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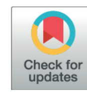

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Radiant Futures: Utopian Art as a Phenomenology of Home-Seeking

Abstract

This essay examines the imaginative potential of utopian art. Utopian art is more than a representation of a possible future, it calls upon our imaginations to pull us into the act of home-coming itself. Following Heidegger, we depart from the idea that phenomenology is concerned with the imagination as an essential part of being-human. This essay leans on insights from Fredric Jameson's phenomenological exploration of potential futures via the imagination as the means through which we experience utopia in our daily lives. This theorization is grounded in an analysis of Susan Sontag's novel *In America* as demonstrating the utopian curves of consciousness as it is experienced phenomenologically in lived time. This novel lends credence to the idea that one purpose (among many) of utopian thinking is to find dreams worth reaching for; and in this reaching we find ourselves coming-home.

Keywords: utopia, phenomenology, literature, imagination, hermeneutics, narrative.

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"One has two ways of enhancing the value of one's own life: the first consists in the rational study of reality . . . the second consists in the experiencing of reality as spontaneous and self-liberating comprehending of its sensefulness. We call the first activity science, and the second art."

(Kocbek)

In the postmodern present, questions of belonging, truth, meaning, and possibility are thrust into a deeply complex position within our world. This complexity is articulated neatly within Nietzsche's parable of the madman from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in which he responds to the social consequences of the ongoing Enlightenment movement. The madman's lamentation on the death of god is a grim foretelling of the chaos that a god's absence would have for those societies whose foundation rests on a tradition of shared religious beliefs. Indeed, one can trace the origins of many modern perspectives—including the growth of liberal democracy from a political-economic system into a set of cultural values—to this historical shift.

One such example of the shift into using politico-economic principles as morality is Francis Fukuyama's text *The End of History and the Last Man*. Therein, he argues human society has reached its peak in the form of 21st-century liberal democratic ideology. He contends that public debates over a superior form of social organization have ceased (at least in institutional environments) and that any contemporary efforts towards change reflect a concern for policy shifts, rather than interest in any foundational movement of society. More precisely, egalitarian participation in a structured market environment becomes the core value of the law over and above human flourishing. This has had profound implications the way humanity exists in its world today.

Consider March 2023, when the United States Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy proclaimed loneliness to be an epidemic which ought to be given the highest priority in government affairs. In his advisory, Dr. Murthy draws a direct line of connection between loneliness and the "social-ecological model" (which includes liberal democracy, neoliberalism, and late-stage capitalism) under which we live. The advisory contains vague recommendations for "spending more time with others" but does little to address the ontological influences at stake for the population at large. As such, liberal democracy appears well equipped to create bureaucracies that identify social concerns without the tools necessary to resolve them.

While Fukuyama might argue that society's capacity for material production has ended the public interest in conversations about social reform, thinkers such as Martin Heidegger argue otherwise. In his astute piece, "Building, Dwelling, Thinking," Heidegger argues that the

technological advancement of human society in its present form leads to an apathetic worldly attitude. Were he alive today, he might argue that society practices an overexertion on the mind's creative proclivities in the form of advertisements, social media, and corporatization of pop culture. Modernity is focused on capitalizing life rather than encouraging it to be lived well. Within this shape of a world, our present collective-consciousness's ability to have faith in collective action and systemic reform has been severely dampened.

We may hold a collective sense that our present situation is off kilter (with regard to loneliness, belonging, meaning, and possibility) but lack the necessary lexicon and shared experience to articulate the change which we are seeking. It is for this reason that modern political thinkers are taking to task our social model for its impacts on human experience which, almost by necessity, pushes us into positions of social isolation and interrupts our ability to experience belonging, form trust in a sense of meaning, and conceive possibilities.[1] In such a system, the cultivation of a genuine political imagination, one that can conceive the world outside of its present organization, becomes imperative. This thought brings a secondary consideration with it; how are we to become attuned to an attitude that will satisfy the dormant needs of a lulled imagination, returning both its vitality and subsequent urgency to us? It is in a turn towards imagination, literature, and utopia that a preliminary outlook capable of these necessary changes might be discovered.

