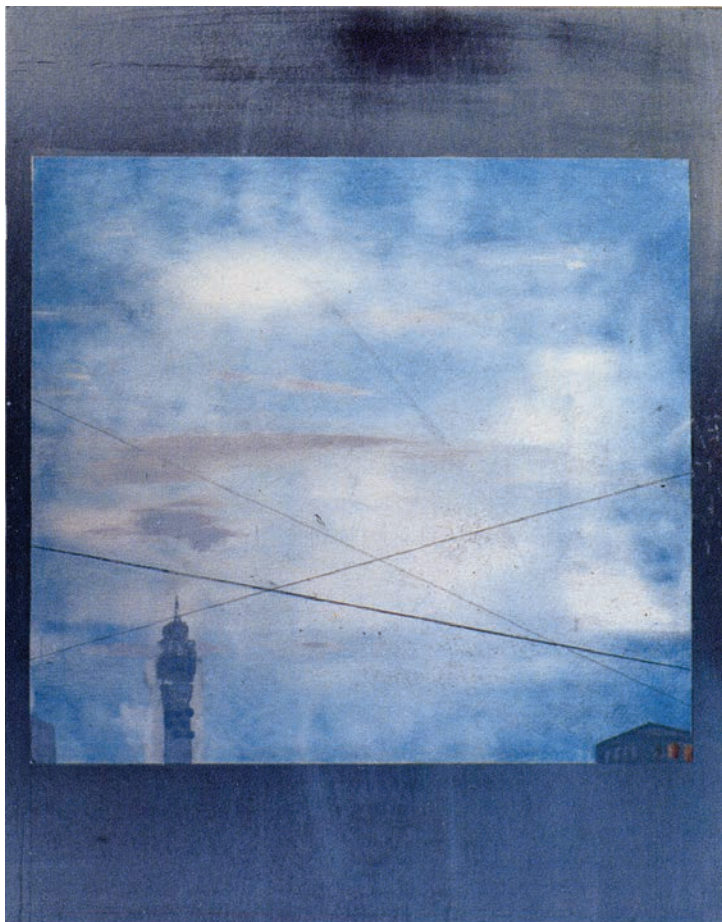


THE SPECTRE OF UTOPIA

UTOPIAN AND SCIENCE FICTIONS AT THE *FIN DE SIÈCLE*



MATTHEW
BEAUMONT

Peter Lang

THE SPECTRE OF UTOPIA

In the late nineteenth century, a spectre haunted Europe and the United States: the spectre of utopia. This book re-examines the rise of utopian thought at the *fin de siècle*, situating it in the social and political contradictions of the time and exploring the ways in which it articulated a deepening sense that the capitalist system might not be insuperable after all. The study pays particular attention to Edward Bellamy's seminal utopian fiction, *Looking Backward* (1888), embedding it in a number of unfamiliar contexts, and reading its richest passages against the grain, but it also offers detailed discussions of William Morris, H.G. Wells and Oscar Wilde. Both historical and theoretical in its approach, this book constitutes a substantial contribution to our understanding of the utopian imaginary, and an original analysis of the counter-culture in which it thrived at the *fin de siècle*.

"Matthew Beaumont is one of the most brilliant of the younger generation of English critics. His work on late Victorian culture puts him among the most suggestive and original scholars of the period. While focused on Bellamy, this wide-ranging study encompasses a rich variety of authors and intellectual currents, all dealing with the elusive but utterly essential idea of utopia. In its theoretical sophistication and historical depth, Beaumont's work is both innovative and illuminating."

Terry Eagleton, Distinguished Professor of English at Lancaster University and author of *Trouble with Strangers* and *Why Marx Was Right*

"So much has been written about *Looking Backward* and late nineteenth-century utopian literature that one wonders if these topics can ever come to us fresh again. Beaumont answers this question by placing Bellamy's utopia within significant yet rarely studied publication and reception contexts, such as the London Bellamy Library books series designed to educate working-class readers, and by presenting utopia as a constructively troubling spectre, a ghost evaluating the readers' present by haunting them with a sense of the absence of a suppressed better world existing somewhere between possibility and impossibility. Thus Beaumont does refresh utopia for us."

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"This is a rich and provocative book in which Beaumont challenges conventional readings of utopian writing at the turn of the twentieth century. Written with insight and clarity, it provides fresh perspectives and unsettles old certainties. It is essential reading for anyone concerned with the cultural context of the time."

Ruth Levitas, Professor of Sociology, University of Bristol and author of *The Concept of Utopia*

Matthew Beaumont is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of English at University College London.

THE SPECTRE OF UTOPIA

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Matthew Beaumont

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Printed in Germany

For Beryl James

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And now in the ruins of the annihilated city [...] a new guest
arrives, unknown, never seen before – the human being.

— ROSA LUXEMBURG, 'Martinique' (1902)

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Fin de Siècle, 19: *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century* 3 (2006), <<http://www.19.bbk.ac.uk>>; 'Socialism and Occultism at the *Fin de Siècle*: Elective Affinities', *Victorian Review* 36 (2010), 217–32, reprinted in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism and the Occult*, ed. Tatiana Kontou and Sarah Wilburn (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2011), 299–330; 'Reinterpreting Oscar Wilde's Concept of Utopia: "The Soul of Man Under Socialism"', *Utopian Studies* 15 (2004), 13–29; 'Red Sphinx: Mechanics of the Uncanny in *The Time Machine*', *Science Fiction Studies* 33 (2006), 230–50; and 'The Anamorphic Estrangements of Science Fiction', in *Red Planets*, ed. Mark Bould and China Miéville (London: Pluto Press / Wesleyan University Press, 2009), 29–46.

