Tantalisingly Close

de Vries, Imar

Published by Amsterdam University Press

de Vries, Imar.
Tantalisingly Close: An Archaeology of Communication Desires in Discourses of Mobile Wireless Media.

Amsterdam University Press, 2012.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/76705.

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Part I

Venturing into the Familiar Unknown
1. Discourses of progress and utopia

As is so often the case in history, what a seer, prophet, or philosopher believes to be the result of novel and original inspiration almost invariably turns out to be a remembered insight from some perhaps long-forgotten book or author. (Robert A. Nisbet 1980: 117)

In order to construct a theoretical framework for a macro-scale perspective on idealised ideas of communication in the ongoing development of media, it will first be necessary to examine the nature and functioning of hopeful expectations, utopian myths, and beliefs in progress. This will not result in an exhaustive overview of the body of work done on utopian thought, as a vast amount of literature has already been written on this topic. The historical account that I construct here will serve to describe the various ways in which longings for a sublime state have expressed themselves through time, so that we are able to gain knowledge of how the concepts of ‘utopia’ and ‘progress’ acquired and changed their meanings, and how they have subsequently been incorporated in communication theories and models (the subject of chapter 2), in accounts of improvement in media evolution (the subject of chapter 3), and ultimately in mobile communication media discourses of the present day (the subject of chapter 4).

This chapter will assess the underlying premise of the existence of ideas of progress and utopia, which I contend is ultimately rooted in a human urge to hope and search for purpose and meaning. This urge expresses itself in ‘necessary fictions’, regulative narratives that foster a sense of improvement by positing two situations that differentiate in time and then presenting the latter of those two situations to be in some way better than the former. Evidently, the ways in which these necessary fictions function are very much connected to how relevant cultural concepts of time and the future are structured, so a short overview of three basic perspectives of time (linear, cyclical, and spiral time) will be given. These perspectives of time are then traced throughout cultural and social history, exposing their influence on ideas of progress and pinpointing the moment where utopian thinking arises as a particular subset of these ideas. We will see that the perennially recurrent hopes and beliefs in necessary fictions foster a poignant and paradoxical conviction that humankind can actually pursue a progressive path towards utopia. Through an analysis of dystopian and anti-utopian world views, which always serve as shadows to utopian projects, I will show that future-oriented necessary fictions invariably and tragically interconnect with notions of cleansing, repair, and, ultimately, reunification with a sublime state. In the end, the ultimate paradox is that humans cannot stop to ‘name the unnameable final
destination, to construe the unconstruable question about the meaning of human existence’ (Zipes 1988: xxvii).

**Hope, belief, and purpose**

Erwartung, Hoffnung, Intention auf noch ungewordene Möglichkeit: das ist nicht nur ein Grundzug des menschlichen Bewuβtseins, sondern, konkret berichtigt und erfaßt, eine Grundbestimmung innerhalb der objektiven Wirklichkeit insgesamt.2

( Ernst Bloch 1959: 5)

Hoping and believing in the existence of purpose are arguably part of the most powerful and significant emotions in the lives of human beings. Without a general idea of where we are heading to, what is asked of us in the meantime, and above all some indication that things are going well, life becomes hard to endure. Moreover, in most times of hardship a basic drive towards self-preservation starts to manifest itself, which is geared towards just one thing: to improve conditions. Making life endurable can mean ensuring that there is enough bread, water, or electricity to get through to the month’s end, but it can also take on a metaphysical form, as many world religions, new age communities, cults, self-help groups, philosophical endeavours and psychological sessions continue to show. It is through the cognitive acts of hoping and believing that ideas of purpose are constructed and sustained: while a strong belief may preclude the need for hope, and hoping for something does not necessarily entail that you believe it will happen, both hoping and believing can be employed to orient oneself, in the present, to a specific instance of the future, which, more often than not, is projected to be a better one.

The value of hoping and believing in making meaningful everyday experiences as well as extreme events has widely been recognised by a diverse range of academic fields. In sociology (Desroche 1979), theology (Moltmann 1967), psychology (Snyder 2000), and neurobiology (Newberg, D’Aquili & Rause 2002; Newberg & Waldman 2006), hope and belief have been described as fundamental in shaping a person’s sense of purpose and well-being in life. What many studies share is their stress, first, on hoping and believing as relying upon a system of affective forces that provides both shelter (from fear or suffering) and direction (towards a better place), and second, on the premise that this system is accessible to anyone. Particularly notable in this respect is the work of Austrian psychiatrist Victor Frankl, who put forward one of the most compelling accounts of the benefits of having something, anything, to believe in. As a former Auschwitz concentration camp prisoner, he wrote about his experiences in...trotzdem Ja zum Leben sagen: Ein Psychologe erlebt das Konzentrationslager [Man’s search for meaning], in which he described how prisoners who believed that there was still some purpose or mean-
ing left during all the suffering, and oriented themselves towards a future event or
task, had less trouble surviving. For Frankl, this undertaking was more than just a
mental trick; he refused to reduce the search for meaning to a mere “secondary
rationalization” of instinctual drives (Frankl 1992: 99). Hence, as psychology
scholar Paul Wong has noted, Frankl places the source and continuous presence
of the need to hope and believe squarely in the human spirit, which houses ‘love,
the will to meaning, purpose, creativity, conscience, the capacity for choice, responsi-
bility, sense of humor, etc.’ (Wong 2001, emphasis added).

What makes Frankl’s contributions valuable for the understanding of utopian
beliefs in general and of ideas of progress in communication technologies in par-
ticular, is that he posits a future-oriented frame of mind as a given. His notions of
hope, belief, and purpose reflect a conviction that they constitute essential prop-
erties of what it means to be human, and that we cannot (or should not) do other-
wise than employ them. Moreover, as a therapist with a keen interest in
behaviourism, Frankl saw the search for meaning guided by an innate hierarchy
of values, which he thought was ‘founded on our biological past and [...] rooted
in our biological depth’ (Frankl 1992: 146). In other words, he held that the drive
to look for purpose and meaning is a constitutive feature of humans, and that it
will therefore necessarily express itself in our actions, cultures, and, last but not
least, in (grand) narratives of how things came to pass, with what purpose, and
with what direction.

As such, Frankl’s views are in line with those of the school of evolutionary
psychology, in which biological traits are seen as constitutive elements of the
ways that humans reason. While reductionist explanations for certain types of
human behaviour can in some cases be quite controversial, they do provide
exemplary material to support the contention that to hope for and to believe in a
better life are undertakings that are shared across time and cultures. Evolutionary
biologist Daniel C. Dennett, for instance, maintains that human organisms come
equipped with a cognitive skill called a ‘hyperactive agent detection device’, which
has, over thousands of years of evolution, instilled in us ‘the urge to treat things
[...] as agents with beliefs and desires’ (Dennett 2006: 117). As a result, this urge
led to the notion of deities, ‘agents who had access to all the strategic informa-
tion’ that humans did not possess (ibid.: 126). Thus, the need to believe in God or
Allah or any other supernatural, omnipotent, and omnipresent force that guides
and steers us is, according to Dennett, the outcome of a biological and evolution-
ary process, one that favours the human organism’s susceptibility to having the
comforting thought that ‘something’ or ‘someone’ has made sure that we exist
and live for a reason. In other words, Dennett holds that this mode of making
understandable an otherwise chaotic world was favoured by natural selection as a
fruitful means to survive, thereby preserving and extending the strand of genes
that is carried by us god-fearing survival machines.
As will be elaborated further in chapter 3, such evolutionary models of why we attribute purpose to what we do in life provide a useful analytical framework for understanding the mechanisms underlying the development of media. But, I should add, they are not without pitfalls. The notion that meaning and purpose are part of our biological make-up, and even might constitute the driving force of evolution itself, is not undisputed. The other side of the debate on the biological nature of purpose is reflected well by the work of evolutionary biologist Stephen J. Gould, who refused to adhere to the almighty power of the gene in gradually steering evolution towards a determined destination. According to Gould, the evolution of biological entities progresses without set goals; there is no purpose to be found in its directive principle (Gould 2002). Moreover, in response to Dennett’s attempt to describe the presence of just such a directive principle in Darwin’s dangerous idea (1995), Gould held that sociobiological explanations of human evolution and behaviour are ‘just-so’ stories, which only create the false illusion of a consistent, contingent, and goal-oriented system, whereas empirical research has so far not delivered substantial evidence to sustain the actual existence of such a biological blueprint (Gould 1997).

While Gould raises a valid point about the problems of the ease with which a need for empirical evidence is discarded, his strategy of dismissing sociobiological arguments by stating that they merely offer a compelling story does not address the questions of why there is a human search for purpose to begin with, or what is the purpose of hoping and believing in ideas of progress. And very important questions they are: considering Victor Frankl’s findings, notions of purpose and meaning are what drive us – perhaps, thus, up to the point where they lead us to perpetuate compelling and deterministic stories that tell of their embedment in evolution. What remains to be explained, then, is the fact that the logic of purposiveness continues to have a strong foothold, as exemplified by stories of ever-present improvement in communication technologies. The act of searching for purposeful meaning and then finding it within directive systems may not necessarily be the result of an evolutionary effect, but it is undoubtedly a very powerful and recurrent trait.

