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Art Experience as Source of Utopian Dreaming

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Abstract

This article explores whether the experience of works of art with utopian themes can give rise to utopian dreaming. Despite numerous global crises, an imaginary deadlock around new forms of social organization appears to permeate Western political consciousness. Through the utopian philosophy of Ernst Bloch and a phenomenological study, I investigate the connection between utopian dreaming and art experience. Five young adults were shown the movie Cinema Paradiso, a work of art that in the terminology of Bloch presents an image of concrete utopia. They were interviewed about their experience of the movie following phenomenological principles. Based on phenomenological analysis, I present five descriptive cases that constitute empirical examples of utopian dreaming following the watching of Cinema Paradiso. These show that it is in fact possible for utopian dreaming to be elicited by certain works of art. Findings are discussed through Bloch's thinking and an important distinction between dreaming and hoping is drawn.

Keywords: art, utopia, political imagination, imagined futures, Ernst Bloch, phenomenological psychology

Introduction

With humanity facing a multitude of overlapping, existential threats, such as the climate crisis, new geopolitical conflicts, and unparalleled economic inequality, one can easily feel that we live in dystopian times (see also Eskelinen, 2020; Moylan, 2022a; Palardy, 2022). Although many people desire change, numerous theorists have noted that imagining let alone creating alternative forms of societal organization has become very difficult. Fisher (2009) captures this condition with his concept of capitalist realism: a pervasive cultural atmosphere of cynicism and sense that there is no alternative to the present state of affairs, namely liberal capitalism and the forms of subjectivity inherent to it. Fisher further

explains this state with reference to Jameson's (2003) assertion that it is now easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. As argued by Žižek (2019), we collectively act as if Fukuyama's thesis about the end of history is true. The details of liberal capitalism (perhaps even a modest social democracy) can be discussed, but the political conflicts of the 20th century are over. The ideology of capitalist realism is that we now live in a post-ideological era.

To explore the possibility of challenging this deadlock of imagination, this article goes back to the utopian philosophy of Ernst Bloch. Bloch's thinking is not widely referenced in psychology (but see e.g. Nissen, 2013; Marvakis, 2007; Sander et al., 2025), despite a recent wave of interest in subjects like imagined futures and social change (e.g. Hawlina et al., 2020; Jovchelovitch & Hawlina, 2018; Power et al., 2023; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2016). As argued elsewhere (Egede et al., in review; Sander et al., in press), Bloch's dialectical materialism is a crucial resource for theorizing the futurity of subjectivity through his conceptualization of utopia and anticipatory consciousness. In agreement with theorists like Fisher, Jameson, and Žižek, Bloch's dialectical ontology entails that world history is always unfinished and thus that change is materially always possible.

The theoretical starting point of this article is Bloch's thoughts on the importance of art for inspiring utopian consciousness of different sorts in *The Principle of Hope* (1995). In a radio discussion with Adorno, Bloch summarizes this theorizing succinctly: "not only if we travel there, but in that we travel there the island of utopia arises out of the sea of the possible. Utopia – but with its new contents" (Adorno et al., 1988, p. 3). Bloch suggests that the very act of allowing oneself to engage with the utopian makes it possible for novel utopian "content" to appear to us. Art is one mode of such engagement. Although its creation and appreciation is mediated by ideology and taste (cf. Adorno & Horkheimer, 2007; Bourdieu, 2010), Bloch insists that art has a utopian dimension: traces of past hopes, dreams and struggles against injustice that shine forth through the work of art, in the present. As Bloch (1985) writes poetically on Beethoven's opera *Fidelio*: "Every future storming of the Bastille is implicitly expressed in *Fidelio*" (p. 243). Works of art in which artists have given form to utopian content express glimpses of something not-yet-become, as a "pre-appearance" of latent societal possibilities for change. "In that we travel there" new possibilities are opened up for the person who perceives a work of art. In other words, in the very act of engaging with certain works of art, we are oriented towards possibilities of change in our own everyday lives and societies, which to Bloch always contain latent possibilities for change, even when these are obscured by ideology. This is not limited to explicitly utopian art (cf. Marcuse, 1978). For the sake of exploring art's potential to inspire anticipatory consciousness, I will focus on art with utopian themes.

In this article, I therefore examine whether the experience of art with utopian themes can give rise to what I will call utopian dreaming. I use the word "dreaming," in the sense of fantasizing or daydreaming about something, rather than imagination to signify a psychological orientation towards desirable possibilities and not only mental imagery *per se*. For this kind of dreaming to be utopian, it has to be directed at something collective as opposed to being merely private or self-interested, whether that be a smaller community, a culture, or society at large. In line with contemporary utopian theory (e.g. Levitas, 2013; Moylan, 2020, 2022a; Jameson, 2005) and Bloch, the utopian will not only be confined to visions of perfect societies, but to a more general desire for or striving towards better forms of social life.

The question of whether art with utopian themes can give rise to utopian dreaming will be investigated in an exploratory, phenomenological study and afterwards discussed in light of the theory of Bloch. Before that, I will briefly offer a short overview of contemporary engagements with art and utopian imagination to situate the present contribution.

