

FRENZY - L'ART DÉCORATIF D'AUJOURD'HUI

1 Fiona Curran/ 2 Mark R Taylor/ 3 Esther Planas/ 4 Mike Watson/
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In Search of the Sensual

Fiona Curran

We would perform a moral act: to love purity!

We would improve our condition: to have the power of judgement!

Le Corbusier¹

In considering this space of The Metropole and how I might respond to the questions it poses about the relationship between art and the decorative I became distracted by an image, a detail that kept returning in my thoughts, a highly stylized image triggered by my knowledge of the former life of the Metropole Gallery as the hotel ballroom. This image that repeatedly resurfaced was the ballroom scene in Martin Scorsese's film interpretation of Edith Wharton's "The Age Of Innocence". This scene presents a lavish, richly sensual and ornate environment near the start of the film that highlights symbolically the themes to be explored; class structures, moral judgement and the social fabric, the relationship between purity and corruption, sexuality and repression, public and private, masculine and feminine. Many of these themes have been well rehearsed in debates surrounding the decorative.² It struck me that this architectural space of the Metropole Gallery functioned originally as a space for the celebration of the sensual, even if it was the restrained sensuality of an elite class who could afford to holiday on the Folkestone coast in an Edwardian hotel of a certain grandeur. I can't help thinking however, that there is something important here in this relationship between the space, the architecture, its former use and the history of the site alongside this fraught issue of the decorative, because what is the decorative if not a physical rendering of the sensual? And the sensual, in its essence is surely about pleasure.

The initial contact I had with the exhibition's themes developed out of the centrality of some of the high modernist texts that engaged with this question of the decorative particularly in its relation to architecture - Adolf Loos' "Ornament and Crime" and Le Corbusier's "The Decorative Arts of Today" in particular the chapter "A Coat of Whitewash, The Law of Ripolin," where he advocated the use of a coat of white

paint instead of the uses of interior decoration in the form of damasks, wallpapers and stencils. For Le Corbusier the use of whitewash means that a man's "home is made clean. There are no more dirty, dark corners. *Everything is shown as it is*. Then comes *inner* cleanness, for the course adopted leads to a refusal to allow anything which is not correct, authorised, intended..."³ The symbolic charge here of white as a sign of moral purity, perfection and clarity (producing "the power of judgement"), could not be more clear and this presence of white within the decorative interiors of the Metropole that has become an almost 'white cube' without quite erasing its past, its history, its own particular *form* once again raises an interesting link to the presence of the sensual within the gallery space. There is a sense here that the decorative element within the building has been tamed or restrained by receiving a uniform application of white paint so as to allow it to take on the function and semblance of the 'neutral' space of the art gallery and yet, any visual material that is placed in its interior has to compete with, harness or highlight the architectural ornament within.

At the start of the ballroom scene in "The Age of Innocence" the character Newland Archer (played by Daniel Day Lewis) arrives for the ball and the scene begins with him selecting a pair of white gloves from a table that is covered in a sea of white gloves in the entrance hall of the house. At the ball the men must wear their white gloves when dancing with a woman, the thin veil of white fabric acts as a barrier between their bodies and somehow contains the flow of sexual energy that might pass between them. Before entering into this world of sensual pleasure then, the white glove functions as a symbol of purity and containment, a visible and metaphorical check on desire. The opening scene is therefore set by this moment of acquiescence to propriety and tradition, this highlighting of the correct moral code that allows the paradoxical celebration of the physical and the sensual at the same time as it seeks to deny and restrain them. This use of white as a motif is further explored in the dresses and flowers of the young women at the ball and in the physical presence of Archer's new fiancé, May Welland. Within the text of Edith Wharton's novel she writes:

*'Dear,' Archer whispered, pressing her to him: it was borne in on him that the first hours of being engaged, even if spent in a ballroom, had in them something grave and sacramental. What a new life it was going to be, with this whiteness, radiance, goodness at one's side!*⁴

Archer's comment "even if spent in a ballroom", indicates a certain unease on behalf of the protagonist that this particular architectural space might challenge the purity and sanctity of the engagement that has just taken place. This threatening presence of the sensual and physical world however, is temporarily negated by the "whiteness" before him in the form of the virginal May.

What the decorative or ornamental offers is a site that can open up a discussion around the subject's complex and paradoxical relation to (and in) representation/signification. The presence of the ornamental conceived as disruptive, distracting,

impure, "fraught", constitutes it as a threat to the proper order of things, it has the power to lead us astray in reinserting the physical body back into the frame of representation. "It is as if at some level the language of ornament becomes the language of impurity."⁵ The ornamental, in architectural form in particular, has been repeatedly theorised as an addition, an afterthought that, rather than enhancing the form beneath, cloaks or veils that form and creates a division between us as viewers and our experience of the *true* and proper form and therefore substitutes confusion for clarity, the inessential for the essential. It has the potential to blur the lines between form and function.

