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# Impersonality and Emotion in Twentieth-Century British Arts

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# Impersonality and Emotion in Twentieth-Century British Arts

Edited by  
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&  
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# Introduction

Christine Reynier and Jean-Michel Ganteau

This volume includes the selected papers from two CERVEC conferences held in the University Paul Valéry-Montpellier III in 2005 and 2006 and comes as a sequel to a previous publication, *Impersonality and Emotion in Twentieth-Century British Literature*,<sup>1</sup> which explored the paradoxical connections between impersonality and emotion, two notions central to modernist as well as to later British literature. Impersonality and emotion, introduced conjointly by T.S. Eliot in his 1919 essay ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent,’<sup>2</sup> were traced from Eliot’s theory of impersonality and ‘significant emotion’ through intentionality theories to contemporary reader-response and other theories. A significant sample of early and late twentieth-century writers, poets and playwrights was examined in the light of these two notions that proved to have been defined and redefined throughout the century and always related in various, sometimes unexpected but nonetheless stimulating, ways.

It seemed legitimate to transfer the two notions of impersonality and emotion from the world of poetry and fiction to that of the fine arts since Eliot himself writes not simply of literary emotion but of ‘art emotion.’ Moreover, these two notions need not be restricted to Eliot’s terms but can be fledged up with contemporary notions, such as Roger Fry’s Kantian theory of ‘disinterested contemplation’<sup>3</sup> or Clive Bell’s ‘significant form,’ or later concepts, like Walter Benjamin’s ‘aura.’<sup>4</sup> Through the double prism of impersonality and emotion, the first set of articles presented here

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1. Christine Reynier & Jean-Michel Ganteau eds., *Impersonality and Emotion in Twentieth-Century British Literature. Present Perfect 1* (Montpellier: Publications de l’Université Montpellier 3, 2005)

2. T.S. Eliot, ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent,’ *Selected Essays* (1932; London: Faber and Faber, 1999) 13-22.

3. Roger Fry, *Vision and Design* (1920; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981).

4. Walter Benjamin, ‘L’Œuvre d’art à l’époque de sa reproductibilité technique’ (1935), *Oeuvres III* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000) 67-113.

bring to light if not the tenets of Modernism, at least some of the aesthetic principles of representative artists of the time.

Modernist British painting, sculpture, photography and cinema is examined and first set against the Victorian decadent art of Bearsdley, one of the modernists' immediate forebears, in Catherine Delyfer's article. Modernism is an umbrella term that can cover many different realities. It was first used to refer to technological innovations and there were plenty at the beginning of the twentieth century which witnessed the rise of radio as well as of the British film industry. New forms of art developed concomitantly with BBC broadcasting and with the cinema, as Claire Pegon and Fabio Vericat show in their respective analyses of Wyndham Lewis's radio plays and Hitchcock's films. Photography also benefited from more sophisticated techniques that led to the works Nicole Cloarec, Aude Ferrand and Gulshan Taneja scrutinise.

Modernism is also a compound of artistic movements that range from post-impressionism to futurism, vorticism and expressionism, to quote only the main ones. On the one hand, there are the 'hard facts' one can grasp easily enough: December 1910: first Post-Impressionist exhibition at the Grafton Gallery; March 1911: first Futurist display at the Sackville Gallery; 20 June 1914: first edition of *Blast*, Wyndham Lewis's magazine. On the other hand, there are the misty contours of these artistic movements that were sometimes short-lived, or that merged into each other like imagism and vorticism, or reacted violently against one another. Wyndham Lewis, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska (both discussed at length by Kunio Shin, Lucy Edwards, Trevor Brent and H  l  ne Aji) under the banner of vorticism denounced the pseudo-formalism of Clive Bell and Roger Fry.

In his *Vortex* Gaudier rewrites the history of art in terms of form, wiping away in a few words Western art from the Renaissance to impressionism, retaining only the types of art that rely on form and masses, on intensity and energy, best illustrated in the paleolithic art of the caverns. 'Vortex is energy!', he writes; 'Plastic soul is intensity of life bursting the plane': plastic form is what he recognizes in Epstein, Brancusi or Modigliani's work. Vorticism parades as an art of intensity where emotion is equated with form, in music as well as in literature, in sculpture as well as in painting or dancing, as Pound showed in the first edition of *Blast*.<sup>2</sup> It tended towards pure formalism, abstraction and a dehumanised form of art, far

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1. Ezra Pound, *Henri Gaudier-Brzeska*, trad. C. Mini  re et M. Tunstill (Toulouse: Arpap & Galerie Marwan Hoss, 1992). In this edition, Gaudier's original *Vortex* is reproduced at the end in manuscript form.

2. See Pound 1992.

from the brand of formalism Clive Bell defended with his concept of ‘significant form’<sup>1</sup> for, as Tomlin writes, ‘once the apostles of “form” begin to talk about “significant form,” they cease to be pure formalists.’<sup>2</sup> And most probably the vorticists wouldn’t have recognized themselves in Fredric Jameson’s definition of modernism as ‘a whole Utopian compensation for increasing dehumanisation on the level of daily life.’<sup>3</sup>

These provocative artists were those Ford Madox Ford called ‘the tapageux and riotous Jeunes.’<sup>4</sup> They defined themselves mostly in oppositional terms as being against impressionism, a superficial form of art; against Futurism, a representational art and an art of the ‘tabula rasa’ that wanted to do away with the monuments and art of the past; and against the Bloomsbury set, too tame, well-bred and traditional in their eyes, privileging introspection, inner life whereas they defended an external approach, like the expressionists. The first half of this volume seems to subscribe to the divisions advocated by the vorticists between themselves and Bloomsbury since the Bloomsbury artists are hardly represented here whereas Lewis and Gaudier loom large. In fact, it should be read conjointly with *Les Cahiers Victoriens et Edouardiens* 62,<sup>5</sup> prepared at the time the 2004 conference was held, which provides *Insights into the Legacy of Bloomsbury* and complements this panoramic presentation of modernist British art.

In any case, the present volume should help us rethink this opposition or at least qualify it since first we cannot ignore the fact that these artists, however different, knew each other and worked together: Wyndham Lewis worked for a while with Roger Fry at the Omega workshop; Vanessa Bell, Duncan Grant, David Bomberg and Wyndham Lewis all studied drawing and painting with the same professor, Henry Tonks, at the Slade School. Secondly, ‘Les Jeunes’, in Ford Madox Ford’s terms, were not always breaking new ground as they pretended to since Victorian artists had already registered the impact of the machine and its dehumanising effect or since the impressionism they denounced had been dead for a long while. And finally, what is perhaps more obvious today is that, rather than divisions, there was an intense circulation of

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1. See Clive Bell, *Art* (1914; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

2. E.W.F. Tomlin, *Wyndham Lewis* (London: Longman, 1955) 33.

3. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Routledge, 1983) 42.

4. Ford Madox Ford: *The Good Soldier*, Dedicatory Letter to Stella Ford (London: Norton, 1995) 4.

5. Christine Reynier ed., *Insights into the Legacy of Bloomsbury. With Unpublished Essays and Memoirs by Roger Fry, Vanessa Bell and Virginia Woolf, Les Cahiers Victoriens et Edouardiens* 62 (October 2005).

ideas amongst those groups. For example, the imagist pronouncement that verse should become hard ‘through being concise and paring away all ornamental frills’<sup>1</sup> is very close to Virginia Woolf’s desire to ‘eliminate all waste, deadness, superfluity’<sup>2</sup>, although she has never been called an imagist novelist. More telling perhaps, in the field we are interested in here, we may notice that in his vorticist manifesto, Gaudier extols the virtues of primitive art just as Clive Bell finds the first signs of Cézanne’s ‘significant form’ in primitive art. These may serve as illustrations of the circulation of ideas within the various modernist British groups as well as of their own specific conception of impersonality and emotion.

The second half of the volume devoted to more recent manifestations belonging to a variety of artistic fields, from narrative art (drama and film, as evinced in the articles of Susana R. Roman and Karim Chabani) to more visual art like architecture (see Michel Morel’s panoramic evocation of London’s contemporary skyline and interior spaces, either public or corporate), sculpture (in Catherine Bernard’s evocation of Rachel Whiteread’s ‘unthinkable spaces’), photography (Philip Horst on Darren Almond, among others), painting (with Brigitte Malinas-Vaugien’s evocation of the School of London painters, and Marjorie Van Baelinghem’s probings into Lucian Freud’s elaborations) and other installations in which the distinction between the narrative and the visual has become more problematic. Concentrating on the latter are Lawrence Gasquet’s approach to Damien Hirst, Julie Morère’s evocation of Julian Opie’s multifaceted though minimalist *œuvre*, Stephen Monteiro’s detour into the seemingly minimalist, more cryptic productions of a Ceal Floyer, and Jean-Michel Ganteau’s concentration on one of Sam Taylor-Wood’s most famous videos. Those can be contextualised within the YBA movement of which Charlotte Gould provides a penetrating, rather comprehensive view. Ronald Shusterman, starting from an example taken from film, provides insights that go well beyond the limits of genre and periodisation to raise the issue of a new hermeneutics of sensation.

Overall, then, two main areas and eras of crystallization appear in the volume’s evocation of contemporary artists, around on the one hand, the School of London painters, and then on the other hand, the Young British Artists and their productions. More specifically, when reading the following pages, one might grow aware of the recurrent interest in neo-sublime aesthetics as emerging from various articles, as a tapping of a now secular

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1. Malcolm Bradbury, *Modernism. A Guide to European Literature. 1890-1930* (1976; London: Penguin, 1991) 238.

2. Virginia Woolf, *A Writer’s Diary* (London: Hogarth Press, 1953) Wednesday, November 28.

way of problematising the impersonality and emotion couple. This might be used, by way of synthesis, to insist on three modalities that seem to be operating in the impersonality and emotion dialogue.

The first one, as stated above, is the sublime, more particularly the way in which sublime emotion, without renouncing any of its pathetic effect, quite systematically goes hand in hand with impersonal abstraction in its capturing of powers and forces that go well beyond the psychological.

The second one, as may well be expected from contemporary production, which is so much concerned with the idea of the tradition to which it belongs, even in problematical, ambivalent fashion, has much to see with the traditional category of *imitatio*, a practice in which the artist has to surrender any exclusive attempt at originality and personality to become a performer of the score of ancient music. In such circumstances, the emotional aspect of the score retains its power while respecting the general requisite of impersonality.

The third one turns its back to the realm of aesthetics to move into that of ethics. What is meant more precisely here is that in the dehumanised, impersonal represented worlds of contemporary art, and in the representational choices, often of a fairly minimalist, objective type that go along with them, what appears is a manifestation of disinterestedness, or more specifically an attempt at suggesting that, together with artistic manifestations that are radically suspicious of traditional representation, there is a tendency to try to situate relations not exclusively under the aegis of ontology but, perhaps, 'otherwise than being.'



# Sensation, Impersonality and Disinterestedness in Beardsley's Representation of the Body

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Beardsley's art defies classification. His particular mixture of low life and high art makes it both sensational and aloof, personal and remote. His defenders legitimated his openly sexual drawings by foregrounding Beardsley's mastery of form and emphasizing a disinterested way of viewing his pictures. Impersonal form served to facilitate acceptance of challenging content. This study brings into focus the ideological underpinnings of such theories of impersonality.

Mastering the representation of the naked body is a required stage in any artist's training. The nude, whether male or female, has always received special attention in the Western artistic tradition. Yet in today's Western cultures it is not always easy to distinguish between artistic and pornographic representations of the body. This is because the limits of the pornographic and the non-pornographic are constantly being redefined. As Lynda Nead has remarked, pornography is not a separate realm of representation distinct from other forms of cultural production. It does not exist in isolation, which means that the term's meaning goes through historical changes, and notions of decency and indecency are culturally constructed and reconstructed.<sup>1</sup>

In the nineteenth century these boundaries were re-negotiated and stretched by poets like C. A. Swinburne or by artists such as Dante Gabriel

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1. Lynda Nead, 'The Female Nude: Pornography, Art and Sexuality,' *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 15 (1990): 323-335.

Rossetti<sup>1</sup> or the British late-nineteenth century pen-and-ink graphic artist, Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898). Aubrey Beardsley was one of a handful of Victorian artists who made it possible for the body's open sexuality to become acceptable in twentieth century European art. His art used sexually explicit images and tropes that until his time could only be found in pornography. His works caused a sensation but maintained their status as high art because of Beardsley's mastery of form over content: his use of 'tradition' in T. S. Eliot's sense, together with his distancing techniques, gave restraint, aloofness, impersonality to his art and limited physical and emotional response to his images in favour of a largely intellectual approach.

Bearing in mind the aesthetic shift operated by Shaftesbury and Kant and using the reformulation of Kantian aesthetics by T. S. Eliot and Clive Bell, I shall analyze Beardsley's appropriation of pornography under the rubric of art, and how concepts such as 'tradition,' 'art emotion,' 'impersonality' and 'disinterestedness' apply to Beardsley's art. With their unique and paradoxical blend of low life and high art Beardsley's works bring into focus the ideological underpinnings of such theories.

In her book on *Modernism, Mass Culture and the Aesthetics of Obscenity*, Allison Pease describes how the boundaries between aesthetics and pornography first became a subject of intellectual interest in the eighteenth century and served to reinforce class distinctions.<sup>2</sup> In eighteenth-century Britain, art and aesthetic experience were redefined by the emergent upper-middle classes through the modern discourse of aesthetics, which presented art as that which has no practical use and incites disinterested intellectual recognition. Theorists from Shaftesbury to Kant viewed the aesthetic experience as promoting the cognitive over the physical faculties. In addition, showing an interest in art was considered a rational, moral and civic-minded activity which identified one as belonging to the upper classes. While aesthetic experience as articulated in the eighteenth century allowed one to transcend and ultimately deny the body, and the materialism on which the upper classes were grounded, pornography on the other hand firmly rooted the viewer *in* the body. As opposed to aes-

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1. Rossetti's interest in and use of pornography are analyzed by Griselda Pollock in *Vision and Difference, Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988) 91-154 and by Robin Sheets in 'Pornography and Art: The Case of Jenny,' *Critical Inquiry* 14. 2 (1988): 315-334. Swinburne's poetry of obscenity is examined in Richard Sieburth, 'Poetry and Obscenity: Baudelaire and Swinburne,' *Comparative Literature* 36.4 (1984): 343-353.

2. Allison Pease, *Modernism, Mass Culture and the Aesthetics of Obscenity* (Cambridge UP, 2000) 11.

thetic disinterest, pornography triggered interest, both physical and financial, in terms of sexual arousal and significant profit. In the eighteenth century, Pease claims, pornography gained public recognition as a genre diametrically opposed to aesthetic ideals, because it threatened the class hierarchies on which aesthetic theories of the time rested, by exposing common experience in physical sensations. Furthermore, the commercial and physical associations of pornography linked it symbolically with the working classes and lower middle classes; the selfish individualism that pornography celebrated was considered detrimental to polite society and social cohesiveness. Importantly, Pease reminds us, the discourses of aesthetics and of pornography became publicly recognized at the same historical moment and were mutually generated as well as being mutually exclusive.<sup>1</sup>

Kant's *Critique of Judgment* thus represented a cultural shift in the eighteenth century, from viewing the art object as having an instrumental value (delight and instruct) to viewing the art object as having an autonomous value, existing for the sake of its own intrinsic perfection. As Kant's aesthetic philosophy became culturally dominant in Britain in the second half of the nineteenth century, form became the foremost signifier of what was considered beautiful and hence high art. Contrary to other aspects of the work of art which might stimulate a subjective and personal sensation or emotion in the viewer, form is according to Kant that which appeals to reason and has universal value.

The theoretical writings of T. S. Eliot and Clive Bell, at the beginning of the twentieth century, clearly showed the perpetuation of similar dichotomies (culture vs. nature, intellectual and universal delights vs. bodily and private pleasures, form vs. emotion). Both Bell and Eliot endorsed the Kantian notion that there is a particular kind of emotion linked to the experience of true art, an emotion that is distinct from any other life emotions or life sensations. The aesthetic emotion is stirred by formal arrangements or 'combinations,' which they call 'significant.' Both Bell's idea of 'significant form' and Eliot's notion of 'significant emotion'—or 'art emotion'—rest on a formalist approach which denies the relevance of life impressions. In his 1919 essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent,' Eliot argued that

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1. Although art and pornography are still often thought of in these oppositional terms, Nead remarks that they should be seen instead as two terms within a greater semantic continuum which is constantly being redefined and which includes other categories, such as the obscene, the erotic, and the sensual (Nead 325).

the intensity of the poetry is something quite different from whatever intensity in the supposed experience it may give the impression of. [ . . . ] [T]he difference between art and the event is always absolute [ . . . ]. Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion [ . . . ]. The emotion of art is impersonal.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, in *Art* (1914), Bell asserted that in a visual work of art,

the emotions of life find no place [ . . . ]. A good work of visual art carries a person who is capable of appreciating it out of life into ecstasy [ . . . ], people who cannot feel *pure* aesthetic emotions remember pictures by their subjects; whereas people who can [ . . . ] have no idea what the subject of a picture is [ . . . ]. Often they can tell by the quality of a single line whether or not a man is a good artist. They are concerned only with lines and colours, their relations and quantities and qualities [ . . . ].<sup>2</sup>

In Ruskinian fashion, Bell concluded that pure aesthetic emotion might prove the world's salvation for 'he who can feel the profound significance of form is raised above the accidents of time and place [ . . . ]. It is the mark of great art that its appeal is universal and eternal.' T. S. Eliot described how this universality might be attained: through *tradition*, which

involves [ . . . ] the historical sense [ . . . ] and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. [ . . . ] [T]he mind of Europe—the mind of his own country—[is] a mind which he learns in time to be much more important than his own private mind [ . . . ]. (Eliot, 14)

T. S. Eliot's injunction to escape the private in order to reach the traditional perpetuates the high cultural vantage point begun in the late eighteenth century, with the division of high and low arts by intrinsic or instrumental value. It is a reformulation of the aesthetic philosophy of the eighteenth century, which posited 'disinterest' as the hallmark of true art creation and true art appreciation. Arguing that the individual needs to be

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1. T. S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent,' *Selected essays* (1932; London: Faber & Faber, 1999) 19-22.

2. Clive Bell, *Art* (1914; Oxford UP, 1989) chapter 1.

sacrificed ('self-sacrifice', Eliot 17) to the cultural, the national, the universal is another way of saying that art should not be for selfish individual interest, i.e. use, that art should not be an object of consumption, but should be a universal object of contemplation. In addition, Eliot's theory confirms the primary importance in art of the cultural capital and the classical education of the dominant class.

In the late nineteenth century, the emphasis on formal concerns became more pressing and was perpetuated by upper middle-class anxiety about the increased access to art and literature enjoyed by the working and lower middle-classes. The unprecedented rise of journalism in the 1890s, which catered largely to the newly educated classes, caused panic in the high-cultural sphere about the success of certain art forms which threatened to marginalize high art. The debased value of art in the commercial sphere made the artists of the 1890s eager to find more abstruse ways of expressing their art. In fact, much of the extravagance of the artistic production in the 1890s can be seen as a protest against commercial society. 'True' art needed to be conceived in opposition to mass culture.

Interestingly, however, mass-cultural forms did make their way into art that aspired to high-cultural status, as the example of Beardsley shows. Not only did he incorporate low and mass-cultural material such as pornography, but he cultivated a stark black and white style which was particularly suited for distribution via the press, since his pen-and-ink drawings could be reproduced mechanically without any loss of quality. While acknowledging and exploiting the new market, Beardsley's art, however, continued to play on the traditional signifiers of high art in order to perpetuate its place within high culture, in order to maintain a form of artistic aristocracy.

Beardsley's work started attracting public attention in 1893 when it appeared in the first issue of Charles Holme's magazine *The Studio*. Following Gautier, Baudelaire and Swinburne, Beardsley chose to create beautiful forms out of subjects which seemed inharmonious. Perfection of form was in itself seen as an aesthetic virtue, so that Beardsley's subjects, which up to then had remained outside of art—subjects such as masturbation, homoeroticism, sadomasochism, necrophilia, zoophilia etc.—, were allowed into art under the pretense that a beautiful form could purify and transfigure an ugly or sinful content. Although most Victorian critics were reluctant to accept the decadent subjects of Beardsley's works, they were quite ready to describe the treatment as artistic. They compared Beardsley's black and white drawings to the designs on antique

vases and they stressed that the 1896 *Lysistrata* drawings (see Figures 1 and 2) were illustrations of Aristophanes' classical play. The use of classical, culturally approved tales operated as a token of high culture. Focusing on form, critics maintained a pretense to disinterest, and thus perpetuated the division between high and low arts. Eventually, in 1896, Beardsley had to start publishing his increasingly daring drawings with Leonard Smithers, a known publisher of pornography. Yet to many who legitimated Beardsley's work it was the formal quality of the works and the cultural capital expressed in them which mattered; in short, what mattered was his ability to represent the codes of artistic excellence as defined by the high culture of his time.

*Cinesias Entreating Myrrhina to Coition* (Fig. 1) demonstrates Beardsley's juggling act between the aesthetic and the pornographic. The loosely draped, frontally exposed woman in stockings was a common scene in erotic postcards of the time (Pease 97). But while pornographic images are designed for the personal use of the voyeur, Beardsley's picture disrupts the typical visual organization of the image and prevents any sensuous reaction. The figure of Myrrhina challenges conventional Victorian representations of women usually portrayed as self-absorbed, unapproachable figures who bashfully offer themselves up to a male spectator's enjoyment. Far from being the typically coy or dreamy female character, Myrrhina is a powerful figure who is granted sexual autonomy. She is laughing and seems indifferent to the viewer, while Cinesias is reduced to a ridiculously small shape at the drawing's edge. In addition his extremely disproportionate, erect penis makes him look particularly comical and grotesque. In fact *Cinesias* is a deconstruction of the voyeuristic process. Cinesias's lifted gaze is not directed at the laughing woman and the latter refuses to provide sexual relief to her pursuer. Evidently this is a reversal of the pornographic mode. Similarly, the *Lacedaemonian Ambassadors* (1896) (Fig. 2) is a refusal of the pornographic ideal, and the massive genitals of the ambassadors are a source of frustration, not pleasure. In both cases, Beardsley's images function both as appropriations of and commentaries on the pornographic genre. In these two pictures, Beardsley further distances his art from the pornographic by creating a visual distraction from the bodies depicted. As Christopher Snodgrass has remarked, the eye of the viewer is drawn to the clothing, headpieces, hair or stockings.<sup>1</sup> The dark or shaded parts of the work, i.e. the parts which are made to stand out, are indeed the decorative details and not the dis-

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1. Christopher Snodgrass, *Aubrey Beardsley: Dandy of the Grotesque* (New York: Oxford UP, 1995) 210.

played bodies. The physically exposed parts of bodies are left in white, the same as the background. In this way the bodies themselves are understated and underemphasized, even though they are the apparent reason for the drawing.

Beardsley's drawings challenge the traditional view criticized by Nead that the pornographic resides *within* the image, that it is a question of content rather than form, of production rather than consumption. On the other hand, Nead has remarked that commercial or titillating representations of sex are usually called pornographic when they are 'regarded as an incitement to action rather than contemplative reading [or viewing]' (Nead 328). In fact, the pornographic should indeed primarily be defined in terms of form and mode of consumption. If, as Allison Pease argues, pornography is a form of visual consumption, 'not a passive act of watching, but rather a consumption, a taking in of an image for personal use, a subjection of the image to the body' (Pease 84), then Beardsley's images are not pornographic. Contrary to pornography, Beardsley's images achieve a depersonalization of the pornographic; they are a deconstruction of the 'subjection of the image to the body.'

In general, Beardsley gains aesthetic distance from the pornographic tropes he chooses by using parody or irony, which suggests critical distance and assessment. In Beardsley's pictures ironic distance usually focuses not on the sexual representation itself, but on how that representation is received, as in *Cinesias*. This technique serves to differentiate the image from the representations of the pornographic in order to establish a critical distance from them by repeating and reproducing them in an incongruent context. This has the effect of making the pornographic representations absurd, hence impotent. It also allows Beardsley to unmask what is usually concealed in the pornographic image, i.e. the origin of the gaze, the point of view, which is typically masculine, together with the power relations that this gaze supposes. As Linda Gertner Zatin has shown, by presenting humorous images of male sexuality as well as positive images of women as erotic *subjects* instead of degrading images of women as erotic *objects*, Beardsley deliberately modified the pornographic conventions to strip them of their misogyny.<sup>1</sup>

It appears that by reconfiguring the pornographic context Beardsley is thus successful at limiting and controlling it. On the one hand, Beardsley's refusal to observe the segregation of high and low—pure and impure, impersonal and personal, masculine subject and feminine object—made

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1. See Linda G. Zatin, 'Felicien Rops and Aubrey Beardsley: The Naked and the Nude,' in *Reconsidering Aubrey Beardsley* (UMI Press, 1989) and Linda G. Zatin, *Aubrey Beardsley and Victorian Sexual Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

his art subversive. His drawings seemed all the more dangerous to his contemporaries as his technical mastery so clearly designated his achievements as artistic. On the other hand, he appropriated pornography for high art, indirectly making sexual representation safe for the middle classes. The appropriation of the pornographic into high art resulted in neutralizing the potentially subversive effects of sexual pictures while exposing and therefore perpetuating upper class control and denial of the body. Paradoxically, Beardesley's exposure of the body as formally controlled through high art was to a large extent a continuation of its distancing and its objectification.

At the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, the low or popular arts were perceived as being associated with profits and interest, while the high arts were linked to disinterest. Low arts were associated with economic capital while high art was linked to symbolic capital. With its emphasis on profit, consumption, personal enjoyment and the individual, mass culture was vilified by the defenders of high culture who valued distanced intellectual contemplation, detachment and impersonality.

This distinction between high and low approaches to art, between consumption and disinterest, absorption and distance, bears similarities with what Walter Benjamin has identified as a major aesthetic shift at the turn of the nineteenth century from an art of aura to an art of distraction (*Zerstreuung*). In his essay on the technological reproducibility of the work of art, Benjamin argues that before the rise of mass-cultural consumption, art was characterized by its 'aura,' which he defines as 'the unique phenomenon of a distance'<sup>1</sup> however close the object may be. The notion of art as defined by a distance, or disinterest, arose as a response to the perceived threat of marginalization by the commercial arts. Created for profit and with the explicit purpose of creating a physical subjectivity and a bodily consumption, pornography is the antithesis of the art of aura, for distance is precisely what a bodily approach tries to reduce. Reaching its maturity in an age of mass reproduction, the pornographic genre represents mass-culture and its repudiation of distance. For Benjamin, distance and concentration are characteristic of the art of aura while immediacy, consumption, distraction are typical of the mass-cultural arts. 'Distraction and concentration form polar opposites which may be stated as follows: A man who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it. He enters into this work of art [ . . . ]. In contrast, the distracted mass absorbs

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1. Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,' *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968) 222.

the work of art.' (Benjamin 239) As in the Kantian model, the aesthetic experience aims to remove the subject from himself and from personal interests. Aesthetic form is what allows and even forces distance.

As Howard Eiland has pointed out, *Zerstruung* is a slippery concept, used both negatively and positively by Benjamin.<sup>1</sup> Eiland draws attention to the fact that in his analysis of Brechtian drama, Benjamin uses the word to characterize bourgeois theatre, i.e. stupefying, complacent diversion which appeals to the emotions, and above all to the capacity for empathy, for identifying with characters. It is opposed to epic theatre, which engenders critical distance. For Bertolt Brecht epic theatre seeks to astonish the audience through the alienation effect and by means of the interruption of sequences. By making ordinary objects and actions seem strange, it renders them conspicuous and encourages the audience to reflect on them and, more generally, on contradictions in social conditions. Beardsley's critique operates through a similar shock-effect.

Beardsley's work is therefore interesting as a turning point when high art began appropriating popular media in order to maintain its supremacy, allowing the body's sexuality visibility in order to control it more effectively and subordinate it to form. Beardsley's drawings reflect the struggle between old and new, aura and distraction, distance and absorption, mind and body, impersonal and personal. Despite their apparent flippancy and frivolousness, they aim at shaking their viewers out of torpor through shock, dissonance and incongruence. Beardsley's art forces distance and performs a critique of the social construction of sexuality and gender identities.

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1. Howard Eiland, 'Reception in Distraction,' *Boundary 2* 30.1 (2003): 51-66.



Figure 1. — Aubrey Beardsley, *Cinesias Entreating Myrrha to Coition*

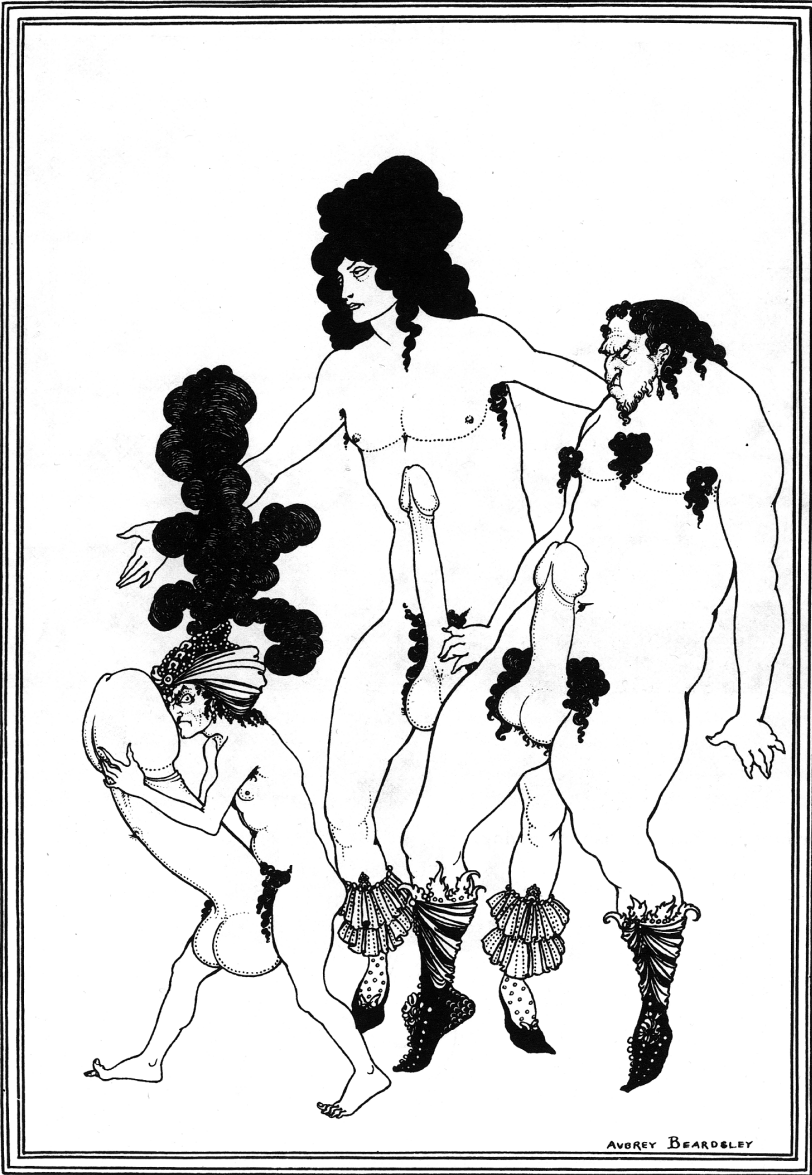


Figure 2. — Aubrey Beardsley, *The Lacedaemonian Ambassadors*



# Vorticist Abstraction and the Question of Impersonality in Wyndham Lewis

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In this paper, I analyse Wyndham Lewis's Vorticist paintings by focusing on the ambiguity in the impersonality of their abstract style. This can be traced back to the inconsistency of his aesthetic, which was an enabling ambiguity for Lewis in Vorticism, but turned out to be a disabling dilemma for Lewis in the years of the Great War. Admittedly, it led to the failure of Vorticism, but I also argue that Lewis developed his mature theory about the relation between art and modernity by learning from this failure.

'Abstraction' is arguably one of the most important innovations of modernist art. Throughout his long career, Wyndham Lewis was concerned with the experiments of abstract art, both as a leading modernist painter and an influential art critic of early-twentieth century England. Yet his engagement with abstract art has a strange history of uneven development. As a painter, Lewis started to follow the trend towards abstraction in Europe from around 1912. Already at that time, possibilities of abstraction were widely explored in the Cubist experiments of Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, and German Expressionism of Wassily Kandinsky. Lewis's own attempts at abstraction reached a point of culmination in the Vorticist movement, launched in 1914 with the publication of its aggressive official organ, *Blast 1*. But this abstract style didn't last long. Already in 1915 or 1916 Lewis abandoned his extreme abstraction. The development of Vorticism was terminated in the adverse circumstances of the Great War. Lewis gradually changed his style to employ his angular pictorial idioms for the purpose of various representations, not only in his work as an official war artist until 1919, but also in his post-war series of satirical pictures (dubbed 'Tyros'), and highly eccentric visionary fantasies in the 1930s and 1940s.

Lewis reached the end of his extreme abstraction around 1914 or 1915, while most of the major abstract canvases were painted after the end of the Great War by European painters such as Kasimir Malevich or Piet Mondrian. We might think of it as a narrative of historical misfortune which frustrated the potential of Lewis's artistic innovation.<sup>1</sup> Yet I want to underscore the fact that, as a critic, Lewis started to think about the attempt at abstraction more deeply from around 1915 in *Blast 2*, which is the final volume of this avant-garde organ. Paradoxically, it is only after Lewis started to retreat from his own practice in extreme abstract art that he developed a mature thought on abstraction. If Lewis failed to pursue his abstract style to a certain perfection in the post-war years, I suggest that Lewis's persistent effort to consider the status of abstraction in modern society is as important as anything in his artistic creation. Lewis managed to construct a system of aesthetic thought in the early 1920s, in pieces such as 'Essay on the Objective of Plastic Art in Our Time' and 'The Credentials of the Painter,' both published in 1922. With necessary changes, Lewis continued to use this system of thought to criticize the development of modernist culture in the Britain of the 1930s, so it is important for us to learn how Lewis reached his mature aesthetic position in the early 1920s.

First of all, I want to consider Lewis's extreme abstraction of the Vorticist period, and show how it encountered its setback in the years of the Great War. Although he lacked any firm theoretical conviction of his own at this stage, Lewis executed these Vorticist geometries in a strong manner of dogmatic avant-gardism. Yet I would argue that this was only a rhetorical strength in a rather weak basis of actual ambiguities and contradictions. This basis was enabling ambiguities for Lewis before the Great War. With the outbreak of the war, however, it suddenly turned out to be a disabling dilemma. It is tempting to consider that this is also the reason why Lewis's extreme abstraction could not survive the challenging adversity of the Great War. Yet he also learned from his experience of failure at this period, hence the much deeper thought later in his career. To prove this, let us first look at two surviving oil paintings of Lewis's Vorticist period. Both were completed in 1915 before Lewis enlisted in the army. They can be regarded as a self-conscious performance to reveal the full range and depth of his creative ambitions. Yet the contrast between the two will expose the contradiction inherent in his attempt at abstraction.

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1. Alfred J. Barr, who consolidated the doctrine of abstraction by identifying it as the prime innovation of modernism in his *Cubism and Abstract Art* (1936 catalogue for the MOMA exhibition), almost completely omitted to mention Lewis and other English artists' attempts at abstraction in the Vorticist paintings. Nor was Vorticism included in the famous chart showing the development of modernist art on the jacket of his book. For the ideological nature of his chart, see W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Theory* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago P, 1994) 230-7.

The first of them, titled *Workshop*, is filled up entirely with intersections of swerving diagonal lines, fragmentary geometric shapes, and distorted grids. All are unified in a picture surface through the formalization of irregular but vibrant rhythm. What is notable is the use of harsh, glaring colours; bright pink, yellow, red and ochre, enclosing the central patch of dark blue. Stark tonal contrasts are exaggerated, making it difficult for us to distinguish the figure from the ground. As is conspicuous in the right bottom corner, where the red and ochre lines intrude into the white patch, the paints are applied in a uniform manner, as though done by a paint-roller rather than a paintbrush. This impersonal handling of colours emphasizes the impression of its total flatness. It annuls our attempt at reading depth into the blank white spaces.<sup>1</sup>

*Workshop* is a canvas of abstract non-figuration. Its vertiginous combination of forms does not allow us to fix a single point of view which enables us to create a perspectival order of recognizable everyday objects. The harsh metallic colours also defy our attempt at imaginative identification with the space of artistic fantasy. The style of Vorticist abstraction excludes the element of representation. It embodies an attitude of detachment, the principle of art's autonomy from the life of everyday emotions.

Yet once we turn our eyes to another of Lewis's canvases from the same period, we confront a need to change our understanding. This is *The Crowd*. Not surprisingly, it shares a lot of stylistic features with *Workshop*; such as rigid formalization, metallic colours, intersecting lines and abstract grids. But let us follow the suggestion of its title. We come to recognize a group of ant-like figures in the irregular lattice-shape upon the creamy white in the central part of the canvas. Those matchstick figures seem to generate a group rhythm of their own. They are storming their way upward, led by two figures wielding red flags. Our perception of the picture adjusts itself to follow this figuration. Our eyes start to divide the surface into the foreground and the background. White patches are now the background which suggests the depth of space. In the foreground, the abstract shapes of bands and grids are transformed into the structures of metropolitan architectures.

In this painting, the formalism of abstraction is used for the aim of figuration. It is even possible to read a narrative of some sort in this work. The

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1. It is Richard Cork who first drew attention to this feature of the painting. See Richard Cork, *Vorticism and Abstract Art in the First Machine Age. Volume: 2. Synthesis and Decline* (London: Gordon Fraser, 1976) 344. As a consideration on the same feature, see also David Peters Corbett, 'The Aesthetic of Materiality: Avant-Garde Painting in London before 1914,' *The Great London Vortex: Modernist Literature and Art*, ed. Paul Edwards (Bath, U. K.: Sulis P, 2003) 116-125.

violence of mass revolutionary movement is contained in the public space limited by the impersonal structure of cityscape. Even the matchstick figures organize themselves into a pattern of anonymous lattice. In contradiction to their gesture towards freedom, they merge into the texture of the impersonal metropolis. According to this reading, the style of abstraction conveys a particular message of its own about its subject-matter: the vision of dehumanisation in modernity. As Tom Normand has suggested, we might understand that Lewis is engaging art as a political tool, that of critical commentary on the hidden reality of contemporary life.<sup>1</sup>

These two readings contradict each other. One, about *Workshop*, vindicates the autonomy of art. The other, about *The Crowd*, advocates a critical engagement with life. But these supposed opposites quickly start to contaminate each other as well. If we look back at *Workshop* from the perspective of *The Crowd*, we can find a reference to the same cityscape of architectural shapes in the canvas. In that case, the central blue patch may signify the sky constrained by the high-rise buildings. Yet if we return once again to *The Crowd*, what attracts our attention is the degree of abstract formalization of the picture surface as a whole. Apart from the commentary on life, the painting appears to assert its separate identity as an artwork by means of its strikingly original style.<sup>2</sup>

This contradiction is largely due to the ambiguous relation between abstraction and representation in the Vorticist paintings. This relation was put into question by the rapid development of abstract art in the early twentieth century. It was a site of heated controversy among artists and thinkers who tried to assert their own aesthetic theories against others. For one, there was a powerful argument for abstraction as against representation in general. Its doctrine regards the representation of objects as unnecessary to a proper appreciation of artistic qualities. Before the outbreak of the Great War, Wassily Kandinsky had already started to explore the potential of direct spiritual expression by means of abstract forms and pure colours. By 1913, he has reached a conviction that the objects are not only unnecessary but even detrimental to artistic beauty itself: 'Now I know for certain that the object harmed my pictures.'<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps the clearest statement of this conviction is issued by Clive Bell, in his 1914 book, *Art*. Bell preached the famous doctrine of 'significant

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1. Tom Normand, *Wyndham Lewis the Artist: Holding the Mirror up to Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992) 5, 76-83.

2. This second reading is presented by David Peters Corbett as a subtle objection to the interpretation of Normand. See David Peters Corbett, *The Modernity of English Art 1914-1930* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1997) 25-38.

3. Wassily Kandinsky, 'Reminiscence,' *Modern Artists on Art*, ed. Robert L. Herbert (1964; New York: Dover, 2000) 17-39, 28.

form' in this book. For him, formal appreciation is the only proper way to enjoy the aesthetic emotion, which is different in kind from everyday human emotions.

The representative element in a work of art may or may not be harmful; always it is irrelevant. For, to appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its ideas and affairs, no familiarity with its emotions. Art transports us from the world of man's activity to a world of aesthetic exaltation. For a moment we are shut off from human interests; our anticipations and memories are arrested; we are lifted above the stream of life.<sup>1</sup>

This theory radically separates 'significant form' from any representative element. It results in a declaration of the autonomy of art from the life of 'human interests.' Art is a realm of Platonic Ideas beyond the realm of mere everyday phenomena. From here to the absolute opposition between abstraction and representation is just one step further.

Yet around the same time, there was a different, rival account of abstraction, originally put forward by Wilhelm Worringer, a German scholar. In his book, *Abstraction and Empathy* (1908), he proposes to understand abstraction in terms of a certain human psychology. T. E. Hulme, his English exponent, is firmly against the segregation of the aesthetic emotion from human emotions in general.<sup>2</sup> Hulme paraphrases Worringer as follows in his essay, 'Modern Art and Its Philosophy' (1914):

In the representation of natural objects, there is an attempt to purify them of their characteristically living qualities in order to make them necessary and immovable. The changing is translated into something fixed and necessary. This leads to rigid lines and dead crystalline forms, for pure geometrical regularity gives a certain pleasure to men troubled by the obscurity of outside appearance. The geometrical line is something absolutely distinct from the messiness, the confusion, and the accidental details of existing things.<sup>3</sup>

In Hulme and Worringer, there is no absolute opposition between representation and abstraction. Instead, there is an opposition between the organic and the inorganic; or, life and deadness. Abstraction is here

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1. Clive Bell, *Art* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1914) 25.

2. On this point, see, T. E. Hulme, 'Modern Art IV Mr. David Bomberg's Show,' *Further Speculations by T. E. Hulme*, ed. Samuel Hynes (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota P, 1955) 135-144.

3. T. E. Hulme, 'Modern Art and its Philosophy,' *Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. Herbert Read (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1924) 86-7.

thought to be a process of transformation of representation. Abstract art transforms the organic objects of transience into the dead objects of permanence. It is driven by a human desire to escape entanglement in 'the messiness' of accidental organic life. It is an attempt at disentanglement by means of reduction and hardening.

Both Bell and Hulme are writing about a contemporary tendency in abstract art. They are part of the larger trend toward 'the purification of art.'<sup>1</sup> Yet they are different. Bell thinks 'human interests' merely irrelevant from the Platonist viewpoint of transcendence. Hulme regards human psychology as a driving-force of art in the spirit of immanence. Critics have generally agreed to recognize the influence of the Hulme-Worringer doctrine in the practice of Lewis's Vorticism.<sup>2</sup> It is certainly true, but it is also important to recognize the trace of the doctrine of artistic autonomy in Wyndham Lewis. As is well known, Lewis was affiliated with the Bloomsbury group of Roger Fry and Clive Bell for a short period before Vorticism. Moreover, *Blast 1* contains some excerpts from Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1911). It is accompanied by an approving commentary by Edward Wadsworth, one of Lewis's fellow Vorticists.<sup>3</sup>

The manifestos in *Blast 1* keep insisting on the independence of art from the conditions of life in general. For instance: 'we do not want to change the appearance of the world, because we are not Naturalists, Impressionists or Futurists (the latest form of Impressionism), and do not depend on the appearance of the world for our art.' (Lewis 1914, 7) Lewis sets up an absolute opposition between art and life: 'Art is something very abstruse and splendid, in no way directly dependent on "Life".' (130) In another place, he also asserts: 'The Vorticist is not the Slave of Commotion, but it's Master. The Vorticist does not suck up to Life. He lets Life know its place in a Vorticist Universe!' (143) Art is not a servant. It is an independent master of Life. This is the message powerfully conveyed in the style of geometric abstraction.

Yet at the same time, Lewis is not quite satisfied with the autonomy of art. It might draw him into an unfavourable association with the art-for-art's-sake doctrine of the fin-de-siècle. As a self-styled avant-garde, Lewis's refusal of the immediate past requires a more significant engagement with the reality of the present. Thus he writes: 'In the experiments

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1. Ortega Y Gasset, *The Dehumanization of Art and Other Essays on Art, Culture, and Literature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1968) 12.

2. See, Michael H. Levenson, *A Genealogy of Modernism: A Study of English Literary Doctrine 1908-1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984) 80-136; Charles Harrison, *English Art and Modernism* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1981, 1994) 75-114.

3. "'Inner Necessity': Review of Kandinsky's Book,' *Blast 1: Review of the Great English Vortex*, ed. Wyndham Lewis (1914; Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow P, 1981) 119-122.

of modern art we come face to face with the question of the *raison d'être* of Art more acutely than often before.' (Lewis 1914, 140) Because abstract art jettisons the traditional obligation of representing visible nature, it is necessary to reconsider the status and function of art with reference to the actuality of the modern world.

It is at this point that Lewis approaches the Hulme-Worringer doctrine. For instance in an essay 'New Egos' (1914) in *Blast* 1, Lewis pays attention to the psychology of metropolis as a relevant factor to modern art. In his view, the progress of science has given humanity an unprecedented power of control over their environment. In this sense, technology has made humanity much freer than before. Yet paradoxically, this also means their stronger dependence on the material conditions such as machinery, technology, and the organization of the modern city itself. The 'modern town-dweller' is entangled deep in the impersonal structure of modernity. It is an undoing of the detached individuality. Thus Lewis writes: 'Impersonality becomes a disease with him,' and 'Dehumanisation is the chief diagnostic of the Modern World.' (Lewis 1914, 141) That troubling sense of entanglement is expressed in this essay. An escape, an attempt at disentanglement is desired. It is necessary to protect the detached individuality. As Lewis writes elsewhere, 'a course of egotistic hardening, if anything, is required.' (134)

Yet this is obviously paradoxical. A desire to escape from impersonality and dehumanisation results in the creation of abstract art: the art of impersonality and dehumanisation. Is it really an attempt at disentanglement? Is it not rather a vindication of entanglement with scientific modernity? In 1913, before the declaration of Vorticism, Lewis wrote that the sensibility of the modern town-dweller was modified by the mechanical environments: 'All revolutionary painting has in common the rigid reflections of steel and stone in the spirit of the artist.'<sup>1</sup> It is a reflection, a modification of sensibility, an imitative adaptation to the conditions of modernity. On the one hand, this contradicts Lewis's Vorticist claim for artistic independence, his claim that it is not dependent on the appearance of the world. On the other hand, this does not strictly follow the Hulme-Worringer doctrine: the Vorticist geometry does not effect disentanglement. Rather, it promotes imitative adaptation to the impersonality of the modern world.

Lewis's Vorticist assertion contradicts itself. As Paul Edwards suggests, it is after all an eclectic composite.<sup>2</sup> To claim for the independence of his

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1. Wyndham Lewis, 'Cubist Room,' *Wyndham Lewis on Art: Collected Writings 1913-1956*, eds. Walter Michel and C. J. Fox (London: Thames and Hudson, 1969) 57.

2. Paul Edwards, *Wyndham Lewis: Painter and Writer* (New Haven and London: Yale UP,

style, Lewis seems to draw on the formalist aesthetics of Bell, Kandinsky and others: its opposition between abstraction and representation. To claim for 'the raison d'être' of his art, Lewis borrows from Hulme and Woringer to measure the actuality of abstraction. To look back once again to the ambiguity of his paintings, we can now say that they are doing the same thing at the level of pictorial composition. From one angle, abstraction can be seen as opposed to representation to suggest the autonomy of art. From another angle, abstraction can be seen to represent the conditions of modernity to assert its actuality. Vorticist paintings rely on the gentle balance between the two understandings: abstraction against representation, and abstraction as representation. Lewis puts forward his power of independent creativity by exploiting the ambiguous nature of its style.

Yet it is only a rhetorical independence. It is secretly dependent on the conditions of modernity. As such, it loses its effectiveness once the reality of imitative adaptation is exposed. The Great War required a radical re-assessment on the nature of modernity. In the contemporary mind, the rhetorical violence of Vorticism was associated with the mechanical violence of the Great War. In *Blast 2*, published in 1915, Lewis laments over the impersonality of modern warfare;

There are so many actions every day, necessarily of brilliant daring, that they become impersonal. Like the multitudes of drab and colourless uniforms—these in their turn covered with still more characterless mud—there is no room, in praising the soldiers, for anything but an abstract hymn. These battles are more like ant-fights than anything we have done in this way up to now.<sup>1</sup>

This passage is heavily ironical. It is Lewis himself who associates the 'abstract hymn' with the 'multitudes of drab and colourless uniforms,' and the uniformity of modern mechanical warfare. Of course, 'praising the soldiers' is itself far from an adequate reaction to the concrete misery of the battlefield. The 'ant-fights' were prefigured in the canvas of *The Crowd*. But now the reference is painfully literal: it does not allow for the rhetorical independence of Vorticist abstraction.

Vorticism failed to provide any appropriate answer to the challenge of the Great War. The dehumanisation of art is outstripped by the dehu-

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2000) 114. Edwards understands this composite nature of Vorticist aesthetics as a 'lack of theoretical coherence.'

1. 'The Six Hundred, Verestchagin and Uccello,' *Blast 2: Review of the Great English Vortex*, ed. Wyndham Lewis (1915; Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow P, 1981) 25.

manisation of reality. Yet Lewis also starts to recognize this situation, as suggested in 'A Review of Contemporary Art' also in *Blast 2*:

[Any] attempt to avoid all representative element is an equal absurdity. As much of the material poetry of Nature as the plastic vessel will stand should be included. But nowadays, when Nature finds itself expressed so universally in specialized mechanical counterparts, and cities have modified our emotions, the plastic vessel, paradoxically, is more fragile. The less human it becomes, the more delicate, from this point of view. (Lewis 1915, 45)

This sense of fragility is accompanied by two adjustments of Lewis's thought on abstract art. First, the representative elements are unavoidable, however abstract a canvas may be. Second, abstraction is nevertheless justified as a style most congruent to the plastic medium of paintings. In 'The Credentials of the Painter' (1922), Lewis clearly associates the immortality of art with the dead materiality of its medium.

There is not one immortality, but several types, and this one is the painter's; a sort of death and silence in the middle of life. This death-like rigidity of the painting or statue, when a living being is represented, this silence and repose, is one of the assets of the painter or sculptor. (Lewis 1969, 218-9)

This passage is reminiscent of Hulme, in so far as it describes art in terms of deadness and immobility. Yet a difference is that Lewis now understands those qualities in terms of the materiality of paintings, while Hulme is adamant on rejecting any 'materialist explanation.'<sup>1</sup>

And the more important difference with Hulme is that Lewis has to gauge the relevance of the artistic materiality to the ongoing modernity of post-war Europe. For him, abstraction is neither absolute nor autonomous. It is contingent on the way Lewis understands the pictorial medium with reference to the fate of humanity in the evolving mechanical culture. As Lewis writes, 'If we cannot get, at the top, a human world, then art, and everything that we have so far identified with the word civilization, must perish. If our values become the values of stones or matter generally,

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1. T.E. Hulme, 'Modern Art and its Philosophy,' 108. Hulme's insistence on the philosophical driving-force of art is such that he rejects any possible influence from available materials over the creation of artistic style. This might be the reason. Lewis said as follows in his later recollection: '[Hulme] was a journalist with a flair for philosophy and art, not a philosopher. Of both these subjects he was profoundly ignorant, according to technician-standard.' *Blasting and Bombardiering* (1937; London: John Calder, 1982) 100. While this statement cannot be taken without noting Lewis's attack on Hulme, my point in this paper is to claim that Lewis might be recognized as a materialist thinker in a profound sense.

we perish, too.’ (Lewis 1969, 225) In other words, it is a question of dire negotiation between the materiality of abstract art and the materialism of scientific modernity. This idea of art’s fragility is a more lasting insight of Wyndham Lewis than any of his noisy declarations of the Vorticist independence.

# Dehumanisation and Anti-Feminism in Vorticist Art

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Vorticist abstraction was based on a desire to produce an art that negates representation or that enters into communion with the spectator. Instead, their geometric ‘form sense’ presents us with mechanical, robot like figures that present man, and more particularly woman, with harsh indifference. This disdain for women was at the core of authoritarian Vorticist ideology and survived the return to more tender, traditional modes of aesthetic expression that witnessing war first-hand provoked in these artists. Their experimentation lies nonetheless at the basis of the spread of great abstract art across Europe and the public’s acceptance of that art.

We can concentrate unashamedly on British arts in the heady, experimental years of Early Modernism circa 1910-1915 because the works produced by artists working in this period are so rich and innovative. In London, in the two years just prior to the First World War, a handful of artists began to produce paintings, drawings and sculptures of an abstract nature and this leads us to enquire into the symbiotic relationship between this significant choice of style and the meaning and underlying intentions of such choices. Vorticism is the vanguard group that characterises those who experimented with abstraction in that period, including visual artists Laurence Atkinson, Cuthbert Hamilton, William Roberts, Edward Wadsworth, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska and Wyndham Lewis among others, who signed the Vorticist Manifesto published in the magazine they called *Blast*, edited by Wyndham Lewis. The magazine ran two issues, one in July 1914 and the second in July 1915.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Wyndham Lewis et al., *Blast 1 and 2* (London: John Lane, 1914-15; Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow, 1981).

