Cruising Utopia

The Then and There of Queer Futurity

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Introduction

Feeling Utopia

A map of the world that does not include utopia is not worth glancing at.
—Oscar Wilde

QUEERNESS IS NOT yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future. The future is queerness's domain. Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present. The here and now is a prison house. We must strive, in the face of the here and now's totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a *then and there*. Some will say that all we have are the pleasures of this moment, but we must never settle for that minimal transport; we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds. Queerness is a longing that propels us onward, beyond romances of the negative and toiling in the present. Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing. Often we can glimpse the worlds proposed and promised by queerness in the realm of the aesthetic. The aesthetic, especially the queer aesthetic, frequently contains blueprints and schemata of a forward-dawning futurity. Both the ornamental and the quotidian can contain a map of the utopia that is queerness. Turning to the aesthetic in the case of queerness is nothing like an escape from the social realm, insofar as queer aesthetics map future social relations. Queerness is also a performative because it is not simply a being but a doing for and toward the future. Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.

That is the argument I make in *Cruising Utopia,* significantly influenced by the thinking and language of the German idealist tradition emanating from the work of Immanuel Kant and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. An aspect of that line of thought is concretized in the critical philosophy associated with the Frankfurt School, most notably in the work of Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and Herbert Marcuse. Those three thinkers within the Marxist tradition have all grappled with the complexities of the utopian. Yet the voice and logic that most touches me, most animates my thinking, is that of the philosopher Ernst Bloch.

More loosely associated with the Frankfurt School than the aforementioned philosophers, Bloch's work was taken up by both liberation theology and the Parisian student movements of 1968. He was born in 1885 to an assimilated Jewish railway employee in Ludwigshafen, Germany. During World War II, Bloch fled Nazi Germany, eventually settling for a time in Cambridge, Massachusetts. After the war Bloch returned to East Germany, where his Marxian philosophy was seen as too revisionary. At the same time he was derided for his various defenses of Stalinism by left commentators throughout Europe and the United States. He participated in the intellectual circles of Georg Simmel and, later, Max Weber. His friendship and sometime rivalries with Adorno, Benjamin, and Georg Lukács are noted in European left intellectual history.[1] Bloch's political inconsistencies and style, which has been described as both elliptical and lyrical, have led Bloch to an odd and uneven reception. Using Bloch for a project that understands itself as part of queer critique is also a risky move because it has been rumored that Bloch did not hold very progressive opinions on issues of gender and sexuality.[2] These biographical facts are beside the point because I am using Bloch's theory not as orthodoxy but instead to create an opening in queer thought. I am using the occasion and example of Bloch's thought, along with that of Adorno, Marcuse, and other philosophers, as a portal to another mode of queer critique that deviates from dominant practices of thought existing within queer critique today. In my estimation a turn to a certain critical idealism can be an especially useful hermeneutic.

For some time now I have been working with Bloch's three-volume philosophical treatise *The Principle of Hope.*[3] In his exhaustive book Bloch considers an expanded idea of the utopian that surpasses Thomas More's formulation of utopias based in fantasy. *The Principle of Hope* offers an encyclopedic approach to the phenomenon of utopia. In that text he discusses all manner of utopia including, but not limited to, social, literary,

technological, medical, and geographic utopias. Bloch has had a shakier reception in the U.S. academy than have some of his friends and acquaintances—such as Benjamin. For me, Bloch's utility has much to do with the way he theorizes utopia. He makes a critical distinction between abstract utopias and concrete utopias, valuing abstract utopias only insofar as they pose a critique function that fuels a critical and potentially transformative political imagination.[4] Abstract utopias falter for Bloch because they are untethered from any historical consciousness. Concrete utopias are relational to historically situated struggles, a collectivity that is actualized or potential. In our everyday life abstract utopias are akin to banal optimism. (Recent calls for gay or queer optimism seem too close to elite homosexual evasion of politics.) Concrete utopias can also be daydream-like, but they are the hopes of a collective, an emergent group, or even the solitary oddball who is the one who dreams for many. Concrete utopias are the realm of educated hope. In a 1961 lecture titled "Can Hope Be Disappointed?" Bloch describes different aspects of educated hope: "Not only hope's affect (with its pendant, fear) but even more so, hope's methodology (with its pendant, memory) dwells in the region of the not-yet, a place where entrance and, above all, final content are marked by an enduring indeterminacy."[5] This idea of indeterminacy in both affect and methodology speaks to a critical process that is attuned to what Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben describes as potentiality.[6] Hope along with its other, fear, are affective structures that can be described as anticipatory.