*Architectural ornamentation necessitates the co presence of heterogeneous purposes in a single aesthetic object and, as a correlative, the inevitability of multiple and inconsistent interpretations.*⁶

We might lose our focus of attention, become distracted by that which supplements the true form and function of the architectural space or indeed be unable to fully contemplate or even distinguish the art object that is placed within the gallery. This notion of the ornament as supplement might link it to Derrida's writings on the *parergon* which, following a reading of Kant, he describes as "that which is not internal or intrinsic, as an integral part, to the total representation of the object but which belongs to it only in an extrinsic way as a surplus, an addition, an adjunct, a supplement."⁷ Famously, Kant singled out the role of the frame as a *parergon* alongside the columns of buildings and the clothes on statues. Derrida argues that far from functioning as an addition or supplement that is *detached* from the work itself, the *parergon* in fact highlights a lack at the very core of the work (*ergon*) which necessitates the need for an addition or supplement; the inside and the outside could therefore be said to be bound together in a necessary complicity, the one highlighting the other.

*It is this analytic of judgment itself which, in its frame, allows us to define the requirements of formality, the opposition of the formal and the material, of the pure and the impure, of the proper and the improper, of the inside and the outside...*⁸

It is the very elements that are *excluded* in this analytical/critical process which are the conditions of its possibilities. Within the stifling and judgemental society depicted in "The Age of Innocence" the sensuality that threatens to overflow its societal restraints becomes the basis of that societies mores and visual codes. Perhaps the uneasy relationship to the decorative witnessed in art and architecture is a symptom of its importance as a constituting element in their histories.

I want to end this text with another literary reference taken from a story by Isak Dinesen that ties together these thoughts on the decorative, the *parergon* and the role of white within the framework of moral and aesthetic judgement.

Dinesen's short story "The Blank Page" in the collection "Last Tales" tells the tale of the sisters of the Carmelite order who survive economically by producing fine linen to be sold as bridal sheets for the young princesses of the royal household. The custom was that on the morning after a wedding the sheet was hung out to proclaim the virginity of the royal bride and the central piece of the once snow white sheet which now bore witness to this fact was cut out and returned to the convent, framed in a gilt frame and hung in a specially created gallery space with gold plates engraved with the name of each princess. As the story unfolds we discover that in the midst of all these golden frames hangs one that differs from all the others – one that displays a linen sheet that is snow-white from corner to corner, and it is those who stand in front of this 'blank page' we are told at the story's end who "sink into deepest thought".⁹

These thoughts in front of the blank page are provoked by the colour white in all its *impurity* and by the framing of that whiteness in a gilt frame, a signifier of the decorative, a *parerga* that is at once both supplement and necessity housing this blankness "that allows for the mark in the first place, guaranteeing its space of reception and production".¹⁰ These thoughts then, are provoked by nothing, by a blank page, by whiteness, by an absence however, which is itself a silent declaration of sensual pleasure.

¹ Le Corbusier *The Decorative Art of Today* reprinted in *Essential Le Corbusier: L'Esprit Nouveau Articles*, trans. J.Dunnett, Architectural Press, 1988, p.188.

² See, amongst other texts, David Batchelor's *Chromophobia*, Reaktion Books, 2000, Mark Wigley, *White Walls, Designer Dresses: The Fashioning of Modern Architecture*, MIT Press, 1995,

³ *op cit*, p.186

⁴ Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, Penguin, 1974, p.24.

⁵ Briony Fer, *On Abstract Art*, Yale University Press, 1997, p.62.

⁶ Wendy Steiner, *Postmodernism and the Ornament*, Word and Image, Vol 4. No.1,1988, p.61

⁷ Jacques Derrida *The Truth In Painting*, trans. G.Bennington/I.McLeod, University of Chicago Press, 1987, p.57.

⁸ *ibid* p.73

⁹ Isak Dinesen *The Blank Page in Last Tales*, Putnam, 1957, p.131.

¹⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. B.Johnson, The athlone Press, 1993, p.253.



Vom Musikalisch-Verzierten: ein Beitrag

Mark R Taylor

'Why decoration?'- as Morty might have titled (as Robin Freeman might have said).

An obvious origin in the charm against the 'memento mori' intrinsic to all sound of plucked or struck string. From 'style brisé' to 'löchriges Sein' (and 'Straight Lines in Broken Times'): our own age would seem (in art, at least, if not in life) temperamentally less inclined to such strategic evasions (though Michael Nyman's vapid (for all their gusto of execution) simulacra stand more in need of mordents than the harpsichord part of Ferneyhough's 'Etudes Transcendentales').

Whence, then, though, the extension to instruments (violin, organ, human voice...) in whose case acoustical givens are such as for this consideration not to arise?

