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The American Violence: Contemporary Utopia in Niklas Goldbach's Video Art

Violence within the American Dream

Elise Kristin Sæhle (candidate 2008)

Master Thesis in Screen Cultures with Presentation (60ects)

Institute of Media and Communications

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“Vienna waits for you”¹

For Mamma and Pappa

¹ Billy Joel, “Vienna”

Abstract

Inspired by the phrase *the American dream*, this thesis, *An American violence*, aims to analyse Niklas Goldbach's *Land of the Sun* and *A Date with Destiny* as critical discourse of the American society today. As the title covers, I am perusing to critique the violence within late capitalism and neoliberal economy, often referred to as the American dream. Rather than analysing Goldbach's videos as aesthetic production, I argue that his production works as a commentary on bigger political questions. Through my thesis I argue that Goldbach provides critical theory on the American wilderness and man's use of natural territories. For this reason the thesis includes theory of utopias such as the promise of the American dream, nostalgia, slow violence and necropolitics, neoliberalism, as well as postmodernism and architecture. This thesis aims to provide an interdisciplinary understanding of Niklas Goldbach's commentary, and the stories of heritage offered through the media screen. I will also contextualize his video art through other similar artists, some although similar in style they differ in their commentary.

Acknowledgements

This project began with a Google search for a German video artist in the fall of 2019, with the goal of moving to Berlin. When I look back, I see myself incredibly lucky as a newly graduated art historian, coming across an intricate, contemporary artist such as Niklas Goldbach. I foremost desired the ways in which he told his stories. At the same time as being critically unfolding truths within societies, his video art were aesthetically pleasing and consoling. And so after spending time observing his art production I became consumed by the labyrinth that is the Californian desert, and its heritage captured by Goldbach. Though the move to Berlin became impossible due to pandemic regulations, I was confident about the artist I would come to spend the next years analysing.

And so, I would like to admiringly thank Niklas Goldbach for his brilliant video art that continues to raise questions beyond the screen, and for making art that even after years of viewing I still enjoy just as much. Also, thank you for your interest in this project early on.

I would like to express my deepest thanks to professor Pasi Valiaho for supervising this project. I thank you for your early comments on utopia that opened doors for my curiosity, and for believing in me with such a large and complicated field. I admire your patience.

Thank you, Steffen Kruger, for the education I received on neoliberalism, and for all the fun and memorable times being a part of the Screen Cultures programme. A special thanks to Kim Wilkins for your guidance in the early stages of this project. I would also like to thank Ina Blom for previous supervision, and for making me passionate about video art. Lastly I am forever grateful for the faculty of IMK for their support throughout this experience.

Thank you to my partner, Matei, for being a fan of my thesis. Thank you most of all for your comfort during times of sickness and pain, and for reminding me to never give up this project even in the worst of times. I would also like to thank my dearest friends in the humanities, Julie and Steffen. And friend and art historian Vera for accommodating me in Rome whilst turning this project in.

Lastly, I want to thank scholars and commentators, poets and writers, musicians and artists, and students and critics, for their desire for a changed, hopefully, tomorrow...

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1. Introduction

“*Man is a complex being: he makes deserts bloom- and lakes die.*”²

This thesis represents an expanded analysis of two video-art works by video artist and photographer Niklas Goldbach: *Land of the Sun* and *A Date with Destiny*. I am looking at the notions of utopia, nostalgia and late capitalism, as well as the idea of possible dystopias within our contemporary society. What I mean by utopia is ways in which humans desires a different society or lifestyle that is currently offered in their current time and place. This could mean a place beyond the boarder of life and death, it could mean the prosper of future, or as I will come to argue; a glorified past. What I mean by the term nostalgia is the longing for a golden past within society or politics, and lastly what I mean when I use the term late capitalism is the economic prosper after the great depression in America, meaning US after the 1950s. The outlook of Goldbach’s art oscillates between a critique of utopia and a critique of dystopia. This is fuelled by his personal fears concerning postmodernism and the present-day economic system.³ Due to this, his work consistently has a deeply pessimistic view of neoliberalism. I argue that Goldbach’ art production works as a commentary for the society of then- late capitalism, and now- our current time dominated by neoliberal economy. I am looking at the criticism that shapes Goldbach’s art, rather than the stylistic choices of the art works itself.

The neoliberal economic system requires of the individual to be responsible for their own welfare. This makes certain groups of already vulnerable people helpless in the face of exploitation (especially corporate exploitation), and places any potential failure on the shoulders of the individual. In other words, it is the exploited that is to blame for their own exploitation, never the exploiter. The case of economic exploitations is part of California City’s heritage, the deserted city exhibited in Goldbach’s 2015 *Land of the Sun*. In the same range, Goldbach’s *A Date with Destiny* argues that neoliberalism facilitates a society where a certain life-style, if not even the essence of life itself, can only be purchased through the mechanics of the exchange economy. Investing in property, which is the issue at the centre of both pieces, means investing in not only your future, but your family’s future as well. As a physical expression of the exchange economy, contemporary architecture becomes the focal

² Quote by Gil Scott-Heron, taken form Goldbach’s *A Date with Destiny*, (00:00-00:10)

³ FLASHER, interview with Goldbach, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e_Aa4JJ1gRM

point of Goldbach's artistic production. This is due to the relationship the field of architecture as a whole has with contemporary economy and economics. Architecture is, first and foremost, an asset or a range of assets which make the object of value in the exchange economy. As Fredric Jameson claims in his 1989 book, *Postmodernism*, "of all the arts, architecture is the closest constitutively to the economics"⁴. Goldbach argues through his work, that postmodern architecture has to include, in fact, all the architecture built after the 1960s i.e. both the hyper modern and thriving city areas, but also the refugee camps, the ghettos, and the failed and abandoned city projects. This thesis aims to establish, through an analysis of Goldbach's two video-art pieces, a better understanding of how postmodernism, with its neoliberal politics, has the power to produce dystopias. Using utopianism as the main theoretical perspective, I conduct an examination of the dual relationship between politics and contemporary screen culture in Niklas Goldbach's work. Ultimately, I argue that his art aptly critiques postmodernism by conceptualizing it as both a dominant aesthetic and as a form of dominant discourse in contemporary culture.

Just like Niklas Goldbach's art work *A Date with Destiny*, this thesis begins with a quote from Gil Scott-Heron whose poetry captures the relationship between man's desire to build and the effect of this desire on the environment he decides to occupy. Niklas Goldbach is a German artist based in Berlin who utilizes the California desert to comment on the effects of neoliberalism and our latent fear of this ideological mindset. Within the Californian desert lie the unfinished and abandoned town projects of California City and Salton Sea Coast Line. Today they are not even ghost towns, they are man-made craters in the natural environment, with the case of Salton Sea Coastal Line being a real danger to the natural environment around it as well as the inhabitants of the nearby towns. In his work, Goldbach uses the past, present and possible future of these cities as a case study of neoliberal ideology. We view these towns through his lens as consequential artifacts of late capitalism and the American dream(ing) dominating urban city planning in the 1960s and 1970s.

The interest in the human presence and the human absence in capitalist societies can perhaps best be attributed to the artist's education in Sociology. Having said that, far too little attention has been paid to Goldbach's work in the field of humanities. Up until now, there has

⁴ Fredric Jameson «Postmodernism» page 5

been almost no scholarly context build around his work. This thesis considers that this puts the field of arts history at a loss since Goldbach's work is so ripe with commentary on the above-mentioned issues. The aim of this project is to fill this research gap as I analyse Goldbach's art as an output meant to critique neoliberal ideology and neoliberal discourse. The relationship between Goldbach as an artist, and the current political landscape becomes especially clear through the 2017 gathering titled *The Parliament of Bodies: A Century of Camps: Refugee Knowledge and Forms of Sovereignty Beyond the Nation-State*⁵. During this forum the artist presents a parallel between postmodern architecture, refugee camps, and governance, showing passion for bio political issues such as movement of bodies and hierarchies of health. I will expand on bio power as theory within the second theory chapter, as well as the subject in analysing *A Date with Destiny*, due to the environmental climate surrounding the inhabitants of Salton city.

Alongside questions of bio power, citizenship as an area of philosophical exploration in the humanities had already sparked an interest in me whilst reading Achille Mbembe's *Necropolitics*, specifically the idea of borderless citizenship as an example of contemporary utopia. As a guest speaker of this forum, *The Parliament of Bodies: A Century of Camps: Refugee Knowledge and Forms of Sovereignty Beyond the Nation-State*⁶, Goldbach described in a similar manner what he sees as an entirely novel way of understanding art history. Goldbach points out that when it comes to architecture, the postmodernist discourse needs to broaden its scope so that it includes all art and architecture made after the 1960s and 70's, not only the glorified parts of contemporary art and contemporary architecture. In other words, he argues that we do not get to pick and choose what is architecture and what is art in the postmodernist discourse by picking only the successful, the gleaming, and the imposing. Therefore, it becomes evident why through his video art installations, Goldbach rhetorically asks why refugee camps cannot be considered a central part of postmodern architecture. Picking up from Goldbach's fundamental questions around postmodern architecture, this thesis will also include the overall role of architecture in neoliberalism.

⁵ *The Parliament of Bodies: A Century of Camps: Refugee Knowledge and Forms of Sovereignty Beyond the Nation-State*.

⁶ *The Parliament of Bodies: A Century of Camps: Refugee Knowledge and Forms of Sovereignty Beyond the Nation-State*.

This project will consist of two main narratives. The first one is concerned with the utopia of late capitalism and contemporary neoliberal economy, and its effects on society - mainly on the cities presented in *Land of The Sun* and *A Date with Destiny*. The second narrative explores the discourse between utopia and nostalgia as understood through Levitas and Sayers. These are scholars who will make up the bigger part of my theory chapter.

1.1 Studied material

Niklas Goldbach's portfolio consists of art works dating back to 2003. This provides scholars with numerous theoretical perspectives and possibilities of analysing his art. This project gives attention to two main videos: *Land of the Sun* and *A Date with Destiny*. Although created four years apart, these videos share many similarities. This might be due to the landscape in which they are shot, as they are both shot within the state of California. Goldbach shot the two videos in different parts of the Californian landscape focusing on the rapid change of two desert towns, Salton city and the Salton Sea Coastal Line, and California City. I have picked the following videos for their similarities not just geographically and visually, but also due to the similarities in which they convey a and comment on remote living in desert towns. Looking beyond time and place, these art works speaks of the same political issues in domesticating 'wilderness'. Wilderness as a topic is within the humanities been problematized. I will further expand on this topic within the second theory chapter. Most importantly; these desert towns were marketed as utopias through commercials establishing the area as miraculous and recreational, "a palm springs with water", as well as the way to get a good life in the sun whilst taking charge of your future.⁷ These words are collected from *A Date with Destiny* and were used to sell property within Salton city.

⁷ A Date with Destiny, Goldbach



Figure 6. "Welcome to the Land of the Sun" Niklas Goldbach, *Land of the Sun* 2014. Photo exert

Having said this, there are other art works in the artist's portfolio that would have optimal candidate for my analysis. Goldbach's videos: *Bel Air*, *Habitat* and *Empire* were all considered for this thesis. His *Form and Control* series is an honourable mention, as well as one of his newer photo-installations: *Aufstellung: Freiburg* (Location: Freiburg) where he cleverly looks at the relationship between postmodern architecture and necropolitics. Deriving from Achille Mbembe's book on the subject, necropolitics suggests a power structure in freedom of moving bodies, as well as putting a price on death. This includes the issues of how some people are forced to re-locate due to environmental disaster, war, and sickness, but most importantly those who are required to remain in the same location, causing disease and death. The issues of Mbembe's necropolitics are more than anything rooted in colonialism, and will be discussed further on.

However, for the scope of this project I have picked the above mentioned two video art pieces as they work together as a whole to offer a good discourse.

1.2 Research Questions

There are many questions going into this thesis, and perhaps many of them too broad to answer. It is nevertheless important to state that the scope of this project is not to critique, analyse, or interpret *Land of the Sun* and *A Date with Destiny* as artworks. Goldbach's stylistic, artistic, or personal discussions in making these videos will not be problematized nor answered. I merely look at these media art works as discourse within my interdisciplinary field, using art to comment on bigger questions of power and politics within the humanities. These were the foundations for establishing the research questions that follows;

1 What is the relationship between Niklas Goldbach's video art and utopias, slow violence, and the American dream?

2 What is Niklas Goldbach's critique of contemporary US society?

I could instead asked about the relationship between his art and the political landscape in which they are created, but I wish to investigate even further and attempt to understand what exactly is his critique is, or 'comment' to use another word.

3 What is the relationship between nostalgia and utopia in A Date with Destiny?

Goldbach's video art is an effort to connect the material destruction of our contemporary natural environments with the utopian aspirations of late capitalism. To do so he uses antiphrasis through elements that evoke nostalgia for the 1960s and presents them side by side with the outcome of the ambitious capitalist projects of those times. He shows us how the American dream has turned now into somewhat of a nightmare; the great to-be cities of then are the toxic ruins of now. He also uses antiphrasis and irony in interviewing residents who tells their side of the story, whilst simultaneously capturing the ruins of a functioning infrastructure. In both *Land of the Sun* and *A Date with Destiny* nostalgia is apparent.

T. Sargent writes that "many utopias are nostalgic in that they look back to an idealized past which is then moved into the future."⁸ Goldbach is no different as he uses pieces of the past to reflect on utopias of the past, and dystopias of the present. The art works which I have centred

⁸ Lyman T. Sargent, *Utopianism*, page 79

this project around underlines the notion that utopia and nostalgia is very much connected, and that the relationship between the two subjects has to be understood in order to reflect on Goldbach's art works. Thus, I will also seek to understand the relationship between nostalgia and utopia. Therefore, my third research questions is:

1.3 Scholarly Context

Screen reliant art has been a central part of art history since the cinema screen appeared in the early 20th century, and has likewise generated a rich field of academic topics to analyse and comment on. Certain expectations can be made in what the focus should be when analysing video art productions, as prominent scholars have influences the field with their focus areas. I present some prominent scholars within my field, as well as hypothetical ways to study Goldbach's videos.

Kate Mondloch is an influential scholar in the field of screen reliant installation art. Mondloch is concerned with the issue of spectatorship and the ways in which we view this art form differently from others mediums of art. She describes herself to be interested in experimental art and the contemporary phenomena that followed these art works.⁹ As the title of her 2007 article goes, Mondloch describes the experience of being here and there at the same time. What she means by this is the sensation of being both a viewer of the screen, and finding oneself immersed in to the screen as a participant. Mondloch has the subject in the center of attention and uses theories of Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes and Louis Althusser¹⁰, all of whom are also concerned with the issue of one's moment of meeting with a work of art. Mondloch theorizes the relationship between viewership and the space of viewing around the screen, with spectatorship and immersion as the central topics of her methodology.

Another central scholar within screen reliant art is Giuliana Bruno. Bruno's thesis relies on the architecture around the screen medium, and how physical space on form of the venue interacts with the screen. Her research focuses on the evolving movie theatres and the effect of the changing architecture and entertainment within the room of the film screening. In her

⁹ Kate Mondloch, «Be Here and There Now...» page 21

¹⁰ Kate Mondloch, "Be Here and There, Now..." Page 23

1997 article “Site-seeing: architecture of the moving image” Bruno writes that “the spectatorial voyage is architecturally constructed and diversified. It is a matter of (dis)location.”¹¹ Bruno is looking at screening from a historical perspective as she defines the evolution of the media screen, both in cinema and in art. Bruno also points out to films as being the current documents of our history.¹²

Using Bruno and Mondloch’s scholarly work to analyse Goldbach could be interesting in how subjective views on utopia and dystopia is affecting spectator reactions, especially if I were to look at the cinematic effects of utopia and nostalgia. We are constantly being asked to reflect on our own spectatorship in viewing art works. For example, the vernissage of Goldbach’s works could be an arena to ask oneself about what effects are in play in seeing *Land of the Sun* and *A Date with Destiny*. This angle was definitely in the cards in 2019 when I began this project, as my motivation to visit the artist were strong. In the end I did not end up attending a vernissage, or a tour of a gallery exhibiting his work, and due to this; and reasons of political commentary, I did not end up analysing subjective spectatorship and the venues surrounding the artist’s work.

Niklas Goldbach’s earliest work consisted of duplicated protagonists taking over urban, modern architectural environments, postmodern cities, and places he describes as oscillating between architectural utopia and dystopia.¹³ The environments are always contemporary cities which have, in one way or another, been affected by postmodern architecture in late capitalism/current neoliberalism. Therefore, the scholar Douglas Spencer came to mind as a defining character in understanding the current critique within this landscape. His book, *Critique of Architecture: Essays on Theory, Autonomy, and Political Economy*, argues that when studying architecture, you are forced to also investigate the political world surrounding it. Discourse and the way people criticise politics changes with the zeitgeist, and according to Spencer, critique of architecture has to also change in the same manner. Although I am not analysing Goldbach merely architectural, the ways Spencer looks at architecture can inspire the way I understand Goldbach’s videos. Spencer writes that “The Architecture Lobby, formed in 2013 so as to challenge precarity of architectural employment, has since gone on to

¹¹ G. Bruno “Site-seeing: architecture of the moving image” page 7

¹² G. Bruno *Public Intimacy*, page 4

¹³ Niklas Goldbach webpage, “About” https://www.niklasgoldbach.de/_WORKS/about_more.html

address a number of political, economic, environmental and ethical issues in which architecture is implicated.”¹⁴ But this does not just entail the environments in which humans work in the field of architecture, but the environments in which humans live amongst and with architecture in its physical form. Goldbach is addressing the very human aspect of living amongst architecture under neoliberalism, in both *Live at the Revel*, and in *Land of the Sun*, which in a quite contrasting way represents this very issue. I will expand on this further in my analysis section.