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Introduction

Ghosts of the future are the only sort worth heeding. Apparitions of things past are a very unpractical sort of demonology, in my opinion, compared with apparitions of things to come.

— EDWARD BELLAMY, ‘The Old Folks’ Party’

I

In *The Story of Utopias: Ideal Commonwealths and Social Myths* (1923), Lewis Mumford pleaded with his readers to ‘be convinced about the reality of utopia’. This was probably the first monograph on utopianism to be published, at least in English, in an epoch increasingly defined by dystopianism (Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *We*, banned in the Soviet Union in 1921, appeared in England in 1924). In the book, Mumford insisted that, despite inhabiting the ‘pseudo-environment’ of ideas, or ‘idolum’, utopia is every bit as real as history. He ended, in an appealing polemic, by affirming the importance of utopian thinking at the present time, emphasizing that ‘if our eutopias spring out of the realities of our environment, it will be easy enough to place foundations under them’. ‘When that which is perfect has come’, he announced in biblical cadences in the book’s final sentence, ‘that which is imperfect will pass away.’¹ A generation later, in the grimly titled *Values for Survival* (1946), where he grieved for the death of his son in the Second World War, and deplored the devastation caused by the atom bomb, Mumford felt less inclined to celebrate utopia’s reality for the collective

1 Lewis Mumford, *The Story of Utopias: Ideal Commonwealths and Social Myths* (London: George C. Harrap, 1923), 15, 24, 307, 308.

imagination. In the 1930s and 1940s, the social myth of the nation state had been violently realized, and the results of this, visible above all in the rise of fascism, didn't exactly resemble an ideal commonwealth. Here, Mumford lamented that 'the spirit of utopianism has not yet been exorcised'.²

So if 'in its ghostly way, utopia continues to haunt mankind', as Chad Walsh claimed in *From Utopia to Nightmare* (1962), it is not simply 'a good ghost that won't go away', as he maintained.³ At times, it is manifestly a bad ghost that won't go away. In the course of the last century, in particular, utopia is generally thought to have been benign when it hasn't exceeded the ideational sphere and malign when it has; benign when it hasn't impinged on history, malign when it has. The prevailing assumption is that if utopia remains utopian, in the dismissive colloquial sense of the term, it is perfectly acceptable; and that if it acquires an ideological force, and can longer be dismissed as hopelessly unrealistic, because it is deemed to have encroached on politics, it is unacceptable.⁴ In order to sidestep this assumption, then, perhaps it is productive to identify utopia as occupying a shifting, often contradictory space between the utopian and the ideological, between fantasy and reality. For heuristic purposes, this is my initial supposition.

Krishan Kumar has claimed that utopia articulates the 'tension between possibility and practicability'.⁵ This formulation is as useful as it is neat, but

2 Lewis Mumford, *Values for Survival* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1946), 74.

3 Chad Walsh, *From Utopia to Nightmare* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1962), 16.

4 Of course, there have also been people, on both the left and right of the political spectrum, who have conflated all forms of utopianism with totalitarianism in the second half of the twentieth century, and hence dismissed utopian thought *tout court*. A statement made by Michel Foucault, in the course of a conversation in 1971 about the way in which, 'as a result of [its] Utopian tendencies', the Soviet Union 'returned to the standards of bourgeois society in the nineteenth century', can stand as representative of this libertarian critique of Utopia: 'I think that to imagine another system is to extend our participation in the present system.' See 'Revolutionary Action: "Until Now"', in Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, eds and trans, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977), 230–1.

5 Krishan Kumar, *Utopianism* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991), 3. The immediate context for this statement might be helpful: '[Utopia] is more than a

I prefer to embroider its dialectic slightly and summarize utopia instead as a form that articulates the tension between impossibility and practicability. Its solutions to those social contradictions that it overtly or covertly critiques are imaginable but, in the prevailing circumstances, unrealizable. Utopia, it could be said, inhabits a region that is at the same time possible and impracticable. Of course, the boundaries of this region are defined historically rather than absolutely, for the political imagination is contingent on the ideological conditions that predominate at a given time. But in general, utopia occupies a liminal space, in the precise sense recalled by Louis Marin, who points out that 'the Latin *limes* signifies, in its etymological origin, a path or passage, a way between two fields'. The *limes*, he reminds us, 'is the distance between two edges', and as such, 'at every moment of its travel, it maintains the difference between the two edges of the limit'.⁶ This is indeed descriptive of the interstitial status of utopia: in its movements, which track those of history itself like a shadow, it constantly maintains the difference between the impossible and the practicable.

It is the figure of the ghost, I propose, that most productively enables us to conceptualize this dialectic of utopia. Terry Castle has explained that, since the eighteenth century, in an Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment culture, ghosts have existed 'tantalizingly on the edge of possibility, somewhere just beyond the boundary of the real'.⁷ They therefore unsettle neat epistemological distinctions between the actual and the imaginary, the present and the absent. 'Ghosts are liminal, metamorphic, intermediary', another recent commentator has observed; 'they exist in/between/on modernity's boundaries of physical and spiritual, magical and real, and

social or political tract aiming at reform, however comprehensive. It always goes beyond the immediately practicable, and it may go so far as to be in most realistic senses wholly impracticable. But it is never simple dreaming. It always has one foot in reality' (2).