The answer may lie in how the human psyche works, if we follow culture critic Steven Shaviro; purposiveness is actually not something we discover, he holds, but attribute, because we need this ‘necessary fiction’ in order to make sense of our surroundings (Shaviro 2003: 209). Thus, while we are very well able to acknowledge that we cannot understand a world without purpose, we should not mistake its presence for proof that it is a constitutive element in the process of evolution; instead, it performs a regulative function. This view on the need for purpose as a regulative function that produces necessary fictions coalesces with what Vincent Mosco calls ‘a remarkable, almost willful, historical amnesia’ (Mosco 2004: 117), meaning that without continuously and deliberately forgetting that earlier attempts to reach an ultimate goal have failed, we will not be able to
find purpose in trying again, nor persist in (re)telling myths that disclose the ultimate route.\textsuperscript{5} This, as I will argue later in this chapter, is the prime reason for the fact that so many utopian projects resemble each other: advocates of these projects simply cannot escape the lure of the ever-present potential, while knowingly ignoring the fact that similar projects have never before been fully actualised. They become both victims and proficient users of stories that tell that there is purpose, and because there is purpose, there is direction. This is the regulative function of necessary fictions.

\section*{Necessary fictions: Expressing the need for explanations}

Religion is the greatest utopia to have appeared in history.

(Antonio Gramsci n.d. cited in Desroche 1979: 80)

The argument constructed so far is thus that, although there is no need to postulate a purpose in evolution, we need it so much to rearrange and order the perceived chaos in our daily experiences of life that we incorporate it in necessary fictions. Vincent Mosco’s engaging account of the persistence and omnipresence of myths also suggests that these necessary fictions constitute an intrinsically human condition, found everywhere around the world and transcending local cultural traditions. As such, an analysis of myths could very well explain the feverish notions of unlimited potential found in discourses of mobile communication technologies, something that will be developed more fully in chapter 4. But I am getting ahead of myself; in order to understand how necessary fictions lead to utopian ideas of progress and subsequently to a need to improve communication technologies, it will first be necessary to investigate the main reasons that make myths appear particularly in progress-minded narratives, and to what extent the acts of hoping and believing orient us towards directions that seemingly lead to a fulfilment of utopian dreams.

One influential explanation for the recurrent nature of myths of progress is that searching for, and hoping to find, the ultimate reason of why things happen as they do is a fundamental part of human storytelling tradition. Comparative mythologist Joseph Campbell has contributed abundantly to the view that human history is driven by this search for universal truths, continuously reinventing and retelling stories that narrate of ultimate journeys to those truths. Moreover, in The hero with a thousand faces (1949) Campbell argued that these stories all follow a single narrative pattern, that of the monomyth, of which thousands of variations have been derived. Borrowing the term from a passage in James Joyce’s Finnegans wake and partly basing his understanding of it on Jungian archetypes, Campbell constructed an elaborate model of the monomyth, which in short and adapted by Fredric Rice reads as:
The hero is introduced in his ordinary world, where he receives the call to adventure. He is reluctant at first but is encouraged by the wise old man or woman to cross the first threshold, where he encounters tests and helpers. He reaches the innermost cave, where he endures the supreme ordeal. He seizes the sword or the treasure and is pursued on the road back to his world. He is resurrected and transformed by his experience. He returns to his ordinary world with a treasure, boon, or elixir to benefit his world. (Rice 2001)

Note here the ‘innermost cave’, which lures the hero into starting his quest; how the hero is ‘resurrected and transformed’, indicating he is renewed, has progressed, has changed for the better; and how he returns with ‘a treasure [...] to benefit his world’, affirming that the risk of the journey was all worth it. The story structure is very familiar, and contains plot elements we easily take for granted. Using any derivation of this monomyth it is possible, as Roland Barthes already noted, to give the elements that make up the myth a ‘natural and eternal justification, [...] a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact’ (Barthes 1972: 143).

The power of the monomyth is thus that it can be used as a general template for countless ideologically loaded stories, all of which will contain a readily recognisable and accessible structure that, through retelling, is reaffirmed again and again as the blueprint for how basic facts of life manifest themselves. A better place really is just around the corner, it says; if only we believe it is, and take risks in getting there, we will be rewarded and everyone will benefit. As already exemplified in the introduction of this book, advertisements for mobile communication technologies make full use of this type of necessary fiction. They present us with an almost transcendental journey towards a place where everyone can connect to each other, reach mutual understanding with ease, and will have left a world of frustration and obstacles behind. As such, they uncannily reflect the basic narrative structures of many religious stories of transcendence, which tell of reaching a religious sublime state like heaven, nirvana, or satori. According to Campbell, such similarities between religious themes and imaginative stories are no coincidence; he found support for his argument that the monomyth is the single most powerful narrative structure we know in the fact that he could recognise it in the dogmas and utopian outlooks of all world religions, on which he wrote extensively in his series of books The masks of God (1959-1968). He held that there is a single, unknowable truth underlying all religions, an immanent force that has given life to everything and into which everything will return in the end, one that lies behind the creation of many if not all of the world’s stories. The power of this force is immense; the mere fact that at the present day more than 85 percent of the world’s population declare themselves as religious, shows how many people in one way or another are confronted with the question of purpose, and try to approach that question in a meaningful way by immersing themselves
in the narrative myths that the religious sublime supplies. A necessary fiction ‘purpose’ may be, but it is a very potent one that can claim cultural and religious independency.

Another way to approach the manners in which utopian thought and ideas of progress find their continuous and instantly familiar expressions in narratives is, according to Campbell, through a probing of our collective unconscious, which both sustains and is sustained by religious scripts, folk stories, fairy tales, urban legends, and the like. Whether it is produced through mystical a-priori knowledge or through common experiences, shared instinct and shared culture, our collective unconscious holds dreams that reflect myths, and produces dreams that reinforce myths. The functioning of these dreams has to be taken quite literally; as literary critic Leslie Fiedler noted, myths are experienced as ‘projections of certain unconscious impulses otherwise confessed only in our dreams, but which once raised to the level of full consciousness serve as grids of perception through which we screen our so-called “reality”’ (Fiedler 1996: 34). And indeed, just as Campbell’s analysis of religions uncovered a drive towards a single shared truth, studies in psychoanalytical research have shown that there are many similarities found in dream patterns across a wide variety of cultures (Domhoff 1996; 2005), suggesting that, again, there is a shared unconscious understanding of expressions of what Campbell calls the universal or transcendent truth. This understanding subsequently informs our actions in our waking hours, directing us along the path of the monomyth.

In the evaluation of the nature of necessary fictions that tell of purpose, utopian progress, and final resolutions, we have to be careful, however, not to settle, as Campbell seemed to do, for the existence of archetypes as their prime driving force. Similar to the problematic issues of controversial arguments in evolutionary psychology, the reduction of human behaviour and storytelling to mere effects of archetypal determinism in the unconscious can lead to a rigid conception of imagination, and does not adequately explain how visions of a better future are translated into a myriad of different actual actions. Here it is instructive to turn to the work of Ernst Bloch, German philosopher of revolutionary utopianism and author of the seminal multi-volume Das Prinzip Hoffnung [The principle of hope] (1959). Like Campbell (albeit within a broader political framework), Bloch studied folk stories, fairy tales, and myths in order to find shared characteristics of visions of a better life. Unlike Campbell, however, he did not think that looking for Jungian archetypes was a productive exercise. He was highly critical of Jung’s reworking of the Freudian unconscious into a collection of ‘primeval memories or primeval fantasies’ (Bloch 1959: 62), and found that this prehistoric vision of the unconscious – one that harboured archetypes as primary drives – was dangerous and objectionable, as it fed reactionary and irrationalist tendencies that could lead to a justification for fascism. Moreover, it left no room for imaginative heterogeneity; used as templates, archetypes work as constraints, suggesting and
almost dictating that derivations are impossible. Instead of seeing the unconscious as a static and rigid entity, Bloch wanted to explore how a radical and revolutionary new could be instigated from it, and how notions of such a process were envisioned and expressed in stories of utopias, hopes, and beliefs.

