

THE DEATH OF SHANGRI-LA: THE UTOPIAN IMAGINATION AND THE DIALECTICS OF HOPE

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The Necessity of the Impossible

At a recent radical education conference, in the USA, a colleague asked how many of the participants could imagine a viable alternative to global corporate capitalism. (I use the term as a general bete noir – everyone can insert their own particular version). Basically, few could come up with any coherent and believable alternative image. Experience suggests that they are not alone in having such a difficulty.

It can appear that there simply **are** no alternatives to the supreme rationality of the market. We can seem “torn between dreams that seem unrealisable and prospects that hardly seem to matter” (Ungger, cited in Harvey, 2000: 155). Yet as Oscar Wilde famously insisted: “A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not even worth glancing at” (cited in Harvey, 2000:133).

At a time when the process of globalisation under the banner of corporate capitalism can seem not only unstoppable, but also the only viable option, and when despair and cynicism seem to go hand in hand with rampant consumerism, I believe there is an urgent need for a fuller engagement with a utopian imagination. The essential cataloguing of profound social, psychological and environmental problems must be accompanied by a vision of hope that is of equal, if not greater imaginal and symbolic profundity. In this dialectics of hope, the goal is for a world that is both more just and more soulful. But, while I seem to be continually confronted by the paucity of any sustainable utopian ideals, I wonder if this is really the case. Has the utopian urge really dissipated in the face of a remorseless logic of global capitalism or has it changed its shape? If so, where could it now be found and what could it look like? (1)

I want to focus on the example of *Shangri-la* and search for its traces in the terrain of contemporary popular culture, for it is here that crucial struggles occur in the politics of everyday life. My aim is not to deny the perilous and oppressive circumstances of everyday life, but to search for images and moments when hope becomes a

possibility, when a glimpse of an alternative can be evoked. This is a crucial issue. It can be compared with someone coming to therapy only to be told by the therapist: 'My goodness, you're in a real mess! I don't see how anything can be done to help'. There must be hope if healing is to take place and the task is to find and work with, the symbols of that hope.

Shangri-la? Whats that?

Over the past 25 years much of my research has been on the relationship between Tibet and the west. Although a considerable part of that research and writing has been concerned with the 'problems' in this relationship, particularly the power imbalance, with the oppressiveness of western fantasies and the use of an idealised Tibet as a form of naïve escapism, this was never my exclusive focus. I was also interested in the flow from Tibet of ideas, practices and values that have influenced and benefited western cultures, of the opportunities presented in the encounter for the west to renegotiate its relationship with the world, for example in the areas of psychology, therapy, religion, science and environment (Bishop, 1989; 1993; 1997). Therefore, while fully aware of the complex 'orientalist' issues, I want to take this opportunity to look again at the extraordinary myth of Shangri-la, at its emancipatory qualities. In the same way that Tibet can become obscured or captured by a vision of Shangri-la (Lopez, 1999; Korom, 1997), so too, Shangri-la, and with it the utopian imagination, can be overshadowed by its complex relationship with Tibet. I certainly don't want to use this talk to debunk western Tibetan fantasies.

I have chosen Shangri-la because it was the final western utopia of the second millennium to reach widespread popularity. Traces of this 1930's fantasy of a lost paradise, hidden in a remote valley, can be found throughout popular culture: in film, novel, travel, politics, religion, environmentalism, advertising, and cyberspace. Applied equally to international hotels, and suburban homes, it has never been exclusively identified with Tibet, although that country gave the myth the fertile ground of its conception and has been intertwined with it ever since. Ambivalence and contradiction, idealization and hostility, have accompanied this fantasy, a fantasy that embraces both utopia and apocalypse. What is the fate of this myth in an era when expanding globalism and high-tech culture have all-but eliminated the possibility of any Earth-bound hidden valley and uncharted civilization? Today

Shangri-la is just about dead, due to a critical postmodern sophistication and irony, to global surveillance, corporate globalism, as well as cultural and economic imperialism. While such a death is welcome for those who saw Shangri-la as a prison of naïve idealism, as merely an oppressive western orientalist fantasy, we must also mourn it's passing. What are the cultural and psychological implications of losing any hope of a Shangri-la, of losing the possibility of a far away but nevertheless geographically real, utopian place, a secret sanctuary, whose sole purpose, however naively and oppressively formulated, was to save the world at the moment of it's ultimate catastrophe? What are the future possibilities for the utopian imagination in the new century? Above all, what can we learn from Shangri-la?

