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**THE AESTHETICS OF UTOPIA:  
CREATION, CREATIVITY AND A CRITICAL THEORY OF  
DESIGN**

*Thesis Eleven*

by

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## **THE AESTHETICS OF UTOPIA:**

### **CREATION, CREATIVITY AND A CRITICAL THEORY OF DESIGN**

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#### **Abstract**

This article combines critical, visual and aesthetic theory to argue that the very act of design is a Utopian process. Crucially, the Utopian dimension is not simply a matter of subject matter or utility. Rather, it lies in the act of formal arrangement and composition, and therefore can apply to visual texts with no apparent subject matter at all. The argument is grounded in Ernst Bloch's critical theory of Utopia, which sees Utopia as a process rather than a destination. It is illustrated with a case study of Navajo weaving, in tandem with an analysis of Navajo creation mythology. It concludes by arguing that we need to go beyond creation theory to a critical theory of creativity: Utopia is not something that we can delegate either to nature or to the supernatural, because as Bloch declares in *The Spirit of Utopia*, 'Life has been put into our hands.'

#### **Keywords**

Utopia, aesthetics, Bloch, Navajo, creativity, design, critical theory

According to Plato: ‘Art is a form of play, not to be taken seriously’ (Plato, 2000). But Plato was wrong, because aesthetics, creativity and design both illuminate and constitute the path to Utopia.

We will begin with the concept and definition of Utopia before looking in greater depth at its various types and cultural manifestations. This in turn will lead us to a particular focus on Ernst Bloch and the idea that Utopia is manifest in visual and popular culture. The relevant concepts of Bloch’s philosophy will be explained, followed by our case study of the interrelationship between Navajo culture, theology and design as articulated both in the practice of weaving (*diyogi*) and in the theology of the Navajo creation myth, the *Diné Bahane*. It is a confluence that creates order out of disorder and meaning out of meaninglessness, and expressed by the Navajo concept of *hózhó*. Yet it is an argument that at the same time goes beyond Bloch and the Navajo: We will see that not only do the arts serve as *representations* of possible Utopias, but that creativity and design are also Utopian *processes* in themselves; formal processes that reveal both the need for and the practice of constructing a better world than the one that we inherit. Weaving is therefore both an act and a metaphor. The argument is expanded with reference to Jungian archetypes, the concept of *Homo Aestheticus*, and Bloch’s atheistic Christianity. It contends that the need to create beauty beyond function, order out of disorder, and to improve upon the world as we find it is common across cultures in both time and space. In so doing it seeks to bring together seemingly diverse approaches and case studies to elucidate our common humanity.

## **DEFINING UTOPIA**

Utopia is a word famously first used by Sir Thomas More as the name of his ideal, imaginary island in his seminal *Utopia* of 1516. Here, Utopians enjoyed a comprehensive welfare state in which the concept of private property did not exist. Everyone enjoyed a six-

hour working day and had so little concern for gold that they used it for making chamber pots. There was religious toleration, and it all amounted, declared More, to ‘the most civilized nation in the world’ (More 1965: 69-70). Since the publication of More’s *Utopia*, the word has come to stand for *all* ideal places and not just this one particular imaginary island. The fact that Utopia translates literally as ‘Noplace’ (More: 1965: 8) is generally overlooked in its application to ideal communities both actual and imaginary. In this way, the Utopian genre stretches well beyond Sir Thomas More –both to his past and to his future.

The Garden of Eden, as described in both the Old Testament and the Torah, could well be the original Utopia. Here, it is widely supposed, Adam, the first man, and his partner Eve enjoyed paradise before earthly temptation got in the way. God, according to Genesis, had built a garden east of Eden: ‘And out of the ground made the Lord God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food’ (Genesis: 2, 9). Adam and Eve were invited to take naked pleasure in the garden and all it offered –except for a certain ‘forbidden fruit.’ They ended up eating it, of course, and God expelled them, in their shame, from Eden: ‘...cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life’ (Genesis: 3, 17). So, paradise was lost, and all mankind suffered for ever more. This is, of course, a somewhat partial and negative interpretation of the text –a matter to which we shall return. For the time being, though, this popular interpretation does at least serve to underline the deep-rooted significance of the Utopian myth to Abrahamic culture.

## **TYPES OF UTOPIA**

From Eden to the present day, there has been no shortage of Utopian writing and even experimentation in western culture. Imagined Utopias, mostly of the literary sort, have been written, read and anthologized ever since. They range from the authoritarian to the libertarian, from the politically earnest to the distinctly off-the-wall. Meanwhile, there have

been various attempts at lived rather than simply imagined Utopias, such as those at Ephrata and Harmonie in 18<sup>th</sup> century Pennsylvania.<sup>1</sup>

There are obvious problems with both types of Utopia. First, the speculative, literary variety typically fails to link imagination with the practical business of living (although it will be argued later that this is not inevitably an obstacle to Utopian thought). Second, the many and various imaginings of Utopia are frequently incompatible –if not clearly opposed. Utopia for one may be dystopia for another, especially as so many are imagined from the interested perspective of the writer and not necessarily from behind abstract and equitable notions of social justice. They are frequently prescriptive and some are well-intended but teleological – justifying the practical means in pursuit of a pre-figured notion of the ‘good life’. This can be especially dangerous as that vision may not be universally shared, and also because history – both ancient and modern- is littered with examples of nefarious acts ‘justified’ in pursuit of some greater, fundamental and presumed good.