6 Louis Marin, 'The Frontiers of Utopia', in Krishan Kumar and Stephen Bann, eds, *Utopias and the Millennium* (London: Reaktion, 1993), 9.

7 Terry Castle, *The Female Thermometer: Eighteenth-Century Culture and the Invention of the Uncanny* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 159.

challenge the lines of demarcation.⁸ The same might be claimed about utopia, which isn't exactly ideal or material, spiritual or physical, impossible or practicable. Furthermore, if a spectre represents the intrusion into the present of a repressed historical past, utopia could be said to represent the intrusion into the present of a future whose historical possibility has been suppressed by the ideological limits that shape the political imagination. 'The Future as Disruption', Fredric Jameson calls it.⁹ Utopia, then, insinuates a troubling sense of absence into the present, and so reveals that reality is not complete, that it is not identical to itself. Like ghosts, utopias momentarily make the unreal seem real, and at the same time make the real seem unreal. They are not real or unreal but fantastic; and 'like the ghost which is neither dead nor alive', as Rosemary Jackson once suggested, 'the fantastic is a spectral presence, suspended between being and nothingness.'¹⁰ This is the ontology of utopia.

More precisely, perhaps, this is utopia's 'hauntology'. The term 'hauntology', which critics of deconstruction tend to regard as an absurd neologism, but which I believe is deeply suggestive, is the one Jacques Derrida devised in order to explore the dialectics of the ghost in *Specters of Marx* (1994). It is an ambitious attempt to think the 'logic of haunting' rather than of being.¹¹ 'Ontology speaks only of what is present or what is absent', as

8 Lois Parkinson Zamora, 'Magical Romance/Magical Realism: Ghosts in U.S. and Latin American fiction', in Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, eds, *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 498.

9 This is the title of the final chapter of Fredric Jameson's *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005).

10 Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Methuen, 1981), 20. If utopias constitute a mode of the fantastic, then, in contrast to 'much mimetic art', they too can be said to evince what Mark Bould has called 'a frankly self-referential consciousness (an embedded, textual self-consciousness, whatever the consciousness of the particular author or reader) of the impossibility of "real life", or Real life'. See 'The Dreadful Credibility of Absurd Things: A Tendency in Fantasy Theory', *Historical Materialism* 10/4 (2002), 83.

11 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994), 10. Hereafter

Warren Montag has commented; 'it cannot conceive of what is neither.'¹² Hauntology thinks and speaks of this neither, and this both, that is the spectre: 'neither soul nor body, and both one and the other' (6). The ghost, as Derrida describes it, is 'a paradoxical incorporation, the becoming-body, a certain phenomenal and carnal form of the spirit' (6). It is a liminal entity, or non-entity, neither living nor dead, suspended between being and nothingness.

In the present context, I am not especially interested in Derrida's 'spectropolitics' (107), as he calls it at one point, and not least because the historical moment in which his book intervened has passed, along with much of its political urgency.¹³ I am interested instead in its possibilities for a 'spectropoetic' account of utopia (45). I propose to treat Derrida's book 'primarily as a *literary* text'; like Aijaz Ahmad, I believe it is most productive to interpret it as 'essentially a *performative* text in a distinctly literary mode.'¹⁴ Derrida's book is not, it must be admitted, a meditation on the idea of utopia. He does at one point allude to utopia in passing, affirming that Marx thought 'that the dividing line between the ghost and actuality ought to be crossed, like utopia itself, by a realization, that is, by a revolution' (39) – but he doesn't develop the point, or even attempt to clarify the ambiguities that this analogy rather unhelpfully generates. So it

references to this edition are cited in the text. For relevant discussions of Derrida and the 'utopian impulse', see Eugene O'Brien, "'Towards Justice to Come': Derrida and Utopian Justice", and Susan McManus, 'Truth, Temporality, and Theorizing Resistance', in Michael J. Griffin and Tom Moylan, eds, *Exploring the Utopian Impulse: Essays on Utopian Thought and Practice* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), 43–56 and 57–81 respectively.

- 12 Warren Montag, 'Spirits Armed and Unarmed: Derrida's *Specters of Marx*', in Michael Sprinker, ed., *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's Specters of Marx* (London: Verso, 1999), 71.
- 13 For a brisk critical account of the relationship of *Specters* to this moment, the aftermath of the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, see Terry Eagleton, 'Marxism without Marxism', in *Ghostly Demarcations*, 83–7 – a response to the book that infuriated Derrida!
- 14 Aijaz Ahmad, 'Reconciling Derrida: "Specters of Marx" and Deconstructive Politics', in *Ghostly Demarcations*, 90–1.

is of course important to resist falling into the trap of translating his term 'messianic' as 'utopian', as he accuses Jameson of consistently doing.¹⁵ But Jameson is surely right to notice the relevance of the term, even if Derrida didn't concede this, and I believe it is highly productive to rethink aspects of what *Specters of Marx* has to say about ghosts, and 'hauntology' more generally, in relation to utopia.

