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Prolific and award-winning genre fiction short story writer Gregory Norman Bossert is in a unique position to chat expansively about the fraught subject of utopia. He is not only someone both well-versed and keenly cognisant of the history of speculative fiction—his "arcadian" fantasy story 'The Telling' won the World Fantasy Award in 2013—but he is also toiling, daily, to bring our most popular iterations of the dream worlds that these storytelling traditions evoke, and whose basic elements he considers crucial to depicting a utopian vision on the page. As a pre-visualisation/layout artist at Industrial Light & Magic, he has worked on projects like **Rogue One, Tomorrowland, Avengers: Age of Ultron** *and many other "tentpole" blockbusters. He brings his crucial experience to bear while discussing the rich utopian tradition within science fiction, and wrings out the complications inherent in even starting to chart a utopian vision that is not in some way problematic or exclusionary.*

Greg, what does utopia mean for you, both as a fictional construct and a projection of an ideal (future?) reality?

I'm most interested in utopia as fiction. In fact, I'd argue that it is *necessarily* a fictional construct, and a speculative one at that.

But this is a viewpoint I reached in adulthood. My favorite works as a child in the '60s and '70s, from Disney's cartoon shorts and theme park *Tomorrowland* to the original *Star Trek*, all seemed to propose utopian societies as practical, desirable goals, and ones that were achievable on a personal timescale. By 2001, we'd be living on the moon, and traveling to Jupiter—I'd *seen* it on the big screen, in a "serious" film—and 2001 was just a few decades away. And my childhood self saw a social, and personal, utopia as a natural result of technological progress.

As I started reading more widely, and in particular discovered writers like Ursula Le Guin and Joanna Russ, I took to heart a concept of an anarchic, arcadian, feminist future that, while not directly achievable, nonetheless had practical, immediate application. I saw no contradiction between the technology of the Disney/Star Trek future and the arcadian/anti-urban/ecological ideals of a story like *The Word for World is Forest*; in fact, the Disney/Star Trek future promised that technology would provide a *solution* to the problems of urban life. (The fact that my father was a pioneer of mathematical population biology/ecology further underscored this trust that technology was compatible with Arcadia.)

My viewpoint changed in the '80s. I'd like to say that this change was the result of my growing understanding of the context of American exceptionalism and economic privilege, and the

history of utopian and anti-utopian literature as satirical social commentary. But honestly, the impetus was the extraordinarily compelling depiction of the future in the film *Blade* Runner.

Up to that point, I had in fact been a great fan of speculative-fiction-as-social-commentary, from *Brave New World* and *Animal Farm* to the shiny '70s dystopian films like *Rollerball*, *Soylent Green*, and *Logan's Run*. But these works wore their satire in plain view, as it were, and the worlds they depicted were clearly and deliberately artificial. I saw them as effective commentary on contemporary society, and great examples of the utility of speculative fiction, but they didn't directly challenge my childhood concept of utopia through technological progress.

Blade Runner, though, and the cyberpunk works that followed it, presented a future that was technologically sound (and technologically appealing), completely plausible, and yet inescapably, necessarily dystopian.

It took several more decades, and a lot more reading, and the eventual confrontation with those issues I mention above of privilege, exceptionalism, and the roots of that '60s Disney/Star Trek *World of Tomorrow* in the profoundly flawed and troubled American psyche of the '50s, before I could write about fictional worlds myself. And by that time, I'd lost faith, and interest, not just in the concept of an immediate, personally achievable technologically-provided utopia, but also in utopian work as any kind of prediction or depiction of a future reality.

The recent Verso Book re-issue of Thomas More's *Utopia* is tagged as "Fiction", and flanked by essays and front/end matter from two illustrious figures of genre fiction from either end of the generational pond: China Mieville and Ursula Le Guin. We'll get into how all this ties back into your own work in a bit, but I'd like to ask you what you think about the confluence between utopia and fiction in general, as well as utopia and what's commonly referred to as "speculative" fiction in particular. Is this correlation so self-evident? And how useful do you think it is, both when it comes to defining utopia in a satisfying way, as well as making efforts to create an as-utopian-as-possible world?

