Get Happy: Play and the Utopian Imagination in Mark Osborne's *More*

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Utopia and play exist in an intimate dialectic. As Peter Stromberg explains in *Caught in Play*, "The process of getting caught up in play both builds and reinforces our capacity to conceive utopian versions of our experiences in the everyday world" (15). In moments of play, participants may continually encounter new experiences and ideas with the imaginative, uninhibited license to refresh their views of the world. Stromberg links play and utopia in a way that should be explored further, particularly as utopian scholars reconceive "utopia" as a necessary strategy for envisioning change in the public sphere of work and politics and in the private life of play and entertainment. Utopia is as much about alternatives for the individual as it is for society, as Northrop Frye presciently argued in 1965 when he wrote that new utopias "would be rooted in the body as well as in the mind, in the subconscious as well as the conscious, in forests and deserts as well as in highways and buildings, in bed as well as in the symposium" (49). However, both utopia and play are too often dismissed as frivolous or even dangerous, perceptions that may keep us from realizing the link between play and our ability to visualize and pursue new ways of being. It is this relationship that I explore in this article by merging utopian studies and play studies to cast an interdisciplinary spotlight on the power of play to shake up unshakeable worlds. I am particularly interested in the "new" utopias of Frye's prediction, utopias of the body and of the subconscious—the very alternatives explored in play activities. I will use Mark Osborne's short stop animation film *More* as my "playground" for this study, after providing some background on both play studies and utopian studies.

When we think of "play" in the Western world, we usually think of children. On the other hand, when we think of "leisure" and "entertainment," we tend to think of adults. The former suggests active engagement with an activity; the latter suggests a passive intake, like watching athletes play a football game. Play is often beset by divisions and boundaries: it is for children, not for adults, or it is for pleasure, not for work. Such distinctions are erroneous dualities based on a narrow view of what play means and what it encapsulates. A common, yet

unsupported, assumption about play is that children play as part of their natural development. However, this view is cast aside as a child develops into adulthood. Labeled by Brian Sutton-Smith as the "rhetoric of play as progress" (9), this focus on play as development does not take into account the play of adults and, particularly, that of the elderly, who are not playing as part of preparation for the next life stage. Sutton-Smith rejects the idea that play is only for children. He instead looks at play as the "lifelong simulation" of the youthful characteristics of "unrealistic optimism, egocentricity, and reactivity," traits that help us "persist in the face of adversity" (231). Even watching a football game can entail a very active engagement on the audience's part—cheering, stomping, pre-game parties, sharing the experience with friends, and even "fantasy" leagues, where spectators play an active role in creating their own teams. Such play activities are not only an important part of life and self-identity, but they may also take over significant segments of life and become inseparable from self-identity. Play is how we enact possibility. Utopian thinking is a form of play that allows the individual to create a social landscape where happiness and life may thrive.

However, some common misperceptions about play and utopia view them as oppositional concepts. Such an understanding is rooted in the definitions and importance we assign each respective activity. In *Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul*, Stuart Brown defines play as "an absorbing, apparently purposeless activity that provides enjoyment and a suspension of self-consciousness and sense of time. It is also self-motivating and makes you want to do it again" (60). He distinguishes several distinct properties of play. Play is voluntary and without obvious purpose. It frees us from the constraints of time and, during play, we feel lost in the moment and less self-conscious, a feeling that he calls a "diminished consciousness of self." Play is improvisational and not bounded by routine or structure. Once outside our daily normal activities, we become open to "new behaviors, thoughts, strategies, movements, or ways of being" (18). Essential to play is the desire to do so continuously. These properties make play the "essence of freedom" because it eliminates "the need to be practical, to follow established rules, to please others, to make good use of time," and the self-conscious guilt that accompanies these pressures (18).