Spencer is devoted to understand contemporary architecture and the larger world in which it exists.¹⁵ He argues that a critique of architecture is directly a critique of capitalism due to the unbreakable relationship between the two. In his book, *Critique of Architecture*, Spencer argues that architecture goes to extreme lengths through use of theoretical arguments to justify its services to neoliberalism. These services are explained as facilitating a better life for the happily adapted and satisfied consumers. But in doing so, architecture fails to consider how it serves those who don't fit into this category.¹⁶

This section has been written in order to understand the academic field in which art and architecture is understood. Although my interdisciplinary way of understanding Niklas Goldbach's video art works moves outside of the frame explained in this section; these scholars help inspire the way we think about art. Art as something moving outside of its medium, being unbreakable in its relationship to contemporary life and politics. This thesis will underline the way we think of art as discourse and commentary. Although subjective to the artist, art can provide a voice of slow violence issues, rarely picked up by more popular mediums such as journalism, film, and tv. For this reason I will use Goldbach's art as discourse, commentary, and critique of the political landscape as well as the changing environmental landscape of Mojave desert.

¹⁴ Douglas Spencer, *Critique of Architecture: Essays on Theory, Autonomy, and Political Economy*, page 19

¹⁵ Douglas Spencer, *Critique of Architecture: Essays on Theory, Autonomy, and Political Economy*, page 20

¹⁶ Douglas Spencer, *Critique of Architecture: Essays on Theory, Autonomy, and Political Economy*, page 20

1.5 Thesis outline

In the introduction I have demonstrated the framework of the chapters that follows. These chapters will target the questions asked in this introductory chapter, both through theory and analysis. Through the academic literature provided by Ruth Levitas, Nicola Sayers, Lyman T. Sargent, Fredric Jameson, David B. Morris and Patricia Nelson, I look at postmodernism, utopia, and nostalgia. Through the scholars David Harvey, Achille Mbembe, William Cronon, Max Liboiron, and Rob Nixon I look at neoliberalism, violence, wilderness, and necropolitics. I will demonstrate the relationship between utopia, nostalgia, neoliberalism, and slow violence, and my chosen art works *Land of the Sun* and *A Date with Destiny*. The overall structure of this study takes the form of six chapters, where the introduction is the first. The second chapter will provide sufficient theory as well as questions of defining utopia. As I will come to demonstrate, scholars are particularly invested in establish a understanding and a definition of utopia. Within the second chapter, I follow different scholars determined to establish a useful definition. I am making room for different scholars from diverse times within academia, but nevertheless ending on contemporary theory within utopian scholarly work. I also include research within nostalgia by the scholar Nicola Sayers.

I took the choice of dividing the theory in two, both due to my understanding of the topic, but also to create a better understanding of the grasp of this thesis for the reader. For this purpose I have decided to call the third chapter *framework*. The third chapter is dedicated to the framework which consists of scholars invested in neoliberalism, necropolitics as well as biopolitics, environmental humanities, and of violence and scale.

Much like the theory chapters, I decided to write two analysis chapters. This makes space for the art works to be considered standing alone, as well as together. The first analysis chapter is devoted to Niklas Goldbach's *A Date with Destiny*. I decided to take on this analysis first as it resembles the first theory chapter of nostalgia and utopia. I will use the theory of Levitas and Sayers to understand the forces that created the riviera town alongside Salton sea, as well as current comments on the area; captured and framed by Niklas Goldbach.

In the fifth chapter I take a close look at *Land of the Sun*. Filmed in California city, it is a comment on the heritage and history of the present day ghost town- in which it is called. I find it important to contextualize the comment made by Niklas Goldbach, and in doing so I am looking at California City's history of prosper, destruction, and fraud. I am focusing on the relationship between lack of infrastructure within California City, and the utopian dreams that is still very much alive within this city. As elaborated on earlier, I believe Goldbach made his art works within the desert as a comment on the political landscape, and that is ultimately the goal of the fifth chapter; to understand his art production as a fuller critique of present day US.

In the sixth chapter I collect ideas from the established analysis and discuss subjectivity. Who decide what makes a good place, and what makes a bad place? I have ultimately picked this discussion up from Ruth Levitas theory on subjectivity within utopianism. It is crucial to make room for this discussion. Goldbach may critique contemporary US politics, but what are the other feelings connected to California city and Salton city? How can we make sense of utopia and dystopia when the discussion is complex and subjective? The discussion is where I form my ending argument.

In the last chapter named by the title itself, *An American violence*, I write my closing arguments as I close the circle looking back at the dissertation as a finished product. What can we learn from Goldbach's art production as a whole, and what would possible future research intel?

2. Theory chapter: Utopia & Nostalgia

In this chapter I will present the theory I will be working with from various scholars concerned with the topic of utopia. My main target with this chapter is to consider the diverse definitions connected to the topic and to establish the relevance for utopianism in contemporary culture. I will do this by expanding on the work of Fredric Jameson, Lyman Tower Sargent, Ruth Levitas, Nicola Sayers, and Sarah Hogan. The chosen scholars have provided theoretical perspectives meant to explore the meaning of utopia in our current time. Particularly, the work of Levitas and Sayers brings a fresh perspective in the field.

The notion of utopia discussed in this chapter intentionally leaves out the work prior to Thomas More. I will therefore exclude philosophical aspirations for a greater society taking place before 1516. Here I am referring to examples like the hopes of an afterlife, virtue, or a good society attached to Christianity and other religions, as well as the budding of ‘perfect’, functioning, societies in ancient Greece. I am, in other words, exclusively following the different trends that followed More’s *Utopia*. I will begin this chapter by presenting some of the earliest work within utopianism to understand utopia’s place in history chronologically. I will continue with more recent scholarly work as I proceed.

Utopia can be found in times and places in history where a satisfying life is not considered to be obtainable in the current time. Levitas writes that

“the construction of imaginary worlds, free from the difficulties that beset us in reality, takes place in one form or another in many cultures. Such images are embedded in origin and destination myths, where the good life is not available to us in this world but is confined to a lost golden age or a world beyond death.”¹⁷

So, utopia urges one to create a fiction by looking towards the future. In other words, where the desire for change exists, the search for a possible utopia exists. This also includes religious, literary and political visions, of not only how things can be but also how they ought

¹⁷ Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, page 1

to be. Therefore, utopia is not only a hope or a fantasy, but also a future to envision and pursued.¹⁸

2.1 More than Moore

Utopia's terminological origin is traced back to Thomas More's book, *Utopia*. The definition is often referencing More's choice of wording, found in the Latin language. Ruth Levitas explains that "utopia as colloquially understood contains two meanings: a good, but non-existent and therefore impossible, society... It contains deliberate ambiguity: is the *eutopia*, the good place, or *outopia*, no place..."¹⁹

"The Inherence in the term of the twin ideas of perfection and impossibility has left a conceptual legacy which, as Levitas points out, 'has not been unmitigated blessing.' It has aided a colloquial understanding of the utopian as 'intrinsically impractical' – dreaming the impossible dream."²⁰

Sayers further expands on this and so colourfully explains that "to limit the utopian to the Thomas More variety, or simply to orientate it in that direction, would be like trying to reduce electricity to the amber from which it gets its Greek name."²¹ Nonetheless, when looked up in the *Chambers' Twentieth Century Dictionary* utopia is described as "an imaginary state described in Sir Thomas More's Latin political romance or satire *Utopia*' or as 'an impossibly ideal scheme, especially for social improvement'"²² A similar definition is found in the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*²³, in *Merriam- Webster dictionary*²⁴, *Cambridge Dictionary* has the same definition of a happy place relating to Thomas More²⁵, and also *Britannica* with Thomas More linked as a key person for understanding the term.²⁶

What I aim to do is not to underestimate the importance of More, but to bring forth the later additions to utopian studies. It is obvious that More's influential book impacted the definition of utopia, and that there is a pattern within the easily accessible definitions. Nevertheless,

¹⁸ Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, page 1

¹⁹ Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, page 2

²⁰ Nicola Sayers, *The Promise of Nostalgia*, page 46

²¹ Nicola Sayers, *The Promise of Nostalgia*, page 45

²² Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, page 3

²³ Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, page 3

²⁴ Merriam- Webster Dictionary <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/utopia>

²⁵ Cambridge Dictionary <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/utopia>

²⁶ Britannica Dictionary <https://www.britannica.com/topic/utopia>

scholars and commentators have proceeded to find a clearer definition of utopia that goes beyond More's chosen title. Utopian studies as a field in academia emerged not earlier than the 1960s. Regardless, the topic of utopia did partake in political commentaries, and found its way into the field of literature.²⁷ As a result of utopia being a part of our discussions in the mainstream culture for decades, separate from any academic debates, there is not a significant consensus in our culture, just like there is no real consensus in academia, on what a coherent definition of utopia might look like. As this chapter will show, there is wide disagreement between scholars when it comes to defining utopia.

I will continue by presenting Ruth Levitas's theoretical perspective from her 1990 book *The Concept of Utopia* where she attempts to create a solid and worthy definition of utopia. To this end, she puts forth three categories: content, form and function. Using her work, I ask if there can still exist utopias where content, form and function are lacking? Levitas makes up a larger part of the theory chapter due to this question, in addition to her understanding of subjectivity within utopianism.

As previously mentioned, this field is affected by inconsistencies in what concerns definitions. Many established philosophers have attempted to clarify this specific matter in the field of utopian studies. Amongst these scholars, Fredric Jameson, Ernst Bloch and Lyman T. Sargent have offered some of the most significant perspectives. Literature professor Sarah Hogan also offers a significant approach as she looks at utopia from a historical point of view. Picking up from her, I will further explore the genre of literary utopia in order to understand the origins and heritage of utopianism.

Nicola Sayers writes in her book *The Promise of Nostalgia* that for some reason there exists a subtle shared understanding that nostalgia and utopia are inherently opposed, "where one is, the other is not."²⁸ Can one better understand the definition of utopia by looking at what it is not? The connection between the two is one that is visible in *Land of the Sun* and *A Date with Destiny*, and therefore a central part of this thesis.

²⁷ Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, page 11

²⁸ Nicola Sayers *The Promise of Nostalgia* page 6

The relationship between utopia and dystopia then becomes significant for my analysis especially since by trying to understand utopia in our contemporary society I must also ask what the role of dystopia is, but perhaps more importantly what don't separate the two.

2.2 Defining Utopia

Ruth Levitas writes that “in exploring existing definitions of utopia we can consider three different aspects: content, form, and function.”²⁹ This argument creates the basis for this chapter as I attempt to find definitions that can determine what utopia means in postmodernism, for neoliberalism, and in Goldbach's video art. I will therefore present the three categories of defining utopia Levitas writes about in her book *The Concept of Utopia*.

2.2.1. Content

Utopia as a term originates from Thomas More's book with the same name, and means both a “good place” and “no place” at the same time. This is generally understood as irony, as the definition express a contradiction. Does More's title claim that the only truly good place is no place at all? Is a completely good place without implications even obtainable in the physical world?³⁰ The assumption that utopia should be imagined as a good place, raise questions of subjectivity, as our expectations of what a good place consist will vary due to not only culture difference, but personal taste.

The sentiment of a good place will look radically different across different cultures, social groups, and circumstances. Utopian scholar Ruth Levitas therefore argues that defining utopia based on the concept of *a good place* is problematic. Levitas further this argument by challenging how one value utopia, explaining that utopia generally derive importance from the level of realism. Utopias that are perceived as realistic will be considered more worthy of attention.³¹ The scholar writes that just like the assumption of what a good place looks like, what we see as realistic is socially constructed.³² More's composition of words is only the first indicator of a complex definition of what utopia looks like.

²⁹ Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, page 4

³⁰ Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, page 4

³¹ Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, page 5

³² Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, page 5

2.2.2 Form

Some scholars chose to consider the form of More's *Utopia*, and understands utopia to be a literary genre alone.³³ Levitas argue that imagining a better society, and seeing faults in the current, does not solely adapt the form of literary fictions. Nonetheless, the field of literary utopias is dominating. Levitas detect clear complications with defining utopia based on form, as literature is limited to specific historical conditions.³⁴

If one were to assume that utopia solely exist as literary fictions, it would mean that utopianism is not to be found in all cultures, beyond the circumstances and access to literature. Therefor Levitas conclude that defining utopia based on form is in-inclusive.

2.2.3 Function

Ruth Levitas writes

“Thirdly, one may define utopia in terms of its function. This is less obvious; to focus on the function of utopia is already to move away from colloquial usage, which says nothing about what utopia is for, but implies that it is useless. Even those who define utopia in terms of form and content, however, see it as having some function.”³⁵

The scholar also elucidates that the function of utopia sometimes becomes to simply raise a question of what the ambitions can be, and how things should look.³⁶ Marxist tradition has defined utopia based on its function in presenting how utopia can be of negative influence, as Karl Marx rejected the idea of utopia.

Sayers writes that Marx being labelled a utopian despite him calling utopia pure speculations, goes to show how long- standing the relationship between utopia and impossibility is. The ones not connected to the current political sphere, what Sayers would called misunderstood and/ or unable to understand the current society, are readily labelled utopian.³⁷ This demonstrates the way in which utopias as considered unachievable. Throughout history some utopias has proven to be not only unrealistic but dangerous to the cost of human life.³⁸ “(...)

³³ Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, page 5

³⁴ Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, page 5

³⁵ Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, page 6

³⁶ Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, page 6

³⁷ Nocola Sayers *The Promise of Nostalgia* page 46

³⁸ Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, page 1

Several theorists have built the transformative power of utopianism into their definition of utopia. For these theorists, the properly utopian is precisely that which has the capacity to change existing conditions.”³⁹ Utopia does not escape reality, but it rather is a fixed reality. Ernst Bloch makes a separation between what can be accepted as attainable futures, and the other category is of those of wishful dreams.⁴⁰ Karl Mannheim is an example of a philosopher who define utopia based on its function. Mannheim is of the opinion that utopia can be possible alternatives for the present day, against those scholars who judges utopia to be impossible dreams. Sayers writes that “if utopianism is considered to be impractical, impossible dreaming, then there are no limitations on its temporality. One can daydream of memories or future hopes or indeed of fantastical other realms; it does not matter which, because these dreams will not impact on reality.”⁴¹

2.3 Desire

“The definition of utopia in terms of content, form or function not only limits the field of study, but leads to mistaken judgements. The repeated fear that utopia is in decline results from the application of specific narrow views of what constitutes utopia. It also leads to miss questions which could fruitfully be asked.”⁴²

Ruth Levitas explains that she finds most definitions of utopia as problematic and limiting. Levitas is interested in what parts of utopia remains while content, form, and function vary. Her thesis is desire.⁴³ “Desire for a different, better way of being.”⁴⁴

“Rather, where such desire is expressed – and the scope for this will itself be historically variable – it will not only vary markedly in content but may be expressed in a variety of forms, and may perform a variety of functions including compensation, criticism and the catalysing of change. The most useful kind of concept of utopia would be one which allowed us to explore these differences and which ultimately might allow us to relate the variations in form, function and content to the conditions of generating society... In conclusion then, a new definition of utopia is offered, which recognises the common factor of the expression of desire. Utopia is the expression of the desire for a better way of being.”⁴⁵

This definition is relevant when analysing a medium other than literary text, and therefore relevant when looking at Niklas Goldbach’s video art works. Levitas definition allows for

³⁹ Nicola Sayers, *The Promise of Nostalgia*, page 47

⁴⁰ Nicola Sayers, *The Promise of Nostalgia*, page 47

⁴¹ Nicola Sayers, *The Promise of Nostalgia*, page 47

⁴² Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, page 208

⁴³ Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, page 208

⁴⁴ Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, page 209

⁴⁵ Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, page 9

expressions of utopia to be variable, and is the most relevant definition when looking into criticism and commentaries in contemporary society, in contemporary utopia.

2.4 Earlier scholarship

2.4.1 The Desire Called Utopia

“What is crippling is not the presence of an enemy but rather the universal belief, not only that this tendency is irreversible, but that the historic alternatives to capitalism have been proven unviable and impossible, and that no other socio economic system is conceivable, let alone practically available.”⁴⁶

To Fredric Jameson utopia is the only way in which current politics gets a challenge. Jameson states that Utopia itself is the mediation for abrupt change and otherness, and symbolises utopia with “the sparks of a comet.”⁴⁷ To the scholar who is so set on the fact that capitalism is unmovable in our contemporary time, the utopian imagination for another way of administrating our political landscape has to be that of the magical, or at least rare, occurrence.

Jameson is hesitant to explain his methodology a psychology of utopian production.

What is central to *Archaeologies of the Future*, is the ongoing theme of imagination and our fantasy mechanisms. Although the study of human imagination naturally leads to historical tendencies and questions such as, “why utopias have flourished in one period and dried up in another.”⁴⁸ The scholar is primarily focused on the utopian text, the form of literature, and the one of science fiction, and express some difficulties in understanding utopia as mere desire such as Ruth Levitas.