Cruising Utopia's first move is to describe a modality of queer utopianism that I locate within a historically specific nexus of cultural production before, around, and slightly after the Stonewall rebellion of 1969. A Blochian approach to aesthetic theory is invested in describing the anticipatory illumination of art, which can be characterized as the process of identifying certain properties that can be detected in representational practices helping us to see the not-yet-conscious.[7] This not-yet-conscious is knowable, to some extent, as a utopian feeling. When Bloch describes the anticipatory illumination of art, one can understand this illumination as a surplus of both affect and meaning within the aesthetic. I track utopian feelings throughout the work of that Stonewall period. I attempt to counteract the logic of the historical case study by following an associative mode of analysis that leaps between one historical site and the present. To that end my writing brings in my own personal experience as another way to ground historical queer sites with lived queer experience. My intention in this aspect of the writing is not simply to wax anecdotally but, instead,

to reach for other modes of associative argumentation and evidencing. Thus, when considering the work of a contemporary club performer such as Kevin Aviance, I engage a poem by Elizabeth Bishop and a personal recollection about movement and gender identity. When looking at Kevin McCarty's photographs of contemporary queer and punk bars, I consider accounts about pre-Stonewall gay bars in Ohio and my personal story about growing up queer and punk in suburban Miami. Most of this book is fixated on a cluster of sites in the New York City of the fifties and sixties that include the New York School of poetry, the Judson Memorial Church's dance theater, and Andy Warhol's Factory. *Cruising Utopia* looks to figures from those temporal maps that have been less attended to than O'Hara and Warhol have been. Yet it seems useful to open this book by briefly discussing moments in the work of both the poet and the pop artist for the purposes of illustrating the project's primary approach to the cultural and theoretical material it traverses. At the center of *Cruising Utopia* there is the idea of hope, which is both a critical affect and a methodology.

Bloch offers us hope as a hermeneutic, and from the point of view of political struggles today, such a critical optic is nothing short of necessary in order to combat the force of political pessimism. It is certainly difficult to argue for hope or critical utopianism at a moment when cultural analysis is dominated by an antiutopianism often functioning as a poor substitute for actual critical intervention. But before addressing the question of antiutopianism, it is worthwhile to sketch a portrait of a critical mode of hope that represents the concrete utopianism discussed here.

Jill Dolan offers her own partially Blochian-derived mode of performance studies critique in *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater*.[8] Dolan's admirable book focuses on live theater as a site for "finding hope." My approach to hope as a critical methodology can be best described as a backward glance that enacts a future vision. I see my project as resonating alongside a group of recent texts that have strategically displaced the live object of performance. Some texts that represent this aspect of the performance studies project include Gavin Butt's excellent analysis of the queer performative force of gossip in the prewar New York art world,[9] Jennifer Doyle's powerful treatise on the formative and deforming force of "sex objects" in performance and visual studies,[10] and Fred Moten's beautiful *In the Break*, with its emphasis on providing a soaring description of the resistance of the object.[11] I invoke those three texts in an effort to locate my own analysis in relation to the larger interdisciplinary project of performance studies.

The modern world is a thing of wonder for Bloch, who considers astonishment to be an important philosophical mode of contemplation.[12] In a way, we can see this sense of astonishment in the work of both Warhol and O'Hara. Warhol was fond of making speech acts such as "wow" and "gee." Although this aspect of Warhol's performance of self is often described as an insincere performance of naiveté, I instead argue that it is a manifestation of the utopian feeling that is integral to much of Warhol's art, speech, and writing. O'Hara, as even his casual readers know, was irrepressibly upbeat. What if we think of these modes of being in the world—Warhol's liking of things, his "wows" and "gees," and O'Hara's poetry being saturated with feelings of fun and appreciation—as a mode of utopian feeling but also as hope's methodology? This methodology is manifest in what Bloch described as a form of "astonished contemplation."[13] Perhaps we can understand the campy fascination that both men had with celebrity as being akin to this sense of astonishment. Warhol's blue Liz Taylors or O'Hara's perfect tribute to another starlet, in the poem "Lana Turner Has Collapsed," offer, through glamour and astonishment, a kind of transport or a reprieve from what Bloch called the "darkness of the lived instant."[14] Astonishment helps one surpass the limitations of an alienating presentness and allows one to see a different time and place. Much of each artist's work performs this astonishment in the world. O'Hara is constantly astonished by the city. He celebrates the city's beauty and vastness, and in his work one often finds this sense of astonishment in quotidian things. O'Hara's poems display urban landscapes of astonishment. The quotidian object has this same affective charge in Warhol's visual work. Bloch theorized that one could detect wish-landscapes in painting and poetry.[15] Such landscapes extend into the territory of futurity.

