

Holding place for utopian imaginaries

This study examines how photographs and videos of allotment gardens construct nature-related utopias and function as placeholders for ecological ideals and cultural aspirations. The guiding question is: *What kinds of utopian imaginaries emerge through visual representations of allotment gardens?* The meaningfulness of visual utopias lies in their connection to futures in the time of accelerating ecological crises, as making alternative ways of doing and being visible has the potential to create pathways towards better futures.

The concept of *utopia* was first used by Sir Thomas More as the name of an imaginary island in his book *Utopia*, published in 1516. Etymologically, the word means ‘no place’, derived from Greek *ou* (not) and *topos* (place), and has come to signify an imagined place or state in which everything is perfect. While the Garden of Eden remains a well-known example of a utopian ideal, this study focuses on European allotment gardens, urban spaces consisting of plots rented to individuals or families for non-commercial gardening purposes. Allotment gardens, originating from the 18th century, have served multiple purposes: from youth education and public health, as advocated by Dr Schreber (1808–1861), often cited as the ‘father’ of the allotment garden movement, to food security in times of scarcity. Today, allotment gardens persist and evolve as places where cultural traditions and contemporary ecological ethics intersect. This historical depth informs the visual analysis done in this study.

The visual data analysed consists of three distinct sets of images. These sets do not form a linear historical sample but rather a bricolage that allows for the reading of differing types of utopian imaginaries. The first set of photographs, taken in the 1920s at Ruskeasuo allotment garden in Helsinki, Finland, is retrieved from the Helsinki City Museum’s archives. These photographs document both the hard work of soil cultivation and its results. The second set consists of photographer Klaus Pichler’s series *The Middle Class Utopia*, photographed in Austrian allotments in and around Vienna. These photographs have been carefully executed with allotment holders to reflect their visions of the land they hold. The third set consists of social media videos taken, edited and posted by the current younger generations of allotment holders.

The analysis conducted follows Erwin Panofsky’s three-tiered iconological framework, enabling a layered close reading of photographs and videos that extends beyond their depicted elements, moving from descriptive observation to cultural interpretation. The analysis relies not only on the images but also on related historical and cultural texts. As a result, three readings of visual utopias are presented:

The utopia embedded in the Ruskeasuo allotment photographs is a place of disciplined productivity. Established in 1918, as Helsinki’s first allotment garden, Ruskeasuo offered city dwellers the opportunity to grow their own food. The black and white photographs from the 1920s depict rough soil, modest cottages with wood-shingle roofs, disciplined rows of soil as well as thriving crops. Although the chronological order of the images is uncertain, they seem to suggest a narrative transformation, progressing from the laborious cultivation of the land to a structured order and eventually to abundance. The utopia for which the photographs hold place is a pragmatic response to scarcity and urbanisation. In this utopian imaginary, the role of humans is to both control and nurture their environment, and these resilient acts hold a promise of empowerment.

The utopia visualised in Klaus Pichler’s series titled ‘Middle Class Utopia’ is one of controlled excess within consumerist plots. Originally intended for working-class people to grow their own

vegetables and fruits, these allotments have evolved into sites of leisure. Although the series was shot around 2010, the chosen approach seems to have frozen time in Viennese allotments, resulting in photographs that are timeless and retro at the same time. The photographs present a curated world of trimmed green fences, manicured lawns, older residents and flowering plants. Many of the images highlight the fences surrounding the plots, narrating a story of isolation, while the absence of edible plants signals a shift from necessity to recreation. There is a strange feel of consumerism in the images, created through flower-printed skirts, lawnmowers, garden gnomes, swimming pools, electric wires and satellite dishes. The images depict a utopia where people have access to nature but have decided to maintain it under their perfect control. This is, of course, a somewhat paradoxical vision, a twisted ideal based on a controversial relationship between humans and non-human nature.

Whereas Pichler depicts the older generations of allotment gardens, the third set of images analysed consists of specific types of short-form videos, created and posted on Instagram by the new generations of allotment gardeners. The utopia visualised in these videos is a space for reconnecting with nature. The videos feature airy music and young gardeners working or wandering around their gardens. The allotments are presented both as a source of sustenance and aesthetic pleasure. The aesthetics and structures of the gardens are less disciplined, although still orderly. Some of the videos also include animal residents of the gardens. The caption of one of the videos state, 'I often think if this is a dream', in another one the lyrics say, 'come with me and you'll be in a world of pure imagination'. The hashtags used further suggest that slow living, organic gardening and growing your own food are an important part of this utopia. Indeed, the videos appear to depict an ecological utopia or ecotopia, where the ideal is based on ecological and sustainable principles.

As the analysis shows, photographs and videos of allotment gardens are not mere depictions of these specific types of places in different times but placeholders for utopias that disclose shifting ideals of nature and society. The images map a movement from the necessity of control to exaggerated control and ultimately towards coexistence, revealing how the visions of good life are negotiated in everyday spaces.

Keywords: visual utopias, allotment gardens, ecological imaginaries, iconological analysis