As I said before, I think that all successful depictions of utopia are necessarily works of speculative fiction. This is a topic that could fill a book—and in fact, it has—so I'll just touch on a few points here.

First: I find utopia most interesting as a speculative process rather than as a blueprint of a specific social system. Which is to say, I am more interested in the creation, critique, and comparison of utopian works than I am in the details of any one particular depicted society.

The Verso Books edition of More's *Utopia* is a perfect example: the essays from Miéville and Le Guin are vivid and fascinating, and they each refer to a deep literature of the critique of utopias. It's worth noting that More's account itself is presented within the framework of a conversation with Raphael, a traveler who has visited utopia, and More's primary narrator concludes: "In the

meanwhile, though it must be confessed that [Raphael] is both a very learned man and a person who has obtained a great knowledge of the world, I cannot perfectly agree to everything he has related". More's words here, and his use of this framing device in general, are a deliberate invitation to further discussion; again, a process rather than a plan.

Second: Without a depiction of the development of a given utopian society within a historical context (contemporary or otherwise)—a plan, as it were, not just for the thing but for how to build the thing—a utopian work has little utility as a specification. And for those works that do attempt to depict the development of utopia, the utopian "how?" at that point where they connect with the "real" world, they inevitably founder upon the empirical realities of sociological, anthropological, and political sciences (or at the very least become muddled down in the contemporary debate over those sciences).

And this is where the speculative element comes in. In order to avoid that perilous placement within a historical context, for instance via direct extrapolation from contemporary society, utopian works must make a speculative leap: a "what if?", a bit of hand-waving, an ellipsis in the historical setting. More does this both through setting (a distant land) and through the rhetorical device of stories within stories. And we see this leap again and again in utopian literature: the far shore (or planet) only discovered after becoming lost, the far future found after social collapse, or so far in the future that historical context is meaningless, or via some accidental high-jinks in a time machine.

Third: The concept of utopia, as a place and as a social system, necessarily begs the question: utopia for whom? Miéville and Le Guin both write vigorously on the problematic question of the utopian "for whom?" in their essays in the Verso edition. Almost any society is ideal for *someone*: from some viewpoint ,any place is a utopia, no matter how much others are suffering.

To posit a simplistic model: If a story is about one or two people being happy, we have Romance (or a romance!). Add a few more happy people and we get Comedy. We approach utopia as that group gets larger. The question of who is in that group, and how diverse they are, is, of course, the point on which many of the various utopian traditions pivot: anarchic, arcadian, libertarian, feminist, Marxist, capitalist, and so on.

To propose a functional utopian reality is thus to propose the utopian person. In fact, following on my second point above, a functional utopian proposal must not just propose the existence of this utopian "for whom", but their creation. And again, such works founder not just on the complexity of the social and psychological sciences, but on the brutal tradition of such attempts. The ties between 20th century Futurism and Fascism are an easy warning here.

A fictional context arguably gives us the flexibility to craft characters to fit our utopia without needing to place them too firmly into a historical context; again, we use a speculative leap. This question of "whom" is nonetheless perilous, even within fiction, and hence we find broader

speculative types, from Swift's Houyhnhnms to Le Guin's Gethen to any number of exoticised "native" societies.

There's one more person in the mix, of course: the reader. The relationship between the reader and the Utopian "for whom?" is a fundamental problem in depicting a utopia. Fiction provides us the tools to manage this relationship. The simple context of a work being presented as fiction already gives us some useful distance. More's device of nested narrators has been endlessly emulated, and is of course a basic trope: the "tall tales" of a traveler met over a drink. And all the dressings of genre fiction—future or fantastic or exotic settings, spaceships and time machines— signal to the reader that we're making that speculative leap, and thus avoiding any direct discussion of how our utopia, and our utopian "for whom?", is connected to the historical context of the reader.

Of course, there are plenty of utopian works that are presented as non-fiction, or as fiction within a concrete historical context. Some of these works are in very specific scholarly or literary contexts; the bulk of them, however, and almost all that present themselves as utopian to a general audience, will fail for reasons like the ones above.

