

Two Technological Dystopias: *Le Monde tel qu'il sera* and *Alpha Ralpa Boulevard*

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to compare two technological dystopias: Emile Souvestre's *Le Monde tel qu'il sera* (1846) and Cordwainer Smith's "Alpha Ralpa Boulevard" (1961). Both texts present dystopian societies experienced by many of its inhabitants as being the best of possible worlds. The above authors question the massive use of technology, worry about what technology can do to human beings, how it can dehumanize them. They reveal serious social and moral concerns regarding the less privileged. These are excluded from the benefits of "Utopia" while making it possible. Both authors are child of their time: they live in a period of national pride, they can see the shadows behind the luminous, the dangers resulting from human beings playing God with nature and humanity. Also, they are innovators: Souvestre announces dystopian science fiction and Smith renews with the genre announcing the New Wave movement in Anglo-American science fiction.

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Introduction

Everything has already begun before; the first line of the first page of every novel refers to something that has already happened outside the book. (Calvino 1979, 153)

One man's utopia is another man's – particularly a disillusioned man's – nightmare. (Elliott 1970, 87)

Traditional Utopia, having its roots embedded in myth, is a promise of a better/different reality. It carries an underlying statement about the probability of a better life. However, promises can be broken and probability might have a high degree of failure. Dystopia, Utopia's dark twin, tends to counterbalance the excess of optimism, of irrational faith.

The two utopias that will be compared in this paper are both warnings against the blind faith in technology and its promised paradise. They both show Utopias that are real Infernos, built by humans, at the expense of their freedom, their happiness, and their humanity. As all other Utopias, these are branded by the historical moment in which they were conceived and they present a similar diagnostic and different solutions for the same problem: social and political perfection is a promise, a goal one should dream about but never try to accomplish at the risk of finding hell.

1. *Le monde tel qu'il sera*: the birth of technological dystopia

Souvestre's novel, *Le Monde tel qu'il sera*, was published serialized during 1846. It is the first major technological dystopia. Although being Souvestre's only excursion in the *roman de l'avenir*, it becomes "the model for every thing that will be written in the genre during the 19th and even the 20th centuries" (Versins 1972, 824). Souvestre wrote his technological dystopia in a century well-known by faith in the "unlimited progress of humankind" (Souvestre 1859, 3-4), sustained by the positivist philosophy. Several utopian systems defended a rational social, economic, and political organization, like the ones presented by Owen's, Saint-Simon's, Fourier's, etc. Everything was sustained by an apparently unshakable faith in science and technology financed by an ambitious bourgeoisie. Souvestre's novel, in spite of all its weaknesses, sounds sometimes prophetic and, as several critics have noticed, it anticipates Wells, Huxley or Orwell among other dystopia writers.

Since his arrival in Paris – to complete his law studies, in 1826 – Souvestre had been in close contact with the followers of Saint-Simon. Motivated by his social concerns, the young Souvestre finds similar interests in the Saint-Simon circles. Defending that art should be useful (Plötner-Le Lay 2006, 29), Souvestre engages on activities aiming at the education of women as well as the working classes. By 1845, his political opinions had evolved. Without ever denying his republicanism, Souvestre gets further away from the social utopianism of Saint-Simon and Fourier, embracing

definitely a Christian social and moral philosophy (Plötner-Le Lay 2006, 31). This can be easily observed in his *Un philosophe sous les toits - journal d'un homme heureux*, a work acclaimed by the French Academy in 1851. This book made its fortune outside France, namely in the United Kingdom where, by 1853, it had an English translation.

In spite of the considerable fame that Souvestre's name acquired outside France, *Le monde tel qu'il sera* has a short publishing history: three French editions in the 19th century and another only in 2002, a Portuguese adaptation in 1859 (reissued in a revised edition in 2006) and a Spanish translation printed in Lima in 1863. The English edition was first published in 2004.