I recently asked one of my undergraduate classes how many had heard of Shangri-la. Out of about 100 students only a dozen put up their hands and of these only a few had any real notion of what Shangri-la was, let alone its connection with Tibet. I told them to ask their parents or grandparents. I was certain they'd know. It is partly a generational thing. It was a fantasy that worked, was real, was even a healing fiction, for three, maybe four generations. Yet, although often now not named as such, there are many idealised images, particularly, but not exclusively of Tibet, that resonate with the qualities of a Shangri-la.

Lost Horizon, in both novel and film, told of a brilliant young British diplomat, Conway, who is mysteriously abducted from a turbulent 1930's China and flown, along with some unfortunate companions, into unmapped regions of the Kun Lun mountains bordering northern Tibet (Hilton, 1933). The plane eventually crashes high in the mountains. They are rescued by a party of Tibetans and, after an immensely difficult journey, are taken to their monastery which is located in a hidden valley. Miraculously, after the terrible blizzards, high winds and bitter cold of the journey, the secret valley seems bathed in perpetual spring. Shangri-la, as the place was called, had been established in order to preserve the very 'best' aspects of 'civilisation' against the certainty of impending global warfare with its catastrophic consequences. We are told that people can live until they are many hundreds of years old due to the regenerative atmosphere of the valley, but if they leave, they rapidly age, wither and die. The British diplomat has long been torn between political action and a contemplative life, as opposing solutions to the world's pressing problems. In

fact, we discover that his abduction was orchestrated from Shangri-la and he has been chosen to replace its wise and very ancient spiritual leader, originally a Jesuit missionary, who is at last dying. Conway is unsure what to do, but is finally persuaded to leave Shangri-la by his disgruntled companions and to regain the outside world. However, on the journey out he becomes convinced of Shangri-la's truth and his role in its mission. He then sets out, alone, on a desperate but almost impossible journey, to try to find his way back.

Shangri-la and Tibet

The dominant western fantasy of Tibet is as a 'lost realm', a mysterious, remote fairytale land on the roof of the world, the last home of ancient mystery traditions where parapsychological and occult feats are treated as commonplace, a sublimely peaceful realm outside the crass turmoil of history (Bishop, 1989). (2) Whilst often oppressive, this idealised image has also been mobilized successfully by some exiled Tibetans in recent decades, as they struggle to find ways of enlisting western sympathy and support, perhaps even to the point of believing it themselves. Some Tibetans have criticised both westerners and fellow Tibetans for becoming imprisoned within a Shangri-la 'complex'. Conversely, often Tibet has been caught in a cross-fire as westerners scathingly critique the seeming absurd idealisation of Shangri-la (Bishop, 2000). In such cases, Tibet is identified almost exclusively with the utopian vision. Clearly, the relationship between Tibet and Shangri-la is a complex one.

So, what can we learn from Shangri-la?

I believe that the most important challenge in the new century is to overcome a split between social, individual and environmental perspectives, as well as between the spiritual, psychological and the secular. A conversation needs to be set up which values and takes all of these into account. Much of this work has already begun. Like Shangri-la, the 'goal' is an image of a society, a world, that is both more soulful, spiritual **and** more just.

A crucial site of this struggle is popular culture and its place in everyday life. A sustained and sympathetic engagement with this awkward terrain is vital, with its exuberance, its crass commercialism, frustrating contradictions, with its often creative

and discerning audiences. Often described as nothing but debased, cheap entertainment, a distraction at best and consumerist manipulation at worst, popular culture reveals itself, just like Shangri-la, as the site of momentous ongoing global struggles, in small acts of resistance and meaning-making.

Indeed, in novel and film, Shangri-la was imagined as being somehow outside popular culture, a culturally superior place where dance bands, radio and cinema were absent. But, crucially, it was conceived entirely within popular culture and draws us, entangles us, in its messy terrain. Paradoxically, therefore, Shangri-la encrypts at the very heart of popular culture a space that is imagined totally free from it.