To explore such a perspective, we will turn towards the work of Fredric Jameson and Susan Sontag. Fredric Jameson's description of utopia in his 2004 *New Left Review* article titled "The Politics of Utopia" describes a political imagination that at once offers a way to look for the possibility in complex social environments while also addressing the phenomenology of such imagining. Jameson offers meaningful rebuttals to end-of-history thinkers like Fukuyama while sketching a model for detecting (in a beneficially pragmatic way) the whispers of utopia in our present perspective. The irony of referencing Sontag in an essay on utopia and interpretation is not lost on this writer, given her polemic against the latter in her article "Against Interpretation." Before diving into a study of the phenomenology of utopian imaginative thinking, her argument in the essay will be rehearsed briefly to see her stance against interpretation as, in fact, a diatribe against thinkers who make a claim to having the *only interpretation* of our world. Furthermore, we will see that Sontag conceives of interpretation as an aesthetic act which belongs to everyone. With this

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[1] Byung-Chul Han has written a series of texts on the subject. See *The Burnout Society*, *The Transparency Society*, *The Disappearance of Rituals: A Topology of the Present*, etc.

foreground in mind, her work in the novel *In America* will have a chance at sharing its most sophisticated insights. By accompanying her characters, a 19th-century Polish theater troupe's journey to a build a new home in the American West, will we see how an attunement to the utopian elements of our imagination are both urgent and necessary in participating in the act that Heidegger calls "home-building."

HOME-BUILDING AND ITS RELATION TO BEING

Heidegger's theory of home-building is given its shape in his essay "Building, Dwelling, Thinking." At the time, Heidegger's work is underscored by a deeply metaphysical tint. His concept of being-in-the-world illustrates his discrete preoccupation with the being-of-being (otherwise, for humans: the experience of living). This phenomenological angling of his work acts as a guidepost for the rest of his metaphysical system. His essay might more accurately be titled "*The Experiences of* Building, Dwelling, and Thinking." In this way, the reader finds a clearing in Heidegger's argument that the human act of measuring one's world takes place between the sea and the sky, in the boundaries of one's own lived horizon (Heidegger 145). From here we find our entry into the meaning and importance of "home-building" as a human act.

For Heidegger, home-building is deeply intertwined with meaning, possibility, and imagination. He reminds us that we are only able to locate our own position in the world by learning to take the measure of our social and experiential boundaries. In this way, Heidegger's work shows its substance as a pragmatic philosophy that can (at least, attempt to) account for lived experience as inseparable from our cognitions of the world. Humanity does not find itself in procuring a specific "right" essence; instead, it is found in the act of searching for an essence itself. It is for this reason that possibility and imagination carry such weight for Heidegger. The searching act which defines human existence is the search for meaning. Using the faculties of the imagination to consider different possibilities, we can arrive at a stable frame of meaning that becomes our metaphysical home—our chosen vista through which to view the world. The imaginative act of searching-for-meaning is an essential part of Heidegger's metaphysical system. It is the property of the meditative facilities of the mind insofar as one meditates on possible combinations of thoughts and meanings to arrive at the specific one we will call home (Heidegger 151).

