

Response to Ursula K. Le Guin's 1973 short story 'The One's Who Walk Away From Omelas' by Mook Wheeler.

Presented to students on the Dublin Institute of Technology BA in Visual Art as part of the module Virtual Environments: Is one life enough? Wednesday 8 March 2017

So here are a couple of the thoughts I had on that story, as told to Gentle [Heron]:

Is utopia possible for a community? The people would have to be all exactly alike, with identical interests. You could not entertain the idea of a 'shared utopia' with a group of people who were all different, with different interests, desires, values and needs. There would be continuous conflict in decisions, objectives and goals.

Does that mean that utopia has to be a personal thing? Is utopia possible for an individual? To achieve personal utopia, Maslow's concept of self-actualisation may be required -- that is, very simply, you get to do what makes you happy. But what if the only thing that makes you **truly** happy, that makes your world **perfect**, is ... to be a serial murderer? Or a thief? Or a politician? Or a vampire cannibal paedophile? Or a Mook? Or whatever is politically incorrect at the time? Being 'yourself' might make you happy, but not necessarily others. And no matter how discreet or vanilla you try to be, your presence in the community will have some impact. To exist is to have impact on your surroundings.

So an individual **might** achieve personal utopia within a community, but they might also get locked up or beaten to death. See any number of case studies.

Can a person achieve utopia on their own? Was that one of the reasons why those individuals walked away from Omelas at the end of the story? They could not live with a society which condoned the sacrifice of one person for the health of the community. But neither did they object or say anything – they could not bring themselves to upset their society's peace of mind or equilibrium. They did not want to rock the boat. So their only option was to walk away quietly, taking their problem with them....

Now THAT'S called being ideologised! Haha. That city has got it all wrapped up! Hegemony on the surface, oppression underneath, and an apparently transparent system of ideology where people are allowed to visit the prisoner. How plausible is this?

How do you critique a story that ignores the way people actually are, and how people actually tend to think, behave or do in a group, even putting aside cultural differences? I found myself thinking: Le Guin might call these creatures 'people', but they certainly aren't human. They're one-dimensional cardboard fabrications. Omelas is a social critique that ignores the vicissitudes and mutability of societies and people. For me, it was like reading a science-fiction story which had got all the physics wrong – a most uncomfortable experience.

Additional thoughts from September 2018

1) the tortured child in the story is obviously (but not that obviously, to tortoises) a distorted Christ, an 'innocent' receptacle (a helpless and unsocialised infant supplied with neither understanding nor political rights) who carries all the ugliness of that society in order for it to function as an apparent utopia; the child is also a 'Dorian Gray portrait' analogy – a safe that keeps the (growing) ugliness of the society locked away. The debate here would also be about whether individual/human rights, self-will, voice, visibility, etc are inherent rights (as the UN would have us believe), or simply political tools and choices in the interest of hegemony and 'the greater good'. What is the price of peace worth? This brings me to my second point.

2) Disability activist Dan Wilkins once wrote: "A community that excludes even one of its members is no community at all": Wilkin's essay 'The Need for Inclusive Communities' is here: <http://www.abilitycenter.org/essays/need-inclusive-communities/> The link between Wilkin's point and the one made by 'Omelas' is a question of extent: Is there an absolute? All or nothing? Is it acceptable to think in terms of numbers? At what point does it become reasonable to deny the few (or one) for the good of the many? The moral choice of having to deliberately shut the door on a friend in order to save the rest of the crew from the explosion is a familiar one in films. Spock's statement that "The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few" illustrates both the tempting logic, and inherent danger, of such thinking. Where do you draw the line? What discourse does one use to justify sacrificing (or excluding) forty.. or ten.. or one person.. to maintain a course/cause? All discourse becomes political within this context, including the discourses of morality and personal choice. Perhaps Wilkins is telling us that as a community, we just have to try harder; after all, absolutes are also impossible positions.

Mook, a former academic with a doctorate in a social science field, has Aspergers and manages clinical depression and anxiety. Mook described 'being an autistic social scientist as somewhat of a paradox: trying to understand the production/politics of subjectivity without being able to negotiate it in a personal or practical sense, for the most part.'