Third, history demonstrates that ‘lived’ Utopias rarely worked as intended in the long term. A combination of practical reasons were at work, often including the built-in obsolescence achieved through sexual abstinence (something of a *leitmotif* in Utopian religious communities), rival prophets and a fair smattering of crankiness. But more than that, so many of history’s ‘ideal’ communities failed to be truly Utopian in that they existed only in anticipation of, and in preparation for, a better world to come –and so were not intrinsically Utopian for their own sake in the present. Finally, and crucially for us, neither imagined nor lived Utopias were fundamentally concerned with the theory or ontology of Utopia, thus leaving a curious hole in an ideal society where moral reasoning and theories of social justice ought to be. This opens the ground for a critical and theoretical turn to this investigation, which will thus set the stage for aesthetics and a re-union of theory and practice.<sup>2</sup>

As Darren Webb observed in an article for *Politics*, Utopian literature today exists ‘in abundance’ (Webb 2008: 202). Much of this literature is, of course, political; analytical rather than fictional or imaginative. But even within the political genre, there is much difference to be observed. Webb therefore proposes a: ‘taxonomy of modes of hoping’ (Webb 2008: 197), in which he suggests ‘estimative’, ‘resolute’, ‘patient’, ‘critical’ and ‘transformative’ as distinct categories of hope (Webb 2008: 203-204). He avers that hope still has a necessary place in our ‘collective emotional orientation’, but concludes that what we need is not more or better Utopias being written, nor even a revisiting or re-evaluation of the Utopias of the past. What we require, he argues, is a reconstitution of the very institutions of social life, ‘so that they once again foster critical and transformative hope’ (Webb 2008: 202). However, my analysis, while grounded in the ‘critical’ mode of Utopianism identified by Webb, argues that such Utopianism is already evident in the act of creativity, and that the search for Utopia is therefore already a work in process and not just a destination. Our analysis will continue, therefore, under the ‘critical’ thinking of Ernst Bloch.

## **ERNST BLOCH**

Ernst Bloch is both our most important and difficult Utopian thinker. He is in equal measure impossible and indispensable. A Marxist expressionist on the edge of metaphysics, he persuades us that Utopia -the prospect of a real and better world that is yet to come- is already encoded in our art, literature and popular culture. Here we see life as it *ought* to be – as a shining and radical alternative to the way in which the world currently *is*.

Even his greatest supporters, however, concede that Bloch is very difficult to understand. Vincent Geoghegan, for example, holds that Bloch’s three volume *The Principle of Hope* is, at best, ‘intimidating’ (Geoghegan 1996: 2). Indeed, it is: ‘studded with opaque metaphor, untranslatable puns, obscure neologisms and overblown rhetoric.’ (Geoghegan,

1996: 2) These are not simply problems of translation. According to J.K. Dickinson, Bloch's German style is:

interlaced with a sometimes baroque and completely unabashed complexity; prose poetry of considerable beauty combined with what at times seems a turgid verbosity, and all delivered with a self-assurance which, too easily felt as dogmatic self-righteousness, can repel or intimidate a reader. (Dickinson 1996: 8)<sup>3</sup>

Jack Zipes, the English translator of *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature* admitted: 'it is sometimes impossible to understand Bloch, even when one has a firm command of German' (Zipes: 1988b: ix). Ronald Aronson went further, declaring: 'much of the book's second and third volumes is not only a torture to read, it is impossible to follow' (Aronson 1991).<sup>4</sup> Maybe this is, as Geoghegan suspects, partly a product of Bloch's bold attempt 'to encompass the whole of reality, from the atom to the cosmos...' (Geoghegan 1996: 3). On the other hand, Aronson wondered aloud whether *The Principle of Hope* was deliberately written to be 'not understood' (Aronson 1991; Geoghegan 1996: 44).

Notwithstanding, Bloch believed that cultural texts, from the high and deliberate to the popular and unaware, contained 'preserved meanings' that served to criticize existing social conditions. These preserved meanings were usually unconsciously inserted into the texts by means of *überschuss* (over-shoot), in which they ended up revealing far more than the author had originally intended. These meanings were frequently Utopian, holding up images of a better world that was yet to be accomplished. In this way, painting, opera and literature, for example, were 'wishful landscapes' rather than literal or documentary accounts of the times in which they were created (Bloch 1986: 794-838). For example, Bloch wrote that Pieter Bruegel's 'The Land of Cockaigne' (1567, figure 1) was painted:

exactly as the poor folk always dreamed it would be. As an eternal Sunday, which is one because there is no sign of any treadmill, and nothing beyond what can be drunk, eaten, boiled or roasted is to be found. (Bloch 1986: 813)

Because Bloch's theory was not limited to 'high' or elite culture, he also saw 'wishful images' preserved in popular cultural texts as diverse as circuses, travelling fairs, best-sellers, film, stamp-collecting, pantomime and even the fairy-tale, (Bloch 1986: 339-418) which was a 'castle in the air par excellence' (Bloch 1986: 369). Consequently, Bloch argued that Utopian imaginings of a better world were not limited to the leisured, intellectual class, but that: 'in countless ways, individuals are expressing unfulfilled dreams and aspirations,' and that, as Geoghegan put it, 'in song and dance, paint and plaster, church and theater, Utopia waits'(Geoghegan 1996: 91).

Bloch preferred to concoct his own terms with which to express his philosophical concepts, rather than re-use those more familiar to other people. Typically, Bloch's are hyphenated (often multi-hyphenated) and translatable only with difficulty from the German. Among the most important is *Vor-Schein* (anticipatory illumination). Here, literature, art and popular culture contained the shape of things to come, which helped light the way towards Utopia. Writers and artists were like midwives who helped deliver these ideas into forms that people could see, read or understand (Zipes 1988a: xx). As Bloch put it, 'the tendency and latency of that which has not yet become... needs its activator' (Bloch, 1935).<sup>5</sup> Tendency and latency were therefore key concepts, as were *noch-nicht-bewusst* (the not-yet-conscious) and the *noch-nicht geworden* (the not-yet-become). In *The Principle of Hope*, Bloch showed how this not-yet-conscious was represented in daydreams and wish-landscapes, together with significant religious, scientific, political, and artistic events. The daydreams of the not-yet-conscious, unlike night dreams, took place in the semi-conscious and pointed to real, objective possibilities (Zipes 1988a: xxxii). This was done by anticipatory illumination, found in the cultural heritage of the past and present, and which gave rise to hope for the future. As Bloch put it: 'Anticipatory illumination provides the aesthetic significance of happiness at a distance, concentrated into a frame.'<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, what Marx had described

as the material base of society could, according to Bloch, be transformed by its cultural superstructure (Zipes 1988a: xxxiii). Art, literature and popular culture were able to show what was missing from life as it was now and so provide the inspiration for change in the future.