Let us begin by considering Warhol's *Coke Bottle* alongside O'Hara's poem "Having a Coke with You":

Having a Coke with You
is even more fun than going to San Sebastian, Irún, Hendaye, Biarritz, Bayonne
or being sick to my stomach on the Travesera de Gracia in Barcelona
partly because in your orange shirt you look like a better happier St. Sebastian
partly because of my love for you, partly because of your love for yoghurt
partly because of the fluorescent orange tulips around the birches

partly because of the secrecy our smiles take on before people and
statuary
it is hard to believe when I'm with you that there can be anything as
still
as solemn as unpleasantly definitive as statuary when right in front of it
in the warm New York 4 o'clock light we are drifting back and forth
between each other like a tree breathing through its spectacles

and the portrait show seems to have no faces in it at all, just paint
you suddenly wonder why in the world anyone ever did them
I look
at you and I would rather look at you than all the portraits in the
world
except possibly for the *Polish Rider* occasionally and anyway it's in the
Frick
which thank heavens you haven't gone to yet so we can go together
the first time
and the fact that you move so beautifully more or less takes care of
Futurism
just as at home I never think of the *Nude Descending a Staircase* or
at a rehearsal a single drawing of Leonardo or Michelangelo that used
to wow me
and what good does all the research of the Impressionists do them
when they never got the right person to stand near the tree when the
sun sank
or for that matter Marino Marini when he didn't pick the rider as
carefully
as the horse
it seems they were all cheated of some marvellous experience
which is not going to go wasted on me which is why I'm telling you
about it[16]

This poem tells us of a quotidian act, having a Coke with somebody, that signifies a vast lifeworld of queer relationality, an encrypted sociality, and a utopian potentiality. The quotidian act of sharing a Coke, consuming a common commodity with a beloved with whom one shares secret smiles, trumps fantastic moments in the history of art. Though the poem is clearly about the present, it is a present that is now squarely the past and in its queer relationality promises a future. The fun of having a Coke is a mode

of exhilaration in which one views a restructured sociality. The poem tells us that mere beauty is insufficient for the aesthete speaker, which echoes Bloch's own aesthetic theories concerning the utopian function of art. If art's limit were beauty—according to Bloch—it is simply not enough.[17] The utopian function is enacted by a certain surplus in the work that promises a futurity, something that is not quite here. O'Hara first mentions being wowed by a high-art object before he describes being wowed by the lover with whom he shares a Coke. Here, through queer-aesthete art consumption and queer relationality the writer describes moments imbued with a feeling of forward-dawning futurity.

The anticipatory illumination of certain objects is a kind of potentiality that is open, indeterminate, like the affective contours of hope itself. This illumination seems to radiate from Warhol's own depiction of Coke bottles. Those silk screens, which I discuss in chapter 7, emphasize the product's stylish design line. Potentiality for Bloch is often located in the ornamental. The ornament can be seen as a proto-pop phenomenon. Bloch warns us that mechanical reproduction, at first glance, voids the ornamental. But he then suggests that the ornamental and the potentiality he associates with it cannot be seen as directly oppositional to technology or mass production.[18] The philosopher proposes the example of a modern bathroom as this age's exemplary site to see a utopian potentiality, the site where nonfunctionality and total functionality merge.[19] Part of what Warhol's study of the Coke bottle and other mass-produced objects helps one to see is this particular tension between functionality and nonfunctionality, the promise and potentiality of the ornament. In the *Philosophy of Andy Warhol* the artist muses on the radically democratic potentiality he detects in Coca-Cola.