Art and Utopian Imagination

In the 18th century, the German poet and thinker Schiller (2016) wrote that “It is through beauty, that we arrive at freedom,” speaking on what he referred to as the “aesthetic education of man.” Bloch was among the first to theorize the link between art and such utopian emancipation in philosophical depth, alongside thinkers such as Benjamin (2018) and Marcuse (1978, 1998). Since, utopian imagination has been explored across a wide range of disciplines, most notable in utopian studies (e.g. Levitas, 2013; Moylan, 2022a, 2022b). A growing body of empirical work uses art-based methods as a form of “utopian pedagogy,” aiming to rekindle political imagination (Perheentupa & Porkola, 2025; Salmenniemi et al., 2024; Fält, 2025). These studies share the assumption that engagement with art can help people imagine the world as different from how it is or awaken a desire for something other than the present state of affairs (see also Nadir, 2010; Levitas, 2013; Abensour, 1999).

Another approach focuses on existing aesthetic practices. Nissen and Friis (2020), for example, examine the collective artistic activities in a Danish drug treatment facility, arguing that these practices transgress the instrumentalism of standardized psychotherapy and thereby constitute a utopian social practice (see also Nissen, 2013; Lohtaja, 2020; Sander et al., 2025). Such non-hegemonic practices can function as “prototypes,” concrete incarnations of the idea that something different is possible (Nissen & Mørck, 2011). There are different ways of investigating art’s potential for giving rise to utopian imagination (for general sources on utopian methodology see Brown & Cole, 2003; Gutierrez, 2020; Rajala et al., 2023).

Studies that use art to inspire utopian imagination reveal a persistent difficulty, namely that participants often report that imagining a different future is frustratingly hard (Perheentupa & Porkola, 2024; Salmenniemi et al., 2024). For Jameson (2005), the inability to imagine utopia is not caused by a cultural shift, and it is not a problem that can be solved through better or more utopian art. Jameson (1982) argues that utopian art paradoxically expresses “our constitutional inability to imagine Utopia itself, and this, not owing to any individual failure of imagination but as the result of the systemic, cultural, and ideological closure of which we are all in one way or another prisoners” (p. 153). From this perspective, the potential of utopian art lies neither in its ability to elicit visions of alternative futures nor in the first instance in the desire it awakens. As Moylan (2022b) argues, utopian anticipation begins in negativity – in the experience that “something is missing” (cf. Adorno et al., 1988). Utopian art can offer a standpoint from the point of which a critique of the present can be articulated. This can also counter the cynical stance of capitalist realism by orienting the subject towards the contingency of and what is lacking in the present.

Given these tensions, it remains ambiguous when, how, and to what extent art can inspire utopian dreaming. The present study addresses this ambiguity by offering a

psychologically detailed, phenomenological account of how utopian dreaming may arise in concrete encounters with art. From a utopianist perspective, the aim is to describe specific instances of utopian dreaming in the art experiences of ordinary viewers and thereby illuminate if what Bloch (1995) calls the “utopian impulse,” our spontaneous inclination to hope and dream, reveals itself subjectively when people engage with works of art that carry utopian themes.

Cinema Paradiso

To explore the link between utopian dreaming and art with utopian themes empirically, five people were shown the Italian movie *Cinema Paradiso*, directed by Giuseppe Tornatore (1988), and interviewed about their experience of the movie.

In *Cinema Paradiso*, we follow the life of movie director Salvatore di Vita (Toto), who in a flashback reminisces about his coming of age sometime in the middle of the 20th century. Growing up in the rural village of Giancaldo on Sicily with his mother and younger sister, Toto is fatherless and often goes to bed hungry. The village has a cinema located in the church of the city with the name *Cinema Paradiso*, indicating its paradisiacal nature. The cinema functions as a kind of gathering spot where people across social boundaries watch movies and, as a result, laugh, cry, fall in love, and even sleep. Everyone is welcome in the cinema, and the townspeople get very upset when there is not enough space for everyone. Toto loves to watch movies in the cinema, collects little strips of photographic film that were discarded due to censorship, and dreams of learning how to work the cinema. The middle-aged and childless school dropout Alfredo occupies the role of projectionist. Alfredo initially rejects Toto, but by being annoyingly persistent and clearly showing a passion for the cinema, as well as a longing to spend time with Alfredo, Toto is accepted as an apprentice. A sudden fire in the cinema leaves Alfredo permanently blinded, and Toto becomes the new projectionist of the village. After falling in love with a girl and going to the military as a teenager, Toto is commanded by Alfredo to leave the village, never come back, and “never give in to nostalgia” as he says. Decades after Toto cut all contact with his roots, we find out that the event that triggered the flashback is a phone call about the death of Alfredo, which finally makes Toto come back to his hometown to attend the funeral. During Toto’s visit, the townspeople witness the now abandoned cinema being blown up to make space for a parking lot. The movie ends with Toto being brought to tears when viewing a montage of all the small strips of film that his younger self collected, and which he found during his visit.