Derrida's poetics of the *revenant*, the remnant from the past that reappears and disrupts the present, is predicated on a conception of the present that, as one might expect of the architect of deconstructionism, emphasizes that it cannot be completely present to itself. He refers in the book's exordium, for example, to the 'non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present' (xix). Then, in the first chapter, he points again to 'the disjuncture in the very presence of the present, this sort of non-contemporaneity of present time with itself', which he immediately identifies as 'this radical untimeliness or this anachrony on the basis of which we are trying here to *think the ghost*'¹⁶ (25). Derrida derives this formulation from Heidegger, his old interrogator; but in light of the book's title he might also have had recourse to the Marxist tradition in excavating the non-identities of the present.¹⁷ For it is through the idea of the non-synchronous present that

15 Jacques Derrida, 'Marx and Sons', in *Ghostly Demarcations*, 248–9. Part of the problem, predictably enough, is that Jameson and Derrida, in spite of their mutual admiration, are here deploying quite different definitions of 'utopia' and 'utopian'. The latter has no sense of the former's ambitious attempt, throughout the last three or four decades, to restore not simply respectability but philosophical complexity, and political valence, to the term 'Utopian'.

16 Unless otherwise indicated, italics in all quotations are to be found in the original.

17 Although he isn't mentioned in this context, it seems plausible, given their relationship, which Derrida himself has commemorated, that Louis Althusser is also a spectral presence at this point. I am thinking in particular of his insistence, in *Reading Capital*, that 'the co-existence of the different structured levels, the economic, the political, the ideological etc. [...] can no longer be thought in the co-existence of the Hegelian *present*, of the ideological present in which temporal presence coincides with the presence of the essence with its phenomena'. See Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Pantheon, 1970), 99. In contrast to Bloch, Derrida's discourse on the present in *Specters of Marx* doesn't

Ernst Bloch, who regarded Heidegger as one of his principal intellectual antagonists, tries to think utopia. According to him, the present contains an '*objectively* non-contemporaneous element as a continuing influence of older circumstances and forms of production, however they may have been crossed through, as well as of older superstructures'. Bloch establishes that the present is not identical with itself because capitalist society contains residues of pre-capitalist economic and social forms; that is, for historical and material reasons.¹⁸

But Bloch also insists that, for reasons that are no less historical and material, the present is non-contemporaneous with itself because it contains intimations of post-capitalist relations – in the shape of participatory forms of democratic association for example. His conviction, to appropriate Terry Eagleton's comments on Bloch's friend Georg Lukács, is that 'the outline of [a] desirable future can already be detected in certain potentialities stirring within the present'. 'The present is thus not identical with itself', either for Bloch or Lukács: 'there is that within it which points beyond it, as indeed the shape of every historical present is structured by the anticipation of a possible future.'¹⁹ The future, like the past, shapes the present from the inside. Those elements of the present that are 'distant from and alien to the present', as Bloch puts it, are comprised not only of the 'unrefurbished past' but of the 'prevented future'.²⁰ This repressed utopian impulse, the prevented future, threatens to irrupt into the present. It is not simply a 'radical untimeliness', in Derrida's abstract sense, but a potentially revolutionary untimeliness, in some more concrete sense.²¹

press beyond the philosophical to the historical; it doesn't rise, as Marx might have phrased it, from the abstract to the concrete.

18 Ernst Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times*, trans. Neville Plaice and Stephen Plaice (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), 108.

19 Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verso, 1991), 106.

20 Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times*, 108, 110.

21 On the dialectical relationship between what Bloch refers to as the 'unrefurbished past' and the 'prevented future', see Pierre Macherey's statement that, in affirming the spirit of Marx, a Marxist 'inherits from that which, in the past, remains yet to come, by taking part in a present which is not only present in the fleeting sense of actuality,

If Derrida overlooks the philosophical and political significance of the 'non-present present' for the Marxist tradition that he so carefully, self-consciously filters in *Specters of Marx* (6), he nonetheless offers a fertile metaphorical reconception of the idea. The book's epigraph is taken from *Hamlet*: 'The time is out of joint'. For Hamlet himself, Derrida explains, 'time is *disarticulated*, dislocated, dislodged, time is run down, on the run and run down, deranged, both out of order and mad' (18). And the ghost of the protagonist's father, according to Derrida, is the figure generated by this disadjustment of time. In deconstructive terms, it is a supplement, which exposes a constitutive lack in that which hitherto seemed complete and self-contained. So Derrida goes on to explore the disconcerting effect that old Hamlet's spectral presence has, in the opening scenes of the play, on Horatio, Marcellus, and his son. These scenes dramatize the disruptive impact the past has on the present, in part because it reveals that this present is always-already inadequate to itself. Derrida's interpretation of the armed apparition's gaze, which is uncanny in the precise Freudian sense, is especially suggestive:

This Thing meanwhile looks at us and sees us not see it even when it is there. A spectral asymmetry interrupts here all specularity. It de-synchronizes it, recalls us to anachrony. We will call this the *visor effect*: we do not see who looks at us. (7)

This 'visor effect', which evokes a protective helmet into which 'slits are cut' so as to permit Hamlet's father 'to see without being seen' (8), is a brilliant conceptual innovation. Disappointingly, Derrida immediately notes that he 'will probably not speak of this *visor effect* any more, at least not by that name' (7), but he does in fact explicitly refer to it again. The visor-effect, he adds, is what makes us 'feel ourselves seen by a look which it will always be impossible to cross' (7). Hamlet's father's unhomelike look therefore

but which undertakes to reestablish a dynamic connection between past and future'. See 'Marx Dematerialized, or the Spirit of Derrida', in *Ghostly Demarcations*, 19.

concentrates the sense of uncanniness that is structural to 'the logic of the ghost', as he will subsequently characterize it (63).²²