In order to make room for a possible analysis of the radically new, Bloch introduced the concept of the not-yet-conscious, which he posited as a supplement to Freud’s unconscious. We do not really know ourselves, according to Bloch, so we cannot extract everything there is to know about ourselves from our unconscious. The not-yet-conscious, then, as scholar of folklore and fairy tales Jack Zipes writes in his introduction to Bloch’s selected essays, is ‘formed by the impulse of hope, in which inklings of what [humans] might become manifest themselves. For the individual, the not-yet-conscious is the psychical representation of what has not-yet-become in our time and its world’ (Zipes 1988: xxxii). The not-yet-become is thus the domain of everything-that-could-be in our daily reality, and the not-yet-conscious is formed by stories of hope that tell of how the not-yet-become, at some point, might come to be. The most important thing about these stories, Bloch insists, is that they need to be productive, they need to uncover themselves at spots where they can form an impetus for action. The places where Bloch traces these manifestations of hope are primarily in daydreams, and not in dreams, as Jung and Campbell argued. There is a significant difference between dreams and daydreams. Whereas the former are part of the unconscious and ‘house repressed and forgotten desires and experiences’, writes Zipes, daydreams fall into the realm of the semi-consciousness and therefore ‘can be productive for the formation of individuals and the world since they [...] point to real, objective possibilities’ (ibid.). Daydreams can inform possible ways to take action, and give shape to the means by which humankind expresses what these roads to reaching certain objectives might look like. This is why, as Zipes summarises Bloch’s viewpoint, ‘all art and literature that have anything to say to humankind are utopian’ (ibid.). Utopia is not just a repressed ideal that keeps churning out different versions of the same monomyth, it is an actual, objective goal that can be reached by acting upon engaging and hopeful daydreams.

Bloch’s conception of the not-yet-conscious thus not only adds another dimension to how we can understand the recurrent nature of utopian myths that tell of improvement and ultimately of reaching a sublime state, it also stresses that these myths can be identified as having continuous and real effects on the creation of a future-oriented mindset – even more so than when approached from the perspective of the monomyth or archetypes. They do something with us, they make us susceptible to the lure of that-which-lies-before-us, and as such they make us conscious of the fact that every time they are told they can set us in motion. They constitute, in several ways of interpretation and differentiated in time, an insatiable part of human reasoning that is aimed at bringing about change for the better.
This is why myths work so well in utopian stories, and what makes their presence so persistent throughout time. Grand ideas of where we are heading to, or what we should do to improve things, grab hold of our imagination and propel us into action, but each time they do so, the paradoxical nature of the ensuing quests makes us think that we are not quite there yet, and the whole process starts again. The recurrent tone of hope is ever present; as sociologist Henri Desroche concurs in Sociologie de l’espérance [The sociology of hope], necessary fictions of hope, belief, and purpose pass through recurring historical cycles, and lead us to realise that ‘[n]o route has ever led any caravan to reach its mirage; but only the mirages have set the caravan in motion’ (Desroche 1979: 144, emphasis in original). Desroche is quick to add that the process of hoping for and constructing plans to realise a better life is not inevitably cyclical; neither is it ‘necessarily linear as the optimism of a cumulative progress rising to infinity would postulate’, but it ‘could be a spiral’, connecting both the recurrent linear and cyclical aspects of the ‘panorama of millenarian phenomena’ he finds in human history (ibid.: 42-43, emphasis in original). Pondering the thought that the “messianico-religio-ideologico-revolutionary” whole, the concept with which he describes the matrix of articulations of the hope for a better world, ‘constitutes a prophetic dimension of collective consciousness’ (ibid.: 143), Desroche makes clear, as I have also argued so far, that ‘to orient oneself to a better future’ is an inherent and shared human property, but, it has to be noted, one whose description and articulation are dependent on a vision of time as linear, cyclical, or spiral.

Concepts of time and progress

The question to be addressed to [the utopian desire] is, does that desire work to pull the present forward, progressively, towards the as-yet-inexpressible but hopefully better future state, located in what Ernst Bloch calls the future unconscious, or is it a regressive impulse, in search of some prelapsarian lost domain located in the past unconscious. (Jan Relf 1993: 108, emphasis in original)

Meaning or purpose can be obtained by envisioning a more tolerable future place that, when crisis is over, lies in front of us. In all guises, this thought that somewhere, just within reach, lies a better world, is arguably as old as the moment humans began to make sense of their surroundings. Describing this better world, setting out paths, undertaking the supposedly necessary or needed steps to reach it and actually getting there is what is often called progress, a phenomenon that must be approached quite carefully. Throughout history and within different cultures, ideas of progress have manifested, and continue to manifest, in many forms, depending on what concepts of time and future those cultures hold. To construct a schematic overview of how ideas of progress evolved and exerted
influence on the creation and sustenance of myths of communication improvement, it will prove to be useful to group the many existing varieties of visions of time and the future into the three basic categories that Desroche proposed in his book on hope. Sohail Inayatullah, co-editor of the Journal of Future Studies, describes these categories as three basic shapes: ‘the linear evolutionary shape of progress (the dominant paradigm of development), the cyclical shape of the life-cycle and the natural world, and the spiral shape that combines progress and tradition’ (Inayatullah 2005).

Clearly, according to Inayatullah, it is the linear shape in particular that is associated with progress, as it lends itself quite well to creating a mindset based on making predictions. What lies further ahead may not be directly accessible, but at least this ‘further’ holds the inherent possibility that there is a direct path or a general direction that can be taken in order to arrive at a desired point in the future. Progressive linearity denies degeneration, evades the idea of going back, and tries to hold an equilibrium while continuously elevating it. There are, of course, various periods of short-term ups and downs that become visible when one zooms in on a small scale, but ultimately, and on a larger scale, the net result projected by the linear perspective is advancement. Cyclical time, on the other hand, knows only movement leading ultimately back to its origin. There are linear aspects to be found in cyclical time as processes can temporarily go ‘up’ or ‘down’, but the process eventually ends at the beginning. In cyclical time, writes Inayatullah, ‘change is normal and opposites exist in dynamic tension in every stage’ (ibid.). There is no general direction – in the linear sense – towards which cyclical time is heading, there are only recurrent phases.

There is reason to doubt, however, that the concept of progress can only be found exclusively in linear perspectives. While linear views are not seldom seen as optimistic (‘a better future lies just ahead’) and cyclical views as pessimistic (‘we will inevitably return to from whence we came’), both schools recognise there are positive as well as negative characteristics of their perspectives to be pointed out. Linear time harbours promise and prediction, but also causes catastrophic scenarios when wrongly taken paths that lead to ‘progress traps’ cannot be abandoned (Wright 2004: 5). Cyclical time preserves traditions and holds no unpleasant surprises, but can create a feeling of powerlessness as the fate of history cannot be escaped. As a result, if the idea of progress is to be squarely coupled to a model containing at least some positive connotation, both linear and cyclical visions of time provide ample room for its incorporation. The fact remains, however, that both visions are slightly handicapped metaphors; they do not fully capture the idea that progress also knows its moments of déjà vu.

The ready answer to this problem is provided by the spiral vision of time, which combines linear and cyclical time in order to connect progress with history. According to Inayatullah, the spiral pattern
intends to remove the future from the confines of pre-determined history, from the cycle, and to create the possibility for [...] an acceptance of structure, but a willingness to transform the suffering associated with history, and to find previous pockets of darkness and illuminate them, to pierce through silences. (Inayatullah 2005)

As such, the spiral view recognises recurrent processes, concepts, and ideas, as well as an imminently present higher plane towards which these processes, concepts, and ideas can lead. Thus, progress in spiral time can take on the incremental and accumulative properties of linear time, as well as the traditional and value-preserving properties of cyclical time, without having to yield to a single, restrictive framework.

The spiral, then, owing to its intricate integration of both linear and cyclical attributes, is a powerful tool to express causal relationships and to provide explanations of events for which there exists an urge to find their purpose. In the spiral vision of time, events take place because the linear course of movement leads us in a certain direction, or because the events happened before and must happen again. Capturing the spiral in Ernst Bloch’s terms, hope works on the premise of already having sensed but not yet experienced what we are looking for; utopia has already existed, in ourselves, now we need to return to ourselves to find it again. The reason for the spiral’s seduction therefore lies in its self-referentiality, a property that is of significant importance for understanding ideas of purpose and progress, and which will be described in more detail later in this chapter. Because the spiral connects itself to itself, it constructs, by definition, a constellation of everything that can possibly happen, continuously moving and incorporating new events, interpreting them in terms of old ones.

At this point it must be stressed that none of these time visions imply that causality between events is a given; rather, perceived causal relationships in the experience of time are more often than not induced by a psychical need that, quite similar to the functioning of necessary fictions, asks for an imposition of order on chaos. This urge for a ‘spatialisation of time’, as Henri Bergson (1910) called it, underlies the distinctive teleological elements of determinism so often found in ideas of progress, and masks the open and indeterminate character of time. Spatial configurations of time quite easily lead to a depiction of time as a coherent and seamless flow, whereas in an open-ended view of time, just as the outcomes of successive throws of dice are not influenced by each other, each unit of time can be seen as qualitatively distinct from every other. Bearing in mind this distinction between diachronic time as a research object and synchronic time as a framework for a historical approach, the next two sections provide an overview of how cyclical, linear, and spiral time each are seen to have had their dominant periods in history, co-shaping ideas of progress and utopian stories along the way. This overview should be seen as a necessarily selective look at a heterogeneous body of
ideas consisting of what can be called ‘historical constellations of utopian thought’ (Manuel & Manuel 1979: 15ff); not all stories share the exact same structure or themes, but they do enlighten the multitude of ways in which the future-oriented mindset has expressed itself through time.