“Bloch applies his utopian hermeneutics to the wish pictures found in the mirror of ordinary life: to the utopian aura which surrounds a new dress, advertisements, beautiful masks, illustrated magazines, the consumes of Ku Klux Klan, the festive excess of the annual market and the circus, fairy tales and colportage, the mythology and literature of travel, antique furniture, ruins and museums, and the utopian imagination present in dance, pantomime, the cinema and theatre.”⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, page xiii

⁴⁷ Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, page xiii

⁴⁸ Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, page xiv

⁴⁹ Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, page 3

Fredric Jameson uses Bloch's argument as a survey of human faith in utopia, although seeing some hermeneutic issues in his definitions. Jameson writes that Bloch's interpretative definition only works if utopianism is unconscious. Bloch's principle is most of all sufficient when arguing that utopia can be found in unexpected places.⁵⁰ Jameson reminds us of how Bloch finds utopian impulse from "everything future-oriented in life and culture...everything from games to patent medicines, from myth to mass entertainment, from iconography to technology, from architecture to eros, from tourism to jokes to the unconscious."⁵¹

Jameson, on the other hand, sees utopianism as two distinct lines. Both of these lines are growing out of Thomas More's *Utopia*. One of the sections complements Bloch's utopian theory, describing utopia as an unconscious impulse finding its form through different practices. The other line is explained as systematic, revolutionary, and a political practice, working to realize the utopian program.⁵² When illustrating these two lines he uses the head titles of *program* and *impulse*. Intentional communities, revolutionary practice, cities and written text are all categories within the utopian program. Under the title impulse stands the categories: reform, political theory, individual building and hermeneutics.⁵³

"It has often been observed that we need to distinguish between the utopian form and the utopian wish: between the written text or genre and something like an utopian impulse detectable in daily life and its practices by a specialized hermeneutic or interpretive method."⁵⁴

Although Jameson's methods are deeply complex, the two categories are conclusively narrowed down to two distinct classifications, the *utopian text* and the *utopian wish*. The utopian text, although more politically loaded within Jameson's theory, is similar to T. Sargent's category of utopian literature. Utopian text manifests through different forms: artistic work, communities or spaces, with a politically charged opinion wanting to reach through.

⁵⁰ Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, page 3

⁵¹ Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, page 2

⁵² Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, page 3

⁵³ Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, page 4

⁵⁴ Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, page 1

2.5 Lyman T. Sargent

Lyman T. Sargent writes that most utopian scholars do not find it essential to define utopia, and that they know one when they see one.⁵⁵ He also suggests that students and researchers often fall within this trap, because they have a tendency to understand utopia as one concept, and not a construction of different traditions. T. Sargent's thesis is an attempt to gather all the perspectives from the individual disciplines within humanities, whilst making room for distinct approaches. He leaves out certain terms and jargons, as they tend to be discipline specific, and focuses on creating new methods for analysis.⁵⁶ T. Sargent writes that "the central problem with most approaches to utopianism is the attempt to use a single dimension to explain a multi-dimensional phenomenon."⁵⁷

Lyman T. Sargent categorizes utopia into what he calls three faces, named: utopian literature, utopian practise and utopian social theory. I will now present the three faces briefly.

2.5.1 Literary utopianism is modelled on the relationship between opinions and ideas of society, and their articulation in literature. These ideas often include solving problems of the present and describing a society that is in huge contrast to the author's current time. Sargent explains that the misuse of utopia as a perfect place still exists both within scholarship and public opinion . However, this does not reflect the reality of utopian literature.⁵⁸ Science fiction is the most common genre associated with utopianism. In fact, this association is so strong within the collective belief that the two are one and the same thing. However, not all science fiction comments on their subsequent intricacies.⁵⁹

Contemporary utopian studies have opened the utopian literature category up for other artistic representations beside literature. Literary utopias now include works within fields such like film, photography, music and video art. However, the scholars within this field is rather scarce.

⁵⁵ Lyman Tower Sargent, "Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited", page 2

⁵⁶ Lyman Tower Sargent, "Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited", page 3

⁵⁷ Lyman Tower Sargent, "Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited", page 3

⁵⁸ Lyman Tower Sargent, "Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited", page 6

⁵⁹ Lyman Tower Sargent, "Interview part two" with *Alimentopa U. Foodways*

2.5.2 The utopian practice is referring to an intentional practice of utopian ideology within a specific society. This could be a family which lives together with common, unconventional values.⁶⁰ To detail these types of communities, T. Sargent defines them as “as a group of five or more adults and their children, if any, who come from more than one nuclear family who have chosen to live together to enhance their shared values or for some other mutually agreed upon purpose”⁶¹

2.5.3 Utopian Social Theory

Utopian social theory includes scholars and academics of the twentieth century focusing on ideas of progress.⁶² The element of progress is important, and questions whether or not the world is improving. The wish for progress is understood as the explanation of historical shifts and changes.⁶³ T. Sargent suggests that the differences between proponents and opponents of utopia, and societal progress, became part of the political debate throughout the twentieth century, making utopianism more political than ever.⁶⁴ Utopian social theory is therefore a method in understanding the shifts in history, such as the birth of neoliberalism.

2.6 Sarah Hogan

Sarah Hogan reads Jameson’s *Archaeologies of the Future* as lacking a certain emphasis on the shifts in history within neoliberalism. At the same time she credit him for leaving the term open enough for other carried meanings such as historical projects, mode of thinking, social desire and even human propensity.⁶⁵ What she aims to do, is to fill this gap in utopianism with historical shifts and writings, and to use the concept for understanding the past. Hogan focuses on making utopian literature historical artifacts. Hogan explains that her “hope is that in studying the utopian genre as an expression of sociohistorical transformation, I will also draw more attention to the imperialist origins both utopian literature and capitalism, thereby considering what a study of fiction has to say to the transition debate.”⁶⁶

⁶⁰ Lyman Tower Sargent, “Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited”, page 15

⁶¹ Lyman Tower Sargent, “Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited”, page 14

⁶² Lyman Tower Sargent, “Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited”, page 21

⁶³ Lyman Tower Sargent, “Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited”, page 21

⁶⁴ Lyman Tower Sargent, “Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited”, page 22

⁶⁵ Sarah Hogan, *Other England’s*, page 4

⁶⁶ Sarah Hogan, *Other England’s*, page 20

Hogan uses More's *Utopia* as an autopsy of societies crossover from feudalism to capitalism, and applies the book work as her source to understand this process. The economist, Maurice Dobb, proposes that England's early capitalism begun as a reaction of the fall of feudalism itself, and functions as a critique of the popular acceptance of capitalism being a product of trade, marked, and urban development of the modern world.⁶⁷ Robert Brenner describes capitalism as a consequence of feudalism, rather than a disruption of it⁶⁸ whereas Ellen Meiksins Wood refuse to point to the specific scene of birth of capitalism, claiming that it has a lot of different birthplaces, still reoccurring and adapting to changes in society.⁶⁹

2.7 Nostalgia

Nicola Sayers work on memory and nostalgia makes her a relevant writer on contemporary utopia. Her er recent book *The Promise of Nostalgia: Reminiscence, Longing and Hope in Contemporary American Culture* published in 2020 is a deep dive into our cultures nuanced relationship to nostalgia. Instead of seeing the nostalgic impulses of our current time as an absence of utopia, Sayers understand it as hidden utopia within our culture. The second chapter, "Memory, nostalgia, utopia and time", Sayers uses the previously mentioned established utopian scholars, Jameson, Bloch, and Levitas, to much like this chapter find a contemporary definition to utopia. Sayers presents theory of Levitas in saying that utopia is not always oriented towards the future like popular understanding might have it but can also be oriented towards the past. For utopia to look backwards and not ahead, Sayers needs to define utopia in its capability to generate desire, other than to understand it through form, function and content. Her defining traits of utopia is therefore desire from Levitas thesis and hope from Bloch's. Sayers describes herself as an academic of nostalgia and hope.⁷⁰ The term hope is perhaps carefully used as a reference to Ernst Bloch and his 1950s book on utopia, *Principle of Hope*. Sayers writes that Bloch is an ally, as his understanding of utopia is far broader than Jameson allows for within his theory. Sayers writes "indeed, utopia as memory of the forgotten is a significant counterpoint to the more common association of utopia with

⁶⁷ Sarah Hogan, *Other England's*, page 13

⁶⁸ Sarah Hogan, *Other England's*, page 16

⁶⁹ Sarah Hogan, *Other England's*, page 18

⁷⁰ Nicola Sayers webpage, «about» <https://nicolasayers.com/>

the future.”⁷¹ Her thesis aims to explore whether or not the nostalgic tendencies hold an unconscious longing for utopia.

Sayers writes that the 1970s marks a boom in culture, where writers, journalists and scholars engaged with the subject unlike previously before. “Some even going so far as to diagnose America as having a nostalgic condition.”⁷² Fred Davis interpret the nostalgia trend of the 1970s as a direct response to the massive changes attached to the previous decade. Sayers writes that “if America can be diagnosed as having a nostalgic condition (...) then it is one that shows no sign of abating.”⁷³ It is therefore a familiarity in our relationship to nostalgia when looking at *A Date with Destiny*. It is with the relationship we have to nostalgia Goldbach ironically depicts the landscape of Salton City.

Utopia as well as dystopia does in fact not have to belong to a future, or even to the past. It might be a part of our contemporary time and be a subject of current critique. Goldbach is using the utopia known as the American dream, of late capitalism in America, to elucidate the current dystopia of its ruins in the times in which we live. This way of analysing our contemporary time in his art stretches throughout his artistic production. Sayers writes that “art (including, of course, literature and music) is central in bringing forth a really possible utopian world,”⁷⁴ and that “for Bloch, too, it is what is suppressed by society that motivates the artwork.”⁷⁵ One of Goldbach’s arguments is that postmodernism has to include all art made after the 1960s, and not only what we chose to glorify in our culture. *Boulevard de L’Europe* is a video artwork by Goldbach filmed in 2015 as part of his video series *Form and Control (image)*. The video is about the politics around the Eurotunnel which separates Britain from France. It was shot in the areas around the tunnel in Calais, where border security is strict.⁷⁶ “In a Europe that professes to be liberal and to encourage freedom of movement, the structures described here express control, restraint and exclusion.”⁷⁷ The architecture around the Eurotunnel is a cultural mark of economical profit within a neoliberal society that benefits certain groups within society and excludes the others. What is being expressed in *Boulevard de L’Europe* is very much a dystopia of the present-day borders, with is a part of our modern

⁷¹ Nicola Sayers, *The Promise of Nostalgia*, page 44

⁷² Nicola Sayers, *The Promise of Nostalgia*, page 2

⁷³ Nicola Sayers, *The Promise of Nostalgia*, page 4

⁷⁴ Nicola Sayers, *The Promise of Nostalgia*, page 59

⁷⁵ Nicola Sayers, *The Promise of Nostalgia*, page 59

⁷⁶ Niklas Goldbach web page «Selected works»

⁷⁷ Niklas Goldbach web page «Selected works»

culture and architecture. Sayers writes “Are nightmare alternatives also utopian? And death or non-existence, are they not also alternatives?”⁷⁸ In this example the answer for her question is perhaps yes.

Levitas explains that

“In Goodwin’s formulation a conceptual break from here and now is made for the purposes of comparison. However, she argues that there at least six ways in which such contrast with the present may operate, only one of which is utopian. First, it may involve an idealisation of the past as a criticism of the present, as in the representation of a Golden Age, which has largely conservative implications. Secondly, the present may be justified by reference to a hypothetical past – a feature of contemporary conservatism – or, thirdly, by reference to a hypothetical present... Fourthly the present may be inverted for critical purposes... utopia which carries out a ‘constructive criticism of the present via an ideal alternative (future or present).’⁷⁹

The scholar explains that utopias can in the same way act as apologies for a certain outcome, rather than always presenting the worst possible outcome.⁸⁰ This is where the utopia is serving a critical function. Levitas includes this as Barbara Goodwin’s, the utopian philosopher, ambition to make utopian study a central part of social and political theory.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Sayers, *The Promise of Nostalgia* page 45

⁷⁹ Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, page 202

⁸⁰ Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, page 202

⁸¹ Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, page 203

2.8 Chapter outline

So far I have presented the varied ways in which academics define and understand utopia. Regardless of how one interprets utopia, the topic appeals to a large body of scholars. This research is educating by displaying multiple ways of defining utopia. I have through the theory on utopia attempted to convey that utopianism stretches far wider than the idea of “a perfect society.” Utopia is the neoliberal body, the urban city within the desert, crossing borders, an American dream, an American dream turned to be a nightmare, dreaming of a lost time, a sense of safety beyond reach, a future for generations to come, growth in money, growth in spaces- in health, the desire that enabled all of these scenarios. Utopia cannot be touched, but is touched and altered by all people within all cultures which create desires for their community, and turns that desire into goals and drive.

3. Framework: Late Capitalism and Slow Violence

This chapter is dedicated to the framework of scholars who convey messages within neoliberalism, necropolitics, biopolitics, environmental humanities, and of violence and scale, which are all part of life after late capitalism, also referred to as the capitalocene by scholars. Defining the capitalocene, or the age of capital, is to understand the past five centuries of our history through not only a nature- society divide, but as infested with power struggle as well. “Rather, the capitalocene signifies capitalism as a way of organizing nature- as multispecies, situated, capitalist world- ecology.”⁸² Drawing on Fredric Jameson’s notion of capitalism as the only alternative for human society, this chapter looks at theories surrounding this question of capitalism as un- changeable.⁸³ Without an alternative, capitalism should be considered with critical theory. The next pages will introduce theory as such, starting with the term slow violence.

3.1 Slow violence

This thesis uses the definitions of scholar Rob Nixon from his book titled *Slow Violence*.

Nixon describes the term:

“By slow violence I mean a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all. Violence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational viability.”⁸⁴

Slow violence is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, and of a temporal character and scale.⁸⁵ Due to its concealed nature, slow violence with its blind spots often victimizes marginalized groups in society. I argue with this project, that art and artistic production can help elucidate and make visual the impact of slow violence. Through the video art of Goldbach we see the aftermath of late capitalism, and the structures that have come to harm the inhabitants of the Mojave desert cities in years to come. The decline of the Riviera town of Salton City, and the Las Vegas- inspired California city, is not instantaneous. Over years the environment along with the human inhabitants of the area has been tormented by the consequences of city planners of the 1960s. The first analysis chapter will in large part

⁸² Moore, *Anthropocene or Capitalocene...*, page 7 introduction

⁸³ Jameson, *Archologies of the Future*, page xii

⁸⁴ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence*, page 2

⁸⁵ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence*, page 2

explain the environmental harm and aftermath of the Salton sea. Nixon describes cases of slow violence as “unrepresented in strategic planning as well as in human memory.”⁸⁶ This explanation I find fitting for the city planning projects of late capitalism. Aftermath also becomes an important word when looking at cases of slow violence, due to its non- explosive impact.

Nixon asks a question of how we can make the unsensational stories of violence a part of conversation. He writes,

“... how can we convert into image and narrative the disasters that are slow moving and long in the making, disasters that are anonymous and that star nobody, disasters that are attritional and indifferent interest to the sensation-driven technologies of our image-world? How can we turn the long emergencies of slow violence into stories dramatic enough to rouse public sentiment and warrant political intervention, these emergencies whose repercussions have given rise to some of the most critical challenges of our time?”⁸⁷

One way of answering Nixon’s research question is asking ourselves which stories are being sensationalized, and if a broader representation in the news image could help elucidate some of the stories of slow violence. Another solution is to look to art and artistic production such as literature and film. Goldbach’s art production can in this way be understood as critique in the way he decide to bring issues of slow violence within the Mojave desert art work, opening up to different kind of spectatorship. “The past is never dead. It’s not even past”⁸⁸ resemblance one of Goldbach’s latest art works “Album, cut togheter- cutting through.” This work is actually consisting at the moment- constantly being uploaded, and consists of all the photographs Goldbach has ever taken.⁸⁹ The art work is temporal and making the connection between past and present everlasting. The small moments are captured in the same way as the bigger events, creating a platform for topic of slow development. Max Liboiron puts it this way; “we have known for hundreds of generations that we carry our histories within us. They are part of who we are.”⁹⁰

It is important to nuance the word poor in this instance. Nixon describes the category of “poor” as a representation of different groups outside of economic status, such as lines of

⁸⁶ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence*, page 3

⁸⁷ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence*, page 3

⁸⁸ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence*, quote Faulkner, page 8

⁸⁹ Niklasgoldbach.de, last uploaded 26th of november 2023

⁹⁰ Max Liboiron, *Pollution is Colonialism* quote by Kathrine Crocker, page 100

ethnicity, gender, race, class, region, religion, and generation.⁹¹ I will use this definition of poor throughout this thesis.

