

*Space Utopia in the 1970s of the Twentieth Century
on the Basis of the Kobaian World*

ŁUKASZ STEC

Introduction

Utopia has been depicted in a plethora of works of culture. Thus, its omnipresence creates a considerable incentive to approach the subject from a completely different angle. Endeavouring to put the problem of utopia into wider perspective, this chapter focuses on music and its relation to utopian concepts and notions. Utopias tend to raise the problem of the world improvement. According to Lyman Tower Sargent “most utopias compare life in the present and life in the utopia and point out what is wrong with the way we now live, thus suggesting what needs to be done to improve things” (Sargent 2010: 5).

When it comes to music, there have been plenty of bands approaching utopianism¹; however, there is only one that stands out among the rest, i.e. Magma, a French group led by Christian Vander, a drummer, who along with other members of the

¹ There is a long list of bands playing different kinds of music which referred to both utopia and dystopia. With regard to rock music, there are well-known albums such as *Animals* by Pink Floyd based on George Orwell's *Animal Farm* and the opus magnum of Roger Waters *The Wall*, *Brave New World* by Iron Maiden based on Aldous Huxley, *666* by Aphrodite's Child which is believed to have been staged in Barcelona and directed by Salvador Dalí. The topic of utopian discourse across media including music, computer games, films, visual arts is thoroughly discussed in the book *(Im)perfection Subverted, reloaded and networked* edited by Barbara Klonowska, Zofia Kolbuszewska and Grzegorz Maziarczyk (Klonowska, Kolbuszewska, Maziarczyk 2015).

band have been playing truly original and pioneering music since 1969. Consequently, the aim of this chapter is to juxtapose space utopia that can be found in music of Magma with the examples from literature. Moreover, the influence of jazz is to be explained to present the origins of space utopianism.

In order to explain the phenomenon of Kobaïan utopia, it is vital to provide a brief outline of the events that took place in May 1968 in France, which triggered the worldwide revolution. At that time people were seething with discontent with both political and social order. There were Trotskyites and Maoists who protested against Charles DeGaulle's government. Furthermore, there was a growing objection to social roles which were imposed on people. Eventually, "one-dimensionality" of life—explicitly defined by Herbert Marcuse (Marcuse 1991: 1-18)—in rapidly developing economy roused deep yearnings for a better world. This revolutionary turmoil and ideological staffage took place in the shadow of the clash of civilizations, i.e. the Cold War between the United States of America and the Soviet Union, the Space Race between them, or their efforts to colonise the space.

Utopias from the 1970s are likely to lie somewhere on the horizon and they are neither fully imagined nor fully developed. Tom Moylan, who uses critical method to analyse utopias, explains that:

In generating preconceptual images of human fulfilment that radically break with the prevailing social system, utopian discourse articulates the possibility of other ways of living in the world. The strength of critical utopian expression lies not in the particular social structures it portrays but in the very act of portraying a utopian vision itself (Moylan 1986: 26).

A critical study of "the images of human fulfilment" portrayed in the Kobaïan universe and its intertextual borrowings are thoroughly exemplified in the next parts of the chapter.

Space is the Place—Romantic Nostalgia and Afro-futurism

Christian Vander, along with Laurent Thibault decided to form a band in 1969. Then, there were other musicians who joined them: Jannick Top, Klaus Blasquiz, Francis Moze, Bernard Paganotti and others (the band was regrouped several times). Their music seems to be similar to progressive rock which was popular in the 1970s. In terms of romanticism in progressive rock, it is often emphasized that lyrics evoke

certain ideas that are entrenched in the nineteenth century. Moreover, the most distinctive feature of the compositions, which merits attention, is the fact that they are all complex and often complemented by melodious harmony due to the Hammond organ and the mellotron, which create an impression that the music comes from mediaeval times.