By pure (if not simple) analogy? That 'mordent' should idiomatically evoke 'wit' swiftly implicates the performer: the virtuoso's exhibition of digital dexterity, perpetually ambushed by the potential for unlovely effects (we will all have heard the over-efficiently dispatched trill reminiscent of an electric buzzer: and who, other than Maria von Trapp, would specify doorbells on a list of their favourite things?)

('Für Kenner und Liebhaber': that such furbelows should spring so facilely to the equipment of even the least accomplished chanteuse or siffleur one is inclined (strain though modish ethnomusicology might to reverse the polarity of the argument) to write off to imitation of less debased cultural products, and hence deem of no account: though scrutiny of the philosophical space occupied by vibrato might not be entirely devoid of interest.)

* * *

What, though, far more crucially, of the composer? One takes it as axiomatic that the processual (however variegatedly instantiated) is now the dominant (to say the very least; perhaps the only) valid modality for coherent compositional thought. But potential for grave embarrassment lies in the resultant of the play of

systems (particularly the interplay of several systems) coming smack up against the listener's (seemingly hard-wired) reflex, the innate Trieb to hierarchise and prioritise stimuli in a (misguided?) effort to 'make sense of' aesthetic data, and to relegate any deemed secondary or peripheral.

This is not without consequences: even for, say, Third-Piano-Sonata-period Boulez: but most drastically for lesser figures where systematic derivation of material ('material'?) intended to underwrite consistent intensity of effect actually dissipates, implodes under force of diminishing returns into uniform lack of intensity, equalised loss of significance whose best hope would seem to be of laying itself open to creative misreading in the fashion adumbrated above (postmodern double-coding may of course also 'help'), as the 'saturatedly-significant' becomes the wholly, unmitigatedly decorative, and 'infinite depth' reverts unforgivingly to neutralised superficiality – the late 20th century in a typical downward-spiral forgetting-and-being-condemned-to-replay-as-farce rehash of an aesthetic moment of some hundred years ago.

* * *

Which would seem arguably to deliver the listener into what could almost be viewed as a grim parodic hypostatisation of the Schenker position (already of a quite sufficiently stern, not to say well-nigh totalitarian reductiveness: one recalls Schoenberg, faced with a Schenker graph of the Eroica Symphony, finding his favourite passages 'there, there in those little notes'). Salutary, perhaps, to return to ponder Xenakis and Ligeti's critiques of total serialism, e.g.; certainly the issue would be one of the more pressing in any intelligent account of the current compositional agenda.

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Letters to Theo Cowley: Winter 2005 Spring 2004

Esther Planas

Dear Theo

I been realizing that I had forgot...
 > how much as a dancer, I was a russian...
 > if you think as "ballet" initiated by the french court..as a follow
 > of the fashion in wich they will walk and salutate the king....luis
 > XIV...wich maybe himself the one who walked that way just as a
 > conclusion of a real fisical default.....
 > I imagine...(before getting the righth information), that at some
 > point..these tzar and tzarina....and their mini travel court
 > companions had been visitin versailles..and then got quite flashed!!
 > and then..... kind of transported it" back....in their "valisses"
 > what hapens then, is that anything goin russian.....gets the
 > vodka....the passion...the drama.
 > so there it was..the russian ballet ...developing under the snow...
 > dancers and kossacks.....the spirit of madness....have you ever
 > heard of any french ballet dancer becoming a wild beast or a
 > flower..understanding the NATURE???
 > I guess not...
 > Diagilev..Nijinsky..and Stravinsky..where in a extrange state of
 > mind...the rapture of a daemon...over their frantic heads...
 > and I don't belive the poor french with their exquisit barroque
 > borrowed to the italians....had nothing to do...apart of been mind
 > blowed by what "the Russian Ballet on tour" had done with their
 > formalities and ortodoxias.....
 > Is like the Faberge egs...anything french once crossed the russian
 > frontiers..becomes magic and alive .
 > and when anything russian crosses their own very imposible lands to
 > come down to europe..we feel as if a wild wind has
 > smached all the glasses from all the windows.....and have the
 > temptation to walk over bare foot , get the sweet crushing

> glasses caressing our skin and bleed....just to wake up from a
> sort of letargythe very french "ennui"????

Dear Theo

is strange...
I jump from russia to germany
I hope my text and dreams are not too....ornamental??
just know that this russians....the ones who where mad and
refused...and conflictive...started all.
they did pervert the clasical ballet rules with shaking.....(masturbating)
or some angles that where not supposed to be
I am shure they all where readers of F Nietzsche.....and belive in Dionisus
i guess is not the same to become angular via satan than via
mechanical industrial inductions...or self induction

Thinking about your subject on THE FACE.....
and reviving the germans ideals....and the extrange daemon Oscar
S....your question about the face has a turn of the screw
here, because Oscar did cover THE FACE with a MASK
did he din't realize that allready was sourounded by MASKED FACES???
I guess not....
some how a FACE stills a face....
but a MASK is what erases all references even the sligthless..still
is posible that one could pass next to any of this ballet dancer
after the show..with out their make up and fake eye lashes....and not
even see who he or she is.