A full-page colour cartoon, from the respected British newspaper, *The Guardian*, illustrates the complexities and confusions in the relationship between Tibet, Shangri-la and popular culture (Douglas, 1997). Satirising Hollywood's recent films about Tibet, it shows Scorsese in the director's chair, cameras, movie sets and extras dressed as Chinese soldiers with bayonets fixed to their rifles. A realistic image of an earnest-looking Dalai Lama is located at the very centre of the picture. His head is closely adjacent to a van offering "mobile snacks". By association this suggests that the Dalai Lama and Tibetan Buddhism are just 'fast' foods, a quick snack for mindless westerners. It would appear that something is being trivialised here. But what? Hollywood? The Dalai Lama? Western fantasies? On the other hand, is the Dalai Lama or the utopia of Shangri-la irrevocably diminished by their involvement and representation in popular culture, whether idealised or satirised? Or, is popular culture and everyday life somehow enhanced and invigorated by it, no matter how bizarre, naïve or distorted are the images? I am reminded of the Tibetan Buddhist image of *The Wheel of Life*, which shows the six realms of human existence ranging from the heavens to the hells. In each realm appears a manifestation of the Buddha, demonstrating that no matter how distressing or distorted are the circumstances, help and hope are at hand, the potential for awakening is always present if we know how to look for it. As a symbol of hope, wisdom and compassion, or of struggle against social injustice, the Dalai Lama's influence extends far beyond the more limited range of western Buddhists. While the presence of his image in a satirical, cynical and trivialising cartoon is clearly problematic in terms of the seriousness of his message,

at the same time it marks the doorway into another kind of discourse, marks the point of intersection for another order of imagining.

What about Shangri-la as the archetypal utopia?

There were five crucial aspects to this 1930's utopian vision.

- 1) It was an image of perfection and hence was an object of hope, longing and of desperate nostalgia.
- 2) Although it was safely **hidden** somehow **outside** modern global history and politics, it was also of this world. It was a place one could imagine actually journeying to. It was a place that a few chosen and exceptional individuals could find and live in, as well as a place that could just be believed in and perhaps, like a beacon, used for inspiration and as an exemplary spiritual resource.
- 3) Its apocalyptic purpose, to preserve and ultimately to resurrect civilization, gave Shangri-la its mission and the urgency of its moment in history. Unlike most utopias, Shangri-la was not a blueprint, was not a model to be emulated nor was it a goal to be aimed for. It was imagined to be **a cultural and spiritual ark** - like Noah's, gathering things to ensure their survival and to re-seed the world.
- 4) An acute and essential ambivalence also lay at the heart of this fantasy. Attitudes towards it were not simply celebratory, Instead of a perfect society Shangri-la was also seen in terms of boredom and aristocratic tyranny, its very spirituality a seductive opiate bordering on madness. Instead of a safe place outside the chaos of a world that had lost contact with fundamental values and was speeding to its doom, several characters in both novel and film curse Shangri-la as a prison whose evil wardens and innocent inmates alike were deluded if not insane. Even the leading protagonist, Conway, is unsure.
- 5) It was a magical place. A place of beauty and enchantment. It was like a fairy world that was very different to the regime of spiritual authority and order that seem to dominate both utopian visions and fantasies of Tibet.

Right from the start, Shangri-la came to be used in two very different ways: on the one hand it was a magical hideaway, a nostalgic retreat like a cottage or vacation destination - gone went any bitterness, any pain of loss; gone as well went the apocalypse, the global purpose. On the other hand, Shangri-la was imagined to be an ideal spiritual utopia with a global purpose. But in both cases any ambivalence was

lost - there seemed to be no doubt about its desirability. Over the past 50 years a full vision of Shangri-la is rare, instead various partial aspects are mobilised, for example the apocalyptic mission, its sense of enchantment, or its spiritual perfection, in isolation from the full contours of its imaginal phenomenology.

From a **western perspective** this 1930's Shangri-la can be seen as a Depression-era compensation, promising a kind of never-never land, a paradise in contrast with the unemployment, greed, wars and poverty all around. On the other hand, it could be seen as a critique, a refusal, a protest against a seemingly inhuman machine-age, a degenerate but unstoppable global modernity. It was for many a healing fiction. Of course, it could also be seen, negatively, as the culmination of hundreds of years of oppressive western fantasy-making about Tibet.

On the other hand, I believe the invention or discovery of Shangri-la in the late 1930s can be understood from another, very different perspective.

It is widely recognised, for example, that James Hilton was 'influenced' by Shambhala stories, the ancient Tibetan myth of a mystic kingdom hidden deep in the mountains, one which guides civilisation and eventually will emerge to triumphantly battle with the dark forces poised to take over the world (Bernbaum, 1980). Of course there are important differences between Shambhala and Shangri-la, but the similarities are striking.

I want to suggest that Shangri-la can be seen as part of a transmission of wisdom teachings and mythologising **from** Tibetan culture **to** the west. A process that is still continuing, for example, with the extensive on-going series of Kalachakra initiations by the Dalai Lama. The extraordinary success of a small, third world country, and, latterly, of a very small group of refugees, in influencing a wide spectrum of western society and becoming an integral part of western culture, must be acknowledged. It is simple arrogance to view the success of Tibetan Buddhism, or the widespread interest in things Tibetan, purely in terms of western appropriation. It denies Tibetans efficacy. It is too western-centred.