Admittedly another important feature of progressive rock and romantic nostalgia can be noticed in lyrics that have been used to tell a particular story that turns into an epic one. According to Ferdinand de Saussure, apart from the *signifiant* (signifier) element set in a musical code, there is also the *signifié* (signified) one, articulated in a text (Saussure 2011: 71-79). The latter enables to see various borrowings and inspirations which stimulate the author's works. Following Gerard Genette's idea of palimpsest, it is possible to embrace hypertextuality by way of source texts and peritextuality by analysing album covers (Genette 2014: 7-13). A good example here might be *The Court of the Crimson King*, performed by King Crimson and written by Peter Sinfield, which may be regarded as a madrigal that bears a resemblance to the Prince Prospero's castle from *The Masque of the Red Death* by Edgar Allan Poe. Furthermore, in 1970s music groups recorded conceptual albums focused on certain ideas, for example, *Dark Side of the Moon* by Pink Floyd, devoted to a man who is faced with the problems of civilization and the challenges of the modern world. Musicians drew inspiration from philosophy, spirituality, mysticism, and literature.

In respect of Magma, Christian Vander failed to define his music as progressive, but he insisted on calling it celestial rock or zeuhl. He also described it as the "music of the universal might". The innovative character of Magma lies in the fact that it is deeply rooted in jazz and contemporary classical music. *A Love Supreme* by John Coltrane left Vander with an overwhelming impression, but soon after the news of Coltrane's death in 1967 his admiration turned into staggering despondency. Vander recalls that he was in Italy then and he found it difficult to pull himself together. He was overusing alcohol and drugs, listening to Coltrane's music at the same time. This was a turning point in his life when he decided to form a band that would pay a tribute to his musical master.

Being under a great influence of Ravi Shankar, Coltrane not only composed music that is not deprived of spirituality but also was able to apply different sound scales and take advantage of Indian rhythm which is repetitive (Porter 1998: 211; Holm-Hudson 2003: 484). Amiri Baraka, known as James LeRoi, in his collection of

essays entitled *Black Music*, which centres on jazz music in the 1960s, writes that Coltrane had “a strong religious will, conscious spiritual will, conscious of the religious evolution the pure mind seeks. The music is a way into God” (LeRoi 1968: 193).

Magma’s compositions, defined in terms of classical music, resemble Igor Stravinsky’s dodecaphony, e.g. *Les Noces*, Carl Orff’s choral compositions such as *Carmina Burana* and *Trionfo di Afrodite*, and finally Béla Bartók’s syncopations (Holm-Hudson 2003). Nonetheless, there is the apparent discrepancy between classical music and jazz, and the attempt to merge them together is a symptom of cultural egalitarianism. As French modernist composers, particularly Erik Satie and Claude Debussy, developed a new approach to music, it was possible to produce egalitarian music, and thus those who were not from the upper class could find chamber music appealing. The artistic work of Magma set a precedent for a genre that crossed the boundaries and became universal in the twentieth century. Indeed, for the 1968 revolution, it would have never occurred and it ought to be seen as a proof of mutual interpenetration of freedom and aesthetics.

Regarding the artistic work of Christian Vander in which he attempts to develop a space utopia, it is important to note that apart from Magma there were other musicians who expressed an intense interest in space motifs long before the Kobaian universe appeared. According to Amiri Baraka, jazz music in the 1960s displayed liberating qualities. The extraterrestrial imaginarium was an example of being an outsider—the one who was bound up with social disidentification, striving to express the spirit of otherness. Space to move was a metaphor for obviating oppression experienced by Afro-Americans at that time. In terms of black music, Amiri Baraka explains:

There are other new musicians, new music, that take freedom as already being. Ornette was a cool breath of open space. Space to move. So freedom already exists. The change is spiritual. The total. The absolutely new. That is the absolute realization. Sun-Ra is spiritually oriented. He understands “the future” as an ever widening comprehension of what space is, even to the “physical” travel between the planets as we do anyway in the long human chain of progress. Sun-Ra’s Arkestra sings in one of his songs, “We travel the spaceways, from planet to planet”. It is science-fact that Sun-Ra is interested in, not science fiction. It is evolution itself, and its fruit. God as evolution (Leroi 1968: 198-199).