Is true , that I was always remarqued not to show feelings at
all..that was in my times..times of post bauhaus.....where a
MODERN DANCER was blank....maybe relaxed..because he did not had to
hold the SMILING FACE.... but still....we where
supposed to just aloud people to see the movement in us..not THE PERSON....
and the FACE, as soon it becomes a bit a bit expresive...is eclipsing
the focus.
so BLANK RELAXED INDIFERENCE..
is what would hapen next FRIDAY in contrast with the SMILING
MASKED FACE.
Maybe my piece where I hold my FACE/HEAD with my hands.(
MASK).....will be sort of.
in any case Oscar's MASKED dancers do have a FACE....THEY HAVE THE MASK!!
he was still producing ballet..
more ballet than ballet.
imposible to cover a mask with a mask.....

Dear Theo

Some reflections on a mirror:

I feel like there is a lost mirror..
I grow looking at it..and after years I realize "he was on the

way" between my audience and me
He always make me to hate myself...he was supposed to help me.
But this never hapen.
I mould my figure and pose..and saw others getting really well on
with it"..
they will transform in this kind of bodys and faces that
you always see there in the Opera stages.....masked
faces...smiling to the black hole....and to the heat of the lighth.
like the lighth was the real only good that mean anything to them....
Like...maybe the ugly duckling..I found my self more and more
alienated from my own image...(oposit to the snow white queen, when
she looked to the magic mirror to whom she was adicted...)
seeing but void...
and feeling more and more lost.
just until I was not looking there any more...it hapen that I
dance and move ...and the black hole was filled and I was there
and got a response from the void...
my reflection only happened before the eyes of a public that liked
me .
Their faces exist and I see them....
I integrate them
I do not get too worried.....just be humble...and give a bit of my
presence....
they maybe like it or not..but are real
And to rehearse I prefer the wall....but never my self..
what is the point of seen my self???

notes for a ballet in another country.....

Even if there is a coreographie about a ballet in berlin
It can be another, another coreographie, another country.....

I definetly like to write about a solo dance of a pale been
with dark deep eyes and dark short hair.

and it could be titled " the author as the player"

there is some notes

The author/ the player : a pale young man , told and thinn, like a
swan , delicate, fragile, but firm)
very deep sigth and strong presence
white shirt,dark grey troussers, great shoes,dark blue V neck cashmire

one spot lighth follows his steps on a black and white stage

he looks somewhere, he sees something

he draws, takes notes, films

he dances with out dancing he moves shakes trembles and slides

there is not mirrors

he is out doors and in doors
 looking through the glass window of a house
 inside a room with beautiful dark wood floors
 looking from the window
 looking at a window

we wonder who or what he is seeing...
 it will remind a mystery

curtain falls

Notes for a little ballet at/in/from berlin

- >
- > *movement, attitude...
- >
- > 'ACTITUDE'
- > the principle of control
- >
- > the ballet dancers:
- >
- > a bearded ugly man with trousers with squares like clowneerie...(dyed blond hair)
- > a girl with a "hair cut"
- > another girl with similar "hair cut"
- > (both in grey colors) (both with dyed black hair)
- > a told guy with blond hair (deco/countryside)
- > a middle age guy with grey hair(dressed in black)
- > a middle aged sort of elegant guy a bit overweight
- > a silfidesque guy with short grey hair and a moustache (great shoes)
- > a woman with long black hair (natural) and austrian white shirttopneck laced back and black ridding boots
- > a guy with a coat dark blue and dark blond hair very told (great shoes)
- >
- > scene: the bar of a theatre
- > (the ritual space for tragedy)
- > the border from outside and inside
- >
- > lighting: soft
- > furniture: wood
- >
- > others:
- > barmans in the back ground making cocktails
- > people wandering and passing by
- >
- > no music for this piece
- >
- >
- > title:
- > the coreographie of power



Is it Happening? : The Sublime and the City Mike Watson

The social import of contemporary architecture is often overlooked in debate. As London prepares for the emergence of several further City skyscrapers, along with the 1016 foot tall 'Shard' that will dominate the skyline south of the river, it is surely time to look beyond the usual aesthetic arguments that deride many new buildings as 'eyesores' and 'carbuncles', hampering our enjoyment of more decorative architectural elements!

All hail the new City; for London is a city that is ever in flux, and no decorative element can stake a claim to eternity, but must forsake itself to the wider human project...