Nor was Shangri-la the first example of this transmission. Just a few years earlier the *Bardo Thodol* (or *Tibetan Book of the Dead*), was “discovered” in a small Himalayan town. It was a text that belongs to the Tibetan tradition of "termas" which tells how in the eighth century A.D., Padma Sambhava, hid many spiritual treasures designed to be discovered in the future, when conditions would be appropriate for the reception of the wisdom teachings they contained. Integral to this tradition of 'concealed treasures', are stories about secret and sacred valleys. Indeed, “In addition to serving as repositories for such sacred objects, the hidden valleys themselves are regarded as concealed treasures” (Bernbaum, 1980:64-65). From a Tibetan terma perspective, therefore, it could be said that the western ‘discovery’ of the *Bardo Thodol*, occurred at precisely the most appropriate moment for its reception into western culture (Bishop, 1997). Given that secret valleys are part of this tradition, it is also significant that the *Tibetan Book of the Dead’s* reception into the West occurred within a few years of the myth of Shangri-la.

Shambhala, Kalachakra, *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, Secret Valleys, are all part of same Tibetan ‘terma’ tradition, one to which I believe Shangri-la can be linked.

While Shangri-la is a fusion of earlier utopian themes, it also marks the definite emergence of a radically different image, one I have not come across before in western history: the secret valley that will act as an ark to save civilisation, but which also serves as a spiritual inspiration in the years leading up to the inevitable apocalypse. This marks the transmission of another mode of mythologising.

So, Shangri-la can be seen, not just as a western creation but also part of Tibetan Shambhala mythologising, one that has jumped across the boundary between mythological paradigms. (3)

Also, if Shangri-la in some way hints at Shambhala, then perhaps it actually exists. But how can it be said to exist? Wasn't it just something written about in a popular novel and re-created in a Hollywood movie? Here we can at least point to ideas of the Buddhist Pure Lands (Suzuki, 1970) and to *Himma*, the faculty of visionary imagination described by the Sufi Ibn' Arabi (Corbin, 1969). In both cases, the power of belief, of creative imagination, is essential. For example, Hillman writes of: “This

faithful attention to the imaginal world, this love which transforms mere images into presences, gives them living being...” (1967: 118). In a similar vein Suzuki writes: “Instead of being born in the Pure Land, for sincere followers, the Pure Land itself is created: it comes into existence.... Therefore instead of our going over to the Pure Land, it comes to us ” (1970: 20). In other words, Shangri-la, or Shambhala, like any utopian vision, challenges our very concepts of objective geographical existence. Indeed, I believe we need to explore the notion of a subtle geography, one that parallels a more common idea of a subtle body.

Vision and Nostalgia

The utopian imagination is haunted by its shadow, its unacknowledged authoritarianism, its power, its certainty, by the desperate seduction of the purity of its vision down to the last detail. But, while the utopian imagination can express itself in a full utopian vision, this doesn't have to be the case. It can simply be an urge towards some ideal, or a refusal to accept the conditions of the present. A vague but persistent prompting. A fragmented intimation. A hope or an expectation.

Utopias are an expression of faith: social, spiritual and psychological. Significantly, Pure Land Buddhism, or an emphasis on paradise in Christianity or Sufism, are expressions of a Way of faith. Psychological faith is not a belief in any particular object or place, but a trust in images and in the productive power of the imaginal, in its reality and in its emancipatory potential in realising a more just and soulful world. Psychological faith vitalises our experience of belief (Grinnell, 1970).

While the brilliance and calculated perfection of utopias such as Shangri-la draws attention to their visionary power, a fundamental tension between vision and nostalgia is integral to the utopian imagination. (4) Underlying hope and expectation is a great sense of loss and the unbearable bitter-sweetness, scarcely acknowledged, of impossibility, of non-return.

This is a dangerous terrain: the fierce dogma of visionary idealism and the swampy molasses of over-sentimentalised nostalgia. Vision and nostalgia in tension **and** in partnership.

As a form of lost paradise, Tibet's political situation evokes not simply outrage but also deep nostalgia across a broad range of Tibetans and westerners.

Deep nostalgia can often be a radical political nostalgia - among exiles, refugees and emigres, among the dispossessed and those who have never possessed, among indigenous populations around the world, in the struggles to sustain cultural integrity in multicultural societies, - a deep nostalgia that refuses to accept the present order, that idealises a past in the name of a future hope.

