Pilgrims in the Labyrinth: Auto-Didactic Utopian Interiority in the Allegorical Works of John Bunyan and John Amos Comenius

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Prefatory Note

As a work of research-based critical graphic design, this essay is not intended to be taken as historical or literary scholarship. We will examine John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* and John Amos Comenius’s *The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart*, but our method will proceed by reflecting critically on the didactic and interpretive role of graphic design in the history of the book, print culture, and contemporary communication technology. As such, this paper will be open-ended, speculative, and even polemical.

Introduction

Both Bunyan and Comenius can be read as suggesting that a utopia, *eu-topos*, or “good place” may be found in the invisible community of individuals who have developed intellectual and spiritual interiority.¹

The problem with most utopian ways of thinking is that attempts to imagine a “good place” only result in failure when practically implemented. Failed attempts at practical utopian experiments and communes have made it difficult to take seriously the important ideas encoded in Bunyan’s journey to the Celestial City, and Comenius’s contemplative retreat into a “paradise of the heart.” Despite the apparent message of each book, however, we will argue that the practical paradise Bunyan and Comenius made available to a rising working class was the possibility of self-education, and the development of an interior life.

The problems intrinsic to the utopian dualisms advocated by both Bunyan and Comenius, are ameliorated in both cases by the fact that each author’s book was published and distributed during an important moment in print culture and the history of the book. Seemingly other-worldly,

¹ The invisible church is made up of individuals who have “already abandoned the world,” Comenius writes; “they live in the world, scattered among others, but the world does not know them.” Comenius, John Amos. *The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart*. New York: Paulist Press, 1998, 196.
sentimental, or escapist themes are made eminently practicable by being delivered to an entirely new group of readers—a multitude for whom literacy and printed books were previously unavailable.

After looking at the utopian function of each books and examining the book history of the time, we will briefly elaborate on some contemporary trends in the field of communication technology. By presenting our paper along with a supplemental artist’s book [I plan to distribute as many as 15–20 bound, paperback copies of this essay, expanded, illustrated, and produced] in print-on-demand and digital formats, we intend to suggest that Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress has a renewed and ongoing importance to Christian culture and the Baptist academy today.

The Utopian Imagination

According to Paul Ricoeur, “We only take possession of the creative power of the imagination through a relation to such figures of false consciousness as ideology and utopia.” Utopian ideas, according to Ricoeur, positively affect the political imagination by following three stages: escapism, legitimation, and integration.

At the level of distortion, utopia is a form of escapism, or an implausible, far-fetched notion. At the level of legitimation, utopia is an alternate form of power and authority that seeks to challenge and shatter the existing social order. At the level of integration, utopia is an exploration of possible individual and group identities.

Utopian “Distortion” and “Escape” in Bunyan and Comenius

The Pilgrim’s Progress is seemingly escapist where it suggest that the world of politics is less important than morally upright behavior and a strict adherence to dogmatic orthodoxy—avoiding,
as Bunyan puts it, “the Quagg into which King David once did fall”\(^4\) and the “deep Ditch of error into which the blind have led the blind in all Ages.”\(^5\) Similarly, Comenius’s *Labyrinth of the World and Paradise of the Heart* appears to advocate for retreat from political engagement through a form of eremitic contemplation: “closing eyes, ears, mouth, nostrils, and all external passages; entering into my heart.”\(^6\)

The escapist “distortion” evident in Comenius’s *Labyrinth of the World and Paradise of the Heart* (1631) and Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678), can be compared to utopian texts of roughly the same historical set and setting: Tommaso Campanella’s *City of the Sun* (1602/1623), Johann Valentin Andreae’s *Christianopolis* (1619), and Francis Bacon’s *New Atlantis* (1627). Bunyan’s Celestial City, Comenius’s Paradise, and Andreae’s Christianopolis, are all imagined as regions of interiority. Large-scale social change, according to these authors, is possible—if at all—only after individual, personal transformations have been accomplished. Bacon’s Bensalem and Campanella’s City of the Sun, by way of contrast, suggest that social change is brought about primarily by means of outward political action and design.\(^7\)

**Utopian Legitimation and Integration in Bunyan and Comenius**

*The Pilgrim’s Progress* operated at the level of political *legitimation* by means of communication technology and design. Advances in seventeenth century book manufacturing, distribution, and literacy\(^8\) provided an opportunity to realize “an alternate form of power and authority, challenging the existing social order.” In the seventeenth century, nonconformist publishing was seen as a very serious political challenge to the existing social order. Bunyan’s publisher Nathaniel Ponder was

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5 Bunyan, 62.
6 Comenius, 187.
8 See note 12, on page 6, below.
repeatedly harrassed and arrested by the English authorities for publishing nonconformist theology, poetry, and other materials.⁹