St Paul's Cathedral, Sir Christopher Wren's mighty erection, constantly coming, and becoming, standing proud, despite the scaffolds that sheath it, and the developments that envelop and threaten it with insignificance. It is the enveloping and sheaving that make it possible... prevent it from becoming unsanitary and impotent. Yes, it shrinks against the rising skyline. Yet the rising skyline is the height against which its magnitude is judged. Like an Alice in Wonderland sensory mind trip, scales shift, just as the landscape does.

We stand on the cusp of major changes in our fair city. Nay, there are always major changes in this fair City of London. The only constant is perpetual change. Like the question, 'are we there yet?', played perpetually on a loop. Excitement, anticipation fear; a very 21st century anxiety. French thinker Jean Francois Lyotard argues that 'there is something of the sublime in capitalist society.' The City is the vanguard of capitalism in London, in Britain, in the World. The City, sublime in magnitude and scope, is somehow beyond comprehension ... all those buildings throwing upwards, while others seem to recede, shrunken, flaccid, greying little buildings. And it is not just the scale that imposes awe; it is the incomprehensibility of what goes on *up there*, in those towers. The endless reams of numbers, delivered across space from high-rise offices, across the planet as reams of 0's and 1's. These are the houses of the word, and the word is money. Across the way, St Paul's is in constant

flux; it somehow maintains its vigour despite all that goes on around. Here the word is God. Across the River Thames, at Tate Modern, the word is 'art', and down the road we are to be joined by an amalgamation of these abstractions: The Shard. London Bridge Tower, the 'Shard of Glass' is Prescott's attempt at penetrating heaven. Given the go ahead in 2003, and due for completion in 2010, at 1016 feet, Britain's tallest building courts anxiety. What will it do to the skyline? How will we see St Paul's? What if it ... *falls?*

As the Shard springs forth anticipation grows: The anticipation of yet more change. The anticipation of anticipation. This the sublime. This is our fair city. This is the '*Is it happening?*' that never happens. The Shard will dominate London Bridge and Southwark, dominate the City - whore and home to bankers and builders alike - and dominate London. Bringing with it at least 4 more skyscrapers, across the way on the North side of the river, this is one change that interrupts even the constant flow of changes... a skipped beat in an already irregular pattern. Whilst financial institutions demand faith in numbers, churches demand faith in God, and Tate Modern requires a certain leap of faith as regards art, the Shard calls forth a faith in the sublime for its own sake. A peculiarly 21st Century mentality, that kicked in with the demise of the Twin Towers, demands spectacle.

September 11 2001: The images we associate with that day will continue to grate with us, jar us, and effect nausea; their inexplicability, and our helplessness. Yet the images play perpetually on a loop across our television screens, and on the internet. Burned onto our collective retina. Our taste for the sublime demands more images, more heads and more buildings. Is this why we build upwards... to stop ourselves from falling?

July 7 2005: The panic as eight bombs exploded somehow outshone the realisation that media hype had made a mistake: There were only four bombs. The '*Is it happening?*' short circuits under the immense pressure of something really happening. We had waited, and waited, and when it happened we waited for it to happen again. On June 21st a dummy round was fired (apparently deliberately). It seems the terrorist is equally embroiled in our anticipatory game.

The Kantian sublime - as outlined in his 'Critique of Judgement' - describes the sensation of looking and feeling when confronted with - in Lyotard's words - 'the absolutely large object,' which fails to provide a representation to this Idea [of reason]. The sublime is that which, measured against ourselves is large beyond comprehension. For Lyotard, it is the question '*Is it happening?*'. Capitalism feeds on such questions, and humanity thrives on a knife-edge, as constantly we escape the death threats issued 24/7 by non-western terrorists across the western media network.

There is a certain climactic joy at the occasional rupture in the usual system of change without change, in a city where the only constant is growth. There is a relief when the inevitable happens, following the initial panic, but only a very short lived one... before we return to the hum-drum of when, and if?

Terror is a good analogy for the modernist sublime, yet the sublime occurs elsewhere,

can be simulated, bought and sold. However, the sublime that kills is subject to the same rules as the sublime in art, the sublime reverence in face of God, and the sublime in architecture. Perhaps the sublime that occurs as incomprehension in the face of *all those numbers* that make up our economy, the sublime that anticipates the next big terror attack, and the sublime fear of divine retribution can only be warded off through the creation of the sublimely huge.