Nostalgia is not a sign of decrepitude, of old age, rather it can signal the summoning of the elders, of the imaginal ancestors. This ancestral issue is crucial now. In every case of a politically radical nostalgia, particularly indigenous politics, but not exclusively so, from Tibet to the highlands of Scotland, from Australian Aboriginals to native Americans, the question of respect for the ancestors is fundamental. How to imagine, respect, evaluate them.

The utopian imagination therefore launches us into an impossible project. It draws us into what Jung called a *complexio oppositorum*, a contradictory mix of opposites.

The title of the original book and film, *Lost Horizon*, suggests that beyond the furthest horizons of our vision, both inner and outer, in a forgotten region of the world or imagination, lies a secret place of utmost importance. It suggests that, so consumed are we with the mundane that our horizons are closed in all around and we have lost a particular horizon which allows us a vision of great importance. Shangri-la is like a beacon reminding us of that 'Lost' horizon. It is a window through which that horizon becomes visible, or at least possible. It is a reminder that something important, a critical other dimension, has been lost or forgotten, even if we are unsure what exactly it is. The idea of lost, remote or distant should not be necessarily be equated with far away in a literal sense. The horizon about which Shangri-a reminds us can be very close indeed

Shangri-la and popular culture.

How does Shangri-la appear? How is it summoned? Usually it is through glimpses and fragments, whether in dream, reverie, or in popular culture. We need to go into

the world of popular culture in order to find images of hope. For popular culture was where Shangri-la was born and, most importantly, this was where Shangri-la had its utopian mission – to be hidden, encrypted, secure within a world imagined to be morally degenerate, wounded, spiritually bankrupt and irrevocably racing to its self-destruction.

I want to look at four moments when there is the possibility of a Shangri-la appearing in texts and circumstances that at first glance would seem uncondusive to a utopian imagining, and try to untangle some of the issues involved, some of the ways in which the encryption can be revealed.

1. Shangri-la and the Dalai Lama

The 1996 film *Independence Day* tells of the invasion of the Earth by a technologically superior and ruthless alien civilisation. Their immense starships are shown hovering low over all of the Earth's major cities, blotting out the sky and terrifying the population. Humanity seems on the verge of extermination. Early in the film, one such starship quickly centres itself low and threateningly over the White House. We are taken into the office of the US President as he tries to come to terms with the enormity of the situation. The camera slowly pans across his desk, then pauses for just a second on a close-up of four small, framed, photographs in a row. On the left, close together, are two family portraits, while on the right is a photo of him and the Pope. But the central photograph clearly shows the President and the Dalai Lama, alone together, laughing, arm in arm. Here are images of the two most powerful figures in human culture, shown united but each at opposite ends of a sharp polarity: secular power and spiritual authority. This is the only reference to Tibet in the film. What kind of meanings could circulate through such a small glimpse? The Dalai Lama is an instantly recognisable signifier of an exemplary moral and spiritual Tibet. His photo appears at the exact moment that apocalypse is evoked and the leader of the world's most powerful nation is in full retreat.

In this film, the apocalyptic connection with Tibet, which is integral to the Shangri-la myth, comes to the fore. The Dalai Lama's photograph is evoked either like some kind of desperate icon or talisman, the Dalai Lama as human embodiment of an Ark-like Shangri-la, or as a nostalgic reminder of human spiritual attainment soon to be

annihilated. It reveals a Dalai Lama, and hence perhaps a Shangri-la, that has become integrated into both western popular culture and high-level global politics.

2. The magical child appears

In many recent films, such as *Little Buddha*, *The Golden Child*, *The Shadow*, *Seven Years in Tibet*, and *Kundun*, the focus has been on the Tibetan male Lama in the form of a wonder child, a figure of benign wisdom and power that can transcend individual death, which can control reincarnation. Often this wisdom/power is enlisted in a fight against absolute evil.

An irritation with the western idealisation of Tibet consistently produces its opposite, a scornful dismissal, or even anger (Bishop, 2000). Elsewhere there are scathing criticisms of Tibet's authoritarian culture and its feudal past, the oppressive role of the male monastic elite. The child motif suggests naivety, simplicity, innocence, trust and vulnerability. The child is therefore a perfect figure to represent an idealised Tibet stripped of any confusing associations with political despotism, or religious deception. Perhaps too, it can be read as symbolising a new beginning, a rebirth for Tibet itself? Or the rebirth as promised by Shangri-la? This late twentieth century motif of the wonder-child is certainly different to the one 100 years earlier, of Tibet in terms of an infantilism - the child as irrational, dependent, irresponsible and pre-moral.