These observations run counter to the traditional understanding of utopia as an end goal, i.e., a society that is purpose-driven, bound by strict rules, unwelcoming to new and possibly threatening ideas, and adhering to a rigid structure. In "Utopians at Play," Philip Abbott begins his exploration of the playful qualities of utopian literature by recognizing that the utopian genre is often criticized for its "absence of play," and that utopian thinkers are "so single-minded, so resolute in

their project, so serious and sober that they cannot tolerate play" (44). Another common criticism of utopia is that it trades freedom for communal good and promises wholesale happiness at the expense of individuality. The utopian thinker appears so determined to achieve social harmony that choice, including the choice to play, is removed from the social fabric. It seems that utopia is meant to bury unruly urges, while play elicits them. To play a game implies that someone will lose—a unappealing outcome for a society of balance, harmony, and equality. Inherent to play is also the sensation of fun, a result that draws players back continuously. The utopian narrative is not a most exciting genre because characters are often flat and one-dimensional, and the enforcement of ideological concepts tends to turn off modern readers. Not many people whom I know wish to read and reread Plato's *Republic* for "fun."

While the values of play and of utopia might seem contradictory, they can be reconciled if we revise and reimagine what is typically thought of as "utopia," as many contemporary utopian scholars suggest we do. Originally, utopia was meant for the imagination, where alternative visions of the present could be considered. This aspect of play is detailed by Abbott when he posits that the most common evidence of utopian playfulness is the practice of de-familiarizing the familiar in an effort to capture the reader's interest while still retaining plausibility (49). Utopia thus exists in a playful boundary realm of real and unreal. It is fitting to observe that the term "utopia" began as a play on words when, in 1516, Sir Thomas More coined it by combining the Greek words for "good" (*eu*) and "no" (*ou*), indicating it to be a "good place" that is "no place." His point was not to provide an achievable blueprint for perfection, but to allow looking at the world and its problems through more than one lens.

If utopian thinking allows us to transcend momentarily the boundaries of daily life in order to see the world anew, then utopia increasingly becomes its own form of play. Michael Holquist defends this imaginative aspect of utopia in "How to Play Utopia." He explains that utopian fiction substitutes for society much like chess substitutes for battle, with neither utopia nor chess meant to be either. Utopia is play with ideas. It provides the opportunity to toy with plausible and fanciful adjustments to the social fabric and to consider the give and take of social change. The objective is to experiment with social alternatives, not to develop well-rounded characters. Yet, problems occur when utopia is treated as more than play with possibilities. Holquist warns that to treat people as pawns in enforcing utopian ideology works within the confines of fiction, but "to attempt the same in life leads to the police state" (121). To ignore that utopia is meant as a form of play is a dangerous omission of utopia's function.

For this reason, twenty-first century audiences often misunderstand utopian thinking by interpreting it as a precursor to the justification of tyranny and oppression. What started as an imaginative way to reconsider the present became the very antithesis of creativity and difference. The popularity of dystopian literature and film in the last century is a testament to the declining popularity of utopian thought and fiction, and to the belief that utopia is meant as a blueprint for what should be, rather than a game of what could be. Literature like Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*, George Orwell's *1984*, and, more recently, films like Terry Gilliman's *Brazil* and Kurt Wimmer's *Equilibrium* link the pursuit of socially mandated equality and "happiness" to totalitarianism with its subsequent loss of individuality, creativity, and freedom. Such works legitimately criticize the forced implementation of an imaginative concept. When many think of utopia, they think of Stalinism, of Nazism, of the illusion of that perfection promised through mass consumption, but engineered in slums and sweatshops. Utopia has become synonymous with oppression and tyranny. Nonetheless, it is the actual *misuse* of utopia's function that leads to justified evil.

In *The Concept of Utopia*, Ruth Levitas explores the confusion surrounding the term. She explains that "problems which beset utopian scholars arise from the absence of a clear definition of utopia which separates its specialist academic use from the meanings current in everyday language" (2). Levitas identifies two common approaches to understanding utopia: utopia as the intrinsically dangerous precursor to totalitarianism, and utopia as an "intrinsically impractical" fantasy that has no real clout (3). It is either entirely too dangerous or completely innocuous. But both approaches have the same outcome, i.e., utopia cannot promote real or meaningful change. Consequently, we continue to believe that what is will always be, and that there is no alternative. However, she believes that utopia is a concept more readily useful than a fantasy island, and more positive than the rise of a totalitarian regime.

