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TEACHING THE CONCEPT OF TECHNO-UTOPIA AS A UNITY OF UTOPIAN AND DISTOPIC DISCOURSES

ENSEÑAR EL CONCEPTO DE TECNO-UTOPIA COMO UNIDAD DE DISCURSOS UTÓPICOS Y DISTÓPICOS

Julia Dmitrievna Smirnova¹
E-mail: myphilosophy@mail.ru
ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2766-7318>
Regina Rinatovna Fazleeva¹
E-mail: pagua@yandex.ru
ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1402-8779>
¹ Kazan Federal University, Russian Federation.

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ABSTRACT

The cybertopias of the future combine two traditional mechanisms of utopian thinking: belief in the scientific progress and technologies capable of freeing life from restrictions restraining creative freedom (utopianism) and simultaneously criticizing a technological society with its dehumanizing potential (dystopism). In the context of virtual utopia, technology is becoming a way of transforming the individual and improving society, on the one hand, and a tool of human self-knowledge and a field of critical understanding of the negative consequences of global technologization, on the other hand. Technological change reconstructs the human community to such an extent that it gives rise to the concept of digital utopia - "digitopia" - due to the peculiarities of development and implementation of the Internet technologies in the everyday life of mankind. This article includes an attempt to teach cyberspace as a product of human creativity itself, which will allow studying the virtual reality more accurately and impartially: both the current present of the information society and its possible future.

Keywords:

Cyberspace, utopia, dystopia, digitopia, techno-romantic utopia, en-topia.

RESUMEN

Las cybertopias del futuro combinan dos mecanismos tradicionales del pensamiento utópico: la fe en el progreso científico y las tecnologías capaces de liberar la vida de las restricciones que restringen la libertad creativa (utopía) y al mismo tiempo criticar a una sociedad tecnológica con su potencial deshumanizador (distopismo). En el contexto de la utopía virtual, la tecnología se está convirtiendo en una forma de transformar al individuo y mejorar la sociedad, por un lado, y en una herramienta de autoconocimiento humano y un campo de comprensión crítica de las consecuencias negativas de la tecnologización global, por otro. El cambio tecnológico reconstruye la comunidad humana hasta tal punto que da lugar al concepto de utopía digital - "digitopía" - debido a las peculiaridades del desarrollo e implementación de las tecnologías de Internet en la vida cotidiana de la humanidad. Este artículo incluye un intento de enseñar el ciberespacio como producto de la propia creatividad humana, lo que permitirá estudiar la realidad virtual de forma más precisa e imparcial: tanto el presente actual de la sociedad de la información como su posible futuro.

Palabras clave:

Ciberespacio, utopía, distopía, digitopía, utopía tecnoromántica, en-topia.

INTRODUCTION

Virtual reality is an integral part of human life in the modern information society. Modern culture presents the Internet as a space existing outside material reality, as a field, in which “impossible” promises and hopes of modern society can be implemented, namely: individual freedom, equality as a universal unity of mankind beyond gender, racial, national, social, economic differences, technological progress that goes hand in hand with moral progress, social justice, free market and rule of law. Thus, the reality of real life finds its hope for the implementation of the dream of a “brave new world” in the virtual reality of cyberspace.

This study is made within the framework of the constructionist paradigm and phenomenological methodology. The constructionist paradigm (in the context of the classic work of Berger & Luckmann (1995), was applied to form and analyze the most accurate laws of the functioning of society, in order to find correlates of the social reality of our time with the utopian image of the ideal society of the future. In addition, the application of the constructionist paradigm allowed us determining how and why the individual's integration into the social system occurs, how the socialization process affects the subject himself/herself, how the objects of real life correlate with subjective cybertopias.

We used the phenomenological method to study such phenomena as cyberspace as a whole, the “utopia/dystopia” dichotomy and technoutopia in their formation and development in the context of digital modernity.

