

BOOK REVIEW

Jameson, Fredric. *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. New York: Verso, 2005.

Archaeologies of the Future is a two-part volume in which Marxist literary critic Fredric Jameson presents a new, 233-page study of Utopia—which he unfailingly capitalizes—alongside twelve previously published essays on the subject. Reaching from Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516) to Kim Stanley Robinson’s 1990s Mars novels, Part One (the new material on which I focus) is a rich meditation about how science fiction, its aliens, and its impossible worlds remain closely tied to history. While a sharper overarching thesis has eluded my reading, it may be that the double negation of Jameson’s slogan, “anti-anti-Utopianism” (xvi), inherently precludes an overt central claim.

Jameson’s strength is his ability to encapsulate paradox. Even in the introduction, we are faced with

the formal dilemma of how works that posit the end of history can offer any usable historical impulses, how works which aim to resolve all political differences can continue to be in any sense political, how texts designed to overcome the needs of the body can remain materialistic, and how visions of the “epoch of rest” (Morris) can energize and compel us to action. (xiv)

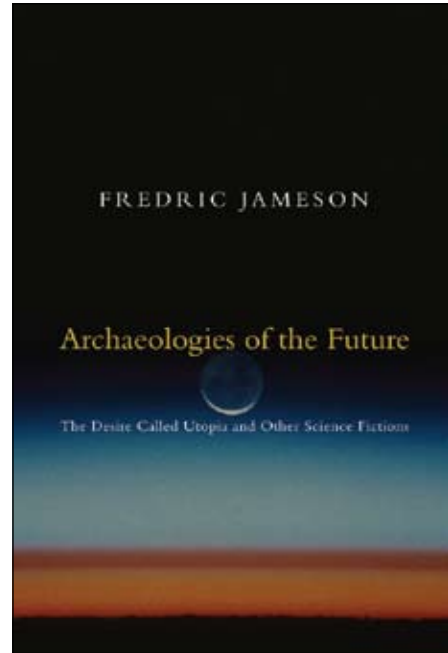
Soon Jameson is teaching us to parse the conventional category of utopia into the utopian form or program, which requires complete commitments and total closure, and the utopian impulse or wish, which is more subtly distributed throughout culture. Along the way we cover a helpful chart delineating six stages of science fiction, including space opera, science (or pseudo-science), cultural critique, subjectivity, speculative fiction, and cyberpunk. There are also insightful comparisons between the trace’s significance for the past and the utopia’s significance for the future; as Jameson explains, irremovable stains of historical deeds and irrepressible visions of possible futures are equally the stuff of literary time capsules.

What I have not been able to find in this wide-ranging volume, though, is the source of Jameson’s unremittingly negative approach to utopia, whether in its textual forms, its social incarnations, or the interpenetrations of those domains. Like many critics, of course, he is understandably suspicious of the term, which he notes is often strangely preoccupied with the thing it excludes (More’s original treatment brackets money, Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s early-twentieth-century novel *Herland* eliminates men, etc.). Jameson also warns us about exclusivity more broadly, that is, the enclave mentality that fosters cultic extremism by obsessing over a series of taboos. Nonetheless, when Jameson identifies utopian space as “an aberrant by-product” of “real social space,” a “self-contained backwater,” and a “pocket of stasis within the ferment and rushing forces of social change” (15), he risks oversimplifying his subject. Implying that all utopian texts demand a mimetic, one-to-one reconstruction in

the actual world of the present, Jameson looks past this literature's potential to serve as stimulus rather than blueprint and to criticize its alternative societies, rather than merely to romanticize them.

Let me clarify this assessment with a brief look at Jameson's valuable—but to me incomplete—reconsideration of the traditional opposition of utopia and dystopia, where he compellingly demonstrates that we need more subcategories, but leaves little room for optimism about actual social reform or revolution. Beyond utopia, which is by definition inaccessible from the reader's geographical or temporal standpoint, Jameson proposes the critical dystopia (borrowed from science fiction and utopia scholar Tom Moylan), the anti-utopia, and the apocalyptic. The critical dystopia involves an extrapolative warning (“if this goes on...”) and seeks change on issues like overpopulation, pollution, or governmental power (think of Steven Spielberg's science fiction film *Minority Report*). The anti-utopia can be equally dark but for a different reason: nightmare visions like George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are motivated less by the prospect of change than by cynicism “about human nature itself, whose corruption and lust for power are inevitable, and not to be remedied by new social measures or programs, nor by heightened consciousness of the impending dangers” (198).

So far, so good. But Jameson's definition of the fourth category, the apocalyptic, effectively reduces all religion to conservative politics. Jameson reserves the term “apocalyptic” for treatments of Earth's destruction like Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins's *Left Behind* series, narratives which “seem more plausible than the Utopian vision of the new Jerusalem



but also rather different from the various catastrophes...prefigured in the critical dystopias” (199). Jameson also differentiates the apocalyptic from the anti-utopian, since it does not “disabuse its readership of the political illusions an Orwell sought to combat” (199). The problem is that Jameson ends up equating the apocalyptic with both utopia and fundamentalism, suggesting that in blurring politics and religion, the apocalyptic “brings us around to our starting point again, inasmuch as the original Apocalypse includes both catastrophe and fulfillment, the end of the world and the inauguration of the reign of Christ on earth, Utopia and the extinction of the human race all at once” (199). As a secular version of religious absolutism (which relies on its own negations and enclaves), Jameson's utopia thereby rules out any fifth category between the apocalyptic and utopia—any hope that humanity's story might be spiral rather than merely

circular, and that instead of cycling from the apocalyptic back to a naive idealism, we might find a way to dream that does not gloss over our failures.

Given Jameson's introductory slogan and his recurring interest in Utopia's radical "impossibility," I kept expecting *Archaeologies of the Future* to go further. Every so often, Jameson acknowledges more ambiguous, self-conscious visions of the future; in one of many passages returning to Ursula Le Guin, for example, he marvels that she is "a Utopian writer with mixed feelings, and offers the constitutive undecidability of a representation which affirms and foregrounds Utopia in the very same act by which it calls it fundamentally into question" (80). Later, discussing Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia* and its influence on cyberpunk, he muses that perhaps Utopia, instead of being "absolutely restricted by its own limits, is capable of mutation" (191). And in his last chapter, Jameson speculates about how social units like the islands of an archipelago might be related but not assimilatory, so that "the tension between whole and part is never resolved" (225). These sober invitations for social transformation without complete secession suggest greater possibilities for utopia (if not Utopia), so I was disappointed that they remained tangential. For those seeking thoughtful critiques of insularism, fear tactics, cynicism, and performed certitude, *Archaeologies of the Future* is likely to be provocative, but they should be forewarned: Jameson says little here about how to otherwise imagine the future.

and religion in twentieth- and twenty-first-century American fictions and cultures.

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