Cinema Paradiso does not display a perfect future, societies of abundance, or liberated existence, but it does express what Bloch (1995) calls concrete utopia. Bloch distinguishes between abstract and concrete utopia. Abstract utopias are what we usually think of as utopias: harmonious and overly static worlds that are disconnected from the present societal situation and its conflicts and contradictions. Concrete utopias are more ambiguous forms of utopia that, though they express hope and something better than the present, do not eradicate such conflicts and contradictions, which unfold in every society and in the everyday life of every human being. Art which embodies concrete utopia does not present perfect worlds or political programs abstractly but expresses a striving beyond the present in a lacking, unjust world.

In *Cinema Paradiso*, we witness Toto's mundane, even tragic, everyday life, and the cinema is not represented as a particularly glamorous place. Despite its realism, there is clearly something very appealing, something almost magical, about the space of the cinema. A special atmosphere lives in cinema through the communal, collective, and democratic appreciation of works of art. An aesthetic community like the cinema in *Cinema Paradiso* would even be materially possible in most modern societies. The cinema in *Cinema Paradiso*, in the context of Toto's life, functions as an image of concrete utopia, which potentially can expand the viewer's unnoticed horizon of "objective-real possibilities" in their own life, as Bloch (1995, p. 253–241) calls unrealized possibilities that could develop from the present material conditions.

Though some readers may regard the utopian dimension of *Cinema Paradiso* as overly nostalgic, the movie itself resists a purely nostalgic reading through its depiction of the hardships of village life, characters warning against nostalgia, and the demolition of the cinema. In a world saturated by cynicism and a pervasive sense of dystopian inevitability (cf. Žižek, 2009; Fisher, 2009; Sloterdijk, 1983), the film's depiction of community and shared aesthetic appreciation stands out. Utopia also does not need be located in the future. As Jameson (2005) argues, even genres explicitly dedicated to imagining the future, such as science fiction, inevitably fail to escape the present. Likewise, Bloch (1995) does not prescribe what the future utopia should look like in detail, he uncovers utopian traces in cultural artefacts of the past. Marcuse (1978, p. 73) captures this dialectic in claiming that "the authentic utopia is grounded in recollection," and *Cinema Paradiso* embodies this insight. The closing montage of censored film fragments function as utopian traces. They do not represent a utopia in a literal sense, but they express love, connection, and care as a form of being-together.

Methodology

The article's methodology is inspired by Giorgi's (2009) phenomenological psychology and other phenomenological-psychological investigations of art (e.g. Roald, 2008, 2015; Funch, 1997, 2019). In Giorgi's (2009) approach, the epoché and a phenomenological-psychological reduction are used to assume a phenomenological-psychological attitude. The epoché can be viewed as the mental act of bracketing the natural attitude, again understood in a psychological context, our preconceived notions about what things are, what has caused them, and so forth. In the natural attitude, we are rather naïve to what and how we are actually experiencing, and we tend to explain or judge rather than describe. As Merleau-Ponty (2013, p. 26) states, the phenomenological attitude understands the natural attitude better than it understands itself. The goal is not to remove a veil to see the world objectively but to try and grasp what it is like to experience something in daily life. The reduction consists of a strict focus on psychological meaning as it reveals itself in everyday life (see Englander & Morley, 2023). Translating these principles into a methodological approach, the goal was to describe the experience of *Cinema Paradiso* and emerging utopian dreaming in interviews in collaboration with participants and to accentuate their experienced meanings in analysis.

Interviews

The five participants were found among university students who were interested in participating in a study on movies. They were given the opportunity to watch the movie in a quiet environment and merely informed that they are part of a study on art experience and that they can watch the movie as they normally would. After watching the movie, the first part of the interview was conducted, focusing on the participant's affective experience of the movie. We continued the interview the following day and focused on whether and which kind of utopian dreaming arose during and after the movie. The interviews were split up, based on the assumption that emotions are more easily described immediately after watching (Funch, 2019; Roald et al., 2023), while utopian dreaming might arise and develop after the viewing itself. Informed consent was gathered before the watching. The participants were informed that they will be anonymized and that they can withdraw their consent at a later date if they desire.

The interviews were phenomenologically oriented. The goal was to allow the participants to describe their experience in as much detail and as precisely as possible (see also Funch, 2019). The role of the interviewer was to create the conditions that allowed the participants to express what they experienced during and after the movie experience. This was done through open phenomenological questioning, bracketing the natural attitude, continually directing the attention of the participant towards which, when, and how certain experiences emerged during the watching of *Cinema Paradiso*. Except for the first question, which consisted of asking a variation of "how did you experience this movie?," no questions were explicitly prepared.

Analysis

All interviews were transcribed. I analyzed transcriptions adopting a phenomenological-psychological attitude and extracted parts of the interviews where the participant is describing the art experience and instances of utopian dreaming. Preferably using the words of the participants, these chunks of description were used to produce a narrative text, in which the structure of experience for each participant was described. These descriptions are the outcome of the analysis. Given the exploratory nature of the empirical inquiry, my goal was to illuminate whether it is possible for utopian dreaming to arise in conjunction with certain art experiences through descriptions of concrete instances of this phenomenon. My contribution should not be viewed as a complete phenomenology of utopian dreaming in art experiences as I do not describe generalized, essential structures of this phenomenon (see also Roald et al., 2021).

