

Framing and Freeing: Utopias of the Female Body

Lynda Nead

The standard definition of utopia is in two parts: it is at once 'no place' and also the imagined location of the good society.* Utopian fiction and non-fiction frequently tell the story of the traveller who moves from the flawed world of the present to a different region, geographically separate and remote, where the problems and struggles of our everyday lives are resolved.¹ It is in this sense of the mapping of utopia in terms of space and place, that one can begin to speak of utopias of the female body. In particular, I want to propose a connection between the vision of utopia as a sealed and separate place with an idealisation of the female body which has been pervasive within Western art and aesthetics.

The best place to begin this exploration of utopias and the female body is with the geography of Thomas More's *Utopia* (fig. 1, first published 1516). More begins his account of the society and laws of Utopia with a description of the land itself. Utopia is

an island (not surprisingly, it is approximately the size of England). It is crescent-shaped, like a new moon, and between the two horns of the crescent, which are some miles apart, the sea enters and spreads into a broad bay. In the bay itself, the water is calm, smooth and sheltered and the whole inner coast is one great harbour. This contrasts with the outer coast of the island which is: 'rugged by nature, and so well fortified that a few defenders could beat off the attack of a strong force'.² The entrance into the bay of Utopia is very dangerous, for the waters are littered with natural and man-made obstacles. There are submerged rocks which make the waters treacherous to navigate and in the middle of the channel a fortified tower stands on the one rock that rises above the surface of the water. The geography of Utopia seems to have been designed by nature and by artifice to keep out intruders; equally, it fulfils the function of keeping in the Utopians. This dual function of exclusion and containment is focussed on the mouth of the bay, which is the only point where entrance or exit is possible, and then only at great risk. The fortified boundaries of Utopia recall the flawed condition of the commonwealth itself – attractive in some respects, but highly unattractive in others, with elaborate constraints imposed on its citizens and with clear restrictions on personal freedom.

There is one more point about the geography of Utopia which is relevant here. The land, it seems, was not always an island. Utopus, who conquered the country and gave it his name and who 'brought its rude, uncouth inhabitants to such a high level of culture and humanity that they now excel in that regard almost every other people',³ also changed its geography. After conquering the natives, Utopus promptly dug a channel where the land joined the continent and thus caused the sea to flow around the country. To civilise the land, to create Utopia, the king had first to separate the land from the continent and to render it complete, entire and bounded.

So, Utopia is an island with a rough, impenetrable outer coast line and with one crucial point of access and outlet, which is the treacherous entrance to the bay and its smooth, calm waters within.

There is a striking analogy between the island of Utopia and a particular utopian representation of the female body. Although the association of a country or state with a woman's body is a common enough trope within Western political and cultural discourses, the analogy goes beyond that allegorical one. The Western tradition of the female nude is traditionally articulated in terms of the transformation from the actual (the individual body with its inevitable imperfections) to the ideal (the nude). It is the move from a perception of unformed, corporeal matter to the

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Figure 1. *The Island of Utopia*, from Thomas More, *Utopia* (Louvain, 1516).

assertion of unity and control. It is this process of transfiguration which renders the nude the perfect subject for the work of art. As Kenneth Clark states in his book *The Nude*: 'the nude remains the most complete example of the transmutation of matter into form.'⁴ But the resolution of matter and form cannot easily be accomplished in the representation of the *female* body. Woman is both *mater* (mother) and *materia* (matter), biologically determined and potentially wayward. Now, if art is defined as the conversion of matter into form, then imagine how much greater the triumph for art if it is the female body that is thus transformed. Pure nature, transmuted, through the forms of art, into pure culture. The female nude, then, is not simply one subject among others, one form among many, it is *the* subject, *the* form.

The question of containment and boundaries is thus a critical one in representations of the female body. The integrity of the female figure is guaranteed by the impenetrability of its framing contours; the boundaries of the female form have to seem inviolate for the image to offer the possibility of an undisturbing aesthetic experience. The artist who paints or sculpts a female nude performs a similar act of transformation to that of King Utopus. Both take uncivilised matter (the natives / the female body) which is subdued and regulated by enforcing the coastline / outline. Utopia is created, but don't forget the entrance to the bay and its treacherous point of transition between inside and outside.

