

Topia Revisited

Developing and Living our Analogous Topoi in 2029

Over the last 25 years, part of mankind has begun to digitize its environment, to visualize, and to link up with one another in networks. This segment of humanity seems to be getting tangled up in this, since that's where *Homo ludens* is in his new element: he creates, invents, tests, fantasizes, implements—and, in going about this, appears to be able to forget himself like a child at play. Here, the new media's acceleration of progress seems at times like an unconsummable object of fascination—too gripping and too mysterious for one to be able to withdraw from in order to find—or perhaps to rediscover—one's "own" place.

At the same time, for pioneers of genetic engineering and other uncompromising proponents of progress, *topia* refers rather to the space of a biological system than to the artifact-and-symbol space of a communicating "culture." Thus, the terms and projections of topoi have necessarily developed and spawned such offshoots as *utopia*—*dystopia*—*depos- itopia*—*ergotopia*—*heterotopia* or even *polytopia*. What all these *topoi* have in common, though, is that they are products of processes of social synthesis formation in which we as fellow members of a "society" can also feel at home, protect one another, communally long for change, or want to get used to each other. Thus, every cultural and social space will contain various different topoi.

What seems to me to have the most explosive implications for the present, though, is the polytopia, the media-propagated multi-locationalness of individuals and thus the explosion of the effective lebensraum as well. This aggregate state of multiple locations brings forth hominid multitudes—in the best of cases, human schizos who act in small, hybrid groups. And they give rise to nuclei, the germ cells of new social topoi.

But do these first inhabitants of polytopias even have time to chat with their analog neighbors? The term MIPS (million instructions per second) is the ultimate expression of the acceleration of social time. From this concept, we have become aware—and if not from scientific studies than thanks to paying continual attention to our social surroundings—that in striving to bring about perpetual balance of "one's own individual" position and significance in today's mass-mediated construction of space-time, the sense of proportion can be overtaxed. We find out what is happening simultaneously with the occurrence of the event itself and at the same time as events taking place in all other regions of the world. The excessively high frequency of events and their synchronous, momentary and thus likewise fleeting character contribute to their not even becoming matters of fact in our consciousness.

Memesis is the synonym for this condensation of cultural and technological developmental vectors (*Ars Electronica* 1996) and *Unplugged* (*Ars Electronica* 2002) refers to the boundaries of the new cognitive islands, lines of demarcation around a *global village* that excludes anything that doesn't join in the online game. But thematicizing this very real disproportion could be tantamount to a meta-event that will remain with us over the next 25 years: the 5 per cent of mankind that disposes over access to the Internet today configures in the form of globally functioning production systems the lebensraum of approximately 80% of mankind. And it is, in turn, among this 5 per cent that new communities are forming as quasi-ethnic groups that define themselves via the classic cultural-anthropological manifestations of differentiation such as (programming) languages, (virtual) territories and expectations of salvation (analogous to a religion). Meanwhile, Google generates global folk-

lore, interfaces function as an ersatz for traditional native costumes, and *Ars Electronica* as a ceremony. A segment of this polytopia humanity—even if it makes up only five per cent—thus creates its own institutions just like it always has.

On the other hand, haven't the contents of older utopias also proven to be far more attainable than previously believed? Marvin Minsky has come closer to mankind's age-old dream of immortality at least to the extent that, during his own lifetime, he has *striven* with the help of new technologies to faithfully translate the contents and structures of his cognitive personality into cybernetic storage devices. The outsourcing of human remembrance to machines will gain importance for our social coexistence. *Depositopia*—the knowledge network as mirror and storehouse of our planetary inhabitation—has, in the last decade, (also) developed into a gigantic garbage dump for data. This innovative new resource—its memory structure, its accessibility and cultural-technical translatability—is becoming increasingly existential since it provides us with the indispensable raw material for the production and orientation processes of tomorrow: information. Can't we jointly gain access to it and find what we're after? Doesn't that amount to a mental subnormality, and one that we're aware of? And, over the long term, that makes us self-conscious and intimidates us. *Homo ludens* like *Homo oeconomicus* still has to learn to clean up his mess, learn to care for our places of habitation now for the future.

An integral part of *Depositopia* is the design aspect; after all, in an *intelligent ambience* (*Ars Electronica* 1994), surface phenomena become content. The aesthetics of topia, the design of our artificial environments, not only has a fundamentally modified perception of space and of the concept of environment as its consequences. Images and sounds of the media worlds also seem concrete and bind us emotionally. And, above all, the visualizations, simulations and the condensation of visual experiences that reach us on a daily basis necessitate a heightened interpretational competence in the encounter with these images. But visually, we're still pretty much illiterates. For much too long, the images of science were too subjective and too irrational in spite of their reproducibility (and that of their effect as well).