## 1 Dehumanisation

Among the Vorticists's friends was young philosopher and art critic T.E. Hulme, who gave a lecture that greatly influenced the aesthetic production of these artists on 22 January 1914 at the Quest Society in London. The lecture was entitled 'Modern Art and its Philosophy' and was the fruit of conversations Hulme had had with German art historian Wilhelm Worringer.<sup>1</sup> In the winter of 1912-1913, Hulme had travelled to Berlin to talk with Worringer who had published in 1908 a doctoral thesis on the reasons for abstraction in art, entitled *Abstraction and Empathy*.<sup>2</sup> Worringer provided psychological reasons for earlier artists' urges towards abstraction and contrasted them with their urges towards realism or empathy. He believed that the abstract art of earlier periods—Islamic, Byzantine and Celtic—was the product of artists' obsessive desires to find or impose order in or onto the world because they felt threatened by it and not just because of their incapacity to produce mimetic art. Hulme took on Worringer's views completely and he was the first person to present them to a London audience. Hulme, in his lecture, expressed his belief that contemporary British representational art, like that of the Greeks and the Renaissance, was soft and 'sloppy' and not to be pursued. Hulme was keen on recent Vorticist work that exemplified the urge to abstraction. Abstraction was a way of eliminating individualist psychology, spiritual communion, feeling and ego-centric sentiment from art. The Vorticists were quick to pick up on Hulme's ideas and began to work towards an anti-humanist, geometrical art in which formal design played the key role as a way of purifying art of what they called 'Sentimental Gush' and of giving it discipline and order in a quest for austerity, stability and permanence, a perfection and rigidity that vital, humanist forms can never have. The turmoil of the years leading up to the First World War was perhaps an additional cause for their desire for stability and order in the face of world-wide confusion and chaos.

The Vorticists spearheaded the movement towards a Classical revival in which formal discipline born of rationality and the intellect, rather than of human emotions and feelings, is the supreme concern. This is a clue to the definition of the Vortex itself, that 'great silent place where all the energy is concentrated.' (*Blast* 1 153) We can witness a number of essential developments in Wyndham Lewis's work from this period on. First,

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1. Hulme's essays are collected in *Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. Herbert Read (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1924).

2. Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy*, trans. Michael Bullock (New York: International, 1967).

figurative titles disappear. The works he displayed at the Doré Galleries in October 1913 are called *Composition* or *Drawing*. The spectator, if he wishes to adopt a traditional stance before the work, is held at a distance by the artist. All reference to a human context is effaced and human forms are replaced by geometric ones with which we find it difficult to empathise. The artist presents us with a cold and objective arrangement of spaces, surface, colours and shapes that excludes from our reading of the work whatever is not necessarily caught up in those factors. As Lewis puts it 'We want to leave Nature and Men alone.' (53) The interest of the drawing is in the forms it contains and the fact that such forms were primarily suggested by human figures is of no importance. Lewis's famous 'Feeling of Indifference' excludes emotion on two levels then—both on the part of the artist who portrays human figures with cold detachment, aloof austerity and excluding all sentimentality and on the part of the spectator who finds it difficult to empathise or share common human feeling with the mechanical robotic figures of Vorticist works.<sup>1</sup>

It was for this reason that the Vorticists felt England was the most propitious part of Europe for the rebirth of ordered abstract art and this because of its cold Northern climate. In *Blast 1*, the Vorticists bless Shakespeare for his 'Bitter Northern Rhetoric of Humour' (*Blast 1* 26) and claim that the harsh, bare climate of England will mean that the new art born is a 'northern flower.' (*Blast 1* 34) The new possibilities of expression are the 'legitimate property' of Englishmen because 'they are the inventors of this bareness and hardness, and should be the great enemies of Romance.' (*Blast 1* 41) This led them to also curse or 'Blast' the Gulf stream for making the country's climate milder and to damn the French in four centimetre high bold type, block capitals for their 'sentimental gallic gush.' (*Blast 1* 13) For the Vorticists, the 'human and sentimental side of things [ . . . ] cripples or perverts the inhuman plastic nature of painting' (*Blast 2* 114) and we can see this clearly in Vorticist works of the period. Take for example, *Two Mechanics*, an ink and watercolour drawing of 1912 that shows two naked, angular muscular men standing to the left while their heads turn to look out at the viewer. Their hands are clamped together over their genital region and it is in this sense that they are 'mechanical'—acting, as it were, as machines, dominated by the mechanical impulses of their loins. No sentimentality or emotional fervour here. Lewis's *The Vorticist*, also of 1912, depicts a cruelly mechanised human being in which elements of the robotic machine are suggested in

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1. The 'Feeling of Indifference' is used as the title of a chapter in Robert T. Chapman, *Wyndham Lewis: Fictions and Satires* (London: Vision, 1973).

the hard mechanical shapes, combined with elements from human anatomy, to form a disturbingly ambiguous portrait. Similarly in *Lovers* of the same year, any feelings of ecstasy are perhaps conveyed by the swirling abstract shapes around the human forms, which themselves, perhaps because of the taut angular forms and ‘clean arched shapes’ of their bodies (*Blast* 1 25) seem more locked into a kind of hard conflict or mutual aggression than in a traditional expression of feeling, sensuality or love. The intention here is that the figures represented be the embodiment of aesthetic principles—the human body becomes non-vital and distorted to fit into stiff lines and cubical shapes of various kinds so as to produce non-mimetic art that refuses communion with the spectator and treats the figures portrayed with indifference. Art and life, and all that life implies in the way of emotion and instinct, must be two separate entities then, and art becomes synonymous not with life, but with death. Deadness is the sole and unique condition of art for the Vorticist because it frees him from life, from the feelings and drives that make art sloppy. These aesthetic tenets are equally expressed in the literary figures of Lewis’s prose work of the period. In his novel *Tarr*, the eponymous hero, living and working as a painter in Paris, explains that the artist must be ‘ascetic rather than sensuous and divorced from immediate life. There is no slop of sex in that.’<sup>1</sup> For Tarr, sex is a monstrosity, ‘It is the arch abortion of this filthy universe’ (26) in that it creates links between people, is an expression of human feeling or instincts and ultimately brings life. Moreover, it can distract the artist from the cold intellectuality he needs to produce abstract geometric lines and forms.

In this light, it is no surprise to see that female forms come in for particularly tough treatment in Vorticist works. Take for instance sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska’s work *Red Stone Dancer* of 1913. Here the female body of the dancer is presented in geometric, angular form—the breasts become squares, the hips rectangles and the whole body a tense exploding spiral. Gaudier shows a particular disgust for soft, sensuous feminine forms in art. He has this to say of the Venus of Milo,

Il n’y a rien de plus détestable que la Vénus de Milo—justement parce qu’elle n’est qu’une ligne savoureuse pour les cochons, qu’un énorme ventre si tu veux, sans bosses et sans trous, sans duretés, sans angles, sans mystère, et sans force, une chose moelleuse.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Wyndham Lewis, *Tarr* (London: Egoist, 1918) 30.

2. Letter to Sophie Gaudier in May 1911 in the Ede Collection at the Kettle’s Yard Library, Cambridge.

In the same light, Anastasya, Tarr's mistress, has this to say of her own breasts, 'It's a handicap [ . . . ] there's no blinking the fact... it's all part of the beastly shop-window—I have to stick frills around them even, just as pork-merchants in their shop-fronts decorate the carcasses of suckling pigs.' (Lewis 1918, 231)

## **2 Indifference to women and reactionary politics**

This refusal of soft feminine forms leads the Vorticists to present women in a highly impersonal light from both the social and the ideological stance. From the practical point of view, the male Vorticists were hostile to the women in their circle, 'Let's not have any of those damned women,' Christopher Nevinson is reported to have declared at the inaugural party of the Rebel Art Centre.<sup>1</sup> Luckily for the Vorticists, they could count on the financial support of Kate Lechmere to pay the Centre's bills and incidentally, sew the curtains. Of all the artists who signed the *Blast* manifesto only two—Jessica Dismorr and Helen Saunders—were women. Gaudier Brzeska speaks of their participation in the Allied Artists Association exhibition in these terms, 'With them stops the revolutionary spirit of the exhibition [ . . . ] Happily the Rebel stand shows that the new painting is capable of great strength and manliness in decoration.'<sup>2</sup> Helen Saunder's untitled gouache composition of 1913 can be seen in this sense as an autobiographical allegory of her social struggle to find recognition as an artist, as the imprisoned female forms within a rigid, rectangular framework of lines and bars suggest. Her second composition of the same year also shows a barred in, almost foetal feminine form, pushing up backwards against the upper frame of what seems to be a cell-like enclosure, the figure again working in pent in, confined and obscure conditions. For the Vorticists, women were lesser persons, both as artists and as members of society, because they were under the sway of their emotions and sensibilities and had no access to the reason and vigour of male intellectual thought.

This view of women as lesser beings meant the Vorticists were keen to keep women imprisoned in their silent, traditional Victorian social role. Let us remember that the social backdrop to Vorticist aesthetic experimentation was frequently dominated by efforts made by women to escape from their 'impersonal' status as second-class citizens and become

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1. Richard Cork, *Vorticism and Abstract Art in the First Machine Age*, II (London: Gordon Fraser, 1976) 146.

2. Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, 'The AAA,' *The Egoist* 15 June 1914: 227-8.

'real' people equal with men. Subsequent to the countless demonstrations organised by Mrs Pankhurst's WSPU and her 'girls,' it was in July 1910 that the Asquith government promised the 'Conciliation Bill' which would give the right to vote to 1 million women who were owners of houses or business properties with a rent of over £10 per annum. Asquith did his best for the Bill to fail and dropped it after its second reading in the Commons, leading to the Black Friday events of 18 November 1910 when suffragettes held a picket in front of the Houses of Parliament and skirmished with the police for over six hours. Police brutality earned favour to the girls from the public and the militants became even more determined: hunger strikes, forcible feeding, arson attacks on parliamentary letter boxes, destroying putting greens on golf courses put enormous pressure on the government, culminating with Emily Davison throwing herself under the hooves of the King's horse at the Derby on 4 July 1913. The Vorticists had little time for women's rights and present a rather threatening 'Word of Advice' to suffragettes who like Frieda Graham might decide to knife other pictures in the National Gallery: 'In destruction, as in other things, stick to what you understand [ . . . ] Leave works of art alone. You might some day destroy a good picture by accident. Then!—mais soyez bonnes filles!' (*Blast* 1 151)

If the Vorticists were opposed to women gaining independence as individuals it was because for them, women were opposed to art. Succumbing to the emotional 'gush' of women was suicide for the artist in his quest to rid his art of all traces of emotion, of feeling and of life. They prevented men from attaining the pure, a-temporal and impersonal sphere of abstract art by constantly bringing the man back down to the slush of everyday human existence, to the wishy-washy flux of psychology, sentiment, of what goes on 'inside' us. In this sense, Tarr speaks for Wyndham Lewis and his rebel artists when he says, 'Deadness [ . . . ] is the first condition of art. The second is absence of soul, in the human and sentimental sense. The lines and masses of the statue are its soul. No restless, quick flame-like ego is imagined for the inside of it. It has no inside.' (300) Art belongs then to the impersonal, dead sphere of male intellectual coldness, whereas women are at the opposite pole, that of emotion and life. Tarr thus describes women as the 'arch-enemy' of his picture. There is too much 'life' in a woman for the painter who is looking for purity and abstraction, situated at the pole diametrically opposed to empathy, let us remember.

Women can thus pervert the male artist in his quest for impersonality through their bodies. Woman's capacity to arouse desire in a man and to produce children represents a refusal of the death of the individual

that attaining pure art imposes. For the artists, their sole children are the works of art. In *Tarr*, the bodies of the women the artist meets are brimming over with vitality. Tarr describes for example the 'soft and quivering and quick flesh' of Bertha that is 'as far from art as it is possible for an object to be.' (Lewis 1918, 301) Tarr is revolted by Bertha's copious bosom and considers making love with her to be making life with her, a form of castration for the artist as it involves desire, sentiment and involvement with another person. As such, women invade men with their smothering, passive presence that absorbs the creative spirit and prevents the aloofness and detachment that artistic creation demands. Tarr goes on, 'She is so intensely alive in her passivity, so maelstrom-like in her surrender, so exclusive in her sacrifice, that very little remains to be done.' (Lewis 1918, 298) Bertha's presence deprives Tarr of the cold faculties of his intellect by enticing him to engage in an emotional relationship with him. Her inner profuseness of emotion, the instability of her feelings and emotional excesses are symbolised by the inside of her house for which Tarr feels such disgust: 'It was a complete Bourgeois-Bohemian interior. Green silk cloth and cushions of various vegetable and mineral shades covered everything, in mildewy blight.' (Lewis 1918, 52) It is as Tarr considers the decoration of the room that Bertha wakes up and with desperate, possessive fury, throws her arms round him, her tears torrential and her demands for emotional attachment imperious, 'Oh dis, Est-ce que tu m'aimes? M'aimes-tu? Dis!' she declares in French, the language of emotion and sensuality (Lewis 1918, 58). Tarr yields to the temptation, is incapable of de-attaching himself from her and, as a result, becomes artistically impotent. Bertha is reminiscent here of many of the women in Lewis's paintings, notably perhaps the *Smiling Woman Ascending a Stair* of 1911, in which an ugly, seemingly derisive and frightening woman stares haughtily at the viewer as she moves to a position of dominance over us.

The Vorticists accused the liberal and democratic State of having allowed the sex war by according some liberty to women. This, they thought, caused women to overrun society with emotion, the enemy of intellect and reason and of strong, abstract art. This was one of the ideas at the basis of the Vorticists's authoritarian ideology and their offensive attacks on women were not limited to misogyny but had a strongly-felt reactionary political basis. Among other avant-garde movements quite different attitudes to woman can be found. The Expressionists considered woman as a source of inspiration, the Futurists saw the mother as the central pivot of the Italian social fabric. For the Vorticists, women had no role to play in the organisation of life and society when they were emo-

tionally so unstable and ‘chaotic’ themselves. Here lies one of the main dichotomies of the Vorticist movement: while we regard their geometric art as uniquely modern, this art is the reflection of a reactionary philosophy born of their impersonal aesthetics, the rejection of emotion and empathy.

Empathy with their public was not the Vorticists’s aim. Beyond the rejection of woman, humanism led them to espouse T.E. Hulme’s vision of man in general as innately limited and deprived of any spontaneous goodness. This lack of empathy can be traced in their notion of laughter. Like the smile on the face of Lewis’s woman ascending the stairs, Vorticist humour is dark and sardonic. Laughter is not shared with the reader but aimed at us. Laughter is close to Tragedy here: ‘We only want Tragedy if it can clench its side-muscles like hands on it’s belly and bring to the surface a laugh like a bomb’ we read in *Blast* (31). Vorticist politics were merely the logical extension of their aesthetics—there is no fondness for humankind, no tender laughter or poking of fun, but a need for ‘form sense’ in running the State, the need for an authoritarian government capable of correcting the feminine, romantic disorder born of democracy. The State is compared to a work of art in that it needs a strict structure imposed on it to provide a stable and permanent society run by an elite of intellectual men in which art could flourish, free from the influences of the market and democracy. ‘A Vorticist King. Why not?’ proclaims *Blast* (40). This would be a way to protect the artist from the ‘fat mass’ represented by the rest of society that pens the artist in (*Blast* 27).

### 3 Witnessing war

All the Vorticists, despite their disdain for the society they lived in, went to war. Unlike members of Bloomsbury, who were far less critical of the State, but pacifist, they joined up.<sup>1</sup> Gaudier joined the French infantry in September 1914 and was killed in battle in June 1915, aged 23. Hulme went to fight in the trenches in France in 1914 and was killed in fighting in 1917 aged 34.<sup>2</sup> Lewis served as a Lieutenant in the Artillery as from March 1916 until 1917 when he was transferred to a Canadian regiment as a war artist. In his work, as in that of his fellow Vorticists, Lewis

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1. After the introduction of conscription in 1916, Clive Bell avoided going off to the front by finding a job at Garsington Manor, estate of pacifist MP Philip Morrell and his wife Lady Ottoline. The same goes for Duncan Grant.

2. Roberts joined the Royal Field Artillery in March 1916 and served until 1918 when he became a war artist for the last few months of war. Wadsworth joined the navy in 1914, was wounded but continued to work designing camouflage for ships.

abandoned the desire for an indifferent art that negates communion and empathy with others. He abandoned abstraction and adopted a style that allowed him to react positively to the dreadful spectacle of human suffering in the trenches. This not just in reply to the conservative demand of the War Commissioners, but out of a feeling of shared humanity. The First World War drowned the expletives of the Vorticists's purely aesthetic call-to-arms. They felt sickened by the machines that had inspired their geometric drawings that were now causing untold human misery. They turned their backs on radicalism and adopted a more representational style. Lewis says this of his sudden reversal, 'Upon waking up I found an altered world: and I had changed too, very much. The geometrics which had interested me so exclusively before, I now felt were bleak and empty. They wanted filling [ . . . ] with the flesh and blood that is life.' He describes how,

When Mars with his mailed finger showed me a shell crater and a skeleton [ . . . ] I was still in my abstract element. And before I knew what I was doing, I was drawing with loving care a signaller corporal to plant upon the lip of the shell crater.<sup>1</sup>

The war made romantics of them all then, and the drawings of Lewis from this period are full of compassion for the physical and mental exhaustion of the soldier.<sup>2</sup> The figures are less tense and in the uniforms of the Royal Artillery, the muscled heroes lose their invulnerability. Take for instance the ink, crayon and watercolour from 1918 entitled *Walking Wounded*. The high viewpoint adds to the feeling of vulnerability of the soldiers, without removing anything of the intimacy of feeling with them of the artist. The artist seems to be in a position that is close to the figures and above them, as if in a position of compassionate protection, although inevitably impotent. The metallic gleam of the bodies makes the men seem like insects, an immediate expression perhaps of their 'inhuman' conditions that puts the artist this time on the side of human suffering. This is an expression of what Henri Gaudier speaks of in the notes he sent back from the front for *Blast 2* as 'a gentler order of feeling,' a sudden descent from the summits of cold, indifferent abstraction (*Blast 2* 34). The same sudden compassion led Jacob Epstein, who also figures in *Blast 1*, to mutilate his *Rock Drill* sculpture in 1916, the year of the Battle of the Somme. Initially begun in 1913, the sculpture was a plaster robot-like

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1. Wyndham Lewis, *Rude Assignment* (London: Hutchinson, 1950) 129.

2. Lewis exposed 57 works from his period as war artist in an exhibition at the Goupil Galleries in London entitled 'Guns.'

figure mounted on a huge second-hand pneumatic drill previously used for quarrying rock as a celebration of the machine age and how those machines had given man new power. Once people in London began to realise how machines were effacing innocent lives across the Channel, Epstein's enthusiasm for machinery evaporated. He discarded the drill. He hacked off the right arm of the plaster figure, together with the buttocks and legs and cast the torso. Emasculated, mutilated and defeated in permanent bronze the sculpture with its sad, masked face is a monument to the terrible monster man had made of himself.

In Hugh Kenner's opinion, World War I dissipated the Vortex as if, 'the Armada had broken off English intellectual life in 1588. The mind of England was abandoned to Bloomsbury to its perdition.'<sup>1</sup> However, in spite of the Vorticists' proclaimed intentions to leave their public 'cold,' to purify this relationship of all emotion or communion, the effect of their aesthetic achievements produced quite the opposite effect.<sup>2</sup> All the berating of art institutions in their manifestos, the lists of those that were Blessed and Blasted, caused people to take a strong interest in them. They were strongly disliked at the time of their action and they caused tremors in established circles. This may well explain why those that had the power to do so did their utmost to leave them in the dark. Yet reviewers of the day, like those that look at Vorticist works today, reacted, be it negatively or positively, strongly. Irrespective of the unpleasant ideology underlying the movement, Vorticism introduced abstract art in England and helped destroy the conservative taste of the English public, who until then, 'would never regard painting as anything but a joke or a chocolate box.' (*Blast* 1 15) The Vorticists spearheaded the fabulous spread of abstraction across Europe and the US and paved the way for the work of future great 'abstractist' artists like Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth or Ben Nicholson. The Vorticists spent energy on producing a critical reaction, a critical awareness of new ideas that set a basis on which Pound, Eliot and Joyce could capitalise. Notions first evoked in the Great London Vortex of 1914 constituted a laboratory of Modernism that led to the breakthrough and the acceptance of aesthetic, linguistic and stylistic experiments that means that much of the twentieth-century art and literature that followed seems Vorticist without quite realising that it is. It set off

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1. Hugh Kenner, 'Remember that I Have Remembered,' *The Hudson Review* 3 (1950-1951): 603-604.

2. Lewis writes, 'The coldest musician, even one who, like Schoenberg, appears to be writing a sort of musical prose, cannot help interfering with your body and cannot leave you so cold as a painter can,' *Wyndham Lewis on Art*, eds. Walter Michel and C.J. Fox (London: Thames and Hudson, 1969) 173.

a chain reaction that permeated the masterpieces of Anglo-American art and the appreciation of those works by the public.



# Mimesis, Abstraction, and 'the passion for the Real' in the Aesthetics of Wyndham Lewis

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In his essay 'A Review of Contemporary Arts' (1915), Wyndham Lewis claimed that two of the clearest aesthetic positions on modern painting were absurd: 'Imitation, and inherently unselective registering of impressions, is an absurdity,' he wrote, adding that the 'attempt to avoid all representative element is an equal absurdity.' Lewis's rejection of both these extremes was grounded by his assertion that 'The human and sentimental side of things, then, is so important that it is only a question of how much, if at all, this cripples or perverts the inhuman plastic nature of painting.' Rather than going for a completely 'inhuman' or a 'human and sentimental' position, Lewis attempted to strike a balance between them.

This rejection of the extremes of both emotionality and impersonality in painting in favour of a more compromising approach gives an early indication of Lewis's distaste for what Slavoj Žižek has termed 'the key feature of the twentieth century: the "passion for the Real".'<sup>1</sup> I will examine the ways in which Lewis developed this distaste for the 'passion for the Real' in his writings of the 1920s and 1930s. I will look in particular at Lewis's arguments against modern religion, which he saw as dangerously emotional, and against modern science, which he saw as dehumanising, and both of which he saw as damaging belief in the reality of the human personality.

I will argue that the tension between abstraction and representation that is a central feature of Lewis's painting can be understood as an attempt to maintain a sense of reality and personality, albeit an idiosyncratic one, rather than engage with the 'passion for the

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1. Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, Mass. & London: The MIT Press, 1991) 17.

Real' he considered inherent in both absolute mimesis and absolute abstraction.

In his essay 'A Review of Contemporary Art' (1915) Wyndham Lewis attempts to 'point out [ . . . ] the way in which the English VORTICISTS differ from the French, German or Italian painters of kindred groups.'<sup>1</sup> This attempt could be seen as merely a self-promoting and deluded effort to distinguish himself and his group from earlier European avant-gardes of which the Vorticists were largely derivative, but Lewis's essay does have genuinely interesting things to say about modernist art, and the aesthetic he proposes in it is an original one, and helpful in understanding his later thinking.

Lewis begins his essay by attacking the Impressionists who, he claims, 'carried naturalism to its most photographic extreme.' (Lewis 1915, 60) The Impressionist painter, Lewis argues, felt that 'He must paint what is under his nose—"composition" or arrangement [ . . . ] anything but scientific unmodified transcriptions are an academicism.' (Lewis 1915, 60) The idea of an art which scientifically reproduces nature directly and 'unmodified' is an important coordinate in Lewis's thinking, and he associates it here not only with Impressionism but also Futurism and to some degree Cubism. Lewis expands on his rejection of this position, writing that:

The first reason for not imitating Nature is that you cannot convey the emotion you receive at the contact of Nature by imitating her, but only by becoming her. To sit down and copy a person or a scene with scientific exactitude is an absurd and gloomy waste of time. [ . . . ] The essence of an object is beyond and often in contradiction to, its simple truth: and literal rendering in the fundamental matter of arrangement and logic will never hit the emotion intended by unintelligent imitation. (Lewis 1915, 73-4)

'Scientific exactitude' is rejected both because it is seen as boring and, importantly, because it is seen to fail on its own terms, as it does not capture the 'essence' of an object, merely its 'simple truth.' This second point is significant as it demonstrates that in his rejection of mimetic realism Lewis was concerned with forming a significant relationship of art to reality. It is this concern which also prevents him from endorsing a model of complete abstraction in art, in which all reference to reality would be

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1. Wyndham Lewis, 'A Review of Contemporary Art,' first published in *Blast* 2, 1915, reprinted in *Wyndham Lewis on Art: Collected Writings 1913-1956*, eds. Walter Michel & C. J. Fox (New York: Funk & Wagnells, 1969) 59.

transcended altogether. Lewis insists both that direct mimetic representation fails as representation, and that complete abstraction fails as abstraction. He argues that even the most seemingly abstract works always contain what he calls an 'unavoidable representative element' and that the 'attempt to avoid all representative element [in painting] is an equal absurdity' to the absurdity of 'scientific exactitude.' (Lewis 1915, 73, 75) Lewis does not mean that 'any possible natural scene or person is definitely co-ordinated' in abstract painting, 'but that the content, in detail, must be that of the material universe.' (Lewis 1915, 73) He is not arguing that all paintings, however abstract they may appear, really depict some identifiable thing, but that their materiality cannot be transcended and they cannot reach a purely abstract level in which all reference to the world is lost. He also argues that painting has an 'unavoidable representative element' on the level of form, writing that:

the general character of the organizing lines and masses of the picture inevitably betray it into some category or other of an organized terrestrial scene or human grouping: especially as the logic and mathematics at the bottom of both are the same. (Lewis 1915, 73)

Form, as well as material, is seen here as untranscendable—whatever 'lines and masses' may be painted they will always be governed by the same 'logic and mathematics' as that which organises 'human groupings.'

As Paul Edwards has pointed out, Lewis aesthetics of this period are marked by a 'critique of transcendence,' and although 'Lewis wanted his painting to suggest or draw the viewer into imagining that other world,' he 'ruled out the possibility that the work of art can belong entirely to it.'<sup>1</sup> Edwards writes that 'Where Malevich soars straight into a transcendent realm, Lewis's paintings and drawings constantly remind us that they cannot, and do not attempt to, entirely transcend the material world.' (Edwards 2000, 132) As we will see, in Lewis's later work this 'critique of transcendence' develops into something more like a fear of transcendence.

Lewis's rejection of both 'scientific' mimesis and 'transcendent' abstraction leads him to something of a compromise when he comes to define what it is he sees his own painting as doing, but the fact that his position is one of compromise or hybridity does not signify an indecisive vacillation between two stronger positions but rather indicates the sophistication of

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1. Paul Edwards, *Wyndham Lewis: Painter and Writer* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2000) 128.

his thinking. One feature of Lewis's thinking is an awareness of how seemingly opposed positions can be synthesised. For example, he writes that:

We must constantly strive to ENRICH abstraction till it is almost plain life, or rather to get deeply enough immersed in material life to experience the shaping power among its vibrations, and to accentuate and perpetuate these. (Lewis 1915, 62)

Here both abstraction and immersion in material life, which at first appear to be opposed movements, merge into each other—'enriched' abstraction becomes 'almost plain life' and immersion in material life reveals the abstract patterns beneath it, its 'shaping power.' Lewis does not only attempt find a compromise between abstraction and mimesis but to develop a way of painting in which both the reality of abstraction and the abstract nature of reality are represented. He does not want to transcend the material world in his art, but rather to immerse himself in it and get beyond its 'simple truth' to its 'essence' and its 'shaping power,' patterns in which 'the logic and mathematics at the bottom of both' the abstract and the real are represented.

This aesthetic can be seen at work in a work such as *Design for Red Duet* (1915), whose linear forms can not be seen as straightforwardly mimetic, in the naturalistic sense, nor as completely abstract. The blocks in the drawing's top left hand corner seem to be derived from modern architecture but do not depict a recognisable scene as such; rather, they can be seen as a representation of the to some degree abstract 'logic and mathematics' which form the 'shaping power' of ideas behind modern architecture and urban life. The two complex central forms in some way represent the human figure—two heads and two sets of bent legs are clearly visible—but these human figures are depicted with the same visual language used for the architectural forms, with the suggestion perhaps that the same 'logic and mathematics' shapes the modern human as does the modern city.

This mingling of the representational and the abstract, the human and the architectural can also be seen in *The Crowd* (1915) where the human figures seem to emerge from the abstract grid of the city. Paul Edwards has written of how Lewis's Vorticist aesthetic

analyses the construction of identity in modern societies from the city's varied levels of organisation: intangible networks as well as the more obvious streets, communications and transport systems. Such identities are not simply free and emancipated pick-and-mix constructions from the cornucopia of modernity; Lewis at all times has an Althusserian sense of

the ways in which the systematic determinism of modern societies masquerades as personal autonomy. In the construction of these Vorticist works [ . . . ] lines are vectors and constrain the forms their interaction creates. Nothing floats free as an object of pure contemplation in an indeterminate abstract space. (Edwards 2000, 125)

Edwards's reference to Althusser is suggestive, as Althusser's analysis of the paintings of Cremonini seems also to describe what is going on in Lewis's much earlier Vorticist works:

'paints' the *relations* which bind the objects, places and times. [He] is a *painter of abstraction*. Not an abstract painter, 'painting' an absent, pure possibility in a new form and matter, but a painter of the real *abstract*, 'painting' in a sense we have to define, real relations (as relations they are necessarily *abstract*) between 'men' and their 'things,' or rather, to give the term its stronger sense, between 'things' and *their* 'men.'<sup>1</sup>

*The Crowd* exemplifies the painting of the 'real *abstract*' of modern urban life, and the potential of Lewis hybrid aesthetic position.

In outlining his own aesthetic position Lewis does not only talk in terms of the technicalities of painting but introduces the more general terms 'human' and 'inhuman':

The human and sentimental side of things, then, is so important that it is only a question of how much, if at all, this cripples or perverts the inhuman plastic nature of painting. If this could be decided we should know where we were. For my part I would put the maximum amount of poetry into painting that the plastic vessel would stand without softening and deteriorating: the poetry, that is to say, that is inherent in matter. (Lewis 1915, 71)

Lewis seeks not to do away with either the 'human' or the 'inhuman' at the expense of the other but to synthesise as much of both of them as he sees possible into some aesthetic unity.

Lewis's rejection of pure and extreme aesthetic positions in favour of some sort of compromise or hybrid makes him a strange avant-gardist: for all of Vorticism's aggressive loudness, the aesthetic he proposes seems to be one of balance rather than of belligerence. Lewis even predicts that 'a great deal of effort will automatically flow back into more natural forms from the barriers of the Abstract,' a prediction perhaps borne out by the

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1. Louis Althusser, 'Cremonin, Painter of the Abstract,' *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (1966; New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001) 158.

post-First World War return to ideas of classical order by many modernist painters. (Lewis 1915, 77) This lack of extremism is symptomatic of Lewis's dislike for what I will call 'the passion for the Real,' a passion that was a feature of much modernist aesthetics and ideology.

The phrase 'the passion for the Real' is used by the philosopher Slavoj Žižek to describe 'the key feature of the twentieth century.'<sup>1</sup> Žižek claims that 'The ultimate and defining moment of the twentieth century was the direct experience of the Real as opposed to everyday social reality—the Real in its extreme violence as the price to be paid for peeling off the deceptive layers of reality.' (Žižek 2002, 5-6) This 'passion' can be seen in the desire of mimetic realism for 'unmodified scientific transcriptions' of 'the Real,' and in abstraction's attempt to transcend 'everyday social reality' altogether.

Central to Žižek's argument is the distinction between 'reality' and 'the Real,' terms which he takes from the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. This distinction is based on the idea that

the reality of the social universe [is] an illusion that rests on a certain 'repression,' on overlooking the real of our desire. This social reality is then nothing but a fragile, symbolic cobweb than can at any moment be torn aside by an intrusion of the real.

Žižek also stresses that

Far from being a sign of 'madness,' the barrier separating the real from reality is therefore the very condition of 'normalcy': 'madness' [ . . . ] sets in when this barrier is torn down [ . . . ]. (Žižek 1991, 17)

Žižek adds that this barrier is maintained by fantasy, which, he argues 'is on the side of reality,' and is essential to its maintenance. He claims that

when the phantasmic frame disintegrates, the subject undergoes a 'loss of reality' and starts to perceive reality as an 'irreal' nightmarish universe with no firm ontological foundation; this nightmarish universe is not 'pure fantasy' but, on the contrary, *that which remains of reality after reality is deprived of its support in fantasy.*<sup>2</sup>

As we will see, the idea that 'the Real' cannot be encountered directly, at least not without some breakdown of the subject's sense of 'reality,' is one that resonates with Lewis's thoughts on reality in *Time and Western Man*,

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1. Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates* (London & New York: Verso, 2002) 5.

2. Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London & New York: Verso, 1997) 66.

his 1927 book of cultural and philosophical criticism, and can be used to clarify Lewis's treatment of mimesis and abstraction in his art practice and aesthetic theories. Lewis stresses the importance of belief in the construction of reality:

For the understanding of 'reality,' and to get at the meaning of the problems suggested by the term 'reality,' there is no term so important as 'belief.' *Reality* is in fact simply *belief*. [ . . . ] To *believe* in a thing's *existence* is to experience its *reality*. Reality, then, is simply a way of describing our capacity for belief, and the things in which we believe.<sup>1</sup>

Lewis's idea of a belief-sustained reality prefigures Žižek's idea of 'reality' sustained by a 'phantasmic frame.' And the intrusion of the unmediated 'Real' produces, for Lewis as well as Žižek, a sense of unreality:

The single, isolated, direct sensation, however 'real' (as we should describe a sensation) in one way and perhaps violent, would not yet bear with it the consciousness of *reality* or of *belief*. Take any sudden, violent sensation. Imagine yourself walking along a platform waiting for a train, and that suddenly a 'crashing' aeroplane dropped on top of you. For an instant, before you were killed, you would be aware of the aeroplane. But that instantaneous sensation, without anything preceding it or following it, would lack *reality*. Such an event [ . . . ] would have a dream quality. (Lewis 1927, 549)

Reality for Lewis is not simply sensation, but the consciousness of sensation that has been structured and ordered by belief, a point he makes quite clearly, writing that 'A purely sensational existence would not be capable of supplying this notion, "reality," at all.' (Lewis 1927, 355) This means that, as Lewis writes, 'reality' as a notion, and in its generally accepted sense, is not what it usually represents itself to be but rather is something which requires a minimal degree of mediation to be experienced as 'reality.' (Lewis 1927, 355) This mediation, which is the task of fantasy for Žižek, is in Lewis's eyes the work of belief. His insistence on the importance of belief for our understanding of reality is directed against, among others, thinkers who thought they had direct emotional experience of God. Here, to put it in Žižek's terms, Lewis sets the 'reality' of belief against 'the Real' of God.

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1. Wyndham Lewis, *Time and Western Man*, ed. Paul Edwards (1927; Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow, 1993) 331.

Lewis's theology may seem a little eccentric, but it continues and develops the anti-transcendent aspect of his thinking. Lewis writes of 'a swarm of philosophers,' who believe that:

the way to attain God is the *direct* one of personal 'religious experience' [ . . . ] the direct plunge to God, not only without mediation [ . . . ] but with a debased reliance upon some kind of semi-philosophical, half-rational image: for clearly no plunge of that sort is entirely 'direct,' unless a great heat of mystical emotion is called into play, which is not usual with philosophers. (Lewis 1927, 365)

Lewis preferred a more traditional and less zealous approach:

How much cleaner, and in the end more efficacious, is the method of the catholic, the inventions of Reason rather than the irresponsible and lonely gushings of 'intuitive' heat. About the wish to seize and mingle with the supreme Reality in a passionate attack there is something lunatic and egoistic. (Lewis 1927, 365)

This emphasis on the 'lunatic and egoistic' nature of the desire to 'seize and mingle with the supreme Reality' is indicative of Lewis's rejection of 'the passion of the Real.' It is also interesting that Lewis now sees the absolute as threatening, writing that 'The Absolute [ . . . ] crushes [ . . . ] the personal life.' (Lewis 1927, 373) Depersonalisation, a process valued by Lewis's contemporary T. S. Eliot, is not seen as something the artist should aspire to, but as something to be avoided at all costs. In 'A Review of Contemporary Art' Lewis saw the transcendence desired by absolute abstraction as impossible; here he sees the experience of the absolute not as impossible but as a distinctly possible and absolutely undesirable threat to 'the personal life.'

Lewis's preference for some sort of belief- or fantasy-sustained 'reality' over 'the extreme violence of Real' is given its most programmatic expression in the following passage, in which he makes a case for a focus on the superficial and the avoidance of the more fundamental:

we are surface-creatures only, and by nature are meant to be that only, if there is any meaning in nature. No metaphysician goes the whole length of departure from the surface-condition of mind—that fact is generally not noticed. For such departures result in self-destruction, just as though we hurled ourselves into space—into 'mental-space,' if you like, in this case. We are surface-creatures, and the 'truths' from beneath the surface contradict our values. (Lewis 1927, 377)

Lewis restricts knowledge to the surface not because he considers 'the "truths" from beneath the surface' as categorically unknowable, but because they 'contradict our values' and potentially result in 'self-destruction.' His epistemology is framed in terms of survival rather than knowability; going 'beneath the surface' is not rejected because it is impossible, but because it is dangerous.

The avoidance of 'the Real' by a rejection of both absolute abstraction and absolute mimesis was a feature of Lewis's aesthetics throughout his career, and I will now examine how it manifests itself in his 1939 essay 'Super-nature Versus Super-real,' written a year after he produced his 'Portrait of T. S. Eliot.' Most of this essay is taken up by a variety of complaints typical of Lewis: he attacks child-art, 'monied dilettantes,' the Royal Academy, and surrealism (which he generally refers to as 'super-realism').<sup>1</sup> It is this last attack which I want to look at, as in it, and in the opposed notion of 'super-naturalism' which he develops, we can see clearly Lewis's passion against 'the Real.'

Lewis's chief charge against surrealism is that it is not authentically modern, that it does not provide a way of painting 'in some new or different manner, more appropriate to the beliefs and conditions obtaining in the twentieth century' than that of Old Master painting or nineteenth-century naturalism, and is

in effect a sly return to old forms of painting, and not the most desirable at that. [ . . . ] It can be described as sly, because it slips back to the plane of the *trompe l'œil* clothed in a highly sensational subject-matter. The subconscious is ransacked to provide the super-realist with an alibi to paint like a Pompiere. (Lewis 1939, 327)

Because of this 'sly return' Lewis places surrealism 'under the heading back-to-nature,' likening it to the painting of Frith, but with a more sensational subject matter. Indeed, he argues that

The super-realist (or *surrealist*) is, as I have pointed out, a naturalist pure and simple. He will copy an object in a slovenly or photographic fashion: it is essential for him that the object should be as *real* as possible, in the sense of a camera-study in a newspaper. And the stupider and more matter-of-fact the pictorial statement the better.

It is of first importance to him, even, that nature should not be altered or 'interpreted,' in any way. [ . . . ] It is not 'nature seen through a temperament,' but *nature* plain and unvarnished that is required. *For it is not an*

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1. Wyndham Lewis, 'Super-nature versus Super-real,' *Wyndham Lewis on Art*, eds. Walter Michel & C.J. Fox (1939; New York: Funk & Wagnells, 1969) 303-33.

*aesthetic emotion but a real emotion—like that experienced in the presence of a street-accident—that is required.* (Lewis 1939, 331)

This distaste for the violence of ‘the Real’ forms the link between Lewis’s dislike for surrealism in 1939 and his dislike of Impressionist and avant-garde painting in 1915, both of which he claims attempt to depict ‘the Real’ unmodified. His complaint against Impressionism in ‘A Review of Contemporary Art’ was that it offered ‘unmodified scientific transcriptions;’ here his complaint against Surrealism is that it offers ‘*nature* plain and unvarnished.’

To counter Surrealism’s ‘passion for the Real’ Lewis presents the notion of ‘super-naturalism’ an art which, as its name suggests, would not be naturalism pure and simple. He writes that

The *super-naturalist* would be aiming [ . . . ] at the opposite to the *super-realist*. The emphasis would be upon *nature*, not upon *the real*. With the super-naturalist it is from within nature that the change is effected, not from without. The ‘real,’ in the photographic sense, would never make its appearance at all. Art, as he understands it, involves a banishing of that kind of reality. (Lewis 1939, 331-32)

The association here between ‘super-realism’ and photography is another indication that Lewis saw it as essentially scientific and depersonalising: surrealism in his eyes merely transcribes ‘the Real’ mechanically and unmodified and offers unmediated sensation: ‘The spectator is offered sensations, as if on the switchback at a fair, among the scenes of nature, by the super-realist.’ (Lewis 1939, 332) In contrast to this, Lewis writes:

The sensations provided for [the spectator] by the super-naturalist would be of a quite different order. Nature would be *pre-digested* for him. He would not be required to participate in any way in the real. Super-nature is not super-real. It is nature transformed by all her latent geometries into something outside ‘the real’—outside the temporal order—altogether. (Lewis 1939, 332)

‘Super-naturalism’ is seen as art which can entirely repress ‘the Real,’ offering the spectator ‘*pre-digested*’ sensations instead. This ‘*pre-digested*’ or mediated nature seems similar to Lewis’s idea of ‘reality’ in *Time and Western Man*: it is not ‘the real thing,’ not pure sensation, but sensation structured and organised by belief. Writing of his portraits of Pound and Eliot painted in the 1930s, Lewis comments that he ‘bur[ied] Euclid deep in the living flesh [ . . . ] rather than [ . . . ] displaying the astral geometries of those gentlemen.’ (Lewis 1939, 330) This does not mean, he argues, that

he was 'unconscious of those underlying conceptual truths that are inherent in all appearances' but that he 'leave[s] them [ . . . ] where [he] finds them, instead of isolating them in conceptual arabesques.' (Lewis 1939, 330) This awareness of what he called in 'A Review of Contemporary Art' the 'logic and mathematics at the bottom' of human reality may explain the peculiar coldness of his portrait of Eliot, which, although by no means an abstract work, is strangely geometrical in certain details: the cuffs and the parting in his hair, for example. This is not a completely impersonal portrait, but neither is it an emotional one; perhaps Lewis has, to reuse his own words from 1915, 'put the maximum amount of poetry into' it 'that the plastic vessel would stand without softening and deteriorating.' However, it is obvious that in the years between 1915 and 1939 Lewis's sense of the correct proportions between the human and the inhuman, the concrete and the abstract, and perhaps even the emotional and the impersonal had changed dramatically.

Lewis himself wrote that he 'never deserted the concrete for the abstract' and claimed that he 'not only continued [his] interrogation of nature, but based [his] geometries upon it.' (Lewis 1939, 330) This dual concern for both the concrete and the abstract was a sophisticated response on Lewis's part to what he saw as the twentieth-century's dangerously depersonalising and violently emotional 'passion for the Real.'



# **Gaudier-Brzeska's *Boy with A Coney* and Epstein's *Rock Drill*: Vorticist Sculpture to the Bergsonian 'élan vital'**

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Through a reflection on the works of Gaudier and Epstein and their theorization, notably by Ezra Pound, this paper shows the discrepancies between Bergson's philosophy and its Vorticist reformulation: 'élan vital' as differentiation, as Gilles Deleuze has shown, is a philosophy of divergence, whereas Vorticism converges toward nostalgic figurations of the natural, pastoral, sexual, pagan, as intrinsic to matter and for the artist to reveal. Sealing the ambivalence of Vorticist abstraction, Bergson's conceptual 'élan vital' thus gives in to the Vortex's work of art as 'radiant node or cluster.'

1913-1914 are the years in which Ezra Pound eventually manages to get his 'little gang after five years of waiting', as he puts it in a letter to William Carlos Williams, dated 19 December 1913.<sup>1</sup> His objective is to move on from his earlier theory of Imagism into the dynamic, Futurist-inspired Vorticism, and to channel the energies of painter and writer Wyndham Lewis and of sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska. And indeed these energies coalesce into the Vorticist manifesto which appears in the first issue of *Blast* in July 1914. Henri Gaudier-Brzeska and Jacob Epstein for sculpture (although the latter does not actually sign their common text), Alvin Langdon Coburn for photography, Wyndham Lewis for painting and prose, Ezra Pound for poetry, are at the core of the project: their theoretical statements and their options in favour of 'geometric art' as opposed to 'vital art' are grounded on T.E. Hulme's take on Wilhelm Worringer's theories about the new art. Thus shaped, the discourse of Vorticism

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1. Hugh Witemeyer, *Pound/Williams: Selected Letters* (New York: New Directions, 1996) 22.

emerges as the radicalization of both French Cubism and Italian Futurism, in an attempt to create an autochthonic (British, London-based) new art, which would challenge the emotionality of their more conventional contemporaries as well as deal with the issues of impersonality through abstraction. At the same time, they are trying to counter the depersonalizing effects of what Pound has come to call 'machine art.'<sup>1</sup>

The Vorticists' take on the relations between geometry and the art of the machine is ambivalent and demands specification: there is a paradoxical tension between an attraction for the impersonal qualities they find in machine-like forms and standardised procedures, and a visceral repulsion for their consequent erasure of the individual, questioning of personal genius and undermining of the emotion characterising the aesthetic experience. The Vorticists' claims about geometric art cannot be identified with claims for a machinic art. In spite of its processes to decompose forms into 'planes in relation,' to take up the words of the Vorticist manifesto, Vorticist abstraction in sculpture does not really embrace actual abstraction so far as to abandon figuration, nor does it respond to the demands of simultaneism and precisionism, which preside over the contemporary take on impersonality as the erasure of the subject's point of view through diffraction and fragmentation. Ezra Pound's redefinition of the image as vortex comes as a discrepant projection over the works of Epstein or Gaudier, be it Epstein's 1913 flenite maternity figures or Gaudier's 1915 *Imp*:

The image is not an idea. It is a radiant node or cluster; it is what I can, and must perforce, call a VORTEX, from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing. [ . . . ] It is as true for the painting and the sculpture as it is for the poetry. Mr. Wadsworth and Mr. Lewis are not using words, they are using shape and colour. Mr. Brzeska and Mr. Epstein are using 'planes in relation,' they are dealing with a relation of planes dealt with in geometry. [ . . . ] The organization of forms is a much more energetic and creative action than the copying or imitating of light on a haystack.<sup>2</sup>

Forcefully, Ezra Pound attempts to bring together varied experiments in as many art media as possible, but in so doing he unwittingly signals a shift from mimesis to formalism, which he himself never achieves. In his memoir dedicated to Gaudier and his work, the terms 'emotion,' 'expression,' 'intention,' are recurrent and it is his slant on these notions which

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1. See Ezra Pound, *Machine Art and Other Writings: The Lost Thoughts of the Italian Years*, ed. Maria Luiza Ardizzone (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).

2. Ezra Pound, *A Memoir of Gaudier-Brzeska* (New York: New Directions, 1970) 92.

'makes it new': the new art is meant to trace the movement of emotion, its intrinsic (and indeed etymological) dynamic qualities, in a cinematographic manner (Pound 1970, 89). As one comes to realise when reading his account of his meeting with Gaudier at an Allied Artists's exhibition in July 1913, Pound's emphasis is constantly both on movement and on energetic discharge, and on intensity and its dynamic figurations (Pound 1970, 44). His interest lies in the formal qualities of Gaudier's work and in their modes of rendering energy and movement: after Gaudier's death at Neuville-St. Vaast in 1915, Pound's memories do not focus on Gaudier's increasingly geometrical forms but on 'a figure with bunchy muscles done in clay painted green' (Pound 1970, 44), thus calling our attention to the organic rather than to the inorganic impulse in Pound's Vorticist sculptor *par excellence*.

In a similar manner, the Vorticists' experimentations in photography never move on to the non-pictorial, by using, as Alfred Stieglitz does in his New York views,<sup>1</sup> the precision of the photographic lense to do things that painting cannot do. Far from acknowledging photography as the 'child of the assembly line,' in Bram Dijkstra's well-known formulation,<sup>2</sup> Alvin Langdon Coburn's portraits of Ezra Pound keep drawing on the blurring techniques used by the pictorialists<sup>3</sup>: what radically changes, perhaps, is the discourse surrounding these works, which links them to the avant-gardes of Cubism and Futurism. The same can indeed be said of Jacob Epstein and his work, in which the stone often comes to be this record of struggle between the material and the artist's will, a struggle often obliterated by his critics with declarations of the artist's status as a medium revealing the forms inscribed in the material. That these forms should be predominantly organic and figurative contradicts the proclamations in favour of inorganic art. The exception in Vorticist sculpture seems to be found in Jacob Epstein's *Rock Drill* [Fig. 14] and its evolution into *Metal Torso from the Rock Drill* [Fig. 25], but details of the sculpture undermine its definition as 'a bold sculptural expression of the Vorticists' theoretical insistence on the "point of maximum energy."' (Cork 39) This hypothesis cannot be sustained by a closer examination of the work and its context. If one reads Jacob Epstein and Henri Gaudier-Brzeska's declar-

1. See in particular the catalogue to the 2004 Paris Stieglitz exhibition, *New York et l'art moderne: Alfred Stieglitz et son cercle* (Paris: Musée d'Orsay, 2004).

2. Bram, Dijkstra, *The Hieroglyphics of a New Speech: Cubism, Stieglitz and the Early Poetry of William Carlos Williams* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969) 91.

3. Especially in *Vortograph of Ezra Pound* (1917), *Ezra Pound e le arti: la bellezza è difficile* (Milan: Skira, 1997) 42.

4. From Richard Cork, *Jacob Epstein* (London: Tate Gallery Pub., 1999) 37.

5. From Cork 38.

ations on art aside from Ezra Pound's interpretations and specific agenda to translate the techniques of Vorticist sculpture into 'do's and don't's' for the poem, the issue of impersonality as enforced by geometry becomes secondary to the preoccupations with the tension between matter and meaning, and the positioning of their works in relation with primitive art. Epstein's figures in flenite are clearly influenced by the Easter Island carvings as exhibited at the British Museum; in Pound's reprint of his 1914 *Blast* manifesto, Gaudier claims that his vortex is the latest in a long line going back to the prehistoric:

Sculptural energy is the mountain.

Sculptural feeling is the appreciation of masses in relation.

Sculptural ability is the defining of these masses by planes.

The PALEOLITHIC VORTEX resulted in the decoration of the Dordogne caverns (Pound 1970, 20).

And this vortex is focused on the artist's action over matter, rather than on an assumed autonomy of the 'primary pigment' defined in Pound's vortex.

In fact, and contrary to Pound's protests against symbolism, Epstein's *Tomb of Oscar Wilde*, which is at the Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris, offers an interpretation, in symbolical as well as formal terms, of the figure of Oscar Wilde, his outlandish foreignness to his contemporaries, his god-like power as a writer, his flying away to the world of the dead and the mythologized. Now this homage to the writer is a prelude to Gaudier's *Hieratic Head of Ezra Pound* [Fig. 3<sup>1</sup>] which takes on the shape of a phallus ready to fertilize the 'great passive vulva of London,' to take up Pound's words in an unpublished manuscript from the Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscripts Collections. Both find their sources not in the Vorticist will to abstraction but on the influence of primitive art, and to a more limited extent, of Renaissance sculpture as exemplified in Michelangelo's slave sculptures. Gaudier's head of Ezra Pound does perform the work on the cylinder which Pound mentions in his comments, but it also sends the viewer back to the megalithic statuary of the Easter Islands. And Epstein's *Rock Drill* finds an interesting precursor in his 1910 *Sun God*, a bas-relief inspired from Abyssinian carving. The sexual posture of the human figure, the discharge of energy which the work seems to express,

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1. From Evelyn Silber and David Finn, *Gaudier-Brzeska, Life and Art, with a Catalogue Raisonné of the Sculpture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996) 113.

the struggle with matter are thematised in both works either through the contrast between the carved figure and a rough background from which it seems to jump out or through the evocation of the violent activity of drilling through rock. Both works imply the fragility of the human form: in the *Sun God*, the human figure is threatened to fuse back into formless matter, bringing about the potential reversal of the differentiating process which his tendrils of hair have never quite completed; in *Rock Drill*, the human figure is plaster, unfinished and unfixed and indeed has not outlasted its original exhibition.

Gaudier never actually ventures to integrate the machine, but when Epstein does, the signs of emotion persist, even in the appropriation of machinery within the work of art. I would like to suggest that Epstein's *Rock Drill* does not have so much in common with Marcel Duchamp's 1913 ready-made *Bicycle Wheel* as with Gaudier's *Boy with a Coney* [Fig. 4<sup>1</sup>]. The evolution of Epstein's sculpture, which in 1916 becomes *Metal Torso from 'Rock Drill'*, confirms this interpretation, since the piece of machinery initially included disappears and the focus of the work moves from the figure in action to a more emotional, if more static, figuration of protection. It is serene in the case of *Boy with a Coney*, and threatened in the case of *Metal Torso*. What has happened in between is not so much the Vorticist revolution as the horror of the Great War. According to Richard Cork, the suppression of the rock drill from Epstein's work is the sign of a change in his attitude towards a machine-oriented and machine-glorifying vision of the world, a change that would be subsequent to the war:

His attitude to the machine age began to change soon after he completed the first version of *Rock Drill*. The Great War had been decimating the young men of Europe for nine months by the time his sculpture went on display. The mechanistic dynamism celebrated in Epstein's fierce work had led to an unparalleled capacity to annihilate humanity. [ . . . ] The machine, hitherto seen by [the Vorticists] as a prime agent of construction, now revealed itself to be the instrument of wholesale obliteration.