3.2 Harm and Violence

To describe the negative, often deadly, consequences of a situation, scholars use the word harm. When talking about potential obstruction but without death or instantaneous outcome, we can instead use the word violence. Max Liboiron explains “we can look at violence, which is the origin of potential harm.”⁹²

“Instead of defining violence as a direct event of force or coercion, the concept of structural violence directly illustrates a power system wherein social structures or institutions cause harm to people in a way that results in maldevelopment or deprivation. . . that constrain(s) them from achieving the quality of life that would have otherwise been possible.”⁹³

The term environmental violence has been used to describe such harm, by The Native Youth Sexual Health Network. NYAHN defines environmental violence as the “disproportionate and often devastating impacts that the conscious and deliberate proliferation of environmental toxins.”⁹⁴ Toxins often refers to pollution and micro plastics, and usually about controlling certain types of toxins. Liboiron writes that “We can monitor plastics in the environment and on consumer shelves all we want, but plastics only come from one place: **industry**.”⁹⁵ Liboiron continues by writing that “environmental violence is about who gets to erase- or produce – and how that is structured so that pollution becomes normal, even ubiquitous.”⁹⁶

3.4 Domesticating wilderness

The historian Patricia Nelson Limerick opens her 1985 book *Desert Passages: encounters with the American desert*, by writing that “deserts have made fools of the wisest people.”⁹⁷ Describing *man's* love for the desert, N. Limerick writes about almost alluring meetings with the desert. The scholar states that deserts can give a sense, perhaps a false one, of vacancy, in part due to the absence of human beings.⁹⁸ “In the Juedo- Christian tradition, the word desert

⁹¹ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence*, page 4

⁹² Max Liboiron, *Pollution is Colonialism*, page 85

⁹³ Max Liboiron, *Pollution is Colonialism*, page 87

⁹⁴ Max Liboiron, *Pollution is Colonialism*, page 87

⁹⁵ Max Liboiron, *Pollution is Colonialism*, page 102

⁹⁶ Max Liboiron, *Pollution is Colonialism*, page 88

⁹⁷ Patricia Nelson L, *Desert Passages: encounters with the American desert*, page 3

⁹⁸ Patricia Nelson L, *Desert Passages: encounters with the American desert*, page 5

did in fact carry the original meaning of a deserted place, or wilderness.”⁹⁹ The term wilderness has been critiqued and problematized since N. Limerick’s book, and perhaps first or famously by the scholar William Cronon. N Limerick does, although just at surface level, though upon this critique when she writes,

“Of course no region on the North American continent was literally empty at the time of white arrival. Even the most arid deserts had at least seasonal Indian presence. Certainly deserts now are not deserted, yet even a seemingly entrenched desert city has an arbitrary look about it- placed in an inappropriate setting for tract houses, lawns, swimming pools, and golf courses. Driving through a desert even today, one perceives human presence- a passing car, an isolated town, a person on foot – as a surprise and an anomaly. The desert can still seem deserted.”¹⁰⁰

In his 1996 article Cronon explains the faults in describing the desert as wild and vacant. “The myth of wilderness as ‘virgin’, uninhabited land had always been especially cruel when seen from the perspective of the Indians who has once called that land home. Now they were forced to move elsewhere...” To forcefully remove native Americans would alter the way certain groups of society would understand wilderness as wild, but nevertheless this would mean a flight from history as Cronon expresses it. “By imagining that our true home is in the wilderness, we forgive ourselves the homes we actually inhabit. In its flight from history.”¹⁰¹ William Cronon argues that this false notion that the wilderness was empty and wild reminds us about how falsely manufactured and fabricated the American wilderness in fact is.¹⁰²

Reading about domestication of the desert Michal Vines article titled “Feeling at home in the Anthropocene” is particularly illustrative. Vine documents an American family moving to the Californian desert, determined to carry with them the culture of green lawns in front of their house, as the family have been used to in the colder climates of the US landscape. As a result green spray paint is introduced to them by neighbours living in the desert area. This story is a great example of domestication and capitalism of the Californian desert after the 1960s, and helps illustrate the need for commodifying nature much like what is conveyed in *A Date with Destiny*. Vine documents:

⁹⁹ Patricia Nelson L, *Desert Passages: encounters with the American desert*, page 5

¹⁰⁰ Patricia Nelson L, *Desert Passages: encounters with the American desert*, page 5

¹⁰¹ William Cronon, «The trouble with Wilderness» page 15

¹⁰² William Cronon, «The trouble with Wilderness» page 16

“Other neighbours were spray-painting their lawns a bright green. While a more affordable option, however, this would be only a temporary fix; most companies estimate that the paint job will last about six months. ‘Anyway’ interjects Maddie, ‘that felt like putting a band aid on the problem without addressing its root cause.’ So about two years ago, the couple decided to replace their withering turfgrass lawn with a popular drought tolerant alternative, *Dymondia margaretae*, a gardy flowering plant endemic to the western Cape of South Africa.... At first the couple were reluctant to let go of their turfgrass lawn. **‘it’s so engrained in our culture’ Maddie tells me.**”¹⁰³

Patricia Nelson Limerick and William Cronon explains that we have different historical attitudes towards the desert, and that the contrast has almost always existed between wilderness as a savage and deadly habitat, and those who believed the wilderness fit for development and resource. Cronon writes that in earlier history “to be wilderness then was to be ‘deserted’, ‘savage’, ‘desolate, ‘barren’ – in short, a ‘wate’, the word’s nearest synonym.”¹⁰⁴ N. Limerick categorizes three ways in seeing the wilderness;

“attitude towards nature as a biological reality in human life- vulnerability to hunger, thirst, injury, disease, and death; attitudes toward nature as an economic resource- a container of treasures awaiting extraction or development; and attitudes toward nature as an aesthetic spectacle.”

Her last categorization of attitude towards wilderness as aesthetic spectacle is reminiscent of Cronan’s writings about wilderness as sublime. Cronan writes that “As more and more tourists sought out the wilderness as a spectacle to be looked at and enjoyed for its great beauty, the sublime in effect became domesticated”¹⁰⁵ In this way Cronan sees a direct connection between tourism and domestication of the wilderness, due to its aesthetic appeal. He goes on by writing that “Seen in this way, wild country became a place not just for religious redemption but for national renewal, the quintessential location for experiencing what it meant to be and American.”¹⁰⁶ In *A Date with Destiny* the narrator is conveying this message in saying that “there is no greater American heritage than the right to outdoor living.”¹⁰⁷ . American identity had to be domesticated into our everyday lives to be kept from passing away with times, with the argument of preserving a shared heritage, making the subject a part of a shared responsibility.

What nostalgia are we talking about when talking of nostalgia of the wilderness? William Cronan is presenting the American frontier as a celebrated topic within literature, who has

¹⁰³ Michal Vine, «Feeling at home in the Anthropocene» Page 405

¹⁰⁴ William Cronon, «The trouble with Wilderness» page 8

¹⁰⁵ William Cronon, «The trouble with Wilderness» page 12

¹⁰⁶ William Cronon, «The trouble with Wilderness» page 13

¹⁰⁷ Goldbach, *A Date with Destiny*, 16:50

been acknowledged as having an ideal American way of living. Cronon writes that “the mood among writers who celebrated frontier individualism was almost always nostalgic; they lamented not just a lost way of life but the passing of the heroic men who had embodied that life.”¹⁰⁸ The frontier way of living of the land and in nature has been respected as a true and free lifestyle. This is a glamorized way of remembering the frontier, mainly by tourists traveling to remote areas for leisure purposes, who perhaps do not understand the laboursome every day of living in these areas. Cronon underlines this by writing that

“ever since the 19th century, celebrating wilderness has been a activity mainly for well-to-do city folks. Country people generally know far too much about working the land to regard unworked land as their ideal. In contrast, elite urban tourists and wealthy sportsmen projected their leisure- time frontier fantasies onto the American landscape and so created wilderness in their own image.”¹⁰⁹

3.5 Neoliberalism

In an interview, Niklas Goldbach expresses a fear of being alone in a hyper modern city and this being the reason he gravitates towards high modern building sites, in addition to abandoned spaces. On other words, he gravitates toward his fears and anxieties. In his 2017 video art exhibition *Form and Control*, Goldbach shoots a video of the “Revel Atlantic City”, a resort hotel/casino which in 2014 declared bankruptcy. In *Form and Control: Live at the Revel* the artist focuses on late capitalist architecture and how dominant it is in our current cultural space. In contrast to *Land of the Sun* and *A Date with Destiny*, *Form and Control: Live at the Revel* takes place in an urban space. As I will come to discuss, Goldbach’s art serves as a comment to how late capitalism and neoliberalist economy could generate the sense of alienation that he personally feels in modern cities. That is why I find it necessary to present theory of this particular political landscape to be able to analyse his video art works. I will do this through scholarship by David Harvey, more specifically his book *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*.

Neoliberalism is a term based on political and economic ideology, with marked economy and free marked competition in the center. The role of the state is to maintain an institutional structure supporting practices such as the right to own private property, entrepreneurial

¹⁰⁸ William Cronon, «The trouble with Wilderness» page 14

¹⁰⁹ William Cronon, «The trouble with Wilderness» page 15

freedoms, free market flow, and trade.¹¹⁰ David Harvey writes that the effects of neoliberal ideology “has become incorporated into the common- sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world.”¹¹¹ In addition, this means that the shortcomings of neoliberalism has not only effected institutions and the economy, but social relations, ways of life, as well as cultural consequences. This thesis will look at the relationship between neoliberalism and utopia, and possible consequences seen in architecture, urban cities, and environmental space. This project also finds the connection between neoliberal social structures and artistic production to be a significant part of current culture.

“The process of neoliberalization has, however, entailed much creative destruction, not only of prior institutional frameworks and powers, ...but also of divisions of labour, social relations, welfare provisions, technological mixes, ways of life and thought, reproductive activities, attachment to the land and habits of the heart.”¹¹²

I will first look at the different forces that makes neoliberalism hegemonic within global capitalism. Harvey explains that neoliberalism emerged to avoid a repetition of the inter-state geopolitical rivalries that had led to the war. “To ensure domestic peace and tranquillity, some sort of class compromise between capital and labour had to be constructed.”¹¹³ This argument is provided through social scientists Robert Dahl and Charles Lindblom and their 1953’ article. The two argued for a need of new societal structure combining economy and ideology. The idea was to secure a peaceful, and strong, society of well-being, through the right combination of market, state, and democracy.¹¹⁴ Dahl and Lindblom argues that the attempt of communism and capitalism had failed.¹¹⁵ Both political forms had been unsuccessful in their raw form, although certain aspects were still desirable to bring forward to the future. Traits from communism existing within neoliberalism includes a focus on voluntarism and will power. The rapid expansion of marked demands productivity and personal performance, at least to be granted a seat in the neoliberalist moving vehicle. As an extension of late capitalism, the process of neoliberalization kept the goal of enhancing of the free market.

¹¹⁰ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, page 2

¹¹¹ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, page 3

¹¹² Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, page 3

¹¹³ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, page 10

¹¹⁴ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, page 10

¹¹⁵ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, page 10

Neoliberalism meant a turn away from production and labour, and a shift to a world based on finance, ownership, and investment. This has suggested a power structure where finance becomes the most important aspect in all areas, both economically, but also as state structures, and how we conduct our everyday lives.¹¹⁶ The liveability of neoliberalism is therefore based on a continues expansion of capital to finance. Neoliberalism requires sufficient demands in the economy, so that the marked can grow steady. *Capital accumulation* is the growth of wealth trough investments and profits, and includes rents, loans, ownership, interest, investments, and savings. It is the capital accumulation through investment of tangible goods that drive production of goods, and drive wealth. *Appreciation* means an increase of the value of an asset over time. This can happen for a range of reasons, including demand or a weakening supply, changes in inflation or interest rates

In studying the social effects of economy and power, issues of class take shape. Harvey explains that “If neoliberalization has been a vehicle for the restoration off class power, then we should be able to identify the class forces behind it and those that have benefited from it.”¹¹⁷ The neoliberalist utopia does not include all in the economic expansion, but rather those whose income, welfare, and ways of living are secure without much intervening from the government. Neoliberalism confers freedom to the financially and socially independent.¹¹⁸ Libroiron writes that “Colonization is not just about having access- it is also about eliminating other types of relations that might threaten that access.”¹¹⁹ Harvey question whether inequality of class was a tactic in reassuring a neoliberal system and writes that “While there are exceptions to this trend, ... the evidence strongly suggests that the neoliberal turn is in some way and to some degree associated with the restoration or reconstruction of the power of economic elites”.¹²⁰ But what is meant by class? Harvey sees the term ‘class’ as a dubious concept, meaning different things in different societies. He also suggests that neoliberalism has entailed a redefining of what one understands as a powerful class.¹²¹ “While neoliberalization may have been about restoration of class power, it has not necessarily meant the restoration of economic power to the same people.”¹²² In the UK,

¹¹⁶ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, page 33

¹¹⁷ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, page 31

¹¹⁸ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, page 38

¹¹⁹ Max Liboiron, *Pollution is Colonialism*, page 95

¹²⁰ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, page 19

¹²¹ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, page 31

¹²² Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, page 31

Margaret Thatcher conveyed power to the rising class of entrepreneurs, whereas the US saw a raising power to the CEO's and financiers of big corporate businesses. What connects these two groups is their ability for capital accumulation.

Harvey has two contradictory views on the origins of neoliberalism. On one hand sees neoliberalization as a utopian project to develop a theoretical design to re-organize international capital. On the other hand, neoliberalism can be understood as a re-establishment of the conditions of capital accumulation, meaning power to economic elites. Harvey sees the second aspect as the more prominent. He believes that the focus on neoliberalism as utopia conveyed a purpose to justify the power shift towards the economic elites.¹²³ Harvey uses the statistics of Gérard Duménil and Dominique Lévy in understanding how neoliberalism has affected class inequality and writes that he “after careful reconstruction of the data, have concluded that neoliberalism was from the very beginning a project to achieve the restoration of class power.”¹²⁴ When asked if the utopian dream still exist within neoliberalism, Harvey accepts the possibility. Yet, he states that neoliberalism would not be accepted, televised and marketed in this fashion, reaching popular legitimacy, had it not been for the upper-class advocates for the ideology.¹²⁵ This assertion reminds of Douglas Spencer previously mentioned argument. He interprets architecture as facilitating for a greater livelihood for the easy going and content consumers, whilst failing to acknowledge how this damage both the relationship but also the destiny for the ones outside of this narrow group.¹²⁶

3.5.1 The good freedoms are lost, the bad ones take over.¹²⁷

Harvey writes that “The word ‘freedom’ resonates so widely within the common sense understanding of Americans that it becomes ‘a button that elites can press to open the door to the masses’ to justify the Iraq war.”¹²⁸ He also refers to Gramsci concluding that “political questions become ‘insoluble’ when ‘disguised as cultural ones.’”¹²⁹ Meaning that neoliberalism exists even without the political vote, because its branches are embedded within art, food, culture, and ordinary life. I am therefor presenting Karl Polanyi's two contradictory

¹²³ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, page 19

¹²⁴ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, page 16

¹²⁵ Harvey, Interview with *On Contact*, “A History of Neoliberalism, part 1” 18:00

¹²⁶ Douglas Spencer, *Critique of Architecture: Essays on Theory, Autonomy, and Political Economy*, page 20

¹²⁷ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, page 19

¹²⁸ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, page 39

¹²⁹ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, page 39

freedoms, as presented by David Harvey. Harvey understands freedom as a neoliberal concept, and Polanyi's view on freedom dominates within *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. In the book one reads that,

“There are, he noted, two kinds of freedom, one good and the other bad. Among the latter he listed ‘the freedom to exploit one’s fellows, or the freedom to make inordinate gains without commensurable ‘the market economy under which these freedoms thrive also produced freedoms we prize highly. Freedom of conscience, freedom of speech, freedom of meeting, freedom of associating, freedom to choose one’s own job. While we may ‘cherish these freedoms for their own sake’,- and surely, many of us still do – they were to a large extent ‘by-products of the same economy that was also responsible for the evil freedoms.’”¹³⁰

Polanyi's contradictory views on freedom is presented in Goldbach's *Land of the Sun*, where Goldbach presents the ‘bad freedoms’ through footage and artistic presentation of what he sees as an exploited community that is robbed of the American dream, through freedom of market profit. The freedom to build has overshadowed the residents value in the community of California City. Despite Goldbach's presentation of California City, the locals put their emphasis on the ‘good freedoms’ of their society. The freedom of the outdoors, freedom from traffic jams and to move freely, the lack of entertainment leaves freedom for creativity, and freedom of space and openness in the desert. One of the locals describes the land as “not tainted by man himself”, in a way describing the desert as freedom from neoliberalism and capitalist society itself.¹³¹ It is this ironic dialogue between the imagery dark sides to neoliberalism, and the residents' comments on their community that Goldbach creates a discourse.

Polanyi dooms the neoliberal utopia by saying that the good freedoms will always lose to the bad ones. How is it then, that *the rest of us* have agreed to these terms, adapting neoliberalism into our lives? Harvey explains this perfectly in saying that “The word ‘freedom’ resonates so widely within the common sense understanding of Americans that it becomes ‘a button that elites can press to open the door to the masses’...”¹³² He also refers to Gramsci concluding that “political questions become ‘insoluble’ when ‘disguised as cultural ones.’”¹³³ Meaning

¹³⁰ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, page 36

¹³¹ Niklas Goldbach, *Land of the Sun*, 3:11

¹³² Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, page 39

¹³³ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, page 39

that neoliberalism exists even without the political vote, because its branches are embedded within art, food, culture, and ordinary life.

In post war America there had been a growth in the interest of purchasing land, with inspirational cities in the desert, such as Las Vegas and Los Angeles. The demand for suburbs grew after the war, and capitalism was in full bloom. However the emphasis on geographical climate to as what territories were better fit for development, did not get attention until the 1970s. The 1970s saw a rise in competition of territories as to who had the best business climate or the best prerequisite to market development, where successful states or regions put pressure on others to follow in their lead.¹³⁴ The map of the US was therefore destined to expose shifting currents of uneven geographical development.¹³⁵ In *Land of the Sun*, residents refers to San Diego and Los Angeles when comparing size and opportunities for further development, only lacking the population to match.. The locals of California City proudly finds their land more viable than the mentioned, popular cities because of reliable water base.¹³⁶ The uneven development through market competition also generates a class struggle between states and cities, leading back to Harvey's argument of neoliberalism being about inequality at its foundation, making neoliberalism as senseless pursuit of a false utopia.