It was important to use the cultural past to pre-figure the future because of what Bloch called ‘the darkness of the immediately experienced moment.’ By this he meant that we were so un-self-aware in the murk of the present that we needed the inklings seen in the brighter world of the not-yet-conscious to anticipate and work towards Utopia. These presentiments that arise in the not-yet-conscious Bloch called *Ahnung* (Zipes 1988a: xxxii). Bloch explained that this ‘paves the way ahead’ and if productive ‘it will connect itself with the imagination of that which is objectively possible.’ This is a kind of ‘intellectual productivity’ which is ‘*work-forming (werkbildend)*.’ In this way things incubate into ‘that which has not come’ and demonstrate our ‘capacity to go beyond the former barriers of consciousness and to move forward’ (Bloch 1919: 355).<sup>7</sup>

Two further Blochian expressions need to be explained before we can proceed to our case study. First is the *aufrechter Gang* or ‘upright gait.’ By this, Bloch wanted to communicate his belief (and there is clearly an evolutionary metaphor here) that mankind had not yet learned –or been able—to walk completely upright in dignity and oppression-free self-respect. Uprightness, says Bloch, was therefore ‘the proper stature he has not yet achieved’ (Bloch 1971: 168).<sup>8</sup> We needed, he argued, to become more God-like and take our destiny into our own hands (Zipes 1988a: xxvii). The goal of the upright gait was *Heimat* or ‘homeland.’ This was not a physical or even an explicitly future place. Rather, it was a social and spiritual place which mankind had only glimpsed in the ‘not yet’ but to which he would return in the future. As he concluded *The Principle of Hope*: ‘Once he has grasped himself

and established what is his... there arises in the world something which shines into the childhood of all and in which no-one has yet been: home-land (*Heimat*)' (Bloch 1986: 1376).

This has taken us a long way from Plato. Plato, we remember, asserted that art was merely a form of play and not to be taken seriously. Art was, he believed, simply an illusion that provided a poor substitute for the real thing. We can see, then, how radically different is Bloch's belief that:

Stage and story can be either a protective park or a laboratory; sometimes they console or appease, sometimes they incite; they can be a flight from or a pre-figuring of the future. The stage is not an illusion; it can also be an anticipation of what is to come, for in it the resistance of the empirical world is eliminated.<sup>9</sup>

Theory is, of course, a delight in itself, but the article proceeds in the conviction that it is even more illuminating when combined with a case study, each the better to elucidate the other. In this way we take our methodological lead from the likes of Clifford Geertz, whose use of case specific studies such as cockfighting in Bali and ritual sheep stealing in Morocco help lead us to more universal theories of culture and society (Geertz 1973). We can now proceed to apply the critical theory of Utopia advanced thus far to our illustrative case study of Navajo culture, theology and design.

## **THE NAVAJO**

The Navajo provide an excellent case study for our investigation because, as Paul Zolbrod puts it, there is:

a direct relationship between the elements of Navajo poetic tradition and the way Navajos conduct their daily lives. The separateness of art that marks our own culture simply does not apply in Navajo culture... Furthermore, art in general is integrated into the Navajo way to an extent that sometimes seems beyond our comprehension. (Zolbrod 1984: 25)

The Navajo are a Native American nation who live mostly in the four corners region of Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado and Utah. It is thought that the Navajo learned something of weaving from the Puebloan peoples, who had been working with cotton and upright looms

since around 1100 AD. The Navajo owed their skill in wool, however, to the arrival of the Spanish and the introduction Churro sheep. Consequently, scholars date the initial ‘Classic Period’ of Navajo weaving back to 1650, continuing up to 1868 (Blomberg 1988: 1).

In addition to using the colours of natural wool, the Navajo obtained dyes from substances such as indigo and, later, cochineal. They were also famed for unravelling and re-working any commercial cloth that they could obtain (Blomberg 1988: 3). In the transitional period (from 1860 to 1890), they began to change from weaving ‘wearing blankets’ mainly for their own use (figure 2) to making rugs for the non-Navajo market. During this period, chemical dyes became available from England, while vivid pre-dyed yarns –known as Germantowns—were brought in from Pennsylvania. This led to the 19<sup>th</sup> century Navajo style known as the ‘eyedazzler’ (Blomberg 1988: 5). In this transitional period, the Navajo often worked under the influence of commercial minded reservation traders (Blomberg 1988: 6-8). The so-called ‘rug period’ followed from around 1890 and into the 1920s. It is a period of high quality combined with a rediscovery of traditional designs (figure 3). The revival period of the 1920s through to around 1950 coincided with the Great Depression. Received wisdom has it that quality suffered, but some impressive rugs were nevertheless made whatever the state of the market. Two examples illustrated here come from Teec Nos Pos (figure 4) and Red Mesa (figure 5), dated about 1930.

The modern period reaches from the post war era to the present day. This example (figure 6) is in natural colours and comes from Chinle, Arizona, made approximately in 1995 by Kay Bia. Only in recent years has the identity of the individual weaver been recorded, and this is still not a matter of major concern for many purchasers, especially of historical pieces. Attribution has not been a traditional Navajo concern.

## **NAVAJO WEAVING: MATERIALS AND TECHNIQUES**

While the styles and economics of Navajo weaving have evolved since they learned the basics from their Puebloan neighbours, the techniques and materials have changed relatively little since they began weaving in wool in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. And while some labour-saving innovations have been adopted, the basic process remains the same. Indeed, the most highly prized examples made today deliberately maintain the traditional ways.