'This spectral *someone other looks at us*', Derrida continues, italicizing his reference to the other in order to reinforce its uncanny associations; 'we feel ourselves being looked at by it, outside of any synchrony [...]' (7). Derrida doesn't mention Brecht in *Specters of Marx*, but the former's 'visor-effect' irresistibly evokes the *Verfremdungseffekt*, or 'V-effect', that is central to the latter's aesthetic. Instantiated in the concealed gaze of old Hamlet's ghost, the 'visor-effect' is a V-effect because, like Brecht's celebrated device for distancing or alienating the spectator from the action on stage, it effects a subtle transformation of its object, unsettling it, disadjusting it, rendering it unfamiliar.²³ The past, in the form of the look embodied by this *revenant*, or half-embodied by it perhaps, thus interrupts the present; it 'diarticulates it, dislodges it, displaces it out of its natural lodging' (31). And it is in this sense, I propose, that it presents a theoretical opportunity for rethinking the mode of estrangement that, ever since the pioneering analyses of Darko Suvin in the 1970s, have seemed definitive of utopian

22 Note that Jameson domesticates and neutralizes the uncanny otherness that Derrida identifies with the concept of spectrality when he claims that 'all it says, if it can be thought to speak, is that the living present is scarcely as self-sufficient as it claims to be; that we would do well not to count on its density and solidity, which might under exceptional circumstances betray us'. Postmodernism, according to Jameson, provides these exceptional circumstances: 'Derrida's ghosts are those moments in which the present – and above all our current present, the wealthy, sunny, gleaming world of the postmodern and the end of history – unexpectedly betrays us' (see 'Marx's Purloined Letter', 39). For Derrida, in contrast, the living present implicitly betrays us under ordinary as opposed to exceptional circumstances: it is ontologically self-divided, so to speak; and it is for this reason that it is necessary to speak about it in the language of hauntology. In effect, my position mediates between those of Derrida and Jameson, since I presuppose that it is in the specific historical conditions of capitalism, which creates circumstances that are permanently both ordinary and exceptional, that the present is constitutively non-contemporaneous.

23 Consult, for instance, Bertolt Brecht, 'A Short Organum for the Theatre', in John Willett, ed. and trans., *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic* (London: Methuen, 1974), 191–2.

and science fiction.²⁴ For the future also interrupts the present and disjoins it, as Bloch and Lukács among others recognized. Utopia too activates a visor-effect, a V-effect that uses a fantastical future to displace and upset the synchronicity of the present. It institutes a 'spectral asymmetry' that 'de-synchronizes' and 'recalls us to anachrony' (6–7). In Chapter 10 of this book, I implicitly elaborate this point in relation to the perspectival device of anamorphosis, which offers another opportunity to reconceptualize the gaze of utopian and science fiction, its visor-effect.

II

Utopia, then, occupies what Derrida describes as 'the virtual space of spectrality' (11), a liminal territory between practicability and impossibility, reality and unreality. It is both of its time and not of its time; and it reveals the alternative futures, the potentialities, secreted in the cavities of the actual present. This can be seen particularly clearly, I think, in the late nineteenth century, the epoch on which this book concentrates, when utopian fiction was more popular than at any other time in its history as a distinctive genre, notably in Britain and the United States. I have discussed the socio-economic conditions in which utopian fiction became so prevalent at the *fin de siècle* in my previous book on the topic, *Utopia Ltd.*, and I don't intend to repeat myself here.²⁵ I am however keen to emphasize

- 24 See Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979). For perceptive commentaries on Suvin, see the essays in Patrick Parrinder, ed., *Learning from Other Worlds: Estrangement, Cognition and the Politics of Science Fiction and Utopia* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000); and, more recently, China Miéville, 'Cognition as Ideology: A Dialectic of SF Theory', in Mark Bould and China Miéville, eds, *Red Planets: Marxism and Science Fiction* (London: Pluto, 2009), 231–48.
- 25 See Matthew Beaumont, *Utopia Ltd.: Ideologies of Social Dreaming in England 1870–1900* (Leiden: Brill, 2005). A paperback edition of this book was published by Haymarket Books in 2009.

that the late nineteenth century is a period in which, to put it in Derrida's terms, 'time is off its hinges, time is off course, beside itself, disadjusted' (18). This sense of non-synchronicity, as I have intimated, is characteristic of temporality itself in capitalist society, and especially of the present – as Marx and Engels established with such forceful eloquence, 'constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones.'²⁶ But the disturbance of social conditions that characterizes the nineteenth-century *fin de siècle* did appear to contemporaries to be especially apocalyptic. Eagleton offers a précis of this situation that is a useful as it is colourful:

Materially speaking, the era of Victorian prosperity is now over; the oldest industrial capitalist nation in the world is being shamefully outpaced by its juvenile rivals; the mid-Victorian bonanza has bred a minatory underworld of urban lumpenproletariat; and the unedifying spectacle of too much Western capital chasing too few colonial territories is about to lead to the conflagration of the first imperialist world war. But the spiritual correlative of this human waste and wretchedness is a cataclysmic crisis of Victorian rationality itself, on which the *fin de siècle* is no more than a set of extravagant variations.²⁷

Utopia, as I have contended, represents what Derrida delineates as 'a spectral moment, a moment that no longer belongs to time, if one understands by this word the linking of modalized presents (past present, actual present: "now", future present)' (xx). These 'modalized presents' did not seem neatly linked at the *fin de siècle*; instead, they seemed discontinuous, disjointed. The mid-Victorian narrative of history as a ceaseless progressive development no longer seemed sustainable. At bottom, this was because of a sustained economic crisis – the 'unprecedented disturbance and depression of trade' that one American commentator identified in 1889 – which had

26 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in *Collected Works*, Vol. 6 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1976), 487.