John Corbett adds that the phenomenon of this space escapism can be considered as an allegory of searching for an ideal place:

What happens, then, in the case of Ra, Clinton, Perry, is that they build their mythologies on an image of disorientation that becomes a metaphor for social marginalization, an experience familiar to many African Americans though alien to most of the terrestrial, dominant white “center”. Staking their claim on this eccentric margin—a place that simultaneously eludes and frightens the oppressive, centred subjectivity—the three of them reconstitute it as a place of creation. It is a metaphor of being elsewhere, or perhaps of making this elsewhere on your own (Corbett 1994: 18).

Yet, Martin Hegarty and Martin Halliwell coined a term Astro Black Mythology to describe music played by Sun Ra (Herman Poole Blount), who claimed that he had come from Saturn and his music was to bring peace on Earth which was oppressed by colonialism and slavery. His album *The Heliocentric Worlds of Sun Ra II* (1966) consists of a map of the solar system which is supplemented with the images of Leonardo da Vinci, Galileo, and Nicolaus Copernicus (Hegarty and Halliwell 2011, LeRoi 1968).

Considering space jazz and Magma together, it is possible to find some affinities between them, thus drawing a conclusion that several musicians in the 1960s were eager to create a quasi-utopian universe which was fully developed by Magma in the following decades.

Literary Inspirations for the Kobaïan Saga

Initially, it is crucial to point out that the albums of Magma, which convey utopian concepts, fail to be chronological. Their debut album, *Kobaïa*, was released in 1970 and soon afterwards, in 1971, it was followed by the next chapter *1001° Centigrades*. Nonetheless, their opus magnum, a trilogy *Theusz Hamtaahk [Time of Hatred]* was being recorded between 1973-1974. It consists of *Köhntarkösz* (1974), *Wurdah İtah* (1974), and *Mekanik Destruktiv Kömmandöh* (1973). Obviously, the trilogy is not chronological in terms of a release date, however, it constitutes the preconceived idea of utopian discourse. In the first five albums representative motifs of utopianism like a long voyage and an arrival at a destination, an attempt to share acquired knowledge and wisdom with common people can be noticed. Moreover, the trilogy itself provides a peculiar story of a prophet who makes efforts to bring salvation to people.

Due to a non-chronological approach, a thorough analysis may encounter particular difficulties. By the same token the artificial language used by Vander to tell a story is quite problematic, owing to the fact that it is a combination of Slavic and Germanic languages and it was invented only to complement the melody—French was not expressive enough, according to Vander.

The music and the lyrics come up at the same time. If I am singing, and if it has to be in Kobaïan, they come up in Kobaïan. Sometimes here is a word that is maybe French or English and I leave it in because it is there, and it's natural. The lyrics come at the same time, parallel to the music. For pieces like *Mekanik*, they were not written in one shot or one session. I had to run a tape recorder to be able to capture it instantly—it goes very fast. I sing with new words that I don't know, and when I am improvising further, the same words come back, even though I don't know them. But I didn't learn them, they impose themselves on me (Thelen 1995).

Henry Chartier in *La musique du diable. Le rock et ses succès damnés* explains that the Kobaïan language appears to be shamanic incantations (Chartier 2010: 646). Apparently, it is close to the phenomenon of glossolalia which occurs with a trance state. Hence, undertaking any research, it is necessary to analyse the official statements made by the band which are also explained in interviews and the album booklets. It is worth mentioning that Vander was reluctant to provide a comprehensive and detailed explanation of the meaning of his music, seeing it as “»steps« or »stairs« that leaves room for imagination”. Therefore, the aim of this chapter is to give prominence to the output of utopian concepts being presented in Magma's works, and to try to find their origin in literature.

