

What is Utopia?

A. Dictionary definition (Oxford English Dictionary):

From the ancient Greek: *οὐ* not + *τόπος* place.

1.
 - a. An imaginary island in Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), presented by the narrator as having a perfect social, legal, and political system
 - b. Any imaginary or mythical place (without implication of perfection, imagined as existing in some remote location on earth. (Obsolete).
2.
 - a. An imagined or hypothetical place, system, or state of existence in which everything is perfect, esp. in respect of social structure, laws, and politics.
 - b. A real place which is perceived or imagined as perfect.
3.
 - a. A written work (now exp. A fictional narrative) about an ideal society, place, or state of existence.
4.
 - a. A plan for or vision of an ideal society, place, or state of existence, *esp.* one that is impossible to realize; a fantasy, a dream.

B. But really, what is Utopia?

1. The above definitions, as usually is the case with dictionary definitions, raise more questions than answers. However, two things are clear from the above definitions:
 - a. Utopia has to do with a place
 - b. Utopia has to do with politics and society.
 - c. Utopia is a literary or narrative genre.
2. Utopia is a political problem.
 - a. Anti-utopians: human frailty
 - b. Utopians: human possibility
3. Utopia has to do with difference. Utopianism aims at imagining systems radically different from the ones we live in.
4. Utopia therefore is a question of representation: of the possibility of representing something which doesn't exist. This takes us from the realm of politics to the realm of narrative, literature, and art.
5. Utopia, then, is also a genre. Fredric Jameson, in *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, argues (along with Darko Suvin), that Utopia is a socio-economic sub-genre of Sci Fi (xiv).
 - a. Utopian Sci Fi, then, like Brechtian theatre, aims to produce *estrangement*: to make that which we find common strange and alien.

- b. The Utopian text is old: perhaps it goes back to Plato's *Republic*. But as a literary genre it goes back to Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516). Two related genres, the historical novel, and Science Fiction, show up a little later in history: the latter with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and H.G. Well's *The Time Machine* (1895).
- 6. Utopia, however, is also an impulse. (More on this below).

C. Distinguishing between the Utopian (literary/narrative) form and the Utopian wish.

1. Fredric Jameson argues that we should distinguish between Utopian form and the Utopian wish: "between the written text or genre and something like a Utopian impulse detectable in daily life and its practices by a specialized... interpretative method" (1).
2. Utopian Impulse (Wish):
 - a. In *The Principle of Hope*, philosopher Ernst Bloch proposed that there exists a Utopian impulse governing all things oriented towards the future in our life and culture: from games to medicine, from myths to architecture, from furniture and clothing to jokes.
 - b. Other philosophers, such as Herbert Marcuse, argue that even our childhood and the memories of happiness we associate with our childhood reflect traces of a Utopian gratification that provide a "standing reserve" of political utopian energy.
 - c. Bloch's idea of the Utopian impulse that suffuses everyday practices, objects, and narratives is one that sees this impulse as implied and concealed: "Here we have rather to do with an allegorical process in which various Utopian figures seep into the daily life of things and people and afford an incremental, and often unconscious, bonus of pleasure" (Jameson 5).
3. Jameson proposes that, when interpreting the Utopian impulse of any object or practice or text, we should apply an **allegorical** key or code. Remember, a metaphor is an instance in which a phrase makes an implicit comparison between one thing and another. An example of a metaphor is: "Love is a rose." If we untangle this metaphor, what we find is that what is meant by it is that love is attractive (the beauty of the rose), but also can hurt us (the spines of the rose). Allegory, meanwhile, is not symbolic in the same way that metaphor is. It doesn't simply explain a concept like love. Rather, allegory is something like the hidden meaning that goes beyond the explicit meaning of the written text (the plot of a novel or film). Allegory is the larger message or idea behind the written text. Jameson therefore proposes the following allegorical interpretative key for untangling the Utopian dimension of everyday objects, things, texts, etc. So if we focus on literary texts:
 - a. First level. The explicit text
 - b. Second level. The representation of the body
 - c. Third level. The representation of temporality (moral).
 - d. Fourth level. The representation of the collective (anagogical).