Every Utopia is deeply rooted in the reality; it aims to replace by a better one, since Utopias are critical exegeses of a given society, set in time and space. The present is always at the background of the imagined social order. And this is also true in what concerns dystopia, being its reverse. In France, the first half of the 19th century is a period of political and social unsteadiness. The Second Restoration, the failures of July's Monarchy and the Second Republic had vast consequences that went beyond the political sphere, affecting the whole society. By the time Souvestre was writing *Le monde tel qu'il sera*, France was facing a violent social and economic crisis: famine, unemployment. Lack of social protection drove many people to despair; the industrialists cut their losses by closing factories, ignoring the social consequences.

This is the scenario Souvestre keeps in mind. While writing a technological dystopia set in the year 3000, he is much more concerned with the present reality than the future perspectives. Through satire and the frequent use of the burlesque, Souvestre draws a violent criticism on industrialization focusing on several aspects – pollution, subordination of political decision to group interests, the absence of social concerns in the liberal policy, the lack of education and moral standards that lead to enslavement of the working classes, the short-sightedness of the political structures.

The main characters, Maurice and Marthe, visit this supposed Utopia during three days. They are the voice of reason tempered with a deep humanism and solidarity. Transported to the future by means of a cataleptic sleep, they discover an unjust society where rich and poor are being deprived of their humanity for the sake of profit. Theirs is the voice of common sense and thoughtfulness.

In *Le monde tel qu'il sera* the political structures are perfect because they are inexistent and/or ineffective:

...le temps a éclairé les hommes; nous avons perfectionné le patriotisme, et nous l'avons rendu plus facile. [...] Notre constitution a été si heureusement combinée que les devoirs du citoyen se sont trouvés réduits à l'obligation de rechercher en tout son propre avantage. [...] Aussi, le système politique des Intérêts-Unis répond-il à tous les besoins de l'homme vraiment civilisé. [...] En tête [du système politique] on trouve le président de la République ou l'impeccable, ainsi nommé parce qu'il ne peut mal faire, et qui ne peut mal

faire parce qu'il ne fait rien. L'impeccable n'est, en effet, ni un homme, ni une femme, ni un enfant, mais ce que nous appelons une fiction gouvernementale: il se compose d'un fauteuil vide sous un baldaquin ! Ce fauteuil est le chef légitime du gouvernement. [...] Quand le chef de l'État vieillit, on appelle un tapissier pour le remettre à neuf, et une douzaines de clous suffisent pour restaurer l'ordre de choses. [...] Nous ne pouvons craindre ni coups d'État, ni usurpations, un fauteuil étant forcément condamné au *statu quo*. Enfin, comme il ne peut rien exécuter, nous lui avons abandonné avec confiance le pouvoir exécutif. (Souvestre 1859, 282-283)

Governed by the *fauteuil*, the rich only have to pursue the task of getting richer at all costs, and the poor the task of surviving. All of them living in isolation:

Le progrès doit avoir pour but de tout simplifier, de faire que chacun vive pour soi et avec soi; c'est à quoi nous sommes arrivés. [...] Encore quelques efforts, et la civilisation aura conquis à l'homme l'isolement, c'est-à-dire la liberté, car chacun pourra se passer complètement des services de son semblable. (Souvestre 1859, 51)

This is achieved through a thorough process of mental conditioning that starts at birth and ends only with death. The rules of the perfected society are imposed from the beginning. The newborn are numbered, removed from their mothers and feed artificially by machines, depleted of any human contact, and in agreement with their social condition. The richer receive a larger portion, the poor have only a ninth so that they get prepared for life in society (Souvestre 1859, 76-77). Those who survive the artificial food, and descend from rich parents, have their skulls examined to determine their innate abilities, avoiding uncertainty in vocation and cutting down the costs of education.

The violent social criticism is, in Souvestre, always tempered with the burlesque and the ridicule that characterizes the upper classes, their "conquests" and their inability to see beyond profit. They live in a fantasy world at the expenses of the workers and the destitute. Their justice, as their government, is a sour joke that punishes mercilessly minor faults. It transforms the convicted in zombies, human beings destituted of any self-awareness or will. On the other hand, the violent criminals live in luxury (Souvestre 1856, 127-130, 135-137); the educational system is totally useless and inadequate; information is controlled and praised by its ineffectiveness; literature became a futile, random and automatic reorganization of ancient texts:

Il y avait d'abord la machine historique, dans laquelle on jetait des chroniques, des biographies, des mémoires, et d'ou sortaient des romans dans le genre de ceux de Walter Scott;

La machine à *variétés*, que l'on bourrait d'*anas*, de légendes, d'almanachs, et qui produisait des voyages comme celui de Sterne;

La machine des *fantaisies*, qui recevait les anciens poètes, les vieux romans, les drames oubliés, et d'ont on obtenait des nouvelles comparables à celles de Bernardin de Saint-Pierre et de l'abbé Prévost. (Souvestre 1856, 207)

This future society, with no creativity, because there are no feelings and no dreams, controls and conditions its workers from birth to death, as if he/she were domestic animals:

...le travailleur reste sous notre tutelle, bien logé, bien nourri, bien vêtu, forcé d'être sage, et recevant le bonheur tout fait. Non-seulement nous régions ses actions, mais nous arrangeons son avenir, nous l'approprions de longue main à ce qu'il doit faire. Les Anglais avaient autrefois perfectionné les animaux domestiques, dans le sens de leur destination; nous avons appliqué ce système à la race humaine, en la perfectionnant. (Souvestre 1856, 146)

Souvestre develops the theme of mind conditioning, which is applied with different objectives to all classes. He also describes an incipient method of eugenics or even genetic manipulation that produces giant vegetables and fruits (Souvestre 1856, 171) but, most important of all, the *métis industriels* that are proudly presented to the visitors:

Des croisements bien entendus nous ont produit une race de forgerons dont la force s'est concentrée dans les bras, une race de porteurs qui n'ont de développés que leurs reins, une race de coureurs auxquels les jambes seules ont grandi, une race de crieurs publics uniquement formés de bouche et de poumons; vous pouvez voir dans ces loges des échantillons de ces différentes espèces de prolétaires, auxquels nous avons donné le nom de *métis industriels*. (Souvestre 1856, 146)

One must keep in mind that Souvestre is writing in 1846, more than a decade before Charles Darwin presented his *Origin of the Species*, or Francis Galton coined the term "eugenics" and demonstrated his theory in *Inquiries into Human Faculty and its Development*, and also before Gregor Mendel, the father of modern genetics, published his *Versuche über Pflanzen-Hybriden*. Many of Souvestre's technological inventions are mere gadgets that owe their creation more to fantasy than scientific extrapolation, as one expects in science fiction. For instance, flying becomes the most natural way for a promenade:

On voyait les fiacres volants, les omnibus-ballons, les tilburys ailés, courir et se croiser dans tous les sens; l'éther, enfin conquis, était devenu un nouveau champ pour l'activité humaine. Ici, des débardeurs aéronautes dépeçaient les nuages pour en extraire la pluie ou l'électricité; là, des chiffonniers aériens glanaient les épaves égarés dans l'espace; [...] tandis qu'à leur côté quelque honnête bourgeois, abrité par deux nuées, essayait de prendre à la ligne les oiseaux de passage. (Souvestre 1858, 68)

However, some of these devices announced present technologies: subways, submarines, synthetic materials, telephone, air conditioning; or themes that would latter become popular in science fiction narratives as time machines.

It is obvious that such gadgets are part of Souvestre's critical judgement of the industrial bourgeois: fat, stupid and dangerously powerful, but when it comes to the consequences of technology on human beings, Souvestre

treats the matter seriously. The gadgets pass mostly without criticism by Maurice or Marthe, but when the result is human degradation, the visitors do not let it go unnoticed using either their souvenirs of traditional stories or past events, or open remarks (only two examples: Souvestre 1856, 91-94; or 142-145).

The three days Maurice and Marthe visit the world in the year 3000 lead them to a conclusion: the future promised by industrialization and technology will enslave humanity in a vortex of spiritual degradation.

Tous deux pleuraient sur ce monde où l'homme était devenu l'esclave de la machine, l'intérêt le remplaçant de l'amour. (Souvestre 1856, 311)

Hesiod, in Antiquity, observing the last generation of humankind exclaimed he preferred that he “were not among the men of the fifth generation, but either had died before or been born afterwards” (Hesiod 1914, 174-175) because “Aidos and Nemesis, with their sweet forms wrapped in white robes, will go from the wide-pathed earth and forsake mankind to join the company of the deathless gods: and bitter sorrows will be left for mortal men, and there will be no help against evil” (Hesiod 1914, 200).