Kobaïa, which was released as a double-LP, tells the story of Earthmen in not so distant future who decide to look for a better place. In order to fulfil their ambitions, they build a spaceship and depart from Earth, hoping to reach the planet Kobaïa—one can easily draw an analogy between the story mentioned above and one of the verses from Sun Ra Arkestra “we travel the Spaceways from planet to planet” (Sun Ra Arkestra, *We Travel the Spaceways*). The album cover depicts the northern hemisphere grabbed in the talons of a bird of prey or an ancient reptile. Among similar block of flats, there are identical silhouettes of people who are raising their arms as though they were crying for help. Whilst on the right side of the hemisphere there is a sacral building similar to the Cathedral of Vasily the Blessed or the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow, on the left side there are skyscrapers denoting the East Coast of the USA. On that account one can see a contemporary reference to a political and military tension between the Western and Eastern Bloc during the Cold War. The whole civilization is seemingly descending into utter chaos and decadence. The aim of the band was to create the prophetic vision of doom which can be treated as an allegorical illustration of the 1960s.

The next album follows the story of the Kobaïans' return home. The landing spacecraft is greeted with the procession of Earthmen, who set their hopes on the visitors' arrival. The emissaries are willing to preach the gospel and convince people

on Earth that only by purification they can find elation and contentment. Eventually, the delegates from Kobaïa stand before the rulers of Earth, who feel suspicious of their revelation. The rulers decide to imprison the Kobaïans, who manage to send a message home saying that their lives are in danger. Soon after, the Kobaïans issue an ultimatum to the Earth's rulers, informing that the planet will be destroyed unless the emissaries are released. Ultimately, the Kobaïans are set free but they are made not to come back to Earth anymore.

Taking the first two albums into consideration, it is possible to draw a close analogy between the Vander's story and a utopian novella. We can observe common motifs such as an arrival to a new place or will to share the experience with other people. Regarding extraterrestrial visions of a better place, we can provide many examples of space motifs in literature some of which deserve special attention. In the seventeenth century there were books about faraway lands on Earth, however, there were also publications which described different locations somewhere in space. For example, *Somnium* (1608) by Johannes Kepler tells a story of a young boy who is told by a demon that there is a mysterious land—Levania—located on the Moon. Kepler provides a scientific description of the Earth's satellite, however, Francis Godwin goes further and depicts a space utopia in *The Man on the Moone* (1638). The protagonist, Domingo Gonsalo, is an adventurer who tries to come back to Spain after years of wanderings. Failing in health on his way home, he is forced to stay on the island of Saint Helena. While recovering from a disease, he watches a wild swan which is capable of carrying heavy loads. It inspires him to construct a flying machine that uses the power of swans to rise up. Eventually, the birds carry Domingo higher and higher and he reaches the Moon, where he discovers the state of Lunarians who live in accordance with a Christian model. Initially, he finds it difficult to communicate with them easily since the Lunarians use a different language—similarly to Thomas More, Godwin developed a new language. After some time Gonsalo succeeds in learning it and he familiarises with the Lunarians' way of life. Nevertheless, he gets homesick and decides to leave the Moon and comes back to Earth. Finally, he lands in China, where the rulers treat him suspiciously—vide the emissaries from Magma's album *1001° Centigrades*—as if he were a magus. Owing to his linguistic capabilities, he finds it easy to learn Chinese and gives an account of the Lunarians' state. It is sufficient to convince the rulers to set him free. It is worth mentioning that *L'Autre monde ou les états et empires de la Lune* by Cyrano de Bergerac is parallel with Godin's *The Man on*

the Moone. The main character, likewise Domingo Gonsalo, contrives a machine and travels to the Moon, where he observes an ideal society.

Admittedly, it is difficult to state whether Vander had familiarised with the above-mentioned books before he developed his genuine vision of Kobaïa. Nonetheless, the de Bergerac's book grew in popularity in the 1970s in France. Supposedly, Vander might have read it even though he fails to tell anything about his inspirations. There is no doubt that the story of the first two albums is utopian and corresponds to some literary works, particularly the first ones from the science fiction genre.

