specific for mania is the utilization of the sense of omnipotence for the purpose of controlling and mastering objects. This is necessary for two reasons: (a) in order to deny the dread of them which is being experienced, and (b) so that the mechanism (acquired in the previous—the depressive-position) of making reparation so the object may be carried through. By mastering his objects the manic person imagines he will prevent

them not only from injuring himself but from being a danger to one another” (Klein 1935, 162).

In a footnote, Klein says precisely that this “reparation”, sic, in quotation marks, is almost always “unpractical” and “unrealizable”, because the whole position is of “phantastic character”. The paranoid fear concerns the preservation of subject (Klein 1994, 99–100) –which in the context of queer experience means the fear that the subject exists partially or untruly (only as long as it is not queer or not perceived as queer) and if it is invaded by the (queer) object it might be destroyed; or the fear that this is the only queer subject in the world and the others might find out or they already know something dreadful and plot the destruction of the outcast; or the fear that there are no queer subjects at all.

In the depressive position, the anxiety is directed towards the survival of the “good” object which has been distinguished from the “bad”. Now, obviously gay and lesbian liberation recognizes what is “good” (“good gay people and their supporters”) and what is “bad” (“homophobes and bad gay people”). Klein notes:

“It seems that at this stage of development the unification of external and internal, loved and hated, real and imaginary objects is carried out in such a way that each step in the unification leads again to a renewed splitting of the images. But as the adaptation to the external world increases, this splitting is carried out on planes which gradually become increasingly nearer and nearer to reality. This goes on until love for the real and the internalized objects and trust in them are well established. Then ambivalence, which is partly a safeguard against one’s own hate and against hated and terrifying objects, will in normal development again diminish in varying degrees” (Klein 1935, 173).

But in the manic defense the process does not involve “the adaptation to the external world”, which is what Freud called “reality-testing” on the way of adaptation to the reality principle. This means that split images of “bad” and “good” are far from the “reality principle” and only because of that the illusion of total control is possible. In practical terms, this illusion means, on behalf of the gay and lesbian liberationists, the illusion that they will present to the world the “good object” (“good gay”) and erase the “bad objects”, because they have control over the process and objects. Yet we have also come to a new psychoanalytical explanation of utopia, different from Freudian: utopias are manic defenses resulting from a paranoid position, where the dystopian paranoia via inversion becomes the land of total control.

The consequences of what I have just described might seem surprising: apparently the “rational” and “progressive” gay and lesbian liberation, with the ideas of gradual change and adaptation, seems to be closer to the “reality principle”; I argue it is a make-believe; apparently the “artistic”, “anarchic”, “provocative” queer jumps to subversions might seem irrational, capricious, not controllable enough; I prove, this makes the positive and significant difference, and without wishful pretense, yet with the impulse to change, queer is closer to the “new reality principle”. And this could be atopia.

### **Reading dystopia reperatively: how to turn inversion into subversion**

Finally, I want to offer a reading of a modernist dystopia novel on homosexuality based on the figure of inversion.<sup>11</sup> I attempt to show how to get out of the vicious circle of utopia/dystopia via subversion. The novel I am referring to is Anthony Burgess’s classic *The Wanton Seed* (1962). It

<sup>11</sup> Compare also (Beatty 2000, 620-622); (Lunčunas Conner 1998, 335-337).

depicts something that from the minoritarian perspective (see Sedgwick 1990, 1 and 47) might pass as a utopia – the world where homosexuality is dominant (and heterosexuality persecuted). The narration, however, leaves no illusion that it is a dystopia and therefore its standpoint is, if there are just two positions, “heterosexual”.<sup>12</sup> First of all, Burgess shows the reign of homosexuality as employing a specific, i.e. effeminate, dress and behavioural style, an effeminate performance. At the same time, however, he suggests that many “born this way heterosexuals” *pass* as gay because of opportunism. This suggests, contrary to what Burgess himself says (and probably believes), that heterosexuality is as much performative as homosexuality, and might not be “innate”. This suggests the first reparative perspective. Now, if the novel is a critique of conformism, in this dystopian-inverted world the pressure is set on “good heterosexuals”, and the writer laments this state, then by the typical operation of reading science-fiction as a “possible world” parting from the “world zero” (i.e. “today”, which has been “straight-dominant”), it actually shows the heteromatrix as oppressive. Or anything that is dominant at any given time as oppressive. This is my second reparation.