The seminal source for the details of traditional Navajo weaving is Gladys A. Reichard's 1936 *Navajo Shepherd and Weaver* (Reichard, 1936), which was re-published in 1974 as *Weaving a Navajo Blanket* (Reichard, 1974). Reichard's heavily technical account is based on her experiences living among the Navajo in the 1930s and learning the techniques from the women themselves, and as such remains invaluable. More recent authorities are both more up to date and contain a broader historical sweep. Prominent among these are Kate Kent Peck's *Navajo Weaving: Three Centuries of Change* (Kent, 1985) and Dockstander's *The Song of the Loom: New Traditions in Navajo Weaving* (Dockstander, 1987). The following account draws collectively upon their consensus.

Traditionally yarns are prepared by the weaver from her own sheep. The favoured Churro wool is easier to clean, spin and dye than that of other breeds due to its low lanolin content. Once gathered, the wool has to be cleaned. This can be accomplished by the use of yucca root suds; sometimes the wool is just hand-picked clean and then beaten. More rarely it is simply washed in water (Kent 1985: 33). The cleaned wool then has to be carded (combed) to remove additional impurities and align the fibres. This is typically achieved with lightly spiked brushes or paddles, one held in each hand. This prepares the fibre for spinning. Spinning sees the fibres twisted and transformed into a yarn, originally using a stick and spindle (Kent 1985: 34). The yarn is then ready for dyeing, and finally for weaving on the loom.

The Navajo use a vertical loom. This is essentially a wooden frame comprising upper and lower loom beams, cloth beams, yarn beams, and tension beams. The frame is prepared with a vertical warp before a batten is repeatedly passed through the warp strings with the weft, gradually building up the design. Dockstander states that 'Each step is time consuming but vital to the quality of the finished product' (Dockstander 1987: 27) and cites research from the Navajo Community College at Many Farms, Arizona, which estimated that it took a total of 345 hours to prepare and make one 3 x 5 foot rug of 'above average' quality from start to finish (Dockstander 1987: 32).<sup>10</sup>

Of course, not all Navajo weaving is or has been accomplished fully using this traditional process. As Kent observes, non-Navajo products of some sort have supplemented hand-spun, native wool since the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. This includes the unravelling of trade cloth, not just to obtain yarn but also colours. Commercial yarns became increasingly available with coming of the Atlantic and Pacific Railroad in 1882, spreading West from New Mexico across Arizona. Packaged dyes were used by some weavers from the transitional period, while pre-cleaned, pre-carded and sometimes pre-dyed materials were introduced from 1950s. There had been changes, therefore, even since Reichard's time in the 1930s (Kent 1985: 41-45). By the 1980s, many different kinds of yarn were being used, in addition to both vegetal and synthetically dyed fibres. However, Kent admitted that some fully traditionally made rugs were still in production, and that 'Looms are still constructed in the traditional manner' although milled lumber and iron pipes might now be used for uprights and loom beams (Kent 1985: 47). Dockstander argues that while some weavers do still save time with the use of commercially spun and pre-dyed thread, many still prefer working with the more laborious, traditionally prepared materials as they feel better to work with -and command better prices (Dockstander 1987: 30). Consequently, and despite some differences,

we can agree with Kent that essentially: ‘weaving tools and procedures are basically unchanged...’ over the last three hundred years (Kent 1985: 47).

The standard, scholarly way to approach Navajo weaving has been just like this: through the study of its chronology, techniques and aesthetic development. More recently, however, Roseann S. Willink and Paul G. Zolbrod began researching what the Navajo designs meant to the Navajo themselves. To do this, they spent 18 months taking over 50 Navajo elders into museum archives and talking with them about the often historic weavings they saw. According to Zolbrod, this was:

enough to indicate that what Navajos themselves say about weaving adds considerably to what non-Navajo scholars, dealers and collectors customarily discern and communicate about textiles. (Willink & Zolbrod 1996: 5)

Willink and Zolbrod maintain that Navajo weavings (*diyogi*) articulate the ‘world view’ and ‘mind-set’ of the weavers (Willink & Zolbrod 1996: 2), and that this was not simply an amalgam of casual attitudes, but rather that:

An entire culture might be woven into a single textile: its mythic and historical associations, its ceremonial practices, its need for balance and order, its sense of place. (Willink & Zolbrod 1996: 4)

In this way, *diyogi* were not simply skilful, abstract designs but, rather, visual representations of often specific legends, episodes, songs, prayers, stories and even creation myths. An individual weaving, therefore, might articulate something of both the ‘mythic memory’ and the ‘collective memory’ of the people as a whole (Willink & Zolbrod 1996: 6). A pertinent example of the latter is provided by perhaps the most painful episode in Navajo history: the Fort Sumner experience of 1864. Here, 7,000 Navajo were rounded up and interned near the fort at Bosque Redondo, New Mexico. After several years of incarceration by the US Army, the Navajo were finally released only to face the three-hundred mile return journey to their own lands now known as the Long Walk. Many died on the way; the remainder returned to

find their homes, pastures and flocks destroyed. The story has been duly handed down to subsequent generations and, according to Willink and Zolbrod:

Fort Sumner motifs arouse a pensiveness for Navajo people today that is comparable to what the European Holocaust evokes in survivors. We found that the merriest gathering would fall into silent recollection if mention was made of the Long Walk and the years of captivity. (Willink & Zolbrod 1996: 17)

Willink and Zolbrod cite the example of one rug thus decoded: ‘All those who saw it... shared a heritage that outsiders without knowledge of the Navajo past would not recognize’ (Willink & Zolbrod 1996: 18).