27 Terry Eagleton, 'The Flight to the Real', in Sally Ledger and Scott McCracken, eds, *Cultural Politics at the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995),

seen capitalism slide in and out of a sequence of recessions since the early 1870s.²⁸ If capitalism seemed diseased, though, its terminal collapse did not look imminent. The working-class movement, increasingly guided by the socialist parties proliferating in Europe, was inspired to an unprecedented extent by visions of a post-capitalist society; but, as the century reached its end, and the imperial rivalries between competing capitalist nations intensified, these visions started to dissolve into the distance.

The explosion of utopianism in England at the *fin de siècle* was thus an expression of the disappointments as well as the achievements of socialists in this epoch, and of a delicate compound of optimism and pessimism. On the Left, the popularity of social dreaming, as I have called it, was at least in part the effect of a historical situation in which socialists were incapable of exploiting the political opportunities that had opened up to them in practical terms. 'The very insignificance of socialism as a political force in England, at a time when no mass labour movement existed to pose urgent day-to-day problems of mobilization', as Perry Anderson has coolly observed, 'encouraged a tendency to futurism.'²⁹ Utopianism is thus one of those 'morbid symptoms', in Gramsci's formulation, that appear in an interregnum, when 'the old is dying and the new cannot be born.'³⁰ Except that the adjective 'morbid' is obviously inappropriate, even if utopianism, especially in its more apocalyptic forms, is to some extent contaminated by the decadence characteristic of the *fin de siècle*. Utopianism is, more accurately, a *spectral* symptom of this intermediate (as opposed to transitional) climate. It invoked the undead futures haunting the present.

In 1891, in the aftermath of the publication of *Looking Backward 2000–1887* (1888), when utopian fiction was at the absolute height of its popularity, the self-styled 'Theo-Socialist' Thomas Lake Harris, who had been

28 David A. Wells, *Recent Economic Changes and their Effect on the Production and Distribution of Wealth and the Well-Being of Society* (London: Longmans, 1890), 1.

29 Perry Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism* (London: New Left Books, 1980), 171.

30 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), 276.

inspired by Edward Bellamy's phenomenally successful book, referred to the times through which he was living as 'the spectral moments that precede the dawn'.³¹ In this atmosphere, typified as much by crepuscular gloom as gleams of light, the relationship between the future and the present was frequently portrayed as spectral. W. Graham Moffat and John White, for example, make extravagantly playful use of the metaphor of the spectre in *What's the World Coming To? A Novel of the Twenty-First Century, Founded on the Fads, Facts and Fiction of the Nineteenth* (1893). This bizarre but rather imaginative utopian romance, which opens with a description of a statue of the 'nineteenth-century prophet' Bellamy, affectionately satirizes a number of *fin-de-siècle* ideologies, as its cumbersome title suggests.³² It is most interested in spiritualism, as its references to contemporaries like Annie Besant, Helena Blavatsky and W. T. Stead (whose *Real Ghost Stories* it footnotes) indicate. In part, at least, this is because ghosts offer a profitable metaphor for thinking about the temporality of utopia.

The novel's most vibrant set piece takes place in an auditorium furnished with a 'ghostly curtain' and 'phantom stage', and therefore deliberately made to resemble an early cinema. In this episode, the denizens of the twenty-first century attend a 'scenophonographic production' in which hologrammatic representations of famous nineteenth-century actors perform *Macbeth*. These 'spectral celebrities, performing, to a twenty-first-century audience, a play of the eleventh [*sic*], as produced by their substances in the nineteenth', according to one character, provides 'much genuine instruction and pleasure'.³³ The episode is an elaborate metaphorical attempt to dramatize the mechanics of utopian fiction. For it is the novel's

31 Thomas Lake Harris, *The New Republic: Prospects, Dangers, Duties and Safeties of the Times* (London: E. W. Allen, 1891), 13.

32 W. Graham Moffat and John White, *What's the World Coming To? A Novel of the Twenty-First Century, Founded on the Fads, Facts and Fiction of the Nineteenth* (London: Elliot Stock, 1897), 3.

33 Moffat and White, *What's the World Coming To?*, 34–6. In this context, it is interesting to note H. G. Wells's injunction to the reader at the beginning of *A Modern Utopia*: 'the image of a cinematograph is the one to grasp.' See H. G. Wells, *A Modern Utopia* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1905), 3.

twenty-first-century characters who, mirroring the nineteenth-century actors they face in this scene, effectively enact a spectral narrative, for the instruction and pleasure of Moffat and White's readers. Past, present and future are interlinked, in the shape of the eleventh (or seventeenth), nineteenth and twenty-first centuries, and then reshuffled. The reader's sense of time as 'a reassuring order of presents', in Derrida's phrase, is unsettled (39). The novel's twenty-first-century characters thus tread 'the dividing between the ghost and actuality', as Derrida calls it – 'like utopia itself' (38–9). The present is desynchronized by the spectre of utopia.