It was inevitable then that the war's apocalyptic course would prompt Epstein to make radical changes to *Rock Drill* (Cork 40).

The man (or woman?) turned robot in Epstein's gunmetal casting, failing adequately to protect the foetus ensconced in its open ribcage can however also be read as the pessimistic war-time version of the flenite maternities, as well as of Gaudier's protective boy. This would also account, as an alternative interpretation, for Epstein's continuation (rather than

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1. From Silber 70.

return) to organic forms in his later works, as in the 1929 maternity entitled *Genesis*. One obviously can only surmise that Gaudier would not have turned to entirely non-organic forms and would have remained on the verge of abstraction, as he does in geometrical yet curvaceous *Red Stone Dancer*. But in Epstein's case, with the loss of its drill, the sculpture gains in pathos, as Stephen Gardiner points out, but it is pathos that was already present in the original work and which goes against the Vorticist claim to universality through the erasure of the subject and impersonality.

Yet its message gained more force when the figure lost its drill, tripod, legs, right forearm and left hand, and was exhibited in this form, cast in bronze, at the London Group in 1916. When the robot's head and stance could be closely examined (difficult to do at a great height), its character surfaced for the first time through the armour with an expression displaying the pathos of sheer impotence [ . . . ]. Here was an entirely new presence, a frighteningly sad and abject creature, a vision of humanity not merely in its time then but, as Epstein claimed, in the future.<sup>1</sup>

What the work points at is a terrifying anxiety in front of the depersonalisation brought about by modernity and modern warfare. This anxiety re-emerges in Epstein's autobiography, *Let There Be Sculpture*, in which *Rock Drill* is described in essentially emotional terms:

It was in the experimental pre-war days of 1913 that I was fired to do the rock-drill, and my ardour for machinery (short-lived) expended itself upon the purchase of actual drill, second-hand, and upon this I made and mounted a machine-like robot, visored, menacing, and carrying within itself its progeny, protectively ensconced. Here is the armed, sinister figure of to-day and to-morrow. No humanity, only the terrible Frankenstein's monster we have made ourselves into.<sup>2</sup>

These works are remote from the coldness and impersonality of the 'formulae' to which T.E. Hulme reduces the expression of emotion in the work of art, especially as he stresses the process of combination as the sole *locus* for creativity, in his *New Age* article of 1913 entitled 'Mr. Epstein and the Critics.' They could even stand as counter-examples or counter-readings to Hulme and subsequently Pound's Vorticist aesthetics. Although Epstein quotes the entirety of Hulme's article in his autobi-

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1. Stephen Gardiner, *Epstein, Artist against the Establishment* (London: Flamingo, 1993) 131-132.

2. Jacob Epstein, *Let There Be Sculpture, The Autobiography of Jacob Epstein* (London: Readers Union Ltd, 1942) 56.

ography, he elsewhere uses Hulme's very words to qualify his assertions. Thus Hulme:

Man remaining constant, there are certain broad ways in which certain emotions must, and will always naturally, be expressed, and these we must call formulae. They constitute a constant and permanent alphabet. The thing to notice is that the use of these broad formulae has nothing to do with the possession of or lack of individuality in the artist. That comes out in the way the formulae are used. (Hulme in Epstein 64)

And Epstein in a 1917 letter to New York art collector and gallerist John Quinn:

My own essays into abstract art have always been natural and not forced. I make no formula, and only when I see something to be done in abstract form that better conveys my meaning than natural form then I use it. There is a solidity in natural forms though that will always attract a sculptor, and great work can be done on a natural basis.<sup>1</sup>

What Epstein and Gaudier's works insist on is on the contrary the radically emotional quality of art and the impossibility of impersonality: what can seem to be achieved in text proves unmanageable in sculpture. Thus, for instance, the grammatical subject can be suppressed from the poem, thus providing an illusion of impersonality: one remembers here Ezra Pound's amendments to T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* or his account of the genesis of his own 'In the Station of the Metro.' But this subject as agent remains manifest in the work of sculpture: *Rock Drill* remains, in Gardiner's words, 'an Epstein' (131) and one could go as far as to say that the plaster figure retains the form of the self-portrait. Through the use of geometric shapes they do not resign from 'vital art,' but emphasize both the dangers of ornamental art and what is perceived as the danger of depersonalisation in modernity: paradoxically, then, the Modernist aim at impersonality emerges as mimetic of the feeling of depersonalisation against which the artists are struggling.

The comparison between these two sculptors' declarations and practice on the one hand, and the theories of sculpture concomitantly elaborated by Hulme and Pound on the other hand, allows for redefinitions of abstraction: moving away from abstraction as a formalist device, they see it rather as abstracting—a process from which, through which and

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1. To John Quinn, 11 Feb. 1917 quoted in B.L. Reid, *The Man from New York: John Quinn and his Friends* (Oxford: OUP, 1968) 299.

into which emotions are constantly rushing, to paraphrase Pound's definition of the vortex, but one that could very well fail to coalesce into the essentialist 'radiant node or cluster' that he uses to define the work of art. Rather, Epstein's works, for sure, and potentially Gaudier's, as they were sometimes left voluntarily unfinished, are stages, the partial results of intuition and of an activity aiming at presenting 'living moments in a precise, ordered form.'<sup>1</sup> By instating a dialogue between the unformed and the formed, the sculptors take up the aesthetic consequences of Henri Bergson's notion of 'élan vital' as a movement of divergence and differentiation: in *The Egoist* (16 March 1914), Gaudier defines his activity as that of 'a man who works with instinct as his inspiring force. His work is emotional. [ . . . ] What he feels he does so intensely and his work is nothing more nor less than the abstraction of this intense feeling.'<sup>2</sup> They are not so much the geniuses of T.E. Hulme's pseudo-Bergsonian aesthetics, who dive into the flux of duration to retrieve shapes that they will fix for us,<sup>3</sup> as figures of the Bergsonian artist in each of us, tracing the patterns of meaning on the surface separating the world of bodies from the world of propositions.<sup>4</sup> For in Hugh Kenner's words, 'the vortex is not the water but a patterned energy made visible by the water.'<sup>5</sup>

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1. Mary Ann Gillies, *Henri Bergson and British Modernism* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University, 1996) 44.

2. Quoted in Paul O'Keeffe, *Gaudier-Brzeska: An Absolute Case of Genius* (London: Allen Lane, 2004) 221.

3. T.E. Hulme, 'Humanism,' *Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. Herbet Reid, with a frontispiece and foreword by Jacob Epstein (London: Routledge, 1987) 149.

4. See Gilles Deleuze, *Logique du sens* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1969, p. 151.

5. Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley: U. of California P., 1971) 146.

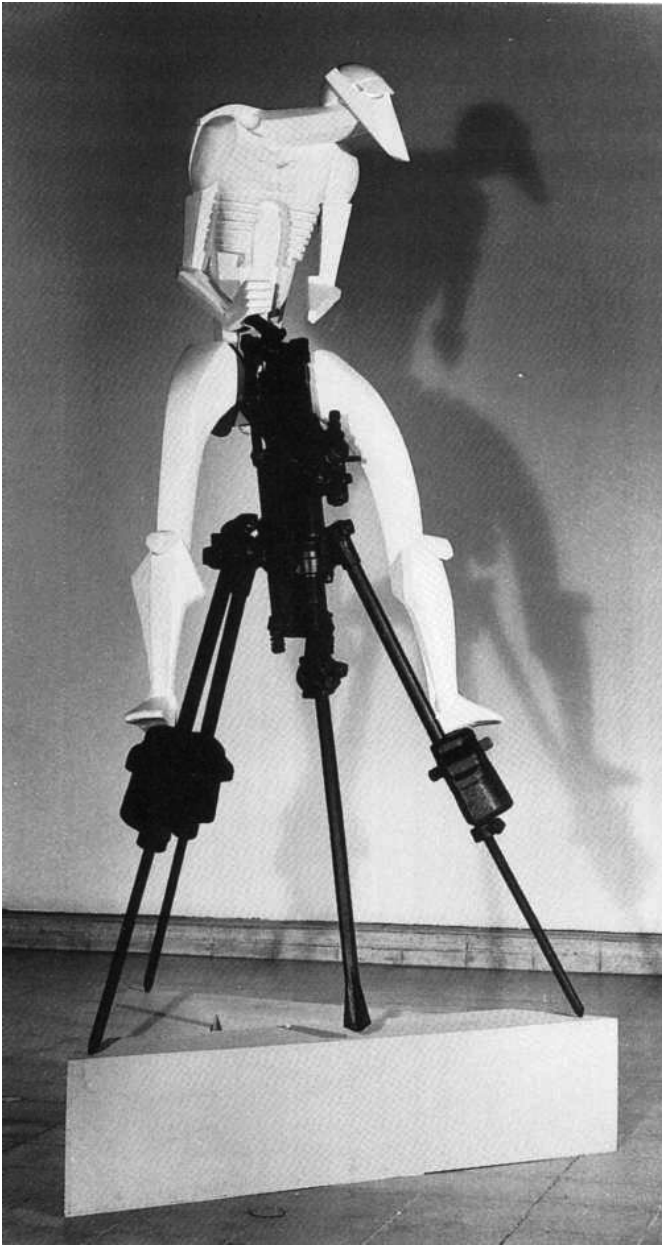


Figure 1. — Jacob Epstein, *Rock Drill*



Figure 2. — Jacob Epstein, *Metal Torso from the Rock Drill*

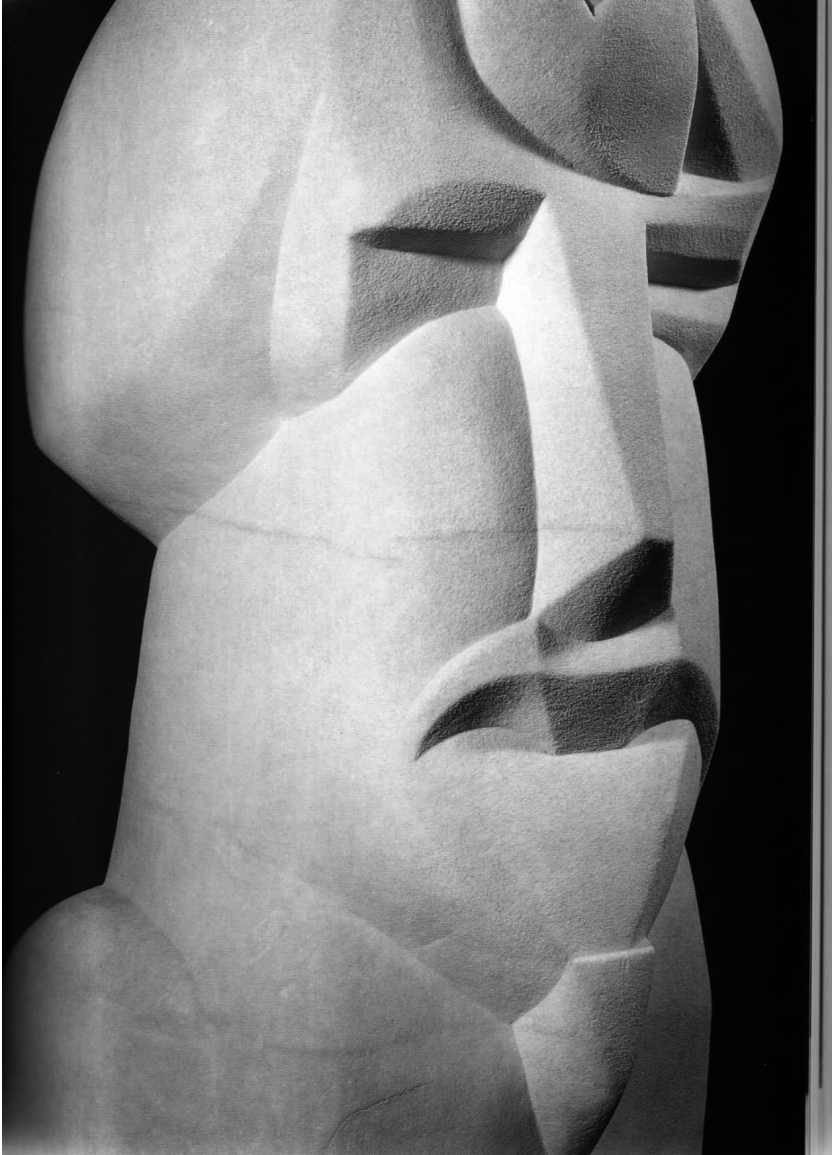


Figure 3. — Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, *Hieratic Head of Ezra Pound*



Figure 4. — Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, *Boy with a Coney*

# **(E)motionless Expressions: Hitchcock's Expressionism and the Trouble with Reproducing Emotion in the Moving Picture**

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This article proposes to consider the early work of British film director Alfred Hitchcock in the light of German Expressionism along with the work of Hugo Münsterberg's *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study* (1916), which is possibly the earliest extensive study of the cinema as art, and Walter Benjamin's views about cinema in 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1936). *The Lodger* (1926) is the first movie Hitchcock films in Britain after his visit to Berlin (Ufa) and Munich (Emelka Studios), where he had filmed his first movies and met the Expressionist master Friedrich Murnau. This movie is interesting as a way not only to judge the impact of Hitchcock's German experience, but also to determine the very meaning of a strictly British modernist cinema. While the cinema can simply be seen as an extension of modern life's subjection to the machine, putting humanity in the picture is also its moment of catharsis as the 'therapeutic explosion of the unconscious' (Benjamin). This goes for both the audience's modern angst as well as a cinematic guiding-principle for re-establishing relations between invisible emotions and their visible expressions. This tense complicity between humanity (read audience) and machine (read cinema) is at the heart of Hitchcock increasing mastery of suspense, where appearances do not simply deceive but call for the audience's critical awareness that not all is what it seems to be but always expresses something, which need not be represented in The End.

In the 1920s there was not much of an film industry in Britain, let alone

modernist at that, and the little that there was could not but be eclipsed at its very conception by that new economic world player, the USA, with which Britain could only claim sufficient cultural likeness to be a partner but not enough money to achieve trend-setting status. Thus Britain, in these early days of cinema history, did look to Europe for further partnership, and, thus, as early as September 1924 Hitchcock was dragged along as assistant director of Gainsborough Productions to UFA's studios just outside Berlin. If anything it was the very economics involved in film production that led to the internationalist tone of early cinema—helped along by the possibility of hosting multilingual casts, which would happily remain silent till the arrival of the 'talkies' in 1928. This was not, however, the internationalism of a deliberate modernist artistic agenda, but that of economics; though it is also true to say that we have to thank the British film industry's shortcomings for Hitchcock's early training in 'modernist' aesthetics, something that would profoundly affect his initiation into this new craft. It took him to Berlin where he would personally meet F. W. Murnau. It is there that Hitchcock would admittedly learn his craft under the shadow of this exponent of German Expressionism. Yet, we do not talk about Hitchcock as an Expressionist director anymore than we talk about a modernist Hitchcock.

The point is that unlike any other art form in the first three decades of the twentieth century, cinema is in itself a *modern* medium whose adaptation to the contemporary world is not so much a struggle of matching art form with a new content for which it had not been previously conceived. Cinema itself poses the formal challenges, which are contained in the actual *modern* experience. The ever presence of the machine is at the heart of modernist dehumanizing angst, and along with the tank, the car or the factory stands the cinema, in ways that literature, sculpture, painting do not. As Walter Benjamin notes in 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction':

Unlike that of literature and painting, the technical reproduction in a work of cinematography is not an external factor to its mass distribution. Technical reproducibility of a work of cinematography is automatically founded on its very technical production.<sup>1</sup>

Machines must be here understood as something beyond the question of technical innovation or tool, and one whose alienating power lie in their

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1. Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1936), Berkeley Institute of Design, 15 May, 2005, [bid.berkeley.edu/bidclass/readings/benjamin.html](http://bid.berkeley.edu/bidclass/readings/benjamin.html)

capacity to appear to do away with human agency through the incorporation of the latter into its chain of production—the WWI's mass industrial slaughter being its most aberrant logical conclusion. Humanity thus loses control over its most precious romantic presumption and production: individual personality and art. This is all the more so because in the twentieth century the process of reproduction forgets the necessity of an original *pre*production, and, thus *prefix*-less, becomes merely an impersonal production. Under such conditions 'the question of the authentic copy lacks here of any sense' (Benjamin 1936). Yet it is *impersonal* in the sense that the cinema actor's authenticity—or the here-and-now that constitutes his personal aura—is displaced on the screen as a product for the public's consumption, a commodity. Yet this depersonalization finds schizophrenic compensation in the parallel cult of the actor's personality outside the studio—what we know as *stardom*. The result is that of passing impersonality for personality which is really only a mirage of individuation as it is reproduced through the industrial production of the actor's studios. This 'magic of personality' is, for Benjamin, not only that:

which has long consisted in the rotten splendor of its status as commodity, but its complementary cult status, activates in turn the corrupt constitution of the masses, which fascism promotes instead of their class consciousness. (Benjamin 1936)

The loss of identity is thus projected from actor to audience, as the imprisonment of the former in the photographic chain of production of the reel consolidates the worker's own chains to his on machine labor, for which we are paradoxically made to feel good about.

So, if the modernist arts seek to at least awaken us from our slavery to the machine—as a metaphor from existential angst—, the cinema would seem, at best, a passive feature of that modernist experience, at worst complicit with it by offering a false sense of scopic glamour about our own dehumanized selves as we adore the false personality of the film-star. This is no less than escapism, but a particularly difficult one to unmask, as it is an escape into the fiction that rules the very social reality that has come up with the cinema industry in the first place. That is, the film-stars' apparent freedom is conditioned by its own imprisonment to the chain of production of the reel/real. In Hitchcock's *Sabotage* (1936), Mrs. Verloc finds little consolation in sitting to watch a movie at the theatre managed by her husband, Carl Verloc, after learning of the death of her younger brother, Steve—who becomes the unintended victim of the bomb he was unknowingly carrying to Piccadilly Circus. Mrs. Verloc learns that her

husband is really a terrorist, and that unable to plant the bomb himself, he had sent Steve instead who was killed after failing to deliver the package in time. The effect of the film *Mrs. Verloc* sits to watch appears at first therapeutic as the Walt Disney cartoon that is playing makes her turn from despair to laughter in an instant.



But no sooner has she returned to set the table for Mr. Verloc's dinner, submissively readopting her role as a wife, she compulsively picks up a knife and kills him.

Mrs. Verloc's emotions are not tamed by the cartoon, which in itself reflects the highest form of photogramatic imprisonment. Of course the in-joke is that the cartoon shows a bird posing as a lady, which finds associations to the birdcage in which the bomb was concealed, and in which Mrs. Verloc is now also metaphorically entrapped as enslaved housewife. The cartoon is indeed the tamest form of acting, as Hitchcock once told Peter Bogdanovich that Walt Disney, as a cartoon maker, had 'the best casting: if he doesn't like an actor he just tears him up!' Yet, Mrs. Verloc's emotions do get the better of her and she kills her husband in vengeance for her brother. Mrs. Verloc is indeed enthralled by the show to which she responds with laughter, yet that escapism has the alternative effect of ultimately distancing her from her role as a wife to that of a sis-

ter, thus irresistibly killing her husband which underlines that the fiction of her marriage is overcome by the reality of her sisterhood. This release from personal identity as social role is mediated through human emotion, which the cinema as an industrial machine of reproduction, can repress but also catalyze.

Three years before completing what is probably the first treatise on the cinema, *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study* (1916), the psychologist Hugo Münsterberg had in 1913 done a lot of work towards an understanding the relationship between man and the industrial machine. *Psychology and Industrial Efficiency* (1913) studies the ways man and machine can best settle their interaction for the sake of greater efficiency at minimum psychophysical effort. Münsterberg shows perhaps a naïve optimism, or what was then known as social idealism, in noting that:

The whole history of the machine demonstrates this economic tendency to make activities dependent upon those muscles which presuppose the smallest psychophysical effort.<sup>1</sup>

Yet there must be some truth in that, even if the abuses throughout the industrial revolution are evident, but Münsterberg was precisely concerned about analyzing and correcting this situation for the benefit of both the human worker and the mechanical machine. He was the first to introduce a psycho-technical test to ensure that the right person was chosen for the appropriate job as, say, tram-conductor in Boston—where he was then teaching at Harvard having moved from Freiburg University encouraged by William James.

What Münsterberg does is to reverse the relation between man and machine, by emphasizing the need to bring out the psychological subconscious that has predetermined the evolution of industrial machinery, rather than the other way round:

The growth of technical devices has thus been constantly under the control of psychological demands, in spite of the absence of systematic psychological investigations. But the decisive factor was, indeed, that these psychological motives always remained in the subconsciousness of civilization. The improvements were consciously referred to the machine as such, however much the practical success was really influenced by the degree of its adjustment to the mental conditions of the workingmen. The

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1. Hugo Münsterberg, *Psychology and Industrial Efficiency* (1913), PART II: THE BEST POSSIBLE WORK, Chapter 14: 'The Adjustment of Technical to Psychological Conditions': 162. 'Classics in the History of Psychology,' York University, Toronto, Canada, 15<sup>th</sup> May, 2005, <http://psychclassics.yorku.ca/Munster/Industrial/>

new movements of scientific management and of experimental psychology aim toward bringing this adaptation consciously into the foreground and toward testing and studying systematically what technical variations can best suit the psychophysical status of man. (Münsterberg 1913, 163-4)

It was in the context of these studies that Münsterberg would watch his first ‘movie’ some three years later. After watching *Neptune’s Daughter*, he confessed in ‘Why We Go to the Movies’ (1915), that ‘surely I am now under the spell of the “movies” and, while my case may be worse than the average, all the world is somewhat under this spell.’<sup>1</sup> That he would choose the term *spell* seems unfortunate, though, as it places the active influence on the machine rather than on man’s psychology. Yet Münsterberg’s fascination with the cinema lies in the latter’s resemblance of man’s mental activity, from which we must deduce the *spell* is nothing else than that of the mind in contemplation of itself. As an art form the issue is not whether the cinema imitates nature, so that the spectator is held under the spell of a new form of technical reproduction, but whether it imitates the mind.

The order of the pictures on the screen is no longer the order of events in nature, but that of our mental play. Here lies the reason why this new art has such peculiar interest for the psychologist. It is the only visual art in which the whole richness of our inner life, our perceptions, our memory, and our imagination, our expectations and our attention can be made living in the outer impressions themselves. (Münsterberg 1915, 178)

The implications for the industrial psychologist of *Psychology and Industrial Efficiency*, where he noted that ‘the practical success [of industrial machinery] was really influenced by the degree of its adjustment to the mental conditions of the workingmen’ (Münsterberg 1913, 163-4), would be that the cinema is the most finely tuned industrial machine ever created, in that the spectators as workers meet the machine in perfect complementarity and effectiveness. The psychophysical subconscious of the worker is thus expressed by the machine to which it adapts.

Some twenty years later Benjamin unknowingly concurs with Münsterberg’s embracing of this new technical development in that ‘the cinema helps man exercise himself in those new apperceptions and reactions involved in the increasing common daily task of handling a machine.’ (Benjamin) The relationship between man and machine need not be one of submission. In so doing the spectator can still potentially overturn

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1. Hugo Münsterberg, ‘Why We Go to the Movies,’ *The Photoplay; A Psychological Study and Other Writings*, ed. Allan Langdale (1915; New York and London: Routledge, 2002) 172.

his passive slavery to technology, where the cinema reflects, not just the workings of the mind, but the labor relations between man and machine, in the manner of giving the spectator a unique opportunity to examine them by providing the necessary distance between the emotional subconscious and its technical expression. This is the very gap silent movies in the 1920s exploited, namely German Expressionists. "The word "expressionism" means "squeezing out," thus making the true essences of things and people emerge into visible form."<sup>1</sup> Expressionism centers on human emotions as the first casualty of the modernist dehumanization process. Emotions may only be salvaged by acknowledging their unconscious presence and thus placed outside the constant motion of its daily technical reproduction. The catch is that it is only the technology that suppresses emotion that has the key to express them. The strategy out of this catch-22 is akin to that of Epic Theatre, which opts for the revealing of the means of production as a way to legitimate human agency in the industrial process—this translates into the unveiling of the backstage simultaneously as the action progresses on the theater stage as in Bertolt Brecht's plays.

Expressionist cinema developed a number of techniques of its own whose practical effect was to problematize the systematic reproduction of movement onto the screen. It meant the unveiling that not only is the cinema not reproducing *real* but *reel* movement, but that it could effectively challenge the industrial tyranny of the ever-moving turning reel that causes the impression of real movement on the screen. Münsterberg's *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study* (1916) devotes one of its chapters to precisely this problem, where he endeavors to establish the non-mimetic nature of art in terms of the issue of the cinema's reproduction of movement:

We know that any single picture which the film of the photographer has fixed is immovable. We know, furthermore, that we do not see the passing by of the long strip of film. We know that it is rolled from one roll and rolled up on another, but that this movement from one picture to another is not visible. It goes on when the picture is darkened. What objectively reaches our eyes is one motionless picture after another, but the replacing of one by another through a forward movement of the film cannot reach our eye at all. Why do we, nevertheless, see a continuous movement?<sup>2</sup>

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1. Susan Hayward, *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000) 172.

2. Hugo Münsterberg, 'The Photoplay: A Psychological Study,' *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study and Other Writings*, ed. Allan Langdale (1916; New York & London: Routledge, 2002) 71.

What Münsterberg is getting at is that the perception of all movement is a mental projection, which is never directly conscious of every single sequence of an object in motion. The turning reel of the cinema projector simply operates on this cognitive fact which has been historically exploited by devices such as the zoötrope or thaumatrope. Thus Münsterberg's overlap between the cinema's technical mechanism and those of mental activity are established. Yet, how is the cinema more than a mere optical illusion concerned with exploiting the relativity of our perceptions, an industrial machine enslaving our psycho-emotional responses to the linear pulsation of the projector's mechanical motor? The answer is that the spectator can become conscious of this optical manipulation, just as the film re-enacts the very cognitive mechanism at the spectator's disposal in ordinary perception, without for that matter destroying the overall effect of the cinema.

In, say, Hitchcock's *Thirty-Nine Steps* (1935), as the murder suspect, Richard Hannay, is departing from Edinburgh Railway Station, he catches a glimpse of three policemen standing on the platform through the carriage window in what is a classic cinematic allusion to the relativity of movement. The spectator, who has only to resort to his own experience in trains, may notice, as he looks out of the carriage window with Hannay, that it is not the train that it is *moving* but the backdrop along with the policemen. Hitchcock deliberately keeps them separate to accentuate the incongruity between forefront, which includes Hannay in the carriage and the *gliding* policemen just behind, and the backdrop, which is composed of a screen whose only movement is that of the film projection of a platform being left behind. In the film studio the only ones moving would be the policemen standing on a moving plate between the carriage and the backdrop screen. Münsterberg explanation is that 'we are inclined to consider as being at rest that which we fixate and to interpret the relative changes in the field of vision as movements of those parts which we do not fixate.' (Münsterberg 1916, 73) Here as the policemen who stand uncomfortably close to the foreground to be moving in the opposite direction of the departing train carriage. In such circumstances the cinema must gain the cooperation of the spectator in the form of his willingness to lend his attention to the pictures passed in front of his eyes. Such generosity is accomplished by establishing that his is not simply a passive attention, but that, even if involuntary, his attention is necessary for the effectiveness of motion. The irony, of course, is that this contract is ultimately settled over the spectator's capacity to immobilize the image through attention, as just noted. The cinema's retort, of course, is to do it

for us through the close-up—yet another characteristic feature of Expressionist cinema.

It is through the close-up that the cinema pays homage to its photographic roots, while it establishes itself as the site of emotional release and complicity with the spectator. Benjamin compares still photography psychoanalysis by noting in 'A Small History of Photography' (1931) that 'it is through photography that we first discover the existence of this optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis.'<sup>1</sup> The glimpse photography affords of the visual subconscious is not only linked to the expression of underlying psychological states or emotions, but is necessarily linked to the emancipation of these emotion from their commodification in the age of technical reproduction. The Expressionist close-up, thus modeled in Benjamin's interpretation of early photography, is an act of industrial strike against the unstoppable rhythm of the photogram turning ceaselessly inside the projector's reel. Yet, Benjamin goes on to note that this *pause* is all the more evident when the process of taking the photograph in those early days required too long periods of exposure: 'The [photographic] procedure itself caused the subject to focus his life in the moment rather than hurrying past it; during the considerable period of exposure, the subject as it were grew into the picture, in the sharpest contrast with appearances in the snap-shot' (Benjamin 1931, 245). The very photographic process obliged the models to stay still for a period which turns into one of spiritual or emotional contemplation. It is in the photographic still of the first manual cameras that the aura, as uniqueness and duration, survives only to be annihilated by the increasing innovative speed of technical reproduction. Benjamin's concessions to the aura here give away his latent melancholic romanticism for an achievable synthesis between image and emotion, which amounts to a concession to the dangers of reification he was always in the ambivalent position of keeping at bay: 'What is aura, actually?' Benjamin asks rhetorically, 'A strange wave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close the object may be' (Benjamin 1931, 245). But let us remember that 'A Small History of Photography' had been written some five years before 'The Work of Art in the Age of Technical Reproduction' came out.

When Hitchcock arrived in UFA's Berlin studios in 1926 he was already familiar with the German masters—Fritz Lang, F. W. Murnau, G. W. Pabst,

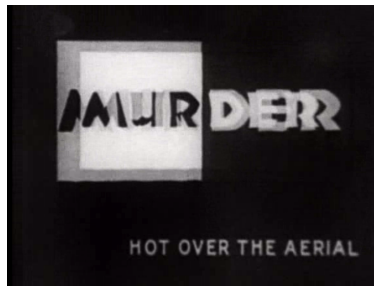
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1. Walter Benjamin, 'A Small History of Photography,' *One-Way Street*, trans Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (1931; London & New York: Verso: 1997) 243.

and E. A. Dupont. Once there Hitchcock found that:

The Germans shot the set, not the stars, and when they shot the stars they anatomized them into eyes and mouths and hands. The Germans loved shadows and glare, bizarre angles, extreme close-ups, and mobile camera work.<sup>1</sup>

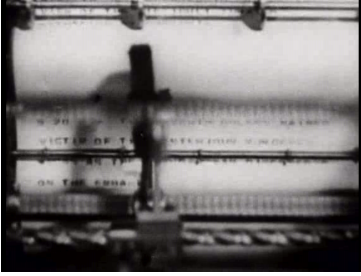
Hitchcock's natural liking for their cinema quickly turned into the adoption of their main artistic tenets. Namely that, as Murnau himself told Hitchcock on set, 'what you see on the set does not matter. All that matters is what you see on the screen.' Hitchcock would also add that Murnau's *The Last Laugh* (1924), which was then being shot, was 'the prime example of expressing a story idea' as 'told visually from beginning to end' by virtually dispensing with intertitles. This purely visual approach to the cinema may seem a surprising turn for the young Hitchcock who had started off in the business as title designer. Yet he readily took it up two years later in his third film as director, *The Lodger* (1926), where intertitles do their best to become images themselves rather than remain captions imposing narrative continuity from the outside.



Resistance to the traditional captions is akin to avoiding the appropriation of the image by the narrative machinery. This is not a denial of language, but its re-appropriation by and in the image, where it finds its legitimate locus, and where the image in turn can claim a visual rhetoric of its own which is intrinsically linked to the emotional unconscious of the onlooker. Because in the silent era the cinema still retains its photographic roots, it also shares this danger, where the increasing speed of the automatic camera is 'ever readier to capture fleeting and secret moments whose images paralyze the associative mechanism in the beholder' (Ben-

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1. Patrick MacGilligan, *Alfred Hitchcock: A Life in Darkness and Light* (Chichester, England: John Wiley & Sons, 2003) 63.



jamin 1931, 256). Benjamin adds: 'This is where the caption comes in. Whereby photography turns all life's relationships into literature' (Benjamin 1931, 256).

One can favorably project Benjamin's diagnosis to the film camera which he was not explicitly writing about. In fact, Münsterberg had addressed the issue of captions, or 'leaders' as he calls them, head on:

They appear sometimes as so-called 'leaders' between the pictures, sometimes even thrown into the picture itself [ . . . ] In all these cases, the words themselves prescribe the line in which the attention must move and force the interest of the spectator toward the new goal. But such help by the writing on the wall is, after all, extraneous to the original character of the photoplay. (Münsterberg 1916, 82)

When the picture sequence is unable to speak for itself, it is because the autonomy of the visual rhetoric of each of the sequence's component photographs has been impaired. And once photography itself has fallen foul of its own original visual rhetoric, victim of the caption as in the printed press, it must turn to the motionlessness of the close-up to trigger its own subconscious speech and complicity with the spectator. Motionlessness is, however, only meaningful within the dialectic of the latent motion of the moving picture. For Münsterberg, the caption must be substituted by the close-up which 'has objectified in our world of perception our metal act of attention [ . . . ] The close-up has to furnish the explanations. If a little locket is hung on the stolen or exchanged infant, it is not necessarily to tell us in words that everything will hinge on this locket twenty years later when the girl is grown up.' (Münsterberg 1916, 87)

Benjamin does not seem sensitive to the advantages of the cinematic close-up but insists on the dualism between radical motion and motionlessness: the cinema on the one hand and painting on the other. 'Let us compare the screen over which the film unfolds with that over which a

painting hangs,' Benjamin offers, now in 'The Work of Art in the Age of Technical Reproduction':

The image on the first screen keeps changing, but it does not on the other. This last invites the beholder into contemplation; in front of which he can abandon himself to the course of his mental associations. But this is not the case in a film. As soon as one is watching it changes. It cannot be fixed, nor like a painting nor like anything real. (Benjamin 1936)

Thus confronted with paintings when he first enters his rented rooms, the lodger, in Hitchcock's film of the same name, is horrified by the immobile gazes of the painted blonds who stare back at him paralyzing him into a pose of recognition



We do not know why. We might suspect him of being the Avenger, who has already killed some seven blonds by that stage of the movie. This suspicion is both dismissed and confirmed by the succession of frames of a newspaper boy shouting the news of the murders. Yet, the newspaper boy, who stands as the accusing caption, literally carrying a billboard with the newspaper headline 'Murder,' is not allowed to consolidate its interpretation of the lodger's image because, as we have already noted, Hitchcock contains the written accusation within the image-world of the film, both encouraging and resisting the audience's association.

More importantly, throughout the movie, and in true Expressionist style, Hitchcock makes such linguistic aids unnecessary allowing the beholder time to abandon himself to the course of his own mental associations by insistently suspending the action of the moving pictures.

Hitchcock promotes visual suspense by suggesting that the spectator's investigation cannot be stage-managed through a linear reading of words in time, but the cinematic image spatially expands beyond the edges of the frame, which rather entrap the scene. The close-up promises its expansion through an alternative duration to that of the turning reel. This



expansion is perhaps suggested by the shot (above) of the lodger framed by the window under which stands the newspaper boy, as the embodied accusing caption, and from which he could possibly walk out from if the reel, like a moving train, would only slow down. The close up suggests this possible decrease of speed, and the possibility of release from the accusing inevitability of the plot's linear trajectory. Don't the windows of a passing moving train resemble the very mechanism of the moving picture, of photographs passing before a beam of light? Aren't train carriages the chosen scene of so many a cinematic crime? Placing the spectator within this complex relation between motion and motionlessness—of watching a moving train carriage from another carriage in a parallel rail track as we noted above about Münsterberg's description of the psychological perception of movement—acts as a critique of the presumed guilt inherent in police identification snapshots, which already places the suspect behind the bars of the caption that underlines it. No sense, here, of the relative motion of riding a train, which must be the ultimate metaphor of the moving picture experience. The Expressionist close-up unveils precisely this parallel dimension of motion, and thus of destiny. The shadow of the window frame forming a cross on the lodger's face (also above) may confirm our suspicion that he is guilty, just as it could possibly

be read retrospectively—once it turns out he is innocent—as the Lamb’s foreknowledge of his own necessary sacrifice for the shortsightedness of others—including ourselves, as the sensationalist audience’s reluctance to let the image speak for itself. The moving picture is played against the still photograph through the close-up to bring about the latent motion of the conscience’s emotions by holding visual interpretation in suspense.

The wrong-man motif, which would accompany Hitchcock’s work throughout much of his career, here plays out the theme that appearances are deceiving if one remains a passive spectator, thus laying oneself wide open to the prescriptive reading of the caption as the newspaper boy claiming MURDER. Thus Hitchcock’s are not mystery movies about finding out the killer. He is quite clear on the subject when he told François Truffaut: ‘Don’t forget that for me mystery is rarely suspense; for example, in a “whodunit,” there is no suspense but an intellectual question mark. A “whodunit” encourages curiosity without emotion; and emotion is a necessary ingredient in suspense.’ (Truffaut 67)<sup>1</sup> Precisely, and Hitchcock’s movies should rather be labeled ‘whonotdunit’ as a rhetorical question. Benjamin himself had noted this forensic dimension to early photography:

Atget’s photographs have been likened to those of the scene of a crime. But is not every square-inch of our cities the scene of a crime? Every passer-by a culprit? Is it not the task of the photographer—descendant of the augurs and haruspices—to reveal guilt and to point out the guilt in his pictures? (Benjamin 1936)

And Hitchcock does this to some extent. For just as the lodger is tormented by the captions that remind him of his sister’s slaughter, they will also eventually pin the murder on him as the masses and the spectators frantically feed on the headlines that populate the film, very nearly lynching him. He is saved just on time by the news that the real Avenger has been caught. Alternatively, other film protagonists who have actually committed murder, *Sabotage* (1936), have to be stopped before they confess their misdeeds impelled by their conscience. The police would not be able to tell the killing from the crime—the caption here being the letter of the law. As Peter J. Hutchings notes: ‘Criminality [. . .] is the direct result of the establishment of criminal law.’<sup>2</sup> The difficulty in these cases is that these protagonists are only really guilty of killing the killer, just like the

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1. François Truffaut, *El cine según Hitchcock*, trans. Ramón G. Redondo (1966; Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 2004) 67.

2. Peter J. Hutchings, ‘Modern Forensics: Photography and Other Suspects,’ *Cordozo Studies in Law and Literature* 9.2 (Autumn-Winter 1997): 229-243 (231).

lodger would like to kill the Avenger for killing his sister, which curiously makes him also an 'avenger.' In a way these are all guilty, yet Hitchcock suspends the Law as the appropriate means to judge guilt. Hitchcock lets guilt in its most abstract form hover above every individual as the target of all apperception and contemplation, but not as something that can ultimately be resolved by passing judgment for us.

The outcome is, however, never totally surprising. That we all hide something is no news to anyone; the only twist lies in it not being what may have been expected, which is never a total shock, because as it is revealed, it turns out, it does not matter anymore because we should have known it. Hence Hitchcock's famous *MacGuffin*—or excuse for a mystery—, which in a movie like *The Birds*, as late as 1963, is finally done away with, as we never find out—don't care, does it matter?—why the birds start attacking humans. We are all guilty of something, and the birds throw the first stone so that we don't have to. Nor is Hitchcock completely innocent himself, as he plays the dangerous game of turning his audiences into lynching mobs: the audience's emotions are put into motion but are only kept in place through the thinnest thread of visual suspense which might at any time snap releasing the very irrational forces it wants to both acknowledge and control. Benjamin adds:

If one considers the dangerous tensions generated by technology, with all its consequences for the great masses—tensions which, in critical stages, adopt a psychotic character—we will arrive at the conclusion that that very technology has also created against it the possibility of a psychological vaccine in the form of certain types of film, which by forcing sadist fantasies and masochistic hallucination arrests its natural and dangerous maturation in the masses. Collective laughter represents the premature and healthy explosion of such mass psychosis. (Benjamin 1936)

Yet the very cathartic experience that the cinema affords runs the risk of unleashing the very emotion it tries to control through its suspended expression, which is thus not repression as such. That Mrs. Verloc in *Sabotage* (1936) goes on to kill her husband after watching a Disney movie shows that her inner thirst for vengeance remains unstoppable—even if our own emotional response to her crime on the screen falls *just* short of forensic condemnation. Again, the visual suspense is activated by focusing on the actor's faces as the stabbing takes place. We have the benefit of watching the shock while remaining in suspense about what has actually taken place and watching the regret in Mrs. Verloc's face.

Perhaps it is too late for her, but not for us. Hitchcock's guilt lies in his taking the beholder so close to the hysteria taking place on the screen; in



giving what people want—under the condition, however, of not allowing them to be absolutely certain about what this is. Visual suspense arrests the beholder's emotions before they arrest somebody else who must forever be the wrong man even when one is always in some sense the right one.

# 'Waves of Emotion': The Radio Play and Modernist Experimentation

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This study begins by considering various, short-lived modernist forays into the theatre, attributable in part to the highly conventionalised space (only overcome by cumbersome mechanics in early Soviet theatre, for instance), to institutionalised audience expectations, the normative emotions acted on stage, and mimetic assumptions about character and voice. It posits the radio play as 'modernism's youngest child,' where what eluded modernism on stage could effortlessly be realised: the dimensions and perimeter of the theatrical space are condensed within the listener's mind, the voice is freed from the confines of the speaking self, time is quite separate from duration while the dream is quite inseparable from wakefulness. These considerations are illustrated by MacNeice's radio play *The Dark Tower* which mixes fragments of voice, poetry, verse, cliché and music to achieve a new, decidedly modern, experimental form of theatricality that explodes the very definition of theatre. It breaks what Woolf called the 'tethers of a single mind,' loosening solid narrative form, without losing an intensity of emotion that is personal because it is impersonal.

Writing to Vita Sackville-West in 1927, Virginia Woolf evoked the passions seething within herself in the following terms: 'I wish you could live in my brain for a week. It is washed with the most violent waves of emotion.'<sup>1</sup> While the tone may suggest this is passing fancy, or a whimsical recognition of their growing intimacy, the words shed light on certain aesthetic preoccupations of Woolf and many of her generation. Were it possible, Woolf seems to imply, to get inside another's brain, to 'tune in'to another's mind and body, one could fathom the unspeakable dramas

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1. Quoted in Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (1996; London: Vintage, 1997) 485.

of interior experience, not the cognitive affections but the more primitive passions. This recalls various early modernist techniques dating back at least as far as Browning's dramatic monologues, trying to encompass both the clamour of the objective world and the dramas of the inner mind in a distinctly modern form. The formal experimentation this entailed has long been the subject of academic inquiry. Arguably the greatest novelty of modernist art forms was their awakening to new technical developments since Newton, as certain critics have asserted, or Gutenberg. Clearly, finding a new form for modernist expression was what mattered; in Craig's terms: 'If you can find in nature a new material, one which has never before been used by man to give form to his thoughts, then you can say you are on the high road towards creating a new art.'<sup>1</sup>

My starting point here is drama's conspicuous imparity in many accounts of modernism, despite immensely innovative early twentieth century experiments in dramatic performance and production. Certainly theatrical modernism never really made the mark that other art forms did, remaining in the annals as mostly short-lived flamboyance, cumbersome mechanical experiments that were no sooner mounted than outmoded, most frequently perceived as expendable tricks that hindered the human actions on stage. The masque had, in any case, already brought architecture to the theatre; this was not yet the formal and technical breakthrough modernism required. My contention will be that the radio play was, in many respects, modernism's youngest child, where the dream plays, rituals and insubstantial pageants that modernist drama, poetry and fiction had toyed with could effortlessly be given shape, but not body, by the microphone, transmitter and wireless. In an unprecedented and unexpected fashion, the machine could thus be brought to the theatre, and the theatre to the machine, making it possible, for the first time ever, to hear, as if in one's own head, the inner voices of others. I shall turn to substantiate my argument to Louis MacNeice's *The Dark Tower*,<sup>2</sup> a crowning achievement in the radio play's experimental phase, to appreciate the ways unembodied voices relate back to primitive, impersonal art forms of the distant past. Well before technological modernity opened up the air-waves, theatre was clearly reacting against the weight of imitation, sequential action, temporal and spatial definition and quite simply physical reality and socially-defined existence. In the theatre, censorship, funding and spectator expectations tended to confound exper-

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1. E. G. Craig, *On the Art of Theatre* (1911; London: Mercury, 1962) 46-7.

2. Louis MacNeice, *The Dark Tower and Other Radio Scripts* (London: Faber and Faber, 1947).

imentation. The architecture of the theatre normalised audience behaviour and expectations. Billboards and programme notes hailed actors as characters, thus perpetuating the idea that great acting meant the faultless projection of character, personality and emotion. It is far beyond the scope of this presentation to chronicle all the ways in which playwrights, actors and directors kicked against the weight of tradition in this respect. I shall limit my examples to just two figures, a playwright and a director, who, in the era immediately preceding public broadcasting, ran aground in their insoluble quest for theatre without personality.

Wyndham Lewis's *The Enemy of the Stars* (1914), is both dramatic script and artistic manifesto, transcribing Vorticism into words and sounds. While undeniably dramatic in scope and movement, the play defies all efforts to bring it to the stage. Its verbose, theoretical slant finds no comfortable place in any theatrical medium; the characters owe more to primitive allegory than personality, the repugnant individual psychodramas the twin figures describe being consumed into a biblical-cum-circus clown tradition. More even than Strindberg's *A Dream Play* (1902) in which characters melt, dissolve and emerge within the over-arching consciousness of the dreamer, Lewis's drama is conceived as 'a dream of action' within a dream that replaces human figures with galvanised automata, and where the setting is as technologically determined as it is primeval. Real spectators are somehow dispensable, being already figured within the play as silent manikins of posterity staring down onto a stage, presented in scene II like a hut, tipped on its back, eviscerated. The script calls for restless and rhythmical sound-shapes that sever conventional links between scripted sound and performance: 'Fungi of sullen violet thoughts, investing primitive vegetation. Hot words drummed on his ear every evening: abuse: question. Groping hands strummed toppling Byzantine organ of his mind, producing monotonous black fugue.'<sup>1</sup> Speakable words replace dialogue, in what is perhaps one of the greatest dramas of the mind in the theatrical repertoire, defying all notions of theatricality.

The work's optical rather than visual power was not lost on D. G. Bridson who recognised here, as in much of Lewis's work, its immense radiogenic potential.<sup>2</sup> Wyndham Lewis's 'great without' thus proved an inimitable 'great within' as his scripts and novels were adapted or conceived in terms of radio in his later years.

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1. P. Wyndham Lewis, 'The Enemy of the Stars,' quoted in *A Soldier of Humor and Selected Writing* (1914); New York: Signet Classics, 1966) 81.

2. Evoked by Bridson in D. G. Bridson, *Prospero and Ariel: The Rise and Fall of Broadcasting* (London: Gollancz, 1971).

My second example of a craftsman of the theatre rubbing up against the conventions of stage personality is the designer-producer Gordon Craig. In his 1902 production of Handel's *Acis and Galatea*, Craig used curtain strips to near veil the stage so that any stage movement filtered through 'as if in the mind.'<sup>1</sup> Craig's later collaboration with Stanislavsky in the Moscow Art Theatre further challenged conventions of dramatic performance, his 1912 *Hamlet* making the prince an off-stage voice, opposing him to the physical, material presence of Claudius and his world. It was a breakthrough indeed in terms of Stanislavsky's intricately imitative conception of actor and embodied emotion (*perezhivaniye*), as reflected in his famous exercise whereby an actor spoke the words 'good night' fifty times, convoking fifty different emotional states. Craig abandoned such representative, cognitive subtleties in favour of declamations emanating from screened-off figures, hardly actors at all, believing that even vestigial personality and physical presence obstructed the pure forms of art that he was seeking. Predictably, after this ground-breaking *Hamlet*, he broke away from actors and stage altogether in favour of dramatic theory.

Craig and Lewis's stage experience, set alongside similar experiments by Marinetti, Gaudier-Brzeska, Meyerhold, Piscator, Yeats among others, demonstrate the real but short-lived attempts to draw from the theatre something other than pre-set dramas of action. *Sweeney Agonistes* might have contributed to a redefinition of what non-theatrical drama entailed, had Eliot not abandoned it in the belief that it belonged nowhere.<sup>2</sup> In the absence of an aesthetic tradition within which such experiments could take shape and find a purpose, they remained flashes in pans. That radio could paradoxically provide this tradition was a message spelt out by Pound and the Vorticists; Marinetti, meanwhile, celebrated radio's novelty in *La Radia*, probably the first manifesto to herald in radio drama a new art form that would break with the chisel, pen or typescript.<sup>3</sup> It was the radio play that could, being broadcast across the nation, actually shake to the core the very welding of drama and theatre, actor and action, appealing purely to an auditory imagination. Drawing as it did on

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1. Max Beerbohm, *Saturday Review* (5th April 1902), quoted by Christopher Innes, 'Modernism in Drama,' *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, ed. Michael Levenson (Cambridge: CUP, 1996) 136.

2. A letter from Eliot to Woolf, 22 May 1924, describes the difficulties of trying to complete *Sweeney* in terms of the contemporary writer struggling to write something wholly outside the tradition. Quoted in Peter Ackroyd, *T. S. Eliot* (1984; London: Sphere, 1991).

3. Marinetti's futurist involvement with the radio play are evoked at length by Margaret Fisher in her remarkable study, *Ezra Pound's Radio Operas: The BBC Experiments, 1931-1933* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002).

aesthetic modernism and technological modernity, it assigned a new art form with a new, but also very ancient, story to tell.

That working ahead into a new technological form would also renew with distant voices of the past was readily acknowledged by writers awakening to the creative possibilities of a new medium. When Eliot refers to the 'auditory imagination,' even if not in the context of radiophonic literature, it is clear that with an aural sensibility born from a revival of spoken rhythms in drama, not only would words be reinvigorated but 'the deeper, unnamed feelings which form the substratum of our bring too': '[ . . . ] feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word; sinking to the most primitive and forgotten, returning to the origin and bringing something back, seeking the beginning and the end.'<sup>1</sup> Eschewing the written, writerly order of the printed page in favour of a more impersonal, distant speaking voice is something Virginia Woolf toys with in the drafts for *Reading at Random*, which, as Hermione Lee stressed, 'was to begin with the prehistory of Britain, swamp, forest and wilderness, out of which came sounds, songs, rhythm, folk-tune, and an art whose key-word was anonymity.' (Lee 750) That radio could be both trail-blazer and archaeologist in this respect was something McLuhan early noted: 'Where the heavy visual stress is lacking in a culture, there occurs another form of sensuous involvement and cultural appreciation.'<sup>2</sup> This was exactly what radiophonic workshops in the early years of the BBC explored, establishing aestheticized sound as a medium in itself, from which solid narrative form could be taken away without losing deep feeling. Technicians, producers and writers showed that the radio waves could explore emotion and emotional states through the colour and intensity of words, and not just reflect expressionist semantics of transmitted, cognitively defined and recognised sentiments.

The interweaving of speech, sound and music proved one of the first truly innovative achievements of radio writing, as the dramatic control panel linked up recording studios and orchestrated sounds, intensity and distance to explore forms of consciousness. It also brought music and sound together in parable form, each aspect of the sound-montage working as a tangential indication of meaning elsewhere. Pound, whose radio operas of the early 1930s are only now receiving the interest they deserve, thus explains how music and sound fit together: 'The music is to that extent a comment on, or an elucidation of, the form of words and possibly

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1. T. S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933; London: Faber and Faber, 1964) 119.

2. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (London: Sphere, 1967) 82.

their meaning, or, if you like, of the emotive contents.’<sup>1</sup> Experimental broadcasts of this sort were conceived as musical shapes and rhythms, playing on the relations and counter-tensions between word and music. What is clear is that this lifting of words from the page made possible a stream of consciousness far freer than any lineal arrangement of words on a page by an artfully absent narrator. Radio writing released prose from ‘the tethers’ of a ‘single mind’ and ‘the straight lines of personality’; into ‘the minds and bodies of others,’<sup>2</sup> while finding in drama a welcome change from the single voice, and in the disembodied sounds and voices transmitted at a given frequency a necessary escape from the linear shapes of realism into the non-theatrical dramas of rhythm, incantation, cadence and recitation.

Importantly too, the aspiring ‘damned egotistical self’ of the writer-creator inevitably changed. The creative mind moved from romantic individuality into tight creative and technical collaboration not only with actors but with technicians too, a welcome cure, as Louis MacNeice admitted, for ‘lonely poet blues’: ‘The mere fact that one’s words issue from other people’s mouths, while gratifying no doubt to an author’s vanity, is also a welcome release from his involuntary egotism.’<sup>3</sup>

Already a seasoned BBC writer and producer when *The Dark Tower* (1946) was first broadcast, Louis MacNeice acknowledged the ways, both innovative and primeval, that radio drama appealed to the emotions: ‘The wave-lengths that I use are the wave-lengths of the heart,’ he stated in a 1940 radio message.<sup>4</sup> His use of Browning’s poem, ‘Childe Roland to the Tower Came’ as the frame and reference in his own radio play points clearly to the way he construed the interplay of tradition and personal talent. The radio announcer’s words, present in the script itself, open the play with a quotation from and passing comment on Browning’s ‘Childe Roland’:

And yet,  
Dauntless the slughorn to my lips I set  
And blew. ‘Childe Roland to the Dark Tower came.’ *Note well the words, ‘And yet.’ Roland did not have to—he did not wish to—and yet in the end he came to: The Dark Tower.* (23)

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1. Ezra Pound, *Guide to Kulchur* (New York: New Directions, 1968) 112.