We stand proud; we rise to be counted... building ever upward being the opposite of shrinking, collapsing, and dying. The Shard, in a society that demands spectacle, to ward off the threat of an altogether different kind of spectacle, is representative of a 21st century neurosis. Yes it will be very big, yet it will induce the sublime throughout the building process, and onwards as it presides over the growth of the City for years to come, not for its size, but for what it represents. It is the embodiment of a proud yet godless society. A society predicated entirely on abstractions that are once abstracted even from themselves: God is dead, anything constitutes art (indeed as Joseph Beuys proclaimed, 'Everyone is an artist', and therefore, surely, art ceases to exist as a category), and the economy seems to exist on its own momentum, a false economy with phoney dips and crashes. Left in this position we now look to build a monument to what? The old Christian, leftist and anti-capitalist position, that we build monuments to money, to empire and to boost politicians egos only rings half true. All of these things exist as media and data veils... they too are abstractions. In this sense the Shard threatens to answer back the resounding '*Is it happening?*' with a simple 'No.' The biggest fear, our global catastrophe, highlighted by a monument to nothing... an abstraction of abstraction. We represent nothing, we have become entangled in our own spectacle so far that it is us that have come out of the computer screen as a series of 0's and 1's. The Shard hails the impotence of the resounding 'When?' It shows us the sublime as a huge opening onto nothingness, not as an abundance of questions and ever delayed answers.

That is, if that's how we choose to read it. That is the graveside eulogy delivered by the doubters. We risk, the well-worn argument runs, destroying the skyline, ruining the view of the city churches. We risk becoming a society without faith, turning our backs on the beauty of nature, whilst worshipping ever-bigger buildings as phallic symbols of wealth. It is an argument easily dismissed in face of the fact that we so clearly live in an age of images, impressions, and media suggestions... fallacies.

These objections beckon forth our demise in that they turn a blind eye to the shallowness of the systems we are predicated upon. Global capital is as intangible as God himself, whilst nature can only exist in tandem with the man made. To ignore this speeds our end. Whilst to accept it, to engage in the fallacy that is western society allows for a constant deferment of disaster through spectacle.

The Shard as an exercise in event making, as spectacle, bears tribute to the ever-changing face of London. As a symbol to the nullity of western systems of belief, it also bears witness to the resilience of humanity in adverse conditions. That the godless, with only a reliance on the constant deferment of the '*Is it happening?*' to spur them on, can create and build regardless, is tribute to a certain resilience. The

Shard, the City and London in general, present a sublime that defers the horror of sublime terror, through spectacle, a constant developing and unfurling of ideas and practices.

20th century German philosopher Theodor Adorno provides a link between the Jewish ban on images and our contemporary profane dedications to nothing:

‘The Old Testament prohibition on images has an aesthetic as well as theological dimension. That one should make no image, which means no image of anything whatsoever, expresses at the same time that it is impossible to make such an image.’

The impossibility of creating, visually, an adequate tribute to God finds its parallel (and opposite) in the impulse towards creating perpetual spectacle in a society that has realised its foundations as being of an imaginary kind. The Shard is one of many temples to a new mentality.



The Decorative: On Culture and Beauty

Charlotte Bonham-Carter

In order to understand the role of decoration in art, and in writing more specifically, we need first to understand the meaning of decoration itself. If the notion of decoration in contemporary art is considered paradoxical, constitutively impossible, or otherwise undesirable, I would argue that this reaction is due partly to its superfluous nature, and partly to a conceptually dependent relationship between decoration and beauty.

First, I would like to consider a theory formulated and presented by Brian Eno, at a lecture he delivered at the Royal College of Art. The title of Eno’s lecture was ‘The Big Question,’ and the question here was one about culture, namely, what it is and why we do it. According to Eno, culture is ‘everything we do that we don’t have to,’ and he cites examples from cake decorating and Cezanne, to hair-dressing and Samuel Beckett as evidence. He then makes distinctions between basic self-expressions, such as communication, and their elaborated forms, such as paintings and poems.

I think it is useful to test Eno’s definition of culture against an understanding of decoration, which is often deemed superfluous. In the practice of writing, there are inevitably moments when we write more than we ‘have to’ (depending on the context, sometimes more, and sometimes less). However, while such instances may extend beyond the base form of communication and into, (by Eno’s logic) the domain of culture, they are not necessarily incidents of decoration.

There are two points that distinguish Eno’s notion of culture from decoration: first, writing that is ‘more than one has to’ in the aid of style is not decorative; it is rather a means of developing and demonstrating a distinct identity, and second, writing that is ‘more than one has to’ in the aid of innovation is not decorative; it is rather a means of transcending conventions. So, to formulate a definition of decoration in

writing (or art in general) from Eno's definition, 'everything we do that we don't have to,' I would add, 'that is neither in the aid of formulating a distinct identity, nor innovative.'

While culture can be understood as that which extends beyond the basic needs of human survival, it can also be understood, according to Eno, as an interior monologue that determines one's own understanding of, and preferences in, the world. I would argue that decoration is defined by the lack of such import. With this qualification, the question then becomes, what is the imperative to decorate? In answer to this question, we will consider the aspiration towards beauty in decoration.