**Visions of time and progress until the Renaissance**

> We dream much of paradise, or rather of a number of successive paradises, but each of them is, long before we die, a paradise lost, in which we should feel ourselves lost too.  
> (Marcel Proust 1924: 186)

While our current day-to-day experience of time can give rise to a fairly strong feeling that the structure of life is governed by causes and effects, and therefore always already has allowed for a linear realisation of goals that have been set in the past or present, this is generally thought by history scholars to be a fairly recent and mostly Western vision of progress. Lacking the experience of a swiftly changing world, the argument goes, people for a long time did not see any apparent direction that history was moving towards, and this attitude was more or less carried over until at least the Renaissance. A majority of studies of ideas of progress therefore hold that only when the field of science established discrete systems, in which accurate measurements delivered undisputable proof of advancement and thus of the accumulation of knowledge, only then could the linear idea of progress as we now understand it develop and claim its important place in Western civilisation (Ginsberg 1953: 7).

Although there is much merit to this view, if only because the exact wording of what we now mean by ‘progress’ cannot be transposed to other historical periods such as classical antiquity, I would suggest that myths that tell that humankind can advance to higher levels of civilisation and will continue to do so in the future are not unique to the last few hundred years, but have had a regulative role in many eras, in various shapes and roles. The modern era did not invent the idea of progress, but intensified and politicised its mythical underpinnings to an unprecedented extent, so much so that we are still entangled in it to this very day, and experience its influence on discourses of media evolution. The present section will substantiate this claim by showing that the human inclination to maintain a future-oriented outlook based on hope and a belief in purpose can be traced in many more and earlier times. The observations presented here should not be interpreted solely as constructing an account of chronological developments, but more as presenting a number of systematic and representative cuts in a historical timeline, and thus as showing the broad genealogical transformations in the thinking of time, progress, and utopia.
In most present-day historical research it is generally acknowledged that accounts of the structure of time in ancient – mostly Greek – sources emphasise its cyclical nature. Time cycles were believed to follow an eternal arc that stretched from a Golden Age to a Silver, Bronze, and finally, an Iron Age, after which divine intervention reset time back to a Golden Age. In these ‘ages of the world’, systematically written down for the first time around 700 BC by Hesiod in his Ἐργα καὶ Ἑμέραι [Works and Days], humankind typically experiences a slow but sure moral and spiritual decay, from a peaceful and happy time during the Golden Age to a dismal and chaotic epoch ruled by war and greed in the Iron Age. In this cyclical chain of events there is no progressive improvement to speak of, only a progressive degeneration from a once sublime state that only at an indefinite point in time could be restored. Most early Greek poets and philosophers therefore rarely looked ahead, instead turning their attention to the Eden-like past and emphasising the deplorable state of their own society. Technological developments may have provided the most palpable examples of how the Greeks might have experienced something that resembles our current notion of progress, but these developments were more often seen as bringing decline instead of advancement.

By describing man’s transformations in life as part of a cyclical and recurrent journey away from an ideal place, and positing them as ubiquitous and fixed truths about the human condition, the logic that connects the ages of the world is made up of two influential forces of human hope, and thus of desire and action: first, a feeling of loss caused by separation from one’s origin, and second, the recognition that there will never be a final stable state, that things are bound to happen again and again. Both forces engender their own specific necessary fictions. The first conveyer of desire and action, a feeling of loss, is in Greek mythology most prominently visible in Plato’s Symposium (written some four hundred years after Hesiod), in which he recounts how the poet Aristophanes tells of the creation of the two sexes. This creation myth describes how, long ago, humans came in three genders (androgyne, male, and female) and lived in perfect harmony. But, because the humans became complacent and did not properly honour the gods – especially Eros – they were punished and split in two, resulting in a division of humankind in heterosexual men and women, homosexual men, and lesbians. Since then, every one of us is eternally searching for our lost half, hoping to be reunited again in a state of bliss, under the guidance of Eros. The story outline thus acutely sets up an erotic longing for a return to a sublime state, propagating countless quests aimed at reaching that state; as Eros does not exonerate us, however, it is a longing that can never be fulfilled. Nonetheless, the story stirs us into action because it presents us with a goal that lies in the future: there is a path, and it should be travelled.

The second influence upon desire and action, the acknowledgement that things never remain as they are, gives expression to feelings of nostalgia as well.
as of hope; both look in opposite directions for a point in time where things were or will be better. According to historian Robert Nisbet (1980) this opposition can be observed in any discursive account on ideas of progress, and therefore it is possible to argue that not all Greek philosophers and poets saw their time on Earth as part of a cycle of regress. Moreover, even though Hesiod is often associated with having a regressive view on history, he could actually be seen as writing about progress in a very familiar modern fashion. In a second infamous myth in *Works and days*, Nisbet exemplifies, Hesiod tells of Prometheus, who stood up to the will of Zeus and single-handedly helped humankind make its first advance to civilisation by stealing fire from Mount Olympus and giving it to the pitiful humans. Then, having ‘lifted mankind from its primal degradation and misery to a level where man might seek to rival the gods’, Prometheus was punished by Zeus for all eternity (ibid.: 19). Thus, from that propitious moment on, humans were endowed with reason and gained the almost inescapable drive to build upon self-made stepping stones and progress to a better life. While Nisbet admits that it is not exactly clear what the nature of this progress was—Hesiod did not differentiate between moral, ethical, technological, or other forms of progress—it is a vision of progress nonetheless, and it had a considerable impact on classical thought. As Nisbet continues to show, throughout the classical period, Hesiod’s suggestion of the possibility of an unlimited advancement of humankind has influenced many writers, such as Aeschylus, Plato, Aristotle, Lucretius, and Seneca, all of whom had respect for ‘knowledge […] that gives protection, comfort and well-being to mankind’, had a clear conception of ‘the acquisition of this knowledge by man through his own abilities’, and recognised that this acquisition had ‘taken place cumulatively over a period of time’ and would continue to do so (ibid.: 46).

We therefore see that, while the cyclical model of time is held by many historians to be dominant in myths of life in classical times, complementary notions of linear progress can also be distinguished, thus negating the view that those myths told of nothing but recurrent decline and degradation. This observation has a significant impact on the current project of tracing the genealogy of stories of improvement. The Greek (and later Roman) society is widely held to be the starting point of Western civilisation, of the origin of many seeds of present-day thinking, so if ideas of improvement can be found amidst a *Zeitgeist* that is supposedly free of any belief in linear advancement, it makes their relation to contemporary ideas all the more potent. This is of course not to say that ideas of progress have not changed for more than two thousand years, or knew no alternatives. Although I am inclined to disagree with historian Morris Ginsberg when he says that ‘we are not justified in ascribing to [progress] universality, continuity or necessity’ (Ginsberg 1953: 5), because in my view there is a certain widespread psychological necessity to entertain a—any—notation of ‘that which is better’, I agree that any attempt to reduce the myriad forms of ideas of progress to a single
unbroken strand is futile. Rather, all these variants should be taken into account, composing a broad and contextually sensitive perspective on the manifestations of ideas of progress. The conditions that influence how we look at our own contemporary existence are dynamically structured, constantly shifting the boundaries of what is considered as ‘better’.

Linear ideas of progress found in myths in classical times were thus overshadowed by cyclical thinking, and differ from the contemporary version we have come to know. Not only was the progressive accumulation of knowledge more an individual than a collective process (one that did not necessarily entail social or ethical advantages), classical ideas of linear progress are also generally not endowed with much potency: according to historian Sydney Pollard, they were more ‘poetic explorations’ than ‘firmly based philosophic views’, and served no systematic search for a universal law of progress (Pollard 1968: 2-3). Accounts vary as to the moment in time when allusions to the modern notion of progress did find their first articulation; while most historians follow the argument that a belief in progress ‘could not take a firm hold over men’s minds’ until the doctrine of Providence was abandoned when modern science emerged (Ginsberg 1953: 7), others squarely place the seeds of the modern idea of progress much earlier, in Saint Augustine’s *De Civitate Dei* (*City of God*). In this chief orthodox Christian work, Nisbet, for example, already sees notions of ‘a unity of all mankind’, ‘historical necessity’, and ‘a confidence in the future that would become steadily greater and also more this-worldly in orientation as compared with next-worldly’ (Nisbet 1980: 47).