2. Virginia Woolf, ‘Street Haunting’ (1927) *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, IV*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (London: Hogarth Press, 1986) 480-91.

3. Louis MacNeice, General Introduction, *The Dark Tower and Other Radio Scripts*, 13.

4. ‘Salute to the New Year,’ quoted by R. D. Smith in ‘Castle on the Air,’ *Time Was Away: The World of Louis MacNeice*, ed. Terence Brown and Alec Reid (Dublin: Dolmen, 1974) 87.

It is the 'And yet' that the play dramatises and explores. The poem ends, and MacNeice's play opens, on the clarion call, then from the music grows the story: it is Roland's elder brother practising the call that he must perform at the end of his quest. It is, we learn, a family tradition, to set out on a quest to a land laid waste by a dragon, that cannot be killed but only challenged in his own demesne: the tower. Roland is the seventh boy of the family, whose tradition reaches back seven generations, who too must set out on the quest from which there is no return. This is unsurprising, since it is an explicitly figurative quest, against figures and metaphors of evil. Roland begins his special training, as the knell sounds for Gavin, and is after six years ready to set out. But Roland is a reluctant questor, unsure of what he should look for and whether he even wants to go, tempted too by his beloved, Sylvie, to shun his destiny. He finally embarks on an elusive sea-journey of distraction from which Sylvie manages to lure him, only to find themselves in the land of the dragon. They are nearly married in a haunted chapel, when voices of duty and conscience implore Roland to continue alone. He advances through deserts and forests of doubt, all but abandoning his quest before the voices of the past again impel him: the tower grows before his eyes, he unslings his trumpet and sounds the challenge.

Even such a cursory summary shows how MacNeice's play inscribes itself into a tradition, which extends back through Browning to Edgar on the blasted heath, and thither to the old ballad of Burd Helen. It also evokes *Everyman* and *The Pilgrim's Progress* on the way, drawing on the 'ancient but evergreen' theme of grail quests undertaken by heroes of other lands and ages, in which lands laid waste by a dolorous stroke of varying guises had to be redeemed. MacNeice's Roland is clearly following this well-worn path through his own waste land, from the waters of distraction to the lower initiation of the perilous chapel, which alone admits him to the final consummation of the tower. The ritualistic structure of his story combined with the free verse, unearthly incantations and chorus-like comments also inscribe his quest in the tradition of classical, impersonal, drama such as Woolf celebrates in 'On not knowing Greek,' dramas 'which are known to everyone in outline, so that a great fund of emotion is ready prepared, but can be stressed in a new place by each new poet.'<sup>1</sup> Here too, in the barest of landscapes, there is both the vast scope of classical theatre, but also the intense intimacy of interiorisation as action is enacted in the mind. Roland's quest remains ritual, not life, the charac-

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1. Virginia Woolf, 'On Not Knowing Greek,' *The Common Reader* (1925; New York: Harvest Harcourt, 1994) 25.

ters around him are more puppets than people, in a hieratic, formalistic whole.

Roland's quest is indeed a dream play, 'but a dream that is full of meaning' as the announcer insists, and in which the voices of the past speak out with all the haunting reality of ghosts: ghosts of past and future, ghosts of wasted generations, ghosts of his latent selves, and the ghost of his mother's will 'around [his] mind.' A very Bradleyan play of appearance and reality, performing the doubts of a mind unsure of where it begins, is even written into the play in the form of an old drunk who invites Roland to join him:

Roland A puppet? ...A projection?. How he lies!  
And yet I've sometimes thought the same you know—  
The same but the other way round.  
There is no evidence for anything  
Except my own existence—he says his.  
But he's wrong anyway—look at him snoring there.  
If I were something existing in his mind  
How could I go on now that he's asleep?  
Soak (*muffled*). Because I'm dreaming you. (41)

The episode works as a conceit both structurally, reminding the listener of the immaterial world of the radio play, and thematically, gnawing away at the remaining convictions Roland may have that he's a fully-fledged character with personality and emotions of his own. The old soak's bravado performance, summoning up walls of sound and a bar to prop himself up at, as well as reminding Roland that he is at best a figment of another creative imagination, arguably does away once and for all with any lingering realism the listener may have sought to cling to. As T.S. Eliot acknowledged when he included a passage from Bradley in the notes appended to *The Waste Land*, it is in the intensely private world of the self that impersonality is first encountered.

The intimacy of the microphone and recording studio equally reinforces the setting of the play as a drama of the mind rather than the stage. Even the most wistful, introspective soliloquy on stage requires vocal force and projection to fit the acoustic realities of the amphitheatre. Here, the story arrives 'in the simplest domestic circumstances, told by voices unadorned,'<sup>1</sup> where whispers can be ghostly susurrations, and where impressions of space and distance are achieved by a nameless actor's distance from a microphone. This overlapping of impersonal technique and

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1. Ada Briggs *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom, II . The Golden Age of Wireless* (Oxford: OUP, 1965) 164.

subjective experience is what Dylan Thomas played with in the opening section of *Under Milk Wood*, until the marriage between another's dream and the listener's fantasy was all but completed: 'Time passes. Listen. Times passes. Come closer now [ . . . ] From where you are you can hear their dreams.'<sup>1</sup>

In MacNeice's play, the vestigial action is both deeply personal and intensely unreal. Here the rhetorical and informative elements of language are almost totally subsumed into performativity, until language is the dramatic action. It is a perfect example of parable art, a quintessentially impersonal form where characters and action are only ever standing in for something other. The 'sleight of hand' language<sup>2</sup> they entail again ensures no concessions are made to realism. Parables have two dimensions or four but never three; their characters have none of the 'emotional slither' of characterisation and identification; they hover simply on the verges of a fantastic beyond. They point to significance and interpretation, but never get there themselves, leaving meaning 'just on the far side of language.' (Woolf 1925, 31)

On the far side of language too is music, which is an integral part of MacNeice's play, whose composition by Benjamin Britten again confirms that the radio play undercuts the singular authority of the creative personality. It is Britten's music in the play which occupies the part of chorus, not just marking certain transitions between scenes but creating them. The Dark Tower itself is built not of bricks and mortar but chords and plangent harmonies. Performed early in the play it defines the enigmatic edifice that Roland must set out to find as a sort of resounding dramatic pause: (*The Dark Tower theme gives a musical transition to the schoolroom* 26); it then strikes up as the quest draws to its end and creates the tower before Roland. Music equally provides the non-realistic setting, so that it is always in an implied, impersonal geography of sound that Roland wanders. The tavern scene, for example, where the old soak informs Roland that he is but a projection of his inebriated mind, is literally orchestrated for and by an orchestra, making even this paragon of solipsism into a studio conductor.

In a similar vein, the ship's engines are not pre-recorded sound effects but 'orchestral engines'; the orchestra performs the splash when Roland leaps overboard and the chapel boasts an architecture of sound: *The bell continues but is gradually submerged by orchestral chapel music. The latter swells to a definite close, leaving Roland and Sylvie in the Haunted Chapel.*

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1. Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood* (1953; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000) 2.

2. Louis MacNeice, *Varieties of Parable* (Cambridge: CUP, 1965) 3.

*The voices echo in the emptiness.* (53) If outside space is configured by orchestration, so the inner depths of conscience and doubt are sounded both by a ‘tangle’ of ‘forest music’ (56) and the derisive, harping chants of speaking birds. It is in this deployment of heterogeneous fragments, musical cadence, a ticking clock, nursery rhyme and cawing crows that the dramatic virtuosity of MacNeice’s art is at its most original; it blends conversation and incantation, deliberate conversational flatness and symphony orchestra, hackneyed images and quick cutting into an aesthetic whole.

Writing the music into the overall dramatic structure, a melodic counterpart forming a parable in sound, Britten’s score is vastly different to that of studio orchestra or the intrepid pianist whose music filled pauses and illustrated pre-conceived, pre-existing feats of action in the years of the silent movie for example. Here, the music itself is often the action, bringing to the dramatic movement what Eliot calls ‘a kind of musical design’ which ‘check[s] and [accelerates] the pulse of our emotion without our knowing it.’<sup>1</sup>

Roland’s quest is too abstruse, his doubts and hesitations too formalised for any direct empathy to be elicited from the listener. If the final scene has dramatic effect and emotive resonance it is not because the listener shares the hero’s triumph by proxy. It is the orchestrated performance of doubt, hesitation and despair insinuating through a ticking clock, a pounding heart beat and strident chords taking over from schoolboy jeering that makes this obscure, impersonal exploit into an intensely personal experience, where wistful heroism and performance anxiety are overcome in a resoundingly performative feat of self-mastery and triumph.

Roland Yes, dear friends, I will blow it the way you taught me.  
I Roland, the black sheep, the unbeliever—  
Who never did anything of his own free will—  
Will do this now to bequeath free will to others.  
(*full out*) Ahoy there, tower, Dark Tower, you’re getting big,  
Your shadow is cold upon me. What of that?  
And you, you Dragon or whatever you are  
Who make men beasts, come out—here is a man;  
Come out and do your worst.  
(*The heart beat, having reached its crescendo, ends clean.*) (66)

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1. T. S. Eliot, ‘Poetry and Drama,’ *Selected Prose* (1951; London: Faber and Faber, 1992).

The dramatic drawing out of the final catastrophe could arguably not have been achieved in any other medium, bringing the listener into the tension of ritual and consummation. It is not in its performance of affections but in its resonant emotive appeal that MacNeice's drama in particular, and experimental radio dramas in general, explore the wave-lengths of emotion. It offers a medium in which, as in music, complex experiences and intricate sensory perceptual states can be awakened that cannot in themselves be assumed to constitute emotions. The most intimate dramas of the inner mind resound in a kind of communal consciousness harking back to the sounds and music not only of an individual life but, through a basic fellowship in receptivity, to the bardic, mystical lure of story-telling, when shapes and sounds lingered on long after the teller had fallen silent.

I have but touched on the place of the radio play in late-modernist aesthetics and the scope offered by plays frequently neglected by critics. But I would like to conclude on a single note looking ahead to a likely extension of the ideas evoked here. It remains to pursue, by further analysis, the double patterning of scripted and scored radio drama from the point of view of studio craft and music, where language is first and foremost an aural effect and plot the exploration of effects made by superposed voices. This sort of investigation would extend to those modernist dramas which, while not conceived for radio, find in the ephemeral, viewless medium of the air-waves an ideal setting for the static, incantatory pageants that the stage belies. It would embrace too those adaptations of fictional works that seem to find in the more spatial medium of sound just the release they were seeking from the single voice and the lineal organisation of print: Wyndham Lewis' *The Human Age*, Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, David Jones' *In Parenthesis*. In each case, the medleys of remembered sound, snatches of popular song, rhythms of symphonic composition and patterns of age-old stories are brought together within the over-arching unity of dramatic and musical order. These pass through wires, transmitters and captors, to be heard once, and sometimes only once, by a listener who, as the *Counterblast* manifesto of 1954 suggested, 'begin[s] to structure the primordial feelings and emotions from which 3,000 years of literary have divorced us.'<sup>1</sup>

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1. Quoted by Marshall McLuhan, *Essential McLuhan*, eds. Eric McLuhan and Franz Zingrone (London: Routledge, 1995) 230.



# Beyond Brecht: Emotion as Didacticism in Edward Bond's Theatre

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The British playwright Edward Bond, certainly influenced by Brechtian drama, proposes a completely new emotional theory of TEs (Theatre Events) transcending the obsolete alienation effects. Applied to a play like *Human Cannon* (1982), this study concludes that political and social responsibility is the key element in this emotional approach which rejects the distancing element preached by Brecht in favour of provoking 'rational' emotional responses.

Within the group of British playwrights that emerged in the sixties, politically leftist and disillusioned with the savage capitalism that dominated the world, Edward Bond is certainly one of the authors who were most influenced by the theoretical aspects of Brechtian drama. Widely criticized because of his use of violence in theatre, the thematic consistency of his plays explains the presentation of pain and suffering as a didactic device to show the problem of violence as a social phenomenon. Like Brecht, Bond defends the need of an epic theatre, an analysis of truth to reflect the real history of humankind without the misinterpretation of mythological manipulations. Despite the similarities between both authors concerning ideological and methodological aspects, the treatment of emotions suffers a process of evolution from the obsolete techniques of the German playwright to the completely new emotional theory developed by Bond. His new use of emotions as an effective device to shock the audience is progressively applied to plays like *Human Cannon* (1982), which will be analyzed afterwards.

Brecht himself recognizes that his theatre is theoretically rational and not emotional but Esslin identifies 'the rejection of empathy and the emo-

tional involvement of the audience<sup>1</sup> in Brechtian epic drama. This apparent contradiction becomes possible when we compare Brecht's initial hypotheses in which the audience were invited to distance themselves from the action through the process of alienation with the final result in which an eclectic mixture between emotions and alienation seemed closer to reality. This was Brecht's sincere intention:

The emotions are to be involved only at a further remove: the critical analysis of the social facts, presented in the concrete form of living pictures, is to produce socially useful emotions such as indignation at injustice, hatred of oppressors, or an active desire for the overthrow of the existing social order. (Esslin 209).

However, this theoretical rationalization of emotions with social ends proved to be totally ineffective because the public response to plays like *Mother Courage* was instinctively to move the audience to tears about the horrors of war and not the cold reflection about the failure of capitalism expected by Brecht. On the other hand, trying to go beyond Brechtian failures, Bond develops the *aggro-effects* in contrast to the alienation effects of his predecessor: 'In contrast to Brecht, I think it's necessary to disturb an audience emotionally, to involve them emotionally in my plays, so I've had to find ways of making that *aggro-effect* more complete, which is in a sense to surprise them...' <sup>2</sup> In this way, Innes roots the use of violence in Bond's play as 'a measure of urgency' and the need to present the play not as a mere instance of Aristotelian catharsis but 'as a sort of shock therapy designed to galvanize their consciences into life and provoke them into viewing society "objectively" and "rationally" (that is, from his perspective).' (Innes 199) Emotionalism, thus, becomes a didactic device to provoke political and social conscience in the spectator's mind.

The audience's emotional commitment supposes a fundamental break with the Brechtian tradition of epic drama. *Lear*, *Human Cannon* or *The Woman* call for a response about what is happening on the stage, but instead of seeking some distance from the events, these plays urge an involvement which gives a more active role to the spectator. Appealing to their sense of justice, humanity or compassion, Bond's characters are able to develop a more profound analysis and a need for action because of the shock state in which the audience abandons the theatre. In the development of his theory about *TEs* (Theatre Events), Bond transcends

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1. Martin Esslin, *Brecht. A Choice of Evils* (London: Methuen, 1984) 19.

2. Quoted in Christopher Innes, 'The Political Spectrum of Edward Bond: From Rationalism to Rhapsody', *Modern Drama* 25.2 (1982): 199.

the Brechtian alienation effects with a less abstract and more positive orientation:

TEs are not simply Brechtian alienation effects. [ . . . ] Yet alienation theory depends on a philosophy of mind held by Diderot and other eighteenth-century rationalists. It appeals to objective judgement but does not secure the means of achieving it. The mind cannot get outside itself to be objective. The structure of mind is part of the continuum of society.<sup>1</sup>

'Alienation' will not enable us to critically examine our fear—and what it hides—because it will not let us confront it. Almost all theatre reaffirms fear or (in vulgar Brechtianism) avoids it. Reason is not free to describe the world unless it is free to redistribute emotion. The two are ineluctably joined.<sup>2</sup>

The construction of emotion in Bond's theatre is not based upon static qualities or universal and timeless feelings but real possibilities of revolt after viewing the actions developed on stage. Avoiding the sentimentality of dramatic images, his theatre invites the audience to become a witness of the horror of reality trying to form an effective political and social conscience beyond empathy and false self-pity. For Bond, emotions stand for cultural structures needed to be changed: 'Emotions stand between concepts and feelings and, in this respect, they are passive. To change then you must change concepts, but each is locked in the other. Emotional appeals achieve only token responses, we cry at the superficially moving.'<sup>3</sup> (Bond 1998, 331) Nevertheless, problems arise when the emotional response to an aggro-effect is isolated repulsion—which has happened to some critics—rather than continuous implication leading to a point of extremity. After Brecht's distinction between reason and emotion, Bond's proposal is based on a 're-description' of emotion without the corruption of expected responses, consequently, a new emotional freedom to re-describe the social world more rationally. In one of his letters, Bond explains this emotional metamorphosis from fear and acceptance to the acquisition of power (from problem to answer):

There is a form of feeling which is also an understanding. It doesn't replicate the former fear (or anger or arrogance etc). It creates the former emotion but by altering the description of the cause it adds another emotion—

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1. Edward Bond, *Plays: 6. The War Plays. Choruses from After the Assassinations* (London: Methuen, 1998) 325.

2. Ian Stuart, ed. *Edward Bond Letters 5* (London: Routledge, 2001) 7.

3. Edward Bond has his own unique approach to punctuation which I have tried to preserve in deference to the author's style.

and then the power of the first emotion (the fear, anger etc which is our problem) becomes the power of the changed emotion which rejects the first emotion: there is a stage act of transference, in which victimhood passes to accepting responsibility, and the situation is made coherent. (Stuart 2001, 7-8).

Within this kind of answer plays, we may contextualise *Human Cannon*, a play about the Spanish Civil War in which the female character Agustina becomes a revolutionary heroine in favour of class struggle defending human equality against the oppression of capitalism. Through the horrors of the war and the injustices of fascism, Bond's didactic theatre emphasizes the possibility of provoking emotions in the audience throughout the play but a meaningful selection of the most relevant scenes has been analyzed as a general vision of his dramatic use of emotions.

In order to understand the play and as an emotional contextualization, the author depicts in the first scene the desperate situation in which Agustina and Nando live, in a poor world where their child has died of starvation. However, the cause of Agustina's dead baby is not to be located in its parents' economic conditions but in an unjust system which favours differences between poor and rich: 'If you werent [sic] so poor the child would have a better chance of living.'<sup>1</sup> According to the cause-and-effect method portrayed by Bond, this context justifies the revolt of the country against the tyranny: 'We fight you for the sake of our children!' (Bond 1996, 113) Giving an example of integrity against the attempt at corruption performed by the priest, Agustina appears as a suffering mother who understands that children die but the poor must fight to survive and change the conditions of injustice in an inhuman world. In an illustrative counterpoint which seeks to show the feeling of pain as action, Agustina simultaneously prepares the dead baby for burial and a tin of food for Nando who will need it to continue working. Through such a dramatic device, the author portrays in this example of a 'mother courage' the need to fight instead of the passive acceptance of suffering.

Scene III, entitled *The Surrender*, leads us from the rural to the industrial landscape. Agustina and her daughter, Tina, work for a munitions factory with a large group of women whilst men fight on the frontline. The factory turns into a city, a small microcosm in which the stories of many different characters develop as real examples of the injustices of war: their cruel function consists in producing the bullets and bombs

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1. Edward Bond, *Plays: 5. Human Cannon. The Bundle. Jackets. In the Company of Men* (London: Methuen, 1996) 37.

which will be used to kill their husbands and relatives. In this horrible setting, Bond opposes the decision of Agustina's family to act against the submission of the rest of the people who live in the factory: 'Slaves have to make their own chains[ . . . ] In the end all weapons are used against the working class [ . . . ] In our society everything is a weapon [ . . . ] That's why we need a revolution. Then the weapons could become tools again, and we could build instead of destroy.' (Bond 1996, 63) Nando defends the need to fight even when the defeat of the city is near because surrender would mean to betray the deaths of many people who die for this cause. In this desperate factory, Bond introduces an essential symbol of hope and fight in the image of a blind man pushing a crippled man's chair. Appealing to the feeling of solidarity as an alternative to this destruction, this symbol of hope in the human cooperation is reinforced with the introduction of music (a violin and a flute in the invalid's lap) which gives the idea of a possible victory. Klein mentions that Bond's intention in this scene is to reveal 'how almost impossible tasks can be achieved if people cooperate to each other's benefit.'<sup>1</sup>

In this factory scene, Agustina becomes the audience's eyes during a metaphorical journey through the reality of war. Her interventions are less important than in the rest of the play because her role consists in learning the horror of war while leaving the main focus to the stories of anonymous characters. The knowledge that Agustina suffers personally in the factory leads to an evolution in her political consciousness and a development in her character from observation to action. In this industrial and violent microcosm, her concern for children is one of the main factors in her maturity: 'The children have taken the chalk they use to mark up batches of shells and they're writing alphabets on the walls.' (Bond 1996, 59) This parallelism criticizes the political responsibilities of war in children's learning: 'Society is the trauma of childhood.'<sup>2</sup>

The last step in her evolution from awareness to action is reflected in the ending poem of the scene, analyzed by Debusscher as 'a lyric effusion in rhymed verse [ . . . ] musing about a time when there will be justice between nations.'<sup>3</sup> Through the use of poems or public soliloquy in Bondian terms, Bond's heroine engages the audience more directly: 'The poor dont [sic] ask the shopkeeper to give his food away /The prisoners

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1. Hilde Klein, 'Human Cannon—An Epic History Play by Edward Bond,' *Anejos de Analecta Malacitana* 6 (1989) 87.

2. Edward Bond, *The Hidden Plot. Notes on Theatre and the State* (London: Methuen, 2000) 166.

3. G. Debusscher, 'Human Cannon: Edward Bond's vision of the Spanish Civil War,' *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire* 65.3 (1987): 607.

dont [sic] ask the governor to set them free/[ . . . ] And the world will call for peace and the call will be in vain.’ (Bond 1996, 63-64) The possibilities of romanticizing this type of poems seem one of the main problems for Bond and in this sense, the central poem of the play, ‘My Spain’, needed precise instructions for the performance. Giving its condition as the poetic climax in *Human Cannon* at the end of scene VIII, a kind of sentimental chorus of women was proposed but consistently rejected by the author in favour of his new interpretation of emotions:

It romanticises their journey—as if inside them they had some secret energy or passion which could magically liberate them from all their problems. That sort of romantic strength is of no use because politics is always practical and the solutions to political problems dont [sic] come from an innate or nationalistic spirit but from learning.<sup>1</sup>

In scene X, entitled *The Soldier’s Training*, Nando is arrested by the squad of fascists and executed. His death is again characteristic of the cruelty of Bond’s dramaturgy: the Captain teaches one of his soldiers to shoot properly using Nando as a living target. Draped in a republican flag, Nando has to bear the missed attempts of the disciplined soldier who first shoots at his right hand and then at his left. The bleeding of his hands evokes undoubtedly a religious image though Bond is also intent on a very different objective, certainly: to show the audience Nando’s power in his convictions. In fact, despite the protagonist’s death, the author perceives this scene as a victory of Nando’s ideal against irrational power: ‘The young soldier kills but he has no power over himself. Nando is killed but his use of the flag shows power over himself’ (Stuart 1995, 73). As an anticipation of the future death of Agustina, the emotional atmosphere that this cruel death provokes does not stimulate feelings of pity or sorrow in the spectator but a profound consciousness of the injustice of the act.

The final scenes of *Human Cannon* expose the effects of the failure of revolution and Agustina, arrested because of the explosion of a bomb in the village church, is sentenced to death. The character called *Investigator* tries to force Agustina’s confession adding other ten women from Estarobon to the death sentence; these women appear dressed in black as a symbol of their dead relatives in the war. Despite the fascist oppression of the trial, the strength of these women resists injustice considering Agustina as guilty like the rest of them. With inevitable echoes to Lope de Vega’s *Fuenteovejuna*, the women make the whole village respons-

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1. Ian Stuart, ed., *Edward Bond Letters II* (Amsterdam: Harwood, 1995) 73-74.

ible of the bomb and one by one answer 'Estarobon' to the *Investigator's* accusations—only one of them will yield to the pressure. From the initial fear experimented by people at the beginning of the play, the example of Agustina and her endless fight has developed the growth in the political consciousness of the village emphasizing the importance of community learning. In a surreal theatrical metaphor, Agustina, restrained by women, strains towards the *Investigator* with this antifascist speech:

AGUSTINA.

When you make us weak you teach us to be strong

[ . . . ]

When you rob us you teach us to sabotage

When you exploit us you teach us to strike

When you make laws you teach us to break them

[ . . . ]

When you use weapons against us you teach us to arm

When Fascists imprison a country they teach it to be free!

(Bond 1996, 114-115).

In a final act of solidarity, the village women raise Agustina above her enemies' heads, becoming a 'human' cannon that now represents a new example of force and unity among the village women. At this precise moment, the emotional significance of this symbolic gesture becomes central and the sense of collective union against fascism also involves the audience in a striking use of theatre as education.

Conversely, the fascist regime seems unable to accept the value of this gesture rejecting Agustina's world as utopian and unreal: 'Fascism is normality protected from change.' (Bond 1996, 116) However, this lineal prose is contrasted to the explosion of poetic richness in a moving concluding choir. This final creed opens a possibility for change in the future due to the value legacy that these women have taught their children: 'But the lives they lived have made us strong / And to our children we pass our strength.' (Bond 1996, 117) The figure of Agustina's grandchild, raised above the fascists' heads, shows a powerful image of a better future and the opportunity to create a more human world free of misery. As the moral of *Human Cannon*, the relationship between this hopeful child and Agustina's dead baby at the beginning of the play stands alone as a meaningful proof of Man's capability of effecting change.

With this analysis, our intention has been to prove the effectiveness of the new emotionalism developed by Bond learning from Brecht but not ending there. Bond has created a personal dramatic theory in which commitment and individual implication appears as an inextricable link

between playwright and audience. Against the empty sentimentality that other playwrights make use of, the strategic devices carefully chosen by Bond to create shock fulfil a clearly didactic function in relation to the audience: to show the possibility of change as a response to the irrationality of our system. Impersonality, in the most Brechtian definition of the term, is clearly subverted in Bond's plays by introducing the spectator as the main judge of the action transcending his traditional witness function. Taking into account the thematic structure of the play, it seems difficult to approach the stage with impersonal attitudes since the actions developed are specifically designed to move the audience. In this sense, *Human Cannon* stands as a good example of Bond's original interpretation of emotions as a redefinition of freedom in the era of postmodernism.

# Bill Brandt's Great Britain: Revealing Emotions beneath Archetypes

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Bill Brandt started working as a photographer in the mid-thirties, at a time when documentary photographers claimed to express their artistry through the very impersonality of their medium. All his life, Bill Brandt showed a special interest in photographing his paternal and adoptive country. His portraits of English social types and his landscapes of places associated with British cultural heritage reveal an emotional quality linked to the very notion of Englishness, what T.S. Eliot called 'the tradition.'

Bill Brandt started working as a photographer in the mid thirties, at a time when there was much debate over the status of documentary photography. Up until then, photography had been considered as art providing it was not presented as a document. Throughout the 1930s, however, some photographers started to claim that the objective rhetoric they were elaborating, while being faithful to photography's indexical technique, was much more than mere documentation. In other words, the thirties witnessed the emergence of a paradox, namely that photographers, by foregrounding the impersonality of their medium, claimed to express their artistry.<sup>1</sup>

Bill Brandt, however, as it is the case with all great artists, did not belong to any specific artistic school. Through his art, he united three major trends of photography: working as a documentary photographer for magazines, he was also a formalist conjoining the two influences of pictorialism and surrealism. His work is often divided into two main periods, the first dominated by documentary reportage, the second, starting

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1. This question has been remarkably analysed by Olivier Lugon, *Le Style documentaire. D'August Sander à Walker Evans 1920-1945* (Paris: Macula, 2001).

in the 1950s, characterized by his use of wide-angle lens and abstract studies of nudes, some of which are reminiscent of Henry Moore sculptures. Through the present paper, however, I want to stress the continuity of Brandt's approach to his adopted country, for, although he is now deemed as one of the greatest British photographers, Bill Brandt was born in Germany. In particular, I would like to demonstrate that the emotional depth of his photographs is largely due to the way his personal gaze resonates with the notion of Englishness.<sup>1</sup> In so doing, Bill Brandt anchors his photographs in what T.S. Eliot called 'the tradition', which 'involves, in the first place, the historical sense, [ . . . ] and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence [ . . . ], a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and the temporal together.'<sup>2</sup> For Bill Brandt, this historical sense was to be explored through two fundamental genres of photography: portraits and landscapes.<sup>3</sup>

Bill Brandt was born in Hamburg but of an English father. When he decided to come and live in England in 1931, his vision of the country was one of a foreigner, but one who felt deeply English and had nurtured an imaginary relationship with this paternal land. In particular, the photographer often said that his first decisive contact was provided by the illustrations of children's books. Bill Brandt's first collection *The English at Home*, published in 1936, displays an ambition to give an overall view of English society. It is largely based on the representation of types and stereotypes. As in the children's rhyme 'Tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor, rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief', Brandt focuses on generic subjects, often shown in uniform, captured in, and defined by, their environment. The newness of the gaze is thus imbibed with old-fashioned imagery, focusing on the exterior signs of Englishness, highlighting the impersonality of the object photographed as well as the photographer's look.

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1. The notion of Englishness has been much debated since the first half of the twentieth century; in particular, some scholars endeavoured to define an 'art geography', to isolate the national character specific to the artistic production of a country (see Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Englishness of English Art*, 1955).

2. T.S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919), *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot* (Faber & Faber: London, 1975) 38.

3. Some photographs are available on a number of websites, among others: [www.specialphotographers.com/pages/exhibition.asp?action=more\\_info&exhib\\_id=21](http://www.specialphotographers.com/pages/exhibition.asp?action=more_info&exhib_id=21), [www.masters-of-photography.com/B/brandt/brandt\\\_parlourmaid\\\_at\\\_window.html](http://www.masters-of-photography.com/B/brandt/brandt\_parlourmaid\_at\_window.html), [www.designautopsy.com/blowup/portfolios/a-d/Bill\\\_Brandt/index.asp?link\\\_id=23](http://www.designautopsy.com/blowup/portfolios/a-d/Bill\_Brandt/index.asp?link\_id=23), [www.leegallery.com/brandt.html](http://www.leegallery.com/brandt.html), [www.billbrandt.com](http://www.billbrandt.com) (the Bill Brandt Archive Home Page).

*Piccadilly Circus* (1939) is a perfect example of such type: it shows a full length portrait of a Bobby, who is standing firmly on his feet in the middle of the crossroads. The traffic brought to a standstill highlights the fixity of the pose and the fact that his face remains hidden contributes to turn the individual into a type, here none other than one of the pillars of British institutions, a figure of authority mixed with benign friendliness.<sup>1</sup>

Interestingly enough, the frontal pose was the subject of much debate in the thirties. After being rejected at the beginning of the century by Modernist artists as too contrived, it was reassessed positively during the thirties (with the studies of August Sander in Germany or the portraits made for the Farm Security Administration in the United States). Bill Brandt's picture shares with them the perfect clarity of details, the frontal view centred on the subject and the static pose; but, contrary to the approach of most other photographers interested in portraiture who wanted to stress the anonymity of the portrait by obliterating all professional or social context, here Brandt is not interested in the person as such but in his role—his professional and social persona. Beyond its documentary aspect, the photograph serves the staging of national representations, one characteristic of which would precisely be the English concern for social codifications.

This search for generic types is most specifically expressed in a series of photographic reportages<sup>2</sup> showing a character, most of the time female, in her daily professional activity. The reports themselves are conceived as sequences depicting different moments of the day's work, which results in a kind of emblematic schedule. One example is provided by the series called 'The Perfect Parlourmaid' (July 1939), in which Brandt followed Pratt, the parlourmaid running his uncle's house, throughout the day. Pratt was one of Brandt's favourite subjects: representing domestic order in its utter rigidity, she is propriety incarnate. In *Airing the Down-*

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1. While the Metropolitan Police was created in 1829, as early as 1851, *Punch* was commenting that the police were becoming 'the national favourites', taking the place of the army and the Navy who had been the 'favourites' during the Napoleon wars. Some thirty years later, the *Times* wrote: 'The policeman, who is in foreign cities regarded as an enemy, not only by the criminal classes but by the working classes generally, and who in times of social disturbance is made the first victim of popular hatred, is in England rather the friend of the people than otherwise. It is not only the black-coated respectability that feels at home with him, but the workman and the woman of the people...' *The Times*, 14 September 1883, quoted in Clive Emsley, 'The English Bobby: an Indulgent Tradition', in Roy Porter ed., *Myths of the English* (Polity Press: Cambridge, 1992). This image will last until the end of the 1950s, when new police tactics such as the Unit Beat System were introduced.

2. Another departure from strict documentary style can be seen in his use of series. Although series were much favoured for their taxonomic quality, Brandt's predilection for series lies in their narrative quality.

*stairs Rooms*, the marked low angle shot highlights Pratt's severe and domineering look. *Hornton Street / Preparing the Family Breakfast* shows Pratt again inspecting the breakfast tray. While the other maid is wearing the same uniform, Pratt's attitude and her stern look clearly establish a strict hierarchy among servants. Lastly, in *Parlourmaid and Underparlourmaid Ready to Serve Dinner*, Pratt's look is as stern as ever, but here the object of her look is located on the other half of the double page. Pratt is literally looking down on her social superiors who occupy the bottom of the opposite picture. Just like the butler who has adopted the values of his masters so well that he becomes the keeper of these values, Pratt shows she is proudly aware of being the essential cog necessary to the life (or even the survival) of the upper class.

Beyond the portraits' typological value, the photographer accompanies the subjects in their act of self-representation. His gaze doesn't seek to reach the inner truth of the 'real person' while claiming to pierce through the social mask that the character exhibits to the world. On the contrary, by examining the mask itself, and the way the character wears it, the photographer aims at revealing its emotional dimension, linked to the role the character is proud to fulfil.

Like most of the photographers throughout the 1930s, Bill Brandt cannot help being struck by the huge contrasts dividing the social classes in England. All the more so, while the country was being hard hit by the Depression (unemployment rate reaching a record high in 1933 with 3 million people out of work, which represented 23% of the working population), the crisis affected the way of life and the ostentatious consumption of the upper classes surprisingly little.<sup>1</sup> However, his photographic reports, although they are anchored in the harsh reality of the 1930s, dominated by economic hardship and social inequalities, cannot be reduced to their documentary dimension. What interests the photographer above all is not to make any political statement but to explore the formal contrasts. One efficient means for that effect is Brandt's recurrent use of contrastive juxtaposition. This device no doubt stresses social inequalities but it also paradoxically denotes the profound unity of the country, who ultimately adopts the same rites, ceremonies and institutions. George Orwell stressed this feeling of emotional unity despite deep social divisions: 'England is the most class-ridden country under the sun. It is a land of snobbery and privilege, ruled largely by the old and silly. But in any calculation about it one has got to take into account its emotional unity,

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1. It is estimated that 5 % of the adult population owned 79 % of the wealth, among which the richest 1% possessed 56 %. See Noreen Branson & Margot Heinemann, *Britain in the Nineteen Thirties* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1971) 154-158.

the tendency of nearly all its inhabitants to feel like and act together.<sup>1</sup> Orwell was writing at the beginning of World War II, but it seems to me that this observation is also true outside moments of crisis. This can be seen through the collective participation, although in separate places, in rituals such as the Derby at Epsom. *Derby at Epsom* (1936) is thus composed of two pictures, each showing spectators who clearly belong to separate social classes. Nevertheless, the pairing stresses the idea of an echo, the two scenes being the two sides of the same coin: one showing the back of the characters, the other offering a frontal view, one taken at ground level, the other depicting a domineering group as they stand on a vehicle. What unites the two pictures, though, is the decentring from the main spectacle (the races) to the spectators themselves as well as the emphasis on oblique lines, be it a body lying on the ground or the direction of the gazes.

In his last publication *London in the Thirties* (1983)<sup>2</sup> which is in fact a selection of photographs from his first two books, Bill Brandt proposes a radioscopy of English society. The book is structured along three chapters which correspond to the social geography of the English capital: first the East End and the districts near the Thames, the second further West in Battersea, the third and last devoted to the upper class and their servants. As in a school book, each class is represented by its dwelling—its exterior view as well as its inner space: *Rainswept Roofs / East-End Bedroom* (1933) shows the endless lines of identical brick terraced houses found in working class neighbourhoods, *The Great North Road / Living room in Daleham Gardens* (1936) the bow-windowed, mock-Tudor semi-detached houses of the middle-class and *Hollywalk, Hampstead / Coffee after Lunch* (1936) the elegant mansion for the upper class. As the frame tightens, we can note a progression from the anonymous uniformity towards more intimacy and individuality. Moreover, the pairing of the pictures establishes a dialectic relationship between exterior and interior worlds. The exterior view leads to wonder about the representation of the inside. Significantly, the parallel established between the pairs remains incomplete as there is no human being in the first pairing. If this corresponds to some social comment (these people cannot stay at home but have to work), it also points out that interior views are just another display of a social façade. The characters are still in the act of self-representation, even if the child engrossed in his book introduces a part of dream. Paradoxically, the deepest sense of feeling comes from the corner of the empty room. The human

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1. George Orwell, *England Your England and Other Essays* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1954) 208.

2. Bill Brandt, *London in the Thirties* (London & Bedford: Gordon Fraser Gallery, 1983).

presence can be felt in all the traces and imprints it has left: the unmade bed, the chamber pot, the corset lying around. The room, through its very disorder, the articles of clothing, worn out and out of shape, the objects which have just been used, all become the imprint of an absent being. Photography, itself a trace of reality, seems capable of depicting an individual or a group of people despite or rather thanks to their very absence from the picture. Bill Brandt has frequently and successfully exploited this technical capacity linked to the ontological status of photography to highlight the emotional depth of otherwise quite trivial subjects.

In his introduction to his collection *Camera in London* (1948),<sup>1</sup> Bill Brandt compares the photographer to a traveller who discovers an exotic country, looking for the extraordinary in the ordinary. From his early photographic reports, he had always been preoccupied by conjuring up an emotional dimension which he called 'atmosphere':

Thus it was I found atmosphere to be the spell that charged the commonplace with beauty. And still I am not sure what atmosphere is. I should be hard put to define it. I only know it is a combination of elements, perhaps most simply and yet most inadequately described in technical terms of lighting and viewpoint, which reveals the subject as familiar and yet strange. I doubt whether atmosphere, in the meaning it has for me, can be conveyed by a picture of something which is quite unfamiliar to the beholder...

In this respect, Brandt's urbanscapes are reminiscent of pictorialism as well as of the poetic realism of French photographers such as Atget and Brassai. In *London* (1934), for example, the city is drowned in fog and smog. Its atmosphere evokes an expressionist film. Two figures stand out, and the vertical line of the streetlamp contrasts with the oblique one made by the man. The latter seems to lean against the lamp, peering into the fog, which builds up a feeling of mystery.

This poetic atmosphere is even to be found in Brandt's photographic reports in the Midlands and Northern England. Without concealing any of the poverty and bleakness of the stricken regions, the photographs emit a strange beauty, which was described by J.B. Priestley in his book *Pages from English Journey* (1934), a beauty that was to become a kind of archetype of the industrial North. Here is J.B. Priestley describing the region around Birmingham:

I was glad that I did not know the names of the towns down there in the smoke; I felt that I was not looking at this place and that, but at the metallic Midlands themselves, at a relief map of a heavy industry [ . . . ] No doubt

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1. Bill Brandt, 'A London's Photographer', *Camera in London* (London: Focal Press, 1948).

at all that the region had a sombre beauty of its own. [ . . . ] I thought so then, and I thought so later, when I had seen far more of its iron face lit with hell-fire. But it was a beauty you could appreciate chiefly because you were not condemned to live there.<sup>1</sup>

*Train Leaving Newcastle* (1937) shows an industrial cityscape plunged in mist, smoke and smog. What is striking here is that the photographer had not tried to conceal or even tone down the huge black mass. On the contrary, it dominates the composition and highlights the outline of the massive architecture. The only vista left is offered by the arch of the bridge but the outlook it offers is the bleak view of the industrial world. *Catch Point, Halifax* (1948) belongs to a series called 'Hail, Hell and Halifax', referring with black humour to the old saying 'From hail, hell and Halifax Lord deliver us.' Here the gigantic scale is stressed by the high angle shot and the depth of field marked by the two parallel ways, one going up and the other down. Once again we can note two large black masses framing the picture: some indistinct threatening buildings amidst which some chimneys are spewing their black smoke. The presence of five children running towards the camera brings an unexpected element of life, in sharp contrast with this deadly black world.

*Children, South London* (April 1939) belongs to a series dedicated to children's games in London's poor districts. One may see in the photographer's interest in children's games the expression of imagination triumphing over daily squalor. However, beyond the social and historical testimony, what is striking in this picture is its tonal gradation of grey, which highlights the serpentine line of the street. The reference to Hogarth's serpentine line may come as a surprise, while the picture's subject is so deeply anchored in a harsh and painful social reality. But Brandt's art lies precisely in this collision between documentary report and reference to British art history. Some references are quite explicit: in *The City as it is now—London Bridge* (1939), Bill Brandt establishes a dialogue with Gustave Doré. The photographer went back to the locations depicted in the French engraver's book, *London*, published in 1872. This picture belongs to a series entitled 'Unchanging London.'<sup>2</sup> Once again, the photo-

1. J.B. Priestley, *Pages from English Journey* (Didier: Paris, 1958) 42-43.

Further on, Priestley writes about Sheffield: 'The sun was low but still shining strongly and, with the increasing smokiness of the air, it made a strange chiaroscuro, as Northern as high tea and the proper short "a" sound. For one minute Sheffield, far below, looked like the interior of an active volcano. [ . . . ] Down below, on the left, were rows and rows of little houses, acres of slanting and gleaming slates. We ran under the murky canopy and were in Sheffield. The smoke was so thick that it made a foggy twilight in the descending streets, which appeared as if they would end in the streaming bowels of the earth.' (Priestley 54)

2. Published in *Lilliput* in May 1939.

grapher's choice is remarkable as being the perfect archetypal sight of the city. As noted by Blanchard Jerrold, who wrote the text accompanying Doré's engravings: "This is the view of London which is familiar to all civilised peoples. "Le Pont de Londres!" the Frenchman exclaims, carrying his vivacious eyes rapidly over its proportions."<sup>1</sup>

More essentially, though, Bill Brandt's reference to British culture does not lie in specific quotations but in highlighting some plastic motifs and compositions. One of these motifs is the recurrence of oblique and curved lines, and above all the serpentine line so dear to William Hogarth. In *Hadrien's Wall* (1943), the serpentine line here stands out thanks to the film development which hardened the contrasts. Another recurring feature is a composition in three planes alternating light and dark zones. *Top Withens— Wuthering Heights* (1945) offers one perfect example of such composition divided into three planes, respectively dark, light, and dark, corresponding to the variations of relief.

No doubt this last picture immediately evoked pages from Emily Brontë's novel. Great Britain is full of such places one immediately associates with a writer. Does not one speak of the Brontës' Yorkshire, Thomas Hardy's Wessex? J.B. Priestley, as he travelled towards the Cotswolds, exclaims: 'We might have been journeying through the England of the poets, a country made out of men's visions.' (Priestley 25) The real, to quote Mikel Dufrenne talking about Nature, is 'une idée qui n'apparaît que vêtue,'<sup>2</sup> an idea that can only be apprehended through frames of reference elaborated through history, specific cultural forms, and the filter of language. Landscape photography is thus a means to confront photography with other artistic forms. Through this dialogue, the singular subject of a personal perception is moulded by the nation's collective cultural history.

*Literary Britain* (1951)<sup>3</sup> was a long-standing project of Brandt's and includes some former works. Published for the 'Festival of Britain,'<sup>4</sup> its concept may appear quite outdated, close to some popular Victorian books such as William Howitt's *Homes and Haunts of the Most Eminent*

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1. (London: Gustave Doré & Blanchard Jerrold), (London: David & Charles Reprints, 1971) II.

2. Mikel Dufrenne *L'Inventaire des a priori. Recherche de l'originaire* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1981) has shown how formal *a priori* do not only apply to the content of our perceptions but also to what makes them possible.

3. *Literary Britain* is composed of several works commissioned in the 1940s by *Lilliput*, *Picture Post* and *Harper's Bazaar*.

4. The Festival was held from May to September 1951 to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Universal Exhibition. It was also a way to celebrate the end of the 1940s marked by economic hardships and austerity. The main event was the South Bank Exhibition for which the Royal Festival Hall was built.

*British Poets*.<sup>1</sup> However, Bill Brandt's project differs considerably since it is not merely illustrative. The collection bears in epigraph a quotation of Lord Byron: 'Where'er we tread 'tis haunted, holy ground.'<sup>2</sup> In *Literary Britain* Bill Brandt photographs landscapes in which the places are endowed with the feeling of a presence resulting from an emotional relationship to the literary past of Great Britain. The photographer aims at capturing the circulation of this emotion emerging from the places which nurtured the sensitivity and imagination of a writer whose work in its turn inflects our gaze on them. This vision, imbuing objects apparently devoid of human presence with an emotional link to some British cultural heritage, proves emblematic of photography itself as Bill Brandt conceived it. Bill Brandt used to quote this sentence of Orson Welles, which can apply to photography as much as to cinema: 'The camera is much more than a recording apparatus. It is a medium through which messages reach us from another world.'

*Top Withens, West Riding* (1945) is the place which inspired Emily Brontë for *Wuthering Heights*,<sup>3</sup> Bill Brandt succeeded in depicting a visionary landscape where all the elements were carefully worked out: the low angle shot, the unusual weather conditions (just after a hail storm), the film development hardening the contrast between light and dark. Brandt explained he had to come back several times:

One of my favourite pictures of this time is *Top Withens* on the Yorkshire moors. I was then trying to photograph the country which had inspired Emily Brontë. I went to the West Riding in summer, but there were tourists and it seemed quite the wrong time of the year. I liked it better, misty, rainy and lonely in November. But I was not satisfied until I saw it again in February. I took the picture just after a hailstorm when a high wind was blowing over the moors. (Brandt 1948)

To conclude I will mention Hardy's Wessex very briefly through a single photograph. *Stonehenge* (1947) shows the famous pre-historic site from a distance with a large area of ground covered in snow. Here again the

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1. Illustrated by W. & G. Meason, it was published in two volumes in 1847 and was reprinted the same year, then in 1857, 1862 and 1893.

2. *Childe Harold*, canto II, stanza 88.

3. 'Wuthering Heights is the name of Mr Heathcliff's dwelling, "Wuthering" being a significant provincial adjective, descriptive of the atmospheric tumult to which its station is exposed in stormy weather. Pure, bracing ventilation they must have up there, at all the times, indeed: one may guess the power of the north wind, blowing over the edge, by the excessive slant of a few, stunted firs at the end of the house; and by a range of gaunt thorns all stretching their limbs one way, as if craving alms of the sun.' Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995) 4.

unusual weather conditions give the landscape a visionary aspect, as if the photograph were a negative. Moreover, the sharp contrast between light and dark blurs the effect of perspective, as if the landscape had no spatial depth. Interestingly, this picture was used for the front page of the magazine *Picture Post* in 1947 when it published a special issue entitled 'Where stands Britain?', which was entirely dedicated to the post-war crisis.<sup>1</sup> The choice of a pre-historic site may seem odd to illustrate current social affairs, yet it shows how much Bill Brandt's photograph, thanks to its great stylisation, was perceived to express some part of the nation's emotional state.

Bill Brandt's position as photographer testifies to a dual tension which characterizes his look: at the same time remaining exterior to the subjects he photographs and trying to resonate with them, foreign to the country which he explores while revealing part of the nation's collective representations. The emotional depth of his photographs is to be found in the duality between their documentary authenticity and what T. S. Eliot called the 'tradition,' a set of impersonal forms that allow emotions to become some collective feelings. The emotional dimension of Brandt's pictures does not lie merely in the historical and social testimony they provide but in the way the photographer's personal look and artistic research resonate with Englishness in history as in the arts.

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1. *Picture Post*, 19 April 1947, 'Where stands Britain?'

# Representations of the Body in Modernist Art

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An early x-ray, a poster entitled ‘How to enjoy James Joyce’s great novel’, Clive Bell’s bathtub and Vanessa Bell’s dresses—what do all those items have in common? Some of them were exhibited in a large impersonal hall at the University of Texas, others in the intimate interior of a Sussex home. All of them are relics. What strikes the visitor is the overwhelming presence of the body in both exhibitions, whether it be textual, visual, personal or universal, visible or invisible. The focus of this paper is the representation of the body in all its forms—and the emotions attached to it—in a corpus of modernist works displayed in those exhibitions.

From October 2003 to March 2004, the University of Texas at Austin held an exhibition, entitled ‘Make It New: The Rise of Modernism’, in the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center (HRC). A constant feature seemed to haunt the exhibition—that of the body. Deconstructed and reconstructed, the body—whether it be pictorial or textual—is the core of modernist experiment, which explores the idea of point of view and form and, to a larger extent, of the visible and the invisible. The word ‘exhibition’ itself evokes the idea of showing a body of works—a *corpus* of archive material.

The almost total absence of British painters among the works exhibited is quite surprising. Although this lack might only be due to archive acquisition policy or availability, the visitor cannot help wondering what was happening in the arts in Britain at the time. Seeing paintings by Picasso and Matisse, it becomes clear that the missing link may well be Bloomsbury: Roger Fry made continental post-impressionists known to the British public through his exhibitions. How, then, is the question of the body tackled by Bloomsbury artists? How do they fit in with the rest of the mod-

ernist movement? To answer those questions, I will deal with another exhibition, that of Charleston, Vanessa and Clive Bell's Sussex home. This place has a double status, being a house *and* a museum, which calls into question the visitor's emotional attachment to archives. In this paper, material from both exhibitions will be analysed in order to show the differences but also the similarities at work within modernism regarding form, motion and emotion. I will study first how the body is fragmented, then how it is transformed and, finally, the way it is liberated in modernist representations.

## 1 Fragmentation and multiplicity

I'd like to start by looking at the way writing underwent a radical change in terms of form or, more precisely, in terms of shape, of layout, with the rise of modernism—although this year's conference has stepped away from literature, and although I was warned by a caption when entering the HRC exhibition of the 'lamentable fall into babble that language can undergo', illustrated by Joyce's famous 'word' which has in addition a strikingly visual quality.<sup>1</sup>

The written text thus acquires a visual dimension, a body as such, as if literature and illustration were reconciled. e. e. Cummings, instead of constructing a significant shape which would reflect—illustrate—the content of the poem, as Guillaume Apollinaire did, explored the way in which the body of the verse and of the word could break. In a poem like 'Flattened dreamlessnesses',<sup>2</sup> the tension between meaning and nonsense is heightened by the symmetrical arrangement of typographic signs and layout of blanks which first catch the reader's attention: 'essn/esse', 't) (t.' His body itself is summoned in the construction of the sense: he follows the run-on-lines with his eyes, even possibly with the tip of his finger, making out the links and pauses, giving birth again to the content of the poem. The aesthetic emotion arises from the element of surprise but also from the first-hand character of the experience<sup>3</sup>: the reader has to work through raw material to build the body of the text.

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1. 'bababadalgharaghtakamminarronkonnbronntonneronttuonnthunntrovarrhoun-awntokawntooohooordenenturnuk.'

2. The typescript of the poem was exhibited at the HRC. For the published version, see *Fifty Poems* (New York: Duel, Sloan and Pearce, 1940).

3. While Antoine Compagnon experiences pleasure in the activity of quoting, the reader's emotion comes here from the pasting together of the primary text itself: 'Et, dans le texte, comme pratique complexe du papier, la citation réalise de manière privilégiée une survivance qui réjouit ma passion pour le geste archaïque du découper-coller' (Antoine Compagnon, *La seconde main* [Paris: Seuil, 1979] 17).

On the other hand, Richard Aldington, in a poem like 'In the Tube,'<sup>1</sup> respects the rules of spelling and syntax but chooses to concentrate meaning in short, haiku-like stanzas which enclose a whole world of experience and emotion. The visual effect—Aldington was an Imagist—enhances the feeling of enclosure present in the meaning. The poem's climax—the isolated verse: 'What right have you to live?'—acts as a mirror suddenly turned to the reader. It is not the body of the text but the body of the poet—and that of the reader—which is pulled apart, crushed by modernity.

At a period which also saw the rise of photography, the author steps down from his pedestal and comes closer to his readers. His general outlook, his body, his face thus publicised awaken interest. The HRC exhibition was thus strewn with photographs of W.B Yeats, James Joyce, Ezra Pound etc. Through this medium and its mode of circulation, the author is re-embodied and is endowed, as it were, a second life as a public—famous—figure. The experiments and thoughts of the modernists can be followed in newspapers and magazines; the readers have access to their private lives as well as their views on art, as shows this enticing blurb found on the Final Number of the *Little Review*: 'Confessions and letters. More than fifty of the foremost men in the arts tell the truth about themselves in this number. Photographs.' A new relationship between creator and work is established through the media. Publishing and sensationalism, literature and gossip mingle.

The impersonal stance promoted by T. S. Eliot in his famous essay is thus slightly warped: although they respect it as a kind of manifesto and ultimate goal in their artistic practice, some authors do not grudge exposing their lives to the public.<sup>2</sup> The photograph entertains a metonymical relationship with both work and author. It reconciles the search for impersonality with the flesh-and-bone dimension of the author who expresses himself *about* his work. A photograph may become a keepsake, a memento for the reader—who may in this case even be called a 'fan.' The quest for the author (reaffirmed last September with the publication of David Lodge's latest novel, *Author, Author*, in which Lodge openly goes against Henry James's disapproval of biographies) seems to drive the reader: 'Why does the writing make us chase the writer?' asks Geoffrey Braithwaite, narrator of Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot*,

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1. Published version in *Images* (London: The Poetry Bookshop, 1915).