There is also another theme in Magma's saga that is worth discussing. The trilogy *Theusz Hamthaak*—as has already been mentioned—treats of apocalyptic visions and eschatology. The whole story happens after the emissaries' visit on Earth, when a young adventurer called Köhntarkösz, who is a keen archaeologist, discovers a forgotten tomb of an ancient priest Ëmëhntëhtt-Ré. While exploring the tomb, Köhntarkösz has a vision and he learns about the priest's life. He finds out that Ëmëhntëhtt-Ré had been close to achieve immortality before he was murdered. And on top of that, he becomes acquainted with the prophecy that the Earth would be destroyed by the Ork people. The story is followed by the next album *Mekanik Destrüktiw Kommandöh*, which is believed to be an opus magnum of Magma. Like *deux ex machina*, another figure is introduced who tries to relieve people from chaos. It is Nebehr Gudahtt who makes a prophecy about the Earth's annihilation. In the official material added to the vinyl it is stated that:

This work, written in all humility, is the story of Nebehr Gudahtt, a man who one day tells the Earth people that in order to save themselves from ultimate doom, to purify their minds and so to have access to Ultimate Existence, they must sacrifice their lives on Earth. But this message is far from being understood.

Earthmen, you cursed race!
 If I have called you here it is only because you deserve it.
 My divine and on so cerebral conscience compels me to it.
 You perfidious and coarse deeds greatly displeased me.
 The penalties which will be inflicted upon you
 Shall exceed the bounds of Understanding.
 For you see:
 In you incommensurable pride and your unfathomable ignorance
 You have dared with impurity to defy me,
 to challenge me, to provoke me,
 and to unleash in all its immensity my frightful and destructive wrath,
 bringing upon yourself your own inexorable punishment.

Oh inexhaustible Faith,
 design to rest your Divine Sight
 on a heart so sensitive and fair.
 Support this supreme act:
 Those who in their senseless pride
 have dared to doubt Eternal Wisdom
 must be punished.
 Forces of the Universe
 mete out your incoercible anger!
 Infernal Creatures from the endlessness of Time
 open the Gates Of Darkness so that Light should be no more!
 Unfurl upon mankind your silent incandescent legions
 that they may crush the earth, wipe-out the crowds and erase space,
 and that in this inextinguishable apocalypse
 ashes should burn for ever,
 and all the blood of all the universes should mingle with
 this immeasurable, putrid chaos—your last shroud.
 And from it, before the Angels of Darkness take it beyond all infinities,
 a solitary tear will fall;
 the tear of your remorse and your suffering,
 a tear so pure and clear,
 that in it you will see your final destiny—
 Purification,
 State Of Grace,
 Faith and Magnificence
 Mansuetude
 (Magma 1973)

The prophet reviles people and calls for betterment of society through self-purification—it might have some inclinations in Christian baptism. People do not want to listen to him and regard him as an impostor. Stunned and stupefied they want to kill Nebehr and all of a sudden one man stops and turns to his fellows to bridle emotions and he says: “I have seen the Angel of Light and he smiled at me. He smiled at me, he smiled at me, the Angel of Light!” (Magma 1973) The people begin to change their minds and the march against Gudahtt turns into the march of gratitude and the will of unification with the Infinite Wisdom. In the official booklet one can read:

The Universe guides them into the Celestial March—the one from which there is no return. And immutable Fate now completes its work.

They do not feel their dying. Angels and seraphim bow to them in respect and for their human perception this is such a strong sensation that they simply faint into space.

The State of Grace is achieved (Magma 1973).

Apart from Infinite Wisdom the people have to put their live into Kreuhn Kohrman's hands.