Descriptions

The participants go by the anonymized names of Maria, Katrine, Carl, Ingrid, and Johanne. When quotation marks are used in this part of the article, they refer to the words of the participant. As interviews were done in Danish, quotes have been translated from Danish to English.

Maria

When Maria saw Cinema Paradiso, she was struck by mixed emotions, but “mostly emotions associated with joy.” Maria was particularly moved by the scenes that took place in the movie theater. The joy came specifically from seeing that

They just have each other. And that they have something to look forward to. And something they get so much joy from. But that somehow it comes so naturally that it's just what they do. They just go and watch a movie.

She describes the emotions that went through her as “nice and warm.” The warmth reminds Maria of times with her family at Christmas and feels “like you're being hugged.” Maria describes this warmth as calm, simple, and safe. She elaborates that this safety included a feeling of being able to be in her surroundings without worrying and that there is “no danger.” Beyond the happy warmth, it is beautiful to watch for Maria: “I think there's something beautiful about the fact, that people always seek each other out in some way and always form some kind of community around something.”

The movie also made Maria reflect on her own life. She has a feeling that the emotions she experienced were connected to “what oneself is kind of looking for in life, or in a community.” Maria got to think that a sense of community, like the one she experienced in the movie, is something she longs for in her everyday life in Copenhagen. She realized that she had grown up and currently lives in a city and therefore “never had the life” that she saw the people in Cinema Paradiso have. Maria's close family lives in a country other than Denmark and therefore she believes that she seeks the warm feeling of security and community that she felt during the movie even more. She describes the life that she sees the people in the movie living as “of course we're together here and now, the fact that it's automatic for them to find each other and seek out each other, and it's like, it's not really something that requires energy either.” There was a simplicity and a naturalness to what Maria saw in the movie and what she seeks. Maria contrasts this with everyday life in Denmark, where “people are together in a completely different way.” In other words, the movie made Maria think about how people relate to each other in a different way than the way she typically lives her social life in Denmark: implicitly and automatically being with the people around her in a loving relationship that provides emotional warmth, security, and peace.

Beyond that, the movie also reminded Maria of the communities she is already a part of, which in part gives her the same feeling as the movie. She identifies her dorm life as the “most similar to the community they have” and partly carries the same sense of community that Maria longs for. Besides dorm life, Maria mentions the cinema, as a type of place, came to mind during the movie. In the cinema, Maria experiences “that feeling of being with others” and that “the cinema [is] really a place where you can just think about one thing. So it also gives you peace of mind when you just sit there and watch a movie.” In this way, Maria was also reminded of what the cinema as a place means to her, that it acts as a kind of breathing space for her, where she experiences a peace that is otherwise difficult to find.

Katrine

Katrine felt overwhelmed and moved by the movie, and she experienced a range of emotions. She describes that the scene that moved her the most was the conversation between the adult Toto and his mother when he returns to his old village, where the mother utters the words: “There are only ghosts here.” Katrine sees Toto in childhood as someone who seeks the unconditional love that all children long for and that Katrine as an adult still seeks, but, according to her, can never have. Katrine explains that she lost a parent as a child and that she has therefore also sought a love that she could never have. Katrine felt a sense of grief in connection with Toto's return to the village. She describes that what was lost was both the experience of love in childhood and the experiences you never had. As she puts it: “What you had is dead (...) what you had will never happen again.” The feeling came “right down to your chest” and felt “like a weight.” At the same time, Katrine also describes the movie experience as cathartic. As she puts it “... it comes with so much sadness, but it's so freeing to hear it being talked about.” Katrine elaborates on this sense of relief by referring to the blowing up of the old movie theater at the end of the film. She experienced it as beautiful and as a sign that “you are able to move on.” Her sense of relief was also part of the connection to Toto that she built throughout the movie. For Katrine, this kind of connection felt redemptive and made her feel understood. She elaborates that when she feels understood, she feels that it “opens up the possibility that you can be a part of [the community].”

Katrine mentions that she has a general feeling that she loves movies “because they show what you would like in some way.” Katrine's feeling of contrasting heaviness and relief was accompanied by reflections on what she misses and longs for in her life. Having lost her mother as a child and having a father, who is ill, Katrine expresses a desire to be able to let go of her past and finally be free to fulfill her wishes. She feels that she mirrors Toto in the movie and says “I would like to get to a place where it's your life that you have to focus on and your wishes for what your life should be. More than it being a fear that you're leaving someone behind in Sicily.” Katrine mentions that she is going on an exchange program and moving to a foreign country for the first time: “I have many, many big dreams about what it will become. I am looking forward to getting to know many new people. But in a different way than I might get to do here at home sometimes.”