Levitas offers her own inclusive definition of utopia as a strategy for visualizing the possible, how to give shape to the desire for something different. She writes, "The essential element in utopia is not hope, but desire—*the desire for a better way of being*. It involves the imagining of a state of being in which the problems which actually confront us are removed or resolved" (my italics, 191). According to her, the shift from a fantasy world to a realizable vision depends on where we place our hope because, if change is to happen, we must place it "in an agency capable of transformation" (200). I believe that play could be a source for transformation.

Play studies are beset with problems of definition and perception. Contrasting viewpoints lead to different insights into the value of play: is it an escape from the

pressures of adult life, or a child's preparation for entering and managing the adult world? The varying perspectives on play and the many attempts to "make sense" of it make it "theoretically anomalous subject matter," as Sutton-Smith has called it ("Piaget on Play" 104). In "Ludic Toons: The Dynamics of Creative Play in Studio Animation," Pat Power notes that the study of play has been largely overlooked by the academy. He notes that "people consider play . . . appropriate only for kids and, therefore, essentially frivolous; so there is little incentive for academics to promote [it] as a field of study." Power also points out that the dynamic nature of play makes it "too enigmatic and ambiguous to fit into neat academic categories" (23). However, it is this ambiguity, this flexibility, and this open-endedness that makes play an ideal trigger for the utopian imagination.

Much as scholars of utopia seek to revive their field, play scholars defend the cultural significance of play. Stromberg writes that "the practices and ideals formed and reproduced through play, though they are devalued in official discourse, are nevertheless often vital and significant in our social life" (103). He considers the phrase "just having fun" a form of doublethink that limits the study of the subconscious values expressed in forms of play and entertainment (175). In "Imaginative Play in Childhood," Jerome Singer links the adult capacity for utopian thought to childhood engagement with play activities. Play is a "prototype" for adult daydreaming, which allows them to "miniaturize the world's complexities" and effectively manipulate situations otherwise out of their control. Adult daydreaming, far from being a frivolous direction of energies, allows for "an underlying practice of alternative possibilities" (203-04). This observation recalls Levitas' definition of utopia as a strategy for solving problems. In their article "Child's Play and Adult Leisure," Garry Chick and Lynn Barnett write that play "may be a fertile ground for the creation of culture" (48). Rather than being shaped by culture, play contributes to the creation of culture and to inventions and innovations that aid culture progress. It helps us to concoct what does not yet exist. As Johan Huizinga affirms, civilization "does not come *from* play like a babe detaching itself from the womb: it arises *in* and *as* play, and never leaves it" (173). Play, then, can be a powerful and world-transforming activity, if not *the* world-transforming activity that we may experience.

Sutton-Smith emphasizes that we should not ignore play behaviors or subscribe to the rhetoric of progress that assumes adults no longer need play. His reason is that play is part of our make-up. He argues for the imminence of play by asserting that it is a fundamental part of human survival and persistence. In his conclusion to *The Future of Play Theory*, he argues against the hypocrisy of focusing on the rationalities of children's play without considering "adult play irrationalities" (280).

To see play as a preparation for adulthood is rather simplistic, and denies the many ways adults themselves play, though we often refer to this play as "leisure" that is distinctly different from the day-to-day work life of the adult world. Society often separates play into specific events and timeframes that set it outside the "normal" routine of everyday life, e.g., playgrounds, sports arenas, and playtimes (recess or vacations) emphasize the dichotomy between play and all else in life, particularly work (282).

After surveying the often ambiguous and contradictory field of play studies in *The Ambiguity of Play*, Sutton-Smith anchors his own definition of play in biological and evolutionary principles, particularly Stephen Jay Gould's argument that variability and flexibility are key to surviving in a world of unpredictability. An organism that cannot adapt has less chance of surviving a world that is guaranteed to fluctuate. The spontaneous, shifting, and sometimes even chaotic nature of play suggests that such behavior is a way to simulate survival mechanisms. People are always trying to manage and control unknowns to best adapt to life's uncertainties, from their financial futures to the inevitability of death. Sutton-Smith ultimately defines play as "a facsimilization of the struggle for survival" with its biological function serving to affirm one's ability to adapt and change in order to survive. Players play primarily to perform "existential themes that mimic or mock the uncertainties and risks of survival and, in so doing, engage the propensities of mind, body and cells in exciting forms of arousal" (231). From the young to the elderly, play keeps the mind and the body agile and dynamic.