In a significant reversal, just as Tibet becomes symbolised by a wonder child, the west becomes symbolised by the other side of the archetype, by some of the more infantile characteristics. So, *The Golden Child* opens with a close-up of a giant, prayer wheel, followed by robed monks solemnly chanting in front of a giant golden statue of the Buddha. The film then cuts to an image of the Statue of Liberty, which is quickly revealed to be merely a small reproduction, in the back of pick up truck. After the US flag, the Stars and Stripes, we are shown, in quick succession: donuts, petrol pumps, and a billboard with HOLLYWOOD, CALIFORNIA. These icons of the USA seem tacky, temporary and superficial compared with the ancient ritual certainty of the Tibetan objects that surround the wonder child. At best the Americana seems playfully childlike and brashly innocent. Certainly its superficiality seems unable to cope with a struggle against the forces of evil.

Many in the west are looking for some source of wisdom, certainty and personal power. In these films, the exemplary qualities of Tibetan religious culture are condensed into the image of a wonder-child, innocent, wise and pure, with miraculous healing powers. As if a direct cipher for Shangri-la, in these films the child-monk, so separate from the mundane world around him, is also strangely vulnerable to outside forces, but, on the other hand, is mentally and psychically in control.

3. Shangri-la.com

To work, imaginally, with popular culture, also means taking advertising seriously, as a complex and contradictory expression. Idealised, 'Shangri-la', Tibetan images are found in a range of commercial advertising.

In an advertisement for SBS, Australia's unique TV and Radio, dedicated exclusively to multicultural broadcasting, and to a non-racist multicultural society, an Aboriginal male with sacred markings is shown playing a didgeridoo alongside Tibetan monks in full ceremonial attire playing *ra-dongs*, the famous 6 metre long trumpets. The location is Tibet, or another Himalayan country. The respect accorded to Aboriginal spirituality is echoed in that accorded to Tibetan, particularly among SBS viewers and the readers of the quality newspaper, *The Weekend Australian*, in which the ad appeared. Indigenous Australia is placed alongside indigenous Tibet, mutually reinforcing both struggles. Is this merely an indulgent image of self-congratulation by a liberal elite, or is it a healing fiction, or an image of a hopeful ideal?

The second is for ApplePowerbook. The ad shows four smiling Tibetan monks in full ceremonial attire standing around an equally smiling western man, seated with a PowerBook computer on his lap (Barglow, 1994:195-197). Close inspection reveals that on the screen is information about Drepung Loseling monastery in Tibet; about its enforced relocation in India due to Communist Chinese occupation of Tibet; about details of worldwide performances of sacred music and dance by the monks; claims that these traditional practices can heal and purify the planet in these troubled times. Again, here is an idealised, 'Shangri-la' cultural politics, religion and psychology in close proximity with entertainment and consumerism. They all share the same stage, the same media, the same rhetoric, the same images and symbols. Boundaries are blurred. It requires careful imaginal work to untangle each form of promotion, to

create some small space between them, let alone to evaluate and pass judgement. Is it a case of pure commercial exploitation, both of Tibetan culture and of a utopian imaging? Or a subtle form of cultural imperialism that draws the Tibetan culture into the technology-centred and market-driven concept of how the world is put together? Or is it showing a compassionate western technology coming to the rescue of exploited Third world cultures, albeit like endangered species? Is it part of a remetaphorising, a re-souling, of technology, particularly given the connotation of a Shangri-la and the spiritual/occult imagining of cyberspace, often prompted by western fantasies about Tibet? Of course, it could be all of these, depending on the context and audience.

As advertising increasingly struggles against consumer cynicism, hostility and indifference, traditional cultures are being used as signifiers of authenticity and high moral purpose. In such a case, Tibetan Buddhist imagery could signify an attitude that transcends conspicuous consumption. While on one hand it helps to bypass consumer resistance and provide a powerful endorsement of the advertised product, on the other hand, their presence within consumerised space also confuses and blurs boundaries, revealing the presence of other dimensions and possibilities.

4. Dreaming of Shangri-la

A man dreams he is climbing huge stone steps, embedded into rock, up a grass-covered mountainside. They are well worn. God like, as if for giants. Seems too much work to climb. But he remembers they are meant for god-king and struggles on. He reaches the top and it becomes a slick modern Asian hotel. There is no Dalai Lama. It is an expensive place but not top of the range. He is reminded of Disney and theme parks.

Even the Beijing government is now promoting 'Shangri-la' tourism to a monastery on the borders of Tibet they claim was the one that inspired James Hilton's creation (Sly, 1999).