<sup>12</sup> Compare the *Afterword* written 20 years after, i.e. in 1982: “I cannot foresee the highly schematic world of “The Wanting Seed” as ever coming to birth, but I think some aspects of it – the glorification of the homosexual, for instance – are already with us” (Burgess 1994, xii). Let us make things clear. The novel was published in 1962, i.e. five years before the legalization of homosexuality in England and Wales (in Scotland this occurred in 1980). In 1982, when Burgess was writing his afterword, it was legalized in Ireland. Margaret Thatcher had been by then the PM for three years then and her policy towards gays cannot be described as any other than “homophobic”. As I understand, for Burgess the “glorification of homosexuality” means its depenalization. Curiously enough, with a new political situation ten years later, in a new preface to the novel’s 1994 edition, which includes all the paratexts, i.e. forewords and afterwords, Burgess tried desperately to suggest he was always progressive; I would rather say, always adjusting.

The third question is provoked by the fact that Burgess “forgets” to ask about the genesis of the dystopian situation. In the novel, homosexuality was installed as dominant because of overpopulation. Certainly many dystopias, if not all, are obsessed with reproduction.<sup>13</sup> This proves Edelman’s statement against reproduction, despite the fact he does not analyze any literary works, dystopian or not. If we are to read this “possible world” from “world zero”, then it is obvious that overpopulation was not due to glorification of homosexuality, but it was produced by heterosexuality. This is, however, inconvenient for Burgess, so he leaves it aside. Furthermore, it must have not been homosexuals who officially ordered the dominance of homosexuality, but the very heterosexuals who had the power, because homosexuals did not have it. And this might mean – contrary to Burgess’s point – that homosexuals were overruled, once again and in a new way, since the new world was ordered without their impact or participation. This is my third reparation.

Furthermore, Burgess attempts at a rather queer, i.e. strange connection between homosexuality and vegetarianism.<sup>14</sup> After heterosexuality is restored, people start eating meat as they return closer to nature. I leave aside the existing arguments that eating meat for humans is not “natural” (if so, people would be able to kill “meat” with their teeth and eat it raw); once again, Burgess avoids the genesis question: vegetarianism was supposed to

---

13 Just think of *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley (1931), *The Handmaid’s Tale* by Margaret Atwood (1985), which are also interesting in this case because they also address queerness. The queerest take on reproduction is a recent Spanish novel *Taxim* by Juan Sardá which I studied as “cyberqueer”, comparing it to the above mentioned novels and also Burgess (Sobolczyk 2014). Edelman also cites P. D. James’s novel *The Children of Men* on reproduction.

14 The only “reasonable” – albeit it is not “reasonable”, it is just “historical” – explanation of the link between homosexuality and meat-eating that comes into my mind is Philo’s idea in *De Abrahama*, in which he suggests that the oversupply of food results in the increase of homosexual tendencies.

be the answer to overpopulation and a poor meat supply; however after the revolution suddenly the world abounds in “meat”.<sup>15</sup> Instead of presenting something close to the “reality principle”, the novel offers only a projection of anxieties – anxieties which are a manic defense as a result of paranoia – and those anxieties do have a face, and this face is “conservatism”. Well – the queer ideal would not be a world where everybody is gay, and neither one where everybody is straight.

### A-conclusions

Throughout this essay I purposefully avoided presenting a dictionary definition of atopia. I think this notion belongs to a different order than stipulated by the “traditional” “scientific” “standards”. I see it as belonging to the same category as concepts such as “queer” and “camp” which, despite of all attempts at defining, cannot be defined – nor should they be. One of the interesting imports of queer into the academy might be its insistence on rejecting certain “normativising” standards defined as “epistemological” or “scientific” – there is a “queer epistemology”, I believe, with the “undefinability” as one of its un-rules. This does not entail any epistemological chaos: the terms are used and contextualised throughout some project (this article for instance) and the sum of their uses constitutes a “working” definition. After all, the “traditional” epistemologies fail to describe, not to mention “define”, many phenomena, not only “camp”, but also “precognition”, “God” (in queer theology) etc.

---

15 The malicious punchline that comes at hand instantly suggests that it must have been the homosexuals – as sodomites – who kept the animals for sexual purposes (as they usually do, if you didn’t know) and thus when homosexuality was abolished, the animals were liberated.

If “atopia” means something that will take place in a future, but cannot be predicted (unless we employ the above mentioned “precognition”), then it cannot be defined precisely either, if it is to retain its epistemological status. I shall only, by means of an “a-conclusion”, remind that the Greek “a-” might perform as “no-”, “without-”, “lack of-” or just negation. With this in mind I should play upon the pair “atheism” and “agnosticism”, suggesting that “atopia” is similar rather to the latter: without necessarily negating the existence of god or any other metaphysical rule, it abstains from giving any firm metaphysical judgment. However, even this brief “a-definition” seems to propose and foreground some immobility, whereas my intention was to show that “atopia” is not only “topos” but also “tropos”: the unspecified ironic movement of subversion.