3.6 Necropolitics and sovereignty

I am presenting the term necropolitics, and the work of scholar Achille Mbembe. The term necropolitics is suggesting a power structure determining cases involving issues such as how some people are forced to re-locate and how others are required to remain in the same location.¹³⁷ Mbembe is asking questions about mobility as freedom, and if humans are more immobilized than realized, where in some cases the immobility can lead to deadly outcome. The political theory is in this way presenting a direct link between the individual person and the government, revealing how politics have power over human bodies. Necropolitics is a theory developed on Michel Foucault's biopolitics, politics of the body.

“Furthermore, contemporary experiences of human destruction suggest that it is possible to develop a reading of politics, sovereignty, and the subject different from the one we inherited from the

¹³⁴ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, page 87

¹³⁵ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, page 87

¹³⁶ Niklas Goldbach, *Land of the Sun*, 11:23

¹³⁷ Mbembe, *Necropolitics*

philosophical discourse of modernity. Instead of considering reason as the truth of the subject, we can look to other foundational categories that are less abstract and more tactile, such as life and death.”¹³⁸

Achille Mbembe is constructing a relationship between necropolitics and neoliberalism when he problematizes what the good life is all about.¹³⁹ When answering this issue, he explains that modern politics expects a human sovereignty over ourselves, our meaning and our destiny. Mbembe is presenting his theory as a modern romance between government and the individual, researching the question “what does politics ask of us?” According to Mbembe our job is a personal sovereignty over our lives and prosper, while in the process becoming a fully moral agent of society.¹⁴⁰ A dilemma presents itself. How can the government keep a hand on our lives, and on the same time expects us to be in charge of our own freedom? An example of this kind of relationship is maybe best understood through structures like the welfare system, where the government has a close connection to human bodies and their health, enabling certain outcomes of life through the emphasis on fixed educational systems, economy in forms of tuition and loans, and by foregrounding schooling in specific cultures or parts of the society, overseeing others.

Marina Grzanic calls political subjectivities in the era of neoliberal global capitalism both a bad joke, and something obsolete.¹⁴¹ The researcher finds that not all humans qualify for the role of being a subject. This is explained through her analysis of citizenship and refugees. Grzanic is reminding us about the deaths near the coast of Lampedusa in 2013, where hundreds of people were found dead by the shore. Her analysis puts emphasis on the statement of the Italian Prime Minister, Enrico Letta, who to the crisis responded by making the dead bodies Italian citizens. The paradox was that the refugees who had made the trip alive was sent back. Grzanic writes that “not only did they not receive citizenship, but they faced fines and detention for illegally trying to enter a state border of a foreign county.” Grzanic’s research is generating the argument that the American Dream and the neoliberal logic is rooted in fiction and a false sense of utopia.¹⁴²

¹³⁸ Mbembe, *Necropolitics* page 14

¹³⁹ Mbembe, *Necropolitics* page 13

¹⁴⁰ Mbembe, *Necropolitics* page 13

¹⁴¹ Grzanic, “Political Agency: The Subject and the Citizen in the time of Neoliberal Global Capitalism” page 4

¹⁴² Grzanic, “Political Agency: The Subject and the Citizen in the time of Neoliberal Global Capitalism”

3.6.1 Dystopia: the Necroscene

In Moore's book *Anthropocene or Capitalocene* he references Justin Mc Brien's view that extinction is more than death of certain species and humans. It also means the decline and death of cultures and languages, and ways of living.¹⁴³ "The Capitalocene, in this view, is also a *Necroscene*: the accumulation of potential extinction- a potential increasingly activated in recent decades."¹⁴⁴

The Necroscene is defined as the age of death and extinction due to capitalist accumulation.¹⁴⁵ This includes examples such as climate refugees and cultural objects previously mentioned. The Barcelona based sociology academic Oriol Batalla writes that the surprising fact about this topic, to many researchers and scholars, is not the dangerous facts of extinction or harm, but the fact that we have been prone to digest this as 'business as usual.'¹⁴⁶

3.7 Postmodern Utopia

David B. Morris writes that "Postmodern utopia is not so much nowhere as anywhere."¹⁴⁷ In a postmodern era the ways in which humans express their utopian desire will vary from earlier examples in history. Expectations and what is considered a luxury and a necessity will also vary. David B. Morris argues that in late capitalist culture the way one sees utopia is fractured and polymorphous.¹⁴⁸ Morris explains that "Postmodern utopia is not so much nowhere as anywhere"¹⁴⁹ and that similarly to N. Limerick and Cronan utopia can be found in the sublime of vacant nature.

"One eminent French intellectual glimpsed what he thought a peculiarly American, postmodern utopia from the observation deck of Chicago's Sears Tower – "the highest tower in the world"- while another distinguished French visitor felt deep utopian stirrings in the wide-open spaces and dreamscapes of the American West."¹⁵⁰

Morris' thesis is nevertheless that utopia has established its new residence in our very own personal space. Morris' argument is that "postmodern utopias reflect a belief that the only

¹⁴³ Moore, *Anthropocene or Capitalocene*, page 7

¹⁴⁴ Moore, *Anthropocene or Capitalocene*, page 8

¹⁴⁵ Oriol Batalla, *Green Capitalism? Politics from the Necroscene to the Eleutheroecene*, page 1

¹⁴⁶ Oriol Batalla, *Green Capitalism? Politics from the Necroscene to the Eleutheroecene*, page 1

¹⁴⁷ Morris, "Postmodern Pain", page 151

¹⁴⁸ Morris, "Postmodern Pain", page 151

¹⁴⁹ Morris, "Postmodern Pain", page 151

¹⁵⁰ Morris, "Postmodern Pain", page 151

valid remaining space of perfection lies, ready-at-hand, in our own individual flesh: a paradise of curves and muscle.”¹⁵¹ The utopian body is self-made, and created for not only an ideal vision, but of ideal health. Morris makes the point that utopias long have been focused on health, using metaphors as the illness of society to explain anti- utopian outcomes. Now health and illness no longer only refer to society, but to the perfection of oneself, most commonly in our appearance. Michael Vine reflects on this when he writes about the neoliberal turn in our independent provision of good health, and how fresh air became a luxury to aim for.

“While the figure of the asthmogenic home long predates the rise of neoliberalism as a mode of political- economic organization and subject formation, it thus dovetail with what many scholars have identified as a ‘neoliberal turn’ within the provision of healthcare, with its characteristic emphasis on autonomy, responsabilization, and self- governance.”¹⁵²

The remote lands and nature were seen as healthy due to air quality and free open spaces. In contrast this would mean that urban cities were suggested to be something negative. Cronon writes, “If one saw the wild lands of the frontier as freer, truer, and more natural than other, more modern places, then one was also inclined to see the cities and factories of urban- industrial civilization as confining, false, and artificial.”¹⁵³ These assumptions can help making the class divide within demographics within different climates stronger. For example the assumptions of the difference between those who are from the north and those of the south, those who live more people in smaller square meters and those who have bigger room to cultivate their lifestyle. This example were prominent within the peak of the covid- 19 pandemic, an example I will come back to in analysing *A Date with Destiny*.

3.8 Chapter Outline

I have now presented framework for the following analysis chapters. Neoliberal economy and the heritage of late capitalist society is what generates the living conditions of contemporary US. As I come to understand there are certain groups who relocate to the desert to escape neoliberalist society, to live in the ruins of late capitalism in Salton city and California city. On other words you can never really free yourself or your mind from the consequences of

¹⁵¹ Morris, “Postmodern Pain”, page 152

¹⁵² Michael Vine «Beyond Touch: Cultivating Caring Atmospheres in Arid America» page 29

¹⁵³ William Cronon, «The trouble with Wilderness» page 14

capital ideology. I have presented theory on 'wilderness' by Cronan which will be used within analysis to understand the different approaches to desert living.

Necropolitics will become critical for the analysis of the ecologically damaged Salton sea in a *Date with Destiny*. Necropolitics is theory based on deadly consequences and direct harm, but what happens to the living beings suffering alive? Rob Nixon's Slow violence is an important term for categorizing the effects of living near a toxic sea bed.

I have presented an postmodern take on utopia which defines utopia within our own flesh and bones, meaning we take it with us wherever we go. But who decides what the ideal is? The understanding of subjectivity and freedom contributes to conceptualize utopia.

4. First Analysis Chapter

In this chapter I will take a closer look at Niklas Goldbach's *A Date with Destiny* through the theory and framework I have presented in the pages previous. I am bringing the words of Rob Nixon with me as I together with Goldbach's camera lens take a critical look at the political and human- made environment of Salton city, "... in advance and in retrospect, the human and the environmental costs."¹⁵⁴

I am putting an emphasis on the fact that this analysis takes a stand from art critique and formal (or non- formal) analysis. There are many things to say about the aesthetic and stylistic quality of *A Date with Destiny*. This is nevertheless not the focus of this thesis, but rather to see his art as a critical commentary on the society in which it is made. In this chapter I look at the relationship between utopia and the American dream within the riviera town of Salton city. The main focus for the first analysis is to answer the first research question; what is the relationship between Niklas Goldbach's video art and utopias, slow violence, and the American dream? Most important for Salton city is the close by Salton sea which has undergone changes causing suffering to residents in the nearby areas. This will be an

¹⁵⁴ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence*, page 7

important focus in questions regarding slow violence in Goldbach's *A Date with Destiny*. I am looking at the third research question; what is the relationship between nostalgia and utopia in *A Date with Destiny*? I am wondering this as nostalgia is such a prominent part of *A Date with Destiny* due to the narrator. Nicola Sayers calls utopia temporal, meaning that utopias neither belongs to a specific time nor place. This could mean that Goldbach's use of American dream- nostalgia belongs in the contemporary, and could be a tool for answering questions important for present day politics.

4. 1 To call the Salton Sea home: living in the ruins of the 1960's riviera town Salton City

*"You are about to witness this idea become a reality... this is the story of the miracle sea of the desert, the Salton Sea"*¹⁵⁵ *A Date with Destiny*

Niklas Goldbach's 2019 *A Date with Destiny* was filmed alongside the Salton sea coastal line with shots from the riviera towns Desert Shores, Salton Sea Beach, Salton City, Red Hill Marina, Bombay Beach, North Shore and Mortmar. The main focus is on the sea which is drying up as we speak. In lack of humanity, the Salton sea is the protagonist of the landscape. The main character has undergone changes and have become toxic to the point where no inhabitants of the riviera town can live alongside the miracle sea.

The Salton sea "is steadily drying up, exposing a lake bed that threatens to trigger toxic dust storms and exacerbate already high levels of asthma and other respiratory diseases in Southern California."¹⁵⁶ The Salton sea can be smelled all the way into Los Angeles, 150 miles away.¹⁵⁷ Threats to the populations health and the fear of possible arsenic poison makes the costal line impossible to inhabit. An ecological dystopia, a human- built catastrophe, an architectural failure with an infrastructure in despair. This story is far from a stand-alone within the region of California, as this story is repeated to some extent in the second sub-chapter, as I look closer at Goldbach's *Land of the Sun*. It is also a part of a bigger historical trend, in with the suburbia of post war America emerged, whereas some cities were built in

¹⁵⁵ Goldbach, *A Date with Destiny*, 00:38

¹⁵⁶ Niklas Goldbach web page, «Selected works» f

¹⁵⁷ Niklas Goldbach web page, "Selected works"

the middle of deserted ground. In this chapter I am presenting the utopia of American late capitalism, and how some of the suburban riviera towns did not meet the idea of a dream place within the desert.



“Welcome to Salton Sea” Niklas Goldbach *A Date with Destiny*, Photo exert 05:02



Kim Stringfellow, Dead Snow Goose, Salton Sea Sonny Bono National Wildlife Refuge 2001 © Kim Stringfellow 2001-2013. All rights reserved.

4.2 A Palm Springs with Water¹⁵⁸

According to the website dedicated to Salton Sea history and preservation, the first claims that the water is toxic emerged in 1961, only few years after the development beginning of Salton City in 1958, the same year Nat Mendelsohn begun the development of California City. In 1968 Tracey Henderson writes in her book *Imperial Valley* that the salinity threat is increasingly expanding, calling it too late to save the Salton Sea.¹⁵⁹ In *A Date with Destiny*, the narration commercial track borrowed from *The Holly Corporation* describes Salton Sea as “millions of fish, ready for the taking”.¹⁶⁰ This is a commercial track from 1968 documenting the immense changes to the environment surrounding the costal line of Salton Sea. What it fails to leave out is the ongoing issues connected to the water quality documented within the same time frame. In 1986 the State issues a claim that the fish of the Salton Sea should be avoided as food, or increasingly cut back on due to toxins, and the next years thousands of birds die around the Salton Sea. Reading the timeline presented, the years following up to present day, presents many political plans to save the sea. To this day the sea remains toxic. So what makes this so hard to acknowledge? The decline of the Salton sea is a great example of slow violence, where the future consequences might be hard to grasp. Were there any warning signs that was overlooked or ignored? And in that case, why? Neoliberalist economy favours short term profit which can lead long term environmental harm as effect. Max Liboiron discusses this whilst using EDC- toxins as example,

“EDCs (toxins) do not work like bull-in-a-china-shop toxin trespassers, wrecking things and spilling cell soup. They work as part of the system, disrupting it while allowing it to continue, resulting in things like recurrent miscarriages, early- onset puberty, early- onset menopause, obesity, diabetes, and neurological disorders such as early- onset senility in adults- none which are directly lethal.”¹⁶¹

Profit is not always the reason for accepting potential harm. Tradition, culture, and habits can also have potential to cause slow violence. This obstacle is difficult to navigate and most of all it can cause other potential harms in effect. As Liboiron fraises it, sometimes eating the poisoned fish is the only option to survive.¹⁶² Certain groups does not have the luxury to choose and does not have the opportunity to avoid toxins. Liboiron references to Elizabeth Hoovers research on the Mohawk- community of Akwesasne, who regardless off advisory on poisonous fish consumption, due to the contaminated polychlorinated biphenyls (PCB’s), eats

¹⁵⁸ Goldbach, *A Date with Destiny*, 08:50

¹⁵⁹ *The Salton Sea Authority*, Timeline

¹⁶⁰ Goldbach, *A Date with Destiny*

¹⁶¹ Max Liboiron, *Pollution is Colonialism*, page 95

¹⁶² Max Liboiron, *Pollution is Colonialism*, page 106

the fish from their local pond.¹⁶³ “We give thanks for that food and we have to use it... I mean it doesn’t make sense scientifically, but it makes sense spiritually and mentally that you should eat that, you know. You can’t just put it aside and say, ‘well your (the fish’s) work is not good enough’.¹⁶⁴ The Mohawk spokesperson puts the emphasis on the fact that it is not the fish’s fault for being contaminated, and so to not do it justice and make it a contributor, they eat it to give thanks. It makes sense for certain groups and cultures to eat toxins, it is become a part of their diet. Liboiron writes that “The environmental contamination in Akwesasne has negative impacts on the cultural, social, and physical health of the community beyond those directly related to the ingestion of fish. Here pollution, language, eating, and obligation are part of the same bundle.”¹⁶⁵ In Salton city the Salton sea is contaminating residents around the lake bed. But social structures such as money, power and resources, as well as heritage and histories of generations and family, contrasting fears and opinions about urban lifestyle, freedom from capitalism and neoliberal economy, are all part of the bundle. This is not to say that there are any actual freedom from neoliberalism within the remote Mojave desert. As I argue, the residents are living in the ruins of late capitalism, very much having to cope with an changing economy having effect on labour and lifestyle. But as mentioned in *A Date with Destiny*; the freedom of the outdoor and being away from the ‘hustle and bustle’ of modern cities is still a reason residents come to the desert to live. I repeat “I mean it doesn’t make sense scientifically, but it makes sense spiritually and mentally.”¹⁶⁶

4.3 Salton Sea

In the 20th century construction begun diverting water from the Colorado river into the lake bed of Salton sea, which for some time created fertile grounds for farmers. The motivation to administrate water flow from the river, mainly came from agricultural productivity and labour.¹⁶⁷ A somewhat failed attempt to allocate water from the river ended up creating the Salton sea we know today. Instead of evaporating over the next decades, irrigation were put in place to keep the area from drying.¹⁶⁸ Farmers kept supporting the ecosystem for a the foreseeable future by tending to the irrigation processes.