Utopian thinking is an extension of the human drive for flexibility and adaptability. In the traditional sense, the "perfect" society stays perfect because it never deviates from clockwork predictability. But as dystopian literature shows time and again, enforcing a social blueprint benefits ideology at the expense of individual life and happiness, which is why we need to remember that, at heart, the utopian imagination is not about forceful implementation but playful and imaginative possibilities. Driven by the desire for something better, utopian thinking allows one to see difference where it might not seem to exist. This is what Frederic Jameson calls a strategy of "disruption" in *Archaeologies of the Future*. "Disruption" is Jameson's term for the role utopia plays in helping us imagine the possibility of a break in seemingly immutable systems. According to him, we are often "incapacitated to imagine" that any other way of living is possible outside of fantasies and fiction (231). The solution to this paralysis is utopian thinking, which offers "a meditation on the impossible, on the unrealizable in its own right" (232). The true potency of utopia in the twenty-first century is believing in the possibility for difference rather than to know what a new society would look like.

It is the rupture itself that is utopian. In this sense, utopian thinking, like play, is about disrupting routine and the status quo and avoiding stasis, since survival for both us and our society is not about anchoring ourselves to a static world, but keeping the mind and body awakened to the unavoidably dynamic nature of life. When people are able to imagine that change is possible, the power of that belief extends the investment they may make in the potential happiness of their lives.

Utopian thinking in *More*

Stromberg's hint at the important relationship between utopia and play, that play foregrounds our capacity to engage in utopian thinking, emerges beautifully in *More*, a 1998 Oscar-nominated short film. The film pits a symbol of spontaneous, carefree play—children on a merry-go-round—against the gray and monotonous world of adult work and consumption. The film is set in a modern dystopia, where skyscrapers tower over downcast workers as they shuffle gloomily through their day surrounded by advertisements for a reality-altering device called Get Happy. This is the world that results from lives void of variety and flexibility, and without the arousing influence of play, hope and desire have all but disappeared.

Like Sir Thomas More's original pun, the title of the film is layered with meaning. Companies make more to sell more, and consumers hope to find more about of life through those products. There is also the longing for a more genuine and lasting sense of connection and happiness that those products tap into and manipulate, though never fulfill. This is the essence of utopia as defined by Levitas: the desire for a better way of being. It is possible that the title also playfully references Sir Thomas More, thus establishing a clear link to the utopian genre. Much like More's fictionalized island for reflecting on the realities of the present, the conflict of the film builds around different narratives of utopian possibility. The adult world of consumption lures consumers with the promise of an always-future utopia perpetuated by illusion and discontentment, while the youthful world of play engages the utopian imagination and offers an immediate and genuine experience of embodied happiness.

The film focuses on an unnamed, downtrodden factory worker who sits in an assembly line making "Happy Product." He is frustrated by the grim faces and dehumanizing work that fill his life and it is apparent that he longs for something different. This utopian impulse is spurred by a reoccurring dream filled with memories of a joyful, carefree childhood, represented by laughing children on a playground. When he awakens from these dreams, he is filled with a warm glowing substance, a kind of inner self, as if his body were producing its own organically generated happiness (no batteries required). It fades quickly but, over time, it lasts longer and longer, and the man is inspired to translate the joy of the dreams into

a livable experience. He eventually dismantles a Happy Product and uses the parts to create a similar goggle-like "Bliss Product." When the man puts it on, he sees a vibrant, paradisiacal utopia of color and sunshine instead of the bleak achromatic cityscape. Ecstatic, he markets his invention and quickly skyrockets into corporate fame and power. However, after the initial buzz of his invention wears off, the man removes his own Bliss goggles and realizes that he is missing the spark that kindled his dreams. He ends up contributing to the very system that he set out to disrupt. The final scene shows children laughing on a merry-go-round under the ominous, Big Brother-like gaze of billboards promoting Bliss Product—a product that the children do not need.