> What's great about this country is that America started the tradition where the richest consumers buy essentially the same things as the poorest. You can be watching TV and see Coca-Cola, and you know that the President drinks Coke, Liz Taylor drinks Coke, and just think, you can drink Coke, too. A Coke is a Coke and no amount of money can get you a better Coke than the one the bum on the corner is drinking. All the Cokes are the same and all the Cokes are good. Liz Taylor knows it, the President knows it, the bum knows it, and you know it.[20]

This is the point where Warhol's particular version of the queer utopian impulse crosses over with O'Hara's. The Coke bottle is the everyday

Drawings, 1950s, *Still-Life* (*Flowers*), ballpoint ink on Manila paper, 16 3/4 x 13 7/8 in. (42.5 x 35.2 cm), Andy Warhol (artist), The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh; Founding Collection, Contribution, The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc., © 2008 The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts/ARS, New York.

material that is represented in a different frame, laying bare its aesthetic dimension and the potentiality that it represents. In its everyday manifestation such an object would represent alienated production and consumption. But Warhol and O'Hara both detect something else in the object of a Coke bottle and in the act of drinking a Coke with someone. What we glean from Warhol's philosophy is the understanding that utopia exists in the quotidian. Both queer cultural workers are able to detect an opening and indeterminacy in what for many people is a locked-down dead commodity.

Agamben's reading of Aristotle's *De Anima* makes the crucial point that the opposition between potentiality and actuality is a structuring binarism in Western metaphysics.[21] Unlike a possibility, a thing that simply might happen, a potentiality is a certain mode of nonbeing that is eminent, a thing that is present but not actually existing in the present tense. Looking at a poem written in the 1960s, I see a certain potentiality, which at that point had not been fully manifested, a relational field where men could love each other outside the institutions of heterosexuality and share a world through the act of drinking a beverage with each other. Using Warhol's musing on Coca-Cola in tandem with O'Hara's words, I see the past and the potentiality imbued within an object, the ways it might represent a mode of being and feeling that was then not quite there but nonetheless an opening. Bloch would posit that such utopian feelings can and regularly will be disappointed.[22] They are nonetheless indispensable to the act of imaging transformation.

This fear of both hope and utopia, as affective structures and approaches to challenges within the social, has been prone to disappointment, making this critical approach difficult. As Bloch would insist, hope can be disappointed. But such disappointment needs to be risked if certain impasses are to be resisted. A certain affective reanimation needs to transpire if a disabling political pessimism is to be displaced. Another way of understanding Bloch's notion of hope is briefly to invoke the work of J. L. Austin. In *How to Do Things with Words* Austin displaces the true/false dichotomy that structures Western metaphysics with the much more conceptually supple distinction between the felicitous and infelicitous.[23] Austin's terms are derived from understanding the everyday speech act. Felicitous speech acts are linguistic articulations that *do* something as well as say something. But as Austin maps out the life of the felicitous speech act we see all the things that eventually go wrong and the failure or infelicity that is built into the speech act. Bloch's hope resonates with Austin's

notion of the felicitous insofar as it is always eventually disappointed. The eventual disappointment of hope is not a reason to forsake it as a critical thought process, in the same way that even though we can know in advance that felicity of language ultimately falters, it is nonetheless essential.

The moment in which I write this book the critical imagination is in peril. The dominant academic climate into which this book is attempting to intervene is dominated by a dismissal of political idealism. Shouting down utopia is an easy move. It is perhaps even easier than smearing psychoanalytic or deconstructive reading practices with the charge of nihilism. The antiutopian critic of today has a well-worn war chest of poststructuralism pieties at her or his disposal to shut down lines of thought that delineate the concept of critical utopianism. Social theory that invokes the concept of utopia has always been vulnerable to charges of naiveté, impracticality, or lack of rigor. While participating on the Modern Language Association panel titled "The Anti-Social Thesis in Queer Theory," I argued for replacing a faltering antirelational mode of queer theory with a queer utopianism that highlights a renewed investment in social theory (one that calls on not only relationality but also futurity). One of my co-panelists responded to my argument by exclaiming that there was nothing new or radical about utopia. To some degree that is true, insofar as I am calling on a well-established tradition of critical idealism. I am also not interested in a notion of the radical that merely connotes some notion of extremity, righteousness, or affirmation of newness. My investment in utopia and hope is my response to queer thinking that embraces a politics of the here and now that is underlined by what I consider to be today's hamstrung pragmatic gay agenda. Some critics would call this cryptopragmatic approach tarrying with the negative. I would not. To some degree this book's argument is a response to the polemic of the "antirelation." Although the antirelational approach assisted in dismantling an anticritical understanding of queer community, it nonetheless quickly replaced the romance of community with the romance of singularity and negativity. The version of queer social relations that this book attempts to envision is critical of the communitarian as an absolute value and of its negation as an alternative all-encompassing value. In this sense the work of contemporary French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy and his notion of "being singular plural"[24] seems especially important. For Nancy the postphenomenological category of being singular plural addresses the way in which the singularity that marks a singular existence is always coterminously plural—which is to say that an entity registers as both particular