Katrine explains that she is particularly looking forward to getting to know new people “without baggage,” as the people she hopes to meet do not know about her past or her parents. For Katrine, this allows for a greater simplicity in building new relationships. This is important to her, and she believes that she has a “very idealistic view of” social relationships. This simplicity is something Katrine has experienced before at folk high school¹ and at cultural events. She explains that it is “... a confirmed agreement [that] we all want to talk to each other.” The “agreement” that Katrine has experienced and longs for more of was also expressed as a sense of community or a feeling of sharing something: “And you look around, right, and you just, well, you make eye contact with everyone (...) if you've been to the theater (...) Because everyone just can't contain their excitement.” In the theater, Katrine has experienced a kind of implicit sense of belonging. Katrine

1 A folk high school is an idiosyncratic kind of boarding school, most widespread in Denmark and Norway, that many Danish, young people for up to a year. It is based on non-formal education, communal living, and one usually goes there to learn or practice arts, sports, crafts, politics based on personal interest.

contrasts what she hopes for with living in Denmark and Copenhagen, where she feels that people are “restrained.” About this restraint, Katrine says that she believes that “there is something in our society that makes us feel this way.”

Carl

Carl experienced Cinema Paradiso as magnificent and warm. The most meaningful moment for Carl was the scene where Toto and Elena kiss in the rain. For him, the scene is an expression of “throwing everything (...) to the side for love.” and he felt that “it (...) was incredibly beautifully captured.” He experienced a “nice feeling in [...] the solar plexus, close to the chest” In the past, Carl has experienced a similar feeling with his girlfriend and with his father when he was little. Carl says that “when she smiles genuinely, I can really feel [it] just kind of blossom up inside of me. And seeing that smile bloom all over me.” In the scene with Toto and Elena, Carl recognizes that he needs to focus on what is most important to him in life by “throwing things away to kind of just nurture love.” The memory of his father is about not having to take care of problems and worries: “to sit on his shoulders (...) and to feel (...) that there was no danger to deal with. (...) Everything was like good and safe.” Carl summarizes the two memories with the Danish word “nærvær,” a kind of intimate presence, and elaborates that the experiences with his girlfriend as an adult and his father as a child have in common that they are free of longing and dominated by “peace.”

Concerning the emotions and the peaceful memories of loving relationships, Carl says that during the movie, especially during the scene where Toto returns to the village as an adult and thinks back to his childhood, he reflected on “what it means to live a good life.” By this, he refers to “what is worth prioritizing and striving for” and that the good life for him is “intentional, with well-being (...) with meaning (...) and where you make (...) the right decisions (...) in accordance with your own values.” Carl connects this more abstract urge to live a good life to his experience of Toto's insistence on not giving up in the movie:

Salvatore's own choices in seeking out and spending (...) many days outside Elena's window (...) And the pursuit of his own hopes and dreams (...) as a projectionist and his return (...) seeking out Alfredo and trying to get into the movie theater (...) That kind of striving.

Carl emphasizes that he became aware of his desire to possess “the general ability to understand my own life and the life I live from day to day.” Carl explains that at times he experiences his life as chaotic and confusing and that he wants to understand whether he is spending his time on the right things: “there's an enormous peace and joy in that sense of overview.” Cinema Paradiso also allowed Carl to reflect on what it is he wants to spend his time on. Carl dreams of realizing a long-term project that revolves around authenticity, which he will also work on in a future academic project. Carl hopes that this project can serve as his “singular goal.” In his view, working on this project has the potential to create better conditions for people who, like Carl himself did in high school, suffer from social anxiety, which Carl views as the opposite of authenticity. Carl imagines that if he could “see this work through to the end,” then “one could accept (...) saying (...) it's actually okay to feel this.” on a collective level. Carl imagines that a community that is more accepting and open to disorders such as social anxiety would also have given him better opportunities to alleviate it.

Carl describes his vision of such a community. He sees this community as “characterized by comfort and safety (...) some of my key words from the movie (...) By joy. Of warmth. Of meaning. Something that like, something that justifies inevitable periods of suffering and pain in life.” By working on how people can live more authentically with other people, he hopes to lessen the suffering inherent to human existence. The project is deeply meaningful as it potentially “benefits others as well as [himself].” Carl reflects further on his own role “Now, I don't have a lot of talents, but I think that this, this is my chance to really do it. So I want to take advantage of it.” Carl wants to help other people in the best way that he can. Going back to Carl's initial reflection on what it means to live a good life, he realized during the film experience that he wants to focus on the things that matter most to him. Particularly, central to him is what he calls “love between people” – both towards particularly important people, such as his love for his girlfriend, and in a broader sense towards other people in general, especially in his work with social anxiety and authenticity.

Ingrid

Ingrid found the movie touching, and that it was the overall life story of Toto's life in the village that moved her. “It's the whole thing in context with itself that I find touching,” she says, especially the relationship between Toto and Alfredo, which she describes as a “very beautiful relationship because they can kind of fill some spaces in each other's lives. Where maybe they both really need it quite a lot.” She says that this feeling is “quite simple” and manifests itself as a warmth “between the belly button and the [collarbones].” It feels like “like getting a hug” and “a big wave of water (...) but it's warm.” The feeling is “pleasant” but also “a little sad.” She has felt this feeling before, e.g. when she reminisces about living on a Greek island with her parents as a child. Upon awakening these memories, Ingrid describes that she “grieves for what was. But it's also okay to move on and step into what will be.” Ingrid describes this feeling as a “positive nostalgia.” The relationship between Toto and Alfredo and the community in the village in which it took place is over, but it was beautiful while it lasted. The experience of beauty evokes memories that contain a similar warmth that Ingrid mourns is over, but which also gives rise to a feeling that something new is about to happen.

