

going we cannot bring any sort of order to what we do and when we do it. In other words: without direction it is easy to get lost. Utopia gives us a direction – it orients our compass. No matter where we are, no matter what we are doing, we can look to that point on our horizon, see the different paths available, and redirect ourselves. We need points on the horizon that keep us aimed in the right direction.

The importance of having a loadstone to orient direction was brought home to us recently by Occupy Wall Street (OWS) in New York City. One of the many great innovations of OWS was the refusal to have a set list of demands. This allowed for many people with many different interests – some of them conflicting – to shape the movement and feel that it was theirs. But the downside was a lack of unified direction, and this left OWS open to being pulled this way and that. As the police became more aggressive, the focus became battling the police; as homeless people took up residence, time and money was spent servicing their needs. And the continual pressure by authorities to vacate the park meant that the objective of OWS became focused on merely continuing the occupation in one location. In a word, OWS became *reactive* instead of *proactive*. The irony, or perhaps tragedy, is that OWS always had a goal, which was complex and multi-layered: it was a vision of a world based on reciprocity and respect rather than money and greed. But without that Utopia, consistently and constantly projected onto the horizon, OWS lost its way.

Utopia, as a point on the horizon, also provides a way to measure and check our progress. Just as mile markers only make sense in terms of distance to an end destination, we need a final goal in all our work in order to know if we are moving forward, sideways or back. Does doing Y get us closer to X? We can only know if we have an X coordinate to check against. That said, Utopia is a tricky X coordinate as it is constantly receding. Yes, we will never reach Utopia, but with it to guide us we at least have a better sense if we are walking in the right direction.

### **MOTIVATE: UTOPIA MOVES US... AND OTHERS**

Think back for a moment to the opening exercise in this chapter and your ultimate win. Most likely that win is worth getting up for in the morning; maybe it is *why* you get up in the morning. Whether you are fully conscious of it or not, that ideal is likely what motivates you to step off the curb of indifference, take the risks you do, and do the drudge-work that has to get done. Utopia is that Big Win.

Changing the world is very, very hard work. As artistic activists we dive headlong into the ugliness of the world that most people try to escape. We are up against the most powerful forces on the planet. We lose more battles than we win. And the struggle is a long one. To do this work day in and day out we need motivation. We need to constantly remember why we are doing what we are doing. We need, in the words of the old Civil Rights song, to 'Keep Our Eyes on the Prize'. Bugged down in the immediacies of life we often forget this. When we concentrate on immediate objectives and ignore our ultimate goals we are practically guaranteed to wake up one day with a full-blown crisis, screaming out: What is it all for? Utopia is a way to remind ourselves what it is all for.

And, not just us. We cannot change the world alone, we need others, and they will join us – but only if they, too, are inspired by the dream we are

working, and walking, towards. We need to make sure that in every piece we create there is a kernel of our Utopia. Not only will this glimpse of Utopia inspire people, but it ties together the multitude of tactics, actions and pieces we are creating that can otherwise seem random and unconnected. Utopia is the thread. And others can follow it along with us.

For artistic activists, Utopia is indispensable. It is a destination that inspires, critiques, generates, directs and motivates, and one we will never, ever, get to. But it keeps us moving forward. Utopia is good for walking.

### **Lesson 5: Dystopia, or why we love The Poseidon Adventure**

Utopia has an evil twin: Dystopia. Both are visions of an alternative world, but the types of worlds imagined are radically different. If Utopia is a dream where everything goes right, dystopia is a nightmare where everything goes horribly wrong. Utopia is a place we long to visit; dystopia is a place from which we want to flee. They are both powerful tools for artistic activism.

Dystopian scenarios have been used for millennia to motivate, and pacify. Take the Bible as an example. For every scene of heavenly promise, where the lion lays down with the lamb, there is an opposing picture of hell, with fiery lakes of burning sulphur. People are inspired by images of what they desire, but they are also motivated by illustrations of what they fear. Perhaps, more so.

Because of this, artistic activists employ dystopian imaginings in their work as frequently, if not more frequently, than Utopian visions. This is particularly true for artists and activists concerned with the environment. Ecologists are faced with the challenge of making urgent and visible a set of problems that are slow, cumulative and largely invisible... until it is too late. Dystopian scenarios give environmental degradation a tangible presence; they make the invisible horror visible.