2. Those were not private photographs reproduced in magazines. They were taken by journalists.

Why can't we leave well alone? Why aren't books enough? Flaubert wanted them to be: few writers believed more in the objectivity of the written text and the insignificance of the writer's personality; yet still we disobediently pursue.<sup>1</sup>

The very *raison d'être* of places like Charleston or of the HRC and its exhibition is questioned. However, one way of reconciling 'objectivity of the text' and quest for the writer's personality is to make a distinction between the works and the man—or woman,—between a purely biographical and intentional reading and an interest in the life of the person as such.

The form of the so-called 'little magazines' in which interviews and works were published enhances the impression of fragmentation: the body of the works is cut out to fit serial publication (as was the case for *Ulysses*: the thick body of the book was broken up). The titles themselves are evocative of dislocation (*Blast*), din (*Fanfare*) and movement (*Rhythm*). With modernism, the traditional form of the text, and its mode of circulation, undergo a process of not only radical but fast and multiple change. The various artistic movements—one can thus understand the term in both ways—that are labelled as 'modernism' intend to make themselves heard, and the artists become their most efficient mouthpiece.

Let us now turn to the other focus of this paper: Charleston. Home of Vanessa and Clive Bell and several of their friends, it was inhabited until 1980. What the visitor can see nowadays, however, is a still life, frozen in time, of what the house looked like in the 1950's. Quentin Bell describes the place as 'a kind of time capsule in which the public can examine a world which has vanished.'<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, the present interior is the result of various changes—for instance, Clive Bell's study went through several periods of use and occupancy, from family living room which hosted many boisterous parties (1916-7) to the quietness and privacy of the study, in which Bell wrote his memoir, *Old Friends*. Each occupancy left a mark, each room is made of a diversity of layers.

'Ours was an elastic home,' writes Quentin, in a phrase referring to his parents' relationship but which could well be applied to the house itself. (Visitor's guide 4) Inside the various rooms as well as in the house as a whole, harmony emerges from the juxtaposition of works belonging to a variety of periods, countries and styles: the garden is laid out in an Italian fashion, in the dining room, the visitor notices British and continental

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1. Julian Barnes, *Flaubert's Parrot* (London: Picador, 1985) 2-3.

2. Virginia Nicholson, *Charleston, An Artists' Home* (The Charleston Trust, 1999) 3. References to this catalogue will be from now on indicated under the title 'Visitor's Guide'.

ceramics, as well as African patterns. *Discordia concors* is born out of the *bric-a-brac* character of the place. Metamorphosis and continuity create an oxymoronic whole.

## 2 Metamorphoses

When James Joyce's complex novel *Ulysses* was published uncensored in the United States in 1934, Random House thought it fit to publish a companion to the novel under the form of a poster entitled 'How to enjoy James Joyce's Great Novel.' The structure of the narrative is laid out, and the reader can follow the characters' wanderings around the city of Dublin. Thus ironed out in this double, the text loses its flesh, as underlines the phrase '*plan* of Dublin.' Looking at the map and at the summary of the action is like looking at an x-ray revealing the bone-structure of the novel. As a consequence, an ordinary map of Dublin is, to the reader of *Ulysses*, evocative of the novel and is exhibited as such at the HRC. To Martin Heidegger, the work of art in a *thing* which 'communique publiquement autre chose, elle nous révèle autre chose; elle est allégorie. Autre chose est réuni, dans l'œuvre d'art, à la chose faite. Réunir, c'est en grec *sumballein*. L'œuvre est symbole.'<sup>1</sup> In our example, the composition of the symbol is made explicit: map and novel form the two parts of the *sumbolon*. The possibility of a metaphorical or symbolical reading is thus annihilated: a Dublin street in *Ulysses* is nothing more than a Dublin street.

The Random House poster plays the role of *alter ego* to the novel—I insist here on the word *alter*. It appears as a guide for a reader-sight-seer (we visit the Round Tower, the museum, the library, the beach, the medical school) who—according to the publisher—will not understand the book unless he is taken by the hand through it—unless he is given the map of the maze. The reluctant reader is reassured to know that '*Ulysses* is no harder to "understand" than any other great classic. It is essentially a story and can be enjoyed as such.' This emphasis on form, structure and readability tends to sanitise, to level out the reader's experience and the reach of the novel. However, after reading it, the *Ulysses* fan will turn to the Joyce paraphernalia in order to satisfy his urge to know more, to continue the experience. When visiting Dublin, he will attend one of the Joyce walking tours organised by the James Joyce Centre ('In the Footsteps of Leopold Bloom', 'The Land of the Cyclops', 'Joyce's Heartland' etc.). The reader is not only looking for the author but also for his charac-

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1. Martin Heidegger, 'L'Origine de l'œuvre d'art', in *Chemins qui ne mènent nulle part* (1962, Paris: Gallimard 2002) 16.

ters and places. Although the border between reality and fiction seems to be blurred in the reader's mind, the distinction remains clear. The tours, museums, graves and birthplaces are significant because of their connotative dimension. The flesh-and-bone author and the looming, insubstantial figure of the author are like allotropes of the same person. 'There is another ego,' writes D. H. Lawrence to Edward Garnett, 'according to whose action the individual is unrecognisable, and passes through, as it were, allotropic states which [ . . . ] are states of the same single radically unchanged element'<sup>1</sup>

Metamorphoses are also the result of the artist himself. Charleston epitomises his action on his surroundings, which become his raw material. David Garnett describes the place in such terms: '[ . . . ] one after another the rooms were decorated and altered almost out of recognition as the bodies of the saved are said to be glorified after the resurrection' (quoted in Visitor's Guide 3). Never quite the same yet constant in its form and purpose, the house is a body on which the inhabitants leave their marks. The building and its inner parts are even represented on canvas. Photographs or paintings such as *Charleston* (on which we can see the house's reflection in the pond) and *The Kitchen*, by Vanessa Bell, create an embedding of and mirror games between subject and representation. The place stands on two indissociable and complementary realms of existence: even at the time Charleston was occupied, the paintings and other works (upholstery, sculptures, furniture) were displayed in the different rooms, which gave the impression that one was not only walking through a house but also through studios and an art gallery where the works of the dwellers were exhibited.

Original works are juxtaposed with copies of works by other painters: among others are a *Copy of a Fresco at Assisi* (R. Fry 1917), a *Copy of Picasso's Pots et Citron* (Quentin Bell 1957), a *Copy of Raphael's St Catherine* (V. Bell 1922), a *Copy of Vlamick's Poissy-le-Pont* (V. Bell c. 1956), as well as copies of Bloomsbury works, for instance a *Copy of Vanessa Bell's Tea-Things* (1917) found in Duncan Grant's bedroom. In this regard, Charleston is the illustration of Bloomsbury's admiration of previous artists. Tradition is present directly and indirectly through the artists' new outlook. Re-representation gives way to original creation. As T.S. Eliot puts it: '[ . . . ] novelty is better than repetition. Tradition is a matter of wider significance. [ . . . ] It involves, in the first place, the historical sense [which] involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of

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1. D. H. Lawrence, *Letters* (London: Heineman, 1962) 282.

its presence.<sup>1</sup> The existence of multiple, diachronic, points of view acts as a catalyst.

Bloomsbury artists, putting into practice Roger Fry's theories, use a variety of media to work on form, colour and texture.<sup>2</sup> The opening of the Omega Workshops also enabled to develop the interest—of the public and artists themselves—in applied and decorative arts. Most of the furniture exhibited at Charleston is made from raw material. However, a closer look at the lampshades shows that some were cut out from Vanessa Bell's frocks. During the war, fabric was scarce, she consequently used that of her old dresses. The borders between art and household needs, between impersonal and intimate are easily crossed. Is the visitor looking at an ordinary lampshade, made up from the only scraps the housewife could gather in times of war, or at an intentional work of art? Most certainly both, as art and life are intertwined at Charleston. But answering this question does not really make sense, since everything exhibited in Charleston is supposed to be, at best, a work of art, at worst, a relic for the nostalgic visitor. In this particular instance—the lampshade—the object, through recycling, becomes an extension of the artist, like the dress that used to cover her body. By acquiring a new use, it is liberated from formal constraints.

### 3 Liberation from the constraints of representation

Bloomsbury artists were influenced by French painters like Henri Matisse and Paul Cézanne and their new ways of seeing and representing the body.<sup>3</sup> Their experiments in decorative arts operate a spatial change from traditional, framed paintings to an integration within the body parts of the house. At Charleston, the paintings follow the contours of doors,

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1. T. S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1920) 14.

2. Virginia Woolf thus writes on her sister's paintings: 'If portraits they are, they are pictures of flesh which happens from its texture or its modelling to be aesthetically on an equality with the China pot or the chrysanthemum.' *Recent Paintings by Vanessa Bell* (London: The London Artists' Association, 1930) 2. Referred to next as *Catalogue*

3. The mere painting of naked body by a female artist such as Vanessa Bell was quite shocking at the time. Her sister, in the very first lines of her foreword to the catalogue of Vanessa's exhibition of 1930, insists on that revolution: 'That a woman should hold a show of pictures in Bond Street, I said, pausing upon the threshold of Messrs. Cooling's gallery, is not usual, nor perhaps, altogether to be commended. For it implies, I fancy, dome study of the nude, and while for many ages it has been admitted that women are naked and bring nakedness to birth, it was held, until sixty years ago that for a woman to look upon nakedness with the eye of an artist, and not simply with the eye of a mother, wife or mistress was corruptive of her innocency and destructive of her domesticity.' (*Catalogue* 1)

mantelpieces, tables and bath tubs, the subject merging at times into the object through the use of *trompe-l'œil* technique. The very shape of the medium plays a part: unlike canvas, it has a purpose and a relief which the painting has to serve. Decorative artists have to deal with a pre-existing shape. The difference between what Heidegger calls the 'product'—the useful object or tool—and the 'work of art' is here reconciled. (Heidegger, 33n)

Duncan Grant, Roger Fry, Clive and Vanesa Bell focus on form in their productions. The truth of an emotion or a perception emerges from the construction of a 'significant form'<sup>1</sup> which is valued for its inner qualities. Most tapestries, wall papers, seat covers from the Omega Workshops are non-figurative and part of the Bloomsbury experiments with abstract and primitive painting. The very movement and organisation of shapes is explored here, the artist is going back to the essence of form, to primitive forms of art. When the body is represented, shape and movement are again linked. The idea of movement, however, contrasts with that of 'speed', emphasised by the Futurists. With Bloomsbury artists, movement is always smooth, suspended and enables the painter to explore the way it influences form. Portraits of friends, but also nudes are Bloomsbury favourites. The features of bodies and faces are represented in a minimalist way with patches of colour and simple lines, which are nonetheless evocative. The expression of motion and emotion are born of the same form.

Movement is a constant feature of modernist art. The living arts saw an explosion of movement, the whole body being used to convey the intensity of emotion (see Isadora Duncan's choreography, Josephine Baker's etc.). In pictorial arts, its representation was explored by the Futurists, as in Marcel Duchamp's *Nu descendant un escalier* (1912). Duchamp claimed that he wanted to 'create a static image of movement' with this painting in which the motion and displacement of the body are captured. The same machine-like body is shown in successive places and times and is depersonalised in the process. 'On voit un corps rigide comme une armure qui fait jouer ses articulations, il est ici et là, magiquement, mais il ne va pas d'ici à là,' notes Maurice Merleau-Ponty about Duchamp's *Mariée*.<sup>2</sup> Ironically, it is the figure of the artist himself who brings identity back by inhabiting the body in Eliot Elisofon's photograph entitled *Duchamp Descending a Staircase*.

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1. 'There must be some one quality without which a work of art cannot exist [ . . . ]. What quality is shared by all objects that provoke our aesthetic emotions? [ . . . ] Only one answer seems possible—significant form.' Clive Bell, *Art* (1914; Oxford: OUP, 1987).

2. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *L'Œil et l'esprit* (Paris: Folio Essais, 1964) 78.

The refining of form and of movement representation led the modernists towards the invisible. With the new vision emerges an a-temporal dimension. The subject does not fall into over-signifying and leaves room for the beholder: 'No stories are told; No insinuations are made. The hillside is bare; the group of women is silent; the little boy stands in the sea saying nothing. If portraits they are, they are pictures of flesh which happens from its texture of its modelling to be aesthetically on an equality with the China pot or the chrysanthemum,' writes Virginia Woolf about her sister's paintings (Catalogue 2). This move towards the impersonal particularly influenced Virginia Woolf's writing, in which she explored the question of disembodied point of view and narration. What mainly struck her in her sister's works was the fact that Vanessa started to paint portraits without facial features. The identity of the people portrayed in *Frederick and Jessie Etchells Painting* (1912) is stated in the title as if the painter gave it 'le soin de désigner par son nom prosaïque l'être ainsi constitué, pour laisser la peinture fonctionner plus purement comme peinture [ . . . ]' (Merleau-Ponty 75). But concentrating on the general shape and contours of the individual still enables the painter to convey a personality, an identity. Details become redundant. Representation, however, does not have the same status in *Studland Beach*, which Vanessa Bell painted the same year. The featureless patches are still recognisably figurative, but what is clearly at stake here is the lay out of form and colour on canvas, announcing her abstract period. *Studland Beach* gives out a melancholy feeling (the two groups of human figures are isolated, a woman is standing alone, there is a feeling of emptiness due to the uniformity of colours, the beholder can read no expression on the figures' faces). Although the figures express nothing, they do not fail to touch the beholder who embarks on a new emotional experience. An experience transmitted by the artist, whose art is a formal medium for emotion. Virginia Woolf noted that:

[ . . . ] her pictures claim us and make us stop. They give us an emotion. [ . . . ] Her vision excites a strong emotion and yet when we have dramatised it or poeticised it or translated it into all the blues and greens, and the fines and exquisites and subtles of our vocabulary, the picture itself escapes. It goes on saying something of its own. [ . . . ] Our emotion has been given the slip. And yet somehow our emotion has been returned to us. For emotion there is. [ . . . ] Here, we cannot doubt as we look is somebody to whom the visible world has given a shock of emotion every day of the week. And she transmits it and makes us share it; but it is always by her means, in her language, with her susceptibility, and not ours. [ . . . ] And perhaps by degrees, who knows?, one would become an inmate of

this strange painter's world, in which [ . . . ] there are no words. (*Catalogue* 3-4)

The tension between identity and universality has caught the attention of modernist artists as a whole. My last two examples are both representations of a hand. The first one is an early x-ray exhibited at the HRC. Scientific—therefore objective and devoid of emotion—or artistic experiment? Once again, the border is not that obvious: the taking of the image appears to have been consciously staged (note the use of props, rings, chain, keys). The second example is a print of William Butler Yeats's hand. The exact circumstances under which the poet did it are unknown, it can only be assumed that it had to do with his interest in the esoteric. Trying to interpret those images, the viewer stands in front of several distinct paths. Two extremes are juxtaposed in the pictures: first, thanks to the new view point on the body offered by them, we have access to the innermost identity of the person (his/her bones, his fingerprints). Their metonymical dimension is at the same time restrictive, synecdochic—in the sense that the body undergoes a disintegrating process<sup>1</sup>—and universal: thus seen, the hand is indistinguishable from another human hand, and the print links representation to an invisible, mystic dimension. Like the prehistoric 'positive' hand prints found on cave walls, Yeats's print could have been a way to contact spirits.<sup>2</sup> The artist is therefore but an impersonal medium—T. S. Eliot would also say a 'catalyst'<sup>3</sup>—through which significance and emotion flow. An author like Rosamond Lehmann particularly insisted on the passive character of writing—and, by extension, of any creative activity:

[ . . . ] leisure employs me—weak aimless unsystematic unresisting instrument—as a kind of screen upon which are projected the images of persons [ . . . ]. It is a detached condition [ . . . ]. One might almost be

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1. The bones echo a dead person's skeleton. Thus adorned, they remind the beholder of John Donne's line: 'A bracelet of bright hair about the bone' (John Donne, 'The Relic', *The Complete English Poems* (London: Penguin Classics, 1996) 76).

2. According to the paleontologist Jean Clottes, this is a possible interpretation to the prehistoric hands: Jean Clottes, 'Dans les cavernes profondes, elles pouvaient avoir pour but d'entrer en contact avec les esprits derrière les parois.' (*La plus belle histoire de l'homme* [Paris: Seuil, 1998] 87).

3. '[ . . . ] the mind of the mature poet differs from that of the immature one not precisely in any evaluation of "personality" [ . . . ] but rather by being a more finely medium in which special, or very varied, feelings are at liberty to enter into new combinations. The analogy was that of the catalyst.' (Eliot 18)

dead, watching from the world of shades, so pure in one's observation, so freed from will, from desire to shape or alter personal ends.<sup>1</sup>

Relinquishing personal emotion, the artist is a mere body, '[il] apporte son corps,' says Paul Valéry (quoted in Merleau-Ponty 16). And it is through his body—through sight—that he has access to what Merleau-Ponty calls 'the flesh' of the world:

La vision n'est pas un certain mode de la pensée ou présence à soi: c'est le moyen qui m'est donné d'être absent à moi-même, d'assister à la fission de l'Être, au terme de laquelle seulement je me referme sur moi. (Merleau-Ponty 81)

After having undergone fragmentation, metamorphosis and having been represented static and in movement, the body comes out of the modernist period as a complete whole. Intimacy, universality, the visible and the invisible are evoked through the use of different media. In both exhibitions, works of art mix with objects belonging to artists or evocative of past times. Works of art, belongings and anything *about*—around—the artists are like growths emanating from his body. Seeing—and sometimes touching—those things may be what drives the visitor. The figure of the author—but also that of his works—is all-pervading, endowing things and places with several layers of meaning. Aesthetic emotion is what enables the reader to be in contact with the flesh of the world; sentimentality drives him back to relics.

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1. Rosamond Lehmann, 'The Red-Haired Miss Daintreys,' in *The Gipsy's Baby* (1946; London: Virago, 1982) 57.



# **(E)motion Pictures and Impersonality: Desire, Visual Pleasure and Narrative Erasure in *Blow Up***

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This paper purports to confront the emotion/impersonality couplet to the visual pleasure/objectification pair introduced in Laura Mulvey's notorious article 'Visual pleasure and Narrative Cinema.' By Mulvey's analysis, in mainstream films woman is reduced to a visual/static/sexual object whereas man enjoys mobility, sensuous gratification along with the capacity of constructing a narrative. Antonioni's *Blow Up* seems to validate her critique but also foregrounds its own constructed nature. As such, it is subject to deconstruction, opening on a reconsideration of the plot, its characters and the dialectics of emotions and impersonality.

By way of an introduction to his chapter on the pictorial representation of the female body, John Berger describes sexual difference in narrative terms, recouping the narration/description opposition:

One might simplify this by saying: *men act* and *women appear*. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object—and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.<sup>1</sup>

In her groundbreaking article 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,' Laura Mulvey follows the same logic. Drawing upon psychoanalytical concepts such as Freud's theory of scopophilia and Lacan's Mirror Stage,

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1. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC and Penguin Books, 1972) 46.

she offers insight into the gendered nature of the narrative process. By Mulvey's analysis, woman in mainstream cinema is reduced to a static, sexual and visual object. The limited function of woman is opposed to the mobility and sensual gratification to man on whose activity the film centres and who therefore is seminal to the narrative, dynamic and hermeneutic functions of the film. One might argue that it is the man's personality that carries the affective force of the film. In comparison, the woman's impersonality, her limited stereotypical function renders incapable of inciting great emotion—she becomes a mere cipher of his desire. To a certain point, *Blow Up* can be seen to confirm such an analysis and yet it is a film that demands a more nuanced consideration of the dialectical tension between emotion and impersonality

Although released eight years (i.e. in 1967) before Mulvey published her critique, Antonioni's *Blow Up* can be considered to interrogate the ways in which desire and pleasure invest the field of vision and action. The use of a camera for all its technical (and hence impersonal) nature does not preclude such emotional investment. On the contrary, it seems that such 'objective' optical devices as the mechanical apparatus of the cinema<sup>1</sup> duplicate it, projecting the spectatorial position onto the screen.

My contention is that Antonioni's work operates as a parody of those mainstream films that Mulvey vehemently attacks. However, it reaches a critical point at which the narrative begins to deconstruct itself. As the plot does not seem to evolve toward resolution, its main (male) character is progressively deprived of all his attributes, thus undermining the narrative's founding libidinal drive.

## 1 Founding images and libidinal investment

Mulvey first refers us back to Freud's notion of scopophilia, which she associates with 'taking people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze.'<sup>2</sup> The definition she gives seems to accurately describe the regime of gaze that is characteristic of the photographer on whom the plot of *Blow Up* is deceptively centred.

In order to analyse in detail the film's pivotal park scene, it is necessary to focus on the specific nature of the object of this curious gaze. Drawing on Freud's *Three Essays in the Theory of Sexuality* (1905) and 'Instincts and

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1. On this notion, see also Jacqueline Rose, 'The Cinematic Apparatus—Problems in Current Theory' in *Sexuality in the field of Vision* (London: Verso, 1986) 198-213.

2. All quotations from Laura Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' refer to the version printed in the *Norton Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001) 2179-92.

their Vicissitudes' (1915), Mulvey reminds us that scopophilia is rooted in the curiosity of the Oedipal moment:

[Freud's] particular examples centre on the voyeuristic activities of children, their desire to see and make sure of the private and forbidden (curiosity about other people's genital and bodily function, about the presence or absence of the penis and, retrospectively about the primal scene). (Mulvey 2184)

The association with voyeurism is confirmed by the attitude of the photographer in the park, hiding, rapidly slouching from one tree to another. The notion of the primal scene and its oedipal connotations (the sense of exclusion from sexual union) is of interest here: the photographer is seemingly sexually attracted to the Vanessa Redgrave character (referred to as Jane in the script and henceforth) and makes a point of mentioning her companion's age ('Your boyfriend is a bit past it'). This triangle recalls the Oedipal situation and the curiosity surrounding the primal scene. Mulvey's reference to the retrospective nature of the latter is exemplified in the film by the photographer's compulsive analysis/editing (i.e. fragmenting/re-membering) of these pictures. In this context, the photographer, aptly named Thomas in the script (a Peeping Tom indeed), finds what he was looking for—a gun, a phallic symbol *par excellence*.

A different, possibly contradictory, psychoanalytic approach to visual pleasure underlines its narcissistic aspect. Inspired by Lacan's concept of the mirror stage, Mulvey emphasises the interaction between the image and the construction of the Ego, the most significant aspect of which is that it is via an image that a child becomes fully aware of his/her self. Indeed it is only as a photographer that the main character is presented, his name remains unspoken throughout the whole film and his personal details are all self-denied, contradicted as soon as he pronounces them, deconstructed as it were. This character is therefore entirely dependent upon his visual functions, functions to which he is restricted in the first half of the film.

However this image (created through the mirror stage process) has another consequence as it is immediately idealized. Consequently the birth of self-consciousness gives a kind of precedence to the image. Likewise Thomas, for whose patron saint seeing is believing, gives more credence to his pictures than to the world they are supposed to represent. Only when he has been robbed of his photographs—one may say when the mirror has been broken—does he return to find actual evidence of the crime he pictorially reconstructed.

Significantly, the mirror moment predates language, which is instanced through the silent montage sequence in *Blow up*. In a pre-linguistic search for the self, the photographer *speculates* (a term which etymologically suggests a mirror image) about his pictures. But, 'recognition is overlaid with misrecognition' and, instead of introjecting the image like the child in Lacan's system, Antonioni's character is *projecting* his own erring violence onto the screen of his photographs, much like Mulvey says that the spectators project their repressed desires onto the screen. Indeed the mirror-stage analogy enables her to establish the identification of the audience to the main (male) character and his gaze.

## 2 Anxiety and depersonalised women

The possibility of transcending the imaginary and therefore of acceding to language hinges on the castration complex. At this juncture it becomes necessary to introduce gender determinations in this commentary: in psychoanalysis, the object of a male gaze is the female 'castrated' body and Mulvey contends that mainstream cinema operates according to the same conventions. 'Hence the look, pleasurable in form, can be threatening in content and it is woman as representation/image that crystallizes this paradox.' (Mulvey 2186) *Blow Up* presents an emphatically visual construction of woman and negotiates this tension.

The first half of the film, models who are defined as professionally objectified, are used as '(passive) raw material for the (active) gaze of man.' (Mulvey 2191) In a scene that was reproduced on the film poster, Thomas photographs a model as she lies lasciviously on the ground. The exaggerated sexual connotation of this scene in which the camera functions as a phallic symbol in terms of both sexuality and power is deliberately phallicentric in its representation. In a more subtle fashion, space also transcribes relations of power; whereas he enjoys the possibility of retreating into the background after the photo session, she remains impassive. Moreover, given their positions during the shoot, he can only take close shots of her face. Mulvey maintains that this particular technique participates in the sexual division of representation.

Conventional close-ups of legs or face integrate into the narrative a different mode of eroticism. One part of a fragmented body destroys the Renaissance space, the illusion of depth demanded by the narrative; it gives flatness, the quality of a cut-out or icon, rather than verisimilitude to the screen. (Mulvey 2187)

Women are thus at once denied agency in the narrative and depersonalised. Their objectification *via* both the medium and its narrative engenders this paradoxical tension between the visual pleasure the male character derives from 'iconised' women and their reification. What Mulvey deems 'the actual image of woman as (passive) raw material for the (active) gaze of man' (Mulvey 2191) is therefore epitomised in this scene.

A second photo-shoot scene reinforces the impersonal treatment of woman, who are nothing more than sheer visual material. They are perfectly *plastic*, the term suggesting visual arts as much as a smooth cold 'synthetic material [ . . . ] that can be moulded into shape.'<sup>1</sup> The camera thus unifies and de-characterizes the different models by way of tracking shots which superimpose them one upon another. The models are in a line, materialising that paradigm of women. Although wearing different colours, they can all be substituted for one another. Furthermore they appear through filters: they are nothing but the canvas upon which visual experiments are made. One of the models is dressed so as to evoke a peacock and suggests a conventional symbol for female vanity<sup>2</sup> and their heavy make up tends to render their facial traits (when they are not altogether hidden) an impersonal mask. So as to emphasise the discrepancy between the models and the photographer, he makes them shut their eyes and so dispossess them of their scopic organ, performing thus a castration of sorts.<sup>3</sup>

This symbolic castration operates on two levels: on the one hand, it is associated with a depersonalising, 'un-man-ning' gesture of visual objectification and, on the other hand, it operates as a reaction to the presence of woman as a threat, as an anxiety-provoking being.

Woman connotes something that the look continually circles around but disavows her lack of a penis, implying a threat and hence unpleasure. The male unconscious has two avenues of escape from this castration anxiety: preoccupation with the re-enactment of the original trauma (investigating the woman, demystifying her mystery, counterbalanced by the devaluation, punishment or saving of the guilty object [ . . . ] or else complete disavowal of castration by substitution of a fetish object or turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous. (Mulvey 2188)

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1. 'Plastic' in *New Oxford Dictionary of English* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998) 1418.

2. To complicate issues, the peacock is a male bird. It seems that vanity is therefore a male quality that is displaced onto women.

3. Woman-as-raw-material for visual pleasure is represented in the appearance of the two girls defined in the script as brunette and blonde (the latter being Jane Birkin) appear in motley colours and end up having sex with the photographer in a purple sea of paper. This sequence appears as a perfect blend of sexual and scopic drives.

An emotional response to femininity—be it desire or anxiety—conditions effectively the impersonal treatment of woman and consequently her degree of integration into the narrative. The diegesis thus serves the purpose of this transformation of the female character into a impersonal fetish. Indeed, the fashion world where much of the action takes place is the equivalent of what Mulvey says about the show-girl and the musical comedy:

Traditionally the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen. For instance, the device of the show-girl allows the two looks to be unified technically without any apparent break in the diegesis. A woman performs within the narrative; the gaze of the spectator and that of the male characters in the film are neatly combined without breaking narrative verisimilitude. (Mulvey 2187)

Narrative similitude is here ensured by the profession of Thomas who can therefore indulge all his scopis drives. When the Vanessa Redgrave character indicts his curious gaze, he says: ‘Some people are politicians, some people are bullfighters, I am a photographer.’ Besides the gender-specific nature of the (only apparently haphazard) list professions he chose, all of which are reflect positions of power, this justification sounds like an alibi for an act in which circumstances are less than extenuating. The narrative offers a similarly weak excuse for the sexist display of female bodies. Spectators in turn share this alibi as they are led to identify with the male character who is the bearer of the gaze, as opposed to the ‘flat’ female characters whose bi-dimensionality prevents any such engagement.

This analysis illustrates the validity of one of the ‘two avenues of escape from castration anxiety’ mentioned above. The other one resorts to what I call the ‘narrative drive’ (through which ‘man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer and not maker of meaning’ [Mulvey 2183]).

Thomas feels the almost compulsive need to re-create it, to duplicate the scene in the park (previously discussed in the context of the traumatic primal/oedipal moment). He tries to unravel the mystery of the woman peacefully frolicking with an older man. It is not surprising then that it is a gun, an emblematically phallic symbol, that the photographer ends up seeing (or hallucinating) as a result of his fascination with the pictures of this couple.<sup>1</sup> He soon ascertains her guilt in a crime, and here, paradoxic-

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1. Etymologically *fascinus* is a Latin equivalent for the Greek *phallus*.

ally, she is less threatening because she becomes ensnared within a narratological category (what is more, a very filmic one: the *femme fatale*). He re-asserts his own masculinity as he performs this narratorial function. Initially, he flatteringly posits himself as the hero, who has prevented a crime. His activity here evokes Mulvey's definition of classical filmic codes: 'Playing on the tension between film as controlling the dimension of time (editing, narrative) and film as controlling the dimension of space (changes in distance, editing), cinematic codes create a gaze, a world and an object, thereby producing an illusion cut to the measure of desire.' (Mulvey 2192)

One can see why, having been comforted in his masculinity after a faltering moment of anxiety, he can fully indulge in sexual intercourse, not with one but two girls at the same time. Finally by literally 'telling them where to go,' he can also enjoy his omnipotence. But a nagging doubt re-emerges then. Indeed his photograph seems to illustrate Mulvey's point when she describes male mobility in narrative films: 'the active male figure demands a three-dimensional space [ . . . ] he is a figure in a landscape.' There is indeed another figure in the landscape and it is not another gun: it is in fact a dead male figure.

### 3 Deconstructing the male hero

This painful realisation leads to yet another anxiety attack, visually transposed *via* sudden sweating. Thomas then loses all his characteristic aloofness and betrays his emotions. This crisis is a major one because it undermines his previous confidence; he has just proved his vain heroic glory to be absolutely groundless. Indeed his status as a hero is utterly shattered by this discovery: in Mulvey's words, he is not the strong male figure capable of 'advancing the story, making things happen.' (Mulvey 2187) His mobility is questioned by the fact that his narrative endeavour was based on two-dimensional static representations.

Characteristically, the photographer is only too reluctant to investigate the real world outside of the two-dimensional frame. He is not the dynamic figure that Mulvey describes, but he is perfectly static (or caught in the closed circuit of his loft). He does not *make* things happen. He *lets* them happen. He does try to *correct* them but on the contrary *magnifies* them in the flat world of his photographs.<sup>1</sup> When the latter becomes three-dimensional again, it also becomes threatening. After seeing the body, he

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1. The first pictures we see him taking are politically non-committed though realist pictures.

loses all agency and goes adrift in an apocalyptic Bosch-like London. This loss of a driven mobility, of a drive finds an objective correlative in the propeller he bought earlier in the film. After finding the body (without acting upon it) he comes back to his studio and touches the inert and useless object—as he had touched the corpse.<sup>1</sup>

From this point on, the film works toward a progressive and careful subtraction of all the defining qualities of the character. In the second part of the film, the classical visual apparatus is reversed. In the scene when Patricia and Bill make love, Thomas is a voyeur. But he is watched by her, the illusion of concealment is shattered: voyeurism (as well as film conventions) imposes a sense of separation. Therefore the process is an altogether different one: she invites him to stay and she looks at him while she has sex. She manipulates him in her sexual fantasy, whereas he is reduced to an image framed by the door. When she comes to his studio right after this scene, she denies any intention of leaving her husband; that is to say that Thomas is no more than a sexual image and not an object of greater affection.

Adding injury to insult, she remarks on his failure to see (or to construct) what happened in the supposed murder scene: i.e. the double failure as bearer of the gaze and as narrator. When he shows her his only remaining piece of evidence, his last photo of the dead body: she dismisses him once again. By saying ‘It looks like one of Bill’s painting’, not only does she refuse to see the meaning that Thomas forced upon it (confirming his signifying impotency) and refers to her husband who, in turn, is capable of such efficiency. Out of mercy, she endeavours to retrieve the hero in him and asks for help which he does not give her. Eventually she gives him a more explicit, ultimate chance to act and give meaning to events (‘I wonder why they shot him’). His disappointing answer (‘I don’t know’) makes her leave on her own accord (for the first time in the film) with a sad sympathetic smile on her face.

The identity crisis that started with doubts about his narrative construct is thus prolonged in this scene where the most defining features of his character are denied, and which he passively accepts. He nevertheless attempts to re-assert his personality and wants to restore the pictorial world that he is more familiar with. He therefore wants his friend Ron to accompany him with the ensuing dialogue:

- I want you to see the corpse. We’ve got to get a shot of it.
- I am not a photographer.
- *I am!*

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1. Significantly, Saint Thomas was the one who wanted to touch the body of Christ.

This last line functions as a self-disavowal. In spite of the manifest claim, the latent question is: if he is indeed a photographer, why does he need anyone to take a picture? He becomes suddenly aware of this renewed failure as the lines that immediately follow illustrate. Ron (obviously under the influence of psychotropic drugs) asks him again: 'What did you see in that park?.' His stern reply is: 'Nothing.' This proves to be true since in the next sequence, the corpse has vanished, erased as it were from the picture. Thomas's photographs were stolen, nobody came to see to the body, and so it is in turn time for Thomas to be erased. In the last image of the film, Thomas is still this image in a landscape, perfectly still. He has stopped taking any picture, and talking: his only narrative existence is purely visual, soon to fade out. His camera at this final juncture is dangling from his pocket, no longer the protruding phallic symbol it used to be. In the first part of the film it was always at hand, like a weapon: he shot the Vanessa Redgrave character running towards him as if to stop her. Significantly she had told him then that he had never seen her, foretelling by the same token his own erasure.

With the benefit of hindsight, one perceives that she imposes another narrative that short-circuits Thomas's conventional narratives derived from the codified genre of the whodunit. Her story is one of the recovery of her own image. Her undisguised feelings (desire, anger, fear, joy) construct the narrative without imposing on it. Crucially, it is through her visual expressions and more particularly by following the direction of her gaze that Thomas has been able to build a story from the static pictures.<sup>1</sup> Although she does not provide any personal details (the name and phone number she gives are erroneous), she demonstrates another tension between emotions and narration, which is not one of violent imposition. She invites meaning without rigidity, allowing free play for the signifier she embodies. Her impersonality comes from the mixed messages she sends: she has no consistent persona,<sup>2</sup> she does not fit neatly into the classical narratological functions. As such, she can be utterly mobile, even if he tries to keep her still in his studio, she is constantly in motion. She literally and successfully refuses to be 'in the picture.' She chooses her own erasure and thereby frees herself from the strictures of the signifying chain.

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1. He reconstitutes her 'eye-line match,' which means in cinematic parlance that he follows the direction of her gaze to represent its object: he might compose his own story but he follows her 'stage directions.'

2. The term 'persona' comes from Latin and originally designates the mask that actors used to wear on stage.

Throughout this paper, faced with a constant (narrative/visual/sexual) desire, the content of the term ‘impersonality’ has undergone significant changes. From the de-humanising process of female objectification to the erasure of ‘the combination of characteristics or qualities that form an individual’s distinctive character,’<sup>1</sup> it illustrates the variability of ‘meaning’ when combined with such emotions as pleasure or anxiety. In film the complex economy of the gaze also subjects the spectators to a process of depersonalisation as they identify to the main (often male) character. In the final words of her article, Mulvey calls therefore for the liberation, not only of women, but also of the audience ‘into dialectics and passionate detachment’ (Mulvey 2192)—a phrase which epitomises the indissoluble, though labile, pair formed by emotion and impersonality.

Antonioni’s most successful representation of the emotion-impersonality couplet is situated both in the opening and final sequences where carnivalesque mimes represent the irrepressible libidinal forces that run through narrative. In the end, they very expressively play tennis with invisible rackets and an invisible ball. The camera follows the movements of the latter, and in so doing demonstrates that desire and (e)motion enable one to create a narrative. Visibility is thereby defeated, as Thomas has just been proved to be. When he catches the invisible ball to throw back to the mimes, he silently articulates his surrender to the forces of the invisible and the ineffable (he has altogether stopped talking and taking pictures for some time). Motion is reinstated as the dominant narrative force, a form of desire that is not gendered, purely abstract, impersonal and as such universal.

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1. ‘Personality’ in *New Oxford Dictionary of English* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998) 1385.

# Impersonality and Emotion in the Paintings of Lucian Freud: Depersonalisation and Displacement, Modernity and Contemporaneity

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The paintings of Lucian Freud, as associated to the School of London, are still considered as the product of figurative tradition and postwar ethos. Considering his paintings from the angle of impersonality and emotion helps disentangle the modernist aspects of his work from what I argue to be his contemporary relevance: the displacement of emotions, the interplay between affects and composition, the focus on aesthetic devices. Ultimately, comparing Freud with some examples of Young British Art allows to re-contextualize his art.

Since 1976, when the exhibition *The Human Clay* toured England, the British artist Lucian Freud has been associated with several other painters into what was named the School of London. My analyses of this phenomenon<sup>1</sup> have led me to consider that so-called artistic phenomenon as a critical construct mostly related to the cultural reactionary backlash of the late seventies and the 'return to figuration' that corresponded in the eighties.

As a result of his inclusion into this School, Lucian Freud and his paintings were somewhat de-contextualised. Through systematic references

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1. See my doctorate dissertation, *Le Phénomène d'École de Londres et la peinture de Frank Auerbach, Francis Bacon et Lucian Freud: de la figure au corps, de la tradition à la contemporanéité*, supervisor: Pr. Liliane Louvel, 2006. Other similar analyses include James Hyman's *The Battle for Realism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), his essay for the exhibition catalogue *Blast to Freeze* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje-Cantz, 2003) and his article 'A School of London in Little England', in *Art Monthly* (150: octobre 1991).

to post-holocaust art or existentialist background, these paintings were read in a topical way, as representations of late modernity gloom or allegories of specific emotions (such as bereavement, atonement or despair). The figurativeness of the art of Freud did of course stand as a specific case in the age of Jackson Pollock, Donald Judd or even Land Art, but such opposition to abstraction has no longer been a valid argument or even an accurate way of defining Freud, since the aforementioned return to pictorial and figurative representation.

It may thus be time to try to see Freud as what he literally is: a contemporary artist. Looking at Freud's paintings from the angle of emotionality and impersonality, we can see the artist and his oeuvre in a less sentimental way and re-contextualise them. The purpose, in so doing, is not so much to strictly oppose 'modern' to 'contemporary,' but to apprehend Freud in an alternative way. Freud's contemporaneity, I shall argue, shows particularly well in the structural use he makes of skin, by which he goes beyond the polarity of impersonality and emotion. In a way that is at points extremely similar to the works of contemporary British artists, Freud does not concentrate so much on the nature or the cause of emotion, but favors its displacement and its use through the setting up of emotional devices.

## 1 Emotion through depersonalisation

The modernist paradoxical polarity between emotion and impersonality, as expressed by T. S. Eliot, may seem to have a pictorial equivalent in the paintings of Freud. Even in his self-portraits, Freud seems to put himself at a distance. In the case of *Interior with Hand-Mirror* (1967), the figure of the painter is replaced by his reflection in a small hand-mirror and rendered un-focused by the large, thick brushstrokes apparently seeking to dissolve him. In *Interior with Plant, Reflection Listening* (1967-68), the figure is put at a distance and invaded by a mass of plants, almost fading into it. The very titles depersonalize the work, as they transform a portrait into a mere still life ('Interior with...').

Depersonalisation consists primarily in taking something away. It is a negative move in art-making, an act of destruction or purification: hence the stark nakedness of Freud's portraits, a nakedness in all senses. Indeed, the portrait entitled *Naked Girl* (1966) seems a 'model stripped bare by her creator,' and shows nakedness can be intended as a bodily condition, but is also emphasized by the nakedness of the setting. We may also speak, for *Small Naked Portrait* (1973-74), of the nakedness of the expres-

sion: there is no narrative clue, no action nor topic to these pictures: we look at the sheer simplicity of a naked body, and we do not get any excuse or reason for this nakedness, neither from the setting, the surroundings, nor from the figure.

The models very seldom look at the painter: they are not, however, so much isolated or desperate as they are purposeless. This absence of purpose, as the absence of narrative baseline, is the most disturbing and poignant aspect of Freud's portraits. When posing, models may or may not get support from the painter, who can engage in a verbal relationship or just eye-contact. Contrary to what happens in the portraits by Frank Auerbach (in which models obviously looked at him, with, tension, love or defiance, as in *Head of Catherine Lampert*, 1994), Freud does not help his models. Freud looks at his models, but doesn't regard them, nor have regard for them: his gaze might be said to be a scrutinizing one<sup>1</sup>. Freud's treatment of the models consists in a close inspection, the search and the exposure of details, or the intimacy of the model, as in the case of *Rose* (1978-79).

The viewer's emotions and empathy seem to be aroused by the painter's own absence of empathy and by the display of the impersonality of the painted figures. The emotions are thus not aroused by the development of a pathos (gestures, postures, situations connected to specific emotions) as would be in a painting by Greuze, David, or Hogarth, but by the absence of pathos. The artist does not seem to address the predicament of his subjects, and least of all to dramatize or beautify it. The figures are just left lying, sitting or hanging there.

We might even speak of a self-denying pathos, particularly in the case of the portraits of Freud's mother, who is painted with utter objectivity, as an object, inanimate, limp or lifeless, as in *The Painter's Mother Resting* (1976). In *The Painter's Mother Reading* (1975), the mother's eyes—the mirror of the soul—remain hidden, which is another, more insidious way of depersonalising the figure.

In painting or visual arts in general, the Figure is the focus of the viewer's emotional response. In the case of Freud, it becomes the site and the crux of depersonalisation, in a reverse way: the more realistic and prominent it is in the painting, the more visible and efficient the depersonalisation process is. The figure in Freud's paintings is thus not used to convey any specific emotions, but to create a space for wonder, bewilderment or the gloom of the viewer himself.

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1. The term 'scrutiny' has almost become a hackneyed one, because it has been overused by the School of London champions and critics as warranting the moral value of the portraits.

## 2 Bacon, the painter of flesh; Freud, the painter of skin

If we compare the use of the figure and the effect of Freud's paintings of with those of Francis Bacon, we realise that Bacon's works aim at the creation of a shock, as in *Lying Figure in a Mirror* (1971). In such works, depersonalisation is more of a distortion, a disruption: it is much more radical—so radical that the very humanity of the figure is at stake, even imperilled, and that the very use of notion of figure becomes questionable. On the contrary, one painting by Freud with a quite similar composition and subject, *Sunny Morning—Eight Legs* (1997), keeps the integrity of the figure. The emotion produced is more related to unease (the painting often triggers laughter) than to fear or horror, as in the case of Bacon.

The surface is the site of the intervention of the painter and the site of emotion. We know that the concentration on the surface is a typical feature of modern art. But the surface of Freud's work is not just a coat of paint: it is analogous to skin, as in *Naked Portrait on Red sofa* (1989-91). Skin, in Freud's portraits, has an overbearing presence, because of his predilection for nudes. But what I name 'skin,' in the case of Freud's art, is not just the representation of the skin of figures. Skin is the structure, we may even speak of a skin diagram, used to create a motion, or turbulences, in the painting. The emphasis on surface is not an emphasis on the medium, but rather a change of focus, which accounts for our unusual experience of Freud's portraits. As the background and the surface function as skin, they come to life. In *Naked Man on Bed* (1987), the rags in the right upper corner are the result of the indifferenciation between the figure and the décor. It even seems that skin is spreading out of the human figure. In Bacon's paintings, solid colors and even surfaces surround the figure, which remains the focus, but Freud's works are characterized by indifferenciation: the animation, the life, the emotion all spread to the walls, furnitures and rags.

When Freud wants to show the body, he creates a dissonance, by keeping the setting of nude paintings or traditional postures, and creating a discrepancy between this structure and its effect. He makes nude and nakedness overlap. This implies a change in the significance of the painting, a sort of move, which of course has an impact on the reception. While Bacon's surfaces are overtly and violently troubled, nothing, in Freud's paintings, ever comes to break, tear or trouble the surface or the figure.

### **3 From depersonalisation to displacement**

Far from being a mere latter day avatar of Expressionist or Modernist painting, such concentration on surface is contemporary inasmuch as it works through the superimposition of a structure which carries an effect, and through indifferenciation rather than the breaking or confusing of the surface. Freud's work thus does not consist so much in depersonalisation—a denial of personality and emotion—, as in a displacement of the persona. This is not a removal, but a motion, an artistic move in terms of practice and approach, which leads, in the composition, to a relocation of affects.

In the portraits of Freud's mother, indeed, emotion cannot be suppressed. The coexistence of impersonality and emotion in *The Painter's Mother Reading* is the result of the displacement and the re-structuring of the persona in the painting. The eyes of the mother are indeed substituted with the gaze of the armchair: its buttons stare at us on behalf of the mother, creating a sense of unease which has nothing to do with the figure or the representation of the mother. Beyond the classical setting, the composition and use of figure, the affect comes from elsewhere.

Displacement could be seen from a psychological angle, as an emotional response of the artist, a reflex of denial when facing his mother getting old—'The Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Painting.' But beyond this interpretation, the device is one Freud used increasingly from the sixties on, and not just in portraits. Freud indeed manages to make still lifes and landscapes just as unsettling as portraits: the use of plants is one way to disseminate life, and thus the e-motional potential, in the painting. In a painting ironically entitled *Still Life* (1993), Freud uses the counterpart of indifferenciation: substitution. The cushion is not an object, but an explicit analogon of the nether parts of a female body, and the faces represented on the pages of the book emphasize this analogy, making the whole composition suddenly alive. This life instilled into the commonest object is a way to catch the viewer unaware, to destabilize, thus to move him or her. Freud does not thus resort to the disruption power, nor the tongue-in-cheek subversion of Modernism.

### **4 Displacement as a contemporary practice**

This is why Freud can be compared, if not formally associated, to contemporary artists, and not necessarily painters. Danto famously defined contemporaneity as 'less a period than what happens after there are no more periods in some master narrative of art, and less a style than a way

of using styles.<sup>1</sup> Freud's refusal to disrupt the figures, his apparent acceptance of the structures of traditional painting make him more contemporary than modern.

The exaggerated realism Freud resorts to is indeed akin to that of some younger British contemporary artists. The new conception of Realism developed in British art in the 1980s and 1990s aimed at causing a sensation, creating wonder, above all other emotions. Such realism might seem self-contradictory, as it remains perfectly objective, thus impersonal, while integrating disturbing elements that undermine the otherwise illusionistic device, and trouble the reception. Confusion in scale is extensively used for that purpose: the 'Benefits Supervisor' (the model being designated by her job) Freud made pose on several occasions for him is echoed by the huge women somewhat obsessively represented by Jenny Saville (for example in *Prop*, 1992), as fallen or bloated Venuses. The sense of enormousness, of excess and of uncanny reality also calls in mind the sculptures of Ron Mueck, another master of scrutiny and realism. The concentration on organic details such as the quality of skin, the hair, the nails (as in *Big Man*, 2001), with the change of scale, creates a sensation of awe, but also displaces the focus of the viewer's attention from the represented object to the device. What is emphasized here is the artist's 'know-how', though not in terms of classical artistic mastery (Mueck does not work neither with oil paint, nor with marble).

Hybrids are the results of another structure-generated disorder, the consequence of realism gone wild: the figures of *Triple Portrait* are on the verge of indifferenciation and fusion, not though as the result of conflation or a colliding within the image, as in Bacon's earlier works. Their figures merge by juxtaposition and above all through the treatment of the surface, where human hair, skin, dog's fur and the rags on the background are unified and form a continuum of living texture.

## 5 Of structure and emotion

Exaggeration and displacement are two structural devices that show British contemporary art practice does not consist in rupture or morbid dismemberment, just in the way the notorious Chapman brothers do not just destroy and dismember as they do in *Great Deeds against the Dead* (1994). *Zygotic Acceleration* (1995), perhaps their most decried work, is an attempt at restructuring the human body, making it hybrid, tampering

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1. Arthur Danto, *After the End of Art—Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton University Press, 1995) 10.

with life as well as with the figure, and playing with the responses, both aesthetic and emotional, of the audience. This structure is a purposely a non-viable one. As in the series of animals by Damien Hirst (*Away from the Flock* or *Mother and Child Divided*), the bodies are not whole bodies, nor figures, but cannot be considered as scattered pieces either. The pieces are indeed still held together by a structure (the frame, often overlooked, but a crucial element in the works), in a suspended movement of recomposition, which makes the works all the more poignant.

Freud also experiments with structures when he unleashes the skin diagram in a portrait, or lets the rags invade and animate the painting. All these artists consider emotion in the making, explore and display the very possibility of emotion. The work of art then appears as an experimental device: a work by Hirst, composed of his trademark pharmacy cabinet and entitled *Holiday and no Feeling* (1989), seems to represent the position of the contemporary artist. It can be characterized by leisure and endless possibilities, but also by a lack of stake artists try to make up for by tampering with emotions. Freud's studio, which is represented in all his portraits without exception, with the same props, the same composition, is then quite similar to Hirst's laboratories. It appears as a control-site, or a control-structure, where to experiment with human affects.

The importance of the structure explains why the mode of analogy is so important in the paintings. It overwhelms the more traditional representational connection. Confusion is kept between skin and paint in Freud's portraits: the paint does not represent skin, but mimics it: like skin, it bears cracks and blemishes. The correspondance is though not so much in the aspect, appearance, but in the function and the structure. *Portrait of Kai*, a painting of 1991, shows the use of skin goes beyond mimesis. Freud paints everything *as* skin, not like skin: he doesn't imitate a skin in particular, but he can paint a sofa or a wall with blemishes, cuts, imperfections. Kai's hair, and even the hair on his chest, are painted as a covering surface, in continuity with skin—as skin. This analogy between medium and object reminds us of the function of blood in the work by Marc Quinn, *Self* (1991); another example of analogy is the infamous portrait by Marcus Harvey, *Myra* (1997), in which the brushstrokes are replaced by children's hands: the device and the setting off of such specific devices at the level of reception constitute the emotional stake of the works.

## 6 From aesthetic emotion to critical motion

The importance of structure, patterns or devices poses the question of whether this re-structuring is a tentation of a return to a system, following the trend of the retrogressive moves of the eighties. The dissonance instilled by Freud in the portraits, his use of traditional and modernist devices with such distance rather seem to correspond to the criterion of 'impurity' by which Danto defined the contemporary. (Danto, 12) In order to comprehend the function of emotion and its relation to impersonality in Freud's work, it is thus necessary to not just let ourselves be moved by these works, but to make a move ourselves, as viewers and as critics. Hal Foster advocates this same sort of move, when he suggests to take into account the parallax phenomenon, that is, the fact that an object appears to be displaced only due to the observer's movement. According to Foster, the awareness of parallax and the subsequent shift in our way of looking at works of art help 'move away from a logic of avant-gardist transgression toward a model of deconstructive (dis)placement, which is far more appropriate to contemporary practices.'<sup>1</sup>

Freud's place in art is analogous, in many ways, to the place of the figure and emotions in his works. The feeling of unease in his paintings is but a function of the displacement and the depersonalisation of Freud himself, his isolation from the contemporary as a traditional modernist, the 'Ingres of Existentialism.' There is a real need to restore his individuality and contemporaneity. It is a paradoxical thing that the sentimentality and nostalgia at the roots of the phenomenon of School of London and in the presentation of Freud should be what prevented the viewers from seeing the true emotional stake of his paintings.

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1. Hal Foster, *The Return to the Real* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996) xii.