It is probably Bellamy himself who makes the most creative use of this trope of the spectre, at the end of the nineteenth century, in order to characterize the operations of the utopian imagination; and I propose to examine his sophisticated application of it in some detail. If *Looking Backward* posits a historical development, from 1887 to 2000, in which the present is carefully synchronized in relation to the ideal future it constructs, it deftly deploys its spectral trope, at the same time, in order to locate utopia 'outside of any synchrony', in Derrida's formulation (7). In this utopian dialectic, the present and future are therefore both continuous and discontinuous with one another. *Looking Backward* involves not simply both a look forward (from 1887 to 2000) and a look backward (from 2000 to 1887 – because the book's protagonist, Julian West, is employed in this utopian society as a historian of the nineteenth century, the epoch from which he has time-travelled into the future); it also involves a look askance. In the final chapter of the novel, where West suffers from an appalling nightmare in which he appears to find himself back in the late nineteenth-century life from which he thought he had escaped into the Boston of 2000, he embodies the spectral, anamorphic gaze of utopia.

Horried to find that he is back in the squalid, corrupt conditions of the *fin de siècle*, and homesick for the utopian society he erroneously assumes must have been merely a dream, West desperately traverses the city – in so far as he can move freely at all. 'A dozen times between my door and Washington Street I had to stop and pull myself together', he records, 'such power had been in that vision of the Boston of the future to make the real Boston strange.' Troubled by the 'prevalence of advertising' on the streets of the city, in contrast to Boston in 2000, where the presence

of commodities is extremely discreet, if not invisible, he muses 'whether the pathos or the moral repulsiveness of the spectacle most impressed me, so suddenly become a stranger in my own city'.³⁴ Tramping through the poorer and more populous parts of the city, the almost incomprehensible horror that the oppressed inhabitants of Boston stimulate in him seems to make him hallucinate, and on scrutinizing them he suddenly perceives 'that they were all quite dead'. 'Their bodies were so many living sepulchres', he observes; 'On each brow was plainly written the *hic jacet* of a soul dead within'.³⁵

Of course, from the perspective of the late nineteenth century, the novel's immediate present, it is not these people that are spectral but – in an uncanny reversal – the time traveller returning from the utopian future. For the reader of *Looking Backward*, it is the future rather than the past that is effectively undead. In this scene, then, West is a *revenant*, a *revenant* who has irrupted not from a repressed past but a repressed future; not from an 'unrefurbished past', as Bloch might have put it, but a 'prevented future'. He is one of those 'ghosts of the future, instead of ghosts of the past' that Bellamy refers to in a short story from 1876.³⁶ In Derridean terms, his gaze activates the visor-effect, that asymmetric spectral look which, using the future to desynchronize the present, 'recalls us to anachrony' (6–7). He is the spectre of utopia.

'This spectral *someone other looks at us*, we feel ourselves being looked at by it, outside of any synchrony', as Derrida puts it in a statement I have cited once already (7). In *Looking Backward*, the sentences that succeed the revelation I have discussed above vividly develop the idea that, precisely because a utopian alternative is secreted inside it, the late nineteenth-century present is non-contemporaneous with itself:

34 Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward 2000–1887*, ed. Matthew Beaumont (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 182–3.

35 Bellamy, *Looking Backward*, 189.

36 Edward Bellamy, 'The Old Folks' Party', in *Apparitions of Things to Come: Edward Bellamy's Tales of Mystery and Imagination*, ed. Franklin Rosemont (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1990), 47.

As I looked, horror struck, from one death's head to another, I was affected by a singular hallucination. Like a wavering translucent spirit face superimposed on each of these brutish masks I saw the ideal, the possible face that would have been actual if mind and soul had lived. It was not till I was aware of these ghostly faces, and of the reproach that could not be gainsaid which was in their eyes, that the full piteousness of the ruin that had been wrought was revealed to me.³⁷

The role of the spectre, in the form of Bellamy's time traveller from the future, who stands in for utopia, is to divide the present from itself, or reveal its self-divisions, and so to excavate an alternative future. The 'spirit-face' that West imagines he momentarily sees in his nightmare is a fleeting trace of the utopian dream he fears he has lost forever. For the reader, to formulate it in Derridean terms once more, it is a 'paradoxical incorporation' that represents the 'becoming-body' of the future (6). Suspended between being and nothingness, the present and the future, the real and the unreal, this 'spirit-face' is the perfect emblem of utopia's hauntological identity.

Temporality, in *Looking Backward*, is defined by two distinct dates, two distinct epochs, as its title makes explicit: 1887 and 2000. From the standpoint of the book's real readers, 1887 constitutes the present and 2000 represents the future. From the standpoint of its ideal or imaginary readers – those whom, as a historian of the nineteenth century employed in the 'Historical Section' of a college in twenty-first-century Boston, Julian West supposedly addresses – 2000 constitutes the present and 1887 represents the past. As I have implied, utopia does not exactly belong to either of these epochs. Even if Bellamy's utopian future, described in the bulk of the book, evolves from the more or less dystopian present he depicts in the opening and closing chapters, utopia itself inhabits a different temporality, the time of non-contemporaneity. Utopia, in the form of the utopian imagination that motivates the narrative of *Looking Backward*, can be located not in the past or the future but in the non-synchronicity of the present. In relation to the book's title, it occupies the place not of either of the specific dates to which it refers but of the hyphen that connects them: 2000–1887.