You've inhabited various spaces of what could broadly be defined speculative fiction, in fact, and it's fair to say that your short stories run the gamut of genres and styles, from sci-fi to horror and fantasy. Perhaps picking up on some of the strands of the previous question, how would you describe the process of creating and inhabiting those fictional spaces, and do you think that ability and/or tendency can be used to utopian ends?

As I've said, I think that the speculative leap—that "what if?" that frees a story from the historical context or a simple extrapolation thereof—is a requirement for depicting a utopia. And the literary tradition of genre fiction, and all the tropes that signal those traditions of genre, help create a slightly distant, forgiving relationship between the reader and the text that allows her to enter into a utopia without stumbling over the difficult issues of "how?" and "for whom?". Given that, my answer to your question is a simple "Yes".

That said, my own way into the speculative process very rarely leads me anywhere near a utopia. Some of this is the simple problem of storytelling in a utopian setting. The dynamic of setting-conflict-resolution is not the only way to tell a story, but it is certainly the easiest, and tends to be my starting point, even if I later abandon that structure for something more interesting. But if we start with conflict, and if we make that conflict personal to our protagonist, then we're left with one of two scenarios for a utopian work: (a) Our protagonist is in conflict with the utopia, but through the course of the story comes to accept it, or (b) our protagonist is in conflict with an antagonist who is in conflict with the utopia, and our protagonist either convinces the antagonist to accept the utopia or removes the antagonist.

None of these stories appeals to me. Stories of outsider learning to fit in, or being assimilated or rejected, seem to me at best tone-deaf and outdated, and at worst offensive, even dangerous. Of course, there are plenty of other ways to create and resolve conflict between characters in a utopian setting. But these other approaches will, I think, result in a work that is not itself utopian, and in fact will tend toward becoming anti-utopian.

To give a more concrete example in my own work: my story 'The Telling', originally published in *Beneath Ceaseless Skies* #109, November 2012, started as a sort of arcadian utopia, based around the rural tradition of "Telling the Bees"—having the youngest child of the household announce significant events like births and deaths to the beehives. My initial plans for the story were relatively positive: a child would tell the bees about a death, the bees would reject the telling, the child would have some sort of adventure prompted by the bees' rejection until all was resolved.

This was a fantasy, not a horror story, so the conflict wasn't going to be *with* the bees: there are (almost) no deadly clouds of stinging insects. And so, as my protagonist Mel goes about on an adventure to solve the mystery of the bees' displeasure, the conflict comes from Mel's interactions with the adults. And as that story unfolded in my head, those adults all came to represent different aspects of their arcadian setting. Some were comfortable in it, some rejected it but were still defined by it. In fact, as the story progressed, so strong was the tradition of the arcadian/rural/pastoral in my head that the adults threatened to become archetypes of this tradition. And in turn, it became more and more clear that my original plan for the story's resolution, for Mel to find a place in this would-be utopian setting, would fail. The story stopped being about Mel reconciling the bees, and Mel's own place in the household. Instead, Mel comes to accept, and surpass, the bees' initial rejection. And so my story evolved to become anti-utopian.

Almost all of my stories involve some kind of physical transformation of the central character. In 'The Telling', Mel undergoes a change induced by, and mimicking, the bees; in 'Bloom', the protagonist is horribly disfigured by an encounter with an alien ecology; in 'Spinning the Thread', the protagonist has just undergone a grisly death and resurrection and his actions require a continuing "spinning out"; in 'Lost Wax', one of the two main characters uses her art to physically transcend limitations of her emotional and political situation, and so on. This sort of physical transformation, as an externalisation of personal or social change, run up against the problem of the utopian "for whom?". If the setting is utopian, and a character undergoes some fundamental change, then that character is not going to fit in at the start or at the end. As I said above, I don't like stories that resolve by the main character fitting in. And stories that resolve by the character *not* fitting in to a utopian setting end up being, I think, anti-utopian.

Given that you're an American writer and also given that the field of speculative fiction— sci-fi in particular, perhaps—how would you respond to the truism that dystopias come far

more easily to us than utopias, and how confident are you in the ability to make an effort to dream up utopias instead, given the current political climate in the US and elsewhere?