Figure 1. — Lucian Freud, *Interior with Plant, Reflection Listening* (1967-68)

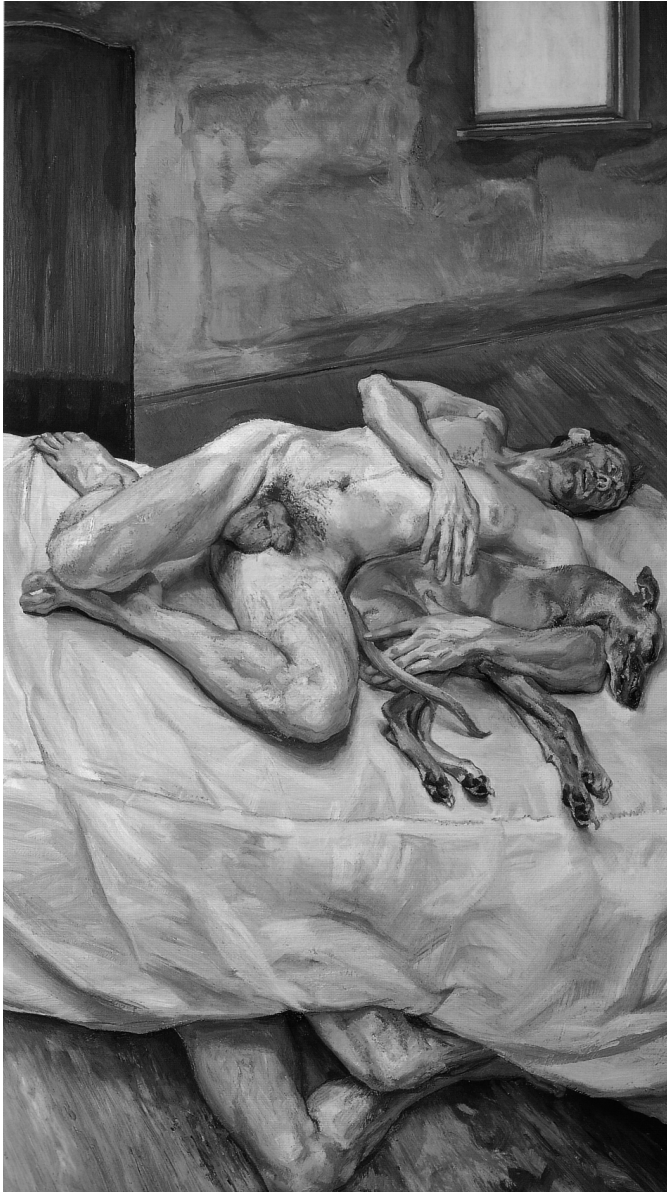


Figure 2. — Lucian Freud, *Sunny Morning—Eight Legs* (1997)



Figure 3. — Lucian Freud, *Naked Girl* (1966)



Figure 4. — Lucian Freud, *The Painter's Mother Reading* (1975)

# The School of London Painters: Scanning the Soul

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During the second half of the twentieth century a whole group of painters referred to as *The School of London*, challenged the paradox of achieving impersonality and emotion on a canvas through the act of painting. These artists were moved by the desperate wish to pin down passing experience with a new pictorial language producing images out of paint as opposed to those who looked for new ways of packing their paintings with information. Totally committed to the representation of the human figure in spite of their intrinsic differences, they rejected Abstraction at a time when it had become the major means of expression in visual arts. Avoiding the illustrational or narrative they wanted the image to stand on its own, stripped of any referential support so as to engage in an uncanny relationship with the figure and the viewer through the sole medium. I analyse a selection of works by Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud, Frank Auerbach, Leon Kossoff and Michael Andrews, to brave the meanders of the paradox they became literally obsessed with.

The term *School of London* that has been used since the 1970s refers to a group of British artists living and working in the British metropolis who challenged the legacy of Realism and Expressionism showing a total commitment to the process of painting and above all to the painting of the human figure. Their main interest is the representation of man's relationship to his environment, whether urban or human, with the result that these British artists are mainly concerned with landscapes and the human figure. Indeed, figurative painting has always been prominent in British painting and the *School of London* painters have simply pursued this tradition and contributed to the reassessment of figurative art at a time when the drift was towards abstract art. These representatives of figurative art

who emerged during the post-war period all refer to the work of Francis Bacon, which sharply highlights the tension and vulnerability of modern urban man.

## 1 Five painters from London

There has been, however, a tendency to limit the *School of London* to the hard core of Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud, Frank Auerbach, Leon Kossoff and Michael Andrews.<sup>1</sup> The reason probably being that they stood apart from the international artistic trends. They formed what R.B Kitaj later called ‘a herd of loners’<sup>2</sup> because of their reclusive way of life and their total rejection of Abstraction and of the media hype prone British Pop Art that was developing at the same time. Another reason for tightly linking painters who showed strong intrinsic differences is also the fact that they were a group of cosmopolitan artists who, except for Michael Andrews, had more or less ended up in London under strained circumstances: Kossoff’s family had fled the Russian pogroms, and Freud’s and Auerbach’s, Nazi Germany; Bacon, born and brought up in Ireland during the civil war period, left for London at sixteen in total rupture with his family. As exiles, refugees or simply outsiders, they probably shared the fact of being other, instituting the alien side of reality, constructing other sides of the world. Therefore they created a new pictorial language ‘carr[ying] inside [themselves] like a secret crypt, or like a handicapped child, beloved and useful, that language of a long time ago that fades but never determines to leave you.’<sup>3</sup>

## 2 A new pictorial language

The term *School of London* did not stem from the artists themselves but was first coined by R.B Kitaj (a Cleveland-born British trained artist) in 1976 at an exhibition organised by the latter and entitled *Human Clay*<sup>4</sup> where the works of thirty-five artists inspired by the human figure were

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1. Michael Andrews (1928-1996), Franck Auerbach (born in 1931), Francis Bacon (1909-1992), Lucian Freud (born in 1922), Leon Kossoff (born in 1928).

2. Quoted in Alistair Hicks, *The School of London, The Resurgence of Contemporary Painting* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1989) 16.

3. Julia Kristeva quoted in Franscesca Alfano Miglietti, *Extreme Bodies, The Use and Abuse of the Body in Art* (FAM) (Milano: Skira, 2003) 93.

4. A reference to W. H Auden’s poem, *Letter to Lord Byron*: ‘To me Art’s subject is the human clay,/ And landscape but a background to a torso,’ *Collected Longer Poems* (New York: Random House, 2002).

shown. If the phrase did not define the style of the *School of London*, it nevertheless underlined some of the dominant characteristics of the painters' work, that is a form of painting which combines figurative, realistic and expressive elements, is concerned with modern urban man and his individualistic mode of thought and perception while highlighting the tension between private and public sphere. In other words, the representatives of the *School of London* tackle the scanning of the soul. Nevertheless, London is hardly a source of inspiration for these artists but rather the indirect scenery for an individual that stays in the background stripped of any referential support.

Thus avoiding the illustrational or narrative the *School of London* painters wanted the image to stand on its own so as to engage in an uncanny relationship with the figure and the viewer solely through medium. They were moved by the desperate wish to pin down passing experience with a new pictorial language challenging the paradox of achieving impersonality and emotion on a canvas through the act of painting. The belief in the creation of an individual pictorial language was essential to these painters and explained their resistance at being part of an art movement as such. 'One can no longer share a language like painters did in the eighteenth century', declares the painter Howard Hodgkin.<sup>1</sup> 'To be an artist today one has to create one's own grammar first and then paint'. (Hicks 12) This is the challenge that this group of painters were to confront.

### **3 A search for impersonality**

The *School of London* painters can hardly be labelled Modernists,<sup>2</sup> in the sense that they never really challenged the aesthetic doxa; nevertheless, their work seems to echo T.S. Eliot's statement that from the impersonal emerges emotion: '[t]he emotion of art is impersonal. And the poet cannot reach this impersonality without surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done.'<sup>3</sup> Though deeply anchored in the art of the past that they often use in a provocative way, their pictorial language has its roots in their avoidance of the illustrational, of the narrative but also in their acute sense of theatricality. It allowed them to consider the act of painting in terms both of its necessary artificiality, therefore striving towards

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1. Howard Hodgkin (born in 1932), British abstract painter.

2. The reason for this assertion is that Modernism's historicist programme of development sought to bring art into a culturally significant relationship with the advancement of science and the programmatic and developmental thrust of social change.

3. T.S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', *The Sacred Wood. Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (1920; London: Faber and Faber, 1997) 48.

impersonality, and of its complete involvement in the painting process, thus unleashing emotions. It is essentially in the painter's relation to the subject that the search for impersonality is most significant: that is the subject considered literally, expressed in the titles of the paintings and the subject considered pictorially, that is the figure in space or in its own space.

It seems that in the very titles of their paintings the artists already express their need to stress the impersonal as the only means for the emergence of its apparent antagonism, emotion. A distance is often established by the use of an abrupt pictorial terminology (nude, head, study, figure), referring to the genre rather than to the subject of the painting, so that little information seeps through, thus avoiding any illustrational function on the part of the painter or narrative attempt on the part of the viewer. It seems to reify the subject, to strip the sitters of their personal and social identity, to erase that part of their identity linked to the real world. It is also a way to refer to the sitters as if they were the objects and not the subjects of the paintings: they bear the function of objects installed for the sole purpose of the painting process.

In his titles Bacon tends to rely on the impact of a fusion between a neutral pictorial signifier and an affect-loaded signified, as is the case with his numerous studies for crucifixions, or with the portraits of his close friends. But the sitters may also undergo a complete depersonalisation when being referred to as anonymous, as it is shown in his recurrent use of the terms 'figure' or 'body' in his titles (*Studies from the Human Body* 1975). This is all the more dichotomous as Bacon and the *School of London* painters at large have always insisted on working only with people they like, people they know well. It seems of utmost importance to the painters to efface any trace of subjectivity as if the creative process demanded the burial of personality. Some of Freud's models even recall that sense of being 'like a still life, a bottle or an apple.'<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, Freud excels in this particular approach. His titles rarely bear names and when they do, they are often reduced to a first name only. It may indicate an intimacy with the model, but nothing else will be revealed about their intimacy, thus trivialising the relation. More often, the sitters are reduced to their sheer physicality bordering on the obsessive (*Head of the Big Man* 1975; *Head and Shoulders of a Girl* 1977). Freud is probably the one in the group who has the greatest need to mark his distance with the model, thus the use of prosaic titles reminiscent of a sci-

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1. 'Face to Face with Freud', John Cornwell, *Sunday Times* 22 May 2005: 27

entific codification (*Portrait Fragment* 1971; *Pregnant Girl* 1960; *Woman with Arm Tattoo*, 1996).

Auerbach certainly has the most extreme attitude in his reference to his sitters as they are often reduced to the initials of their names (*Head of E. O. W.* 1954) turning them into an enigma for the viewer but probably expressing a privileged relationship to the painter, exclusive of the viewer. He also tends (like Bacon) to number his paintings (*Head of Catherine Lampert II* 1988) adding the option of repetitiveness proper to soul-destroying cataloguing.

Kossoff's titles are less impersonal preferring the term 'portrait' to 'head' where sitters are concerned but his favourite locations are overcrowded public places that engulf the individual into anonymity (*Outside Kilburn Underground, Spring* 1976) while by contrast Michael Andrews, whose work tends to deal with social interaction or situations of psychological challenge, favours more explicit titles (*The Colony Room I* 1962; *Melanie and Me Swimming* 1978-79). But he also resorts to enigmatic or poetic titles (*August for the People* 1951; *Lights II: The Ship Engulfed* 1972) that set the viewer at a distance.

#### **4 A surge of emotion**

For the *School of London* painters space and its relation to the figure have always been infinitely problematical because pictorially this is where the impersonal triggers the emotional both in the figure and in the viewer. Their London landscapes avoid any of those places the city is famous for. They resort to their immediate environment, to the streets and districts where they live and work. The narrow streets and empty squares bring out the isolation of modern man. The urban landscape can be either limited to the empty suggestive arena-like streets of Bacon's paintings as in *Portrait of Isabel Rawsthorne Standing in a Street in Soho* (1967), or to the dreary or sordid views from the windows of Freud's suburban studios (*Two Irish Men in W11* 1984-85), or dismantled and filtered by Auerbach's conscience projecting onto the canvas the desolation of a demolition site (*Maples Demolition Site, Euston Road* 1960). While Andrews favours stifling walled-in gardens that seem to reinforce the isolation of the figures, Kossoff vainly tries to break with this urban vision but his tiny creatures are swallowed or crushed by the weight of their urban environment and the toned down pigments (*Outside Kilburn Underground, Spring* 1976).

With the exception of Michael Andrews, their figures are generally excluded from any lively urban environment and they seem to have resigned themselves to their private miseries, indifferent to the world around them and to the gaze of the artist. They are dragged away from their familiar environment, as shown by their desperate or resigned attitudes, where they seem to be condemned to impersonal interiors conveying the same impression of dislocation and impersonality: they are subjected to the vast, brightly-lit, windowless, interchangeable spaces of Bacon's interiors with their cold tubular designer furniture meant for anonymous waiting-rooms, or to hotel lobbies or hospitals (*Three Studies of Male Back* 1970); while Freud's studios, have poorly furnished broken-down interiors with walls splattered with thick accretions of paint or plaster reminiscent of stage settings as in *Large Interior WII (After Watteau)* (1981-83). Auerbach's figures (*Head of J.Y.M* 1974-75), just like Kossoff's (*Portrait of George Thompson* 1975), invade the whole space of the canvas reducing to nought the notion of context, thus sealing them off from any identifiable space other than the thickly painted support while Andrews's figures seem to be crammed in stuffy interiors but it is just a casual vision of groups where the figures are placed as in a series of unrelated and unaesthetic snapshots as is the case in *The Colony Room I* (1962).

Invariably, because of the absence of any referential props for the figures, the frailty and vulnerability of the models are exacerbated, space has become the artists' lair and the figures, under the pitiless scrutiny of their artistic eyes, have become their preys. The figures' passivity, their self-absorption, physical exhaustion and useless expectation of a non-event unleash the most intimate emotions ranging from desperation to boredom. Bacon's figures do sometimes make a useless effort to escape this issueless situation but are curbed by the violence of the painting gesture like a splash of pure pigment nailing them to the support (*Portrait of George Dyer in a Mirror* 1968). The sitter is thus reformatted to the painter's whims, fantasies and concerns and becomes the painter's creation embodying pictorially his challenge to transience, to the pinning down of a passing experience.

## 5 The dynamics between art and emotion

The painters of the *School of London* cannot dissociate the physical fact of the real world from the physical fact of paint. Therefore, it is essentially through their personal relation to the act of painting that emotions are expressed. They all admit their constant struggle with the medium

and the canvas, a desperate struggle that can last years as shown by the dates accompanying the paintings. It seems that the question of completion is for them a personal drama. Freud claims that he likes to feel that every aspect of the portrait is 'provisional, changeable, removable.' (Cornwell 28)

Except for Bacon and Andrews who work both from life and from photographs, the *School of London* painters have always relied on the presence and patience of their sitters. Kossoff and Auerbach even mention how it seemed that they would never finish their paintings and the torture it implied for their models. They are all interested in the dynamics between art and relationships and it explains why they paint people they know well: their families and their close friends. They share an acute awareness of time, human frailty and mortality rather than a concern with timeless certainties and ideals. Totally committed to the representation of the figure they want images and energy to come out from behind the curtain of flesh, thus giving to the painting process the power of tearing off the social mask, of 'clear[ing] away one or two of the veils or screens,'<sup>1</sup> as Bacon put it.

In his vigorous studies Bacon frees human obsessions. Therefore he mainly uses acrylics for the background surfaces which stretch smoothly, uniformly but firmly, hemming in the figures for which he uses oil, more malleable, and pastel, more delicate, allowing him to work at them again a few days later, thus expressing through the successive reworking the ephemeral nature of man's condition. Bacon distils emotion on the canvas asserting that his painting is just like 'great poetry [that] makes an assault on the nervous system' (Hicks 21) as in *Portrait of Henrietta Moraes*, 1965 where the pressure of the smooth but dense multi-planed toned-down background reduces the figure to a cut of meat on a butcher's stall. The hacked red and blue pigments pressed into the canvas show the resistance of the whitish sensual volumes to the inevitable distortions and injuries. For him, 'Art is an obsession with life' (Sylvester 65) so that he aims at making the image work upon the nervous system.

Freud is more interested in grasping the blood and flesh presence of the sitter with the most obsessive precision. His quest for a longed-for truth about the subject produces paintings that defy narrative, that are ultimately about 'truth.' Freud talks of making the paint flesh and his nudes are pulsating masses of paint rendered with a precision reminiscent of a surgeon's scalpel. Freud started with soft silks but rapidly moved

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1. Francis Bacon in David Sylvester, *Interviews with Francis Bacon* (1975; London: Thames and Hudson, 1985) 82.

to harsh brushes and the palette knife. He also equates paint with life using specific pigments for the human body, different from those he uses for clothes or objects.<sup>1</sup> Emotion is thus generated in the painting process, in the medium itself. From the 1960s onwards, his palette has been restricted to the colours of the flesh, the clay of the creator in all its nuances as in *Naked Portrait with Reflection*, 1980. The paint is voluntarily toned-down as if the repetitiveness of the act of painting had faded its vividness. The pigment is dulled, but dense, loaded, coagulated in little lumps and organised in powerful volumes. The worn out and torn open couch, echoes the palette of the painter who is partly reflected in the mirror: the subject of the painting seems to surge exhausted from Freud's palette as Athena from Zeus's head. Concentrated close-ups and angled views jeopardising the stability of the figure, finalise the process of appropriation of the sitters, not to record but to reveal emotion beyond reification as the title shows with the term 'portrait' and as Freud himself asserts: 'As far as I am concerned the paint is the person. I want it to work for me just as flesh does.'<sup>2</sup>

It is through an expressive-realistic style that Auerbach and Kossoff look for the pictorial apprehension of the sitter's inner being. Auerbach considers the act of painting as a means 'to capture a raw experience for Art.'<sup>3</sup> He started using limited colours and essentially tuned down yellow and brown, claiming Rembrandt's legacy, which could be felt in the engraved, grooved surfaces of yellow ochre reminiscent of wet gravel (*Head of E. O. W.* 1954). He then persisted with only a few colours, as in his series of black and white paintings, asserting that, 'one wants the richest materials and richest possible sensibility to the subject expressed in the most economical way' (Hicks 29). His subjects are very limited and endlessly repetitive, 'the subject becom[ing] richer the longer [he] goes with it, unused possibilities present[ing] themselves.' (Hicks 29) He feels the irrepressible need to exhaust his subject, whether human or other so as to lock it in a no man's land, the artist's space, between spontaneity and a relentless belief in form. He does it with a few bold strokes or frenzied marks and crossings, as if to pin down his emotions through the appropriation of the subject. The production of images out of the paint is then a struggle between the thick fluidity of the paint and the rigid structure of

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1. 'I wouldn't use Cremnitz [white] on anything that wasn't alive, I use it for flesh, or even on the hairs of a dog, but never for instance on a woman's dress', quoted in (Hicks 46).

2. Lawrence Gowing, *Lucian Freud* (1982; London: Thames and Hudson, 1985) 91.

3. Dawn Ades, 'Figure and Place: A Context for Five Post-War Artists', *British Art in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The Modern Movement*, ed. Susan Compton (Münich: Prestel-Verlag and London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1986) 75.

the background as in *E. O. W. on Her Blue Eiderdown*, 1965. The figure, spurting directly out of the tube of paint, is supported by the stifling density of the paint in the background but with all the weight of the accretion of oil paint resists the sliding downwards induced by the fluidity of the blue mass of the eiderdown. The body is a field of vigorous strokes from a richly laden brush trying violently, to quote Auerbach '[ . . . ] to pin something down that would defy time, so it wouldn't all go off into thin air. This act of portraiture, pinning down something before it disappears seems to be the point of painting.' (Hicks 28)

Kossoff also uses extremely thick paint and a limited range of intense dark colours. He forces images out of the paint as if to emphasise the primacy of matter. Thus the weight of the paint, of the charcoal and the wild strands as if to tie the swinging figures and buildings to the ground. Therefore, his figures and landscapes possess an awesome solidity, a monumentality that conjures up an agonised, simple but dignified world conveying the powerlessness of man in the face of the material world. In his paintings there is a sense of the figure, an immovable icon, planted in the earth, a sense of the artist precariously superimposing his order on chaos as in *Nude on a Red Bed*, 1972. The childlike figure with wide-open eyes uncomfortably huddled on the narrow bed taking up most of the confined needle-scratched space of the canvas, elicits this powerlessness. Nevertheless the frontal view, the sculptural impastoed volumes of the belly and thighs suggesting pregnancy, highlighted by the worked marbled pigment of the flesh also turn the figure into a resisting icon as expressed by the artist himself: 'Finally, in spite of all this activity of absorption and internalisation, the images emerge in an atmosphere of freedom.' (Ades 310)

Andrews's fairly thin paint and measured restraint are in tune with some sort of reverie about life in our times though they could reflect a dispassionate attitude on the part of the artist because of the insertion of photographic views. But Andrews subtle and sometimes disconcerting remoulding of appearances through the use of contrasts and light effects triggers emotional reactions such as in *Melanie and Me Swimming*, 1978-79. The luminous, smooth but dense tones of the flesh irradiate the privileged father-daughter relationship symbolised by the merging of the arms of the two figures into a circle at the centre of the painting. In contrast the thin, smooth fluid surface of the water whose intense dark pigment turns into a mass of muddy water seems to pin down the symbiotic event. The distorted leg in the foreground, a visual effect and a line guiding the eye of the viewer to the very subject of the painting, seems to impede the flowing mass of the water symbolising the inevitable passing

of time. The toned-down angular rocks in the background, which dominate the scene, seem ready to entomb this ephemeral moment. Andrews is obsessed with recording his immediate impressions but adopts a specific approach: 'I am interested in external appearances for what they reveal of what is internal.'<sup>1</sup>

Engaged in the virtually perceived world rather than symbolic orders, the *School of London* painters have a strong belief in the power of painting. They want to infuse emotion and observation in the paint itself through the process of depersonalisation and dislocation. The physical experience, weight, tension of the muscles, inner movements, and the dramas are to be expressed solely through the paint itself. Their obsessive fascination with the figure allows them to convey the most profound emotions about human existence in its utmost ordinariness. The atmosphere of vulnerability, isolation and guilt that seeps out of their pictures constantly recalls the Existentialist mood of the second part of the 20th century and shows the legacy of the Swiss painter and sculptor Alberto Giacometti and his 'Existentialist Man', man naked, unpropped, alone and stripped of his comforting myths. The *School of London* painters scanned new codes, new ways while deeply aware of the impact of tradition in contemporary modernity.

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1. Quoted by Paul Moorhouse and Ben Tunfnell on-line [www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/andrews](http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/andrews) - 8 January 2006.

# **‘Don’t Be So Sentimental!’: Emotion and the Tyranny of Reference**

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One of the ways in which theorists such as Nelson Goodman and Martha Nussbaum have tried to justify the value of the arts is by showing that the emotions they express or produce are in some way beneficial to mankind. To that extent, any vision of art that sees it as essentially impersonal might appear to diminish its utility. But, at a deeper level perhaps, the call for impersonality (at least as formulated by Eliot back in 1919) may be no more than another way of emphasizing the ubiquity and hegemony of the emotional response to art, where the term *emotion* takes on a higher sense.

How intrinsic are the emotions to the aesthetic experience? Do the emotions provide some *sui generis* form of cognition, a form which perhaps finds its best expression in art? Or is there a sense in which emotions sometimes get attached to works of art for the sake of convenience or simply out of institutional habit? My first example will be the sculpture of Anish Kapoor, and here I will argue that his art is more one of *sensation* than of emotion, despite those elements of the paratext that comes with his work. More generally, the arbitrariness of the labels that one may attach to such works can help us escape from the absolute tyranny of reference.

The realm of reference, of narrative and human content, is usually the realm of emotion. We might want to argue, therefore, that works of art which make the emotions a subject of reflection do teach us how to live. My example here will be two Monty Python sketches, with an emphasis on the way that the representation of emotional imbalance can help us understand how affect and language interact. It might be argued that such representations give us an intellectual, rather than an emotional, understanding of affect, and to that extent, they are impersonal in themselves. But I will argue that our own

emotional involvement is a necessary component to the success of the sketches.

Do we want to conclude, however, with Goodman, that the emotions function cognitively in works of art? Must we agree with Nussbaum when she implies that those works that do not deal specifically with human problems are in some way inferior? Once we've conceded that Kapoor and many like him are not *really* dealing with ethical issues, are we obliged to see their forms of visual art as secondary? In my conclusion, I intend to reject the theory of cognitive emotion (and the Vicarious Experience Theory which is often derived from it) in favour of a metaethical theory more in tune with the variety of art. This pluralism may take us beyond the dialectic of impersonality and emotion.

## 1 Authenticity, personality and emotion

There has been, for a number of years now, a general impression that authenticity is both a necessary and sufficient condition of art. If the emotions of the work are strong enough, and if they are sincere (the argument goes), then the mere fact that the work serves as some kind of visual index of these emotions suffices to make it a valuable experience. Even without concrete emotion in the traditional sense, the mere presence of authenticity and factuality, one claims, can turn the *archive* into the *artwork*. In the spring of 1972, the English artist David Tremlett travelled throughout England, Scotland and Wales, recording sounds in each and every county. One can see this work (if not hear it) today at the Tate Modern: *The Spring Recordings* (1972) is an installation which consists of 81 music cassettes placed on a glass shelf in a separate room. The rationale seems to be that the act of transcribing the real is itself a human necessity, and even in the absence of some represented human situation, this act of transcription has its own affective power. One can see how this logic leads to the even more obvious art of the authenticity of personal human emotion characteristic of people such as Tracy Emin or (if I may mention two non-British artists) Nan Goldin and Sophie Calle. Emin's *My Bed* (1998-1999) seems to be saying that the actuality of her life, emotions and experiences is enough to turn a mattress into a masterpiece. And behind all of this is perhaps some idea that the emotions themselves are in some way essential to art. Emin is more than just a few letters of the alphabet away from Eliot—from the Eliot who wrote in 1919:

Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things.<sup>1</sup>

If we have encouraged an art of self-expression, or perhaps one should say self-*exhibition*, it is because we assume that the paradoxical universality of *particular* emotion holds some kind of key; it is because we feel that the act of reference to these emotions involves some higher kind of cognition.

The late American philosopher Nelson Goodman was famous for a theory of cognitive emotion, a theory which makes affect a central part of both aesthetic experience and general knowledge. A very similar theory has more recently been developed by Martha Nussbaum. I propose to explore these theories via an analysis of the work of Anish Kapoor and of a somewhat lesser known (but still highly typical) *Monty Python* sketch. If it can be argued that these works of art depend on, or produce, concrete linguistic and affective adaptation on the part of the reader/spectator, this might be said to show that the 'emotions function cognitively,' as Goodman would have it. Exploring this topic may help us refine the concepts of affect, perception and cognition in their relation to art.

But before I turn to these questions I need (for reasons which will become clear shortly) to deal with some vital issues raised by the latest developments in the famous British soap opera, *Hendon Way*. Here is a summary of what has happened so far:

Trevor is an MP and a highly respected man in Hendon. A long time ago, he got separated from his young wife Allison and their daughter Nikki in a fit of anger and never saw them again. 18 years later, Allison and Nikki—whom he thought dead—arrive in Hendon to claim recognition. Meanwhile, Trevor's business and prestige has been threatened by the arrival of a Pakistani businessman named Amir who has become very popular in the community. And the return of Allison and Nikki means that Trevor has to break off a secret engagement he has with Stacy. So will he find love again or is he on the road to emotional and financial bankruptcy?

Of course, this has been a practical joke: The soap opera '*Hendon Way*' does not exist and many of you may have already recognized that this story is nothing more than a transcription into a modern context of the plot of Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*.

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1. T.S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent,' *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, ed. F. Ker-mode (London: Faber, 1975) 43.

Now the point of my practical joke might first appear to be that the difference between great literature and soap opera isn't going to be in the plot alone, since the basics of plot are the same in both cases. In other words, the practical joke seems to show that the moral and emotional efficacy of art isn't a matter of 'content' in the most concrete sense of this term. One could argue that the difference between Hardy and *Hendon Way* (or *Coronation Street*) is going to be a matter of the *language used* to relate the plot, or of the *reflections* and *ideas* attached to the plot. But I'd like to add a second example (not quite as ridiculous this time, perhaps) to show that the situation is somewhat more complicated than that. In *Upheavals of Thought*, her lengthy treatise on 'the intelligence of the emotions,' Martha Nussbaum spends much time on the philosophy of mind and the theory of the emotions adumbrated in the work of Proust. In a typical passage, she notes how the young Marcel views his mother's goodnight kiss—that 'concession to my misery and agitation' (the narrator notes)—with 'utmost pain' since, as Nussbaum puts it, 'it is a sign that she will soon be departing.'<sup>1</sup> This may well be a famous passage, but I would wager that a greater number of French people alive today are more familiar with the following refrain from a popular song:

Je suis malade, complètement malade,  
Comme quand ma mère sortait le soir,  
Et qu'elle me laissait seul avec mon désespoir!<sup>2</sup>

One does get the feeling that Marcel P. and Serge L. are talking about the same thing, so, as always when one starts to discuss the link between art and emotion, the problem becomes that of the relation between 'high' culture and 'low.' Who is to say—or how are we to prove—that *In Search of Lost Time* is 'better' or 'deeper' than the popular song? Both of the above examples could be used to show that our criteria of aesthetic evaluation cannot be made in terms of the *intensity* or even the *nature* of the emotion itself. Nor is the message going to be that great art teaches us to *restrain* the emotions, while pop music gets us to *indulge* in them. Not all 'tear-jerkers' are necessarily low-brow rubbish, and there are obviously many works of popular entertainment based on an *inhibition* of the emotions. (How could one appreciate a typical James Bond film if one really stopped to think about death and suffering?). My argument will be, therefore, that the emotions enter into art in complex and unpredictable ways. But

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1. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: CUP, 2001) 176. See Marcel Proust, *Du côté de chez Swann* (Paris: Gallimard, 1954) 17.

2. 'I'm sick, completely sick / Like when my mother went out at night / Leaving me alone in my plight.'

perhaps it might be wise to ask whether or not such identifiable human emotions necessarily play a role in all art.

## 2 Emotions without narratives

By speaking of 'identifiable human emotions' in the last sentence, I seem to be implying that emotions could in some way be non-human or non-identifiable or both. There is a vast body of philosophical literature on the emotions, going back through works such as Anthony Kenny's *Action, Emotion and Will* (1963) to Hume and ultimately, like mostly everything else, all the way back to Plato. There has been some debate as to whether or not emotions can be objectless,<sup>1</sup> but without going into the philosophical niceties of the question, what I would like to argue is that emotions may be not so much *objectless* as devoid of specific narrative content. Whether or not we may wish to abandon the term *emotion* in such cases, in favour of a more restricted notion linked to the concept of sensation, is a question we may postpone for the moment. The point is going to be that the projection of specific and identifiable human emotion onto works of art that are otherwise fundamentally abstract may not really be the best way to encourage their appreciation. This projection of narrative or referential content onto the abstract can indeed be seen as a tyranny of reference, the kind of tyranny of reference that allows Emin or Goldin to raise their private lives to the status of art.

This brings me to the work of Anish Kapoor, an artist whom no one would ever accuse of indulging in self-exhibition. His works do not, either via their form or their paratexts, attempt in any way to express an autobiographical message. Indeed, in the early stages of his career, his works generally remained *untitled*. When he did give titles to his work, Kapoor had (and still has) a certain penchant for vague or non-concrete titles such as *Oblivion* or *Turning the World Inside Out* or *Making the World Many* or *Mass* or *Red in the Centre* and so on. Even his major initial series, *1000 names*, seems to suggest by its very title that such a title tends towards the infinite and the infinitely variable in its connection to the work.<sup>2</sup> Very rarely will Kapoor give one of his compositions a strictly figurative name, allowing us to attach some particular narrative or representational content to what remains a rigorously non-figurative sculpture or installation. Perhaps the most famous recent example is *Marsyas* (2002) where the title quite logically links this monumental red skin stretched in the centre

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1. Notably between William James, who coined the concept of *objectless emotions*, and John Dewey, who rejected the idea. See also Kenny, *Action, Emotion and Will* (London: Routledge, 1963) 60.

2. I have borrowed this insight from the work of Lawrence Gasquet.

of the Tate Modern to both the history of art and the act of flaying. Quite clearly, such a title is appropriate, and, as paratext, it adds information which enriches the aesthetic experience.

Need this always be the case? The tyranny of reference would have us believe that untitled works are necessarily in some way secondary to those works that vehicle a human content. With respect to emotion, this would lead us to conclude, as a corollary, that those works whose titles inject some recognizable human emotion into the total meaning of the work are, other things being equal, superior works of art. Now it is tempting for a non-figurative artist to use the shortcuts of language in order to grant depth to an otherwise abstract work. This kind of paratext gives direction to the otherwise limitless hermeneutics of the non-figurative; it often provides an opportunity for humour or wisdom or moral comment, and, at times, can be used to show off one's erudition. This is something that Kapoor does in a masterful and perhaps somewhat mischievous way, since many of his most poignant references are taken from Christianity or Greek Mythology, rather than from the culture of his own original homeland. In the same way that Salman Rushdie has argued that 'Commonwealth Literature Doesn't Exist',<sup>1</sup> Kapoor seems to be saying that 'Commonwealth Sculpture' isn't his line. On the other hand, however, were he to give typically Indian titles to all of his compositions, would that make them fine examples of Commonwealth Art? In other words, does the paratext play a determining role here? I propose to examine this question via a brief analysis of a recent work, *Melancholia* (2004). And the reason I have chosen this particular sculpture is that it does use the obvious shortcut of attaching, via the paratext, a recognizable human emotion to a fundamentally abstract work. The question thus becomes, to what extent is such a title actually motivated by the work? If the title is arbitrary, is the work necessarily a failure? If the reference to a specified emotion or to a concrete narrative content is not really an intrinsic part of the composition itself, can we say that the work is in some way inadequate? Or might we hold that all of this play with the paratext can often be beside the point.

So on to the analysis of *Melancholia*... or perhaps not. For the best way to make my point was to engage in a little experiment, a game of identification. This game, by the way, was not designed to test the audience's knowledge of art history, so any Kapoor experts present in the audience were kindly requested to hold their peace. My game of identifica-

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1. See Salman Rushdie, "'Commonwealth Literature' Does Not Exist" in *Imaginary Homelands* (London: Granta, 1991).

tion really had to do with the operation of metaphorical language, with what Goodman calls the transfer of symbol schemata—or more precisely with the way that the vocabulary of emotion can be applied to a work of plastic art. I presented four works by Kapoor, three of which were actually untitled, and one of which was, or was said to be, *Melancholia*. Which one was it?

I think that all of us can recognize the feeling of melancholy, and we may indeed value any work of art that in some way teaches us something about this feeling—where the expression ‘teaches us’ amounts to no more, but no less, than helping us achieve a new understanding of how to live with it. But no one could honestly say that we truly and *fully* recognized the emotion in any of the works of art which I presented. Each time I have conducted this experiment with groups of student or colleagues, there has always been a marked preference for one of the objects—but *not the right one, unfortunately*. This would tend to prove both that metaphorical language does follow vague guidelines in its application and also that Kapoor has given his evocative title to the wrong work. But does that really mean that *Melancholia* is a failure? Supposing that we do indeed fail to attach this particular human emotion, or indeed, any narrative content, to this particular work of art? Does that mean that the work does not affect us, or that its specifically plastic qualities cannot be powerful in their own way? Even in the absence of reference to human emotions, even in the absence of any reference whatsoever, can we not argue that all of these works by Kapoor provoke intense affectivity by means of their complex sensorial qualities?

It is time to escape the tyranny of reference, and to note that the end of its reign does not imply an end to affectivity. For if we can show that such abstract art operates independently of any human emotion, and a fortiori, independently of the narrative content to which such emotions are attached, we have not thereby shown such art to be ‘impersonal’ in any traditional sense of the term. To argue that the art of sensation, the art of phenomenology, is necessarily ‘impersonal’ is to say that the absence of reference is in itself automatically an absence of feeling. But couldn’t we say instead that sensation is one of the most personal things we have? Might we not say indeed that, by sharing his complex and enticing visions of spatiality and colour with us, Kapoor is giving us a much more intense emotional experience (albeit an abstract one) than Emin is by inviting us to share, so to speak, in the emotions of her bed? Indeed, one could argue that the inhibition of certain trivial or superficial emotions might help us escape from the dead-end of self-indulgent art. But I believe that Mr. Eliot has already said that.

### 3 Narratives without emotions

The subject of inhibition brings me back to the question of humour and forward to the Python sketch I would like you to consider:

*Two ladies are sitting by the fire looking at a photo album.*

Mrs Nigger-Baiter (MICHAEL PALIN). Oh, yes, he's such a clever little boy, just like his father.

Mrs S (TERRY JONES). D'you think so, Mrs Nigger-Baiter?

Mrs Nigger-Baiter. Oh yes, spitting image.

*The door opens. The son comes in.*

Son (JOHN CLEESE). Good afternoon, mother. Good afternoon, Mrs Nigger-Baiter.

Mrs Nigger-Baiter. Ooh, he's walking already!

Mrs S. Yes, he's such a clever little boy, aren't you? Coochy coochy coo...

Mrs Nigger-Baiter. Hello, coochy coo...

Mrs S. Hello, hello... *(they chuck him under the chin)*

Mrs Nigger-Baiter. Oochy coochy. *(the son smiles a little tight smile)* Look at him laughing... ooh, he's a chirpy little fellow. Isn't he a chirpy little fellow ... eh? eh? Does he talk Does he talk, eh?

Son. Of course I talk, I'm Minister for Overseas Development.

Mrs Nigger-Baiter. Ooh, he's a clever little boy - he's a clever little boy. *(gets out a rattle)* Do you like your rattle? Do you like your rattle? Look at his little eyes following it ... look at his iggy piggy piggy little eyeballs eh... oo... he's got a tubby tum-tum. Oh, he's got a tubby tum-tum.

Son. *(whilst Mrs Nigger-Baiter is talking)* Mother, could I have a quick cup of tea please. I have an important statement on Rhodesia to make in the Commons at six.

*Sound of an explosion out of vision. Cut to reveal Mrs Nigger-Baiter's chair charred and smoking. Mrs Nigger-Baiter is no longer there. The upholstery is smouldering gently.*

Mrs S. Oh, Mrs Nigger-Baiter's exploded.

Son. Good thing, too.

Mrs S. She was my best friend.

Son. Oh, mother, don't be so sentimental. Things explode every day.

Mrs S. Yes, I suppose so. Anyway, I didn't really like her that much.<sup>1</sup>

Thus in this hyperbolic vision of the British 'stiff upper-lip' we learn that 'things explode every day' and that there is nothing to make a fuss about—we mustn't be so sentimental.

I have dismissed perhaps a bit hastily an aesthetics of emotion based on what I have called the tyranny of reference. It might be wise to work

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1. *Monty Python's Flying Circus: Just the Words*, volume 2 (London: Methuen, 1990) 64.

through some of the more theoretical implications. Martha Nussbaum's most explicit statement of the connection of emotion and art comes in a chapter entitled 'Interlude: "Things Such as Might Happen".' (Nussbaum 238-48) The title is derived from her own rendering of a famous passage from Aristotle's *Poetics*. The emotional (and thus ethical) interest of fiction comes in its portrayal of 'things such as might happen'—the connection of art and emotion is essential since tragedy (for example) can point out 'the general vulnerability of human life to unexpected reversals.' (Nussbaum 241) For Nussbaum, when the novel explores 'things such as might happen' it engages 'emotional responses' that are 'built into the work itself, into its literary structures.' (Nussbaum 242) But we see here how her analysis drifts away from general considerations about art to more specific conclusions drawn from concentrating on literature in general and the realist novel in particular. It may well be that tragedy points out our vulnerability to unexpected reversals, but I doubt that a sculpture by Kapoor can bring me to the same conclusion. Nussbaum insists on our feelings of compassion for fictional characters and the way they connect up to possibilities of our own lives; (Nussbaum 245) that is why the *sort of thing that might happen* is so essential for her. The problem is that this seems to banish the fantastic, the surreal, and the non-representational from the realm of true art. But I think we need to leave room for emotion—indeed, for ethical and political growth as well—in those forms of art that do not respect the canons of realism. We need to leave room, in other words, not only for *things such as might happen* but for *things that explode* in unpredictable ways. Nussbaum writes that 'the "potential space" of aesthetic activity is a space with which we investigate and try out some of life's possibilities.' (Nussbaum 243) But this obviously doesn't work for non-figurative art; though we do want to say that Kapoor's exploring of the 'possibilities' of red and black has its own value.

There is where I believe that a theory of the *metaethical* dimension of art works better.<sup>1</sup> For my metaethical theory holds that the 'potential space' in question involves the exploration of possibility itself, it involves the experience not merely of particular judgments and values (as is inevitably the case in the realist novel) but rather *the experience of the form and process of all judgment and all interpretation*. The metaethical theory doesn't need to pass value-judgments on the arts; it doesn't establish a hierarchy since all forms of art provide this hermeneutic experience. Even though my experience of Kapoor has nothing to do with concrete eudai-

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1. See 'Le Texte comme tissu social,' in Lecercle and Shusterman, *L'Emprise des signes* (Paris: Seuil, 2002).

monistic issues, it does teach me something about interpretation—that paradoxical combination of necessity and choice. To limit art to ‘things such as might happen’ is to forget Nussbaum’s own implicit lesson that human beings are not to be compartmentalized.

We can think of many Python sketches as examples, in a sense, of *narratives without emotion*—narratives where the absence of emotion leads to a kind of caricature of impersonality, as in the Niggerbaiter Sketch. One of the key points of the Niggerbaiter sketch has to do with the illogic of shaking a rattle at John Cleese and asking if he can talk. The *ooch-coochy-coo* baby talk problem is but an exaggeration of our own constant difficulties in modifying our discourse to meet the needs of a constantly varying audience. In this sketch, the superficiality of language goes hand in hand with a lack of emotion, since the real punch line of the text is perhaps not ‘things explode every day’ but ‘Don’t be so sentimental!’ Impersonality triumphs, we might say, when John Cleese gets his mother to admit about her best friend: ‘I didn’t really like her that much.’

Yet does this mean that the ‘emotions function cognitively’ here? It is true that my knowledge of the emotions is what enables me to get the jokes, and it is also the case that responding to the sketches involves re-adjusting this knowledge and reacting to the more or less improbable worlds that the Pythons present to me. But these are indeed improbable worlds, and if my previous knowledge helps me perceive their improbability, that should not count as a full-fledged form of cognition. It seems to me more important to insist on the notion of *community* that emerges from this hermeneutic experience than to claim that I am actually deriving new information from what is merely a skit.

#### **4 Towards a free hermeneutics of the sensory**

The tyranny of reference would have all art bow to the necessity of representation; it would impose as an ideal the inclusion of recognizable human emotion in all works. At its worst, it turns moral criticism into narrow-mindedness, for it uses concrete emotive criteria in a political agenda. If we judge the Python sketches or Kapoor’s untitled works from the standpoint of high moral seriousness—a position steeped in emotion—then obviously we will find their art lacking, indeed, we will find it worse than impersonal. Once we reject the tyranny of reference, however, and accept, alongside other forms of interpretation, a free hermeneutics of the sensory, we no longer need to base art on the specific emotion. For

both emotions without narratives and narratives without true emotion can help produce the kind of community I have in mind.

The undeniable importance of the emotions is simply the result of the inescapable fact that all mental life is inherently subjective. Everything we do and everything we are is embodied in our own personal phenomenology; there is no getting away from our separate individuality and feeling. As Matthew Arnold put it in his poem 'To Marguerite': 'We mortal millions live *alone*.' But perhaps I should give the last word on art and emotion not to Arnold or the Pythons but to Gerard Manley Hopkins and to another, younger, Margaret:

Spring and fall  
to a young child  
Margaret, are you grieving  
Over Goldengrove unleaving?  
Leaves, like the things of man, you  
With your fresh thoughts care for, can  
you?  
Ah! as the heart grows older  
It will come to such sights colder  
By and by, nor spare a sigh  
Though worlds of wanwood leafmeal lie;  
And yet you *will* weep and know why.  
Now no matter, child, the name:  
Sorrow's springs are the same.  
Nor mouth had, no nor mind, expressed  
What heart heard of, ghost guessed:  
It is the blight man was born for,  
It is Margaret you mourn for.<sup>1</sup>

Like all emotion, emotion in art is always *our* emotion. When leaves drop, or things explode, it is always Margaret that we mourn for. In our common hermeneutic endeavours, however, in the communities we forge by means of those forms of life we strive to share (such as jokes or works of art), we do manage to transcend, at times, the isolation of our individual grieving.

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1. G.M. Hopkins, *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. W.H. Gardner & N.H. MacKenzie (Oxford: O.U.P., 1970) 88.



# Towards a Technical Eternity? Neo-Romanticism in Darren Almond's Photography

Philipp Horst

The work of Darren Almond circles around time and space, history and geography, subjectivity and objectivity, perception and emotion. With his ongoing series *Fullmoon Photographs* Almond has developed an artistic position that is at the same time rooted in a tradition of (painterly) Romanticism and part of a Post-Modern photographic discourse. His artistic voice thus oscillates between individual, subjective emotionality and the technical qualities of his medium. Almond aesthetically and efficiently utilises e.g. the exposure time of his camera to manipulate and seduce the viewer. On his quest for the adequate image, he travels to remote places that become symbolical for the passing of time, but also for freedom and loneliness—both central aspects of Romanticism. He combines elements of a found visual and political landscape and the result is a photograph, itself a step towards turning the subject matter into myth. His photographs negotiate between the power of the visual image and the common view that our perception e.g. of landscape is much more determined by what we know—history, mythology—than by visual stimuli.

In Darren Almond's art, the concepts of time and space, history and geography, subjectivity and objectivity, perception and emotion all play a major role. Having said that one could conclude that his work focuses on nearly everything. And indeed, far from being arbitrary or accidental, Almond's art is unique and universal—he bridges the gap between Post-Modern Appropriation Art,<sup>1</sup> photography and the Romanticist world

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1. Stefan Römer, 'Appropriation Art,' *DuMonts Begriffslexikon zur zeitgenössischen Kunst*, ed. Hubertus Butin (Köln, 2002).

order. Almond was shortlisted for the 2005 Turner Prize and was on show at the London Tate Gallery in early 2006. The curators there argue that 'he produces works which have universal as well as personal resonances', and Almond adds that his work shows 'the vulnerability of yourself against time.'<sup>1</sup> His most recent exhibition—*Time 2 Kill*—opened in January 2006 in Berlin.<sup>2</sup>

In the context of a neo-expressionist, highly subjective and colourful Albert Oehlen painting, Almond shows an oversized digital clock. It is the perception of time on which he focuses. With this work he contrasts scientific measurement with emotional and subjective perception. Additionally, the digital clock is also a symbol of 'vanitas,' mercilessly showing us the passing of time. I will try to show how Almond visualises vulnerability and time, how he playfully undermines concepts of personal and national identity. All that is carried out with his photo camera: and therefore in a medium that regardless of today's omnipresent and extremely powerful visual culture still carries the decadent atmosphere of formal experimentation.<sup>3</sup>

Although Almond works in many different media—among them 'sculpture, film and real-time satellite broadcast'—I will concentrate on his photography.<sup>4</sup> One of his artistic aims seems to be the investigation of the relationship between a subjective and emotional perception of nature on the one hand and the tempting objectivity still postulated by contemporary forms of technology on the other hand. In our case this is represented by the camera. However, the ambivalence of his subject matter becomes immediately clear once one looks more closely at his work. I will try to show that his strategy is one of seductive manipulation. He is, so to speak, subversively straightforward, mixing old and new, subjective and objective, blurring the boundaries of both the genres and the actual images.

Photography has long lost its Modernist aura of authenticity. Digital manipulation is at the core of many a contemporary photographers' work. In most cases this digital manipulation is not clear at all—think of Jeff Wall's combination of narrative and scenic choreography and digital alteration—but can surely be distilled by diligent scrutiny, as with e.g. Andreas Gursky's photos. His images of the river Rhine are, like Almond's photographs, both an adoration—or appropriation—of an art historical pretext and a step back towards the Romantic concept of sub-

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1. [www.tate.org.uk/britain/turnerprize/history/almond.htm](http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/turnerprize/history/almond.htm)

2. Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin, *Time 2 Kill*, January 14-March 11 2006, cf. [www.max-hetzler.com](http://www.max-hetzler.com) 13 January 2006.

3. cf. Candida Höfer's work, which puts a strong emphasis on aesthetised formality.

4. [www.tate.org.uk/britain/turnerprize/history/almond.htm](http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/turnerprize/history/almond.htm)

limity. This example opens up the dialogue between the highly influential Romanticist world order and contemporary art. Andreas Gursky does not choose the famous part of the upper Rhine valley, the Loreley, where the Romantics were, or the parts associated with Richard Wagner's *Rheingold*. Instead he looks for what is right on his doorstep, the lower part, the so called 'Niederrhein' around Gurskys hometown Düsseldorf. The artist smoothes his image digitally, so that the degree of abstraction becomes prominent. It echoes Mark Rothko's paintings or other All-Over structures by like-minded American Expressionists—and what did Rothko do if not translate Romanticism's latent fear of the sublime into post war American abstraction. In a more culturally based reading Gursky also shows how contemporary society sees and treats nature, that is, for example, as a means of transportation, always ready for alteration if needed. Although the image and the content are not 'real' in the old sense, we can all easily imagine such a river, flattened by urban development, and it is maybe only the alert who would recognise the digital manipulation. In the first place we tend to see the commodification but also the Romantic stylisation of nature. Just think of Wordsworth's famous poem about 'London.' Yet in Gursky's image the stylisation has the opposite function.

Almond's perspective combines this (Post-Modern) manipulative and subversive idea with a 'traditional,' pre-Modernist, Romantic notion. Romanticism believed in the individual artistic genius, the subjective expression of personal emotion. In a manner of speaking the artists believed to be chosen to communicate their personal experience to their fellowmen and considered their lives to be somehow representative. In order to show the growing alienation of modern society as a result of the ever increasing significance of the industries, nature was chosen as a 'concept' to idealise God and man alike. Darren Almond is obviously conscious of all this, and he takes up this thread in theory and practice. And he is not alone in doing so. In 2005, a whole exhibition in Frankfurt's Schirn Kunsthalle was devoted to *Wunschwelten—Ideal Worlds, New Romanticism in Contemporary Art* and showed among others Peter Doig and David Thorpe.<sup>1</sup> The theoretical aspect of Almond's pieces lies in his conscious and explicit quotation of art history. I am thinking of C.D. Friedrich, but also of Flemish painting. This technique is in itself a Romantic one:

[ . . . ] Romanticism foregrounded the image's emphasis on what the image presents, how it functions and its expectations of the viewer. [ . . . ]

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1. Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt a.M., 12.05.05-28.08.05.

[sometimes it was] a game of duplication and multiplication, of the recurrence of an image in one, several or many others.<sup>1</sup>

Let's have a closer look at some of his images to see how this is realised in practice.

With his ongoing series of the *Fullmoon* photographs, impressively on show in Düsseldorf's museum for contemporary art K21 in 2005, he develops an artistic position that is at the same time rooted in a tradition of—especially painterly—Romanticism and part of a Post-Modern photographic discourse. Furthermore it takes up questions of national identity.<sup>2</sup> This becomes clear if one sees how the artist beautifully and efficiently utilises e.g. the exposure time of his camera to lull the viewer into a false security. In an interview in 2004 Almond comments on his moonlight pictures as follows: 'In order to polarise these landscapes within my own breadth of experience I track them down by moonlight to photograph, which by its nature demands the removal of the artificial, the man-made street lamp.'<sup>3</sup>

First of all I think we would agree that this is a 'beautiful' image of an impressive picturesque natural scenario. And without doubt, it is this cliché that Almond looks for. Like the Swiss photographic double act Fischli/Weiss, Almond takes up common notions of the beautiful in nature and presents them against the grain: Where Fischli/Weiss use a Neo-Cubist fade-over technique to counter their stereotypical snapshots, Almond's approach is possibly more subtle. The image confuses us, but though the term irritation is usually used in a rather negative way, Almond's irritation is somehow comfortable, almost conciliatory. His general image of nature—and let's not forget that it is Almond's very personal perspective—is tinged with a notion of myth and mystery. Formally, this is expressed by an inherent heterogeneity: while certain parts of the photograph are brilliantly clear—certainly the result of a prolonged exposure time—others are strangely blurred. Thus the image loses a certain degree of unity, while it becomes at the same time, well, more radiant. What is clearly most striking is the fact that all photographs are taken by night (though I still doubt the 'normal' viewer immediately gets it)—and they look like weird day time images. Almond turns the notion of time upside down, another strategy of confusion. The sea is illuminated by a

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1. Rainer Metzger 'The Abyss of Images', *Ideal Worlds, New Romanticism in Contemporary Art*, eds. Max Hollein, and Martina Weinhart (Frankfurt: Hatje Cantz, 2005) 57.

2. Kunstsammlung NRW K21 ed., *Fifteen Minute Moon* (Köln, 2004).

3. Darren Almond in an interview with Julian Heynen published as an insert in Kunstsammlung NRW K21.

full moon which is shining as brightly as the sun at high noon, while the sea itself is black. It is a certain spirit Almond wants to evoke, a feeling between the uncanny and the familiar. The result echoes the atmosphere of Magic Realism. Magic Realism's idea is founded on the subtle combination of realistic and super-natural phenomena. One of its most prominent representatives is E.T.A. Hoffman whose fantastic tales are related in the down-to-earth tone of confessional journalism. Hoffman, like C.D. Friedrich, is a key figure of Romanticism. Like Almond's pictures his stories pretend to be what they are not: clear factual accounts. Magic Realism, according to art critic and artist Franz Roh (1925), faithfully portrays the exterior of an object, and as a consequence the spirit, or magic, of the object reveals itself. 'This [art offers a] calm admiration of the magic of being.'<sup>1</sup> Without taking the analogy too far, I think Darren Almond's series *Fullmoon* takes up this thread and combines the obvious with the obscure.

The image *Channel* was taken in England, on the coast. The significance of England's geography has always played an important role in the formation of a national identity. The fact that the nation(s) is/are surrounded by water was not regarded as a limitation or isolation, but as something genuinely positive.<sup>2</sup>

In the same way as the English cliffs, the limestone cliffs of Rügen are a symbol of national identity. Ever since Caspar David Friedrich painted them around 1818 they have stood for the glorification of the native German soil. Even today they symbolise Romanticism's concept of a pantheist adoration of nature for countless tourists.