Experiencing the simple yet beautiful life stories embedded in the village community, Ingrid got to thinking about what different “places to stay,”¹ as she calls them, mean to her. She mentions her campus, about which she says that “you have this idea of who people are and where they hang out, not that they only belong there, but that it's a place to be.,” and her neighborhood in Copenhagen, where she knows and regularly talks to shop owners and other residents. In her neighborhood, Ingrid feels that she is part of “one big family” and that the different people who are part of this family have a kind of “caring roles without active care.” Ingrid explains that she does not have close relationships in the neighborhood, but that the people there still mean a lot to her:

It's kind of a [non-committal] way of showing love. (...) we're different people and we do something totally different, and we don't really have anything to do with each other. There's no requirement that we have anything to do with each other, but you just want to give like a sweet gesture to pass on good energy.

Ingrid repeatedly compares her neighborhood to the community that she recognizes the people in Cinema Paradiso have. A passive, non-committal community that differs from

friends and family. In Ingrid's neighborhood, she also sees what she calls her "worldview":

... I think a lot about like people and society as a big organism that kind of has to get along with each other. (...) I can get very sad when there is a lot of division and conflict and war (...). So I just think it means a lot to like experience success [...] positive experiences that the organism can, that the cells can figure out how to talk to each other (...) I think maybe we have a very individual-based society and forget to take care of each other.

Ingrid appreciates when she feels that people "flow with each other" as she "feels really strongly that people really need each other." Ingrid's sense that society is "very individual-based" also implies that the cohesion and care she experiences in her neighborhood is not the general way of being together in Danish society. What Ingrid means by an "individual-based" society was expressed in a recent experience Ingrid had on the train, where no one helped a woman who had had an unpleasant experience:

When I was on the train not long ago, there was someone who walked through and was the type of person you can be a little uncomfortable with. And then all of a sudden, I didn't really see what happened, but he was suddenly all over a woman sitting there. And she was really scared. And no one said anything or reacted.

Ingrid misses people taking care of each other and being aware of each other's needs, without basing it on a close relationship. In this way, the experience on the S-train contrasts with everyday life in the neighborhood and on campus. Towards the end of the interview, Ingrid says that she has made a conscious decision to "stop thinking so much about the future," and instead focus on "what feels good now." Conversely, she remembers times in her life when she has not had places to stay or communities that she has often sought. These include when she was young and her parents fought a lot, and when she had a boyfriend who isolated her socially: "those have been two times that I remember quite clearly that were quite lonely because there was no community. (...) you're kind of in survival mode." Even though Ingrid says she does not want to reflect on the future, she is aware that "there's a community there right now that won't last forever."

Johanne

Overall, Johanne found the movie "really, really beautiful." The scene where Toto and Alfredo project the movie from the theater onto the city wall in the village square especially made an impression on her. She was very engrossed in the scene as she "was kind of in the moment, so I wasn't really in touch with what I was doing," but she was "just happy to see it, really." The joy hit her when Toto exclaims "bellissimo" and Alfredo replies something like "oh, you wanna go down there?" and allows Toto to go down to the square. Johanne elaborates that she feels it was a "nice moment between the two. And at the same time that showed how great a character [Alfredo] was, because he wanted to do this for the people outside too." Later, during the movie other emotions arose in relation to Alfredo's role: "A little later I thought back to that scene. And then I was like, no, I kind of understand what he means by that, you become like that slave" Here Johanne refers to Alfredo at one point describing himself as a slave about his work in the cinema, because he has to be alone and control the projection equipment while everyone else is together in the theater. She feels that it's "beautiful" that "he likes to help these people and do a

favor,” but also that it is “a bit of a shame that he just stood there all alone.” Johanne expresses that she has compassion for Alfredo, which she describes as a “sympathy with being on being left out. (...) you become a little invisible in it all. (...) I just think it was kind of tragic to see that loneliness.” In her own life, Johanne has felt it is “a shame” and “unfair,” when people don't appreciate those who give a lot to a community without getting anything back – which reminds her of her father, whom she sometimes sees in a similar role.

Regarding the joy Johanne felt during the movie, she thought “I really want to just go and travel and see this in real life” mentioning the sun, warm climate, and the sea. Seeing the city portrayed “was a bit like coming to such an unknown city and just seeing such an insight into the life there.” The experience reminded Johanne of an experience she has had several times when driving home from work. Johanne often chooses to drive down a bar street where there are always people sitting outside chatting. She “loves (...) cycling through the bar street” and seeing “love and community” but describes that she misses being “absorbed in her own life” – which Johanne sees in both the people on the street and in the movie. Johanne reflects on her observation that part of what made her happy in the movie experience was that village life appeared “primitive” to her in a way that Johanne perceived as “simple, plain and beautiful.” Johanne went on to reflect on the society she saw, and how her view changed in the movie:

... it looks like it's a different openness in that society. But when they came to the new time, where it was more modern, that kind of society seems more private, in a way. But when it's this, it also felt a bit nostalgic, because it's like when you were a kid and you didn't have technology to use and you just ran around and lived life as it was. There's a different approach to the people around you. People are more (...) entertained by each other, in a way that we are not today (...) Maybe that's what was so appealing, it seemed like they were warm towards each other, and that it was so open and free.