This relationship between boundaries and the female body is continually reformulated within the Western high art tradition. Take this allegorical painting of the virtue *Chastity* by the sixteenth-century Italian painter, Giovanni Battista Moroni (fig. 2). The allegorical figure holds a sieve on her lap which is the symbol of her purity and inviolability. The sieve is filled with water and yet no liquid runs out, for Chastity is watertight; it is impenetrable and allows no leakage. The miraculous water-filled sieve is a

metaphor for the ideal, hermetically-sealed female body. The boundary has been made absolutely inviolate, a kind of armour between the inside of the body and the outside. Of course, there is something worrying and incomplete about the sieve as a figure for the virtuous woman. Sieves may hold on to purity and dispel the impure; or, they may retain the impure and relinquish the pure substance. In either case, if nothing is allowed in or out, then the female body remains a disturbing container for both the ideal *and* the polluted. There is an ambiguity here which is reminiscent of the entrance to the bay of Utopia. Keeping in or keeping out? The dual function recalls the original uncivilised condition of the inhabitants of Utopia and of the female sexual body and the necessity to subdue and regulate before the ideal can be achieved.

Woman is able to stand as an allegory of Chastity by displacing the worrying connotations of yielding and porous skin, or oozing gaps and orifices onto the clear outline and metallic surface of the sieve. But there are other ways in which this Utopian desire for clear boundaries and definitions can be satisfied. The female body can be re-formed, its surfaces reinforced and hardened by bodybuilding (fig. 3). Lisa Lyon won the first World Women's Bodybuilding Championship in 1979. About a year later, she met the photographer Robert Mapplethorpe and posed for a series of pictures which were published in a book called *Lady: Lisa Lyon* in 1983. Now bodybuilding is a mixed blessing for feminism. On the one hand, it seems to offer a certain kind of liberation, a way for women to develop their muscularity and physical strength. But on the other hand, this revised femininity seems simply to exchange one repressive Utopia for another; one body beautiful for another, possibly racier, image of woman which can easily be absorbed within a patriarchal repertoire of feminine stereotypes. What is interesting in the present context, however, is the way in which both Lyon's bodybuilding and



Figure 2. Giovanni Battista Moroni, *Chastity*, mid-to-late 1550s. National Gallery, London.



Figure 3. Robert Mapplethorpe, 'Lisa Lyon', from *Lady: Lisa Lyon* (New York: Viking Press, 1983).

Mapplethorpe's photographic techniques are discussed in terms of bringing the female body under control. Both Lyon and Mapplethorpe are referred to in the book as classical sculptors, in their search for a physical and aesthetic ideal: 'his eye for a body [is] that of a classical sculptor' and she is 'a sculptor whose raw material was her own body'.⁵ The sculptor metaphor is one which emphasises the projection of surfaces, the building and moulding of form. Together, Lyon and Mapplethorpe turn the raw material of the female body into art.

Now in talking about these images of the female body in relation to Utopias, I am not referring to the projection of models of Utopian societies but more to the presentation of a Utopian sensibility. Art, in this case, offers the image of something better, a means of escape from the inadequacies of society. Through the visualisation of the female body in terms of order, symmetry, harmony and contemplation, art constructs its own sealed world, cut off from the continent of the female sexual body and female desire.

Nowhere is this Utopian drive better demonstrated than in Kenneth Clark's *The Nude*, which was first published in 1956 and is currently sold in the eighth edition of a Penguin paperback. The book is subtitled 'A Study of Ideal Art' and the nature of this ideal is neatly contained in the following example from the book. Clark compares two early representations of the female nude: a prehistoric figure of a woman (fig. 4) and a later, Cycladic doll (fig. 5). These he respectively designates Vegetable and Crystalline Venus. In the first example, the body is described as lumpy and protruding, but in the second image, 'the unruly human body has undergone a geometrical discipline'.⁶ This is the important point; the female body has undergone a process of containment: of holding in and keeping out. In the Cycladic figure the contour, the frame of the body has been sharpened, thus hardening the distinction between inside and outside, between figure and ground, between the subject and the space it is not.

One of the key features of a Utopia is the desire for something which our day-to-day lives don't provide and the awareness of this inadequacy has to be present for the escape to be effective. Thomas More's 'rude and uncouth' natives haunt the civilised society of his utopia and, similarly, the lumpy, wayward female body is only ever momentarily controlled by the disciplines of art; its image is never entirely absent. In looking at Kenneth Clark's idealising project, it is possible to be more historically specific about the undesirable state from which the connoisseur is seek-

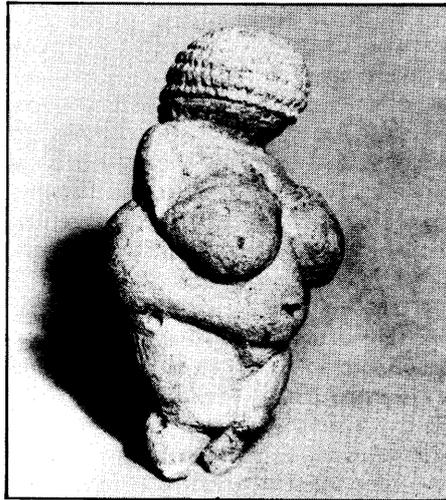


Figure 4. Prehistoric figure of a woman (*The Willendorf Venus*), 21,000 BC. Vienna Natural History Museum.