Now how does the meaning change if an (English) photographer takes a picture at full moon which due to a technical finesse looks like a daytime image? I have already mentioned his visual and semantic strategy of reversal. Maybe one reading suggests that we have to get rid of a limited, i.e. 'insular' concept of national identity. In a globalised society characterised by individual mobility and the rapid transfer of information, the concept 'nation' has come under attack and with it all that was once believed to be 'national identity.' Back to the image.

In contrast to Friedrich's painting Almond's image is without people. In Friedrich's painting the people watch the cliffs and the sea in awe—a pantheist way of communicating with God. Almond's image is devoid of mankind. This is not surprising as it was taken by night. But the implica-

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1. Franz Roh, 'Magic Realism: Post-Expressionism' (1925), *Magical Realism*, eds. L. P. Zamora and W. B. Faris (Durham: Duke UP, 1995) 15-32.

2. Possibly also one layer of meaning of Almond's 2004 aluminium plate *One Way* alludes to this. It consists of a plate that is mounted to the wall, a blue background and silver letters.

tion resulting from this is a different one: where the grandeur of natural beauty in Friedrich's version can also be seen as a stage for the performance of various representatives of contemporary society, Almond merely shows the rocks and the sea, self-sufficiently. At the same time, one cannot overlook the almost dominating black frame, the shadows, or the lack of light at night. It is only a glimpse we get, an eerie glimpse into the past. 'The dark of night generates solitude as no one is around so the images themselves reveal a certain emptiness of human spirit. For me they provide a point of entry into memory.'<sup>1</sup> His curators at London's White Cube gallery write that 'Almond is known for his [ . . . ] photographs that reconfigure ideas of time and place and our subjective and emotional understanding of it.'<sup>2</sup> Indeed, what we have seen is a rendering of our emotional understanding. The images are visually so strong that one cannot but react emotionally. As a result they enter the intertextual cycle and so change their (art) historical pretext.

If we go back to the photographs taken in England, we see that the 'darker' aspects of the sea are also addressed. In reality both threatening and sheltering, the sea in Almond's picture is depicted as a plain silvery surface, reflecting perfectly the diffuse light of the moon. See how the coastline reaches into the water as if to claim more land. A stereotype, for sure, but not without a break, both semantic and visual: on the top right corner of the sea, on the horizon, we see a (relatively!) long white line. This is a light on a travelling boat and a symbol for the passing of time. Additionally, it accentuates abstract qualities that can be found in most of Almond's pictures. This is the visual caesura, the tiny confusion that has the potential to change the whole image. The semantic break lies in the redefinition of a whole time frame. Taking for granted that the line is not a technical error that occurred during the processing, it represents a moving object. Admittedly, if we assumed that the exposure time was 'normal' then the object would have to be extremely fast. Both readings are ambivalent. The speed of the object or the span of the exposure time, both undermine our usual perception.

Possibly the Antarctic continent is just as myths-tic as the English coastline. Almond's fascination with this continent may lie in the natural abstractness of everything, in the isolation and coldness. But it's more than just an aesthetic affinity that makes Almond work here:

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1. Darren Almond in an interview with Julian Heynen published as an insert in *Kunst-sammlung NRW K21*.

2. [www.whitecube.com](http://www.whitecube.com)

The Antarctic and the Arctic are locations already imprinted in a collective consciousness as the 'ends of the earth' and as the last pure wildernesses. They appear abstract, free from social and political formations, kind of a-cultural 'states of nature' and as such they might just preserve a utopic possibility.<sup>1</sup>

Interestingly enough in his most abstract photographs—images built up by endless shades of whites and blues—Almond himself sees a 'utopic possibility.' In her essay entitled 'The World must be made Romantic—On the Discovery of an Attitude' Martina Weinhart, one of the curators of the above-mentioned Schirn exhibition, reflects on the effects of contemporary artists working with Romantic ideas and comes to the conclusion that, '[t]he result [are] images of experience between utopia and melancholy.'<sup>2</sup>

On his quest for the adequate image, Almond travels to remote places which become symbolical of the passing of time, but also of freedom and loneliness—again both central aspects of Romanticism (and of the concept of national identity!). He combines elements of a found visual and political landscape, and the result is a photograph that is one step in the transformation of the subject matter into myth.

Darren Almond's photographs negotiate between the power of the visual image and the common view that our perception of e.g. landscape is much more determined by what we know—history, mythology—than by visual stimuli. Naturally abstracted landscapes, we have seen the Antarctic, or mythologically associative culturescapes (England / Germany / the Netherlands) are contrasted to form aesthetic and artistic antipodes. In his pictures Almond manages to combine the strong notion of individual feeling expressed in his intertextual allusions with the contemporary sense of and for history. In many cases his is a strategy of citation. Consciously—and we may suspect tongue-in-cheek—Darren Almond plays with our visual subconscious. 'Our'? He raises doubts about the fixation of national identities and formulates a political utopia.

The aim of my paper was to extract pre-Modernist key issues of beauty, transcendence and nature from his work, while at the same time contextualising Almond's position within the discourse of 21<sup>st</sup> century photography. The focus has been on the analysis and comparison of exemplary pieces that illustrate Almond's successful strategy of combining impersonality on the one hand and, paradoxically, an affinity with introverted express-

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1. [www.whitecube.com](http://www.whitecube.com)

2. Martina Weinhart 'The World must be made Romantic—On the Rediscovery of an Attitude', (Hollein and Weinhart).

iveness on the other. The phrase 'introverted expressiveness' is a contradiction in terms and, in being one, perfectly suited to coming to terms with the ambivalences of Almond's photography. The images are introverted, because they are tranquil, lonely and meditatively isolated. They are the representation of a subjective vision of an artist working in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And they are expressive because in their provocative simplicity they trigger deep emotions. The twentieth-century Expressionists utilised nature to express their own feelings. Through their art they channeled contemporaneous tensions. Almond on his part provides an escapist vision of both nature and art, or, as Weinhart put it: 'The photograph becomes an abyss where one falls into the otherness of reality.' (Weinhart 36)

# And Still Pursuing Impossible Desires. The Lives and Works of the Young British Artists

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Young British Artists have applied the traditionally literary notion of ‘self-fashioning’ to their work, making their personalities a central aspect of their styles. Yet, while Damien Hirst adopts industrial techniques in a bid to turn his name into a dehumanized trademark, Tracey Emin exposes the most intimate details of her life on film, monotypes, quilts or in books. The apparent discrepancy between these two approaches signals the almost plastic way in which the movement has persistently presented biographies which take on the role of performative identities or even media.

## 1 Margate story

*Strangeland*, Tracey Emin’s recently published second foray into literature, has on many occasions been presented as her autobiography. It follows *Exploration of the Soul* which already purported to be the story of her life, but was printed as a limited edition which seemed to confine this first book to the world of art, making it an artist’s book when *Strangeland* is destined to a wide audience. In a recent article in the *Observer*, Emin stresses the fact that her effort is definitely not a memoir, calling it quite simply a book, which its mass circulation seems to confirm.<sup>1</sup> *Strangeland* in fact compiles a whole series of what we could call ‘scripts’ extracted from the artworks she has produced over the years. The texts had

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1. Geoffrey Beattie, ‘On the Couch with Tracey Emin,’ London: *The Observer Magazine*, Sunday January 15, 2006: 9.

originally been part of videos, neon signs, installations including some hand-written pieces, or quilts, all basing their subject-matters and contents on actual events from Emin's eventful life. While the book indeed tells a story—a very gritty one charting her life journey through her Margate childhood and the specifically British decay the seaside resort embodies, racism, sexual violence and solace, abortions and working under the influence—its stuff is that of art, all these episodes being elements extracted from her artworks. Is the book, referred to as a material object, then another artwork completing her production? Or does it serve as a condensed retrospective of her art (Emin had already called her first show with Jay Jopling 'My Major Retrospective,' fearing her career might be short-lived). The second option suggests that the essence of her art would lie in an autobiographical narrative, one of an extreme nature, her subject-matter being the anecdotal, which is always too precise, when her friend Sarah Lucas, in association with whom she has worked on many projects, seems to opt for the cliché, which is always too general. More than that, her life and her self being the essence of her art, they allow for a book version of her story, in other words, for a scattering of the medium, a medium which is dispensed with to make way for the life of the artist.

And yet, on certain pages, some typographical aspects give the lie to such a simple substitution. Part of the text has been printed as a handwritten trace, and we recognize in these scribbles-cum-reflexive-pauses-in-the-narrative the reproduction of famous works by Emin (can they therefore be considered as illustrations, even though they also appear in textual form, or are they merely typographical eccentricities?). Why is some of the text given in a more artistic form, which is also a more individual form (handwriting appearing as an index of the artist's presence, and yet merely *appearing* as such)? These textual images or pictorial texts confirm the identity between narrative and art and in a way justify *Strangeland*: Emin's life makes up her art, the latter's condensation into book form happens naturally. Still the works these handwritten sentences imitate (it was not decided to photograph them, nor to transcribe them, so the verb *imitate* seems fitting), themselves imitate handwriting. This is quite obvious in her neon signs. But is also true of Emin's textual art: while her short texts and doodles seem the immediate and direct renditions of her emotions, felt or recollected, the technique she uses to create them is that of the monotype, a one-off engraving process which is in fact mediated: the text and image are first engraved backwards before they are printed on the paper. The reversal of handwriting in this technique implies a projective approach as to the eventual result, making the continuity between emotion and work only an impression (with impressed ink).

One of Emin's most famous works is entitled *My Bed* (1998). And indeed, it is her bed, and yet this is true only as far as we are using the *is* of artistic identification rather than the *is* of essential identification. It is her bed as much as Mona Lisa is a seated woman with a wry smile, no matter that she actually used her own bed and the contents of her room to create this piece. It is supposed to have been assembled after Emin suffered a bout of depression during which she could not leave her bed. Far from being a ready-bed, i.e. indifferent, all the elements of the installation are meaningful in autobiographical terms: whether the bottles, condoms, stained knickers or pregnancy tests. Still in terms of autobiography, *My Bed's* previous Tokyo and New York exhibitions (1998-99) had a real noose hanging overhead. Thankfully for Emin, when the piece was presented at the Tate for the 1999 Turner Prize show, the noose was removed out of her life, she said, and removed from the artwork. With this transformation, Emin makes a work which is time-specific rather than site-specific, eliciting embarrassment just as much as sadness for its facile symbolism (the shackled suitcase), but also establishing Emin as the International Woman and artist she claims to be.<sup>1</sup>

The autobiographical nature of *My Bed* suggests the crudeness of personal emotions. Yet, the individuality of the artist as suffering woman becomes the stuff of art and its extreme crudeness is kept at arm's length by the introduction of pictorial allusions. On the makeshift nightstand, there is a polaroid of Emin, neatly placed so as to serve as traditional signature at the bottom of a painting. Emin smiles, admitting to the unashamedly personal content of her installation, but her eyes are hidden behind a pair of dark glasses which both confirm her status as one of Britain's art and media stars and contradict the possibility of the artistic exhibition of an unmediated personality.

## **2 Gavin Turk by Gavin Turk**

When Gavin Turk makes a show of himself in his sculptures, he is each time contradicting the originality of his work, one which is due to the individuality of the artist's person, even if only at the level of DNA identification, by copying other artists. It was in fact to deal head-on with the notion of plagiarism that Turk chose, in 1992, to appropriate, by copying it, Piero Manzoni's signature (*Piero Manzoni*). As a seal of individuality,

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1. Many of her quilts feature this proclamation ('I am International Woman'). The International Hotel was in fact the one run by her parents in Margate and in which she spent her childhood.

a signature plays a major role in art. By reinterpreting Manzoni's themes and motifs, reprising the shape of his egg and of his signature (the first being the symbol of artistic originality, the second, the stamp of this originality), Turk was confronting the problem of the artist's individuality while spectacularly effacing his own. If contemporary art is based on individual gestures, is copying the most individual gestures of all, i.e. the signature, still performing the artistic miracle of being art while displacing the locus of its originality? Alex Farquharson (co-curator of the Paris exhibition 'Le Voyage intérieur'), when writing an article for the catalogue *Gavin Turk, Collected Works 1994-1998*, referred to the miracle of imitation, although of a somewhat tackier, televisual sort, by entitling his essay 'Tonight, Manzoni, I'm Going to Be Gavin Turk.' The reference is of course to the gimmick of the famous TV programme 'Stars in their Eyes,' in which virtual unknowns (except in the case of a 'Celebrity Stars in their Eyes' special) become, during one song and after a complete make-over, their favourite idols. Over the years, as he was becoming a prominent yBa, Turk has had to adapt his artistic practice to the fact that his own signature was becoming more and more of a household name, no longer working as an unknown artist copying well-known artists but being part of the group of (very) well-known artists, therefore more 'Celebrity Stars in their Eyes' than mere 'Stars in their Eyes.'

Turk chose Manzoni quite carefully. The Italian artist was indeed capable of creating art even in the form of a group of signed naked women. This authenticating mark generously affixed by Manzoni has become an artistic motif for Turk, who then went on to create a series of his own signature. The reflexive, even tautological, character of his work appears quite clearly in *One Thousand, Two Hundred and Thirty Four Eggs* (1997). The medium is quintessentially original artist Manzoni's, but the eggs in which the signature is inscribed are only empty shells with holes that face the spectators pointing to an absence and the emptying of a symbol. The signature, the artist's identity, appears here as a secondary aesthetics, which in *Unoriginal Signature* (1996), is anachronistic. Here, the name Gavin Turk is composed on the wall with natural sponges of a Klein Blue colour. Both the reference and the medium refer to Turk's capacity to culturally absorb. But it is also an artwork and a signature all in one name, what Derrida might have called 'une seule signature contresignée, une seule chose signant double.'<sup>1</sup>

By using the signature, Turk questions the presence or absence of the author, his disappearance behind the ultimate figure of the Artist, the

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1. Jacques Derrida, *Signéponge* (Paris: Seuil, 1988) 44.

archetypal individual person. This motif suggests three levels of meaning that construct this apparently common and straightforward sign. It is first a proper name, then a signature, and lastly, an artist's signature. A proper name is so specific to its referent that it becomes entropic. In her article 'In the Name of Picasso', Rosalind Krauss suggests this: 'The proper name completes, exhausts itself in an act of reference.'<sup>1</sup> Just like Turk's empty eggs, this name is an empty one, almost simply a deictic. Krauss denounces the people for whom the artist's name (and not just any artist, but Picasso himself) has come to supersede the art. This name, which is only a reference, becomes for Turk an empty artwork. Thierry de Duve has explained this link between art and name in 'L'Art était un nom propre.' In this article, de Duve shows how the word art does not refer to a logical concept which would be common to all things we call art, and yet it is a proper name, the result of a nomination which is a judgement call and which is a sort of baptism: 'De même que Pierre, Paul ou Jacques, ou Catherine, Françoise ou Nathalie, le nom d'art est un nom propre.'<sup>2</sup> De Duve however uses this sentence in the past tense as a title for his article, making this norm a historical one: 'Alors qu'elle [Modernity] procédait d'un usage régulateur de l'idée de l'art comme nom propre, elle a cru ou voulu procéder d'un usage conceptuel ou spéculatif du nom de l'art comme idée.' (de Duve 60) If the name of art is no longer at stake, it can be dissected like an archaeological object. Gavin Turk's name becoming a work by Gavin Turk refers to this break in art which, as de Duve has shown, used to function as a proper name, its identity subservient to judgement and taste, and has been subjected to its idea, decreed by law rather than by baptism. Turk's name is an anachronistic artwork, torn between definition and incarnation. Still, it is as signature that Turk relentlessly uses his own name. A signature is both an image and a word. As a validating seal, it is a sign of identity, but which identity is Turk referring to: himself or his work? The identity he submits is that of his work with the work of older artists as well as its consubstantiality with its own signed authentication. In her book on the history of signatures, Béatrice Fraenkel has defined this word-image has privileging figure over writing and looking over reading. What's more, a signature is a performative sign and not simply an index pointing to presence. It establishes one fundamental distinction: 'celle qui sépare le corps de chair et d'os, qui produit

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1. Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985) 26.

2. Thierry de Duve, *Au Nom de l'art: Pour une archéologie de la modernité* (Paris: Minuit, 1989) 43.

le signe-signature, et le corps cérémoniel que produit le signe en retour'.<sup>1</sup> A signature produces as much as it is produced. Turk exhibits this tension: the relic of what was never there, the performance of a disappearance, the pretence of originality. And indeed, the artist's signature is not any signature. Béatrice Fraenkel signals a watershed in the history of both signature and painting: 'Pour les peintres, une étape irréversible est franchie lorsque la signature passe du cadre sculpté dans le champ pictural lui-même.' (Fraenkel, 171) This is the moment when perspective is contradicted and the illusion of art lifted, as well as the moment of fusion between artwork and signature, the latter being the stamp of its uniqueness, as well as that of the uniqueness of the artist who created it. The artist's signature is a sign on the canvas while remaining somewhat on the margins because it signals its completion. It is this seal of the uniqueness of a work which also points to the end of its production which Turk isolates and substitutes to the work itself by using all sorts of media. He thus suggests the possibility of moving beyond the dematerialization of art by materialising the tensions of contemporary art, the contradiction of its originality and a questioning of origins which recalls the eggs borrowed from Manzoni about which we can wonder if they came before or after the hen that laid them: does the artist create the work or does the work create the artist?

### 3 Signing on the dots

Thomas Crow has signalled how some processes aimed at erasing the artist's intervention in his or her work are very often characteristic of the most famous artists. The media persona of artists in this case becomes a function of the degree of stylization of the work:

Actual anonymity and self-effacement have not, in fact, been much encouraged in recent artistic practice. The sort of photographic and appropriation procedures that promise an effacement of the authorial self are invariably recouped through other media of publicity and critical attention, so that daring gestures can always be linked to a well-known individual. The sheer efficiency of these moves, the way that an artist's minimal interventions can garner substantial attention and rewards, inspire fascinated admiration for the unique creative personality behind them. The less self-expression has been valued, the more the self of the artist—from Warhol to Kruger to Koons to Hirst—has come to loom over the work.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Béatrice Fraenkel, *La Signature: Genèse d'un signe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992) 185.

2. Thomas Crow, *Modern Art in the Common Culture* (New Haven: Yale P) 101.

And indeed über-yBa Damien Hirst has always affirmed he saw himself as a brand: the organization of his work into series bears witness to this. His spot paintings can be seen as one of his signature works, adorning a mini as if he was co-branding the car under the tag Spot Mini. The spots are implied as an endless series which has come to constitute the backdrop for the rest of his production (one aided by a large group of assistants). And these other works also constitute series with characteristic forms, themes and motifs: death, medicine, animals. And even when a new theme is introduced, it is done with so much panache and sensation that the work is worth not so much for itself but for the person of the artist overshadowing it. Does the exploration of the series and of signature works therefore boil down to subjectivity without expressionism? Expression does appear but in an overwhelming way: the deliberate pomposity of the titles Hirst attaches to his works command some specific, extreme reactions of fear, anger, melancholy or amazement which are so outrageous they cannot be taken at face value: *I'll Love You Forever* (1994), *Loss of Memory is Worse Than Death* (1994), *The Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991), *And Still Pursuing Impossible Desires* (1995). Does this mean that the contradiction of impersonality in Hirst's work is conducted at the price of true emotion? In other words, are the yBas' tactics cynical?

I do not think we can accept this hypothesis, which has sometimes taken the form of an accusation against Young British Art. The equation linking personality and impersonality, emotion and mock-emotions in Young British Art is not resolved in emptiness, but in a movement, a motion, a commotion, a sensation. If the medium is cannibalized by the presence of the artist, does it mean that the latter is not an artist because they have no art. This is contradicted by the fact that Young British Art has regularly and from the outset caused a commotion, a reaction, and also because it has instantly become iconic in its country of origin as well as the world over. Ads have appropriated it, fashion has, as well as television: Gillian Wearing's photographs of people holding signs and videos of adults with children's voices have been made into VW and Evian ads, Hirst's spots adorn Missoni and Eva Herzigova swimming costumes, Tracey Emin has designed bags for Longchamp and modelled for Vivienne Westwood, Sam Taylor-Wood collaborates with the Prada foundation and Jim Lambie designed the floors for Marc Jacobs' show at the Petit Palais during Paris Fashion Week. There is nothing strange in the fact that Young British Art should in this way be associated with fashion: the fashion world has realized that Young British Art represented perfectly the here and now which it is also about. What yBa has managed to do is to

be instantly in touch with the now, to have a synchronicity with it which has made redundant any idea of a context or background against which it should be detached. In spite of their very material presence, their works collide with society, they anticipate the desires and fears of society rather than simply copy its trends and, adopting the same footing, they create a resonance which is yBa's inherent and obvious rhythm.

By displacing its medium (Hirst's sculptures as painting, Emin's books as sculptures, Gary Hume's painting as ready-mades, the Chapman Brothers' graphic installations as conceptual art, more generally, making society in the nineties and at the turn of the century its medium), and displacing the relationship between the artist and their work, yBa transforms a chronological questions, that of contemporaneity, into a spatial one. While, in his seminal essay 'The Artworld,' Arthur Danto defined the possibility of American Pop as having to do with a precise moment, both historical and theoretical, yBa has invented a way of occupying space, a dissemination of its influence which still manages to provide the museum, gallery (and patron) with objects rather than performances or site-specific art, while pretending not to be threatening its walls.

Somewhat more recent contemporary British art, that of the noughties, has sometimes appeared as a reaction against the movement, created by artists presenting themselves as more mature people with clear political preoccupations: Simon Starling, maybe also Jeremy Deller. Yet it seems that reactions against the yBas are just that, somewhat reactionay approaches to the movement which overlook the fact that any reaction to it would have been intended by it, a necessary follow-up to this moment of absolute empathy with the world, and that being self-engrossed must be interpreted as a plastic posture, one in which Tracey Emin is artist, model, subject-matter and medium, not so as to make art disappear, but so as to set it into motion.

# The Clinical Emotions Of Damien Hirst

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Damien Hirst's artworks are often deemed impersonal and violent; they favour settings and materials that are usually associated with impersonality, and flaunt a seemingly never-failing affection for a formal clarity which is often interpreted as a disgust for the intimate. This paper will examine several works of art in a new light, endeavouring to show that most often the acknowledged violence of Hirst's ready-mades is superficial and linked to initial perceptual shock, then leading to some very strong emotional chain-reaction on the part of the spectator. However, a closer examination will enable us to study Hirst's most subtle manner of using the intensity of colour, acute pathos, or playfully simplified representations (instead of blatantly mimetic ones) in order either to subdue or enhance emotional reactions in different ways.

In 1995, the *New York Times* reviewed an exhibition featuring some Young British Artists and titled it 'Not a Drop of British Reserve.'<sup>1</sup> This is obviously what first comes to mind after getting to see from closer the cut up cows of Hirst, the inside-out casts of furniture by Rachel Whiteread, the self-portrait in blood of Marc Quinn, or the inner views of Mona Hatoum's body. No British restraint here, if the words British and restraint have ever been able to be juxtaposed meaningfully from the twentieth century on. I will concentrate on the work of the 'Young British Artist' Damien Hirst, the *enfant terrible* of contemporary British arts, in order to determine the different influences to be recognized in his works. It seems that many of Hirst's sculptures from the 90s display a unique blend of impersonality and coldness, which paradoxically triggers intense emotion on the part of the spectator. Hirst has always claimed his personal debt to minimalist artists, who excelled in showing that art relies first and

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1. Carol Kino, 'Art: Not One Drop of British Reserve,' *The New York Times*, Oct 22th, 1995, 45.

foremost on its own materiality, trusting Stella's famous aphorism 'what you see is what you see,'<sup>1</sup> and nothing more. We will show that Hirst has surely learnt some lessons from the Minimalists, favouring represented settings and materials that are willingly associated with impersonality, and flaunting a seemingly never-failing affection for a formal clarity which verges on a disgust for the intimate, the private, the personal. However, under these very sleek appearances, Hirst acknowledges that his art deals with violence and fear, and that what he favours above all is what he calls 'the violence of inanimate objects.' 'British reserve' is perhaps not blatant here, but Hirst's art is nothing but a lament over time and decay, a post-modern descendant of the well-known tradition of *vanitas*, and as such it finds its place in a dignified artistic institution praising rigour and self-restraint, if not asceticism and humility, two concepts that some media and art critics usually find very hard, even impossible to apply to Hirst.

## 1 Of pickled sharks and chemist counters: Damien Hirst's impersonal world

The general audience will generally agree that Hirst's main feat is the appropriation of the Minimalist box, first turned into a tank, a gigantic aquarium containing formaldehyde allowing for the preservation of decaying corpses, and later into an air-filled vitrine establishing a safety barrier between spectator and object, even if public hygiene is not the main reason for its presence anymore (it was for some early works). Damien Hirst has many times acknowledged his debt to Carl Andre,<sup>2</sup> and he stated in an interview that 'I'd say a Judd box exudes more health & life than I ever felt.'<sup>3</sup> One of Hirst's most famous works, which received the Turner prize in 1995, *Mother and Child Divided*, famously reproduces the simple parallelepipedic form whose symbolical value was dear to Donald

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1. Frank Stella, 'My painting is based on the fact that only what can be seen there is there. It really is an object. Any painting is an object and anyone who gets involved in enough in this finally has to face up the objectness of whatever it is that he's doing. He is making a thing. All that should be taken for granted. [ . . . ] all I want anyone to get out of my paintings, and all I ever get out of them, is the fact that you can see the whole idea without any confusion . . . what you see is what you see.' In 'Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, Frank Stella, New Nihilism or New Art? Interview with Bruce Glaser' (1964) in James Meyer, *Minimalism* (London: Phaidon, 2000) 199.

2. Damien Hirst, Gordon Burn, *On The Way to Work* (London: Faber, 2001) 62.

3. See 'Time of the Signs', an interview with David Bowie in the British Quarterly *Modern Painters*, Autumn 1997. Full text available on this link: [dh.ryoshuu.com/press/1997bowied.htm](http://dh.ryoshuu.com/press/1997bowied.htm)

Judd, Sol Le Witt & Robert Morris. This time the main difference lies in the fact that the boxes are sealed and full, their content obviously meant to be seen through the gigantic panels of glass that constitute them. The same visual repetition of the white armature in *Some Comfort Gained from The Acceptance of the Inherent Lies in Everything* underlines the similarity of all the objects contained, which are parts which originally belonged to the same body, that of a cow. Thus, the minimalistic box paradoxically underlines the former and lost homogeneity of what it contains, and at the same time the newly acquired peculiarities of its artificially modified natural content. The use of glass (as one of Hirst's favourite material) is meaningful, as far as it reveals and tantalises the spectator by showing something unattainable: at the same time the use of glass as a container of something else than air is a departure from the minimalistic credos of artists like Judd or Morris, since it alludes to many things beyond its literal presence, or its existence in the physical world (a cube becomes thus much more than the sum of its angles, to use Morris's expression<sup>1</sup>). Glass thus becomes the perfect way to reconcile the inside and the outside.<sup>2</sup> Glass reveals and protects at the same time: 'it's the most transparent thing ever to hide behind.' (Hirst and Burn 177) The vitrine seems to be one of the central elements of his art, used to demarcate space, to create and delineate boundaries between spectator and art, thus furthering impersonality ('I cannot walk away with the idea that people are just going to start fingering things and messing about with them' [Hirst and Burn 155]<sup>3</sup>); glass also highlights the intrinsic qualities of the object in a pure minimalistic spirit. Hirst's tanks also further the original gesture of minimal art that revealed the gallery as an artificially created space, sound- and colour-proof, an aseptic space detached from the real world. The spectator is particularly aware of moving through the installation place of the gallery or museum since he is invited to walk where he normally would *never* walk, that is through slices of a corpse for instance, in order better to admire the inner works of the body. It thus seems obvious that Hirst's world is an essentially modular world, a world that has absorbed the pedestal on which sculpture is usually presented in museums, the work of art having become its own translucent pedestal (see the apparent air pipes on top of some tanks, like *Love Lost* for instance),

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1. See Peter Lawson-Johnston, ed., *Robert Morris, The Mind/Body Problem* (New York, Guggenheim Foundation, 1994). We can also think of the *Untitled Box (for Standing)* made by Robert Morris in 1961, which was built to fit the dimensions of Morris's own body, like an open coffin never meant to completely enclose it.

2. This was one of Donald Judd's preoccupations. See Meyer 2000.

3. They add: 'You can keep [people] out that way, or you can keep them away with it being dangerous, like the glass pieces.'

a metamorphosis also wished by the Minimalists some 30 years before. Hirst's detractors have accused him of stealing Jeff Koons's idea of the vitrine, even if Hirst himself willingly admits his debt towards the latter, and even if his use of the box implies a further conceptualization of its role, as an absolutely necessary container, whose existence is often required by the very nature of the contents.

Hirst's use of symmetry also recalls one of the thoughts that animated the main Minimalists in the 70s, who sometimes disagreed on whether symmetry was a vector of sensuality or of austerity.<sup>1</sup> It seems that symmetry appeals to Hirst most emphatically, as his famous cut up animals and some of his installations show.<sup>2</sup> He indeed wonders 'what do you do if an animal is symmetrical? You cut it in half, and you can see what's on the inside and outside simultaneously. It's beautiful. The only problem is that it's dead.'<sup>3</sup> Another aspect that was emphasized by Minimalists and which is also adopted by Hirst is the large size of his sculptures, which tends to deprive the artistic experience from all possibly intimate quality, and which on the contrary favours impersonality and distance from the viewer. Robert Morris wrote in his *Notes on Sculpture* that 'the smaller the object, the closer one approaches it, and, therefore, it has correspondingly less of a spatial field in which to exist for the viewer. It is this necessary greater distance of the object in space from our bodies [ . . . ] that structures the non-personal or public mode [ . . . ] Much of the new sculpture makes a positive value of large size. It is one of the necessary conditions of avoiding intimacy.'<sup>4</sup> The scale of gigantic sculptures cast in bronze like *Hymn* or *Virgin Mother* use magnification as a means to become more impervious to any appropriation from the spectator, thus giving back the object its so-called 'natural' autonomy and character. The bigger the object, the more impersonal it will remain, and indeed in the case of Hirst there is seemingly often no real desire for appropriation, the spectator being often repelled by the nature of the exposed object, which often happens to be an actual dead subject. We also know thanks to Georges Didi-Huberman that these minimal and henceforth 'tautolo-

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1. On this subject, see (Meyer 197).

2. Damien Hirst, *Romance in the Age of Uncertainty*, exhibition catalogue (London: White Cube, 2003).

3. Damien Hirst, *No Sense of Absolute Corruption*. Catalogue of exhibition at Gagosian gallery (New York: Gagosian, 1996). Interview by Stuart Morgan.

4. 'Things of the monumental scale, then, include more terms necessary for their apprehension than objects smaller than the body, namely, the literal space in which they exist and the kinaesthetic demands placed upon the body [ . . . ] A simple form like a cube will necessarily be seen in a more public as its size increases from that of our own. It accelerates the valence of intimacy as its size decrease from that of one's own body [ . . . ].' In Robert Morris, *Notes on Sculpture, part II* (1966), in (Meyer 219).

gical' objects are always vaguely disquieting, reminding us of our own global human shape, but without ever making it completely anthropomorphic, that is, friendly.<sup>1</sup> Another common feature that Hirst partakes with his fellow minimalists is that there is often no real craftsmanship involved in his works, they are rarely made by the artist but they rely on industrial techniques (cutting the animals, cutting glass, assembling tanks). To saw a gigantic carcass in two perfectly trim parts is obviously beyond the powers of any human being unarmed with formidable tools. The mightiness of the task reinforces the feeling of impotence of the spectator, and impersonality thus can be seen as courting the industry. The famous and trendy 'spot paintings' (whose very pattern is indeed minimalistic) triggered many protests from the media when Hirst claimed that he didn't bother painting the spots himself but trusted his numerous assistants to do the ingratiating job; we can also think of the spin paintings as a typical example of producing paintings using exclusively mechanistic means, and thus showing the potential redundancy of craftsmanship. The spot paintings rely on the idea of infinite combinatorial patterns of colour (since not one single dot on a painting is the same exact colour as another one), thus underlining a limitlessness that paradoxically underlines our own conceptual limitations. It thus renders the work impersonal by comparison with our bounded imaginary capacities. In a similar vein, striving to make his sculptures awe-inspiring, breathtaking and thus uncongenial, Hirst is reluctant to explain how he builds them, or doesn't like photographers to take pictures before the show is on, as he feels that there must remain a certain amount of mystery and magic that will enthrall the audience.<sup>2</sup>

Impersonality is also conveyed by the subject matter of Hirst's art, which often features medical paraphernalia. Regimented displays of steel surgical instruments, immaculate counters, medical furniture thus produce an effect of asepsis, which is sometimes counterbalanced by some gory anatomical simulacra (*Pharmacy, Adam and Eve*). A quick glance at Hirst's arrays of steel utensils warns us ironically, because all in all it is rather comforting to think that we are introduced to this paraphernalia in the guise of art: the next time we might see them might be in a closer context. For once, we are given a chance to relish the impersonality of the process. The relationship between science and commerce is shrewdly

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1. See Georges Didi-Huberman, *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde* (Paris: Minuit, 1992).

2. 'I like the way it looks in the gallery at the end much more than i like anything else. [...] It's like: I'll do a magic trick, but I want it to be fucking amazing.' In (Hirst and Burn 48).

hinted at in *Pharmacy* (never mind that it ironically was turned into a very lucrative Notting Hill restaurant some time later by Hirst himself); his medical works in general seem to point to our condition of passive onlookers, trying to make ourselves feel important as we can only witness the ever-growing complexity of life as a biological process. The more we see and understand about it, the more complex it becomes; we are like the bohemian scientist of *A Way of Seeing*, who is both viewer and viewed, encased in a double box, the first one being surrounded by sand strewn with some idle beach toys testifying to a carefree existence. The effect of distanciation produced by the encasement of Hirst's subjects proves also to point out very clearly the self-referentiality of his work (the museum or gallery being similar to the box), while the installations that are not encased like *Pharmacy* provoke according to the artist an idea of 'confidence, of trust in minimalism,'<sup>1</sup> in that they give an impression of power upon matter, of supreme order, the works themselves and the represented subject (medical power) suggesting that one can stop decay and preserve life. In this perspective, it is thus perfectly logical that Hirst should so much like medicine packages, which are themselves influenced by minimalist design. The box pattern, also even more obviously recurrent in his medical cabinets, also suggests a kind of retraction of the encased object from the world, a protective shelter setting its content aside for protection,<sup>2</sup> and this preserving function forcefully evokes the cabinets of curiosities that flourished in Europe from the 16th century on.<sup>3</sup>

Hirst gives us his post-modern, white, aseptic version of the cabinet of curiosities in his medical sculptures (*Something Solid Beneath the Surface*), and he even casts some nostalgic glances at the past in works such as *The Way We Were*, in which the modern white armatures shelter the old paraphernalia of the early twentieth century scientist; *Romance* introduces wood encasements, also filled up with all kinds of medical instruments, but this time the glass vessels are contiguous to religious or natural supplies like rosaries, shell or bones, all reminiscent of a past era. In fact Hirst does nothing but place in the open for all to see what was usually kept from indiscreet eyes in Museums of Natural History, except that

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1. See [dh.ryoshuu.com/biography.html](http://dh.ryoshuu.com/biography.html)

2. Q. 'When in doubt, build a box around it'

A. 'Well, that's what I feel like. But then maybe that's my own sort of paranoia. Maybe that's not a good thing. I kind of want to make sure . . . I feel a bit afraid about letting things out into the world somehow. Unless they're as hard as nails—spatially, or something.' In (Hirst and Burn 39).

3. See Adalgisa Lugli, *Naturalia & Mirabilia, Les Cabinets de Curiosité en Europe* (Paris: Adam Biro, 1998); Patrick Mauries, *Cabinets of Curiosities* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2002).

he favours a much bigger size than the one which is common to museums, for obvious reasons of cost: if museums could afford to have pickled sharks in tanks, they certainly would.<sup>1</sup> This accumulation of objects, themselves enclosed in cabinets, themselves sheltered in galleries or museums is also to be read as a self-referential allusion to the power-driven need for collecting, treasuring impulse of collectors, which thus strive to reconstitute a fake and pristine array of carefully selected objects. This drive towards power could also imply impersonality, in so far as the collector subscribes objects to the world and flaunts them for public display, in order to impose his own dominating image.<sup>2</sup> However, Hirst is doubtlessly not fooled by his own megalomaniac tendencies, as *Contemplating a Self-Portrait (as a Pharmacist)* shows. The chemist's white coat is of course empty, and the painting shows nothing but the same unfilled accessory. The impersonality of this self-portrait is delightfully ironical, and the triple encasement testifies to the ultimate impossibility of getting close to any aspect of the universe whatsoever, even for an artist. This blank self-portrait can thus be read as a confession of failure, the failure of the artist to go beyond the walls of appearances, the world being considered as an object of pure contemplation which will forever remain aloof, and hence impersonal. This ironical self-reflexive piece confirms that human presence is felt as trifling and inconsiderable, and that the so-called intellectual superiority of man is maybe not even worthy to be equated with the tangibility of the biological realm. The human intellect is usually much deflated, or even ridiculed by Hirst, who in spite of being accused of megalomania is the first to acknowledge through his works the frailty and vanity of our empire upon matter.

Thus, the 'Damien Hirst Universe,' as half-disdainfully dubbed by some art journalists,<sup>3</sup> seems well secluded in the comfortably bare space of the art-gallery, which was made sacred by minimalistic art in the 70s, sterile from the various pollutions of the madding real-life world, both flaunting and protecting its precious constituents behind inflexible glass walls that hide nothing from our often daunted gaze. However, behind this smooth,

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1. On this subject, see Stephen T. Asma, *Stuffed Animals and Pickled Heads. The Culture and Evolution of Natural History Museums*. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001).

2. On this subject, see Krzysztof Pomian, *Collectionneurs, amateurs et curieux, Paris, Venise: xv<sup>e</sup>-xviii<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987); Philipp Blom, *To Have and to Hold, An Intimate History on Collectors and Collecting* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 2003).

3. See for instance Roberta Smith, 'In Damien Hirst's Big, Shiny Universe, Glass and Steel Meet Pills and Pain', in *The New York Times Art Review*, Sept 29th, 2000. Full text available at [query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9503E4DB113AF93AA1575AC0A9669C8B63&n=Top%2fReference%2fTimes%20Topics%2fPeople%2fH%2fHirst%2c%20Damien](http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9503E4DB113AF93AA1575AC0A9669C8B63&n=Top%2fReference%2fTimes%20Topics%2fPeople%2fH%2fHirst%2c%20Damien).

seemingly self-confident cult of anonymity and impersonality, the spectator can feel that the glass may sometimes be about to crack.

Hirst's boxes might protect their content from the grasp of the actual world, but the real danger might then really come from the inside of the box. Because the suspended, dissected, flayed, sectioned corpses that are sealed inside the box, which convey the frailty and transience of biological life in constant flirtation with entropic decline and destruction, are themselves confronted to physical decay. The natural corruption of his works matters for Hirst, who often looks for materials which are going to age in some patent manner despite their demanded solidity, even when they are not organic. The postmodern *vanitas* is thus ironically itself the first victim of time, in a sense: the glass walls and the formaldehyde they contain can only slow the decaying process, but can never stop it completely. The suspension from time is voluntarily inefficient, and the first major work of Hirst paved the way: *A Thousand Years* featured a real skull left to rot in the museum, the natural cycle of necrophagous insects developing naturally in a box which donned a protective grid, maggots begetting flies until the latter electrified themselves on a lamp. Soon however the museum authorities asked Hirst to replace the real cow's head by a fake one, since the foul smell was absolutely unbearable. Thus, it seems that we can reverse the usual perspective and see some of Hirst's works not as impersonal anymore, but on the contrary as a bit too personal perhaps, that is far from being untouched by the effects of life.<sup>1</sup> Even in the artificial space offered by a gallery, matter decays. This fact may be felt as an impersonal piece of information by the audience, but rejection can of course be seen as a reaction of self-defence: surely we cannot be similar to that piece of rotting flesh in a tank. Hirst likes to be thought of in this way, as the true offspring of Francis Bacon, himself the great priest of two-dimensional fleshy masses.<sup>2</sup> However, I would contend that Damien Hirst is not as violent as he claims he is in his actual rendition of lifelike horror; it seems that there is always an attempt on his part to subdue emotions, to give them a joyful overtone, which is here to counterbalance the violence of what is exposed.

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1. On this subject, read the interview by David Bowie (cf. note 3 on page 192 on page 192): 'What seems to define your work as being so different from that of your peers is a far greater degree of personal passion. A strong resentment of the idea of death or something like that. Anyway, it certainly strikes me as emotive, a reverberation of sorts, whereas in the work of your friends like Gavin Turk or Sarah Lucas, say, the basis seems to be a no-nonsense cynicism, a dark ironic sense maybe. You seem to straddle two worlds—conceptualism and a rather more traditional self-expression. Something that smacks of an emotional life.'

2. Hirst likes to remember that Francis Bacon stayed for one hour in front of *A Thousand Years*. See (Hirst and Burn 181).

## 2 'I like to create emotions scientifically', or Damien's big bluff

The direction of Hirst's work has always been towards death and the representation that we get of it through science. He has admitted this explicitly: 'I like creating emotions scientifically.' (Hirst and Burn 13) The exhibition that was the most convincing scientifically-speaking was, as its title hints, *Theories, Models, Methods, Approaches, Assumptions, Results and Findings*, presented at the Gagosian in 2001.<sup>1</sup> It was to be taken as a quite well-documented (and voluntarily brutal) reflection on the limits and methods of science when dealing with corporeal damage. One finds in this exhibition reproductions of a multitude of official documents used by the police or forensic specialists, from police snapshots to post-mortem diagrams, medical statistical charts, or quotations by nurses who witnessed acts of violence, and more. In the catalogue, the reader is even invited to fill up some these forms as if they related to him personally. Hirst sometimes lets the official documents appear on their own, untouched, and he juxtaposes his own production, then benefiting from the lights of the documents, or he may even insert some of his works into a tongue-and-cheek visual bantering, deflating the seriousness of the legal paraphernalia, like he did for his spot-paintings, referenced as microscopic close-ups of venom samples. It seems then that the chosen form, and the decision to mix magnified legal documents and art pieces was particularly efficient and well-thought out. This mixing of artistic and real-life elements is also prominent in *Romance*, the cover of the exhibition catalogue featuring a ribbon diagram of a protein.<sup>2</sup> However, the juxtaposition of these different objects produces an odd effect, for it reveals a dimension of Hirst's work that could have remained unobserved, were it not for the confrontation with real-life documents: the fact that Hirst's art itself is far from being that horrific, but rather possesses the innocent humour characteristic of some kind of student joke. We have shown that the formal elements which are to provoke the strongest emotions in Hirst's work result from colour, scale, and the introduction of objects that are highly connoted pathologically (like medical instruments for instance). Now if we think about the way he uses colour, it seems that either he either saturates the colours of pre-existing objects (as he does for instance for *Hymn*), or on the contrary he ends up using processes

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1. Damien Hirst, *Theories, Models, Methods, Approaches, Assumptions, Results and Findings* (New York: Gagosian, 2001).

2. I wish to thank Mrs Nicole Botello, Purification Associate in Berkeley, California, for her precious help.

that *erase* natural colours (formaldehyde makes flesh become pigmentless). For instance, it seems that the colour of real blood becomes rather too brownish to be plastically interesting (*Romance*), hence the necessity (conscious or unconscious) for Hirst to magnify pictures showing vivid scarlet wounds in all their gory appeal. The colours have to catch the eye here; on the contrary, for the floating animals, it seems that the absence of colour helps to subdue the shocking effect and make it a bit more acceptable for the audience; imagine walking through the slices of cows if they had kept their original colours and you will get a picture of the possible consequences in terms of ensuing sickness of the spectatorship. Beyond the initial shock, Hirst's pieces are not life-like, they are not strictly life-like in a sense, although they are ready-mades.

Let us take the example of the 'big guy,' as Hirst calls him. It is in fact a magnified replica of a famous toy made by the brand Humbro and sold in a kit called 'the Child Scientist.' The main characteristic of this replica is that, as a toy, it gives a very simplified representation of the innards of a human being. It is simple, it is playful, it is gaudy. And that's precisely why it appealed so much to Hirst: 'I wouldn't have done it with a teaching-hospital one. I did it with a toy. [ . . . ] It's fantastic. I just thought it was so brilliant, and it was so accurate, it was like a chemistry set, and I loved it that it was a toy. It was really similar to a medical thing, but much happier, friendlier, and more colourful and bright.' (Hirst and Burn 147) The 'big guy' has just nothing to do with a contemporary medical *écorché*, but remains essentially playful, a bit like the first *écorchés* of the 16th century<sup>1</sup> and the visual *oversimplification* of the physical features is perhaps its most appealing feature (note the red rippled surface of the muscles for instance). The effect of this deformation towards simplification is that the representation completely loses its horrific connotation, just as the pickled sharks and cows become more acceptable to the gaze because of their dull unlife-like colour and posture. This desire to rid representation very subtly of some of its disturbing effects can also be seen in the gesture of exposing the wings of real butterflies, but having taken care beforehand to eliminate the actual body of the insects (apparently Hirst came to a kind of belated realisation that butterflies had the most horrible bod-

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1. On this subject, see Lawrence Gasquet, 'Theatrum Anatomicum: Les plaisirs de l'horreur' in *L'Art de plaire* (Paris: Gérard Montfort, forthcoming); Raphaël Mandressi, *Le Regard de l'anatomiste. Dissection et invention du corps en Occident* (Paris: Seuil: 2003); David LeBreton, *La Chair à vif* (Paris: Métailié, 1993); Magali Vène, *Écorchés. L'exploration du corps xiv<sup>e</sup>-xviii<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Albin Michel, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 2001); Mathias Duval et Edouard Cuyet, *Histoire de l'anatomie plastique* (Paris: Alcide Picard et Kaan, 1898); Claire Barbillon, *Les Canons du corps humain au xix<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2004).

ies.<sup>1</sup> It thus appears that Hirst uses pathos, and wants to shock visually, but he never goes beyond a certain limit, and I would say that he softens representation in a understated way, possibly to make it easier to absorb. Thus, the intense emotion felt by the audience could always be much worse, but instead of this, it is carefully controlled by Hirst, and turned into something that partakes more of gaiety than of gloominess. Another example of this kind of visual bantering can be seen in his own rendition of medical cabinets. *Trinity* for instance seems to be constituted of a joyful assemblage of gaudy human replicas joyfully sliced up and piled up as some construction toys for babies. This gaudy assemblage reconstructs and deconstructs the human according to the modular credos of Minimalism, only with a tad more exuberance and joy (let us remember that Minimalism was trashed as being infantile by its detractors, who dismissed it as reductive and irrelevant, seeing in Judd, Andre or Le Witt overgrown children playing with cubes in millionaire's art galleries).<sup>2</sup> The colours are exuberant, the slices are very regular, and all this seems far more playful than dismal. The same goes for works like *Stripteaser*, or *Death is Irrelevant*, with eyeballs replaced by two ping-pong balls floating on pulsed air. This rather joyful side of Hirst's is very often ignored by the critics, who prefer to tear their hair out deploring the over-seriousness and megalomania of the 'Brat of British Art.' On the contrary, I think that this ironical distancing from emotion reflects quite well the ultimate humbleness of Hirst, and his is a very lucid statement about both art and human condition. This search for visual and conceptual simplification is after all a confession of modesty: 'Cut us in half, we're all the fucking same. Even the moaners. We're all complicated biological fucking lifeforms. Amazing. Everything is so fucking complicated, whichever angle you look at it from. Art's a puff. There is no need for an overabundance of complexity. It's ridiculous.' (Hirst and Burn 228-229) It is ridiculous, and so it might be a good idea to make fun of all this, to see in the recent constant schematic conceptual transpositions begun with the Gagosian show, continued in *Romance* and extensively present in the last art pieces an attempt at self-deflation and relativism. I would thus contend that emotional identification never works completely with Hirst, because of the subtle oversimplification that is always at work in even the most daunting art pieces. Which is why Hirst can have been caught saying that looking at the series of *Natural History* is like going to the zoo,<sup>3</sup> or that 'death doesn't really

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1. See (Hirst and Burn 29).

2. See Hal Foster 'The Crux of Minimalism' in (Meyer 270).

3. Damien Hirst, *No Sense of Absolute Corruption* (New York: Gagosian gallery, 1996), interview by Stuart Morgan: 'There is a kind of confidence about it. *Natural History*, the

exist in life’—hence the final and paradoxical sincerity of the title of one of his first major works, the *Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*. I think this title sums up Hirst’s art very well, and could ultimately apply to all his pieces . . . As he underlined himself, the impersonality and ironical grandeur of his titles make them interchangeable<sup>1</sup> (this characteristic has also been spurned by his detractors, accusing him of shallowness and pretension), and they can be viewed as beautiful language straps just meant to underline the irony and helplessness of the work. Hirst said that science for him incarnates an ‘essentially adult approach,’ (Hirst and Burn 145) and so it is obvious that art is a last desperate attempt to toy with concepts and colours a little bit longer before being obliged to clean up one’s room for good. The scientific simplification that he performs through his work, and which can be totally overlooked, missed by the audience ironically confirms one of the principles in which Hirst firmly believes, that is the fact that art doesn’t require education to be enjoyed. Perception itself does the trick.

Paradoxically thus, the visual shock of the first works involving tanks and cut up animals has left an indelible trace in the minds of the spectators, and the consequent excess of emotion has departed, yet quite ironically replaced by a gesture that has become a trademark. Contemplating the real work doesn’t imply that much emotion any more, and this doesn’t please the artist: ‘When I first presented animals, people felt something. Now they say “that’s Damien Hirst.” One reason to stop I guess, but in the end I want to reach the end of what I had imagined in the beginning.’ Immediate success was thus a double-edged sword for Damien, and this fact perhaps explains his claim that art cannot possibly be self-expressive, and cannot possibly reflect the emotions of an artist without distorting them: ‘If you’re an artist I don’t see how you can communicate how you really feel through your art. [ . . . ] It’s impossible to be able to achieve that. I don’t see how you can communicate personal ideas on a massive scale. [ . . . ] you can’t do it.’ (Hirst and Burn 231) This is a rather dire avowal, and maybe it helps us understand better the complex interplay between impersonality and emotion that lies at the core of Hirst’s various creations.

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collective title for the group of animals in formaldehyde, will come to look like a zoo. A zoo of dead animals.’ Unpaginated.

1. ‘I think the changes in the titles are probably possible with a lot of the works. I mean, they are all about the same sort of thing anyway, I think . . .’ in Hirst and Burn, 26.

# Contemporary Art's Emotional Sites: The Case of Rachel Whiteread

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Recent installation and conceptual art has attempted to sublimate the antagonism between impersonality and emotion by engaging in a complex dialogue with the logic of collective memory. Focusing on the work of British artist Rachel Whiteread, this article intends to show how thus art has provided new ways of reflecting on and of deflecting the waning of affect engineered by the culture industry. With her casts of 'unthinkable spaces,' the overlooked space of everyone's living environment, Whiteread shows up art to be anything but autonomous. With her most famous works (*House*, 1993-1994, and her Vienna Holocaust Memorial), she brings art back onto the public arena where the impersonality of monumental art dovetails as intimate emotion.

Much of contemporary art appears caught between two seemingly incompatible imperatives, both of them, surprisingly, of a mimetic nature: the urge to remain true to the depersonalized, alienated economy of surface affects on the one hand, and the compulsion to stay as close as possible to the epidemic truth of private experience on the other hand. Some artists choose to confront the standardization of hyper-modern identity. It is the case of Andreas Gursky whose panoramic shots of oversized hotel lobbies, of the trading floors of stock exchanges, of Le Corbusier inspired anonymous buildings or of supermarkets all encapsulate the uncanny depersonalization of space in our late capitalist age: *Atlanta* (1996, 186 × 256 cm) features the dizzying stratified tiers of a luxury hotel patio, the floors and rows of room doors rising from the bottom to the top of the picture in a merciless, clone-like repetitiveness redolent of a prison-like atmosphere as much as of high life style; *Chicago Board of Trade II* (1999, 207 × 340 cm) is a digital montage of high angle shots of a trading floor

creating the sensation one is caught in a 360°, all-encompassing perspective that leaves nothing outside, a neat allegory of the globalization of capitalism; *Paris, Montparnasse* (1993, 205 × 421 cm) is a wall to wall view of the grid-like façade of a building overlooking the high-tech Montparnasse station in Paris. Gursky's both overpowering and reticent images are exemplary of the double-edged impact of impersonality in contemporary art. By excluding human presence, by exemplifying over and over again how man has been marginalized and instrumentalized in our increasingly urban world, they function as a mute indictment of such a progressive erasure and also surreptitiously seem to play in the hands of this process. Gursky's work has indeed been criticized for dubiously colluding with the corporate culture it insists it exposes. And one can indeed only wonder at the conciseness of the visual conceit which, in *Paris, Montparnasse*, meets International Style on its own ground, that of geometrical, dehumanized isomorphism, that of hegemonic amnesiac indifference.