Whether the work of Augustine indeed presents us with the first glimpses of the roots of modern progressive ideas, or, as Pollard asserts, was actually ‘written to combat the doctrine of mundane progress’ (Pollard 1968: 5), what it did do was introduce to Christianity – and consequently to much of Western philosophy of history in the ensuing centuries – the originally Jewish notion of millenarianism, the ‘expectation that the end of the world is near and that, accordingly, a new earthly paradise is at hand’ (Noble 1997: 23). This apocalyptical view of the future of humankind marked an important change in the dominant understanding of time – from cyclical to finite, and thus linear – as well as initiated a goal-oriented pragmatism by foretelling that a paradisiacal state would await the chosen ones.

The basic elements that make up the ingredients of the monomyth can be seen to express themselves: the universal truth lies at the end of a long road, and people have to travel this road in a certain way in order to actually arrive at that truth.

The growing conviction in Christian thinking that a new millennium was at hand, however, is not necessarily seen in historical studies as the fundamental driving force behind a change in the general attitude towards the manipulability of the fate of humankind. Many historians discussed so far believed that, long engulfed in a mindset of inferiority, Christian thinkers in Europe did not assume it was possible or even appropriate to actively pursue the worldly implications of
the Final Truth. For orthodox Christianity, progress along the earthly road meant spiritual progress only, obtained by abiding by religious dogma and passively waiting for God himself to announce the Final Judgement. It is Robert Nisbet, again, who disagrees with the dominant vision of the Middle Ages as a period in which ‘thought was lost in contemplation of the heavenly hereafter and in despair of or disdain for the things of this world’; he names Joachim de Fiore as the most powerful of prophets, whose ideas of a future earthly paradise would make their way from the ‘twelfth down to the nineteenth’ century and inspired numerous thinkers of progress (ibid.: 93-95). When we look at the multitude of myths present in the latter of these centuries, there are strong hints that, after the Renaissance, the resigned attitude towards the inevitability of fate slowly morphed into a growing belief that man was capable of altering his living conditions for his own benefit after all (Gombrich 1974).

The Birth of Utopia and Its Progressive Realisation

A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realisation of Utopias. (Oscar Wilde 1891: 16-17)

In his book *Utopie en kritisch denken* [Utopia and critical thinking], Dutch philosopher Martin Plattel notes that although the urge to transcend everyday reality and strive for a better life has seen many different historical manifestations from classical antiquity and onwards, it was not until Thomas More wrote his 1516 novel *Utopia* that stories of human endeavours towards progress began to gain true momentum in the socio-cultural imagination (Plattel 1970: 27-30). Key in this respect was that More gave a name and a place, or, rather, a ‘non-place’ (from the Greek οὐ τόπος [ou topos]) to this envisioned better world: he described Utopia as an island where all inhabitants lived together in harmony, thereby making this a ‘good place’ (derived from εὖ τόπος [eu topos]) as well. Although More portrayed Utopia as a fantasy, and did not consider it to reflect his own personal political and social ideals, he cleverly imitated the mixture of fact and fiction that was characteristic of stories of discovery in his time (such as those of Marco Polo), thereby making Utopia believable and successful, and essentially founding the genre of the utopian novel.

As is predominantly the case with imaginative projections of possible ideals on future or not-yet-existing worlds, Utopia was born out of dissatisfaction with the contemporary state of affairs. Elaborating on Plato’s ideas on the ideal configuration of government of the city state in Πολιτεία [The republic], More presented an alternative societal structure to that of Britain, France, and other European feud-
alist nation-states, indirectly criticising their unwillingness to create a more humane system and put into practice important ideals of Christianity. The characteristic that can be recognised as most significant about Utopia is that More did not describe it as a natural, untouched paradise to be found, but as a society that could be constructed. In other words, Utopia is a narrative that meets – or essentially constitutes – Ernst Bloch’s basic prerequisites for expressing the not-yet-conscious, the daydreams that should be acted upon in order to bring forth truly utopian societal change.

Utopian fictions such as Utopia thus present us with an imaginative other place that can be interpreted as the ultimate reward for quests for a better life. As narrative theorist Phillip E. Wegner points out in Imaginary communities (2002), utopias are “‘nowhere’ [...] precisely to the degree that they make somewhere possible, offering a mechanism by which people will invent anew the communities as well as the places they inhabit’ (Wegner 2002: xvi-xvii, emphasis in original). This theme of perceiving the world as open to human discoveries and hospitable to utopian ventures can clearly be seen as gaining significance in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Written at a time when Christopher Columbus and Amerigo Vespucci had just made their great expeditions to the West, Utopia very much exudes New World pheromones, mingled with an invitation to re-invoke Saint Augustine’s image of the City of God, a perfect place on Earth. In the 1620s and 1630s, around the time Francis Bacon wrote his Utopia-inspired The new Atlantis, the utopian theme was literally exported from the British homeland by the Puritans. Their main goal was to complete the English Reformation and establish a truly spiritual society; by shaping the foundations for this exemplary righteous community, a New Jerusalem, they created a utopian backdrop against which many later American communities were modelled.20 As anthropologist Steve Mizrach notes, America became ‘the vehicle for Europe’s utopian imagination, [...] a place where the regeneration of the age promised by the Rosicrucians and other groups might come about, home to bold experiments in the investigation of nature and society’ (Mizrach 2001).

Social experiments such as those of the Puritans, an increasing stream of publications that aimed to describe all-encompassing models of how the world worked,21 a rise in the number of New World expeditions: these are all reflections of an intensifying tendency to act upon utopian daydreams of progress in the seventeenth century, an era that is marked by a ‘growing confidence of the power of man over his environment and, ultimately, over his destiny’ (Pollard 1968: 13). Thomas More was of course not the sole instigator of this change, nor was he merely the nomenclator of an idea that ‘had always already existed in some natural, ideal realm’ (Wegner 2002: 27), but Utopia became the reference work for anyone thinking about social reform in the following centuries. In the wake of the Reformation, which had already signalled a slow change in the dominant attitude towards the fate of inescapable degeneration and the circularity of time, the
theme of societal manipulability gradually took hold, expressing itself in necessary fictions while surfing on the rising tide of a new idea of progress, which was soon to find its zenith in the Enlightenment.

The Age of Enlightenment, which roughly spans from the second half of the seventeenth century to the end of the eighteenth century, is widely held to be the period during which a rational belief in linear progress both truly emerged and reached its highest peak. At no other time do we find so much optimism about the future and man’s role in constructing a utopian version of it than in these centuries. It was then that the belief in progress acquired its definition as ‘[meaning] that mankind has advanced in the past – from some aboriginal condition of primitiveness, barbarism, or even nullity – is now advancing, and will continue to advance through the foreseeable future’ (Nisbet 1980: 4-5). It is also the time when a linear sense of history manifested itself more fully. The prime force behind this belief in linear progression was reason; human rationality became seen as the most powerful way to break free from irrational fears, dogmatic beliefs, and dangerous ignorance, and to establish standardised methods for engendering improvements.

The fields in which these improvements were best visible were the mechanical arts and sciences. This was not only due to the refinement of instruments, but also, and more importantly, because the accumulation of scientific knowledge could seemingly go only one way, and that was forward through generation upon generation. The Apocalypse still had a prominent place in Enlightenment views of the world’s fate, but humankind no longer had to suffer while waiting for the subsequent Paradise. Moreover, progress in the mechanical arts and sciences became seen both as a sign of immanence of the awaiting Paradise and as the cause of this immanence. A certain historical need for continuous improvement thus arose: without it, there would be no progress, and without progress, there would be no redemption (see Tuveson 1949: 153-203). As will be further elaborated in chapter 3, this is one of the main themes running through myths of technological evolution from the eighteenth century onwards: the mechanical arts became commonly viewed as the driving force in history that brought a human-made earthly paradise closer with each new invention and improvement, and this view still resonates in present-day conceptions of technology.22

What is clear to discern from the events that took place in this period of changing worldviews is that there was an intimate correlation between the production and distribution of necessary fictions that told of reaching a better place through processes of progress. Together with the heightened significance of the gathering of knowledge, as well as the conviction that improvements in knowledge would automatically result in an improved society, the amount of utopian texts published during the Enlightenment rose to an unprecedented number.23 While such an outburst of creativity could have signalled a wide diversification of themes, the original blueprint of More’s Utopia always remains visible. The contents of
Enlightenment utopian texts invariably focus on the distribution of wealth and labour, the configuration of the governing political system, and on true justice and morality; the solutions to the problems posed by these questions all deal with specifying strict relations between groups and individuals, defining socially determined spatial zones, and placing the utopian city radically outside of contemporary societies yet in reach of those that really wanted to change things (Baczko 1978: 30-38). As would become clear in later centuries, this enormous gulf of imaginary and projected social ideals set the tone for many of the plans for social revolutions in Europe, as well as for the birth of modern positivist thinking.