¹⁶³ Max Liboiron, *Pollution is Colonialism*, page 106

¹⁶⁴ Max Liboiron, *Pollution is Colonialism*, page 106

¹⁶⁵ Max Liboiron, *Pollution is Colonialism*, page 108

¹⁶⁶ Max Liboiron, *Pollution is Colonialism*, page 106

¹⁶⁷ Salton Sea Authority, «History»

¹⁶⁸ Salton Sea Authority, «History»

“Algae produce, algal toxins and bacteria can produce endotoxins (...) and both those can aerosolize and blow into nearby communities.” This quote is from Ryan Sinclair, a microbiologist at the Loma Linda University School of Public Health in California.¹⁶⁹ He also informs that mice have reacted in a way that gave them rare kind of asthma. The ideal solution to save the Salton sea from drying would be to replenish it with fresh salt water. To save the Salton sea means to lose a large source of lithium which is necessary in distribution for a lot of tech companies within the US. “The state of California estimates that the Salton sea has enough lithium to supply America’s entire appetite, now and in the future, and 40% of the globe’s demand on top of that.”¹⁷⁰ The decision to keep Salton sea toxic as a source of lithium supply means a negative and irreversible impact on the health of the residents of the towns around the costal line. To repeat the thesis opening line; “Man is a complex being: he makes deserts bloom – and lakes die”, and makes ptofit from the dead lakes. When asked “are the signs of hope?” Knut Schwabe, professor at University of California, states that there might be room for cautious optimism.¹⁷¹

I have used the Salton Sea Authority web page to locate accurate historical information concerning the creation of Salton sea. The Salton Sea Authority is an organisation and a program to both inform and tend to the ecosystem of the harmed sea. As part of their web site they have a donation program where private people can make one time, or monthly, donations to preservation of the sea. It reads “donations will fund outreach, advocacy and educational efforts to realize a sustainable Salton sea, and a healthy liveable region.”¹⁷² At the time being the organization has four different campaigns ongoing to restore Salton sea- and city to a healthy living environment. To take up my previous argument, there are many parts of the bundle in why locals both have to stay in the toxic landscape, but also want to stay in their home- regardless for health downsides. This information is to illustrate that the campaign for restoring the sea and the climate is very much active. Accepting economic help from private donors are helping them realize the mission, perhaps the utopian mission of the city creator.

¹⁶⁹ Girst, «Can the Salton Sea be Saved?»

¹⁷⁰ Girst, «Can the Salton Sea be Saved?»

¹⁷¹ Bardeen, “The Trouble of History- An Uncertain Future of the Salton Sea”

¹⁷² Salton Sea Authority, «Donate»

4.4 Time to start over

When watching *A Date with Destiny*, the first element that strikes the viewer is the narration borrowed from the commercial named “The Miracle in the Desert” of *The Holly Corporation*¹⁷³. The irony is apparent as the narrators descriptions of Salton city as a popular riviera town no longer match the scenery. As a contract, Niklas Goldbach is capturing wasteland upon wasteland, with few to no signs of functioning infrastructure. A miracle place in the desert, the viewer hears, whilst seeing run down motels and gas stations. The band Locus Fudge is playing the soundtrack for the scenery. The lead singer makes a fitting statement, “time to start over, time to start again.”¹⁷⁴ Is it possible to start over, and do we have time? What about the residents you ask yourself, where are they, and so do they have the possibility to start over again? Many have. After the 1970’ Salton City saw a decline in population, with locals moving away from the toxic sea line.

“... This article explores the everyday, practical acts of space-making through which families affected by the onset respiratory illness attempt to carve out a breathable life for themselves amidst a broader scene of social and material instability.”¹⁷⁵

Miranda Green’s article for the *Tortoise* reads “The residents who lives here either can’t afford to leave- having sunk their life savings into an area that has lost its property value or move more recently here because it is so cheap to live. Yet both reel from the environmental consequences.”¹⁷⁶ She also writes that the covid-19 pandemic generated new risk to the residency, due to the common respiratory disease. She claims that the counties circling the Salton Sea had some of the higher number of deceased connected to the pandemic within the region of California.¹⁷⁷ A harm not foreseen by the creators of the riviera towns back in the 1960’s.

But people still move to Salton city. In the 2017 documentary film *Desert Coffee*, we are introduced to Slab City. The desert is known as a place of freedom for the homeless. What I mean by freedom, is freedom from the legal system of urban California cities such as Los Angeles and San Francisco. As mentioned in the theory chapter, Lyman T. Sargent explains

¹⁷³ Goldbach, Selected works “A Date with Destiny”

¹⁷⁴ Goldbach, A Date with Destiny

¹⁷⁵ Michael Vine «Beyond Touch: Cultivating Caring Atmospheres in Arid America» page 22

¹⁷⁶ Miranda Green, Miracle in the Desert, 2021

¹⁷⁷ Miranda Green, Miracle in the Desert, 2021

the people who live such alternative lifestyles the *utopian practice*, or utopian communities. Sargent present these people of having an intentional opinion, following a practice supporting their utopian view. We know from the first theory chapter that a utopia does not necessarily have to be a perfect place or a good alternative at all, but an alternative reasonably far away from the majority's ideas of utopian. Sargent explains this as unconventional values.¹⁷⁸ For these people who have suffered the legal system of being homeless or unjust, Slab city- located by the Salton sea, is the better option. It just makes sense to eat the fish. Goldbach does not include residents as such in *A Date with Destiny*. What the viewer does see is run down facilities where there certainly could be room for imagination. The commentary is still graspable, even without interviews and documentation of utopian communities such as the one of Slab city. Goldbach's art does not stand alone, but is a part of a bigger commentary, which includes films like slab city. A commentary about how politics and economy administrates the livelihood and movement of human bodies. I will expand further in the next sub- chapter.



The non-profit Spread The Love bring a mobile shower unit to a homeless encampment in Brawley Tortoise Media, "Miracle in the Desert" May 2021
<https://www.tortoisemedia.com/2021/05/11/miracle-in-the-desert/>

¹⁷⁸ Lyman Tower Sargent, "Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited", page 15

4.5 FUKK TRUMP

Goldbach is moving around what looks like an empty cinema studio, as he shows the spectator closed down businesses, an empty basketball court and entertainment spots, as well as the marina of Salton sea. Graffiti on the wall of a destructed house reads “FUKK TRUMP” (sic)¹⁷⁹, and we are able to read the words “END” on a street sign.¹⁸⁰ I am mentioning the graffiti as Donald Trump who’ name embellishes the destruction of Salton City both physically but also symbolically. Trump is a central figure within neoliberal politics. In Emily Guerin’s podcast *California City*, she meets up with an associate of the California city’s founder Nat Mendelsohn. Her name is Cathrine Effort. (California city is an area in the Mojave I will expand on within the next sub chapter.) Effort, describes Mendelsohn to have similar deminer as Donald Trump, sharing an American Dream. ¹⁸¹ “I’ll tell you who we saw in the light, it was Donald Trump, the new York accent- kind of a deep voice...” Guerin asks Effort if Mendelsohn reminded her of Trump, in which she confirms. It is in some ways not surprising that the graffiti expresses a hatred to the 45th president, as his presence is associated to the rise and fall of late capitalist architecture, affecting recidency around it. I will again include Guerin and her podcast when analysing *Land of the Sun*.



“FUKK TRUMP” Niklas Goldbach, *A Date with Destiny* 2019. Photo exert 02:28

¹⁷⁹ Goldbach, *A Date with Destiny*, 02:29

¹⁸⁰ Goldbach, *A Date with Destiny*, 02:36

¹⁸¹ Emily Guerin, *California City*, «A Man with a Dream», 5:00

After five minutes of the Holly Cooperation, and Locus Fudge playing, the sound disappears for a little over a minute. The silence is perhaps the most honest description of the area. The silence of the desert is continually mentioned, and in the 2017 documentary *Desert Coffee* one of the residents of Slab City, describes his value as having “peace and quiet of the country”.¹⁸² It is this silence of the landscape Goldbach showcases five minutes into *A Date with Destiny*. As previously mentioned, I do not have knowledge about wheatear or not Goldbach digitally manipulated the footage to make the landscape removed of human interaction. Although it is a common technique in his art production. In a way silence represents the things urban cities do not. To think of urban cities is to think of sirens calling, and of telephone conversations overheard, and the public transport noises day and night. By taking away the noise the observer comes closer to one of the central traits of the desert towns, silence of the country.

4.6 Yearning for the Fifties, the good old days.¹⁸³

A Date with destiny shows the viewer a nostalgic utopia of a golden past, a utopia of late capitalism in the 1960s when capitalism was not yet scary. This is demonstrated alongside environmental and infrastructural dystopia of Salton city’s present day footage. As explained in the theory chapter, the ways in which we see nostalgia varies. To some, both within academia and outside, the after- was area in the US, with the rise of suburbia and property development is seen as a utopia within the past. This is an opportunity for nostalgia and utopia to meet.

“- whether nostalgia might ever be considered utopian – (It)seems to be that nostalgia might be considered utopian only if one conceives of the past as more perfect than the present, and desires somehow to recreate it. If one values the future, by contrast, nostalgia is quite the opposite of utopian: it is ideological, and should be rejected out of hand.”¹⁸⁴

Nostalgia is understood as being a response to the massive changes our society has undergone the past decades. Nicola Sayers reminds us that horror visions, non-existence, and demise likewise are alternatives.¹⁸⁵ Both Ernst Bloch and Nicola Sayers expresses that the artistic medium is a platform to bring forth possible contemporary utopias, and to elucidate the

¹⁸² Lypinski, *Desert Coffee*,

¹⁸³ Nicola Sayers, *The Promise of Nostalgia*, page 2

¹⁸⁴ Nicola Sayers, *The Promise of Nostalgia*, page 60

¹⁸⁵ Nicola Sayers *The Promise of Nostalgia* page 45

suppressed and untold stories.¹⁸⁶ Another one of their arguments is that of utopia being temporal. By being temporal, utopias are open to critique- not only of the present and possible miscalculations of the future, but as a way of learning from the past. This means that traits, heritage, and popular culture can contribute in speaking up about the present day issues. Old ideas can help elucidate the wrongs of the contemporary, just as much as scholars use the past for present day justice, such as critical theory on colonialism. Michal Vine writes that “Such analyses can help us understand the atmospheric injury unleashed upon people both within and beyond the California desert, as well as the differential effects of that injury for differently positioned bodies.”¹⁸⁷ I argue that art like *A Date with Destiny* is contributing by understanding some of our ruins of late capitalism, and to make room for critical analysis of late capitalism, whilst on the same time recognizing the errors of present day neoliberal politics. Video art is also a medium for conveying the harms of slow violence, both related to environmental issues, but also for human rights. In critical analysis, different ways of facilitating architecture, urban development, and contemporary economy and politics might come to show within our present. I argue that diverse voices and different mediums are helpful in conveying the harms and the dystopian aspects of our past and future

“We will be wanting the voices of writers who can see alternatives to the way we like now (...) and even imagine some real grounds for hope. We will need writers who can remember freedom. The realists or larger reality. (...) We live in capitalism. Its power seems inescapable. So did the divine right of Kings!”¹⁸⁸

Levitas writes that “We learn a lot about the experience of living under a set of conditions, by reflecting upon the desires which those conditions generate and yet leave unfulfilled.”¹⁸⁹ *A Date with Destiny* shows a unhealthy living environment caused by the urge to create rivieras in the desert. An utopian dream where desire ran out, and the city builders ran away. Those who chose and those who were abled, ran away from the toxic sea line. Not everyone has the power to relocate. This is an example of the power structure Mbembe calls necropolitics, where certain groups or classes are unwillingly persisting to live in unhealthy environments, whereas people with more reliable income has the opportunity to relocate.¹⁹⁰ The immobility of residents around the Salton sea has within recent years lead to death, as the pandemic hit

¹⁸⁶ Nicola Sayers, *The Promise of Nostalgia*, page 59

¹⁸⁷ Michael Vine «Beyond Touch: Cultivating Caring Atmospheres in Arid America» page 23

¹⁸⁸ Nicola Sayers, *The Promise of Nostalgia*, page 47

¹⁸⁹ Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, page 9

¹⁹⁰ Mbembe, *Necropolitics*

harder on those with respiratory diseases. Involuntarily, the developers founding suburbia around a toxic water base made people decide between health and poverty. This is how politics have power over human bodies.

As touched upon previously through scholar Ruth Levitas, personal opinions control the way we understand utopias. Certain issues will be more important to some than to others. Goldbach's subjective opinion of neoliberalism and of postmodernism, will generate how he understands utopias from dystopias. What is important to acknowledge is that utopia and dystopia is not the difference between night and day, it might be differed by the lens you choose to use, but most likely due to subjective experiences. Utopia would be for humans to keep their lifestyle and their well-being, an entirely different American dream.

4.7 There is no greater American heritage than the right to outdoor living.¹⁹¹

In the beginning of this project I was invested in the oscillation between utopia and dystopia, adopting this understanding through Niklas Goldbach. Between the golden, nostalgic past and a damaged present. In some ways this project has in similar ways experienced this oscillation, as my subjective way of viewing the Mojave cities has wavered. I can therefore, without too much involvement, understand the uncertainty scholars and artists visiting this place suffers. Who decides what makes a place favourable or unacceptable?

Learning about the communities that thrive in living situations far from modernist society, makes it clear that what *A Date with Destiny* is providing is not only a discourse between utopia and dystopia, but perhaps two utopias meeting. Two ways of seeing the present and the future, and it does not have to be nightmare visions. In reading Lyman T. Sargent's theory on utopian communities, this presents itself as the utopia of escapism away from the neoliberal society. Perhaps to some extent the fear Goldbach has of feeling alone in the modern city stretches further than the fear of environmental damage. Or on the other hand, if you want to part ways with the capitalist, modern city, do you have to give up parts of yourself in doing so?

The right to outdoor living with fresh air, space and freedom in contrast to the crowded cities, warmth from the sun, immense space for parking, a casual atmosphere and a clear sky. These

¹⁹¹ Goldbach, *A Date with Destiny*

are the elements connecting the present Salton Sea and the reality presented in 1968. In some incidences one should attempt to understand places for what is there, and not only for what is missing. These are some of the fundamentals drawing certain groups of people to the area, despite what the area lacks. The elements missing from the late capitalist description from the commercial track and that one should not expect Salton Sea to be in 2023 is; *luxury beaches and hotels, essential infrastructure meaning stores, industrial complexes, jobs and livelihood, gourmet restaurants, pools, urban facilities and modern schools*. According to the commercial, Salton City was estimated to be one of the largest cities within California in the year 2000.¹⁹² That estimate did not result in such manner, and the elements promised are still not present in Salton Sea coastal towns.



“Property is Robbery” Niklas Goldbach, *A Date with Destiny* 2019. Photo exert 06:32 ¹⁹³

4.8 Chapter Outro

In this chapter I have looked at the relationship between utopia, nostalgia, and *A Date with Destiny*. I have started forming answers to the thesis research questions which I will continue to do in the second analysis chapter as well.

¹⁹² Goldbach, *A Date with Destiny* 16:30

¹⁹³ Goldbach, *A Date with Destiny* 6:32

5. Second Analysis Chapter

In this chapter I look at Niklas Goldbach's video called *Land of the Sun*. I am covering the second research question; what is Niklas Goldbach's critique of contemporary US society? This question has ambitious qualities to it, and some could mean it is impossible to answer. I argue that ambitious questions should not necessarily be ignored but rather implemented. The artist's intention is nevertheless not part of the analysis, but rather interpreted. Certain opinions guide Goldbach's lens, most importantly his fears. Regardless, it is not a big factor in interpreting *Land of the Sun*. This thesis main argument is that Goldbach's art is a political commentary of our society, and that his art works look at the problems within the American dream. What are the factors in play when Niklas Goldbach discovered his anxiety for the modern, urban, city, and who took the safety and bliss away from the residents of the Mojave? I cannot answer these questions with exact certainty, but I will through this analysis chapter undergo research of his art work.

In analysing *Land of the Sun* I have researched the heritage of California City. It is critical to understand the past utopia of Nat Mendelsohn, the city's creator, to analyse the present day situation of California City. Emily Guerin's 2020 podcast *California City* serves as critical information in understanding the present day place in the desert, as she reports on fraud in the present and past of California city.

I continue to ask, who decides what makes up a utopia? Ruth Levitas theory on subjectivity can support this question. This is an important question which I will further consider in the discussion chapter that follows this analysis.

5.1 All The Streets Have Names

November 2014, Niklas Goldbach shoots within the Mojave Desert in the large town of California City. So large it is the third largest in the state of California. California City's heritage rests on the real estate developer Nat Mendelsohn, who bought the land within the desert with an dream to build a utopian suburbia within the Mojave Desert. Mendelsohn's American dream town did not exceed the expectations, and today the city is mainly filled with large stretches of roads leading seemingly nowhere. It is known today as a unfinished urban planning project, altering the destiny of thousands of residents who moved to California City in its heyday's.¹⁹⁴

“On the ground, a journalist summarized the scene concisely as ‘an immense jigsaw puzzle with most of the pieces missing. There are houses with no neighbours, boulevards with no cars, streets that end abruptly and reappear blocks or miles away.’¹⁹⁵



“The rise and fall of California City”, *Architecture and the Housing*. Page 223. “Aerial View, California City, date unknown. Courtesy of Architecture and Design Collection, Art, Design & Architecture Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara. CA.

¹⁹⁴ Niklas Goldbach, web page, «Land of the Sun»

¹⁹⁵ Starkey, «The rise and fall of California City» page 235

Shannon Starkey is a architecture historian based at the University of California, who is currently working on the disbelief surrounding the heritage of California City. In addition, the scholar contributed with a chapter on the topic for the 2022 book *Architecture and the Housing Question*. I will use this chapter as a foundation when I present the history of California City.

5.2 Heritage and Background

Nathan Mendelsohn was born in Czechoslovakia, and became educated within the arts with a certain interest in agriculture and land use in America. Before taking on the development of California City, he assisted in creating roaring communities within the desert of both Riverside and Hesperia in California state.¹⁹⁶ His interest in city development was answering to a socio-political issue at his present time. As a Czechoslovakian who immigrated to the US, he was in ways raised with the commercial late capitalist ideology, and so the freedom to create was imbedded in his very existence. Mendelsohn had a admiration for the American desert. He adopted the idea that economic accumulation would succeed as long as two criteria's were met: founding and people.¹⁹⁷ The only difference between California City and his previous experience with city development was the remote location, and dusty and windy climate of the area.