Understanding meditative thinking in this way confers a context for Heidegger's subsequent focus on technology. Heidegger argues that

the unchecked spread of technology fundamentally changes humanity's orientation to the world by desecrating those moments requiring meditative thought. He notes that automation significantly increases the rate and intensity at which we interact with curated aspects of our world. Heidegger's well-known concern for magazine advertisements is due to the psyche's tendency to move around too quickly when presented with such a jarring formatting style. The mind resorts to focusing on what is in front of it instead of the processes occurring within itself. With such a format in motion, remaining in synchrony with our imagination becomes difficult. Humanity is prompted instead to make snap decisions based on what it is empirically at hand. We lose the ability to meditate in a society that makes room for the mere calculation of the world. To be clear, one should not read Heidegger as a conservative figure who would return humanity to a world before electricity, for example. Instead, he is someone for whom each mode of thought has a place. Technology and calculation support the material needs of humanity, but they cannot replace our own thirst for *meaning-making* as an ontological endeavor. That is why Heidegger holds eminent art as one of our most potent means for preserving meditative thinking. For art's challenge is to spark the aesthetic act of meditation and interpretation in its audience.

While some chastise Heidegger for clouding his writing with unnecessarily dense language, one might posit the *challenge of language* as the very purpose of this essay. His pedagogical prowess is evidenced in his asking the audience to undertake the kind of meditative thinking that he hopes to give shelter to. As such, he demonstrates his phenomenological commitment in both the content and form of his writing. From this vantage point, we have sufficient grounding to recognize the contribution Heidegger's work has to Fredric Jameson's writings on utopia and the interpretive faculties.

UTOPIA AS A PHENOMENOLOGICAL OBJECT: FREDRIC JAMESON

In his essay, "The Politics of Utopia," Fredric Jameson guides the reader through several elements of his understanding of utopia as an interpretive act. Early on, he asks why one should consider utopian concepts at all. The postmodern reorientation of cultural values from the religious to the economic has set the stage for our political interpretations today. As such, the existing free market is conceived as arising from human nature (to satisfy seemingly organic wishes) and, thus, to act against the market economy is a form of violence against the self (Jameson 35, 51). Utopianism

appears in the modern understanding as a form of self-annihilation, a state of being without desire, an example of Freud's death drive at work (51).

Thus, Jameson conceives of the utopian impulse as arriving from a certain conjuncture between drive and interpretation. It is because humans are beings that exist with drive (in the Freudian sense) that we are bound up in the interpretive act. It is at this point where Jameson assists with converting Heidegger's ontological system into an even more phenomenological lane.[2] Jameson is interested in studying how humanity experiences their ontological situation. The curiosity that sustains inquiry into our worldly experience ties us to the act of interpretation. Humans are constantly taking the measure of the world to find our place in it; so we are, by necessity, always-already at-play with the imagination from within a utopian lens. Jameson's discussion of wishes, desire, and self-annihilation are intended as a phenomenological coloring of humanity's own quest for home-building as meaning-making. It is in our search to find a coherence of meaning for our own identity amidst a worldly social framework that calls us into interpretive play. What is named utopian has the quality of being a (e)u (good) + topos (place) (Ricœur 17–18). In simpler terms, we are searching for a place that is good for us. In other words, we are searching for a place that brings out the good in us, that inspires its own flourishing. The consequence of this search is an inevitable form of self-annihilation as an ego-death, a loss of sense in ourselves, to have a potential of finding a deeper sense of being-at-home.

If Jameson's approach sounds circular, then his argument is being appropriately conveyed. He attributes this "utopian circularity" as a symptom of understanding utopia from the lens of experience and technique. Utopian thoughts have an inherent circularity insofar as they refer to (and encourage) meditative thought as a mode of engaging the world of humanity. This is not to say that calculation does not have its place, rather that it is secondary to those needs which are rooted most deeply in our experience. In contrast to Heidegger, Jameson argues that there are "utopian practices at play from the novel to the marketing floor" (42). He hints at the possibility that utopia is a much softer concept than it is first perceived to be. Jameson reminds us that utopia is "frequently called 'too [or not] political [enough]'" (42). As such, utopia appears more tangible than the caricatures which are often attributed to it. The utopian moment is experienced as a "suspension of the political," of the over-formalization of meaning, and a return of daily life to experiencing-as-such

[2] If we were to be strict Heideggerians, we might instead use the term "ontic." We will keep the term "phenomenological" in reference to the tradition of inquiry that arises from Husserl and Heidegger.