The position of beauty in art is a defining characteristic of the modern era. In the *Critique of Judgement*, Immanuel Kant famously tries to define the criteria with which we judge beauty, a judgment he calls 'taste.'¹ He deduces that this judgment is ultimately based on a concept that lies in the 'supersensible substrate of humanity,' a transcendental idea that is, at once, unknowable, presupposed, and universal.

Responding to the *Critique of Judgement*, Thierry de Duve considers Kant's argument after what is arguably the most important development of contemporary art history: Duchamp's submission of the urinal to the committee of the Society of Independent Artists, in 1917. While Kant asserts that the faculty of taste is the faculty of judging the beautiful, he develops a concept he calls 'genius' to account for those intuitive powers within the artist that enable him to transcend conventions of taste (in his art), to indeed give rise to new conventions. In this instance, then, taste refers to the judging of the beautiful, while 'genius' refers to the producing of the beautiful (i.e. art). De Duve asks, then, what would happen if we substituted "art" wherever Kant wrote 'the beautiful'?" De Duve writes, 'The readymade, which has led to this reading, erases every difference between making art and judging it.'² By extension of this logic, then, 'genius' and 'taste' become equivalent.

It is the conflation of 'genius' and 'taste' that is unique to the modern age. Duchamp made it possible to call art something that was commonly thought to be repulsive. According to de Duve, 'From this moment on, it was art that was at stake rather than beauty within art.'³ In considering decoration in writing, this development has enormous reverberations, as it is also the moment in which decoration, which aspires to beauty, became antagonistic to the meaning of art.

The notion of beauty in writing seems an especially peculiar concept, as writing is really a means of translating experience, sometimes beautiful, and sometimes grotesque. The final question might be, then, is decoration in writing necessarily a good thing? I would answer no. But it can be quite fun.



FRENZY: SPIDER

Susan Morris

When I was about ten or eleven years old, glancing through my father's newspaper, I stumbled across an image that shocked me. Since then, every time I remember this image, it brings on a kind of panic. As a strange accompaniment to the simple, rather dull, facts of the actual photograph, I always get the same, familiar, feeling: each time, I go completely 'blank'.

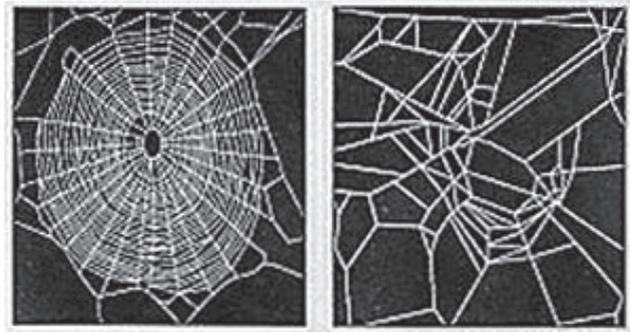
This evocation has echoed throughout the years. Many of my thoughts are woven over it, and much of my work is derived from it. Clearly, I have been *marked* by this image - but in what way? Could it be that I had noticed, in this particular photograph, 'that rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the return of the dead'?

Perhaps I should first say something about the images encountered all those years ago and on which my practice, no doubt, is based. For in fact there were two; a kind of photographic diptych, the images were there to demonstrate the effects of drug-taking on a spider. Two different photographs side by side; two different 'instances' of the creature, one before and one after it had eaten a fly laced with heroin. The spider itself was in neither image, represented instead - or, perhaps, *defined* - by her web; one perfect and the other (after the drug taking) a chaotic shambles. Apart from the intention of the photographs - that of terrifying any potential heroin user into 'just saying no' - (although the caffeine injected spider, as I later discovered, produces a far greater ruin) the question for me remains: what terrified me about the image itself?

¹ See the *Critique of Judgement*, trans, J.C. Meredith, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1952, for further details of this concept.

² De Duve, Thierry, *Kant After Duchamp*, MIT Press, Cambridge and London, 1997, p. 312.

³ De Duve, Thierry, *Kant After Duchamp*, MIT Press, Cambridge and London, 1997, p. 317.



The spider draws the thread from her body. Her movements are compulsive (she knows not what she does) and through these movements she weaves a net. The net is a trap - she consumes all she catches there. The spider's web is both her habitation, and the mark, trace, or notation of her being; through it she can be identified. The web is also therefore her self-portrait - a mirror of her being. And while it is difficult to work out what the scientists at NASA might have thought that the spider had in common with the human, for Lacan, it is completely straightforward. Like the marks which 'rain' from the painters brush, what falls from the spider is not the result of a set of decisions, comes not out of choice, but from what Lacan insists is 'something *else* ... If a bird were to paint', he suggests, 'would it not be by letting fall its feathers, a snake by casting off its scales, a tree by letting fall its leaves?'² What the spider does is completely natural. (Note: James Joyce used to do a little dance he called 'the spider' whenever he was suffering from writer's block)

Decoration is by its very nature superfluous, added at the end of all functional work, like an afterthought - a beyond or outside of thought - for which 'culture' has no need. Perhaps one of the spider webs represented this lawlessness to me; certainly something had got out of hand. Baroque architecture provides a place for this kind of lawlessness (despite the fact that this pleasure is also regulated) and can thereby arouse feelings of revulsion in more 'civilised' minds. It is, as the curator of this exhibition has pointed out (to return these thoughts to their initial context), excessive, wasteful; terms often more associated with the 'little death' of orgasm. Both superfluous and luxurious, it spills all over the place.