With Shangri-la.com now a reality, both in cyberspace and as a Chinese-owned luxury hotels, with criticisms that the Potala palace in Lhasa has been turned into a museum stripped of spirituality, with models of the Potala being included in massive

theme parks, indeed with the branding and theme-parking of any place and space that promises commercial reward no matter how sacred, no wonder the dreamer is worried.

A recent image showing the Potala dwarfed and framed by a Chinese anti-aircraft gun confirms many western and exiled-Tibetan fears (Lovelock, 1992/93). Yet the Potala is still the most-used and crucial image of old Tibet, of the endurance of traditional Tibetan culture and of resistance to the Chinese. The Potala, for all its transformation into a tourist attraction and museum, therefore remains a symbol of memory, of radical nostalgia and defiance (Bishop, 1994).

Like the Potala, Shangri-la is a hybrid, a heterotopia (Foucault, 1980): a single place simultaneously occupied by a plurality of diverse and contradictory imaginings.

A Space In-between

A utopian vision offers a terrain for seeing through, working through, insighting. Not simply accepting, nor simply rejecting. Instead, questioning the dreams we are sold, through a deeper awareness of the imaginal fictions being used, enables us to engage, resist, negotiate and transform.

Imagine a new utopia emerges. How is it communicated? It has to be via media and popular culture. Almost immediately it will become a brand, or used to promote a brand, or involved in entertainment. Will it be rejected out of hand? Nothing would ever get going if this were the case.

Shangri-la seems to be caught between being a utopia and a brand name, between being a tourist destination and the goal of spiritual pilgrimage, between a museum or a theme park and a political and spiritual summons. Is it just a New Age or Hollywood cliché? Perhaps there is more wisdom in Hollywood and in New Age beliefs than many would care to admit. I believe that this messiness is inevitable, perhaps even welcome. There was never a time when the utopian imagination floated free, unblemished, from such 'contaminations'.

I have mentioned that the utopian imagination can offer the image of an outside to corporate globalisation. It can be an image of an alternative, or a position by which to reflect back upon and critique existing circumstances, or it can be a healing fiction offering hope and expectation. (5) As Shurmer-Smith and Hannam point out, it is in the imagination, particularly the utopian/distopian imagination, “that it becomes possible to think the unthinkable, to challenge codes and to deconstruct categories” (1994: 73).

However, the Shangri-la myth also offers an image of a core interiority, the possibility of an interior depth to what can at times seem a homogenised and one dimensional global order. Not so much a stepping outside, but going through, working through. Utopias reveal and symbolically chart an interior space. They insist that there is symbolic depth and psychological complexity at the very heart of apparently mundane things.

Following on from Oscar Wilde’s comment that a map of the world without Utopia marked on it isn’t worth having, we can focus on the mythological image of Atlas - Atlas who by holding apart the earth and sky, creates a space in-between, a space for imaginal play. Utopias help to sustain such a space. They are located at that interface in-between, in-between belief and rejection, in-between acceptance and refusal.

A vehement critic of global corporatism, Naomi Klein, writes: “What haunts me is not exactly the absence of literal space so much as a deep craving for metaphorical space.... [even the] back alleys of unsponsored space are slipping away” (2000:64). Encrypted at the heart of consumer society, Shangri-la is a place free from such notions. In the endless dance between advertisers and consumers, utopian myths such as Shangri-la refuse to be completely subsumed by commercialism. There will always be some crucial part that survives to bring hope or expectation, to act like a virus down loaded into the body of consumer society.

Shangri-la is both oppressive and emancipatory. It maps out a terrain of struggle. While “corporatism and consumerism etc” may well draw the utopian vision onto its terrain, simultaneously, Shangri-la draws global corporatism onto **its** terrain. It refuses

to allow global corporatism to simply determine, uncontested, the ground where the struggle over the imaginal will take place.

Conclusions

In the original myth, it was Shangri-la that offered hope in the face of a global apocalypse. As we have seen, fragments of this purpose still remain, very much alive and active. Perhaps it is therefore premature to speak of the death of Shangri-la. But in two recent films, *Seven Years in Tibet* and *Kundun*, the myth is turned inside out and it is Tibet as Shangri-la itself that is facing its own apocalypse.

Can Shangri-la survive independent from Tibet? Probably not. At least not in its present form. The Shangri-la/Tibet conjunction belonged to a different era, one that is now coming to an end.