(42). Jameson's work finds kindred insights in Susan Sontag's theoretical and literary writings; for her, utopian interpretation is as urgent as it is essential being-in-the-world.

THE AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE OF UTOPIA: SONTAG ON INTERPRETING A LIFE

Now, we will study Sontag's "Against Interpretation" to see how she delineates and relates to the concept of interpretation. She recalls that art has been placed on the defensive since Greek antiquity, wherein Plato decreed art to be dangerously useless. Plato, argues Sontag, believes that art merely re-presents reality through another medium (in addition to the material world which is, itself, a re-presentation of transcendent forms). She summarizes Plato's perspective of art as being "not particularly useful (since you cannot sleep on the painting of a bed), nor in the strict sense, true" ("Against Interpretation" 95). Sontag goes on to provide a series of rebuttals against this mimetic view of art in what I will term an *aesthetic retort*.

Sontag's first counter to the mimetic perspective is that it represents a dampening of *what it is that art does*. The mimetic perspective deals art a disservice by trying to associate it with pure representation since, as Sontag points out, art has never aimed to make such a claim. Rather, it was Plato's metaphysical theory that demanded that art justify itself against the claim of being pure representation. In response, the defenders of great art (i.e. those who, in Sontag's eyes tend to take "the arts . . . [much] too seriously") reply that the artistic encounter is part and parcel to the act of interpretation, to the piercing of the represented to divulge its intended content (97). It is in the contrast between these two perspectives that Sontag finds sufficient footing to launch her own critique.

Modern bourgeois art criticism, contends Sontag, has done its own damage to humanity's relationship with art. To maintain institutional recognition, art criticism has attempted to mold the aesthetic act of interpretation into an instrumentalist technique. She admonishes modern art critics for framing interpretation as a "means of plucking a set of elements (the X, the Y, the Z, and so forth) from the whole work. The task of interpretation [becomes] virtually one of translation" (97). Such an approach strips art of its aesthetic potency, rendering it merely an entertaining parlor trick with the punchline being its singular, decipherable meaning. The instrumentalist practice renders art "manageable, comfortable" (97). The danger of such a practice is that it deludes the interpreter into a misrecognition of their own actions—to believe a declaration to be an

interpretive act. It is for this reason that Sontag finds such approaches better described as matters of de-codification or definition.

For Sontag, art is not meant to have a singular interpretation, rather, it is meant to inspire interpretations through aesthetic events. In this way, interpretation's own reflexive nature is given space to become visible. Indeed, she maintains that a certain level of suspicion ought to be maintained towards acts which are declared interpretive with special consideration given to the present historical moment. She indicts the de-codifying, defining practices masquerading as interpretation to be a "revenge of the intellect upon art . . . [and] the world" (Sontag 98). Sontag argues that a reclamation of interpretation from pure intellectualization is necessary, that it must be returned to its aesthetic dimension. Her argument sketches the disjointing quality of eminent art to be elevated as essential in instructing one's understanding of what it is that art "does." She describes a common error in separating the sensuous and cognitive tasks that the work of art presents. The error of this interpretive style is that the sensuous work is taken for granted and is to be followed by, rather than an informative precursor to, the work of art. She asks for a "recovery of the senses: to see, hear, and feel more" (104). She thus argues for removing the interpretive approach to art (in its de-codifying form), calling instead for an "erotics of art."

In line with Sontag, the phenomenological tradition can be seen as an "erotics of experience," which hopes to equally reflect the sensuousness of life back into the mind's cognizing of the world. Interpretation might then be understood as the courage to be imaginative, to subvert the temptation to codify and to instead remain in-step with our worldly lives. In this way, her perspective's involvement with utopian ideals becomes palpable. Utopia instead should denote an act of aesthetic speculation into potential futures which might be born from our empirical present. It would be poor form to dismiss Sontag as anti-interpretation as such, but rather as against interpretation as a form of decoding. She also passionately warns against turning art into such a calculated endeavor or, even worse, doing the same to one's way of building and living in community.

