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Disneyland as a Degenerate Utopia

“Perhaps Utopia can never be realized without destroying itself.”

David Harvey

Pilvi Takala's 2009 work “Real Snow White” consists of the video recording of her performance in Paris Disneyland. The performance is exposing the boundaries of modern life spaces through the Snow White character who is known and told worldwide, made known by everyone by Grimm Brothers, and adapted to cinema in 1937 by Disney after the rights for use was bought by them. The artist wears the same costume as Disneyland's Snow White and comes to the entrance of the place, trying to get inside. While Takala is sent away from the place by security officers, guards, the public and their justifications, the system that is the center of “peace” and “moderation,” and liberated from conflict suddenly appears to us with another face. The mechanism of repression, control and exclusion becomes visible in this “utopian” place through a modest intervention.

I believe that we should study this act remembering Takala's early acts in places that are central to the social life nowadays, such as shopping malls or working places (“Bag Lady 2006”, “The Trainee 2008”, “The Angels” 2008). In these works, we also witness the interruption of the spatial and mental boundaries of the sterilized, happy and productive working and consumption places, the inside and the outside, with a factor that intervenes. We are one more time faced directly with the mechanisms of repression and exclusion inside these places that are encoded as free living spaces.

David Harvey defines these places as “utopias of spatial form” – while defining the practices of utopians, from Thomas More to Le Corbusier, and to modernist urban designers. On the other hand, nowadays, the implementers of the thought that the construction of the new society will be possible with the design of the environment and spaces that it lives in keep on using this discourse in order to create their own ideal society. Of course, in a radically different way.

Degenerate Utopia is a concept first used by Luis Marin, and also explained by Marin using the example of Disneyland. According to Marin, Disneyland is a utopian place but since it doesn't put a critical distance between the inside and the outside, it is degenerated. This place is a fantastic representation of daily life; “it is a happy, harmonious, non-conflictual space aside from the “real” world “outside” in such a way as to soothe and mollify, to entertain, to invent the history, to cultivate a nostalgia for some mythical past, to perpetuate fetish of commodity culture rather than to critique it.” This pure fantasy place is containing multiple spatial orders “The dialectic is repressed and stability and harmony are secured through intense surveillance and control. Internal spatial ordering coupled with hierarchical forms of authority preclude conflict or deviation from a social norm. (Harvey). With this structure, utopia as a representative of an internalized ideological discourse, takes its place inside our social lives through shopping malls, gated communities and entertainment centers, which are the places that the contemporary neo-liberal utopias come into being, especially for the American society.

This attempt to include and exclude bring not only the places that the values of contemporary society are contained, but also the “bad” and “unacceptable” being kicked out of the social space. It may be interesting to mention another “utopian” space where the entrances and exits are watched, the activities inside are controlled, and the boundaries between inside and outside are abstracted by drawing them strictly.

Hamsterdam is the name of the free zone reserved for the drug dealers in the TV show called *The Wire* (HBO, 2002–08). The TV show takes place in West Baltimore (USA) in the early 2000s and presents a realistic picture of a contemporary neo-liberal and post-industrial American city. The production that can be read as a “a quasi-anthropological reconstruction of real lives” makes the “crime” that has started between the drug dealers in the backstreets of the city and the police, and then spread to the whole city gradually visible. While we go through the world of politicians, real estate dealers, prosecutors, unionists, illegal immigrants etc., we trace how the urban renewal is structured and restructured together with the relations that brings it into being.

Hamsterdam makes it possible for us to observe the trails of this transformation. In the 3rd season of the show the police tries to relocate the drug dealing that they cannot prevent on an empty location outside the settlements. For the governors, this appears to be the most appropriate and necessary solution in order to prevent the probable wars against the districts that are going to be demolished to build new and modern houses, and to avoid the drug dealing becoming part of the daily routine of the streets and make the zone a “safe” place and thus prevent migration. This “freezone,” the utopian zone determined, protected and isolated from the social life by the police for the drug dealers gets its name from a drug dealer confusing the name of Amsterdam, the city where drug dealing is allowed. In the zone, the entrance and exits are controlled by the police, the controversies between the dealer groups are also settled by them, and the buyers are brought to here by the police as well. As a place independent from the law, reality and the relationships of the city it belongs to, Hamsterdam becomes the center of many illegal activities as well as drug dealing. Until it was closed after a murder that took place inside and created the risk to expose the place, it keeps on existing as a utopia-zone.

Hamsterdam makes another face of daily social life visible. In contradiction the ideal, the “enemy” is also brought outside the social space with the same method. Whether the boundaries are solid or invisible, the legal officer that didn’t allow the fake Snow White into Disneyland also does not allow the drug dealer go outside. The reason is similar in both cases. Snow White cannot be let into the utopian zone for the potential of doing something “wrong” inside. And someone in Hamsterdam cannot be let outside for the potential of disturbing the social order.

While I’m writing these lines, I am reading on the newspapers about the reactions to the precautions against illegal migration in the Arizona state of USA. The security forces are making many laws against immigrants such as the right to freely interrogate and retain the people with different ethnic identities and forbidding people with different accents to teach English. Despite the rhetoric about the boundaries being removed, all kinds of goods, capital and activities being circulated freely, Sarkis Sassen underlines the fact that USA is increasing the border budget of Mexico every year: “In this process, powerful states have also made visible the limits of their power, no matter how weaponized their borders.”

Translation by **Duygu Dölek**

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