We recognize Kreuhn Korhmahn as the only and ultimate dispenser of Life, Death and Inspiration, through Space and Time. It is that to which we dedicate our physical and spiritual vessels, and which beyond any values grants to us the knowledge of the Just, and the Beautiful. We recognize the Holy Seal [the Magma logo] as the symbol of Love, Force and Destruction [...]. That Its Invocation brings us the Science of the Music of the Spheres, and carries on us the Fertile Shade of the Holy Prophet; We recognize Kobaïa as the only and genuine planet, the others being only its faded reflection and corruption, dedicated to annihilation. It is the Place Of All the Possible ones, the Distant Paradise which we know since the day when we opened our eyes, millions of years ago... (Magma 1973)

The Age of Discoveries gave free rein to the imagination of people who came up with new ideas, regarding unknown lands and marine creatures. Some of them, e.g. Kepler or Godin were absorbed in their thoughts about terrae incognitae of celestial oceans, seeking for a perfect place on the Moon. Science fiction literature expands proportionally to the knowledge about the universe. Each epoch has its own perfect place which reflects contemporary yearnings of people.

Whilst the first two albums are a good example of utopian poetics, considering especially their closeness of the resemblance with seventeenth century literature, the trilogy *Theusz Hamthaak* seems to be bereft of utopian euphoria. The narrative figure of the prophetic visions of annihilation brings to mind some kind of desolation that can be observed in science fiction literature throughout the twentieth century.

Apparently, utopian literature is like a litmus paper which transposes all social tensions, conditions and desires. Hence, there is an opportunity to observe changeable attitudes towards the world—from idealisation to anxiety that was clearly depicted in *The Time Machine* by H.G. Wells. Moreover, some authors, for example, Mark Watney, Andy Weir, Arthur C. Clarke, have preoccupied their minds with the problem of colonisation. As the knowledge about the universe evolves, we reach the destination of a galactic empire portrayed in Frank Herbert's *Dune* or Robert A. Heinlein's *Expanded Universe*. Albeit the evolution of science fiction literature is intriguing, we cannot focus too much attention on this problem and it is necessary to look at some books which correspond to the Kobaïan saga. Therefore, it is probable that one may find primal texts that could have influenced Kobaïan perspective. Consequently, it would be possible to indicate that lyrics and music could be analysed intertextually.

The prophecy described in the trilogy *Theusz Hamthaak* corresponds to the literature treating of an inevitable disaster. In books by H. G. Wells written in 1930s we are able to observe an irreversible decline of urbanized world in which automatization directly leads to consumerism. Furthermore, deindividualization gives rise to a sense of utter emptiness and apathy. According to some researchers, these are common motifs typical of dystopia (Moylan 2000: 111-202, Graaf 1971: 25-26) There is a certain analogy between the Kobaian story and *The Time Machine* (1895) by H. G. Wells. Earthly beings portrayed in *Wurdah İtah* by Magma are similar to the Eloi, who are the heirs to intelligent society—likewise the one from the Ęmėhntėhttt-Re’s period. Nevertheless, the Eloi are bound to be destroyed by the Morlocks who are supposed to administer justice to the Eloi who have betrayed their principles. The situation is analogous with the Ork people who are alleged to destroy the Earth.

Another important theme is degradation of culture and humanity leading to the collapse of moral values. Such situation met with harsh criticism from the prophet Nebehr Gudahtt on the M.D.K. album. It brings some connotations with the book *Last and First Men* (1930) by Olaf Stapledon, in which people would improve themselves, reaching a level of the most advanced only if they trust in Cosmic Mind, which is described in detail in another book, *The Star Maker* (1937). It can be associated with the benefits of trusting in Kreuhn Kahrman, “When a man dedicates his will to the will of the Supreme Being and gives him all he has, the Kreuhn Kahrman makes of him more than just a man”. Cosmic Mind alike Infinite Wisdom unifies the space, enabling people to achieve a higher level of evolution. The last theme which is described in *Theusz Hamthaak* is the procession led by Gudahtt and it could be connected with *Childhood’s End* (1952) by Arthur C. Clarke.

Taking into account the Kobaian universe, we are deluged with various inspirations and borrowings. We can regard the motifs as actants constituting a narrative model which develops semiotic structure of utopian narration. Owing to thorough research, the picture of utopia may be more explicit and coherent.

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