Sontag's application of this schema is frequently evident within the structure of her novel, *In America*. In fact, one interesting way to read this novel is as the imaginative process that might have been in motion amongst the real travelers whose journey inspired its writing. Their time together is spent conceiving brave possibilities about their future in search of an authentic self-relation, daring to pursue these possibilities, and adjusting to the outcome. This experimentation in search of authentic self-narratives is precisely what Heidegger would consider an event of home-building. In this way, we can bear witness to a poignant reminder that imperfection is a hallmark utopian experience.

Imperfection, experimentation, and authenticity are laced with the logic of a temporally inflected mode of understanding. Each of these concepts contains the assumption that one form of being can proceed (or be succeeded by) another. Knowing that imagination and experimentation are intimately bound up with one another presents an opportunity to think of utopia as an imaginative element to be considered within temporal language. Accessing the phenomenological side of utopia is possible in its temporalization. In looking to the past, we are confronted with the idea of nostalgia. Savoring the occurrence of previously actualized possibilities comprises the base of our understanding of utopia. Recalling Jameson's work on utopia and the death drive, nostalgia glimmers in the past where an ego death led to an unexpectedly profound new beginning. Nostalgia inflames our curiosity towards future possibilities. These future possibilities which involve an interruption and redirection of our present trajectory and timeline in a more utopian direction are the auspices of hope. Lastly, the play of consciousness via the imagination is conceived (at least at a temporal level) as the oscillation between both past and future.[3] When we free consciousness to play within these utopian dimensions, it is engaged precisely in what Heidegger refers to as the act of home-building. Thus, art which stimulates utopian imaginings has the capacity to encourage us towards more authentic engagement with ourselves and one another.

These insights are reflected in a novel by Sontag that both describes a utopia and its lived experience: *In America*. This book elevates the concepts at stake for Heidegger, Jameson, and Sontag as means to reinterpret the real life of Helena Modjeska. Helena was a prominent theater actress from the mid-1800's who rose to super stardom throughout Europe and, later, America. Even as a work of stylized historical fiction, this book is deceptively truthful in the way it highlights the phenomenological themes at work in the study of utopia. They are deftly woven into the characters' inner lives and interpersonal interactions. This text stands as a "living example" of the concepts that are so dear to Heidegger, Jameson, and Sontag.

FINDING UTOPIA WITH-(IN AMERICA)

For this reason, Sontag's *In America* is an exceptional source of material for the contemplation and conceptualization of a utopian phenomenology. This section will take into consideration the relationships between

[3] Here, I would point the reader to Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*. Play as an oscillation between experiences, reflection, and ideals is heavy indebted to Schiller's ideas in this text, particularly Letter IX.

three of the main characters: Maryna Zalewska, the actress; Ryszard Kierul, her lover and journalist, and Henryk Sienkiewicz, her physician. The symbolic associations between them represent the three temporal positions of present, future, and past, respectively. Furthermore, Maryna's development into a figure of greater self-awareness as the book progresses will provide ample opportunity to discuss the utopian imagination at play as it is experienced within the flow of consciousness. The interplay of these dramatic elements set the stage for a robust understanding of a phenomenology of utopia.

For those not familiar, the book follows the life and times of the Polish actress, Maryna Zalewska, who stands at the peak of her theater career in late 1860s Warsaw. Having attained such heights, Maryna finds herself taking stock of her lifestyle and the people around her. In spite of her passionate commitment to acting, she is smothered by the petty politics, ridiculous expectations, and emotional imposition dragging upon her shoulders as a leader of the theater scene. She finds herself hollowed out, hoping for her life to transform somehow. Among those near to her are a handful of friends who share a common interest in utopian thinkers of the day, such as Charles Fourier. They agree to embark on an expedition from Warsaw to build a new communal society outside of Anaheim, California.