At this point it should be noted that, in the accounts of historical manifestations of ideas of progress and utopian thought up until and including the Enlightenment, only two of the three visions of time that were discussed earlier are seen to have expressed themselves most visibly, namely cyclical and linear time. However, although their narrative expressions have indeed known dominant periods, they did not possess any exclusivity. The cyclical worldviews in classical Greece were accompanied by linear subplots, and the linear stories of progress during the Enlightenment were often coupled to the desire to return to a reconstructed Eden, the Paradise before the fall of man. This also means that the third vision of time, the spiral vision, understood as a blend of cyclical and linear time, had always been potentially present, although it had not manifested itself explicitly in Western thought. It is therefore fitting that, at a time when both visions of cyclical and linear time had clashed violently in a major paradigm shift, just after the end of the eighteenth century, German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel put forward an idea of time and history that resembled a spiral-like movement towards the Absolute.

For many historians writing on ideas of progress, Hegel is a mandatory stop-over. According to Nisbet, there is ‘scarcely a work in Hegel’s voluminous writings that is not in some fashion or degree built around the idea of becoming, of growth and progress’ (Nisbet 1980: 276). Similarly, Pollard writes that Hegel’s work represents the view that ‘the actual development of the world’, or what Hegel called Geist [Spirit], necessarily and unequivocally marches forward towards a state of complete consciousness of itself (Pollard 1968: 89). This progression is the result of a dialectical mechanism: every phenomenon (‘thesis’) is met by opposition (‘antithesis’), out of which, on a new and higher level, another phenomenon (‘synthesis’) arises, and then the whole process starts again. As Charles Van Doren notes in his review of Hegel’s position among authors who see progress as the result of some natural cosmic principle, there is thus a ‘rhythmic pattern […] to be observed in all phenomena’, in which ‘[e]verything comes to fruition, then to grief, then to a higher truth’ (Van Doren 1967: 91). The spiral emerges: the process by which Geist heaves itself up is repetitive and therefore circular, the direction towards the Absolute is linear.
Hegel’s account of the structure and motion of time and history thus stood for unchecked progress towards a final goal, which strongly resonated with the utopian mindset of the time. Plattel even states that the structure of every utopian thinking follows the basic Hegelian triad: ‘it moves away (antithesis) from the status quo (thesis), and focusses on a better future (synthesis)’ (Plattel 1970: 47). What is important to stress here, though, is that humankind’s role in Hegel’s view was that of an intermediary: we have little to no agency in the forward movement, it is Geist that progresses and makes its strides visible through the actions of humankind. Moreover, according to Hegel, attempts to actively enforce utopian conceptions of progress form the necessary dialectical counterpart of universal will, and are destined to bring about Terror. Published at a time very much characterised by the French Revolution and its grim aftermath, Hegel’s description of progress as the manifestation of a natural cosmic principle deeply contrasted with the deeds sparked by the utopian mindset of revolutionaries, or what he called ‘specific individual acts of will’ (Hegel 1967: 604). We will return to the dark and paradoxical sides of utopian projects soon, but here it suffices to say that, to Hegel, the image of the ideal Absolute Mind serves as the ultimate synthesis towards which the dialectical process itself moves, constantly setting humankind up for struggles between conflicting states of being.

Notwithstanding Hegel’s reservations regarding the terrifying effects of specific individual acts of will, at a time when necessary fictions of hope and purpose became more and more occupied with the notion that an earthly paradise could be installed, Hegel’s views on history and progress, as controversial as they were then and are now,24 were, in a variety of interpretations, shared, used, or expanded on by some of his early nineteenth-century contemporaries (like Henri de Saint-Simon, Robert Owen, Charles Fourier, and, later, Auguste Comte) in their diverse utopian schemes. The theories they used and the objectives they pursued differed from person to person, but overall a shared conviction can be identified that progress towards a more just and more peaceful society was feasible through instigating a revolutionary change and then building society anew by using a combination of science-based knowledge and technologies. While the main criticism of these ‘utopian socialists’, as they were somewhat disdainfully called by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, was that they merely sketched fantastical visions that could never be realised, their writings have been very influential in shaping a more scientific view on the manipulability of society, and inspired the foundation of many utopian communities, again confirming the power of the utopian impulse (see Schehr 1997).

The period from the middle of the nineteenth century up to the present day is one that shows an oscillating pattern in the ways that ideas of progress and utopian thought were perceived. First, amidst accumulations of scientific knowledge and rapid technological developments that gave rise to the Industrial Revolution, in Western societies the modernist belief took hold that progress was not only...
feasible, but could be steered towards very particular notions of what a utopian future should look like. As Plattel concurs, the utopian mindset ‘was no longer aimed at finding new possibilities, as it was during the Enlightenment, but at making and creating them’ (Plattel 1970: 35, emphasis in original). New scientific discoveries and new technologies increasingly strengthened the idea that all kinds of futures were now wide open, waiting to be realised. The vision of utopia as predominantly separated from us by space largely made way for a vision that saw utopia more as distant in time, something that can be distinguished in modernity’s necessary fictions, as reflected by the popular works and novels of Albert Robida, H.G. Wells and Jules Verne. From the beginning of the twentieth century onwards, however, ideas of progress lost much of their appeal due to large-scale failures of utopian social projects, and because there was a growing sense that new technologies could wreak havoc as much as they could propel humankind forwards towards a brighter and better future. Both world wars and other conflicts and catastrophes in the latter part of the twentieth century radically tempered the belief that humankind was indeed progressing towards a better life. Moreover, in what can be broadly described as a postmodern reaction to modernity’s conceptions of historical progression, a highly discontinuous and contingent view of time and history arose, in which there was no room for postulating the existence of hierarchical or organising principles such as those attached to progress and utopia (Marx 1994).

However, despite intellectual and cultural mistrust of grand narratives that tell of a better life that should be within reach, elements of their discursive constructions remain visible in stories in popular culture, in prophetic books on the optimistic future of what has been called the Information Revolution since the 1990s and onwards, and of course in advertising and publicity material for the sophisticated problem-solving capabilities of networked communication technologies (Hughes 2004: 107-109). Especially industries in capitalist societies are very well aware that the idea of advancement is a necessary element to their existence. Therefore, while necessary fictions of hope and purpose have known many manifestations that were invariably allied to dominant visions of time, and thus cannot be perceived as having a single definitive function, they continue to create new expressions of utopian narratives and stories of progress, which in turn persist in influencing decisions, processes, and actions in everyday life. The lure of thinking in terms of absolutes, universals, or totalities when daydreaming of better futures may have diminished in the latter part of the twentieth century, but it has not been discarded completely: much like in the spiral vision of time, the experience of a rhythmic pattern of rise and decline is today still coupled with a belief in a more general forwards movement. This also means that the inherent paradoxes of such spiral-inspired utopian thinking remain nurtured in conceptions of better futures. As we will see, the paradox forms the tragic disposition of necessary fictions in general, and of communication myths in the mobile age in particular.
When utopia meets dystopia: Behold the paradox

To be sure, I believe that without the notion of an unfettered life [...] the idea of utopia, the idea of the utopia, cannot even be thought of at all [...] There is something profoundly contradictory in every utopia, namely, that it cannot be conceived at all without the elimination of death; this is inherent in the very thought. (Theodor W. Adorno 1964 cited in Ziper 1988: 10, emphasis in original)

So far in this chapter it has been argued that necessary fictions are part of a psychological need to create order out of chaos, to create utopian landmarks that we can look out for while travelling along the paths of life. Because, inevitably, a sense of hope is projected upon the creation and preservation of such landmarks, the genealogy of ideas of progress and utopian narratives has up to now predominantly been discussed in the light of how they present us with a pristine state of ‘better’. What makes utopian landmarks so powerful as blueprints for hoping for the better is that, because they are foremost experienced as exactly just that, a blueprint, they can take on any interpretation of what exactly constitutes a better place. As a result, the utopian mindset becomes a locus where all possible interpretations come together to form a heterogeneous composite of deeply ingrained longings. Moreover, this imaginative constellation is so complex that, in the end, it cannot exist except as the paradoxical fulfilment of an unfulfillable desire. This paradox is inevitable: the human yearning for resolution, as a manifestation of the belief in a purpose to our existence that is recurrently expressed in narratives of progress and utopia, will always generate as well as face paradoxical problems when confronted with actual endeavours to achieve a final or other ultimate state of being. In a tragic yet unavoidable fashion, humankind cannot fully embrace this view; it vehemently tries to cope by either orienting itself towards a final change, putting its faith in transcendental ideals and envisioning the implementation of perfect societal structures, or by combining all these views in a belief in a millenarian apocalypse, the ultimate revolution that will establish a thousand-year-long divine heaven on earth before the end of time comes.