It is possible that Souvestre had these lines in mind when imagined Maurice's moan:

Nous avons déjà vainement cherché dans ce monde perfectionné l'amour et la poésie; mais restait la foi, qui console de tout... [...] Hélas! Elle aussi s'est envolée. (Souvestre 1856, 309)

The perfected world has no salvation. Souvestre writes in a period when Utopias were conceived as definite plans, “organisms” not subjected to change. Being a man of faith, Souvestre finds a solution most of his successors can follow. Maurice and Marthe share both a last vision, thus becoming the witnesses of a future Apocalypse:

... les trois anges de la colère s'étaient précipités vers la terre, où tout était devenu ruine et confusion [...] les portiques croulant, les fleuves débordés, les incendies roulant en vagues de flammes... (Souvestre 1856, 312)

In the midst of the divine holocaust, the two 19th century visitors, the new Deucalion and Pyrrha of the future, hear the announcement of a rebirth for the just:

Paix aux hommes de bonne volonté. C'est par eux que l'humanité renaîtra et que le monde sortira de ses ruines. (Souvestre 1856, 312).

Souvestre opened the way to future dystopias, but while travelling this new route, most of his followers could not keep the unshakable faith in Divine Providence. Apparently, once again, when this Pandora's box was opened, all imaginable nightmares got loose leaving in the box only hope (or faith). During the second half of the 19th century and most of the 20th century, Wells, E. M. Forster, Orwell, Huxley or Bradbury, among many others, were “overwhelmed by what seemed to them the invincible folly and

stupidity of mankind” (Kumar 1991, 91) convinced that “the realization of utopia was bringing in a world of unprecedented servility and sterility, a world where old forms of tyranny were returning in the new guise of mass democratic politics and benevolent state planning” (Kumar 1991, 93), and what seemed worst, producing people incapable of remonstrance (Trousson 2000, 183).

2. “Alpha Ralpa Boulevard”; the dystopian perfection

As Trousson points out, “despite [the] “historical pessimism strengthened by the painful experiences of a troubled [20th] century, hope was still alive and positive utopia reappeared” (Trousson 2000, 185). In the recent history of Utopia, and its negative twin Dystopia, several important changes occurred in this literary genre.

In the name of a very near and threatening future, utopia warned and recalled people to reason rejecting the myth of indefinite progress and extreme industrialization that Nodier and Souvestre had denounced. (Trousson 2000, 185)

The 20th century stroked a deadly blow to the naïve imagination that branded many Utopias in the past. It is confirmed that utopian thought and imagination does no longer have the strength it revealed during the 19th century, when it clearly benefited from the association with the novel. However, it did not entirely vanish under the weight of dystopia. From the beginning of the 20th century, the alliance with science fiction made the survival possible at the expense of several transformations. Vita Fortunati summarized some of the adjustments changes that took place in the last decades of the 20th century:

Utopia [...] is no longer static and is no longer a system that has been planned one time for all, but it is a Utopia as a continuous battle to achieve a better world. (Fortunati 2000, 642)

The radical change from a static world to a world in progress was made possible, among other factors, by the transformation of science fiction in the 60's. Ending an era of faith in science and technology, science fiction in the 60's is characterized by literary experimentation and by a growing interest in human sciences, such as psychology, and sociology. These new themes introduced in science fiction's canon were accompanied by a lack of faith in human intelligence, in the human ability to achieve perfection, and a lesser concern for the scientific accuracy of its extrapolation. These alterations made possible the creation of “ambiguous utopias” such as Cordwainer Smith's “Alpha Ralpa Boulevard”.

Cordwainer Smith – science fiction pen-name for Paul Myron Anthony Linebarger (1913-1966) – is the author of more than two dozen short science fiction stories and one novel, all published in the period of

fifteen years. Cordwainer's narratives are to be read as "legendary cycles of the future" (Burns 1975, 9) spanning from 1945 to the year 18520 (Lewis 2000, 11-15). It is a long-term project united by some common concerns, such as human condition (Hellekson 2001, 104) and transcendence.