Shannon Starkey suggests that California City is one of many projects of its kind, of the post war American housing plans taking place in the late 1950's. The emptiness of the landscape made way for total redesign, making it fit for the middle class consumers to create their life in the desert suburbia.¹⁹⁸ Starkey writes that the blank desert canvas was filled with the question "What would Los Angeles be like if we could sweep away everything and start from scratch- a new plan with all new buildings, utilities and streets"¹⁹⁹ Viewing Goldbach's *Land of the Sun* display the same emptiness Mendelsohn sought after in the late 50's, only the plan of new buildings, utilities and streets failed to succeed. Starkey presents some faulty in Mendelsohn and the city planner Charles Clark. He explains that instead of creating possible models or drawings of diverse housing designs, certain design restrictions were presented, making the personalization of the living situation difficult. A large number of lots were sold within the first years of development, but only a few dozen homes were actually built. Starkey writes

¹⁹⁶ Glenn Stevenson, «Nat Mendelsohn»

¹⁹⁷ Glenn Stevenson, «Nat Mendelsohn»

¹⁹⁸ Starkey, «The rise and fall of California City» page 221

¹⁹⁹ Starkey, «The rise and fall of California City» page 221

that “land was not so much paired and sold with the house, or even the design of a house, but with the mechanisms for controlling and envisioning a thriving and well-designed future.”²⁰⁰ This argument is crucial in understanding the utopia of California City. The buyers of land did not so much buy a house, but rather thought they were making an investment in their future. The neoliberal exchange economy teaches the consumer that money and property can be exchanged for future prosperity, and that growth is inevitable. But growth does not always happen.

“In many cases, sales were generated from employees, rather than by them. New recruits were heavily pressured to purchase land, and encouraged to reside in the city to show their commitment to the company. As a result, a majority of the city’s residents were directly or indirectly employed by the development company”²⁰¹

This made the boundaries between business and personal life blurred. The subjects that invested in California City became immersed in the growth of their neighbourhood, and personally affected where growth did not happen. According to Shannon Starkey’s article, a spokesman for the development company claimed that “industry requires labour and labour requires good family living conditions and good recreational facilities.”²⁰² Once again blurring the lines between home- life and labour. Nevertheless, the city did not become the capitalist dream once required by Mendelsohn, but rather a stand-in city adapting some of his initial goals. There are, as Goldbach captures in *Land of the Sun*, still living within California City that still believe that the growth one day will take place. Their dream remains postponed to this day.

It is not my intention to claim California City as a capitalist dystopia. It is rather my point that dystopias, or unfinished dreams, take up a large part of late capitalist development. In this subchapter, I am seeing the present-day despair of California City parallelly with the intentions that were beforehand.²⁰³ As previously mentioned, the post-war era in America caused a demand for housing, without a certainty of what climate was best suited for development.²⁰⁴

²⁰⁰ Starkey, «The rise and fall of California City» page 224

²⁰¹ Starkey, «The rise and fall of California City» page 225

²⁰² Starkey, «The rise and fall of California City» Page 228

²⁰³ Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, page

²⁰⁴ Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, page 87



”California City” Niklas Goldbach, *Land of the Sun* 2014. Photo exert

5.3 Why did California City not succeed to grow?

William Cronon writes;

“Wilderness suddenly emerged as the landscape of choice for elite tourists, who brought with them strikingly urban ideas of the countryside through which they travelled. For them, wild land was not a site for productive labour and not a permanent home; rather, it was a place of recreation. One went to the wilderness not as a producer but as a consumer.”²⁰⁵

Cronan reflects on a difference between the frontier and the ones who in capitalist heyday wanted to not only to domesticate, but glamourize the desert by creating rivieras and tourism. They had perhaps, most likely, not worked the fields, and were elite business men with money as their access card. Visions and utopia do not generate through American dreaming, but hard, qualified work. “Country people generallt know far too much about working the land to regard unworked land as their idea.”²⁰⁶ Moving to the remote desert also put this responsibility on ‘well-to-do-city-folks’ and tourists with visions and ‘frontier fantasies’, but

²⁰⁵ William Cronon, «The trouble with Wilderness» page 15

²⁰⁶ William Cronon, «The trouble with Wilderness» page 15

without experience in working land.²⁰⁷ This change in attitude towards the desert might have to do with the change of zeitgeist. As part of neoliberal ideology, the subject has the responsibility and the option to create their dream future. As previously presented Morris theory on the postmodern utopia taking place in our own flesh, the idea that our muscles and curves will give back to us the reality it wants to create. With a healthy strong body, perhaps gained through morning jogs or hours at the urban gym, the work of living remote in the desolate wasteland does not project a vulnerability, but rather a personal goal and yet another American dream for the utopian body.

In *Land of the Sun* the viewer interact with a exploited environment in the desert that has undergone massive change, in the name of freedom to build a suburbia within the wild desert terrain that would generate economic growth. Neoliberalism has certain demands that needs to be met in order for economy to grow steady. The economy is in other words in need for continues capital expansion in order to live. California City did not meet these demands, and so the economy stopped growing. These demands rely on an exchange economy where the buyer purchase land and in the same time gives back the sum of money for the price. The economy is also reliant on people within a community to grow, due to tax income. The inhabitant exchanges taxes and get functional infrastructure back. In other words, I argue that the liveability of California city rests on the remoteness and the dusty terrain of the desert, making it unbearable as living situation for the target group it was set out to attract.

Appreciation is increasingly harder in unsatisfactory environments. . *Appreciation* was expected to happen as the demand for housing peaked in the post war era, but the demand weakened as more cities were developed, which had more to offer as a suburbia. Perhaps the, as Cronan puts it, ‘well-to-do-city-folks’ found it alluring with the silence and freedom, but at the end of the day had to come to terms with the hard work it is to live remote. Without the economy they generated the infrastructure would not stand a chance, as money is the force of capitalism.

California city is created based on a utopia of a futuristic dream in the desert. In ways, because the dream is future oriented, the project can never be realized. If the future comes, then the fundament of the utopia is gone. What I argue here is that California city is reliant on

²⁰⁷ William Cronon, «The trouble with Wilderness» page 15

the aspect of the future to exist. In reality the future Mendelsohn described is already present, but since it does not match a criteria of the utopia envisioned, it is not accepted as completed.

5.4 California City, the podcast

The LA journalist Emily Guerin describes the Mojave desert as “An empty canvas that salespeople can paint a dream on.”²⁰⁸ To better understand the present day conflicts and living situation for the inhabitants of California City, I have used Emily Guerin’s podcast *California City*. Guerin describes the Mojave desert city as a haunted small town, and a sixty-yearlong real estate scam.²⁰⁹ The third largest city in the state, haunted by one man by the name Nat Mendelsohn. The podcast presents city history of fraud and pyramid schemes still taking place to the present day. The podcast ended with the trial of California City’s biggest and most visited resort and business, Silver Saddle Ranch. The trial took place in 2020, six years after Goldbach shot *Land of the Sun* in the same area. Silver Saddle is mentioned in *Land of the Sun*, where a resident of the city describes the business as a project in development, describing the deserts prospects of prosperity.

“In my podcast California City, I told the story of a small town in the Mojave desert where, for more than sixty decades, salespeople have been peddling nearly worthless desert land to unsuspecting people. Now the California Attorney General has charged nine of those salespeople with felonies. (...) Silver Saddle Ranch & Club, a remote desert resort in California City (...) where salespeople offered free weekend vacations to Latino, Filipino and Chinese costumers in exchange for sitting through a high- pressure sales pit. Many of those costumers ended up spending tens of thousands of dollar on land they were made to believe would be worth much more in the near future. It wasn’t.”²¹⁰

In episode two of the podcast Guerin meets already presented Catherine Effort. Effort describes California as a utopia of safety, a place where her children would walk to school safely, on roads designed to slow down traffic.²¹¹ In *Land of the Sun* the viewer is introduces to one of the residents. The female voice explains “there is no such thing as traffic jams in California city, they just don’t exist. My home is a mile and a half from my work, and there is no traffic, I go to work in the morning and very seldom do I have to follow behind one or two

²⁰⁸ Emily Guerin, *California City podcast*, “Turning Desert Dust into Gold” 31:10

²⁰⁹ Emily Guerin web page, «My work»

²¹⁰ Emily Guerin, «Criminal Charges Filed Against Real Estate Company at Center of LAist Studio’s California City’ Podcast»

²¹¹ Guerin, «California City» 10:35

cars, this morning there was no one.”²¹² Relying on this, the roads designed to slow down traffic were successful. Unfortunately not much else was.

Real-estate pyramid schemes make up the larger part of Guerin’s podcast. In lack of industry and job markets, the economy of California City is based around the Silver Saddle Ranch, which has for decades been controlling the real estate of the city. *In Land of the Sun*, the Silver Saddle Ranch is described as a keeper of the utopian dream, being appreciated for keeping the American dream alive. I am here referring to the male resident narrating parts of the video. This idea is being presented by one local of the city, without knowing Niklas Goldbach’s intention. The male voice suggests that “If you want to build something I could find you a spot for you, for that to happen”²¹³ In *California City* podcast Guerin describes the ones she interviews to have been tricked into buying a worthless piece of desert land, with some landowners possessing a plot of land without having the economy to build the house,

5.5 Antiphrasis and Contrasts

Polanyi’s contradictory views on freedom is presented in Goldbach’s *Land of the Sun*. In *Land of the Sun* the residents narrating the video puts their emphasis on the ‘good freedoms’ of their society. The examples mentioned by the locals is: freedom of the outdoors, freedom from traffic jams and to move freely, the lack of entertainment leaves freedom for creativity, and freedom of space and openness in the desert. One of the locals describes the land as “not tainted by man himself”, in a way describing the desert as freedom to escape neoliberalism and capitalist society itself.²¹⁴ It is this paradoxical dialogue between the imagery dark sides, and the residents’ comments on their community that works so well as a political discussion. By dark I mean the discomfiting shots of abandoned houses and industries shown throughout the video. It is through this contrast the viewer can comprehend Goldbach’s critical lens. So what assumptions can one make of this antiphrasis, being told one thing whilst seeing the opposite? Goldbach is bringing additional purpose to both the interview and to the footage. Perhaps to get the spectator to use their own subjective thinking and to make personal comments on what they themselves see. It creates a powerful effect in debating the meaning of utopia, and how subjective it can be. “When a character makes a

²¹² Goldbach, *Land of the Sun*, 00:43

²¹³ Niklas Goldbach, *Land of the Sun*, 2:50

²¹⁴ Niklas Goldbach, *Land of the Sun*, 3:11

statement that includes antiphrasis, the writer is able to reveal more of their personality and help the reader better understand how opposed they are to one action, emotion, or other feature of the story.”²¹⁵ Although a literature tool, Goldbach makes us pay close attention to what the locals are saying when giving them a voice to express themselves, whilst also expressing his own personal feeling, causing the role as the commentator or the debater to land in the spectators hands.

Although focusing on man-made structures, Goldbach has explained how he occasionally removes all traces of human movement digitally. This is not explicitly explained in connection with all his art works. Although knowing Goldbach’s intentional choice has an effect on how he sees architecture, urban places and the environment he explores as living organs alone, as free and perhaps uncontrolled though created. Goldbach is through his art production presenting post capitalist structures that is within a flux of societal progress and economical profit. He is showing us new ways of housing, like the un- permanent accommodations presented in his *Form and Control* series, where he ultimately focuses on refugee housing and the political crises affecting how one sees housing today

5.6 Utopian Communities within Desert Space

Jessica Bruder’s book *Nomadland: Surviving America in the Twenty-First Century*, is an investigation in what she calls ‘wheel-estate’.²¹⁶ A rapidly growing culture that are giving up the commodities attached to the neoliberalist logic, abandoning traditional housing. Bruder writes that “many of the people I met felt that they’d spent too long losing a rigged game. And so they found a way to hack the system.”²¹⁷ Like the residence of California City, the nomads are described to have a bone-deep utopian dream. Bruder writes “a bone-deep conviction that something better will come. It’s just ahead, in the next town, the next gig, the next chance encounter with a stranger.”²¹⁸ The nomads utopia lays in the freedom of movement through traveling, by moving from town to town, doing minimal wage work without settling down for long. The nomads are not families, and do not live together, but they do live in a common

²¹⁵ Poem Solutions Limited, «Antiphrasis» definition

²¹⁶ Jessica Bruder, *Nomadland*, page 9

²¹⁷ Jessica Bruder, *Nomadland*, page 20

²¹⁸ Jessica Bruder, *Nomadland*, page 10

patterns, and forms family like bonds by a shared vision. They experience a common loneliness of not fitting in the labour culture of present day America. This resonates with Lyman T. Sargent's theory. As a reminder, Lyman T. Sargent classify utopian communities "as a group of five or more adults and their children, if any, who come from more than one nuclear family who have chosen to live together to enhance their shared values or for some other mutually agreed upon purpose"²¹⁹

Desert residents has to come to terms with how they define desire and value a part form economic value. Is home something you create or is it something carried with you? In the 2019 movie *Nomadland*, based on Jessica Bruder's book, one of the characters talks about her desires as they sit down around the fire pit within the Mojave. She describes her desire as "I did not want my sailboat to be in the driveway when I died", the sailboat being an allegory for her value of freedom from labour.²²⁰ In some ways the people presented in *Nomadland* are forced to be refugees within their own country, trying to exist outside of the neoliberal/capitalist structure. The people in *Nomadland* shares the real story that is the aftermath of the town Empire located in Nevada. As the mine closed down the infrastructure disappeared, and these people were forced to relocate as they no longer could generate income. Despite their values and desires not aligning with present economic system, no place is ever far enough away from capitalism. As Fredric Jameson explains, "the historic alternatives to capitalism have been proven unviable and impossible, and that no other socioeconomic system is conceivable, let alone practically available."²²¹ Jameson also conveys an opinion that the alternatives are not conceivable or possible let alone to imagine. Yet so many people with alternative desires tries to live outside capitalism.

²¹⁹ Lyman Tower Sargent, "Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited", page 14

²²⁰ Zhao, *Nomadland*, 22:00

²²¹ Jameson, *Archologies of the Future*, page xii



Nomadland, 2020, imdb.com

5. 7 Goldbach's commentary (chapter outline)

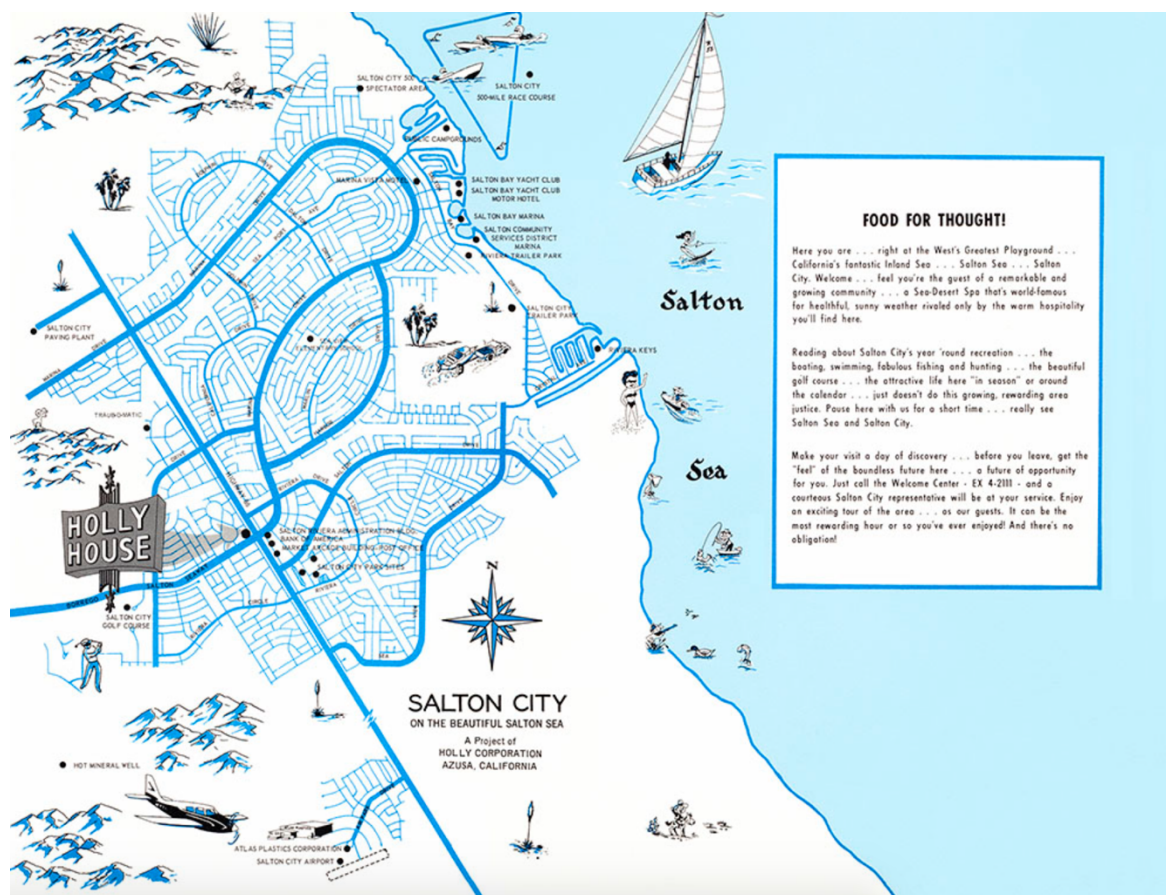
What Goldbach is conveying is a society which has lost touch of the harms afflicting environments and those who live in these environments.

