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ENGL 4903: Science Fiction and the Value of Utopia/Dystopia
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March 19, 2017

*A reading of Jameson's Archaeologies of the Future and Du Bois' The Comet from the
perspective of Barthes' project in Empire of Signs*

In Barthes' *Empire of Signs* he attempts to "search out ... the very fissure of the symbolic" (Barthes 4). He seeks to "[subvert] earlier readings", to replace meaning with void, to "create an emptiness of language" (Barthes 4). Barthes' project is to expose how our language and other elements of Western societal structure are rigid limitations to any attempt to contest society. He contends that in order to even begin the process of critiquing, challenging or reforming society, one must first remove oneself from the structure and norms of society, particularly its language, that temper the "meaning" one thinks one understands. Understanding meaning from a frame of reference outside the one it is contesting is the only productive way to execute such a contestation. His approach to convince one of this is to compare aspects of English and other Western institutions to "features" borrowed from Japan and spun together to create a system. He is careful to clarify that he is comparing the Western system to this theoretical system and not to Japan, or the Orient as a whole and pre-existing system.

This project strikes me as very similar to Jameson's project in *Archaeologies of the Future* and Du Bois' in *The Comet*. Both texts, using their own unique approach attempt to expose the same idea: the limitations imposed on meaning by structure. Jameson evaluates the idea of Utopia as an attempt to expose "our mental and ideological imprisonment" by our own structures (Jameson XIII). Du Bois affords us an attempt to engage with a fantastical scenario in which many elements of our structure are no longer present, in order to comment on the limitations of our systems. In this essay I will compare Barthes' presentation of the Japanese-feature system, Jameson's treatment of

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Utopia and Du Bois' fictitious experiment together, and elucidate how each writer

employs their chosen device to the same end.

Though each of these three writers uses disparate devices to stake their claim, their approaches are strikingly similar. The project itself is challenging because they are attempting to replace meaning with void, rather than extol some alternative meaning. Barthes thus arranges his unique device to accomplish this: “[what] can be addressed, in the consideration of the Orient, are not other symbols ... [but] the possibility of a difference ... of a revolution in the propriety of symbolic systems, ... the author has never, in any sense photographed Japan ... rather ... Japan has afforded him a situation of writing” (Barthes 3-4). Barthes’ path to expose the limits of Western meaning is not to appeal to specific alternatives in Japanese meaning, but to show what differences in Japanese and Western meaning can show about the limitation of language. Similarly, Jameson explains the way in which Utopia is not only an alternative to capitalism like communism or socialism, but far more importantly, “[the] Utopian form is itself a representational meditation on radical difference, radical otherness, and on the systemic nature of social totality” (Jameson XII). He considers the Utopian form not as an alternative meaning but as a truly “other” form, whose otherness is comprised of its inherent ability to expose the limitations of current forms. Finally Du Bois is able to comment on societal structure by creating a fantasy in which there is none: in the New York he presents us in *The Comet*, a mystical comet hits Earth for the first time in history, almost everyone is dead, a sheet of flame outshines stars and awakes memories and a feeling of royal ancestry and so on. Du Bois certainly doesn’t present this world

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without conventional laws of the Universe as an alternative to ours, but as a device to expose what meaning our structures obfuscate.

We can appreciate a contribution to their similar overall project in each of their treatments of a central aspect of their respective devices. Barthes shows how in Japanese “the proliferation of functional suffixes ... turns the subject ... into a great envelope of empty speech, and not that dense kernel which is supposed to direct our sentences” (Barthes 7). He exhorts us to conceive of a verb that can be transitive even though it lacks a subject, and shows us how in English we cannot find an example of this. Without even being able to abstract away the subject, Barthes asks us, how can we begin to critique society in English – how can we conceive of a society that is not in aid of these very subjects without being able to talk of one without them. Though Jameson claims “no Utopian writer has been quite so forthright in confronting the great empiricist maxim, nothing in the mind that was not first in the senses”, he models his understanding of Utopia on this (Jameson XIII). “When Homer formed the *Chimera*, he only joined into one animal, parts which belonged to different animals ... On the social level this means that our imaginations are hostages to our own mode of production... It suggests that at best Utopia can serve the negative purpose of making us more aware of our mental and ideological imprisonment” (Jameson XIII). Jameson is careful to warn potential followers of a Utopian project that the very device of Utopia is useful in showing us the limits of our systems, but not forming successful alternative systems. The reason for this, Jameson echoes Barthes in declaring, is the empiricist maxim he expounds, that Utopia itself is bound by the structure that produced it. Clearly these theorists are in strong agreement

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that any critique of society that seeks to do more than expose the limitations of structure, must be from outside of that structure.

Du Bois cleverly presents the way structure tempers meaning by presenting a relationship between a man and a woman within two different systems. The climax of the story comes when the white woman in the story thinks to herself: “She was no mere woman. She was neither high nor low, white nor black, rich nor poor. She was primal woman; mighty mother of all men to come and Bride of Life. She looked upon the man beside her and forgot all else but his manhood” (Du Bois). Du Bois satirizes the grandiosity she imagines in forming a union with the black protagonist, exposing how much the structure of race consciousness that she lives with modulates her thinking. It has taken her a supernatural comet and countless death (this drastic a change in her structure) to be able to see this man’s manhood, which was always present objectively, and always present to him. Then, as soon as her father and partner are revealed to be alive he is again a “nigger” who is first suspected of taking advantage of the helpless white woman and then, only when proven innocent given money and offered a job (Du Bois). The glimpse of a different structure that Du Bois exposes us to before jolting us back to reality is incredibly effective. It shows the diverse meaning the simple presence of a black man can have depending on the frame of reference – when society is dead he is “Brother Humanity incarnate, Son of God and great All-Father of the race to be”, but as soon as society is back, he is immediately either a criminal or in need of a job (Du Bois). Du Bois’ short but poignant experiment chillingly brings to life the imprisonment of meaning by existing structure that Barthes and Jameson theorize.