Linebarger was extremely well read and apart from English, he could read French, German and Chinese. Due to a lonely childhood and adolescence, consequence of the constant moving from one country to another due to the imperatives of his father's profession, Linebarger spent much of his time reading. Consequently, in Linebarger's narrative production one finds the deliberate, and sometimes acknowledged, use of several literary works. Just a few examples: the short story "Drunkboat" is a retelling of Arthur Rimbaud "Le bateau ivre"; "Mother Hitton's Littul Kittons" is based on Ali Baba and the forty thieves; the novel *Norstrilia* borrows, according to Alan Elms, from the Chinese masterpiece *The Journey to the West* while *Quest of the Three Kingdoms*, another Chinese classic, was used for the stories "On the Gem Planet", "On the Storm Planet" and "On the Sand Planet", published in 1966 in a single volume entitled *Quest of the Three Worlds* (Smith 1994, X).

In my opinion, "Alpha Ralpha Boulevard", published in 1961, is particularly interesting not only because Cordwainer uses several intertexts, as we shall see further, but it is also a short story that unites two of Smith's fundamental concerns mentioned above: human condition and the ability for transcendence. "Alpha Ralpha Boulevard", a short story only twenty-five pages long, is also an open or "ambiguous" utopia of rare quality that makes Ursula Le Guin classify it as unique.

Announcing New Wave science fiction, "Alpha Ralpha Boulevard" has most of the new ingredients that would mark the genre. For instance, there is the literary experimentation that transforms the traditional role of the characters in Utopias. These usually are mere observers, as happens in *Le monde tel qu'il sera*, but in "Alpha Ralpha Boulevard" the story is narrated by the main character, who constantly reformulates his expectations. The characters have psychological depth, and there are evident concerns with sociological analysis, doubts concerning human intelligence, and what lacks in most 20th century narratives, a faith in the ability for transcendence. This links directly Smith's Utopia/Dystopia to Souvestre's, but there are other similitudes.

As in *Le monde tel qu'il sera*, "Alpha Ralpha Boulevard" opens in the perfected future. Through a long period of evolution, human beings achieved Utopia by the 141st century. However, two millennia later, perfection is destroying humanity because "happiness can kill people as softly as shadows seen in dreams" (Smith 1994, 290). The world government, called the Instrumentality of Man, had sworn to preserve humanity pure and happy, taking advantage of all the benefits of space colonialism, technology and science. After two millennia of perfection, they are forced to admit that they were wrong, that perfection does not fit human nature.

We are sworn to uphold the dignity of man. Yet we are killing mankind with a bland hopeless happiness which has prohibited news, which has suppressed religion, which has made all history an official secret. I say that the evidence is that we are failing and that mankind, whom we've sworn to cherish, is failing too. Failing in vitality, strength, numbers, energy. (Smith 1994, 290)

The state of perpetual bliss that humankind, the “true human”, achieved was obtained at the cost of genetic experiments with animals and technological evolution that created both the Underpeople or “homunculi” and robots. The Underpeople, as the workers in *Le monde tel qu'il sera*, had no social or political relevance, had a short lifespan – contrasting with the 400 years allotted to true humans –, had to work hard to earn their living, were severely punished if they broke the rules or regulations and lived underground. There, away from the true Humans, they developed a traditional society: they had their own religion, amusements and economy. Without them Utopia would have been impossible.

The beginning of “Alpha Ralpa Boulevard” is the end of Utopia. The Instrumentality had decided to initiate the “Rediscovery of Man” “reconstructing the old cultures, the old languages, and even the old troubles.” (Smith 1961: 375), reintroducing diseases, natural disasters, etc.

In *Le monde tel qu'il sera* the bibliophile announced that it was possible to reconstruct past cultures:

On l'a dit bien des fois, Messieurs, tant qu'il reste des traces de la littérature et des arts d'une nation, cette nation n'est pas morte; l'étude peut la reconstituer, la faire revivre comme les créations antédiluviennes devinées par les inductions de la science.
La littérature et les arts ne sont-ils point, en effet, le reflet fidèle des mœurs d'une époque?