I do think that the structural tendency toward conflict in storytelling, and in short fiction in particular, makes it easier (or lazier!) to write dystopian or anti-utopian stories. That said, there have been times when speculative fiction, and American science fiction, was full of examples of successful utopian fiction, at least within the context of their contemporary audience. Much of the work before the 1960s, all those stories of the brave exploration of space, does not hold up to a critical understanding of colonialist, feminist, socioeconomic, or even simple literary concerns.

But I look back again to that Disney *World of Tomorrow*, or the original Star Trek series, or to Le Guin, Russ, et al, or to the current subversive, extremely self-aware work of Kim Stanley Robinson, and I have to emphasise that some of the issue is simple laziness. As straightforward and popular a work as James Cameron's *Avatar*—a reworking of Le Guin's *The Word for World is Forest*—is an example of a contemporary utopian story; there's a pleasing continuity in the fact that Disney is currently building an Avatar theme park.

Another factor: I said above that works tend to become utopian as the number of happy people grows. The inverse is true of dystopias. As a result, dystopias are a perfect setting for that bugbear of the American mythos: libertarian individualism. And so we see a glut of stories about the lone hero fighting back against some sort of corrupt corporate hegemony, often with weapons (martial arts, bow and arrow) awkwardly borrowed from an earlier generation of exoticised "native" utopias.

Likewise, the utopian future of the original Star Trek has been co-opted into films of a small team of heroes in a potentially corrupt and corrupting society—a melding of the American myths of the individual and of the team (a.k.a. small business) of misfits and rebels.

To switch back to your "day job" in visual effects for film: having worked on some high-profile properties that also peddle in the fantastical on a grand scale and for a massive worldwide audience—*Star Wars* and Marvel Studios movies, to mention just a few—what's the view of such mythmaking like from where you're sitting, as it were? You clearly work tough hours in a high pressure and challenging job; does the end product that the masses get to salivate over feel any different from having lived with the material from so close to the coal face? And does this influence your perspective on how utopian (or not) these visions can possibly be?

Is the situation ironic? Sure. Is there any business as identified, world-wide, with the American mythos as the film industry? The answers to that—cowboy, cop, superhero—are, of course, the topic of most of the films on which I work. And yet, as you say, the work of making big blockbuster films is far from the American mythos as depicted in those films: hordes of

unacknowledged workers laboring long hours for a fraction of the revenue or creative credit. But…

None of the artists I know in either the film industry or in the writing business are particularly concerned by that irony. Of course, everyone would like more money and more recognition, but the perceived inequality is to the nominal owners of the work, not to its content. One thing about film: the process of creating a compelling vision is literally a matter of vision. And this makes creating utopian works challenging, due to the issue of point of view and the relation of the reader to the work I discuss above. When the audience *sees* the utopian setting, and the characters within it—the utopian "for whom?"—it's very hard to keep the audience from running up against a direct personal comparison of their own setting and selves.

In addition, the big "tentpole" blockbuster films that are the bread and butter of the VFX business have become a commodity business—huge expenses versus huge revenues and actual profit made via cost cutting here and there. As a result, these projects are highly risk-adverse, and rely heavily on received narratives and structures. Unlike literature, TV, theme parks, or those Disney animated shorts, there simply is not a legacy of utopian works in feature film, and thus, in this "save the cat" industry, the corporations that make feature films are unlikely to pick up a utopian work.

It is thus not surprising that the one utopian film I *have* worked on in VFX is from Disney: Brad Bird's 2015 *Tomorrowland*. The structure of this film fits one of my examples above: "Our protagonist is in conflict with an antagonist who is in conflict with the utopia and removes the antagonist from the utopia". While I have issues with both the structure of the story and the depiction of utopia in the work, it's a notable example of a utopian film in the blockbuster genre, and I very much enjoyed helping build the world it depicted.

Overall, I think that the US is still directly engaged with the legacy of the 1950s and '60s, in the "real" world of social and political interactions. And as a result, the arts—at least literary and popular film genres with which I am engaged—are somewhat at a loss on how to re-engage with utopian works.

What would be some of your favourite utopian visions in works of fiction, or art of any kind?