This inherent paradoxical inclination is very much a recognised element in studies of the utopian mindset, and thus should be included in any analysis of how future-oriented processes – such as those that can be found in the mobile communication condition – try to deal with or even conceal conflicting aspects of their projected outcomes. Approaching the specificity of utopian thought from a psychoanalytical standpoint, English scholar Jan Relf adds that utopian fiction narrates and stages imaginary, fantastic solutions to an unassimilable contradiction in the human condition; it strives to reconcile the knowledge that we
inhabit an irretrievably fallen and divided world in which the ideal state is unattainable, with the irresistible and mysteriously present idea of unified perfection (the good object) which we continue to desire. (Relf 1993: 110)

Building upon Jacques Lacan’s ideas about the manifestation of desire, Relf here points to the notion that utopias stand for a state of otherness that we long for continuously without ever attaining it, and that they thus inherently confront us with the question with what methodology they are ever going to be achieved. The focus on paradoxes in utopias at this point is therefore prompted by the supposition that an analysis of their nature and of the struggles to resolve them will provide the means to further understand the discursive strategies that are employed by myths that tell of reaching the unreachable communication sublime. In order to conduct such an analysis, I will highlight three mutually nonexclusive ways in which paradoxes reveal themselves: first, as regulative principles for understanding life itself in general and its myths in particular; second, as solutions for blending unavoidable contradictory opposites in utopian myths; and third, as centres of unstable balancing acts that bring forward anti-utopian and dystopian views, which both complement and reaffirm the tantalising power of ideas of progress and utopian narratives.

**Understanding life through paradoxes**

The nature of paradoxes is such that they first and foremost inspire debates on conceptual notions of how we see the world. Often presenting more questions than answers in a continuous test of what is true, these debates traditionally centre around age-old philosophical puzzles that concern themselves with investigations of purpose and meaning. Instructive in this respect is the work of Roy Sorensen, who in *A brief history of the paradox* writes that paradoxes are the ‘atoms of philosophy because they constitute the basic points of departure for disciplined speculation’ (Sorensen 2003: xi). When proposing to use an analysis of paradoxes as a means to describe the history and focal points of philosophy, Sorenson holds that these ‘[b]odies of conflicting evidence’ have fascinated us from the moment we began to ask ourselves where we come from and where we are heading to, thus stressing their prominent role in necessary fictions (ibid.: 1, 4). Most important to note here is that in every example of paradoxical thinking that Sorenson subsequently explores in his book, he identifies characteristics of paradoxes that are fundamental to an understanding of both our existence and its purpose-giving mechanisms, and therefore should be seen as elemental aspects of necessary fictions that aim to explain the inexplicable. In other words, every utopian myth will contain these characteristics, and by describing any of them, the paradoxes in future-oriented blueprints can be uncovered.
On the level of making sense of our existence through telling necessary fictions, paradoxes are thus inevitable. A very compelling argument for this human inclination towards paradox can be traced in existentialist theories, especially in Martin Heidegger’s treatment of Gelassenheit (‘releasement’) and Jean-Paul Sartre’s description of its conceptual opposite mauvaise foi (‘bad faith’). Whereas Gelassenheit deals with fully accepting one’s existence as something that has no intrinsic goal or pre-given content, as something that can only receive its significance through the meaning one chooses to give to it, mauvaise foi is the result of not accepting the open-ended nature of our existence, of continuously asking for reasons and trying to find the answers outside of one’s own will. Clearly, such a denial of things-as-they-are and of things-as-they-happen actively feeds and sustains a dual-pole system, in which paradoxes reside: there can be no coincidence when everything happens for a reason, and there can be no sense in it all when everything is contingent. People who live in bad faith – and there is ‘a very great number’ of them, according to Sartre (1956: 90) – often face and cannot accept the most obvious paradox: sometimes things are just what they are, even when they are not.

All this shows the double role of the paradox: it presents itself as a necessary element in understanding and coping with the mysteries of life (‘Why are we here? What is our purpose?’), and it arises as the only way in which problems stemming from the desire to unite antinomies can be resolved, becoming visible in fantasies, fictions, myths, and daydreams of wholeness and completeness. In this sense, the paradox thus defines the utopian genre: the ultimate collection of definitive solutions to worldly conflicts can only exist, as Philip E. Wegner concedes, ‘as a formal rather than a concrete spatial possibility, a figural space holder for something else that [is] finally unrepresentable’ (Wegner 2002: 200). Wegner provides a well-crafted analysis of the relationship between utopian literature and the way it has both commented on and shaped the ways in which we view our world, and he notes as well that the utopian narrative typically functions as a cognitive space in which real world crises are finally dealt with. This classification alone could suggest that the main goal of studying utopian myths is to understand them as merely fantastic contemporary projections of a possible ideal future; however, like Wegner, I find that analyses of utopian texts can disclose them as ‘rhetorical machine[s]’ that ‘participate in a significant way in the making of their social and cultural realities’ while they strategically incorporate paradoxical constructions to highlight (and dissolve) opposites in those realities (ibid.: 37, 40).

**Dissolving opposites in utopian myths**

This brings us to the second way in which the paradox manifests itself in utopian narratives, which is in the ability to seemingly dissolve opposites into a homoge-
nous whole. The emphasis here lies on ‘seemingly’, because the search for homogeneity is, again, a common structural theme in utopian myths that lays bare an inherent inevitability of creating unsolvable problems at the same time as they are solved. Universal answers invariably lead to new questions. As philosophers Hans Crombag and Frank Van Dun show in their book De utopische verleiding [The utopian seduction] (1997), there are four basic and interdependent causes of conflicts that all utopian stories try to provide an answer to, and all of those answers prove problematic in finding an overarching logic that is designed to be valid for everyone. The four causes of conflicts that Crombag and Van Dun name are plurality, diversity, scarcity, and unrestricted access; the solutions are found in their opposites by providing unity, consensus, abundance, and ‘righteousness’ (Crombag & Van Dun 1997: 27-28). While the authors see the establishment of a righteous society as the least imaginative of the four solutions – as this would merely need ‘an external force of control’ (ibid.: 28) – they find that the biggest problem lies in the idea that a well-functioning and all-encompassing consensus can be reached. Pointing to the human tendency to judge, value, decide, and act from one’s own limited worldview, they note that ‘even the most servile followers and rabid conformists are no match for the devastating powers of the cumulative misunderstandings, multifarious interpretations and wild guesses that make up the bulk of human communication’ (ibid.: 30).

Solving scarcity by creating an abundance of goods is equally problematic according to Crombag and Van Dun; they note that to make sure there is enough for everyone, there either has to be a drastic restriction imposed upon all desires, yearnings, and needs, or that a great increase in productive power has to be achieved (ibid.: 32). The contrast is enormous: while in the first solution people find happiness in a return to a serene paradisiacal state where nature itself is a horn of plenty (a utopia that Crombag and Van Dun call ‘ascetic’), in the second solution man conquers nature and literally manufactures his own happiness by producing everything he desires (what Crombag and Van Dun call a ‘utopia of freedom’) (ibid.: 32-33). Both solutions, however, ask for a wholly unrealistic organisational structure in order to either contain or satisfy all of a society’s desires, and both fail to see that what is one person’s serenity or freedom is another person’s nightmare or enslavement.

In other words, there can be no utopia without what Bronislaw Baczko calls ‘une représentation totalisante et disruptive de l’alterité sociale’ (Baczko 1978: 30, emphasis in original). This necessity of a regulative but paradoxical totalitarian praxis in order for utopias to work is identified by Wegner as well. In his analysis of Thomas More’s description of the social and spatial organisation of Utopia, Wegner sees a continuous need for ‘abstraction and homogenisation’ in the way people dress and build identical cities in which everyone speaks the same language, follows the same customs, and abides by the same laws (Wegner 2002: 48). When showing that this application of universalising mechanisms automati-
cally leads to the problems arising out of opposites described earlier, Wegner adds that ‘universalizing tendencies themselves produce antagonisms [...] that threaten to tear the social structure to pieces’; the only way in which these unstable relationships can be countered is through the creation of ‘an imagined set of particular allegiances and common grounds’, what he calls an imaginary unity (ibid.: 48-49). In chapter 2, where I will analyse universalising patterns in idealised ideas of communication, we will again see how an imaginary unity (as embodied by the communication sublime) engenders processes in which, the moment that levelling solutions are used to combat certain problems, other problems are raised.

Moving away from utopia... to return again

Finally, we come to the third way in which paradoxes manifest themselves, which is through dystopian and anti-utopian narratives.31 The observation that the inherent paradoxical nature of utopian narratives causes the creation of problems while simultaneously trying to solve them is one of the most prominent reasons that there have been many critical responses to utopian projects throughout time. As has been noted earlier, especially after the rise and fall of utopian socialism, with its tendency to propagate hypothetical visions of perfect societies without offering concrete and substantial mechanisms to create and sustain them, a contemptuous attitude towards the utopian mindset began to become commonplace, in which responses eventually took the form of outright condemnations of anything utopian as being unrealistic.32 So, although scepticism is found in every era and there are earlier examples of literary works satirising the incessant search for utopia (Jonathan Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels comes to mind), dystopian and anti-utopian narratives are typically found at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. Because dystopian and anti-utopian texts are written as a counterpoint to utopian narrative, and therefore define the utopian mindset by presenting themselves as logical opposites, it is important to focus on how these texts relate to the paradoxical character of utopia.