Rugs such as these do not simply portray hardship, for in common with many other groups, such artefacts have taken hardship to produce. The Navajo have to struggle in order to make these elaborate cultural texts in the face of geographical obstacles and poor resources. This drive to make beautiful things against the environmental odds has been observed elsewhere by Dissanayake, who notes: ‘Even nomadic people who own few material possessions usually decorate what they do own’ (Dissanayake 1992, 1995: xii). Gary Witherspoon similarly observes the Navajo ability creatively to rise above hardship (again citing Fort Sumner as an example), but also their ‘ability to create with little or nothing’, especially when it comes to art (Witherspoon 1977: 184). As in life, he says, they overcome difficulties and apparently unsolvable problems. They:

synthesize the apparently irreconcilable, in the way they translate simple and common things into beautiful forms and patterns, and in the way they ritually transform unpleasant and seemingly unbearable conditions into bearable and blessed ones. (Witherspoon 1977: 185)

They regain order and harmony through ritual control (Witherspoon 1977: 187).<sup>11</sup> But again, this achieved only in the face of practical struggle. Gladys A. Reichard describes the necessity of water to the dyeing and manufacturing process, yet at the same time observing that for the Navajo woman: ‘Water is almost non-existent in her grazing lands; such as there is must be kept almost exclusively for internal use’ (Reichard 1974: 15).<sup>12</sup> In this way, she is

‘handicapped by circumstances. The truth is not that she does not *want* to use water, but rather that she does not *have* it to use.’ She gives the example of seeing a Navajo hauling water for several miles by wagon (Reichard 1974: 31). Throughout her study, Reichard continues to stress the primitive nature of the materials and equipment used, together with the hostility of the environment.

In such a culture, mythic time is not the same as historical time, and combined with Navajo stories and poetry, this serves to connect the past, present and future in ways perhaps unfamiliar to contemporary notions of history. Zolbrod uses the example of one weaving, discussed by the elders, which comprises a day and night-time version of the same scene. This, he contends: ‘matches what is different with what is the same within time’s repetitive cycles. The mythic past and historical past offer the same cyclic repetition’ (Willink & Zolbrod 1996: 19). Indeed: ‘For the traditional Navajos, the past is recycled in the present to secure harmony in the future (Willink & Zolbrod 1996: 18-19). Bloch would clearly have understood.

The issue of harmony (a recurring theme in this research) is fundamental to Navajo culture, theology and, therefore, weaving. Indeed, it is underlined by the recurring importance of the Navajo word *hózhó*, which is best translated into English as a combination of order, beauty, balance and harmony. This is not the same as symmetry, and helps explain why on careful examination, Navajo *diyogi* are typically balanced but at the same time non-symmetrical about both axes (figure 7). What they do have is a classic sense of balance, of composition, of *hózhó*. For the weaver, however, this is not simply an aesthetic idea, but, rather, a concept deeply ingrained in Navajo culture and creation myth.

The central figure here is *Má’ii*: the Coyote. He is the ubiquitous trickster; the: ‘agent of disorder who arouses the need to keep things in their place at the loom as well as in the wider scheme of things’ (Willink & Zolbrod 1996: 4). Coyote features significantly in the

*Diné Bahane'*, the Navajo creation story. It is *Má'ii*, for example, who is responsible for the random arrangement of the stars at night. According to the myth, First Man was designing the stars, and mapping out the constellations with mica 'for he wanted the results of this work to be perfect.' But *Má'ii* the Coyote came along, started to interfere, became impatient and cried: 'Let the stars sit wherever they will.' He threw them up into the sky and: 'Instantly they stuck to the sky helter-skelter in random bunches.' So, when we look at the unevenly-placed stars today we can 'observe the everlasting disorder created by *Má'ii*, the Coyote in his impatience, it is said' (Zolbrod 1984: 93-94).

Coyote's escapades punctuate the creation myth to the extent that in the fifth world, a messenger warns the *Diné* (the Navajo) to beware him at all times: 'He is an idler and a trickster. One way or another, he will bring disorder into your lives. One way or another, he will deceive you and embarrass you' (Zolbrod 1984: 122). Much of the Navajo creation myth –and of Navajo culture in general- therefore centres around the struggle against disorder and the finding (or creating) of *hózhó* in its place. It is, as Zolbrod states, a 'dynamic opposition' that underlies the traditional Navajo way of life (Zolbrod 1984: 362).

More than that, the Navajo creation myth has imperfection deliberately built into the world for that purpose. In part three of the *Diné Bahane'*, 'Slaying the Monsters', certain monsters and apparently bad things are deliberately allowed to remain in the world because:

if we go on living and continue slowly to wear out what others use, ingenuity will flourish among them. They will think of better ways to sew and to carve. Garments will become more beautiful. Tools will become stronger and more useful. Designs of all kind will improve. (Zolbrod 1984: 267)

So without the imperfection created by Coyote (and others) in the myth world, there would be no need for the Navajo to be creative, make beauty and change things for the better in this. As Zolbrod says, 'There must be imperfection if there is to be a dynamic, living world, in rugs as well as in a dynamic universe' (Willink & Zolbrod 1996: 5). So, Coyote is both a curse and a

creative blessing. That is why: ‘In the natural order of things, the ongoing struggle for *hózhó* never ends’ (Willink & Zolbrod 1996: 30).

This Navajo narrative presents striking similarities with the much more familiar Judeo-Christian creation myth we have already noted in the book of Genesis. Here, we recall, Adam and Eve are expelled from the perfection of Eden for eating the forbidden fruit. If one examines both the Old Testament and the Torah carefully, however, there is no explicit reference to sex as is commonly believed. Rather, Adam and Eve ate of ‘the tree of the knowledge of good and evil’ (Genesis: 2, 17). The consequence, explains the serpent, will be that ‘the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil’ (Genesis: 3, 5). This is what happened, and instead of having perfection handed to him on a plate to him, Adam now had to work ‘In the sweat of thy face’ (Genesis: 3, 19). And one of the first things he and Eve did was that they ‘sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons’ (Genesis: 3, 7). So, in the face of adversity, creativity begins. More than that –and crucially-, as God complains: ‘the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil’ (Genesis: 3, 22). Perhaps this, then, is the first step towards Bloch’s ‘upright gait’ in which, we remember, man would become more god-like by taking his destiny into his own hands (Zipes 1988a: xxvii). So, while interpreters such as Augustine and Paul have effectively re-written the Eden story to make it one of sin, sorrow and punishment, by getting back to the original text, we could re-interpret it ourselves as an opportunity, a challenge and a blessing -without which we would not grow up and out of the garden; without this there would be no creativity and no culture. This is something that the *Diné* and *Má’ii*, the Coyote, would clearly understand.