In summary: Those Disney animated shorts on the *World of Tomorrow*, filled with self-driving cars and missions to Mars. And the corresponding theme park incarnations of *Tomorrowland* and EPCOT. There's a good deal of nostalgia and an implicit, dangerous privilege involved in looking back on these works. And the works avoid the problem of the utopian "for whom?" by dropping any sort of traditional story structure or characters at all.

But that concept of gradual progress through technology hints at a solution to the problem of the utopian "how?", and in the hands of a writer like Kim Stanley Robinson, suggests a solution to the much more difficult problem of the utopian "for whom?" via a sort of ubiquitous technologically enabled social equity.

The original *Star Trek*, and to a somewhat lesser degree the *Next Generation* series, still lingers as an example of successful storytelling in a utopian context; Kirk and Picard and crew saved the day (most of the time) through the peaceful propagation of their utopian society and the occasional punch. I admit, I've avoided going back to re-watch these shows, with the understanding that they often won't hold up to a serious critical examination (for example, the Borg stories as a brainless Rand-esque take on a socialist failed anti-utopia.) But at the time, they provided a truly compelling vision of a future utopia.

Ursula K. Le Guin's novel *Always Coming Home* and her story *The Word for World Is Forest*, and Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* are touchstones for a set of works that both presented and challenged utopias via an anarchic, arcadian, and/or feminist perspective. Both writers address the problem of the utopian "for whom?" via a deliberately provocative selection of citizens, and rely on well-used tropes (distant worlds, "native" civilizations, time travel, and so on) to leap over the problem of the utopian "how?".

Over time, my understanding of these works has (correctly, I think) evolved from considering them as blueprints for a utopian reality, or at the least as toolkits of useful social concepts—that is, in the model of More's *Utopia*—to considering them as documents actively, critically engaged with the canon of utopian and speculative literature. And I have grown more wary of the received solution to the utopian "how?" via established genre tropes, in particular in the context of anarchic or libertarian utopias; it's hard for me to get past a personal doubt that individuals will function well in such societies without a collectivist, socialist framework.

Regardless, I think that any contemporary depiction of utopia that isn't cognizant of these works is naive, and their influence is still strong, for instance in the derivative, but brilliant, last section of David Mitchell's *The Bone Clocks*. Neal Stephenson has done interesting work with utopian ideas in works like *The Diamond Age*, *Anathem*, and *Seveneves*. I am particularly intrigued by his use in *Anathem* of concepts from the Long Now Foundation, and from the mathematician Roger Penrose. I struggle with Stephenson's storytelling at times—of the books mentioned, I think only *The Diamond Age* is a complete success. But his books, I think, are a fascinating reinvention of the concept of a technological progress toward utopia using new scientific, social, and philosophical ideas, free of the naive nostalgia of the old science fiction *World of Tomorrow*.

As I commented above, Kim Stanley Robinson has been turning out smart, subversive examinations of future utopias for decades now. His willingness to work with long time scales (for example, the Mars trilogy), cover vast distances (such as *2312*), and include large, diverse casts (pretty much all of his works)—all in seemingly effortless disregard of the received conventions of storytelling—allow him to directly address the problems of the utopian "how?"

and "for whom?". A work like his 2012 novel *2312* doesn't look much like More's utopia at first glance, but from its depictions of future economies and arts to its encyclopedic lists of social and technological elements, the book is very much in dialogue with the canonical tradition of utopian work. Like Stephenson, Robinson re-examines the Disney/Star Trek concept of technologically-enabled utopia in light of new sciences and arts. And like Le Guin and Russ, Robinson uses gender, race, and class inequalities to confront the assumptions of previous utopian fiction (Robinson's work is notably aware of non-fiction futurism and utopian studies). Reading one of Robinson's novels is not always easy work—they can feel as if someone took the Verso edition of utopia, chopped up More's original work along with Miéville and Le Guin's essays, and randomly distributed short sections of the resulting mix onto the page. But he is, I think, beyond any other author in investigating the traditional canon of utopia in speculative fiction.