JULIAN AND RYSZARD: FORMING THE FUTURE

As a demonstration of faith in their budding community's project, Julian Bordis, another actor from Maryna's troupe, and Ryszard (her lover) volunteer to be the first to explore California to find a suitable location for the troupe to lay its new roots. Their passage from Europe to the United States disclosed itself quickly as a battle of perspectives in their approach towards this utopian endeavor. Julian, the elder of the two, adhered to a conventional attitude as they boarded the ship transporting them to America. He was quick to lecture Ryszard on the necessary customs to become invisible, dissolved into the demos, in their new homeland. Ryszard, on the other hand, was focused on the exact opposite: he suggested that he and Julian use pseudonyms and *act as if* they did not know one another (Sontag, *In America* 95). He was hungry to experience the freedom brought by the responsibility to create oneself, rather than finding comfort in dissolving one social script for another.

As one might imagine, the experiences of the two characters on their oceanic passage differ notably from one another. Julian feigned seasickness for several days and came to few social events with other

passengers. Ryszard reveled in every opportunity to congregate with the other guests. He mixed with people of several ethnicities, classes, and genders. The wide array of encounters dealt to him left Ryszard at once enlivened and devastated as he was learning to come to terms with the unexpected consequences entailed by his decision to start a new life (107). However, he still reviews his experiences with a charmingly characteristic stoicism. Despite his youthfulness, Ryszard displays a practical wisdom that allows for his hopeful idealism to be given real depth. In this way, he is a paradigm for how the utopian attitude is a boon to the development of a real actor in the world from a pragmatic standpoint. Ryszard moves forward with a hope given to him by his dream of a communitarian utopia. He becomes tempered rather than despondent by the slippery manner that his dream has begun to appear in his present experience as a soon-to-be-real-place. He represents the guiding light that radiates into the perspective of the utopian-at-play.

MARYNA AND HENRYK: PLAY AND NOSTALGIA

The provisional work in Julian's and Ryszard's chapter provides the larger backdrop of the experience of learning to recognize utopia-as-play. With these pieces in place, Maryna's deep soul-searching and personal transformation throughout the novel can be more clearly appreciated as the embodiment of play as the present-experiential form of utopia. Indeed, we witness this transformation resulting from her engagement with utopian moments from her life.

Prior to her departure from Europe, Maryna encountered her son's father. This individual left her with their newborn son after he revealed to her that he was legally married to someone else which nullified theirs. He complained that he would not be able to see his son (not that he did before) and chastised Maryna's decision to relocate, confident that she would miss Europe too much. Her elegant retort—"I am not going to America to find what I will lose by leaving Europe" (127)—indicates the buffering quality that utopian reflection can provide to those working to take courageous actions against the temptations of an unimaginative life. Initially ambivalent about this move and her larger plans for the United States, we see Maryna quickly overcoming these transitory concerns. She instead becomes preoccupied with more mature considerations about how best to run their new utopia or *phalanstery*, a term selected in homage to Fourier.

Many of her personal concerns during this time are shared in letters to her physician and admirer, Henryk, who remained in Poland. These letters are rich in emotions, ruminations, curiosities, and considerations.

At times, Maryna shared with Henryk mundane feelings of inadequacy about losing her stardom, her beautiful physical appearance, and the possibility of failing to establish a viable commune (198). At other times, she is focused on more intimate and existential concerns. She discloses a harrowing fear that her journey will render her unrecognizable to her loved ones in Europe and pleads for Henryk to be understanding, rather than "[judging] the expressiveness of the stage empress to be excessive, unwomanly, rebellious—satanic!" (134). She returns to his affections time and time again as a source for her own stability as endures this transformative experiment.