The Instrumentality searched in the memory banks of the main computer and decided to recreate the old cultures based on literary texts, history books and press clippings. They start the experience with the French culture. The two main characters in “Alpha Ralpa Boulevard”, Paul and Virginia, were the first to be reborn: they went to the hospital and came out with new names, new identities, new private histories and new memories: “I myself went into a hospital and came out French. Of course, I remembered my early life; I remembered it, but it did not matter” (Smith, 1961: 375). Unknowingly, they were the recreation of the two main characters of Bernardin de Saint-Pierre famous novel. However, they were also the new Adam and the new Eve. In fact, there are two major intertexts in “Alpha Ralpa Boulevard”: *Paul et Virginie* and the *Bible*, or more precisely, the story of the Fall.

Their task is to learn to live without the constant protection of the Instrumentality. Food no longer is available in each lamp post (Souvestre's automatic spoons and bottles were substituted by another fantasy), violent hurricanes are no longer avoided. Paul and Virginia have to rediscover their humanity. They have to learn to ask questions, to doubt their senses, to confront

authority. In this process of learning Paul and Virginia are tempted with receiving the ultimate knowledge: they travel the old and obsolete Alpha Ralpa Boulevard to find out if their love is real or a mere implant the Instrumentality integrated in their personalities. This quest will end in tragedy, as it happens in the 18th century novel. But Virginia's death is not the end of the story, only a mere episode in an ongoing Utopia of undetermined end. In the process of recovering his humanity, Paul discovers the power of hate; he also finds out that human beings are capable of killing for pleasure and that they act irrationally, driven by prejudices, and that has tragic consequences. The last words of the homunculus C'mell explains why the search for Utopia has no end:

All of us have been worried about what true people would do to us when you were free. We found out. Some of you are bad and kill other kinds of life. Others of you are good and protect life. (Smith 1991, 398)

Smith, as Souvestre, was a Christian. Both believed in God and in the ability for transcendence. But Smith can no longer depend on God to solve human problems, and being an expert in psychological war, he has a clear picture of the human psyche. He believes human kind has to learn to balance their diverging inclinations. In his Utopia, Smith develops several themes that we can find in *Le monde tel qu'il sera*. I cannot prove that he read Souvestre's novel. Being a compulsive reader, having lived in France for some time, being able to understand and speak French, this is a possibility I cannot discard. The idea of reconstructing a culture based on the investigation of literature and other cultural artefacts is present in both utopias, as there are the automatic processes to feed people. And similarities go even further. Information travels through every house in the year 3000 and in Paul's lodgings information selected by the Instrumentality was available 24 hours a day in the "eye-machine" (Smith 1991, 375). In the year 3000, there is an underground hidden world that sustains the living at the surface.

Le jeune homme entendait bruire sous ses pieds les voix des travailleurs mêlées au grondement du vent, au clapotement des cloaques, aux grincements des outils et aux lueurs des flammes. C'était comme une seconde cité souterraine, où s'élaborait la vie de la cité éclairée par le soleil, un organe caché qui, tour à tour, lui apportait la force et la délivrait de ses impuretés. (Souvestre 1856, 303)

In Paul's paradise there is also an underground world inhabited by the Underpeople, filled with all the robots and machines that sustained the solar Utopia. The expressions of agony and uncertainty (Souvestre 1856, 303) are still present in the Underpeople. M. Atout defended that progress should make every thing easier so that everyone lived for himself and by himself (Souvestre 1856, 50) and that is exactly how people subsist in the beginning of "Alpha Ralpa Boulevard". In the year 3000 there is no mothering and death is a solitary act, while in Paul's world there are no children – people are "born" adult – and death is just falling into a deep sleep at the appointed time. In both worlds there are no more countries, and no more unknown places to explore. Probably they all share the same features:

A force de regarder le monde comme une grande route, chacun avait perdu le sentiment de nationalité; on n'avait plus de ville, plus de foyer, donc plus de patrie! (Souvestre 1869, 98)

However, one striking difference separates both dystopias: a definite negative future is replaced not by destruction as in Souvestre's novel, but by an ambiguous imperfect Utopia where people have to battle constantly to make it a better world.

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