The body of the analog human being is inert. What will the relationship between human beings and their artificially created environments be like in 2029 and who will be the prosthesis of whom? Michel Foucault's *heterotopia* is present here in its negative inversion. The circumstances that have prevailed to date in the human-technology symbiosis bring up the question of sovereignty. Carl Schmitt, a prominent proponent of decisionism, said: "Sovereign is he who decides on the time of others." Today, it's more like: "Sovereign is he who decides on the future body of others." The structure of postmodern despotism does not halt at the boundaries of the individual body.

Paul Virilio spoke gloomily of bio-industrial colonization through transplantation and genetic engineering. He rightfully fears the loss of our being permitted to be human. The chimera was already considered a monster in Greek mythology, and nobody wishes the human being to become a remote-controlled monster. Are we now to condemn playing, experimenting and fantasizing with technologies and the joy of construction? A purely positivist attitude surely blinds us to latent destructivity. But real optimism, the optimization of ideals—Utopia—is achieved only by those who reflect and strategically secure their bastions, their topoi. Irrational emotionalism—besides analog slowness, a specifically human characteristic—is advantageous if we continue to play and test, and have learned to care for and preserve our locations, our topoi. We are responsible for topia and have to actively design our environments in the way in which we would like to live in them—not as chimeras, monster, schizos or slaves but as autonomous beings. The citizen is what is increasingly in demand, and is needed more than ever.

Therefore, I wish to conclude with two final pleadings for the care and maintenance of topoi. The first is nurturing available topoi and withdrawal possibilities with the potential for non-reactionary invariance. "Pre-technological" elements of folk cultures—i.e. traditions—are more structurally comprehensible regressions than embarrassing relics. They survive as recourses triggered by technology itself to earlier stages of cultural genetics. One typically imagines "traditional" communities as (spatially and socially) finely structured and of manageable size, but haven't they always been transparent as well? The "micro" tradition has therefore remained for "its" people a ubiquitous public resource that is not enwrapped by any monopolization and thus offers a free public sphere for activities. The successful nurturing of the symbolic structure of tradition offers emotional satisfaction and a feeling of security. As a space, it allows for openness to matters of public concern in that it also favors all-embracing solidarity, *fraternité*.

The second is actively nurturing the revitalization of the role of citizens as adversaries of the sovereign, as those who strengthen the "contradiction in the system itself" and thereby win back—rediscover—the public sphere.

Translated from the German by Mel Greenwald

Nadja Maurer ■■■■■■■■■■

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Kann Humanitas auch digital sein?

In den letzten 25 Jahren hat ein Teil der Menschheit damit begonnen, seine Umwelt zu digitalisieren, zu visualisieren und sich zu vernetzen. Dieser Teil der Menschheit scheint sich darin zu verfangen, denn dort ist der *Homo ludens* in seinem neuen Element: Er schöpft, erfindet, testet, fantasiert, verwirklicht—und scheint sich dabei vergessen zu können wie ein spielendes Kind. Hier erscheint die Fortschrittsbeschleunigung der neuen Medien zuweilen als unab-schließbares Faszinosum, zu fesselnd und zu geheimnisvoll, als dass man zurücktreten könnte und den „eigenen“ Ort zu finden – wieder zu finden vielleicht.

Gleichzeitig bezeichnet *Topia* für Pioniere der Gentechnologie, für kompromisslose Verfechter des Fortschritts eher das biologische Raumsystem als den Artefakt- und Symbolraum einer kommunizierenden „Kultur“. So haben sich die Begriffe und Projektionen von *Topoi* notwendig aufgefächert, etwa in *Utopia* – *Dystopia* – *Depositopia* – *Ergotopia* – *Heterotopia* oder auch *Polytopia*. Allen *Topoi* ist jedoch gemeinsam, dass sie Produkte sozialer Synthesebildungen darstellen, in denen wir uns als Mitspieler einer „Gesellschaft“ auch zuhause fühlen, uns gegenseitig beschützen, uns gemeinsam nach Veränderung sehnen oder uns aneinander gewöhnen wollen. Jeder kulturelle und soziale Raum wird also verschiedene *Topoi* beinhalten.

Für die Gegenwart besonders brisant erscheint mir jedoch *Polytopia*, die mediengestützte Vielortigkeit Einzelner und damit auch die Explosion des effektiven Lebensraumes. Dieser Aggregatzustand der vielen Orte bringt hominide Multituden hervor, im besten Falle humane Schizos, die in hybriden Kleingruppen agieren. Und durch sie entstehen Nuclei, die Keimzellen neuartiger sozialer *Topoi*.

Doch haben diese ersten Bewohner Polytopiens noch Zeit, mit ihren analogen Nachbarn zu tratschen? Der Terminus MIPS (Million Instructions per Second) bringt wie kaum ein ande-