In Navajo creation mythology, not only is imperfection deliberately built in to the world, but creation itself is a collaborative process. In the creation of the fifth and final world, for example, First Man and First Woman decide that this world must be brighter than the

previous four. They discuss what kind of light might be needed, and make the sun and the moon. In Abrahamic theology, God alone said 'let there be light,' and of course there was. But here, the act of creation was, as Zolbrod points out, 'a matter of wide discussion' (Zolbrod 1984: 365). Indeed, he continues, First Man and First Woman 'are actively creating, performing tasks that we who have absorbed the Old Testament tradition would attribute to God.' But, of course, they don't create the fifth world all by themselves. 'They even need dynamic opposition like that which they get from Coyote' (Zolbrod 1984: 362). This sort of subtlety, Zolbrod contends, 'represents a belief system which manifests poetic sophistication beyond what the usual literate person expects of preliterate verbal artifacts' (Zolbrod 1984: 63). Perhaps it is not too far-fetched, then, to wonder if in our contemporary first world (and I am deliberately echoing with the concept of numbered worlds here), the creation of Utopia might not be best left to God alone. As for the Navajo, what they are doing with design is not simply *evading chaos*. What they are doing is in fact much more actively *creating order* from the raw materials of lived experience. This, it is contended, is an activity that is common to us all through the act of design. Harmony through design is not something with which we are gifted, but something which we need to accomplish *by and for ourselves*.

## **ARCHTYPES AND PSYCHO ANALYSIS**

A problem with case studies, it may be contended, is that illuminating though they are, they may fail sufficiently to make the link between the phenomenal and the noumenal and so make our examples seem isolated or simply anecdotal. However, it is clear that the trickster-Coyote figure is not just a one-off case specific to the Navajo; he is an archetype of far more wide-ranging relevance.

The trickster features in both the arts and in Jungian literary theory. In 'The Trickster in the Arts' John Bebe argues that the trickster is crucial to the creation, the content, and the

reception of a work of art. He can be both the problem and the solution (Bebe, 1992). Jung himself argued that the trickster figured in not only Amerindian but also other cultures, including the Christian New Testament (Jung 1968: 256-260). Indeed: ‘It is just this transformation of the meaningless into the meaningful that reveals the trickster’s compensatory relation to the ‘saint’” (Jung 1968: 256). Jung claims that, to paraphrase in the vernacular, we need a mess in the first place in order for it to be put beautifully right in the second. ‘This gradually brings liberation from imprisonment... and is therefore a bringer of light as well as of healing’ (Jung 1968: 272). The coyote may bring chaos, but it is a necessary chaos because it: ‘contains within it the seed of an enantiodromia, of a conversion into its opposite’ (Jung 1968: 272). Jung therefore helps us expand our focus on the specific case of the Navajo to the far more broadly shared archetype which is, he demonstrates, shared among seemingly disparate cultures. Broader psychoanalytic theory, together with bioevolutionary anthropology, confirms that this human need to create cultural texts is universally applicable.

Donald Meltzer, a psychoanalyst influenced by Melanie Klein, argued in *The Apprehension of Beauty* that the brain gives the emotional experiences of our lives a symbolic representation. This enables us to think about these experiences, and this is in turn important to the growth of the mind (Meltzer & Williams 1988: xi-xii). He continues with the unwittingly (perhaps) Blochian sentiment that:

The history of our truly great creative men and women bears witness to this through their works. It is, after all, not only poets, but the handful of creative people of each era, who are Shelly’s “unacknowledged legislators of the world”. (Meltzer & Williams 1988: xii)

Bloch, as we saw earlier, called it *Vor-Schein*. The connection is all the more striking when Meltzer states that the human mind can only discover its own beauty once it has discovered that of both nature and the works of mankind. He suggests an evolutionary effect because:

In this respect, the growth of the individual's aesthetic awareness mirrors the evolution of the race, in its transformation of weapons into tools... to responsibility for the world. (Meltzer & Williams 1988: xiii)

And as a psychoanalyst, Meltzer echoes Bloch's critical theory of Utopia by stating that the aesthetic conflict with which the apprehension of beauty is concerned is: 'the struggle of the individual between aesthetic sensibilities and the forces of philistinism, puritanism, cynicism and perversity' (Meltzer & Williams 1988: xiii). It is time now to conclude the evolutionary metaphor that we began with Bloch and the *aufrechter Gang*.

## **HOMO AESTHETICUS**

As early as 1926, the British aesthete Roger Fry was grappling with the seemingly strange need of humankind to integrate art into life. He admitted that life could, from a purely practical point of view, be carried out perfectly well without art. Yet in spite of that, people had: 'never, I believe, continued to exist without art of some kind. It must therefore correspond to some fundamental conformation of man's nature' (Fry 1926: 5). So, for example, when building a house: 'he calls in an artist to make his house more magnificent, more attractive to the eye than the mere satisfaction of the need for shelter would imply' (Fry 1926: 5-6). Even when a man dies, and even though he clearly does not need it, his family will bring in an artist as they or he has done at every stage of his life. The need for art, therefore, says Fry follows humankind: 'from the cradle to the grave' (Fry 1926: 6).

Sociobiologist E O Wilson sees this marking of death with art stretching back at least 95,000 years and evidenced by the burials excavated from the Qafzeh cave in Israel. He traces the greater 'creative explosion' back some 35,000 years in the case of European cave art, and unites prehistoric and contemporary practice by arguing that death is an event managed and attended by art even 'among today's hunter gatherers' (Wilson 2012: 278-279). Cave art, he contends, cannot be fully explained by 'utilitarian' theory, while these and other

art forms only became possible after ‘an evolutionary advance when humans developed a capacity for abstract thought’ (Wilson 2012: 277).