Shangri-la is an opening that reveals a “Lost Horizon”. It marks an entry-point for a descent into an imaginal complex(ity), of ambivalence and contradiction. To dismiss a MacShangri-la, or to simply accept it, is to fall once again into the trap of imagining a time, or a culture, when utopian political, religious and psychological visions were somehow pure, were free of struggles over power and meaning, were unsullied and unambiguous. But, the utopian vision is always messy, always paradoxical, qualities that are usually displaced somewhere else, as an unacknowledged shadow side, or swings to the opposite, the fascinatingly gratuitous despair of social chaos and a dystopia.

While the involvement of the utopian vision in commercialism and populism is often painfully unacceptable for visionary purists, who see such a situation as a crass appropriation and contamination, it ensures that the utopian imagination remains in contact with the ‘vale of soul making’, continues the crucial struggle with the mess and contradictions of everyday life. At the same time, for those who are completely absorbed by the culture of often mindless entertainment and conspicuous consumption, the unexpected appearance of the utopian vision, even as just a distant, hazy glimpse of a corner of a Shangri-la, not only provides a reminder of another dimension, but gives it an archetypal landscape and drama. In this sense, on one level, Shangri-la can be actually encrypted as a ‘sacred valley’ in an image/text that seems

far removed from, or directly opposed and even a threat to, the utopian vision. As we have seen, such a scenario is integral to the phenomenology of Shangri-la: a persistent threat from the outside; a place/perspective that is difficult to find; an impossible access; a constant concern about protecting and sustaining its boundaries.

Even more than before, the utopian imagination is now less about formulating large models of an ideal wholeness, than of providing glimpses, sparks, fragments of hybrid spaces in-between. Nor is the utopian imagination merely future-orientated. Instead it can draw upon the reservoirs of hope expressed in a deep, radical nostalgia. A utopian imagination can sustain a faith in the imaginal process itself, can provide a glimpse of and faith in, a lost horizon.

Notes

(1) There has been a recent resurgence of interest by critical scholarship in re-evaluating a utopian imagination and its importance for any emancipatory struggle. See, for example, Harvey's *Spaces of Hope* (2000). More generally, on contemporary utopian images, see Shurmer-Smith & Hannam's *Worlds of Desire, Realms of Power* (1994). For classic volumes that map out the terrain, see Manuel *Utopias and Utopian Thought* (1965); Desroche *The Sociology of Hope* (1979).

(2) Shangri-la-ism can be found across a broad spectrum of western cultural activity (Bishop, 1993). For example, Jung participated in the fantasy although never actually mentioning Shangri-la. For example, in his commentary on the *Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation* (CW 11), he insisted that anyone within reach of a telephone couldn't practice yoga or meditation, seemingly unaware that the Potala palace in Lhasa had long been wired up to the telegraph and that the Dalai Lama had personally requested a telephone connection. There are many ways in which Jungian psychology has been intricately woven into this idealised fantasy of a Shangri-la Tibet. While at times this idealisation was oppressive and misleading, it was also evoked to promote healing and emancipation.

(3) In recent "New Age" works such as Redfield's *The Secret of Shambhala* (1999), the often creative and insight-generating conflation and intermixing between Shangri-la and Shambhala symbolism is extensive.

(4) Vision, whether that of political activism, religious zeal, or therapeutics, seems to loath nostalgia, unless it can somehow be tamed and harnessed for its heroic actions. From such a perspective nostalgia carries an aura of weakness and malingering, attitudes which follow on from the original formulation of nostalgia which occurred in military psychology. It is imagined to blunt and thwart the heroic imperative, which insists that we don't pander to nostalgia, imagining it as a crepuscular or twilight emotion. The heroic fears that by embracing nostalgia means purposeful action will be devoured, be swallowed up, or even worse, one will wallow in a sweet, sticky, self-indulgent and cowardly dereliction of duty. Nostalgia forces a slow descent, whereas vision wants to move quickly, to ascend. Utopian landscapes are often caught between the desire for a planned, future-oriented purposefulness and the need to draw upon the reserves of memory, often expressed as a deep, radical, nostalgia (Bishop, 1995).

Nowadays, nostalgia is particularly under threat, not just from impatient visionaries and activists, but from the world of commercialised popular culture which has seemingly embraced it. At the turn of the millennium we are experiencing an upsurge of desperate visions and an equally desperate nostalgia (from recycled fashions and consumer sentiments to theme parks and folk-nationalisms) (Samuel, 1994). But usually this is only a packaged, superficial and sanitised version of nostalgia, one that excludes the bitterness and pain. Sanitised ancestors.

(5) In his re-evaluation of Edward Said's seminal work on "orientalism" (1979), Clarke quite rightly points to the emancipatory aspects of the western encounter with other cultures and how such cultural 'others' have often been used as 'outside' positions from which to reflect back onto and critique western cultures (1997)

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