Decoration, as Alex Schady³ suggests, 'prevents us from getting to the core of the thing itself'. Instead it encourages a kind of loitering, a hanging around on the brink, a doodling around the edge. Decoration is an act of vandalism, usually surrounding an empty space or hole which itself is often illusory (and announces itself as so). Something remains missing; 'out of it'. Drawing attention to the frame, to the edge, doodling might therefore be associated with anxiety, with the threat to selfhood.

Photography must surely be the epitome of 'non-decorative' art. Yet there is something that it has in common with modes of representation in general⁴, and

something that it shares with drawing in particular; and with two distinct types of drawing - the mark and the scribble. By this I mean the mark as that which marks out, maps and structures space, the diagram, as 'variations of the subjectifying structure'⁵, that demonstrates or points out our position in the symbolic order (an artificial system), as well as the scribble; that which falls short of this kind of articulation, and where something else, some kind of refusal or inability to speak, is going on. Baroque or Rococo architecture, being very accommodating, may be where these two drawing styles meet. Similarly, the 'before' and 'after' photographs of the spider webs also illustrate (or act out) these two positions; of speech, the speaking subject, and of something else outside of that. The two incidences of the spider show both something pleasurable; how pleasure operates, and that which is beyond pleasure, in excess of it.

Derrida suggests that the origin of photography should parallel that of the origin of drawing, which 'necessitates a moment of non-seeing [blindness] in which the artist depicts the ruins of a previous vision. Or rather, there is no initial vision that is not already a ruin'⁶. This is interesting (for me at least) in relation to the feeling I have that my own work is also based on an original encounter - a moment of self recognition or disappearance - with something I barely remember, and which I probably didn't really 'see'. Is 'remembrance', as an activity that breaks through, disrupts, splits or ruptures the (symbolic) order; therefore itself disorderly? Out of order? Remembrance (not memory) is closer to forgetting; hence its relation or link to the trauma, and to its obsessive nature, the repetitive or compulsive activity that often accompanies it (the feeling that we have been there before). My work might take the form of a compulsive restaging of that which I saw; the holes in the net, which, like dropped stitches, stand in for (represent) moments of blanking out; for something that fails to register, to get into language.

In the image of the spider's web I encountered, if not the frenzy of love, then the next best thing. Either way, the result was the same. Was it horror that stopped my heart, or ecstasy? Was it revulsion, or pity? If pity, it would have had to have been of a particular type, related to madness, like that which Barthes experiences when he realises that all the photographic images that had "pricked" him had also trapped him. 'In each of them, inescapably, I passed beyond the unreality of the thing represented, I entered crazily into the spectacle, into the image, taking into my arms, what is dead, what is going to die, as Nietzsche did when, as Podach tells us, on January 3, 1889, he threw himself in tears on the neck of a beaten horse: gone mad for Pity's sake.'⁷

Barthes tries to describe 'the special quality of this hallucination', and remembers a film, which, having initially bored him, suddenly jolts him awake. This shock occurs at the moment in the film (Fellini's *Casanova*) when the automaton enters the screen and with which (with whom?) Casanova begins to dance. At this point, Barthes writes, 'my eyes were touched with a kind of painful and delicious intensity.' As if a veil had suddenly been lifted, for Barthes, the moment was 'something [like] the pangs of love '...as if I were suddenly experiencing the effects of a strange drug.'⁸

- ¹ Barthes, R, (2000) *Camera Lucida*, Vintage, London, p9
- ² Lacan, J (1994) *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Penguin, London, p114 (My Italics)
- ³ Curator: *Frenzy*, Metropole Galleries, Folkestone, July 2006
- ⁴ Geoffrey Batchen suggests that photography should be considered in relation to Derrida's commentary on representation in general, which 'is assumed to be a complicitous entanglement of sight and blindness, absence and presence, life and death, construction and ruin' (Batchen op cit. p172)
- ⁵ Lacan, J (1994) *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Penguin, London, p109
- ⁶ Jay, M, (1944) *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in 20th Century French Thought*, University of California Press, p522
- ⁷ Barthes, R, (2000) *Camera Lucida*, Vintage, London, p117
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p116

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