Goldbach's *Land of the Sun* is accompanied by other voices reflecting on the same topics. I am presenting the artist Kim Stringfellow and two of her bigger projects within the Mojave. The two artistic projects contextualize Niklas Goldbach's video production within the desert area, as the question of utopia is present within these art productions too.

Greetings from the Salton Sea is both a published book, website and a photo installation exhibiting the man made environment that is the Salton Sea. The Salton Sea is presented as challenging both in itself, and people's ability to inhabit the areas around it. Through Stringfellow's photography we learn about the sea's heritage and background. The Salton Sea is also captured through archival real estate films much like Goldbach's *A Date with Destiny*. *Greetings from Salton Sea* was a contributor in the installation *Ecotopia: The Second Triennial of Photography and Video*, as the place presents the oscillation between a utopia of man-made water in the desert, and the ecological disaster that affects the living beings in and around the water to this day.²²²

²²² Stringfellow, «Greetings from the Salton Sea»

The subject for both Goldbach and Stringfellow is the Salton Sea. Goldbach presents himself as a silent observer in *A Date with Destiny*, using irony and music to convey a dystopian message about the sea toxins. He also focuses on the post war capitalist advertisement making people move around the sea shore. Stringfellow's campaign *Greetings from the Salton Sea* is including advertisement form the same corporation, "Food for thought" from the 1960's campaign. *Greetings from the Salton Sea* is a transmedia production, using different voices and mediums beside video and photography to convey a need for change.



"Food for Thought!" paper menu produced by Holly Corporation during the 1960s. Stringfellow 2000-2013 all rights reserved, *Greetings from the Salton Sea*, <https://greetingsfromsaltonsea.com>

The Mojave project is a transmedia documentary project curated by the photographer Kim Stringfellow. The project is researching the Mojave Desert as an ecological space, and a cultural place. Funded by organisations like Andy Warhol Foundation for the visual arts, San Diego State University with gift from previously mentioned artist Ed Ruscha, and so on. The

project is important in tying together artistic production to the heritage and prospects of the Mojave Desert, understanding humans interfering with the climate through multiple medias. One of the under titles of the Mojave project *Transformation and Reinvention* describes a the utopian meaning of the desert. “Past and present utopic communities formed within the Mojave foster a communal life independent from the restraints of mainstream society.”²²³

In this chapter I have looked at the commentary of US society found in *Land of the Sun*, as well as contextualized Goldbach to introduce the idea that his commentary is a part of a bigger collective of voices. As example I have introduced T. Sargents utopian communities through Bruider’s *Nomadland*, as well as artist and activist Kim Stringfellow who is in pursuit to vocalize the slow violence within her community. I have also looked at subjectivity and personal desire. I will expand on this topic in the following discussion chapter as well.

²²³ Stringfellow, «Project themes» The Mojave Project. org

6. Discussion



Niklas Goldbach, video still from *My Barrio*, 2005



Niklas Goldbach, video still from *Gan Eden*, 2006

6.1 Subjectivity within the Capitalocene

“Most of my videos are about my personal fear, plus my subjective views on melancholy, and dystopia, it’s also visions of (dystopia), it is always this mixture of utopia and dystopia, but in the end I always choose dystopia because it kind of maybe more how I see the world... When work on a piece first of all there is this idea of an image. The image gets filled with, let’s call it socio-political content in a way. There are these spaces that are inspiring when I walk through Berlin and I see abandoned spaces or high modern building sites. I kind of have this personal feeling of alienation, and maybe I am afraid of that: of being alone in this hyper modern city. It is a nightmare vision for me.”²²⁴

For this chapter I further the discussion of subjectivity within utopianism. The question of subjectivity is a big part of contemporary scholarly work within the field of utopia and postmodernism. Morris “Postmodern Pain” is an example of the subjective opinions and expectations of what a utopia should look like, as he questions “who is to say what constitutes perfection?”²²⁵ This will be debated more in the discussion chapter.

Within neoliberal economy the subject are seen as the sole provider for themselves, in a state that takes little to no interfering. When exploring the topic of nostalgia, subjectivity decides what parts of history one find glorified or deglamourized. Nostalgic aesthetic preference is decided by personal choice, but also culture. Ruth Levitas provides research in the cultural differences within utopia, and dismantles the definitions of utopia reliant on form, function and content, due to large changes withing class, gender, cultures and communities. A part from being a central topic within politics and utopia, subjectivity is essential for Goldbach’s art production. It is for these reasons I will resonate on subjectivity within this chapter.

6.2 Capitalism is a world- ecology

“Capitalism is a way of organizing nature as a whole... a nature in which human organizations (class, empires, markets, ect.) not only make environments, but are simultaneously made by the historical flux and flow of the web of life. In this perspective capitalism is a world-ecology that joins accumulation of capital, the pursuit of power, and the co- production of nature in successive historical configurations.”²²⁶

California City, and the Mojave desert towns circling the Salton Sea, was in the 1960’s planned to be a thriving suburbia in the desert. The utopian dream of the city planners like Nat

²²⁴ Niklas Goldbach, interview for Flasher.com

²²⁵ Morris, “Postmodern Pain”, page 172

²²⁶ Moore, Anthropocene or Capitalocene. Page 7

Mendelsohn was to create a capitalist empire in the desert, with functioning infrastructure and welfare, to match cities like Las Vegas and Salt Lake city. Today it is an imperfect living situation for those who decide to build their future there in the end of 20th century. The value of property in the Mojave desert is changed, and continues to ask what value itself can be. Is value always economic growth? Or can value, as Emily Guerin puts it, always have a place to go?²²⁷ The definition of value varies much like the definition of utopia, which brings me back to the scholar Ruth Levitas. Levitas states that what we define as a good place will vary from cultures and perception. In other words, the idea of dystopia might be a utopia for some. Niklas Goldbach describes having anxiety of the modern, urban city, and of being left alone in the neoliberal societal growth. The fear of neoliberalism and the societies it generates might be far more threatening within certain subjects than the fear of environmental toxins. Who will choose to establish their life in the remote desert?

For the residents who bought not only land in the end of the 1960's, but also an ideal and a dream of the desert that will soon be blooming, the present day landscape of the Mojave will be perceived as a dystopia. On the other hand, the Californian desert has had people who in the recent years made a choice to leave the modern cities in favour of the deserted suburbia. For me to interpret this place as a dystopia would not be rightfully claimed on behalf of the residency. This has been conveyed through the example of Jessica Bruider's book, which I have also mentioned filmatized, *Nomadland*, as well as the documentary film *Desert Coffee*.

Goldbach is experiencing an alienation within the modern city spaces, and a defencelessness when faced with the neoliberal- driven architecture. In his art works the idea and displacement and disposition is present. Goldbach is observing and capturing in his art new ways of housing, like the un- permanent accommodations presented in his *Form and Control* series, where he ultimately focuses on refugee housing and the political crises affecting how one sees housing today. The gap between utopia and dystopia becomes blurred in questions regarding neoliberal prosper and homelessness as somewhat of a result.

Freedom of the market means freedom of the people who are culturally, socially and economically capable of taking care of their freedom. What caused California City's despair? Within the neoliberal economy the belief is narrowed down to: get the people to inhabit the

²²⁷ Emily Guerin, California city, episode 9 «Cashing on the Desert»

area, and for them to bring assets. With the people and the economy in order the community will continue to grow. This also means for the subjects to bring income. This plan did not succeed as originally planned, and the place became uninhabitable partly due to a decline in tax payers. What remains is the freedom of the desert. All people did not vanish, and there are still inhabitants of California city. Although these people might have subjective values that don't coincide with economic growth.

Ruth Levitas points out that the distinction between nature and culture is embedded, and that you cannot separate the two.²²⁸ Jason W. Moore also looks at the relationship between nature and society, but also in regards to power. “there is no doubt that capitalism imposes a relentless pattern of violence on nature, humans included.”²²⁹ This suggests that capitalism, but also utopia is a part of human nature and culture, and we find it within our unconscious desires and behaviour as individuals and as a society²³⁰. It is therefore also directly connected to our personal fears. This also means there could be no universal utopia, “not just because need are differently perceived by different observers, but because needs actually do vary between societies.”²³¹ Does this mean that utopia is unattainable? Not necessarily, due to the fact that true needs not always is unattainable. Levitas writes that “indeed, without the criterion of human needs and human nature we have no objective measure for distinguishing the good society from the bad.”²³²

Ruth Levitas ends her book *The Concepts of Utopia* with the notion that hope is the expression of utopia for humans nature. She explains that if the idea that here and now is unsatisfactory, one must collect a hope for a alternative. Subjective views might vary, but for a hope of a different society to manifest we must collectively express this view through agency and creativity.²³³ What this means for Niklas Goldbach's art production is to elucidate not only his subjective fears, but also the hope within the communities he interpret. Goldbach's creative video art works *Land of the Sun* and *A Date with Destiny* is combining personal fears of modernism with the hope of two societies within the desert. In this way the oscillation between fears and hope generate a collective opinion for change, both based on

²²⁸ Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, page 211

²²⁹ Moore, *Anthropocene or Capitalocene*. Page 5

²³⁰ Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, page 211

²³¹ Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, page 213

²³² Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, page 214

²³³ Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia*, page 231

utopia and dystopia. I therefore argue that utopia and dystopia does not have to be separated to be understood, in the same way that it is temporal. Patricia Nelson Limerick writes that “in matters of landscape, one man’s ‘ugly picture’ could well be another man’s ‘improvement’”²³⁴

David B. Morris writes that postmodernism normally is explained as an “absence of a single dominant mode of thought or representation.. The utopias generated by such a fractured and polymorphous vision prove both new and unusual.”²³⁵ Morris argues that in lack of feeling empowered to, within the neoliberal and postmodern present, change such fractured society, we became invested in controlling what was easier, ourselves. Utopia might not refer to hopes and fears of society, but a matter of hopes and fears concerning our own body.²³⁶ Not directly linked, but certainly relevant, is Goldbach’s anxiety when close to high rise modern buildings. The dystopia might as well be located in the contrast between huge corporations building tall buildings making the person feel small both in body and mind. Apart from critiquing postmodern architecture, Goldbach critiques the ways in which the destiny of human bodies are determined to stagnate in growth within a neoliberal marked.

²³⁴ Patricia Nelson L , *Desert Passages: encounters with the American desert*, page 7

²³⁵ David B. Morris, «Postmodern pain», page 150-151

²³⁶ David B. Morris, «Postmodern pain», page 152

7. Conclusion:

“With your own vision, you can enjoy such things now in the presence, but also be a part of the future... You by investing in your own land, can give yourself and your family, and future generations, a chance to take advantage of a heritage you might otherwise miss.”²³⁷

The research provided through this project aims to present and discuss the intersection between contemporary artist Niklas Goldbach and the American dream. It is through an understanding of contemporary research of nostalgia of post war America, late capitalism and neoliberalism, that I manage to interpret his art as a dystopian view on our very own time. To conclude this project I aim to ultimately answer the research questions I had in the beginning. I am revisiting the three main questions framing this project:

1 What is the relationship between Niklas Goldbach’s video art and utopias, slow violence, and the American dream?

Goldbach is not direct about his views. He is not literal, and is not asking us to believe one thing or another. Through contrasts and antiphrasis, he directs the viewer to engage and to make their subjective analysis of the thematic of his art. Slow violence is as the word intel’s, slow and often hidden. Art can elucidate the hidden corners of society. Utopia is in similar ways a tool to generating desire.

2 What is Niklas Goldbach’s critique of contemporary US society?

This thesis is a critical theory of the intersection of Goldbach’s video art and the contemporary capital driven society in which Goldbach- and we, live in. His art does not stand alone, it captures the world in which it was made. The artist, Goldbach, who made it, is driven by perhaps negative emotions such as fear, anxiety, being overwhelmed, and dystopian. His emotions drives the art to a place of negative feedback. His critique/ comment,

²³⁷ Goldbach, *A Date with Destiny*

it that though capitalism the society have become prone to slow violence, and that the rapid changes of neoliberalism leads to potential harm, and losers in the cause of profit.

What has been important to me in this research is to see Goldbach in a bigger picture of thinkers, artists, and scholars. Brought on from Ruth Levitas is the collective works of commentary. Goldbach is also expressing a personal desire for a changed society by turning the camera towards the ruins of capitalism within Mojave desert.

3 What is the relationship between nostalgia and utopia in A Date with Destiny?

The relationship is reliant on the fact that the past is not dead, it's a part of our current everyday life. To be nostalgic of the past can also mean being open to damage and pain, but that nostalgic utopias are subjective, and certain classes, groups, and demographics benefits by a glorified past, whereas other groups benefits from the progress leading to the present day. Nostalgic past can also include thoughts about a different way of living, seen though the work of Cronan, the nostalgia of frontier lifestyle glorifies the freedom of outdoors, and open vacant nature, but as we know- this nature was never really vacant. But still, tourists continue to be nostalgic, seeking an utopia of self- reliant humans in nature. In this way, utopia as subjective as it is, can be a place of the past, but also of the present for those who have the recourses to make their personal goal reality.

In *A Date with Destiny* Goldbach argues that utopia is temporal, as the art work critiques the past, the present, and perhaps elucidate the future. *A Date with Destiny* is a discussion about the ramifications of past utopias, and the dystopian present day environment surrounding Salton Sea costal line. Around the Salton sea there are thriving utopian communities, that aspires to live outside the norm of contemporary society. To them the desert acts like an utopia, as it provides structure to function on their own terms without pressure of law and labour.

On the other hand, Goldbach illustrates a society that has to decide between declining health and poverty. The toxic sea is a disaster of man's making, but also asking the people who habituated around it to accept its decline. As neoliberal logic determine, there are a massive class divide between those who can afford relocation, and those left behind. I also argue that culture and tradition makes the question of relocation impossible for groups due to personal

history of *home*. Present neoliberal America is querying the public to provide for themselves, meaning taking charge of their financial present and future, but also guarding their physical health. The utopian body is self-made, and created for not only an ideal vision, but of ideal health. Utopias have for a long time been focused on health, from the metaphors *the illness of society*. The neoliberal logic makes losers out of middle class people inhabiting the Salton sea costal line. Goldbach shows us through nostalgic utopia, and the idea of the post war American dream, that not everything is possible and to take accept the faultiest of both a glorified past, and its result in present time ecology. The past can help recognise the illness of present day Salton sea.

In *Land of the Sun* we hear two voices of locals in California City. To better understand the heritage of California city, I had to look at the ways journalists and scholars talk and write about its legacy. Most commonly known as the ghost town within America, popular culture does not aim to understand the ramifications leading to its decline. Through Emily Guerin's podcast I learnt about the ongoing real estate fraud happening in California city, and about the company Silver Saddle Ranch. I argue that the contemporary issues of Silver Saddle Ranch has little to do with the founders visions. To learn more about California city and the post war suburbia, I read Shannon Starkey's chapter on the subject, whilst also trying to understand the creator Nat Mendelsohn. My research provides a thorough look at the different factors leading up to the city's decline.

In *Land of the Sun* Goldbach is making this discourse available as the video oscillate between utopian visions explained by locals, and his dystopian view of late capitalist architectural development. Goldbach is critiquing the function of real estate within the exchange economy, and is questioning the ability to create stabile housing. In the beginning of this thesis I presented Douglas Spencer and his holistic view on architecture. He claims that by understanding architecture, you are compelled to understanding the ramifications to which the architecture was built. Goldbach is not so much studying individual architecture, but architecture as a bigger section of California City. His critique rest on the post war zeitgeist and the compulsion to create remote housing. This critique is made by showing us part of contemporary architecture seldom exposed. As argues earlier, Goldbach claims that all architecture has to be admitted into how we see postmodern art and architecture. Both the

successful developments, and the lesser successful. This also means that postmodern architecture should include abandoned city projects.

Ruth Levitas defines utopia on a basis on what remains if content, form and function varies, and her conclusion is desire. If utopia is presence of desire, dystopia on the opposite would mean the absence of desire. Goldbach uses the word melancholy to describe his relationship to dystopia, and I would argue that the lack of desire could resonate with the presence of melancholy. Goldbach states that “Dystopia is maybe more how I see the world.”²³⁸

7.1 Thesis Outro

This is the end of my critical analysis of the discussion Niklas Goldbach has with his spectators about the society the art is made. I have gathered diverse voices in the field within what I consider my interdisciplinary field, to get a grasp of the messages about the ruins of capitalism. Being aware of the negative and perhaps melancholic tone of this thesis, having studied an artist with that subjective mindset, my goal is to answer to the comments we hear about modern politics and environmental choices. This is unfortunately no recipe for detecting slow violence and dystopias a head of time, but to be aware that faults to the environment and the humans within that region costs. I wish to see in the future more voices within interdisciplinary fields of utopianism, anthropology, media science, art- and philosophy, as well as global economy scholars and health management students in conversations together. Emily Guerin ironically says in her California city podcast: “*With blood, sweat, and a little luck, we can make the desert into our garden.*”²³⁹ Let the utopian desire be to understand who’s blood, sweat, and pot of luck we use in creating the American, or national, dream.

²³⁸ Goldbach, Interview for Flasher.com

²³⁹ Emily Guerin, *California City podcast*, “The Reconning” 26:45

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