Dystopian and anti-utopian narratives typically exploit one or more fatal flaws in utopian designs, often by introducing an extrapolation of the supposedly ideal preconditions for utopias to exist and then extending them to their radical conclusions. As has been pointed out before, utopian flaws have to do with how universalising organisational schemas such as homogenising work, play, and housing, tend to leave out or stigmatise the particular. Subsequently, there is the problem of how the utopian hierarchy is to be established and maintained. If one thing has been made evident from the analysis of utopian thought, it is that an ideal societal structure will not be found in the wild, and therefore has to be imposed on an alleged non-ideal system.33 This inevitably raises questions on who decides what is ideal, and who takes control to enforce the changes that are
needed to reform society. As behaviourist B.F. Skinner, writer of the utopian novel *Walden two*, aptly remarked, ‘[d]esign implies control, and there are many reasons why we fear it’ (Skinner 1981: 37). Common themes running through dystopian and anti-utopian narratives thus include a totalitarian control by an (unseen) elite or entity, the abolishment of identity, an outright loss of privacy, the complete submission to mechanised or otherwise technologised systems, and the inability to escape from a rigidly imposed social hierarchy. A brief analysis of two influential dystopian and anti-utopian narratives will serve to illuminate this point.

Probably the best-known dystopian novel today is George Orwell’s ominous *Nineteen eighty-four*. In this work, we read that the lives of the citizens of Oceania are controlled by the Party and its omnipresent leader, Big Brother. Telescreens both broadcast Party opinion and monitor every citizen’s activity, so that not only speech and behaviour but even thought can be kept within the prescribed Party regulations. Sexual desire is repressed, children are encouraged to spy on their parents, and cities lie in ruins as a result of never-ending wars between Oceania, Eurasia, and Eastasia. From these descriptions it becomes poignantly clear how Orwell thinks a totalitarian doom scenario can – or even has to – emerge when the necessity to keep everyone and everything in a supposedly (and subjective) ideal configuration is extrapolated towards its radical vanishing point.34 Equally apparent is Orwell’s focus on the paradoxical mechanisms that have to be employed by the Party in order to maintain its power. The Party is never wrong: in part because it continuously alters history,35 but more importantly because it makes excessive use of ‘doublethink’, which is described by one of the Party’s opponents as ‘the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one’s mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them’ (Orwell 1951: 220). Through the central role that Orwell gives to the Party’s reliance on doublethink, exemplified most visibly in the Party’s maxims ‘War is Peace’, ‘Freedom is Slavery’, and ‘Ignorance is Strength’, he shows how self-contradictory and impossible dogmas both automatically arise and have to be actively deployed when universalising projects fuse oppositional worldviews into a single tenable perspective.

A similar focus on totalitarian themes, struggles between collectivism and individualism, and finding ways to escape from it all is found in Yevgeny Zamyatin’s lesser-known Мы [We] (1920), the book that can be credited as having influenced Orwell’s *Nineteen eighty-four* and is seen as the twentieth century’s first anti-utopian novel. In Zamyatin’s fictional future world, 80 percent of the global population has died because of a two-hundred-year-long war that could be described as an archetypical clash between the modern technology-driven mindset and the prehistoric untouched wilderness of nature. Modernity prevailed, and the survivors gathered in a single city (the ‘One State’) that has shut out nature by means of a great ‘Green Wall’. Zamyatin carefully employs common utopian mechanisms for the construction of an ideal society: everything in the One State is per-
fectly planned, balanced, and controlled through an intricate system of regulations, which, overseen by the ‘great Benefactor’, governs labour, free time, social and sexual relations, education, and justice. The ‘Table of Hours’ schedules and harmonises all activities of the city’s inhabitants – who are not called citizens but ‘numbers’ – up to the precise second, and through the diary entries of protagonist D-503 the reader learns that (in contrast to Orwell’s Oceania) this rational and mathematically structured life is considered good. But, and this is what makes We work as a counterpoint to classic utopian themes, underneath this narrative structure Zamyatin questions why the good life has to be paid for by removing every notion of individualism, creativity, and ‘out-of-the-ordinary-ness’. Just as in More’s Utopia, people in the One State dress the same, the city’s architectural make-up is without any frivolity and the social hierarchy is strictly adhered to, but in We, D-503 slowly comes to realise that this is actually not perfection; rather, it works as a straitjacket for what he learns is his ‘soul’. While at first he is of the opinion that the imposed rules of collectivism present him with true freedom because they relieve him from the burden of having to make difficult choices and take charge of his life himself, he gradually cannot help but notice a growing and deeply rooted desire to express his individuality. Diagnosed as having the ‘soul-disease’, he tries to resist the revelation that perfection is in fact unattainable, but he fails miserably. In the end, after having seen the chaotic and colourful world of the Mephi people behind the Green Wall, D-503’s psychic state is in such turmoil that he decides he cannot leave his old world, and undergoes a ‘fantasectomy’ which cures him from having any sense of an autonomous self.

While this ending is of course a bleak one, one that enforces the assumption that We is essentially an anti-utopian novel because there seemingly is no resolution to the oppression of individuality in highly organised utopian societies, Zamyatin actually does present us with a possible way out of thinking of utopias as perfected but dreadful places. The answer lies not so much in persevering where D-503 had turned back, and choosing a Rousseauian return to the pure authenticity of nature, but more in an acceptance of contradictory worldviews and paradoxes as necessary structural elements of life. The irrational world of nature is no more utopian than the rational world of the city, but it needs to exist to establish a highly unstable but nevertheless persisting and necessary balance. Number I-330, the girl that made D-503 doubt the perfection of the One State in the first place and wants him to join her in overthrowing the status quo, makes this point clear when she tells D-503 there is always a next revolution: ‘There is no final one; revolutions are infinite. The final one is for children: children are frightened by infinity, and it’s important that children sleep peacefully at night...’ (Zamyatin 1972: 174). Thus, Zamyatin tells us, as long as utopias are pictured as final, stable, and unchanging societal configurations, they will fall victim to their inherent flaws; the tricky solution to the problems of wanting to design an ultimate utopian place is to accept that the only possible ‘ultimate’ rests in embracing
the presence of paradoxes. In Blochian terms, then, the dialectical infinite revolution described in We ‘critically illuminates that which is “not yet” available to any of us’ (Wegner 2002: 170), and as such serves as a useful – or even necessary – tool to help guide our desire to hope and imagine in a more productive way. Seen as such, utopian thought regains some of the value it lost during the twentieth century, and comes to stand for a continuous receptiveness to change, albeit an absent-present one.

The utopian paradox thus comes full circle: on the one hand, we desire stable configurations that do not exist and cannot be reached (and even if we could realise utopia it would undermine the essence of what it means to be human); on the other hand, the escape from this desire in the form of an infinite revolution is in effect unimaginable itself, and holds within it the prospect of evolving anyway towards a different understanding of what it is to be human, leaving behind our present hopes and dreams of what constitutes a better future. Criticism of the flaws in utopian thought, when viewed from the perspective of the human tendency to look for purpose and meaning, quickly leads towards the equally utopian question ‘If not envisioned like that, how then should we think of what constitutes an improvement upon what we have now?’ Thus, dystopian and anti-utopian narratives may reinforce the notion that utopian thinking is something to be scorned, but in the end there is no escape from it; at least embracing the dialectical version, one that acknowledges the ‘concerns of natural law and human dignity’ as Wegner (ibid.: 171) notes, may provide us with outlooks that are less bleak than those often associated with radically developed utopias.

In the following chapter, the complex functioning and roles of these paradoxes in structuring and guiding the discourses of hope, purpose, progress, and utopia will be revisited as we look at how myths of improvement and fulfilment play their part in idealised ideas of communication. Problems similar to those described above arise when communication is thought of as something that lies at the heart of what needs to be improved in order to progress towards an ultimate and final better place. The price that is always paid for these kinds of converging solutions is a repression of antinomies, which are necessary to understand the longing desire per se. As Crombag and Van Dun note, realised utopia is a ‘happiness machine’ in which there can actually be no conscious knowledge of what happiness is, because its counterpart does not exist and therefore cannot help to construct a scale to judge the degree of happiness on (Crombag & Van Dun 1997: 49-51). The banishment of unhappiness and the accompanying search for a serene ideal may reflect psychological desires that are understandable, but what is wilfully forgotten is that the ultimate fulfilment of those desires will radically transform human existence, along with all notions of what constitutes happiness, individuality, society, or, as will become clear in the next chapter, communication.

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