Nostalgia, in its most general form, can be understood as a fountain for the nourishment of hope. Placing one's attention within a nostalgic mode attunes the faculties of the imagination to the utopian currents that already exist within the reserves of our memories. In exploring these accents, one also finds the psychic materials and reflective insights necessary to craft a fresh vision of the future. Contrary to the promises of modern political demagogues, the past is not something we can return to, nor should we aspire to. Rather, nostalgia is an anchor for reflection on the process of self-transformation as it is unfolding. In her continual writings to Henryk, Maryna is also returning to her younger self to find a contrast to her present circumstances, to see how the hopes of her past have shaped these efforts. Henryk has witnessed Maryna's previous leaps of faith, her pursuit of more challenging roles, her passage through difficult personal trials, and more. His influence provided reassurance that this search for a greater sense of being at home is worthwhile. This helps her find glimmers of hope in her labors, even as they produce outcomes that perhaps differ from her intentions. The partition between a hoped-for narrative and its realized project is the epitome of the present-experiential mode of utopia as play. It is Jameson's utopian circle articulated within a narrative framework.

The notion of play is an embodiment of the imaginative quality of the intellect. It is at once experimental and pleasurable, a search for the nuances within our worldly engagement that allow for us to flourish as human beings dwelling within a world. Instances of utopia-as-play are peppered throughout the plot. Julian's and Ryszard's antics noted above on the ship are a sterling example of this phenomena. On a superficial level, it might be tempting to chalk up to pure mischief their decisions to disguise themselves. While not denying this probability on one level, this decision also serves as a model for *the types of possibilities that are opened by this kind of utopian play*. The troupe's decision to move to California is a willingness to commit to courage, to rely on one another for aid and the grace to make mistakes as they find themselves anew. The purpose of utopia is not to indicate a state of being that is free from pain, fear, disappointment, anger,

or other inescapable facts of being-human. Rather, it is the means through which we can retain our hope and drive for a better future outside of old patterns of being, despite the pain such ventures incur. As such, utopian reflection is an essential part of the craft of human flourishing found in the practice of home-building. Utopia's value as a philosophical concept is repeated throughout the novel and Maryna's elasticity as a character adds credence to this argument.

Maryna was, of course, the de facto leader of the commune. However, she remained potently aware of this dynamic and used it with precision. At one point, she privately revokes her own consideration to administer the daily activities of the community's operations. She preferred, instead, to demonstrate that trait she desires others to acquire: an intrinsic motivation to serve the household (Sontag, *In America* 158). The act is an instance, par excellence, of Heidegger's notion of home-building. Maryna exercised her judgment in favor of bringing the troupe's shared vision into sharper focus. In this way, she exhibits an act of faith that is necessary for an utter rejection of any dominating logic. Our previously discussed notion of the imagination underscores utopian impulses as a primordial facet of our being-in-the-world. By its very nature, it is destined to subvert, even if only at times as a mere improvement to, the social order.

Indeed, this seems to be the direction that Maryna takes in her self-reflection as the phalanstery reaches its apex. It occurs to her that "acting [was subconsciously] a means of freeing oneself from the social condition of docility I received as a woman" (135). For several reasons, she comes to embody the "conscientization" process described by Paul Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, of one who had learned to subvert the master-slave dialectic. At this point, things begin to change. To much surprise, or perhaps disappointment, the phalanstery erected by Maryna and her followers did not manage to survive a single year. In fact, it fell apart roughly six months after Maryna's wealthy husband, Bogdan, had purchased the lease for their community. Some of her followers returned to Poland, others abandoned them for different communes, while Maryna herself returned to the stage with the goal of being the most successful theater actress in America. Her letters to Henryk, the physician, start to dwindle. This newfound silence comes to signal the end of her first American dream.