## Works Cited

- Altman**, Dennis. 1982. *The Homosexualization of America*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Beatty**, Greg. 2000. “Utopian Literature”. In *Reader’s Guide to Lesbian and Gay Studies*, edited by Timothy F. Murphy, 620–622. Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn.
- Bentham**, Jeremy. 1997. “Paederasty”. In *We Are Everywhere. A Historical Sourcebook of Gay and Lesbian Politics*, edited by Mark Blasius and Shane Phelan, 15–32. New York – London: Routledge.
- Berlant**, Lauren, Warner, Michael. 2013. “Sex in Public”. In *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader*, edited by Donald E. Hall and Annamarie Jagose, 165–179. London: Routledge.
- Bersani**, Leo. 1995. *Homos*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Bersani**, Leo. 2010a. “A Conversation with Leo Bersani with Tim Dean, Hal Foster, and Kaja Silverman”. In *Is the Rectum a Grave? And Other Essays*, 171–186. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bersani**, Leo. 2010b. “Sociability and Cruising”. In *Is the Rectum a Grave? And Other Essays*, 45–62. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Burgess**, Anthony. 1994. *Future Imperfect. The Wanting Seed, 1985*. London: Vintage.
- Duggan**, Lisa. 2002. “The New Homonormativity. The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism”. In *Materializing Democracy. Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, edited by Dana D. Nelson and Russ Castronovo, 175–194. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Edelman**, Lee. 2004. “The Future Is Kid Stuff”. In *No Future. Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, 2–31. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Foucault**, Michel. 1986. “Of Other Spaces. Utopias and Heterotopias”, *Diacritics* 16: 22–27.
- Jagose**, Annmarie. 2001. *Queer Theory. An Introduction*. New York: New York University Press.
- Klein**, Melanie. 1935. “A Contribution to the Psycho-Genesis of Manic-Depressive States”. *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 16: 145–174.
- Klein**, Melanie. 1994. “Mourning and Its Relation to Manic-Depressive States”. In *Essential Papers on Object Loss*, edited by Rita V. Frankiel, 95–123. New York: New York University Press.
- Klein**, Melanie. 1997. “The Psychological Foundations of Child Analysis”. In *The Psycho-Analysis of Children*, transl. A. Strachey, 3–15. London: Vintage Books.
- Laplanche**, Jean. 1990. *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, translated by Jeffrey Mehlman. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
- Laplanche**, Jean. 1992. “Seduction, Translation, Drives”, translated by Martin Stanton. In *Essays on Otherness*, 169–200. London: Routledge.
- Lunčunas Conner**, Randy P., ed. 1998. *Cassel’s Encyclopedia of Queer Myth, Symbol and Spirit*. London: Cassel.
- Marcuse**, Herbert. 1992. *Eros and Civilization. A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Morton**, Donald. 1995. “Birth of the Cyberqueer”, *PMLA* 110: 369–381.
- Muñoz**, José Esteban. 2009. *Cruising Utopia. The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York: New York University Press.
- Renaud**, Jeffrey. 2013. “Rethinking the Repressive Hypothesis. Foucault’s Critique of Marcuse”. *Symposium* 2, 76–93.
- Sedgwick**, Eve Kosofsky. 1990. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Sedgwick**, Eve Kosofsky. 1994. *Tendencies*. London: Routledge.

**Sedgwick**, Eve Kosofsky. 2003. "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid You Probably Think This Essay Is About You". In *Touching, Feeling. Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, 123–151. Durham: Duke University Press.

**Sobolczyk**, Piotr. 2015. "Queer – permanentna parabaza subwersji". In *Queerowe subwersje. Polska literatura homotekstualna i zmiana społeczna*, 13–46. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IBL.

**Sobolczyk**, Piotr. 2014. "Corporative Society and Cyberqueer. Utopia and Dystopia Revisited". In *Changes, Conflicts And Ideologies in Contemporary Hispanic Culture*, edited by Teresa Fernández Ulloa, 354–376. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

**Sobolczyk**, Piotr. 2014. "The Anxiety of Social Influence", *Praktyka teoretyczna* 1: 25–52.

SQS  
1–2/2015

14

QueerScope  
Articles

Piotr  
Sobolczyk