According to the bioevolutionary anthropologist Ellen Dissanayake, art is indeed: ‘a biologically evolved element in human nature, that it is normal, natural, and necessary.’ Humans, she says, are ‘inherently aesthetic and artistic creatures’ (Dissanayake 1992, 1995: x). For Dissanayake, art is a ‘general proclivity’ that can be manifested in a variety of specific forms. Engaging with the arts is one of many societies’ most important endeavours and this leads her to profess that widespread needs are being expressed, and this supports what she sees as: ‘the universality of making and enjoying art’ (Dissanayake 1992, 1995: xiii). So (and in direct contradiction of Plato): ‘Far from being peripheral, dysfunctional, trivial or illusory, the arts have been part of human beings’ most serious and vital concerns’ (Dissanayake 1992, 1995: xvi).

Art, according to Dissanayake, is ‘fundamental to humankind’ (Dissanayake 1992, 1995: xix). But it is fundamental in a very real and embedded sense. For her, art is a ‘biologically endowed need’ (Dissanayake 1992, 1995: 60) and so ‘art is biologically essential’ (Dissanayake 1992, 1995: 1). Thus she is able to conclude: ‘the aesthetic is not something added to us –learned or acquired like speaking a second language or riding a horse –but in large measure is the way we are, *homo aestheticus*, stained through and through’ (Dissanayake 1992, 1995: xix).

Dissanayake also uses the example of the Navajo, who: ‘strive to achieve balance and harmonization in their arts as well as their lives’ (Dissanayake 1992, 1995: 132) and that they: ‘seek harmony and balance by means of a slow, careful, and deliberate imposition of control in both art and life’ (Dissanayake 1992, 1995: 165). Such qualities, therefore, ‘are ideals of Navajo thought and behaviour’ (Dissanayake 1992, 1995: 166). We may dispute with Dissanayake (along with Fry, Bell, and Wilson) whether creativity is at source

biologically, intellectually, psychologically or culturally driven, but all agree that it is nevertheless ‘fundamental’ to humankind and not merely (as Plato had it) a peripheral form of play. Thus, regardless of where it comes from, Dissanayake clearly understands the central status of the arts to the whole of Navajo thought and behaviour. And as the Navajo serve for us as a case study in the broader, Geertzian sense, it is argued here that we, like them, are all a form of *homo aestheticus*, striving in human pursuit of Bloch’s *aufrechter Gang*, the: ‘upright gait’.

### **THE UTOPIAN FUNCTION OF FORM**

Navajo *diyogi*,—to say nothing of much of the history of Western painting from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century- are essentially non-figurative. The importance of form, therefore, is crucial. This is something that would be supported by aestheticians including Fry and Bell. It was thinkers such as these who not only pioneered the formalist aesthetic in Britain from around 1910: Through their concept of ‘essential form’ they also paved the critical way for what had previously been dismissed as ‘primitive’ art. Here, emotion could be expressed without the fetters of representational realism and ‘technical swagger’ (Bell 1928: 23). Indeed, continued Bell, with their concentration on the creation of form, such cultural texts could become ‘the finest works of art that we possess’ (Bell 1928: 25). Fry believed that a special kind of sensitivity was required for an appreciation of form; that this was part of an imaginative life that was specific to humans; and that a true understanding of the nature of art would land one ‘in the depths of mysticism’ (Fry 1937: 244).

Bloch takes the idea further. As Zipes explains: ‘Form implied human intention for Bloch. That is, embedded in form was human creative activity that sought to make its mark and march toward a better world’ (Zipes 1988a: xxviii). That, I contend, is why the Navajo weave beautiful rugs from the raw material of their hostile environment. As Bloch says: ‘The

montage of the fragment out of the old existence is here the experiment of its reutilization (*Umfunktionierung*) into a new one' (Bloch 1977: 228).<sup>13</sup>

Weaving is both an act and a metaphor. The Navajo literally construct order, harmony and *hózhó* from the raw materials around them. Weaving is a part of who they are: As Zolbrod says of the traditional Navajo, 'To live as a Navajo was to weave; to weave was to live as a Navajo' (Willink & Zolbrod 1996: 2). Tellingly, during their 19<sup>th</sup> century imprisonment at Fort Sumner, the Navajo continued to weave with anything they could lay their hands on—including recycled yarn from, it is said, cavalry officers' underwear. 'When you want to weave badly enough,' one elder told Willink and Zolbrod, 'you find wool no matter how' (Willink & Zolbrod 1996: 48). But to an extent, we *all* do this, feverishly constructing a preferred version—a preferred *vision*—out of the scattered, raw material of reality. Meltzer, drawing on his travels to the Mediterranean, believed from an early age that: 'to breathe life and beauty into stone seemed to me the highest possible aspiration' (Meltzer & Williams 1988: xxi). This, it seems to me, is something we can understand from contemplation of Michelangelo's unfinished Milan Pieta: a work which is also a record of its own creation. It is both the stone and the life, the one emerging from the other by the hand not of God but of man. This re-prioritisation of man over God (even within a religious cultural context) leads us back to theory, Bloch and the concept of 'atheistic Christianity'.

## **ATHEISTIC CHRISTIANITY**

Bloch begins *The Spirit of Utopia* by declaring: 'Life has been put into our hands' (Bloch 2000: 1). That is exactly the point of our alternative reading of Genesis, and which underlies much of Bloch's argument in *Atheism in Christianity*. Although Bloch did not write specifically about the Navajo, we can see for ourselves the resonances between the Navajo drive to create something beautiful out of the raw materials of daily life and their

collaborative view of both creation and creativity. This in turn leads to cross cultural connections between the Navajo *Diné Bahane'* and Bloch's reinterpretation of the Christian holy texts.