And, odd as it seems, people love dystopias. They are a staple of mass media and no summer is complete without several blockbuster movies that envision our world invaded by aliens, destroyed by nuclear weapons, controlled by computers, overwhelmed with natural disasters, or dominated by the hyper-rich. Classic dystopian books like Orwell's *1984*, Huxley's *Brave New World* and Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* are taught in grade schools around the world, and new dystopian novels like Suzanne Collins' *Hunger Games* series are best sellers. Dystopia is *popular* culture. All the more reason to use dystopias in our work, right?

Maybe not. While both utopia and dystopia conjure up visions of an alternative world, they do not work the same way. Utopia is an image of a world we would like to inhabit. It draws us into the future and says to us: this can be yours if we move forward. It is progressive. Dystopia, however, pushes us away from the future by showing us a world in which we would never want to live. Dystopia tells us to move back, back to the present to change the course of history that might lead us to this horrible place. As such, the response to Dystopia is profoundly *conservative*. In some instances, this conservative impulse may be a good one; the conservation of our environment, for example. Dystopias say to us: we need to stop whatever it is we are doing in the present so we do not bring on the apocalypse.

And... then what? What do we do after we have stopped whatever it is we want stopped? Where do we go from there? We do not know, because unlike Utopias, dystopias have not shown us a vision of a better world: there is no

model to inspire us and build upon. Nor have we been given any sort of hope that a better world might be possible. In other words, dystopian futures do not give us the space or the impetus to imagine a world better than the one we live in today. This one-sided presentation leaves people without a sense of agency.

So why are dystopias so popular? Perversely, we seem to take comfort in contemplating our own destruction. We enjoy watching or reading about how messed up things could get. When artists and activists use their talents to create images of our disastrous future, they are doing so with a sincere intent to instigate some sort of social change. They mean well. But we suspect what they really inspire is a perverse and solitary satisfaction in hopelessness: *Disasterbation*.

Dystopias can act as early warnings of the problems that beset us and dystopias are very effective at dramatizing problems and their dire consequences, but when we use dystopias uncritically in our work we fall into the oldest trap set for activists and artists, assuming that people are not active because they just do not know about or understand the problem. But most people, in some way or another, do. The problem is that people cannot imagine solutions, or how to they can possibly bring those solutions about. Showing harsh reality – past, present and possible future – is important, but it needs to be folded into a larger inspiring vision. As the Marxist literary critic Raymond Williams once wrote, ‘To be truly radical is to make hope possible, rather than despair convincing’.

### **Lesson 6: Dreampolitik**

Martin Luther King Jr began his famous ‘I Have a Dream’ speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in 1963 by laying out the many problems Black Americans faced. 100 years after emancipation, he told the crowd, the Negro is still not free: they are poor and denied the vote, the use of public facilities, and the basic freedoms guaranteed to all citizens by the Constitution of the United States. They are a people ‘in exile in their own land’. ‘So’, he said to his audience, ‘we’ve come here to dramatize a shameful condition’.

For a world that neither knew or cared about the plight of Black Americans, this revelation of the injustices of segregation and discrimination was critical: a dystopic vision of an America that did not live up to its promises or potential. It was a strategy the Civil Rights movement had employed for years, stretching back to the slave narratives written before the Civil War. But King did not stop with the problems. As important as it was to chronicle the horrors Blacks faced every day in the United States, what was crucial for winning converts and mobilizing allies was creating a vision of an alternative, a dream.

In his speech that hot August day, King went on to paint a vivid picture of this promised land: a world where the children of former slaves and slave owners sit at the table of brotherhood, and where his own children will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character. Drawing his audience in, his dream got dreamier: the state of Mississippi, now ‘sweltering with the heat of injustice, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice’. The land itself takes new form: ‘every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be laid low. The rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight’. King concluded by prophesying the future: ‘one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all

men are created equal”’. It was a dream that cleverly appropriated the popular culture of the Bible and the founding documents of the United States; it was a dream familiar to his religious base and the American public. But above all, it was a dream of Utopia.

King is widely remembered for this dream, but he was not some naïve dreamer. He was a realist. He, and the movement which spawned and sustained him, had a sophisticated understanding of how social change happens. The Civil Rights movement never stopped working on the problems they faced. They identified and visualized, dramatized and publicized the horrific reality of white supremacy in the United States. Lawyers filed cases to overturn racist laws, and activists pressured politicians to write new ones that would ensure civil rights for all citizens. But King and the other activists of the Civil Rights movement understood that revealing and resolving problems is not enough to build a movement. In order to organize and orient a campaign, inspire and motivate people, to get them off the curb and keep them walking, you need a dream on the horizon. They kept their eyes on the prize; Utopia.

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