Johanne describes what she appreciates about the community she saw in the movie. She feels that the people in the village are together in a more immediate, outgoing, and social way than is often the case in contemporary Denmark and Norway. She describes in detail what she finds “appealing” in what she sees:

It's great to have trust in other people and community and things like that. It is a nice symbol of home, and that you have a common understanding of values, and that you feel comfortable and warm. Maybe that is something I feel I can miss a bit since I have come here and I do not know so many people. It is great that you have that feeling that everything is recognizable and predictable

What Johanne is referring to is that she has moved to Denmark within the last year to study and says that “it's a bit lonely coming to a new country.” Johanne connects her urge to be part of communities with her changed life situation. The community that Johanne recognizes in Cinema Paradiso, she identifies with home, and as a place where you belong through familiarity, being comfortable, and sharing values with others. For Johanne, community is “these little results of these lives that all these individuals have lived and that come together” and something “you have in common with these other people.” She describes that community comes together and becomes something greater when people feel connected. As an observer of the people in Cinema Paradiso, Johanne describes that

she recognizes a “completeness” and that “it just looks so idyllic and just so (...) simple. It's not complicated, it's just how life is for these people.” She says that “sometimes you see little glimpses of what life might be like one day (...) where everything is so super social (...) imagine if this is my life in two years.” During the movie, Johannes' attention was drawn to one of these “glimpses,” which for her is characterized as being “super social.”

Katrine also brings up this social perspective in relation to her exchange. She feels a conflict within herself about whether she is “allowed” to go to another country while having a sick father. She says that “it's also scary (...) there are also external people who may have a different perspective on it.” In this way, Katrine also expresses how her longings are in conflict with the way she experiences some people perceiving her.

Dreams of a Better Life

Circling back to the introduction of this article, it may seem strange to connect the kinds of personal art experiences to the present state of the world: climate change, the end of history and so on. The study is arguably limited by the fact that participants watched a movie, which was chosen for them by a researcher, alone, which does not capture the full potential of cinema or art's cultural impact. Though it seems peculiar in our present state of capitalist realism, there are actually examples in world history of utopian art having a direct impact on society: for instance, in 1888 in the United States, where Edward Bellamy's utopian novel *Looking Backward* had almost direct influence on social life with around 150 communities having been created around the country with explicit inspiration from the novel three years after its release (see Fitting, 1998, p. 11). Still, a more modest psychological influence of those who experience a work of art is significant. Like Marcuse (1978) writes, “art cannot change the world, but it can contribute to changing the consciousness and drives of the men and women who could change the world” (p. 32).

According to Thompson (2013, p. 3), the original title of Bloch's magnum opus *The Principle of Hope* (1995) was “Dreams of a Better Life.” In the descriptions from Maria, Katrine, Carl, Ingrid, and Johanne we see examples of how these sorts of dreams can manifest themselves in and following concrete art experiences. Maria experienced a longing for an automatic, warm sense of community with other people, something that is less common growing up in bigger cities. She reflects on the fact that people interact in a more anonymous, individual way in her everyday life compared to *Cinema Paradiso*. She also experienced an appreciation for her student residence and the cinema, which to some degree satisfy her social longings. Katrine imagined and reflected on her desires for her upcoming student exchange. She described hoping to interact with people more freely and to act in accordance with her ideals of approaching everyone openly. This, she feels, contrasts with the restraint and reservation usually found in social interaction within Danish culture. Carl reflected on what a good life means to him, based on what he admired about Toto's actions. He imagined how he could contribute to the lives of others around him and work towards these values, and what it would be like if people had better conditions to be less anxious and more authentic. Ingrid was made conscious of her belief that people, in general, take too little care of each other. She contrasts this with the community she recognizes in the village of Giancaldo and in her neighborhood as well as certain campus communities. For her, these contexts embody a collective flow that she believes should be a societal ideal. Johanne experienced the village community as

possessing a warmth, openness, and simplicity that she desires and hopes can be a part of her own life. She reflected on her feelings of loneliness and imagined glimpses of a future where her life could be as socially fulfilling as the one she saw in the movie. As illustrated, some kind of dreaming emerged for the participants in and after experiencing Cinema Paradiso.

Different works of art, as appreciated by different people, will naturally elicit different experiences. As Funch (1997) has examined, art is appreciated in a variety of ways: sometimes engagement with art leads to existentially significant aesthetic experiences and sometimes it merely functions as entertainment or as a source of pleasure. Whether and what kind of utopian dreaming emerges in response to a work of art like Cinema Paradiso not only depends on the form and content of the movie, but also how it is experienced (cf. Roald, 2015). In the descriptions, we see how Cinema Paradiso interacts with the past experiences of the participants as well as how they each anticipate the future: envisioning an ideal organismic society in which people “flow” in the same direction; letting go of or reconciling yourself with a painful past to live more freely, and contributing to the greater good; to being a part of accepting communities, societal openness.