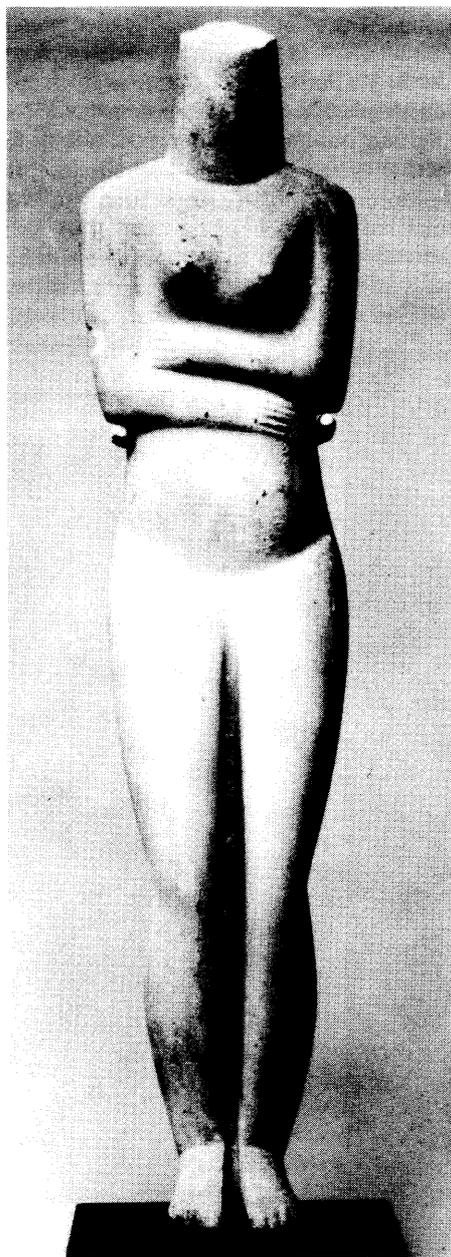


Figure 5. Cycladic marble doll, 2,500-1,100 BC. British Museum, London.

ing to escape. In an essay on the Hollywood musical called 'Entertainment and Utopia', Richard Dyer discusses the relationship between narrative sequences and musical numbers in establishing the utopian relationship of social inadequacy and escape. He states:

To be effective, the utopian sensibility has to take off from the real experiences of the audience. Yet to do this, to draw attention to the gap between what is and what could be, is, ideologically speaking, playing with fire. What musicals have to do, then ... is to work through these contradictions at all levels, in such a way as to 'manage' them, to make them seem to disappear. They don't always succeed.⁷

Amongst the examples Dyer discusses is *The Gold Diggers of 1933*, in which the specific social problems of scarcity, depression, etc., are momentarily resolved in the abundance and extravagance of the musical numbers. I refer to this work because I think that it offers an interesting model for understanding the nature of Clark's utopian vision. In her aptly-named study of women in post-War Britain, *Only Halfway to Paradise* (1980), Elizabeth Wilson discusses the changing boundaries of sexuality between 1945 and 1968. She summarises the general tendency of the period as one of 'sexual enlightenment'.⁸ The reports published by investigators such as Kinsey (1948 and 1953) and Masters and Johnson (1966) emphasised woman's right to sexual satisfaction and, whilst this pleasure was still firmly located within the marital relationship, an image of active, desiring and responsible female sexuality was nevertheless put in place. At the risk of being a little reductive about this, it does seem reasonable to suggest that one of the social inadequacies from which Clark may have been wishing to escape into his Utopia of regulated female bodies was precisely the new, post-War definition of female sexuality. And, of course, the fantasy isn't simply Lord Clark's, but that of a particular section of society which constitutes the audience for high culture and the readership of his book.

But, as Dyer points out, Utopias play with fire and for Clark, there is the constant danger of the female nude returning to its former, pre-utopian state. Considering Georges Rouault's series of drawings of prostitutes (fig. 6), he states:

All those delicate feelings which flow together in our joy at the sight of an idealised human body ... are shattered and profaned ... from the point of view of form, all that was

realised in the nude in its first creation, the sense of healthy structure, the clear geometric shapes and their harmonious disposition has been rejected in favour of lumps of matter, swollen and inert.⁹

What exactly has happened here? The ideals of the nude – structure, geometry, harmony – have given way to unhealthy, unformed lumps of matter. The female nude is meant to transcend the marks of individualised corporeality in a unified formal language, and when this fails, both the image of the body and the feelings of the viewer are profaned, or violated.