For the children at play, there is no need for a device to mediate between them and a better life, since their bodies have a direct link to happiness through play or, more precisely, those bodies at play are the happiness. The children find in play what the adult world is sorely missing, i.e., a freedom of movement that contributes to both a dynamic mind and body. The ability to move is fundamental to play and, consequently, to one's ability to practice utopian thinking. Brown warns, "If you don't understand and appreciate human movement, you won't really understand yourself or play" (84). Like Brown, philosopher Maxine Sheets-Johnstone emphasizes the connection between movement and play by defining play as "a kinetic happening in which the sheer exuberance of movement dominates and in which a certain freedom of movement obtains" (322). She encourages us to understand movement not as a change in position, but as an *experience* that combines a complex and dynamic set of forces and feelings, and thus provides the true locus for understanding life. Again, like Brown, Sheets-Johnstone links freedom to move, freedom of enjoyment, freedom of spontaneity, and freedom of thought to play. With movement comes the discovery of the world and a better understanding of it. The children are whirling on the merry-go-round with their hands outstretched, laughing in unfettered bliss and possibility, while the adults are passively shuttled from home to work as they stare vacantly into space. Happy Product has trained consumers to associate happiness with something outside themselves and separate from their own lived experience. Somewhere between youth and adulthood, the body stopped being an innate source of happiness.

The contrast between the spontaneous movement on the playground and the mechanical routine of the adult world reflects our common priorities when it comes to body and mind. The children inhabit the lowest space in the city, and the man's rise to company CEO puts him at the highest. However, creating such a division contributes to the man's loss of his inner spark. Forgoing play for corporate success has not heightened his creativity and happiness or made the world a better place; it

has done the opposite. To recover the utopian imagination—a mind activity—the body must be re-established as a significant part of life and exercised as much as the intellect. In *The Corporeal Turn*, Sheets-Johnstone argues that thinking is not just something a mind does. To her, the moving body is a conduit for understanding the world as well as the force that creates the world as it moves. This "thinking in movement" is tied to "an evolving, changing situation" in which our understanding of the world dynamically adjusts to our movement within that world. Central to this experience is a "kinetic bodily logos": "a body that, in thinking in movement, 'knows what to do'" (33). Brown also links movement to a thinking body, arguing that the free, spontaneous, unstructured movement of play brings the individual in contact with the world as "a way of *knowing*" (italics in original, 84). The kinetic bodily logos is a natural, built-in function of the moving body, and it gives us the "kinetically dynamic possibilities" that make each person unique, e.g., a person is able to run faster than others (55). If play is cast aside at adulthood, we lose touch with the growth inherent in free-spirited movement, and we can lose perspective of our own uniqueness (61). *More* shows this culmination of a world without play and the loss of dynamic difference that comes with it. If play and movement may lead to understanding and knowing, then it is unsurprising that the city is a monotony of vacant stares and depressed faces.

Happy Product and Bliss Product eradicate the need for play through movement and, consequently, suffocate emotion and desire, making it more difficult to understand and express genuine feelings. According to Sheets-Johnstone, separating emotion from movement leads to "an impoverished understanding of emotion," and we sacrifice that sensation that could be called "aliveness" (214). As we move, think, and experience the world as animate beings, we also arouse and excite our emotions. Happy Product fails because it tries to simulate the experience of emotion without the concurrent experience of movement. With a generic yellow smiley face as a logo, Happy Product is a one-size-fits-all replacement for lived experience that does not require an active contribution from the user. The marketing pitch "Get Happy" hangs over the city as an insidious demand to deny reality and passively accept a mass produced emotion, at first through Happy Product, and later through the only nominally different Bliss Product. Both products manipulate users' perceptions of a Band-Aid reality with a more pleasing illusion. After the man invents Bliss Product and becomes the company's new boss, he is seen sternly urging his employees to work harder but, when viewed through the lens of Bliss Product, he appears to be waving and smiling. When the man takes off the Bliss Product, he briefly exhibits a contented smile, a sign that he too subscribes to a modified illusion of community, togetherness and, fittingly,

bliss, while his actions only perpetuate the workers' misery.