What we see in the Navajo is something that Bloch saw in the wider world, summarised by Peter Thompson as: '...a constant drive, a quest for the something missing, which finds itself expressed in all forms of culture and religion' (Thompson 2009: xiv-xv). And in the place of something missing, Bloch sees the need to change the lived world into something new (Thompson 2009: xiii). It is up to us, says Bloch, to make something of the world and to make it now, for ourselves, if we are to create a Utopia, a heaven on earth. Crucially, as Thompson puts it, this would be 'a world created by our daily labours, rather than God's' (Thompson 2009: xvii). The Navajo, of course, remain avowedly theistic, but viewed from Bloch's perspective, we can see the urge both to create beauty and the collaboration with the gods in creation itself as something that already lies within and not in opposition to Navajo theology and visual culture.

Bloch did not seek crudely to confront and condemn religion. He sought, in Thompson's words, to account for its 'potency and strength which remains far in excess of its ability to explain' (Thompson 2009: ix). What Bloch wanted therefore to do was 'break out' of the traditional interpretation of the sacred texts and instead 'find the things in religion that actually unbind rather than bind us' (Thompson 2009: xiv). This would lead to a Kingdom which was man and not God centred. Famously, Bloch felt able to assert: 'Only an atheist can be a good Christian; only a Christian can be a good atheist' (Thompson 2009: epigraph page). For Bloch it was a question of progress: the progression to a secular religion without superstition, and so of 'making the Christ-impulse live even when God is dead' (Bloch 2009: 167).

Bloch's Utopian impulse continues in art and literature today. We can see, for example, his 'atheistic Christianity' reconfigured in what novelist Philip Pullman in the *His Dark Materials* trilogy envisions as 'The republic of heaven' (Pullman 2000: 548). This, surely, is what Bloch had already seen as: 'the transformation of heaven as the preserve of God into heaven as the city of man' with the new heaven and earth finally 'fully anthropocentric' (Bloch 2009: 67). Similarly, in the contemporary arts and crafts, Rob Ryan in 2010 began using the slogan: "Your job is to take this world apart and put it back together again... but even better!!!"<sup>14</sup> Bloch approached what he describes as 'ornament' in an early chapter of his first major work, *The Spirit of Utopia* (Bloch 2000). In 'The Production of Ornament', Bloch notes that men have whittled on wood since early times, with the ancient Greeks going so far as to apply decoration on weaving and pottery (Bloch 2000: 18). He admired 'historical handicraft' of the past which still had latent, spiritual meaning, (Bloch 2000: 15) together with '*truly great historical applied art*' (Bloch's emphasis) (Bloch 2000: 17). Typically, he saw within this a hope for the future, in which he urged: 'May art henceforth stray far from utility... may *great technique* dominate, an unburdening, cool, ingenious, democratic "luxury" for all...' (Bloch 2000: 15). What Bloch does not appear fully to recognise is that with woven textiles, the decoration is already intrinsic to the design; indeed it is intrinsic to the very fabric and structure of the work itself.

Bloch did understand, however, the greater importance of what we have already seen the Navajo call *hózhó* and which he saw in the ancient Greeks who attained:

...a harmonious symmetry *ante rem*. In this way the Greeks escaped, fashioned a world for themselves where they could live, where at any moment they could evade the terror of chaos... (Bloch 2000: 19).

This is precisely what the Navajo -and the rest of us- do, countering the chaos of *Ma'ii* with the *hózhó* of the *diyogi*.

Clifford Geertz famously wrote: 'Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance which he himself has spun. I take culture to be those webs...' (Geertz 1973: 5). That, then, is something that underlies not just the Greeks or the Navajo but *all* of our cultural undertakings in which we strive aesthetically to create order out of disorder and meaning out of meaninglessness, working to create a world which is so much better than it would be if it was simply left to itself. Accordingly, when we look (for example) at Michelangelo's Sistine Ceiling, the real thing for celebration is not the supposedly divine creation it depicts, but something much more actual and remarkable: the creativity of humankind itself.

For the future, then, we should not delegate our responsibilities to the supernatural, or even labour under the naïve misapprehension that the world we have inherited, untouched by man, will be enough. For Bloch was right: Life has indeed been put into our hands (Bloch 2000: 1).

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## Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> For more on these particular, practical attempts at Utopian living, see (Williams 1866, 1971) and (Arndt 1972)

<sup>2</sup> For a fuller 'taxonomy' of modes of Utopian thought, see (Webb 2008) and a discussion of Utopian 'definitions, debates and conflicts', see (Sargisson 2012)

<sup>3</sup> Cited in (Geoghegan 1996: 2)

<sup>4</sup> Cited in (Geoghegan 1996: 2-3)

<sup>5</sup> Bloch, 'Literature and Socialist Objects,' speech to the International Congress for the Defense of Culture, Paris, 1935, translated and cited by Zipes in (Zipes 1988: xx)

<sup>6</sup> Bloch, *Prinzip Hoffnung* in *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 5 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), 980-981, cited and translated in (Zipes 1988a: xxxix)

<sup>7</sup> Cited and translated by Zipes in (Zipes 1988a: xxxii)

<sup>8</sup> Cited in (Geoghegan 1996: 40)

<sup>9</sup> Ernst Bloch, interviewed in 1968 by Michael Landmann and cited in (Zipes 1988a: 26)

<sup>10</sup> The research was carried out in 1974, but as the traditional method and process has not changed since then, the estimate remains useful.

<sup>11</sup> There are, of course, clear connections with Lévi-Strauss's theory of the cultural reconciliation of binary oppositions here.

<sup>12</sup> The book was originally published as *Navajo Shepherd and Weaver* (New York: JJ Augustin, 1936)

<sup>13</sup> Cited and translated by (Zipes 1988a: 29)

<sup>14</sup> This was also the title of his one man show at the Stafford Shire Hall Gallery, November 13 2010 to 9 January 2011.