And yet it is precisely this notion of the unbounded and fluid female body that has also been offered as an alternative Utopia – one in which, to use More's imagery, the civilised Utopians regain their former, uncouth state and in which the island is no longer separated and cut off from the continent. In this alternative utopia the boundaries between inside and outside are dissolved. In this case, it is the social inadequacies of containment and regulation which are displaced by an aesthetic of liberation and freedom from constraint. The opposition is clearly exhibited in Bakhtin's frequently quoted evocation of the carnival in *Rabelais and His World*, in which he contrasts the classical canons of Renaissance aesthetics and the grotesque realism of the Middle Ages:

Contrary to modern canons, the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits. The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world.¹⁰

So, as we suspected all along, it is the anal/vaginal entrance to the bay which is the key to Utopia. Bakhtin's account has more to do with nostalgia than Utopia (although the two categories are clearly interrelated), but it is, nevertheless, almost an exact reversal of Kenneth Clark's value system. Bring back the lumps and protuberances; this is an escape from the smooth contours of the Cycladic doll and a celebration of the fecundity of the Willendorf Venus. For the female body is undoubtedly central to Bakhtin's definition of the grotesque body – the body in process, liberated from boundaries and modern aesthetics.

This image of an open, unfinished female body is also celebrated in more recent French feminist writing. In this, frequently utopian writing, emphasis is laid on those substances which transgress the boundaries of the body – the mother's milk, tears, urine, etc. In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva defines abjection as that which 'does not respect borders, positions, rules. The inbetween, the ambiguous, the composite'.¹¹ For Kristeva, the object is on the side of the feminine, and the bodily state which she likens to abjection is pregnancy; for in the condition of parturition, the maternal body stands at the borderline of categories and dissolves the socially-constructed margins of identity and the distinctions between life and death, self and other.

In starting with the topography of Thomas More's island of



Figure 6. Georges Rouault, *A Prostitute*, c. 1904. Bakwin Collection, New York.

Utopia, I have discussed an ideal of the female body which is grounded in the containment and framing of the female sexual body. But, as with all Utopias, this image carries within it the means of its own destruction, for the female body constantly threatens to break free from its boundaries and to go beyond the protocols and contours of art. And it is precisely this image of a liberated, open and unfinished female body which has been celebrated by some recent feminist writers.

The oppressions of the aesthetics of containment are obvious enough, but it is also unlikely that feminist utopian aesthetics are best suited for exploring and expressing the complexities of sexual differences and identities. Within feminist cultural politics, the balance between critique and speculation has always been a particularly difficult one to define. Critique has been seen to operate at the expense of the positing of new

alternatives and speculation has been regarded as an avoidance of the pragmatics of the present.¹² But if feminism is to engage in utopian reflection, then the future which we imagine must be one of change and process rather than a state of final, fixed perfection. Similarly, in transforming attitudes towards, and representations of, the female body, utopia could simply be the state which enables the projection of the female body freed from any kind of aesthetic of perfection, offering instead the representation of difference: of age, race, size, physical ability and health.

Notes

- 1 For discussion of this aspect of utopian writing, see Krishnan Kumar, *Utopianism*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991.
- 2 Thomas More, *Utopia* (1516), George M. Logan and Robert M. Adams, eds., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 43.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study of Ideal Art*, London: John Murray, 1956, p. 23.
- 5 Bruce Chatwin, 'An Eye and Some Body', in *Lady: Lisa Lyon*, New York: Viking Press, 1983, pp. 9, 11.
- 6 Clark, *op. cit.*, p. 64.
- 7 Richard Dyer, 'Entertainment and Utopia', in Rick Altman, ed., *Genre: The Musical. A Reader*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981, p. 185.
- 8 Elizabeth Wilson, *Only Halfway to Paradise: Women in Post-war Britain 1945-1968*, London and New York: Tavistock, 1980, p. 86.
- 9 Clark, *op. cit.*, p. 333.
- 10 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Hélène Iswolsky, Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1968, p. 26.
- 11 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez, New York: Columbia University Press, 1982, p. 4.
- 12 For a useful summary of debates on feminism and utopia in relation to the work of Luce Irigaray, see Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine*, London, Routledge, 1991, pp. 18-25.