This result might leave Sontag's reader doubtful of the extent to which utopian sentiments influence pragmatic decision-making. After all, her main character thought to trade the theater for an idyllic pastoral life, only to return to the theater. But Sontag's goals as a writer are more sophisticated than the mere representation of the difficulty of actualizing a challenging project. Rather, she suggests that it is foolish to consider utopia merely in its future-experiential form without considering its present-experiential form

as play and, thus, home-building. In fact, Sontag leans heavily into this idea when, through Maryna's voice, she describes "utopia [not] a kind of place but a kind of time, those all too brief moments when one would not wish to be anywhere else" (175). Centering this phenomenon brings us to the heart of Sontag's project, to account for the failures of utopia. Superficial criticisms of Maryna might view her, and this novel, as a failure of utopian art for not having actualized a single model of utopia as a self-sustaining commune come into focus here. This sentiment is highlighted in literary theorist Darko Suvin's *Brecht's Communist Manifesto Today* termed "anti-utopian thought" (37). It echoes a disbelief in our capacity for change, in line with Fukuyama's end-of-history perspective; that utopia is futile. In contrast to utopian or dystopian works of art which motivate through inspiration or dread, anti-utopian art is anti-motivational to its core.

The truth is that failure is an inevitable part of imagining and living utopia. The error is to think of such failure as the end of an ideal or the destruction of some sacred truth. On the contrary, failure is the root through which the newest branch of our efforts must spring forth. It may behoove us to consider these failures in Hegelian terms as the negation propelling the dialectic of our being-in-the-world. In Maryna's case, this proves a deceptively radical way of considering this dialectic. If Sontag's literary meditation on utopia ends with its heroine returning to the stage, it is because this represents the necessity for actors in the world's theater to continue returning to its stage *despite its failures*.

Following Zalewska's advice, the best actors are the ones who "know how to fake it. There are plenty of times I don't feel courageous, but I act as if it's there and it appears" (Sontag, *In America* 135). When Maryna makes her return to the stage stateside, it is with an enhanced wisdom that encourages her to integrate a greater sense of fulfillment into her life. This has powerful implications for how we consider action in our own lives, particularly in the struggles for meaning waged by the established social order. Many of those within the younger generations are focused on a banal form of speech censorship.[4] To be clear, conflicts over language and meaning are noble and necessary goals for any social movement. However, this must not be carried out capriciously, and it cannot be the only form of waging resistance. Participating in anti-utopian forms of linguistic resistance has leaked from many Leftist practitioners into the public discourse as a staple of contemporary political interaction. Very little consideration seems to be given to the art and process of personal transformation. Such transformation involves a distinct form of messiness, the kind of haphazard vulnerability displayed by the protagonists of Sontag's novel. These events

[4] This refers to the Millennial generation (of which I am a part) and younger.

are far from perfect, yet, from a phenomenological perspective, they are utopian. Sontag succinctly expresses this herself when reminding readers that the "revolutionary endeavor [of] America . . . is [that it is] supposed to repair the European scale of injury or simply make one forget what one wanted, to substitute other desires" (209). In other words, utopia is a return to a space where curiosity and wonder can be given their proper weight in guiding our decisions for the future. As such, the utopian project is analogous to the Japanese art of kintsugi wherein broken ceramics are repaired with gold. It is the efforts of these utopian repairs that hint at the promise of a more radiant future.

CONCLUSION

Susan Sontag's *In America* provides an example of how to approach utopia through an embodied phenomenological perspective. There are plenty of thinkers, both literary and philosophical, who supply models of utopias, communal or otherwise. It can be tempting to sit with an awareness of what utopia tells us our world could be like and make do with the comfort of being the one who is "always right." The tradeoff is missing out on the ability to develop a sense of how utopia can appear in various forms, and how it can serve as a motivation in both political and personal enterprises. Eastern religions have long professed the value of viewing time through the present moment as a powerful experience. Indeed, Sontag seems to echo this sentiment when she states that "one must believe in people to be a great writer, which means one must continually adjust one's expectations of them" (110). Learning to recenter the present moment, to be able to adjust and read that moment in a way that is informed by the past and with a pragmatic optimism for the future, provides a chance for a realistic assessment of one's circumstances, lending support to the efforts of those who seek to move with greater intention towards utopia.

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