The last work I will mention comes from a very different perspective, and a very different literary tradition, and it is not usually cited in discussions of utopia. Jeff VanderMeer's 2014 novel *Annihilation*, the first volume of his trilogy *The Southern Reach*, is most obviously in the tradition of the Weird—that interstitial genre that connects the magic realism of Borges and Marquez to the Decadent movement to the cosmic horror of Lovecraft and Ligotti to writers as diverse as Franz Kafka, Amos Tutuola, Angela Carter, and Leena Krohn. *Annihilation* also echoes the environmental works of writers like Rachel Carson. But it is, I think, useful (and fascinating) to look at it as a work of utopian fiction.

VanderMeer's Area X, a mysterious region inexplicably inset somewhere in the American southeast and into which the novel's characters venture, is presented as being perfectly at peace with itself. The transformative, sometimes horrific effects experienced by VanderMeer's characters don't result from Area X so much as from the assumptions that these explorers bring with them; this despite attempts to discard all technology (shades of the *World of Tomorrow*), despite limiting the team to women only (shades of Le Guin, Russ, et al). It's not a stretch, I think, to see Area X as a utopia that not so much rejects as transcends the canon of utopian fiction. As such, VanderMeer answers the problem of the utopian "how?" by having Area X simply be there, now, free of any human development. And he addresses the problem of the utopian "who?" with the answer: no one of us.

Whether Area X is some unearthly (in any sense) intrusion, or simply Nature itself achieving some pre- and/or post-human perfection, is never clear. Regardless, though VanderMeer is cannily aware of the traditions in which he is working, his creation (Area X) is absolutely oblivious to human concerns, and it is only by abandoning these concerns—technology, communication with the outside world, interpersonal relationships, language, the human form itself—that the characters have a chance of achieving what Area X offers.

What would your own blueprint for utopia look like? And which magazine would be the most likely to publish it?

I could say that utopian fiction is fundamentally a long form, and I am, so far, a writer of short fiction. And I could say that I haven't managed to get beyond my nostalgia for the old *World of Tomorrow*, or my appreciation and awe at the works of folks like Le Guin and Robinson to consider writing my own take on the tradition. But all of this is just to say: I haven't gotten there just quite yet.

I'll delay a little further by saying that, as for which magazine might publish a new depiction of utopia, the good news is that there are many, many options. The traditional speculative fiction markets, the digests like *Asimov's Science Fiction* and *Fantasy & Science Fiction* and the themed short story anthologies, are still quite open to utopian fiction—far more so than you might expect given the prevalence of dystopias in popular film and fiction. And those same traditional speculative fiction markets are more open than ever to new voices, and thus new takes on the tradition.

And the internet too has opened up new markets, from online venues like *Clarkesworld*, *Strange Horizons*, and *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, to international venues like the UK's *Interzone*, the Czech Republic's *XB-1*, or China's *Science Fiction World*.

As for a plan for my own utopia; well, looking at my past work and its focus on externalised, physical transformations of self, and looking at the fundamental challenges of utopian works, the "how?" and "for whom?", I suspect that a utopian work of my own would be based around some sort of personal transformation that spreads, whether via art or language or alien virus or revelation, I'm not yet sure. But the "how" will start, I think, with something personal. And as such, my "how" is likely to fail as a plausible mechanism; as I found when writing 'The Telling', a story of personal transformation in a utopian context never quite goes the direction one hopes.

I do know that I'd rather not have to rely on the account of a traveler telling tales; I love those stories, but they've been done and done well, back to More and before him all the way back to Homer and beyond. I want to take my story straight to utopia. And I'd rather not use the tropes of distant planets or the far future. I don't think I'd try to set my story here and now, though VanderMeer offers one (extraordinary) way of doing so. I'd go somewhere not too far in space and time, like Robinson's *Mars* or Disney's *Tomorrow*.

And as for that most difficult problem of utopia *for whom*, I'll do my best—and fail—to include everyone. (I wish I could end that sentence with "of course", but the canon of utopian fiction argues otherwise). With effort and luck, however, I hope my failures of "how?" and "for whom?" will be nonetheless useful. As I said above, for me utopia is not a blueprint, but an ongoing speculative process, a dialogue that stretches back to the first works of speculative fiction, and stretches as far away and as far into the future as we dare imagine.