37 Bellamy, *Looking Backward*, 189.

It is there, in the copula, the liminal territory that belongs to both historical eras and neither, that the spectre of utopia resides. 'Haunting is historical', Derrida writes, 'but it is not *dated*, it is never docilely given a date in the chain of presents, day after day, according to the instituted order of a calendar' (4). Utopia haunts the present in this sense. It is not a future that can be prophesied or predicted; it is a displacement of the present, a desynchronization of it. It reveals the incompleteness of the present and points to alternative presents, different futures, secreted in its interstices. In terms that can be appropriated from Jameson, it is 'a wandering signifier capable of keeping any number of conspiratorial futures alive.'³⁸ Utopia shadows the movements of history but never fully materializes. It is doomed to be no more than a becoming-body. It remains Not Yet, in Bloch's formulation. In the late nineteenth century, the decades of intense utopian speculation on which this study concentrates, a spectre haunts history, the spectre of utopia.

III

It remains for me to sketch the contents of *The Spectre of Utopia*, first by presenting a rapid overview of its structure, then by outlining the argument of its individual chapters. The first four chapters of the book are fairly tightly focused on *Looking Backward*, the literary and political importance of which, in my opinion, simply cannot be overestimated (in spite of its literary and political imperfections, which are all too apparent). Collectively, they represent an attempt to read Bellamy's utopian romance against the grain. Peter Ruppert has provided a rationale for this enterprise, which effectively shapes all the chapters that comprise *The Spectre of Utopia*:

38 This is Jameson's final description, in his response to Derrida's *Specters*, of what he calls 'Marx's purloined letter' (see 'Marx's Purloined Letter', 65).

We must look beyond the apparently 'closed' form of literary utopias; we must go beyond their reductive solutions and try to disclose meanings that are not objective properties of the text, but which are nevertheless an important part of their critical impact on readers. Such disclosure will allow us to identify what it is about utopian works that enables us to say more than they apparently say, to have an effect that transcends their formulaic solutions and dogmatic assertions.³⁹

The fifth and six chapters then shift attention to a couple of the institutions through which utopian politics were transmitted at the *fin de siècle*. The first of these is about the Bellamy Library, a series of books produced by a radical London publisher, which was centred on a cheap edition of *Looking Backward* probably aimed at working-class readers. The second of these central chapters is about the feminist periodical *Shaffs*, which purveyed a brand of utopian feminism in the 1890s, one shaped in part by the contemporary interest in spiritualism. This spiritualist theme is pursued in the next chapter, a sustained discussion of the 'elective affinities', as I identify them, between socialism and occultism, and in particular Theosophy, at the *fin de siècle*. In Chapters 8 and 9, I discuss two texts that are often central to debates about late nineteenth-century utopianism and science fiction respectively. The first is Oscar Wilde's 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism' (1891), the dialectical ingenuity and political significance of which I celebrate. The second is H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895), generally regarded as the first modern science-fiction novel. This chapter opens with an attempt to devise a theoretical concept (I call it the 'historical uncanny') that can do justice to the innovations of this seminal novel, and then offers a close reading of the text. This interest in science fiction is sustained in the final chapter of *The Spectre of Utopia*, which discusses some twentieth-century examples of the form as well as other novels by Wells. It argues that the perspectival device of anamorphosis offers a fertile metaphor for understanding and theorizing the peculiar narrative techniques of science fiction; and in so doing underlines the spectral qualities of utopia that I have examined in this Introduction.

39 Peter Ruppert, *Reader in a Strange Land: The Activity of Reading Literary Utopias* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1986), 57.

Chapter 1, 'Looking Back at *Looking Backward*', provides an introductory account of the novel, establishing its significance as a publishing event, offering a brief biographical account of Bellamy, and assessing its state-socialist politics, before situating it within the tradition of utopian fiction. The importance of Bellamy's formal contribution to the genre resides in the way in which he relocates utopia – until the late nineteenth century largely positioned in unmapped space – to an imaginable if relatively distant future. *Looking Backward* thus temporalizes utopia. But, for Bellamy, space remains a crucial vector for calculating the future, as I demonstrate in a discussion of the scene in which West's utopian cicerone, Dr Leete, takes him to a rooftop and offers him a view of twenty-first-century Boston. This marks West's initiation in utopia: the clean, neo-classical city laid out beneath him is metonymic of utopian society as a totality. But West finds that he does not immediately feel at home in this society, and at first responds neurotically to finding himself marooned in the future. The panoramic view from the rooftop thus has to compete, in the novel's economy of perspectives, with a less panoptic, more personal viewpoint, particularly in so far as this is associated with his dream of being back in the nineteenth century (which I have started to analyse in this Introduction). This chapter therefore situates *Looking Backward* at the intersection of two angles of vision, the panoramic and the paranoiac.

Chapter 2, 'A Little Shopping: *Looking Backward* and the Dreamscape of Consumption', reexamines Bellamy's novel in relation to the politics of consumption at the end of the nineteenth century, arguing that, especially in the United States, the department store became capitalism's emblematic dreamscape at this time. It opens with a reading of a scene involving 'a little shopping' in William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1891), a novel famously written as a counterblast to *Looking Backward*. It then sets out the importance of the department store to prevailing conceptions of the future of capitalism at the *fin de siècle*, with specific reference to *The World a Department Store* (1900), a utopian fiction written by the department-store owner Bradford Peck. Finally, it offers a detailed interpretation of Bellamy's description of a shopping trip in his utopian romance, in order to excavate the consumerist utopia that is concealed in the folds of its anti-capitalist politics. In this chapter, I implicitly resist Raymond Williams's superficially