DEVELOPMENT

Virtual reality is an integral part of human life in the modern information society. Modern culture presents the Internet as a space existing outside material reality, as a field, in which “impossible” promises and hopes of modern society can be implemented, namely: individual freedom, equality as a universal unity of mankind beyond gender, racial, national, social, economic differences, technological progress that goes hand in hand with moral progress, social justice, free market and rule of law. Thus, the reality of real life finds its hope for the implementation of the dream of a “brave new world” in the virtual reality of cyberspace.

The Internet appears as a free communication space that can effectively develop outside the framework of control and censorship by the state and society: it is a true place of individual self-government and voluntary responsibility of both individuals and their associations. The virtual space changes not only every aspect of a person's life (the way of communication, economic, political relations, and art), but “online life” becomes a place for a person

to project and explore himself/herself, which is the main thing (Turkle, 2005).

However, at the same time, in the context of the virtual, the fragility and multidimensionality of human existence becomes even more noticeable: immersion in the Internet environment, virtual social networks and computer games reduce a person to closed microworlds, having only a remote resemblance to the complex and contradictory world of real social interaction. In the virtual world, *“everyone communicates with everyone at a higher speed, but with less depth”*. (Turkle, 2005, p. 299)

This thesis is an argument confirming the potential opportunity for virtual reality to act as a dystopia (Yar, 2012). In such dystopian discourses, cyberspace is described in four modes as a communication technology. Firstly, it is treated as a “forced substitution of the subject” in virtual relations: when the virtual becomes dominant and guiding communication subject. Secondly, cyberspace is treated as a mechanism for a person's virtual self-alienation: when a person becomes a part of virtual reality, while losing his/her freedom and existential capabilities (Leontiev, 2020).

Thirdly, virtual technology is described as a destructive form of mediation between people, becoming a manipulator of social interaction (Levitas, 2010). And finally, fourthly, virtual technology appears to be a powerful domination tool over human and society, exercising full control over social and political institutions (Jameson, 2005). These four ways of analyzing virtual technologies narrow down to the assertion that cyberspace does not contain anything positive, except for the fact that it breaks the density and quality of human relationships.

Based on the above, we would like to dwell in more detail on the concept of the so-called “techno-utopianism”, which (according to some researchers) “can be considered as the main ideological structure demonstrating the current stage in the development of perceptions about the nature of utopian ideas”. The ideology of “techno-utopianism” is based on the fundamental conceptual and ideological unity of science and technology in the modern information society. This is due to optimistic expectations of the possibilities and consequences of the use of high-tech products, which will lead to the creation of a perfect society of the future, free from the burdens of material worries and engaged mainly in the self-development and knowledge of new things in all available areas of life. Techno-utopia thus becomes the image of an ideal community of people, where the power, law and social relations are built for the benefit and good of the people of the future, and the science and technology help the community to actively function and develop successfully, forming a

whole “techno-utopian” civilization of the future. Moreover, technological change reconstructs the human community to such an extent that it gives rise to the concept of digital utopia - “digitopia”, conditioned by the peculiarities of development and implementation of the Internet technologies in the daily life of mankind. Indeed, as noted above, the virtual space is able to increase personal freedom, freeing a person from the bureaucracy of power, **“traditional socio-cultural hierarchies and outdated social schemes, as well as orders of industrial society. Modern ideologies of techno-utopianism are oriented towards the basic position - cancellation of state control and superiority of free market”**. (Medvedeva, 2011).

Thus, from the point of view of researchers of virtuality as a sociocultural phenomenon, the cybertopias of the future combine two traditional ways of utopian thinking: belief in the scientific progress and technologies capable of freeing life from restrictions restraining creative freedom (utopianism) (Klees, 2020) and simultaneously criticizing a technological society with its dehumanizing potential (antiutopizm or dystopism). In other words, in virtual utopia, technology is becoming a way of transforming the individual and improving society, on the one hand, and a tool of human self-knowledge and a field of critical understanding of the negative consequences of global technologization, on the other hand. In this case, the concept of “information society” can be considered as an actual form of modern civilization development.