Bunyan and Comenius’s books both realized a degree of utopic political integration—the “exploration of possible individual and group identities”—by means of an implicit educational philosophy. Comenius is, of course, most well-known for The Great Didactic. In this radical treatise on the pedagogical process, Comenius argues that formal schooling is less important than “all of life [as] a school designed to prepare humanity for eternity.”¹⁰ In late seventeenth– and early eighteenth century Europe, literacy and printed books were only just becoming available to the multitudes of common readers. Publishing and communication technology effectively created an entirely new class of literate subjects and citizens.¹¹

In addition to The Great Didactic, Comenius also published Orbis Sensualium Pictus, the first picture book for children (c. 1650–54).¹² In 1688, Bunyan published his own picture book, A Book for Boys and Girls.¹³ Picture books for both adults and children were very popular in the seventeenth century. Much like the early Protestant practice of compiling contradictory biblical passages into epigrammatic poems called paradoxa,¹⁴ illustrated “emblem” books were intended as aids to auto-didactic intellectual self-development. Each emblem was made up of a pictura and a subscriptia. The highly ambiguous pictura was interpreted by the script, or motto, to reveal

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¹¹ According to Roger Chartier, the male literacy rate in England was 30 percent in 1644. By 1755, literacy had risen to 60 percent among men, and 35 percent among women. Roger Chartier, “The Practical Impact of Writing,” in Finkelstein, David, and Alistair McCleery. The Book History Reader. London: Routledge, 2002, 158.

¹² Louthan and Sterk, 15.

¹³ Owens and Bunyan, 295.

hidden, formal meaning. By combining text and image, the emblem was intended to simultaneously reveal and conceal. Apparent contradictions were contemplated until the lower levels of the rational mind were bypassed in favor of direct, spiritual intuition.\textsuperscript{15}

**Micro-Utopian Contemporary Communication Technology and Design**

In the past, philosopher and critic Boris Groys explains, professional artists and designers were in the minority. Spectators made up the majority of the general population. Today, however, designers (the producers of texts and images) far outnumber non-designers. Anyone who has created a public persona on Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter, for example, has designed a brand, and promoted a rhetorically-determined identity. Cultural producers have become the norm, while cultural participants operating exclusively from the perspective of spectators are increasingly rare. It is in this way that we are all “obliged to self-design.”\textsuperscript{16}

Nearly all of us, in other words, have become cultural producers engaged in an ongoing process of “self-positioning in the aesthetic field.” While reading a book like *Pilgrim’s Progress*, the average seventeenth-century reader would have projected herself or himself into the story, identifying directly and dramatically with Christian’s doubts and moral failings. “Once people had an interest in how their souls appeared to God,” Groys suggests provocatively, “today they have an interest in how their bodies appear to their political surroundings.”

In such an environment—where the average reader is simultaneously inundated with a constant, regular stream of texts and images, and complicit in the production of more and more of the same—the influential curator and critic Nicolas Bourriaud suggests that “Social utopias and


revolutionary hopes have given way to everyday micro-utopias.” Bourriaud quotes Felix Guattari: “Just as I think it is illusory to aim at a step-by-step transformation of society, so I think that microscopic attempts, of the [neighborly and convivial] type play a crucial role.”

But what might a neighborly, convivial, micro-utopian artifact of art or design look like? Graphic designers Vinca Kruk and Daniel van der Velden present one possible example. Against the usual model, where design is meant to solve problems and produce marketable commodities, Kruk and van der Velden, working under the name Metahaven, create self-initiated images and artifacts intended to “provoke discussion and critical inquiry regarding current political and social issues.”

And how might such a speculative, “proto-functional” artifact be distributed? Curator and critic Anthony Huberman suggests a strategy for taking the products of such micro-utopian, critical graphic design “to market” “Trust in the self-selecting process whereby those who are interested in what [you] do will find their way to [you] and get in touch,” Huberman writes. Only care, in other words, about those who care. The goal is cultural transactions that are not based on competition, or the accumulation of capital, but a gift economy made up sympathies; of “friends who care.” This will necessarily involve smaller groups of people, as Huberman puts it, and “if that sounds apolitical or timid, it isn’t.” Huberman quotes critic and curator Jan Vorwoert: “a culture governed by the economic imperative makes good manners the closest you might get to civil disobedience.”

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Conclusion

Having examined the utopian function of John Amos Comenius’s *Labyrinth of the World and Paradise of the Heart* (1631) and John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678), and briefly elaborating on a few contemporary trends in the field of communication technology and graphic design, we have also presented this essay as a supplemental artist’s book. The bound, paperback artist’s edition is intended to suggest that Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* has an ongoing influence on at least one example of cultural production within Christian culture, generally, and the Baptist academy, specifically.