

Project Text: New Utopias

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New Utopias is a lecture filmed in the style of a 1950s Walt Disney documentary. Starting in 1955, Disney produced a series of light documentaries that combined animated sequences with appearances by leading authorities in the sciences. *Our Friend the Atom* promoted nuclear science, and *Man in Space* explained the latest rocket technology. Now we know that Disney was an early informer for Senator Joe McCarthy's anticommunist Hollywood purge. But in the 1950s his on-screen character, the self-assured science dork, represented the friendly face of western cold-war propaganda.

But McCarthy and the cold war were not the whole story of the US in the 1950s. For the past five years I've been researching the great public works of postwar USA: public schools, housing, cultural complexes, and embassies. These works were carried out in a period of unspoken collective consensus that I like to describe as the New Deal's postwar hangover. F.D. Roosevelt's public infrastructure programs of the 1930s and 40s introduced a new public spirit with so much momentum that it lingered for decades. This collective belief in social progress left traces in society that were still perceptible in the 1970s. The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 was a sign that Roosevelt's utopian wave had finally dissipated.

It is this period I examine in *New Utopias*. I study the popular culture of the late 1960s and 1970s to assemble some of the more far-flung examples of utopian thinking from the decade preceding Reagan's election. And I feature a narrator reminiscent of the 1950s Walt Disney figure. He presents my research in an environment that upholds the production standards of the cold war technological propaganda pioneered by Disney. But where the 1950s original celebrated rockets and nuclear technology, my updated version of the Disney documentary promotes aesthetic frivolity, sexual perversion and UFO abduction fantasies.

Among the new utopias under analysis are Parliament/Funkadelic's legendary *Mothership Connection* tour in which George Clinton proposes to improve the world by bringing us The Funk from outer space; the *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, in which we observe a society that promotes

uninhibited sexual behavior, even incest; and the world of Jacques Demy's *Les Demoiselles de Rochefort*, an aesthetic utopia made up of beautiful artists who are perpetually falling in love.

I have cast myself in the role of a Walt Disney-like narrator in *New Utopias*. Speaking through this character I am able to communicate my own ideas on the importance of utopian thinking. I often read the word "utopia" in artists' and curators' statements. The term most often employed is "failed utopia," used to describe dysfunctional post-war public projects. The term "modernism's failed utopias" is often used in the criticism of works of modern architecture and urbanism that have fallen short of our expectations. While I agree with much of this criticism I feel a need to extricate and defend the word "utopia".

Utopias are ideal but unattainable societies. Which means that all attempts to achieve utopia are doomed to failure. I think it's redundant to focus on failure when all utopias are failed utopias. My video work *New Utopias* is illustrated with an outrageous and unlikely collection of social proposals (respectable citizens will be happy to see these utopias fail.) The absurdity of my selection shows the absurdity of focusing on the specific content of these proposals. While we have fun watching the video we might perceive something deeper underlying the project. This is the spirit at the root of utopian thinking. It is a spirit I worry we may have lost in society: the spirit of imagination and optimism.