Therefore, the very fact of the techno-utopian “digital revolution” appears as a feature of technological modernization, which presupposes a whole range of various “post” ideologies: postcolonialism and post-communist programs, techno-orientalism, cybercolonialism, techno-romanticism, etc. Even certain eschatological expectations related to gramatical modernization and positive transformation of social reality as such are beginning to be vested in the information technologies, in the context of techno-utopianism. It should be noted separately that such a provocative concept as “digital eschatology” has appeared in the scientific literature, which incorporates into its definition two paradoxical positions of a person’s ability to imagine, arising precisely in virtual space.

On the one hand, virtual utopia offers a person the opportunity to create and stay in the world of impossible, unpredictable, uncontrollable events, and, on the other hand, it proves once again that it is cyberspace that actualizes the fundamental human ability - the ability to imagine, to create ideal images of “impossible” societies. And here the human imagination begins to acquire new opportunities under the influence of information technology. According to researchers of digital modernity as a

cultural phenomenon, **“digital eschatology is a variation of the anthropological turn, because it brings to the fore the awareness of the inevitable finiteness of a person, indicates the boundaries of his/her power and problematizes his/her essential foundations, one of which is imagination”**. (Stepanov, 2018)

The so-called “techno-romantic” utopias appear according to this foundation. In them, human imagination and intellect create the possibility of overcoming the boundaries of the material world and freely immerse in the space of cyber consciousness. The central point here is the very human desire for imagination, which provides a universal virtual connection between people, in which a person can be anything: man or woman, gay or heterosexual, black or white, yellow, etc. Thus, a virtual utopian society offers a person the opportunity to choose any identity, which means that rigid social hierarchies become meaningless. According to some theorists of our time, virtual reality contains the “revolutionary” potential of utopianism: the utopianism of cyberreality is revolutionary itself. In this logic, virtual utopia, by its very existence, asserts the existence of an ontological border between the materiality of an industrial society and the new reality of the Internet, which is a space of “mind” and “imagination”, not “matter” (Barlow, 2006).

The researcher of modernity, sociologist M. Yaar [3], does not agree with this idea. In his opinion, the very concept of cyberspace is false, since it is usually perceived and described as a field, having features that differ from the usual idea of reality. The logic of his reasoning comes down to the fact that the Internet environment is one of the many artificially created spaces, in which a modern human lives: the possibilities of communication mediated by virtuality are not different in comparison with any other traditional communication: speech, subject, sign-symbolic. According to Yaar, it turns out that virtual relationships do not contain anything specifically dehumanizing: their quality depends on the personal relationships of communication agents, and virtual reality is only a mediator of real communication itself. Thus, Yaar calls to consider virtual reality not in the dichotomy of “utopia/dystopia”, but rather as “en-topia” - “space within the social environment in which we live, and therefore, having properties similar to real communication: cyberspace is just as complex, ambiguous and contradictory, combining signs of both utopia and dystopia, as the actual space of real human interaction (Yaar, 2012).

As a result of studying the virtual space of techno-utopia as the interaction of the utopian and dystopian aspects of the “impossible” worlds of the human imagination, several general comments can be made. Firstly, techno-utopias

of the future combine belief in the scientific progress and technologies capable of freeing life from restrictions restraining creative freedom (utopianism) and simultaneously criticizing a technological society with its dehumanizing potential (dystopism). Secondly, virtual utopia offers a person the opportunity to create and stay in the world of impossible, unpredictable, uncontrollable events, and, on the other hand, it proves once again that it is cyberspace that actualizes the fundamental human ability - the ability to imagine, to create ideal images of "impossible" societies. As virtual reality contains the "revolutionary" potential of utopianism: the utopianism of cyberreality is revolutionary itself. And, finally, techno-utopia becomes the image of an ideal community of people in which power, law and social relations are built for the benefit and good of the people of the future.

CONCLUSIONS

In the context of virtual utopia, technology is becoming a way of transforming the individual and improving society, on the one hand, and a tool of human self-knowledge and a field of critical understanding of the negative consequences of global technologization, on the other hand.

Indeed, if we proceed from a closer understanding and analysis of cyberspace as a product of human creativity itself, the researchers of modern society will be able to study virtual reality more accurately and impartially: both the current present of the information society and its possible future.

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