So why does the man try to understand his inner desires and improve the world by creating yet another product? Stromberg's study *Caught in Play* provides some insight into misdirected pursuits of happiness and self-discovery. At the heart of his study is the conviction that "in contemporary society some of our most important commitments and desires are sustained not in collective rituals but rather in activities of play, recreation, and leisure" (161-62). He believes that the impact of entertainment on people's lives has serious implications for how they view themselves, how they behave, how they can be liberated through play, and how they become immersed to the point of losing their freedom. Sutton-Smith would agree, calling play "a most malleable cultural form" that can be easily incorporated into propaganda and other persuasive rhetoric, particularly when play is believed to be innocuous ("Rhetorics of Play" 283). According to Stromberg, a powerful utopian image that we pursue through play is the "perfected versions of ourselves"—a desire that leads us to look for experiences that will "transform us into the beings we sense we could and should be" (15). In exploring entertainment's effects on self-identity, Stromberg identifies what he calls the "flexible self," which is made up of those ideas that shape our perceptions and expectations and, therefore, our actions. There is the unique and unalterable individual who we believe ourselves to be, and the "malleable self" that is capable of being lost in play and entertainment, but risks being controlled by its "craving for stimulation" (165). It is Stromberg's contention that our culture is working to develop a self that pursues the "highs" of entertainment at the expense of more meaningful commitments (165). Many institutions exist to "suggest" solutions to personal dilemmas and feelings of discontentment, and to prompt us toward a specific path of self-discovery, like Happy Product. Self-discovery becomes wound up in an image or object outside ourselves and our own history, e.g., a video game, a baseball bat, a Bliss Product.

The lure of such entertainment is that it offers what is missing, which in *More* is the emotional and physical satisfaction of play. Stromberg identifies play moments as experiences where one "glimpses—and feels—life as it should be" (173). Problems arise when the "ecstatic moments" sought are not connected to one's lived experiences (173) or to the kinetic bodily logos that helps define our uniqueness. When looking for the same satisfaction felt in play without actually going out to play, we become open to suggestion by outside forces. This is why the man's solution is to perpetuate the unsatisfying Happy Product with the equally doomed Bliss Product. Happiness and products have become intertwined in his understanding of what defines a better life. Both offer equally static solutions that

maintain the mind unengaged and the body stationary. Even though the man's desire is revolutionary, his solution is mundane. He therefore becomes even more enmeshed in the corporate system, and much removed from the memory of play and the freedom it offers. The man ultimately exchanges one chair for another as he loses himself to the system.

The sadness of the film's ending is intensified by the man's failure to follow what seems a simple solution: to embrace the spirit of play, to delight in the body's own dynamic potential, and to explore the wonders of one's own inner self. It proves too difficult to overcome the boundaries between the childhood world of the body at play and the adult world of passive consumption. This is a nightmarish extension of the misperception that children play and adults do not. Consumers simply sit and tap into the Happy Product experience, thus mediating the kinetic bodily logos and the knowledge gained about the world and themselves through play and physical movement. The man's entanglement in the system and his inability to disrupt it shows the consequences of dismissing the natural desire to improve our world by exploring alternatives. Bliss Product fails to disrupt the system in a meaningful way. By the film's end, the system remains impervious, upheld not by any devious Big Brother or Benefactor, but by the man's own belief of manufactured happiness. Play is "use it or lose it"—without it, the mind and body loose the flexibility and adaptability needed to engage the utopian imagination and to see how difference might be possible.

Sutton-Smith has pointedly asked, "What frightens us about child's play?" ("Rhetorics of Play" 286). In particular, he wonders why we insist on adhering to a rhetoric of progress and the dichotomy between children's play as preparation for adulthood and the supposedly very different "leisure" of adult life (280). It is possible that we fear that play will reveal longings that run contrary to accepted social expectations; the less we play and the more we let outside forces dictate the self for us, the less likely we are to draw on the utopian imagination and visualize difference. If play is to be the powerful agent for transformation and utopian thinking that it can be, we must think beyond play as just fun and games. Play *is* fun and games, but it is also a powerful way to explore the desires and possibilities that are within us.

Ultimately, the film contrasts the physical and dynamic nature of play with the stagnant and unwavering cycle of adult consumption, and it asks us to consider what it *genuinely* means to be alive and happy. Too often the idea of happiness is intertwined with entertainment, a fact that asks us to relinquish our imagination. But happiness may also be a spark of revolution, or a discontent that leads us to dream of something better, which is possible despite all the obstacles around us.

Play propels us dynamically and successfully through life, not just reminding us who we are, but who we can be. It is an undeniably utopian activity that, in turn, makes the utopian imagination possible.

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