At first glance, it can appear like some of this dreaming is merely fantasizing about achieving personal goals. Carl dreams of realizing his own intellectual project, Katrine anticipates going on exchange, Johanne imagines finding warmth and comfort in a foreign country, and so on. At a closer look, the participants generally connect their personal dreams either to a social problem or to a wish for some kind of collective change. Only by a strict separation of the personal and the collective can the dreams be viewed as purely private. For instance, Carl’s project was inspired by his experience of the taboo surrounding social anxiety and he dreams of realizing it because it benefits “everyone as well as himself.” Johanne explains how she recognizes a spontaneous openness in the community of Giancaldo in Cinema Paradiso, which she contrasts to her experiences of being alone and watching other people enjoying themselves together in Copenhagen. Recollection of previously experienced suffering is intimately connected to utopian dreaming (cf. Marcuse, 1978). The participants do not confabulate complete utopian visions based on the content of the movie or out of thin air. For utopian dreaming to remain concrete, it must be rooted in the existential situations of the subject, i.e. everyday life in society, past experiences, the ideological situation and so on. Even when Ingrid is speaking about higher societal ideals, she is reminded of this through her everyday life: where they fall short and where she sees these ideals manifest themselves. She is described the passivity of people around her, when a woman got harassed on the train. Being frustrated that this happened, Ingrid describes her ideals and visions for a society in which people would in fact help that woman. In the context of Cinema Paradiso’s warmth, she reflects on the individualism of Denmark, connected to her concrete memory, inviting her to criticize it (cf. Moylan, 2022a). This, to her, problematic aspect of Danish society gave associations materially existing practices that embody an alternative, but also to a larger vision of a more just society. The degree of utopianism in the described dreams differs, but Cinema Paradiso was actually able to evoke some kind of utopian dreaming.

To Bloch, what we witness in these cases is the utopian impulse manifesting itself in the art experiences of ordinary people. Johanne articulates this insight almost directly: “sometimes you see little glimpses of what life might be like one day.” These glimpses are anticipations of real possibilities embedded in the participants’ lives. The future is

materially not-yet-become and therefore necessarily open, though not completely random; historically developed tendencies exist at both individual and societal levels. And art can orient the viewer towards the not-yet-become through functioning as pre-appearance of possibility.

Though I have focused on utopian dreaming, the utopian impulse has a more fundamental form to Bloch (1995) and that is hope. Humans never cease to daydream of better lives, or dream through the experience of art, and this reveals the utopianism of subjectivity. At the same time, we dream of all sorts of more or less trivial things in everyday life, and we fantasize about commodities, prestige, and social status. In Bloch's analysis, hope, on the other hand, is based on suffering; more specifically, on bodily experience of hunger and of not having what you need but nonetheless searching for it. This is why Bloch (1995) characterizes hope as an "expectant emotion" directed toward the not-yet. At the same time, Bloch describes hope as more than an emotion: it is an action-oriented stance that contains an orientation towards the present as both open and insufficient (Sander et al., in press; see also Egede et al., in review). In its most concrete form, as "educated" or "comprehended" hope (in German *Gebildete Hoffnung*), hope is realized through collective action against oppression and suffering. Hope is never certain, but a "militant optimism" (Bloch, 1995) grounded in the recognition that the world is unfinished. Hope arises from negativity. In this study, Katrine exemplifies this dynamic. Her hopes for her future emerge alongside a melancholic identification with Toto's need to let go of his past. When Toto's mother says "there are only ghosts here," Katrine feels both a heavy sadness and an uplifting sense that she can move on. This sadness is not opposed to hope but its condition. *Cinema Paradiso* evoked a basic hope in the recognition that she is not stuck in the past and that the future is open.

Consequently, some degree of hope is necessary for utopian dreaming, but at the same time, utopian dreaming can feed back into hope. Like utopia, hope manifests in abstract and concrete forms. Educated hope depends on anticipating real-objective possibilities, which can take the form of utopian dreaming. Engaging in utopian dreaming through art can retroactively educate hope by directing consciousness toward latent tendencies and real possibilities in everyday life and society. Hope and utopian dreaming unfold in a dialectical relationship. In societies shaped by capitalist realism, the appearance of utopian dreaming is significant even though it has not developed into hope. Art cannot create educated hope, but it can open up the world and also water the seeds of hope already present in everyday life. Whether concrete utopia expressed by art "becomes practical even only to a small extent and does not merely remain in aesthetic pre-appearance is something which is not decided in poetry, but in society" (Bloch, 1995, p. 216).

Conclusion

This article shows that it is (still) possible for works of art with utopian themes to give rise to utopian dreaming, though the degree of utopianism and its content will vary. As contemporary utopian theorists argue, the utopian should not be confined to depictions of ideal societies, and art, even in the utopian genre, should not be expected to evoke visions of future utopia. Instead, as I have argued, dreams and anticipations of collective improvements of communities and societies evoked from art can properly be viewed as utopian art experiences, whether this is realized reflectively or not. My findings thus

support Bloch's claim that works of art can strengthen the initial conditional possibilities for utopian dreaming, which both depend on and can inspire hope. The dystopian state of world appears to intensify day by day, but we can hope in the style of Mark Fisher's ending to Capitalist Realism (2009, p. 80) that "from a situation in which nothing can happen, suddenly anything is possible again."

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