Other artists have chosen, on the contrary, to reinvest the private sites of individual experience in order to elaborate a confessional idiom: American photographer Nan Goldin in her autobiographical exploration of the mishaps and traumas of life, British born video-artist Steve McQueen, especially in his 2001 silent film, *Illuminer*, showing a night shot of a deserted bed, itself a variation on Felix Gonzalez-Torres's series of posters which ten years before had allegorized the devastation and loss caused by the AIDS virus, Tracey Emin's public dramatization of her private life, especially in her igloo tent featuring the names of all her former lovers, as in a vast, clumsy, emotional patchwork, Wolfgang Tillmans' intimate still lifes of objects taken from the fabric of his everyday life, English video-artist Darren Almond in his confessional 2003 piece, *If I Had You*, exhibited at the 2005 Tate Turner Prize show, that juxtaposes four video projections, among which a close-up, slow-moving clip of his grandmother as she watches a couple ballroom dancing. These are but a few of the artists who have chosen to turn inward, to tap the seemingly fathomless source of personal experience to address an audience supposed to symmetrically read themselves into the artist's self-exploration. Needless to say, this turn inward is anything but recent, since in the inaugural issue of *October*, Rosalind Krauss already perceived an 'aesthetic of narcissism' to be in the offing with the advent of video art.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Rosalind Krauss, 'Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism,' *October* 1 (spring 1976): 50-64. For an analysis of the gendering of installation art when performance creates an interface between private and collective emotion, see a recent study by Jen Harvie: 'Being Her: Presence, Absence, and Performance in the Art of Janet Cardiff and Tracey Emin,' *Auto/Biography and Identity: Women, Theatre and Performance*, eds. Maggie B. Gale and

One may deem such a voyage in, back into the obscure recesses of private experience, to be a reaction against the depersonalization that seemed to have reigned supreme with the rise of minimal art in the 1960s and to have gone with a dematerialization also of paramount importance in conceptual art, a dematerialization which the artist/critic Lucy Lippard interpreted as the necessary destiny of modern art when it comes into its own and at last fully emancipates itself from the erstwhile complex economic imperatives still thought to be dictating to the early generations of modern artists as part of a market economy of art.<sup>1</sup>

However the opposition between impersonal art and emotion may not be as binary as the reactive reading of the history of art may make it out to be. If minimal and conceptual art may be considered as 'escape attempts,' to borrow the title of the introductory chapter of Lippard's essay, these 'escape attempts' were meant to lead art away not so much from emotion as away from the increased commodification of the art object. Paradoxically, dematerializing art also meant a return to the raw material of emotion when it once again allows art to think itself through. It is only telling that Lippard should have chosen to head the opening chapter of her essay with Sol LeWitt's words: 'Conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists. They leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach . . . Illogical judgments lead to new experience.'<sup>2</sup>

Although the conceptual and the narcissistic turns may seem to be aesthetically and ontologically at odds, they may in fact be but joint responses to the urge to rethink art's relevance to the increasing sense of alienation generated by the culture industry. Treading the waters of paradox, art may thus be seen to deliberately experiment with alienation, with anonymity and impersonality all the better both to lay bare the very logic of such alienation and to point to a possible aesthetic sublation of such a depletion of affect.

Such a paradoxical stance is best illustrated by Joseph Beuys' highly private synecdochic work *Felt Suit* (1970) which merely consists in an anonymous felt suit suspended on a coat hanger from the gallery wall. The suit reflects obliquely back both on the deviousness of the contemporary cult culture of artistic genius and seems also to defeat it. As a replica tailored from one of Beuys' own suits, it is meant to be received as an

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Viv Gardner (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2004) 194-216.

1. See Lucy Lippard, *Six years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object* (1973; Berkeley: U of California P, 1997).

2. This is the opening sentence in a list of 'Sentences on Conceptual Art,' published by LeWitt in the fifth issue of the magazine *o to 9*, launched in 1967, in New York, by co-editors Vito Hannibal Acconci and Bernadette Mayer.

indirect self-portrait; yet, as part of a series of a hundred of such pieces, it also contravenes the auratic cult of aesthetic genius. Just as Warhol was to return over and over again to the tradition of the self-portrait, in order to pursue and to deflect it in the age of commodified aura, Beuys was also to propose its own variation on the waning of artistic aura in this piece which works both as a concept and as an epidermic metonymy of the artist. In the mournful vein explored by Andreas Huyssen in *Twilight Memories*,<sup>1</sup> Beuys' anonymous felt suit allegorizes the aporetic tension between impersonal alienation and emotional reappropriation. The suit is no one's suit and is also intimately linked to Beuys' story of survival after his plane was shot down over Crimea in 1943. It hangs loose, waiting to be inhabited, filled by the spectators' private projections. Both frighteningly reminiscent of POW's uniforms and disturbingly comfortable, it is commodious enough to accommodate all forms of historical and private interpretations. It yet remains stubbornly pathetic, a modern variation on St Bartholomew's flayed skin painted by Michelangelo in his fresco of the Sistine chapel. With Beuys' *Felt Suit*, the artist returns as ghost, as impersonal, anonymous martyr and one will remember that Michelangelo chose to paint his own face on the Saint's dead and shapeless skin.

The English translation (*Felt Suit*) of the German title for this work (*Filzanzug*) indeed suits us here too well. It is almost too neat in its dubious literalism which can also dovetail as allegory. Through the tension opened by this conceptual and intimate, inert and vibrant object, the artist postures once more as the site of impersonal affect. On this oblique self-portrait all kinds of surrogate emotions come to hang that allow us to rethink both the alienation of art and the art of alienation as it refracts and deflects the exhaustion of aesthetics. Thus the felt suit may be no less than an instance of the 'dialectic of tact' Adorno evokes in one of his 1944 *Minima Moralia*. Both empty and allegorically haunted, the suit puts us in immediate and conceptual contact with a vicarious experience of loss, whether it be private loss and/or the alienating collective sense of loss Adorno felt inherent to industrial modernity. By accommodating our urgent desire for an impossible tactile contact, it fulfils the ontological function of art as a 'saving accommodation between alienated human beings,' an accommodation that is nevertheless 'inseparable from renunciation, the relinquishment of total contact, passion and unalloyed happiness.'<sup>2</sup> To this allegorical layering of contradictions one may add yet another one that lies in the fact that, like any sacralized artwork, Beuys'

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1. Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories* (London: Routledge, 1995).

2. Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia. Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1978) 35-36.

*Felt Suit* should not be touched only serves to reinforce the physical experience of alienation and to underscore the programmatically paradoxical status of this suit bound to remain at one remove from experience.

Although she initially remained shy of the allegorical radicality of Beuys' private idiom, Rachel Whiteread very early chose also to walk the very thin line between the personal and the impersonal, between anonymity and narcissism. Her 1987 M.A. show at the Slade presented mixed media objects reminiscent of Beuys' metonymies. Her untitled works borrowed from the repertoire of everyday objects or clothes and assembled them so as to produce ghost-like presences evocative of departed beings. A shirt and a rectangular pillowcase hung on coat hangers from the gallery walls, like Beuys' *Felt Suit*. In them was concealed a full water bottle. Thus the shirt and the pillowcase did not hang loose but billowed as if covering a stretched, possibly motherly, belly. Once more these works functioned like objective correlatives, all the more suggestive as they seemed to hesitate between a sort of reticent biomorphism and the impersonal vocabulary of the modernist ready made, literally suspended between two contradictory reading protocols. As ready-mades, they flaunted a form of blank impersonality: the pillowcase and the shirt were un-originated, had become anyone's objects, set loose from the homely syntax of private life. As biomorphic metonymies, they could not but be immediately evocative of once warm bodies, of flesh and blood.

Beuys' dialectic of tact was here given an even more emotional twist. Whereas felt in Beuys' private idiom, is meant to endure and even comes to metaphorize survival itself, the pillowcase—both spectral incarnation of a motherly presence and security blanket—flaunted its own programmed inexorable entropy. The hot water was indeed bound to turn cold, the fabric was doomed to become frayed, the vanished presence was itself to become the memory of a memory. Unlike Beuys' *Felt Suit*, Whiteread's ghostly silhouettes were bound to remain transient, to ultimately disintegrate and eventually to be thrown away; they were ultimately destroyed. Here lay probably the paradox of Whiteread's early experimentation with a tactfully epidermic art, in this mixture of emotional and even libidinal investment and abstraction.

Her probing into the recesses of experience, whether it be aesthetic or brutally physical was brought home more forcefully in the casts she made around the 90s of beds or of hot water bottles (see for instance *Torso*, 1991). Made of dental plaster, a material that obliquely may take us back to a shared experience of fear and pain, these works take us back to the raw, primitive physicality of life, to the essence of experience

before it has even been essentialized, before it has been conceptualized and abstracted out of the body, into words. But Whiteread does not satisfy herself with such idiosyncratic reflections on private sensations. By reworking one of the ancestral genres of art—the cast—she also brings into contact private sensation and the grand and impersonal repertoire of art. In these simple and complex works, heat, pain, organic life enter in a dialogue with the monumental, spectacular history of art as it exhibits itself in the galleries of casts of the V & A or of the Louvre.

Without altering the dialectic in any significant way, *House* made it even more political and recast the tension between the public and the private, between impersonality and emotion, between aesthetic distance and aesthetic affect.

Sollicited by Artangel—the ground-breaking English commissioning art trust—, Whiteread chose to transplant her production outside the consecrated white cube of the art gallery. When answering Artangel's invitation, she did not alter the idiosyncratic aesthetic vocabulary she had already elaborated with her series of casts of the under-space of desks (*Fort*, 1989) or bath tubs (*Valley*, 1990), and then expanded with the production of the casts of interiors, of unthinkable spaces, such as the interior of a drawing room (*Ghost*, 1990). In contrast with the misunderstood idea of the 'dematerialization of art,' Whiteread's casts flaunt their intractable materiality while, symmetrically, acknowledging that matter could also prove ghostly and that such absent presence was of the essence of any aesthetic encounter. In front of her casts, we are meant to feel, almost to touch, the presence of emptiness, the impersonal emptiness we inhabit and overlook, an emptiness which, when made palpable, is eerily reminiscent of other more emotional voids, as if the opaque silence of her blank sculptures forced us mentally to reach out to the heart of absence.

House took her reflection on the collective and maybe even political agenda of aesthetic affects one step further. While for the dominant history of art the modernity of art lies in its autonomization from the social sphere, Whiteread chose to reposition the artwork in the very fabric of urban and political space. Incidentally, she also revisited and revised the canonical history of English modern art, generating discrete inter-aesthetic echoes of the works of Harold Gilman and other masters of the Camden Town Group and the London Group who—under the influence of Walter Sickert—had already focused on the modern co-presence of alienation and intimacy (see for instance Gilman's *Tea in the Bedsitter*, 1916).

Against the increasingly abstract agenda of in situ art which tended to depersonalize the relationship between the artwork and its audience, Whiteread reasserted the necessity or the artist to reflect on her / his

involvement in the political, collective space she shares with her public. With *House*, she made her reflection on the agonistic relation between the glorious isolation of art and its emotional commitment more complex yet. Her decision to produce a cast of the inner space of one of the terraced houses doomed to demolition on Grove Road, in the working class East End borough of Bow,<sup>1</sup> was more than a meta-aesthetic comment on the relative exhaustion of the conventional, anonymous sites of art, whether it be the gallery or the museum. It also engaged in a controversial dialogue with the great tradition of monumental and commemorative public sculpture. *House* did not explicitly purport to be any form of cenotaph erected to the memory of a culture soon to be ousted by the irresistible gentrification of East London. It merely intended to testify to what had once been and thus to acknowledge the accountability of contemporary art to a collective experience.

From the start, Whiteread's choice of location and object constituted a powerful statement on the violent erasure of a formerly deeply-rooted culture. As Iain Sinclair shows in the essay he devoted to Whiteread's Grove Road work, *House* came to embody all kinds of far from clearly-cut issues relating to the enforced, reassuring autonomy of art, to our relationship to vanished often fantasmatic identities, to the violent, if nostalgic, conflict between residual and emergent cultures.<sup>2</sup> Last but not least it also seemed to offer a spectacular dramatization of the house as a metonymy of the body politic. The dramatization was all the more powerful as that metonymy, to a great extent, structures the English sense of an emotional, nostalgic sense of nationhood, from Edmund Burke's first systematization of the trope in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* of 1790 to Dickens's use of the trope in *Bleak House*, *Great Expectations* or *Dombey and Son* to characterize the political and spiritual dereliction of Victorian England, from Austen's idyllic Pemberley in *Pride and Prejudice* to Evelyn Waugh's almost dystopian reappropriation of the myth of the estate in *Brideshead Revisited*, from Maria Edgeworth's political use of the image in *The Absentee*, to E.M. Forster's pastoral revisiting of the same rhetoric in *Howards End*. The blank walls, the occluded windows of *House* are both reminiscent of the blind windows of Mr Dombey's town house which no longer let the sun or life in. They are, needless to say, reminiscent as well of the boarded up houses doomed to demolition and of the violent, authoritarian erasure of collective, usually working-class, memory. A couple of years later Whiteread would return to the same

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1. *House* stood from October 25 1993 to January 11 1994 and was then demolished.

2. See Iain Sinclair, 'The House in the Park: A Psychogeographical Response,' *House*, ed. James Lingwood (London: Phaidon, 1995) 12-33.

theme in her series of photographs of the demolition of run down council estates (*Demolished* 1996, 12 duotone screenprints, 49 × 74,4 cm).

Along with Pierre Bourdieu, Whiteread reminds us with *House* that our identity meshes in with our cultural habitus—a notion Bourdieu develops in *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique*. In a powerful literalization of the concept, she makes us see that we are the metonymies we live in, as much as the metaphors we live by (to borrow the title of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's famous essay on cognitive linguistics). More than any recent work in England, *House* shows up the body politic of gentrified, impersonal, late capitalist London to be erected on the dumb corpse of a formerly vibrant culture. That now dead, suppressed culture returns under the guise of one of its most powerful 'originary metonymies' (to resort to Bourdieu's definition of the basic units that make up culture): everyone's house.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, Whiteread's powerfully empathetic conjuring of a fragment of a departed social body, also serves to prove that the memory has been efficiently suppressed, its play with negativity acknowledging the fact that the past can only be recaptured negatively. The past irremediably remains a foreign country. It cannot be accessed anymore than *House*. Here there is nothing more to be seen, and the emotional impact of the work depends on this occultation. And yet, in this 'phantom-memory,'<sup>2</sup> the past returns as more than a pathetic fragment. It is also unashamedly palpable, tactile. It bodies forth. It endures and although it stubbornly denies entry to its now emptied inner world, its blank stare also mesmerizes us into an intimate process of recollection, it teases memories out of our benumbed unconscious. Thus this anonymous house becomes everyone's house. Although it now stands alone, it is allegorically multitudinous.

Most of Rachel Whiteread's works function like anonymous receptacles for our intimate memories. Like memory machines, they trigger a spontaneous process of appropriation and projection, whether it be her casts of phantom book shelves (*Sequel IV*, 2002), or her recent series of filing boxes which, more than ever, turn the artwork into a memory site.

The stratagem is all the more powerful when such nondescript memory sites are monumentalized and thus further defamiliarized as was the case in her recent installation in the turbine hall of Tate Modern which consisted of huge pyramids of the same filing boxes recast on a larger

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1. Pierre Bourdieu, *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique* (1972; Paris: Seuil, Points, 2000) 297.

2. Angela Dimitrakaki, 'Gothic Public Art and the Failures of Democracy. Reflections on *House*, Interpretation and the Political Unconscious,' *Rachel Whiteread*, ed. Chris Twonsend (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004) 109.

scale.<sup>1</sup> Although their scale may vary considerably, Whiteread's casts, like Martin Parr's series of epigrammatic details of interiors featuring in his 1992 book *Signs of the Time*, draw our attention to the literally pathetic quality of everyday life. Thus, for instance, an anonymous light switch disconnected from its environment, defamiliarized, alienated, may yet tell us of a whole private life, so tangible the traces left on the wall paper by thousands of finger tips seem when enlarged, when obscenely foregrounded. The most minute, the most pathetic of anonymous detail may hence prove to be endowed with a renewed performative function, shedding sudden light both on the impersonal economy of taste that conditions it and on the pragmatic function of the light switch as artwork and of the artwork as light switch.

No doubt it is her capacity to reconcile the empathetic and the conceptual faculties of art that convinced the jury of the 1996 competition for a memorial to the Austrian Jewish victims of Nazism, to eventually opt for Whiteread's project of a cast of a phantom library.

Here again she evolved an intractable, endless allegory of the dialectic of emotion and anonymity. Unlike Christian Boltanski's deeply personalized archival works, Whiteread's Memorial remains deliberately anonymous, almost abstract in spite of its imperious presence. It intends to function as an echo chamber, in all dismal senses of the term, of both the Nazi book-burning rituals and of the death chambers. It precludes all individualized attempt at tracing within its walls precise, personal stories, while offering up its neutral walls, its untitled books to a process of endless exegesis.

Central to this dialectic of tact is art's capacity to defamiliarize the conventional, institutionalized locations of aesthetic experience. With *House*, Whiteread brought the language of art onto the public field, onto the impersonal arena of life. I would like to turn briefly by way of conclusion to the work of another British artist who also displaces the canonical tension between impersonality and emotion. With *Semi-Detached*, Michael Landy brought vernacular architecture and, even more specifically, the metonymy of metonymies, everyone's/noone's house, within the scope of institutionalized art, i.e. the neo-classical, impersonal Duveen Galleries of Tate Britain, Millbank where, between 18 May 2004 and 12 December 2004, Landy chose to pitch his life-size model of a semi-detached house. Both conceptual and eerily material, Landy's work engaged in a thought-provoking paradox. Though it was strangely detached from its urban and social environment, to it were also attached unpredictable

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1. The installation could be seen from 11 October 2005 to 1 May 2006.

and uncontrollable associations: the private associations which the visitors of Tate Britain brought to the house. Dwarfed by the grandiose neo-classical architecture of the Duveen Galleries, Landy's *Semi-detached* nevertheless seemed to resist neutralization, to create all kinds of uncomfortable blockages in the hall meant to function like a hub opening onto the various sections of the museum. Although incongruously diminutive, it insisted and could be that easily circumnavigated, let alone ignored. As was implicit in his aptly entitled work, *Semi-detached* objected that the myth of autonomy had to be demystified, that art, in its most institutionalized, impersonal, alienating form, and the micrologies of private, inglorious experience cannot be so comfortably detached, that they necessarily come into touchy contact.



Figure 1. — *Untitled (House)* 1993. Photo: Sue Ormerod © Rachel Whiteread 2001. Courtesy Rachel Whiteread and Gagosian Gallery



Figure 2. — *Tare II*. © Rachel Whiteread 2005. Courtesy Rachel Whiteread and Gagosian Gallery



Figure 3. — *Holocaust Memorial* 1995/2000, Judenplatz, Vienna. Photo courtesy philip.greenspun.com



# Impersonality and Emotion in Julian Opie's *People and Portraits*<sup>1</sup>

Julie Labay

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Julian Opie's *People and Portraits* series ambivalently reconcile the impersonality of the digital media with a strong sense of self, since Opie poses himself as thinker and prolific creator, thus breaking the impersonality pact as he allows emotions to slip in. On the other hand, the impersonality of his stylized drawings may disconcert the viewer who finds no familiar bearings in the drawings which look like empty shells. The artist recommends a highly disengaged attitude towards his works, but he also knows that they cannot be taken in and understood if the personal emotions, memories and ideas of the viewer do not come into play to fill in the blanks of the narratives that are to be 'read' in his drawings.

Digital art seems to be the most impersonal and vacuous means that one can think of to relate to the external world: Yves Michaud, in *L'Art à l'état gazeux: essai sur le triomphe de l'esthétique*, evokes the paradox found in the ethereal, vaporous quality of postmodern works of art, 'des expériences esthétiques où il ne reste plus qu'un gaz, un éther, une buée artistique,' as opposed to those rare objects that used to be hung in museums and that people contemplated religiously.<sup>2</sup> On the contrary, digital art is the result of a complexly coded combination of numbers and reasoned formulas which seem to have no relevance to aesthetic emotion. In her article entitled 'Bodies and Digital Utopia,' Catherine Bernard evokes a 'dissociation from experienced physical reality,' a 'dematerializ-

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1. I would like to thank the artist for kindly letting me use his works to illustrate my paper. The works that are not reprinted in this volume can be viewed at [www.julianopie.com](http://www.julianopie.com).

2. Yves Michaud, *L'Art à l'état gazeux* (Paris: Stock, 2003), book blurb.

ation and slow disappearance of the physical dimensions of our beings.<sup>1</sup> Such a statement seems to apply directly to Opie's work at first, but as I discuss his exploration of the codes and conventions of representation, I will show how in fact, he tries to combine the personal and the impersonal in his people and portraits series. Juggling with the economical aesthetics of computer creations that come to life through various media such as vinyl, LED, enamel-on-glass sculptures, aluminium, steel, plywood, stickers, screensavers, road signs, CD covers or billboards, Opie departs from traditional visual arts<sup>2</sup> as he sculpts, prints, or installs his works.

Opie emerged as an influential figure on the British art scene in the 1980s, and from the start, he ambivalently combined individuality and impersonality in his reinterpretation of a cultural past that he reclaimed or re-appropriated.<sup>3</sup> His accumulated objects and heaps of canvases or his plates of portraits made him a direct inheritor of Pop Art aesthetics. He was also greatly influenced by minimalist and conceptual artists, reflecting on the status of abstract art and its vision of the world as surfaces and signs, as well as on the (lack of) correspondence between signifier and signified. Opie achieves detachment in the same way as Pop artists did through the sense of distance given by new techniques. While Andy Warhol used serigraphy and Lichtenstein *Ben Day Dots*, Opie chose the digital image in his recent works. This medium conveys an apparent lack of subjectivity and individuality which seems to dissolve the self of the artist and place the work of art to the front of the stage. The clean-edged lines of the drawings confer them an impersonality which seems to imply that the artist does not engage his human personality or emotions in the creative process. However, Opie ambiguously poses himself as creator, and his work is very much connected with real life persons or situations. He talks about his 'greed'<sup>4</sup> to grasp and draw anything available and explains how he came to realize that the realism of his works was a key factor to artistic creation. By realism, he means something which tallies with his

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1. Catherine Bernard, 'Bodies and Digital Utopia,' *Art Journal*, 59: 4 (Winter 2000) 26-31. 'Toute la vie des sociétés dans lesquelles règnent les conditions modernes de production s'annonce comme une immense accumulation de spectacles. Tout ce qui était directement vécu s'est éloigné dans une représentation,' a quote from the opening paragraph of Guy Debord's *La Société du spectacle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992) 15.

2. Opie argues against the sacrosanct canvas in 'Is Painting Back For Good?' *New Statesman* (January 1, 2005) 77.

3. An idea developed by T.S. Eliot in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent,' *Selected Essays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1932). Nearly a century later, Jean Baudrillard condemns the 'remake' and 'recyclage' of past works of art, 'comme si l'art, comme l'histoire, faisait ses propres poubelles et cherchait sa rédemption dans ses détritius.' In Jean Baudrillard, *Le Complot de l'art: illusion et désillusions esthétiques* (Paris: Sens & Tonka, 1997) 12-13.

4. *Julian Opie*, video, 'theEYE' series (London: Illuminations, 2001).

experience of the world, something that is held as information in his head and that he tries to remake into his own language. Ironically then, as he takes photographs of people and draws from them, it is as if he took in fact four steps back from reality: first he perceives/sees these people in a certain way, then he takes a picture of them, thirdly, he executes his drawings, and lastly, he endlessly reprints them or redraws them on various media for the exhibits.<sup>1</sup> Another main dilemma is to decide whether to add lots of details to be as realistic as possible or, on the contrary, none at all, which is the solution he chooses with de-saturated images that could be endlessly reproduced with slight variants. As he strove to remain as detached as possible from his creations, Opie has elaborated a very unique form of art, which is very recognizable and very personal, nearly hyper-personal, or 'hyper-real' in Jean Baudrillard's terms.<sup>2</sup> Opie reduces bodies and faces to the most essential lines and colour planes, omitting idiosyncratic details. As he seems to strive towards a universal mode of expression, a new form of artistic language, in fact he achieves a balance between the generic (the impersonal) and the specific (the personal or the individual), which first confronts the spectator (or 'reader' in Opie's own terms) with an endless repetition of disconcerting look-alikes that hardly stir any emotion in the viewer. I will first discuss Opie's ambiguously detached artistic treatment of people. Then, in spite of the fact that some critics have interpreted Opie's work as alienating and representative of the estrangement from our nature, caused by the advance of technologies and industrial modernity, I will show how despite the seeming neutrality of the drawings, the 'reader' slowly feels a sense of exhilarating identity with the characters depicted, as well as a sense of freedom about how to look and understand the pictures, reacting personally to the works he sees.

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1. As a consequence, his repertoire contains multifarious avatars of the same drawings under different guises. As it is not possible to show everything in a gallery, Opie created a catalogue, a sort of archive impersonally musing on commercialism (he included the prices of each work of art in it) and undermining the idea that art has to be separated from it.

2. Baudrillard describes the (post)modern world as 'un monde hyperteknik, hypereffice, hypervisible. Pas de blanc, pas de vide, pas d'ellipse, pas de silence' (Baudrillard 15), a world with no illusion or imagination left. However, in Opie's works, silences and blanks are at the core of the aesthetic creation. Baudrillard also talks of the 'dés-imagination de l'image' (Baudrillard 17): as artists try to make an image seemingly real (a purpose reached in the digital image which ruins the power of illusion according to him) they kill our imagination. On the contrary, it seems to me that although he is perfectly conscious of the status of his works as simulacra or simulations, Opie leaves room to the imagination of the viewer. What Baudrillard calls 'une montée en puissance du signe' (Baudrillard 40) is in Opie's work only a way to enter a dialogue with the world surrounding us, creating a personal and artistic medium to deal with it.

## 1 The creative process

Opie soon departed from his Minimalist phase to represent real life landscapes, animals and people, but the stripped down lines of his digital drawings retain some abstract quality. Opie's glitzy and ungraspable surfaces are deprived of the torments of the flesh, at the antipodes, if only to take one example, of neo-expressionist paintings whose brushwork<sup>1</sup> imprints the body on the canvas in a painful and distorted manner, disfiguring, or de-personalizing it.<sup>2</sup> Opie seems to eliminate the tactile dimension as if all that went through it were an obstacle to an immediate inner truth, in a world where sight is almighty. Opie's work seems to be an art connected to thought only, a form of art that would be disembodied since the artist's own body stands out of the creative process, refusing to participate in the physical exhaustion of the creation, a clean art with no paint stain on one's cheeks or hands or clothes. Although a lot of technical efforts are put into his works, Opie rarely participates in their setting up and has people do it for him: '[it] allows me a position further back, more like a puppeteer. [ . . . ] Physically, my hands don't touch that material that you are standing in front of [ . . . ] but I have pored over it for many hours. [ . . . ] poring over is for me the way in which I work' (*Julian Opie*, video).<sup>3</sup>

As he started drawing modern buildings Opie took a further step in detachment. Because most modern buildings were rectangular, just like a painting in a way, the object on which he drew the building was itself rectangular. Just as for children toys, Opie thought that if he drew the

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1. 'L'épaisseur de la touche, le grain de la toile, l'apparence grasse ou diluée de la peinture, la violence plus ou moins perceptible du geste, l'incision vive d'un couteau, ou l'effleurement d'un pinceau sont autant de données sensorielles mixtes qui montrent combien la vue repose sur l'évocation d'un toucher.' In Bertrand Rougé, 'Le Corps et la toile, ou le corps du peintre dans l'art contemporain,' *Les Figures du corps dans la littérature et la peinture anglaises et américaines: de la Renaissance à nos jours*, ed. Bernard Brugière, (Paris III: La Sorbonne Publications, 1991) 325-339.

2. '[O]ù la chair, pour prendre corps de peinture, dé-figure' (Rougé 328). Rougé also explains how for Pollock, the canvas becomes 'a sensible surface' (Rougé 329) and a second skin, a statement which would hardly apply for Opie.

3. Similarly, Yves Klein aimed at aesthetic distance by avoiding the artist's touch. Although he participated in the process himself once, in his body paintings, or *Anthropometries* (ca. 1960), Klein wanted to record the body's physical energy and he used the human body as a 'living paint brush.' Bathing his models in his signature International Klein Blue paint, he directed them to press and drag their bodies across paper and canvas, leaving impressions of IKB paint: 'In this way I stayed clean. I no longer dirtied myself with colour, not even the tips of my fingers. The work finished itself there in front of me [ . . . ] And I could salute its birth into the tangible world in a dignified manner, dressed in a tuxedo.' Klein quoted on the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden website ([hirshhorn.si.edu/education/modern/modern4.html](http://hirshhorn.si.edu/education/modern/modern4.html), accessed 9 January 2006).

shape of a car, a tree or a human shape on one side, it would become a car, a tree or a man or woman, and that he would only have to increase the size of these drawings to make them on an adult scale. His objects are all-surface and the emphasis on form and colours makes them easily and quickly readable. Just as the pristine signs and logos that flood our visual field daily, the drawings have no perspective but only a two-dimensional quality which helps the artist to keep them at a distance. Besides, the formal properties of the drawings are as important as the vocabulary they use to communicate meaning.

Opie started drawing people using the old Letraset tracing paper over photographs but then he explains: 'I consciously looked around for a way in which I could draw [people] and it started by buying the aluminium symbols for male and female toilets and I looked at them and thought [that thus] I could combine as I often do the impersonal with the personal' (*Julian Opie*, video), tracing sharp lines which remind us of Michael Craig-Martin's schematic drawings. In the creative process, Opie concentrates on limbs, faces and necks, fragmenting the bodies but also stylizing the shapes and eliminating unnecessary parts: as a result, the bodies of his characters seem maimed or dismembered. The characters' round heads are severed from the torsos and they strangely look like the glory or aura that can be seen over the head of an angel.<sup>1</sup> The absence of neck, feet or hands gives an eerie feeling to the viewer, for de-personalization at first seems to reach an unbearable extreme. When Opie drops the photograph (with relief, he says), the work of art ceases to be a multilayered copy of reality. According to Mary Horlock in her 2004 monograph, Opie's style is a "'non" style,' for it tries to rationalise the human body, 'as if a special computer programme could abstract and reduce reality to quintessentials and fabricate them in multiple forms.'<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Opie considers his portraits as objects: 'I play with images and then I define them as objects, so the portraits exist [only as] digital files and at that point I don't deem them to be art works yet' (*Julian Opie*, video). Thus digital technologies are just a means in Opie's hands, a new tool or media allowing him to

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1. In his 1936 essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,' (*ibid.* [berkeley.edu/bidclass/readings/benjamin.html](http://berkeley.edu/bidclass/readings/benjamin.html), accessed 18 February 2006) Walter Benjamin wondered whether mechanically reproduced art could have 'aura,' a concept which he defined in *Illuminations* as the presence or atmosphere attached to a thing which is one of a kind and handmade (Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. with an introduction by Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn [New York: Schocken Books, 1969] 220). In theory, Opie's digital works are no such things, and yet, they have a unique presence in time and space as installations, or when the web user clicks on the online animated picture which comes to life every time for him or her alone.

2. Mary Horlock, *Julian Opie* (London: Tate, 2004) 85.

create new pictures faster and more accurately, to play with shapes and colours.

With smooth faces and all imperfections wiped out (no pimples and no wrinkles), the portraits present two button eyes, two dots for the nose, the mouth a longer upper line and a shorter lower one, the eyebrows two neat brushstrokes. However, Opie retains one or two details—an exotic flower for Muliati in the eponymous portrait *Muliati, Shop Assistant* (2002), a hair-band for Christine in *Christine, Gallery Director (back)* (2000), or auburn textured hair for Jo in *Jo, Architect* (2001). Thus he never completely erases the personalities of his models, no matter how schematized, ‘and their particularities bec[o]me more prominent through the reduction of everything else’ (Horlock 81).<sup>1</sup> Differentiations can also be noted in the titles (first names, professions, actions, gestures, postures or specific item mentioned), thus maintaining a sense of individuality within the multiplicity and giving a new resonance to the drawing. The characters’ serial forms prompt us to think about society, how we relate to one another and resemble one another, and whether we are all reducible to types.

Opie actually met the people he drew, and he liked the idea of their getting ‘enmeshed in the process’ (*Julian Opie*, video), but at the same time, he radically says: ‘I want it to be as if each person I draw were a multinational company with a logo.’<sup>2</sup> In the end, he seems to have achieved a sort of balance between the personality of his ‘real’ models and the impersonality of a generic form. Such an impersonal attitude on the side of the artist enjoins the viewer to do so as well. But as the viewer tries to tame his fear of an appalling void (the void in the pictures as well as the vapid-ity that our world resounds with despite its being saturated with signs and meaning), he inevitably loses some of his neutrality, as he becomes a sort of co-creator who fills in the blanks of the drawings’ minimal narratives. Through the simplicity of repeated gestures in the LED installations or computer animations, and plain faces in the portraits, the ‘reader’ is inevitably captured in a sort of story that he himself creates, reacting emotionally to the works of art presented.<sup>3</sup> How does Opie’s ‘fiction’ affect the viewer? How do Opie’s disengaged drawings invite but also thwart rep-

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1. Daniel Kurjakovic talks about their ‘indeterminacy’ in *Julian Opie: Portraits* (Zurich: Codax Publisher, 2003) and evokes the difficulty of connecting with Opie’s portraits at first.

2. Interview by Louisa Buck, ‘Logo People,’ *The Arts Newspaper* 12.3 (February 2001): 37, quoted in Horlock 82.

3. ‘Looking is an activity that involves the mental processing of preconceptions, associations and ideas, and this is slightly subjective. It is also dependent on memory’ (Horlock 87). We are thus invited to complete the narratives, as if Opie were trying to suggest that even though everything can be reduced to very simple lines, experience and aesthetic emotion are always specific.

representational and emotional identification? By thoroughly studying the history of human responses to images, in his book entitled *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*, Freedberg detected many factors that question a tidy separation of intellect and emotion and highlight the need 'to acknowledge the role of sensation in knowledge.'<sup>1</sup> Besides, the word 'aesthetics' derives from the Greek word *aisthanestai* ('to feel') and then acquired a larger meaning related to the notion of taste. In Kantian terms, the judgement of taste is subjective, disinterested and free, a triad which seems to correspond to the attitude that Opie's viewer should adopt: 'Opie often argues that a sense of detachment is necessary, that we must distance ourselves from reality in order to see it clearly.' (Horlock 43) As aesthetics explores the compromises and pitfalls of representation, one may wonder what drives an artist to create. Is it the emotion stirred in him by a face? Is it the colour of a person's eyes or hair? This emotional absence stimulates the imagination of the reader who willingly reconstructs emotions, and thus always faces the threat of abandoning his disinterested standpoint and slipping down the emotional slope. Why is the 'reader' so eager to rush in to fill the emotional gap, ascribing melancholy, arrogance or surprise to the characters depicted by Opie?

## 2 'Reading' Opie's pictures

Computers interconnect the image and the viewer to merge representation and reality in a new dual way. It seems that 'digital representations not only possess a power to move us borrowed from their analogue predecessors: they also contain a *vitality* which enables them to engage us in unique and personal interactive experiences. If images make their subjects present to us, digital representations make us present to them.'<sup>2</sup> In fact, Opie's characters all seem to be prisoners of the frame in which they are drawn, as well as prisoners of our gaze.<sup>3</sup>

In *This is Kiera walking* (Fig. 1), the female protagonist walks aimlessly. The rhythm, tempo, and flowing movements<sup>4</sup> of the kinoscopic mural

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1. David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: Chicago U.P., 1989) 438.

2. Timothy Binkley, 'The Vitality of Digital Creation,' *Perspectives on the Art and Technology. The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 55. 2, (Spring 1997) 107-116.

3. Ironically, Opie's reflexive work highlights the fact that we have become 'like prisoners turning over and over in our minds different avenues of escape, but always coming up against the hard reality of our situation.' In Richard Dorment, *Daily Telegraph* November 2, 1994, quoted in Horlock 98.

4. '[L]e marcheur n'est, d'une certaine manière, que son propre corps, que matière sensible [ . . . ] Tel est l'arpenteur: une forme qui n'apparaît qu'en tant que mouvement, une

installed in Braga, Portugal, at the Mario Sequeira Gallery in 2002, call to mind the aesthetics usually found on catwalks. The computer-generated animation of *This is Kiera walking* could be interpreted in two different ways, first as an alienated walker, with a sense of indirection: she is walking in a non-space, going nowhere. Nevertheless, one could say that she walks freely, sensually and harmoniously: we could watch her endlessly and let our dreamy or mesmerized minds wander, wondering where she might be going. But Kiera remains an ethereal character. Her body is weightless, fleshless, and inconsistent. She leaves no traces where she walks, and has no physical presence such as in the work by Richard Long for example: *A Line Made by Walking* (1967) shows a trampled line of grass which raises complex ontological questions that may allow us to throw a new light on Opie's work. Are we all possible objects or subjects of a work of art? Is it art to draw a line just by walking? This photo is impersonal, in the sense that the person who created the line is only present through absence. Yet the photo appeals to our emotions as viewers and stimulates our artistic perception. The individual act of walking relates us to the world and impersonality abandons the picture since we imagine ourselves doing this, as if walking on this lawn allowed us to escape alienation and to exist as individuals performing a singular action.<sup>1</sup>

Kiera, Christine and Julian were used for a project for the Selfridges Manchester store (2003). Ironically, Opie is not so detached since he is Julian and he gets involved in his own process of creation, in a mirror game that punctually undermines his impersonal treatment of the world. All three people are depicted walking around the building. The image is fixed but the sense of movement very powerful. Sometimes the three protagonists meet, walk together, and then head off in different directions, just as we do in the real world where we are perpetually moving, meeting and leaving other people. As the viewer identifies with Kiera, Christine or Julian, he becomes the alienated object of the work of art, but also the free-thinking subject that can 'read' the work of art in his own terms.<sup>2</sup>

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dialectisation entre fixité (permanence d'une configuration, stature) et fluidité (endurance du déplacement, dérive).' In Thierry Davila, *Marcher, créer: déplacements, flâneries, dérives dans l'art de la fin du xx<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Éditions du Regard, 2002) 45.

1. Augé sees the users of contemporary landscapes as transient figures like Kiera, as passers-by with no sense of belonging, which is one possible 'reading' of Opie's work. Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London: Verso Books, 1995).

2. '[comme si] le spectateur incarnait en fait l'objet ou la peinture, tandis que les instructions de l'œuvre ou les matériaux équivalaient à la toile de fond.' In Tony Godfrey, *L'Art conceptuel* (Paris: Phaidon, 2003) 143.

Opie's art seems to subvert and reverse any conventional perception of reality, as if we lived 'inside an enormous novel'<sup>1</sup> in which the external world would be complete fiction and the only reality left would be inside our own heads. This idea is the basis of 'Two minutes out of Time' (2000) or 'Anywhere out of the World' (2000), two movies by Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno in which the protagonist Ann Lee questions the conditions required for a story to emerge. Ann Lee lives in our imagination, and through the look (or non-look) that she sets on the spectator with her empty eyes, she opens the doors of the world of fiction. Just like Opie's characters, Ann Lee has few facial attributes, but unlike them, she has no history and no life, whilst Opie's characters have at least an inchoate professional life behind which they disappear in the portraits series. Ann Lee 'is a fictional shell with a copyright, waiting to be filled with a story.'<sup>2</sup> She questions the status of reality as she addresses the spectator to ask him or her who is real, giving the viewer an existence, acknowledging his presence, however artificial this acknowledgement may be.<sup>3</sup>

In the same vein, Opie's recent works are reactive. The people in the frozen portraits look at us, blankly at first, through two deadpan dots representing the eyes. On closer look, in some portraits, the blackness of the eyes is speckled with small white circles as in *Fiona, Artist* (2001), or the iris is coloured as in *Madeline, Schoolgirl* (2002), and these details make the characters look a little sad or melancholy. In the animated drawings, at first glance, the portraits appear to be static, lifeless images as in *Christine (blinking)* (1999), but as you keep looking at them, the figures in the portraits may suddenly shake their head, smile or raise their eyebrows,<sup>4</sup> engulfing the spectator's gaze: '[t]he incongruity of something so fugitive, fragile and human vies with the production of these works, which is stylised, mechanical and impersonal. Moreover, the actual experience of watching such simple gestures in perpetuity is unexpectedly captivating.' (Horlock 85) As Kathy Cleland puts it in her article 'Talk to Me: Getting Personal with Interactive Art,' just because 'a few moving pixels simulate behaviour we associate with life[, ] [w]e are also caught up in the *interactive* moment, as the portrait we are looking at suddenly looks back and subject object viewing relations are reversed, we become the

1. J.G. Ballard, introduction to *Crash* (London: Vintage, 1995) 4-5, quoted in Horlock 121.

2. Christine Paul, *Digital Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2003) 110-111.

3. On the contrary, Baudrillard argued: 'Il n'y a plus la possibilité même d'un regard—ça ne suscite même plus un regard parce que, dans tous les sens du terme, ça ne vous regarde plus.' (Baudrillard 21)

4. 'Coi movimenti delle membra mostran movimenti dell'animo (exprimer les affects de l'âme par les mouvements des membres).' Alberti, quoted in André Chastel, *Le Geste dans l'art* (Vendôme: Liana Levi, 2001) 41.

object, subject to the gaze of the portrait,<sup>1</sup> challenging the traditional relationship between the active viewer as subject and the art work as passive object to be gazed at and interrogated. We are used to seeing static human portraits in galleries and our imaginations speculate on the personality behind the image but our interaction with them is essentially one-sided. On the contrary, Opie's installations have created new interactive experiences for audiences, challenging the ontological status of the art object. We may wonder how life-like a simulated human persona needs to be for the audience to treat it and respond to it in the same way they would to a real human. Can these responses be generated by digitally created human personae? 'In a gallery context [ . . . ] it is obvious that we are dealing with a virtual, rather than a "real" human. In this situation, there is either a willing suspension of disbelief as the audience member "plays the game," treating the human entity as a person or, alternatively, the audience member might try to catch out and wilfully break the illusion.' (Cleland 15)

When the viewer faces Opie's nudes, the illusion is hard to break, for Opie's drawings are disturbingly sensuous and reminiscent of strip-shows. Kiera or Sara in *Sara gets undressed*. 3 (Fig. 2) or *Sara dancing* (2004), once captured in rigid paintings, are brought to life by computer generation, and the elegance of their movements or motion provokes a discreet erotic emotion in the viewer: 'Pop and realism, eroticism and lack of passion, theatricality and intimacy—all these engage with each other, just like aesthetic seeing and voyeuristic visual pleasure.'<sup>2</sup> Some critics argue that representations of sex in art nowadays have ceased to stir any emotions or desire in the viewer because sex is flaunted at the face of the viewer, bridling his imagination.<sup>3</sup> Even though Opie unequivocally shows women undressing in languorous postures, his nudes remain subtly erotic. And here lies the paradox that is at the core of his works: they are sug-

1. Kathy Cleland, 'Talk To Me: Getting Personal with Interactive Art' ([research.it.uts.edu.au/creative/interaction/papers/interaction04\\_43.pdf](http://research.it.uts.edu.au/creative/interaction/papers/interaction04_43.pdf), 8, accessed 4 January 2006).

2. Thomas Trummer ([www.julianopie.com/info/texts/trummer/word.htm](http://www.julianopie.com/info/texts/trummer/word.htm), 2004, accessed 10 October 2006).

3. '[O]n noterait même que la convocation répétitive du sexe par le champ de l'art tend à amoindrir le sens de l'image du sexe, avec cette double conséquence attendue: une représentation du sexe relevant du lieu commun; une esthétisation *séduisante* du sexe cessant d'aller de soi.' In Paul Ardenne, '*Corpus Eroticus*,' *L'Image corps: figures de l'humain dans l'art du 20<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Éditions du Regard, 2001) 299. Here, we could contrast Opie's aseptic work with Niki de Saint-Phalle's crude *Figure Hon* (1966) which was exhibited at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm. *Figure Hon* allowed viewers to enter the womb of a giant female sculpture lying on her back. (Long before these two artists, however, one thinks of Gustave Courbet's highly realistic close up on a female sexual organ in *L'Origine du monde* painted in 1866).

gestively erotic and provoke a certain emotion in the viewer *because* of the very impersonality of the drawings and the distance that both the artist and the viewer can take thanks to the intriguingly disengaged stylized graphic language.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Opie's erotic *Graves* and the *Remember Them* series (2000 and 2001) may shock the viewer but also touch him. Opie pictures the world of the dead as a mirror-image of the world of the living, and his treatment of death, a highly emotional subject matter, may seem utterly impersonal, reminding us of how Pop artists used low subject matter with no apparent critical treatment of it. But Opie's graves are not all just any graves and the personal dimension in the title *My Grandfather's Grave* (1997) cannot be denied.

When they are not recumbent statues, the characters that lie down in Opie's drawings seem to be asleep. Do they dream at all? Do they reflect on the beauty of their creator's works of art? Could they be mirror images of the state the viewer is in when he looks at an artistic creation, half-dreaming and half-awake, a sort of somnambulist sleep-walking out of his own self as he takes in the work of art<sup>2</sup> (just as when one reads a book and is carried on the wings of fiction), a viewer that would reach the confines of impersonality, a disembodied self surrendering to the evocative power of Opie's work, and reaching a sort of non-world in which the emo-

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1. In the light of François Jullien's book *De l'Essence ou du nu; avec des photographies de Ralph Gibson* (Paris: Seuil, 2000), we could almost say that, as he explores the digital medium and as he obliquely presents the invisible in the visible, Opie succeeds in capturing the 'absolute totality' of humanity: 'Est sublime, nous dit Kant, ce qui nous révèle une totalité absolue excédant le pouvoir compréhensif de notre faculté de représentation, et même de notre imagination; or, cette *totalité absolue* est précisément celle que le Nu non pas offre, c'est trop peu dire, mais impose, assène, sous couvert du normatif, par [ . . . ] le "tout est là" de sa présence. Du sublime, le Nu possède la violence, celle de [ . . . ] l'océan déchaîné.' (Jullien 145) What makes Opie's work sublime are its constant efforts to represent the world in a sort of absolute way, calling to mind what Lyotard calls 'un plaisir de peine,' i.e.: 'on n'arrive pas à présenter l'absolu [le sublime], et c'est un déplaisir, mais on sait qu'on a à le présenter, que la faculté de sentir ou d'imaginer est appelée à amener le sensible (l'image) à présenter ce que la raison peut concevoir; et même si elle n'y parvient pas, et nous en souffrons, un plaisir pur est éprouvé à l'occasion de cette tension.' In Jean-François Lyotard, 'Représentation, présentation, imprésentable,' *L'Inhumain: causeries sur le temps* (Paris: Galilée, 1988) 131-140.

2. In *Expérience esthétique et sentiment de l'existence: l'indifférence du monde* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2000), Alain Chareyre-Méjan writes: 'Ainsi peut-être la beauté des images du sommeil fait-elle comprendre celle des tableaux. Du moins ce qui en elle donne le frisson, empêche qu'on les quitte des yeux. Quand j'admire, au fond, quelque chose en moi s'endort dans la vision de ce qui m'a surpris. Lorsque Merleau-Ponty écrit que je suis, à l'occasion, "cette masse [ . . . ] presque sans pensée, clouée en un point de l'espace, et qui n'est plus au monde que par la vigilance anonyme des sens"' (Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* [Paris: Gallimard, 1976] 191) fait-il allusion au sommeil ou à l'expérience esthétique?' (Chareyre-Méjan 21)

tions that overwhelm him when he starts understanding the work balance the impersonality seen and felt at first?

Opie undresses the world in the same way as he undresses his standing figures. He nearly asks the viewer to do the same and to look at his works with new eyes after a sort of *tabula rasa* that would clear out the myriad of gaudy images, proliferating signs, and over-brimming information taken in by the eye in the modern world.<sup>1</sup> Opie's seemingly empty characters are not the symbols of a humanity that is spiritually bereft, although they may seem devoid of life at first. Through colours and movement, Opie's crowds are not anonymous and not without a touch of nostalgia, surfacing for instance in Maho's melancholy look in *Maho, Gallery Director*. 2. (Fig. 3)

Opie recurrently states his 'desire to plunge into what seems to be real, realistic' (*Julian Opie*, video). Ironically, in 'theEYE' video we can see his installations on gallery walls reflecting his other works, in a sort of *mise en abyme*, as if his work was physically a huge mirror with endless prismatic reflections in it. On the glossy surfaces of the installations, we can also see the reflections of the silhouettes of 'real' people (viewers) passing by, as if they were suddenly engulfed in this world of fiction. Here one may think of Jeanette Winterson's *transpersonality* evoked by Christine Reynier during the second 'Impersonality and Emotion' Conference (2004).<sup>2</sup> Opie's drawings are not only im-personal, but trans-personal, crossing over or transgressing the boundaries of the self to the other, thus destroying all categories (self/other, subject/object, narrator/reader, writer/reader, artist/viewer). When people look at art, Opie feels that they have a slight desire for 'if not answers, at least a position' which he says he does not have clearly. 'These things are really about looking at things and not about [ . . . ] translating them into something else' he says (*Julian Opie*, video). Nevertheless, they do appeal to the viewer's imagination, opening it up, and the aim of this paper is not to try to enclose Opie's work in the impersonality of a polished critical assessment, but rather an attempt to apprehend the unity of his work combining the impersonality and emotions of a thinker whose creations cannot exist without the viewer's gaze.

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1. 'As representations of reality supplant reality itself, everyday experience is increasingly about a fast-paced flow of images. Artists like Opie are trying to find a new way to deal with this' (Horlock 117) and to come to terms with 'our conflicting enchantment and disillusionment with the modern world.' (Horlock 79)

2. Christine Reynier, 'Jeanette Winterson's *Cogito*—"Amo Ergo Sum"—or Impersonality and Emotion redefined,' *Impersonality and Emotion in Twentieth-Century British Literature* (Montpellier: Publications de Montpellier III, 'Present Perfect,' 2005) 299-308.

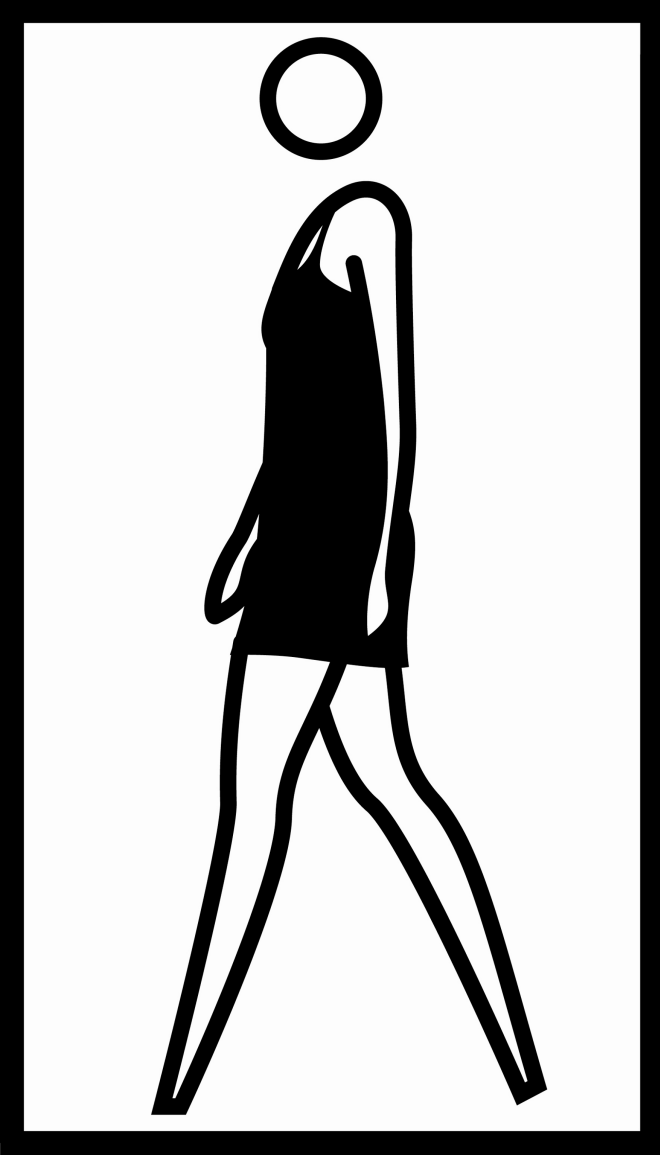


Figure 1. — Julian Opie, *This is Kiera Walking*



Figure 2. — Julian Opie, *Sara gets Undressed*



Figure 3. — Julian Opie, *Maho*, *Gallery Director 2*



# Ceal Floyer's Everyday Emotions

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Ceal Floyer represents the extreme of a neo-conceptualist and minimalist strain in current British art. By examining four key works that target objects so banal and simple that they ordinarily escape attention, one discerns Floyer's emphasis on inconspicuous but telling details as a means of disrupting conditioned emotional detachment. From the image of a full-scale light switch carefully projected beside a door to an empty trash bag filled with air and left sagging on the floor, a supermarket receipt tacked to the wall or found objects arranged by size, Floyer's works are chillingly sober and seemingly drained of any contingent emotional or personal content. Through substitution and irony, however, Floyer's works reveal an underlying emotional potential. The effect suggests our emotional distance may not be as great or certain as we often assume but only reflects culturally constructed coping mechanisms to filter and prioritise the daily flow of raw data to our senses. By subtly altering the principal attributes of these objects, Floyer peels away the hard skin of conscious life to expose our deeper, more convoluted responses.

In February 2001, at the start of an orchestral concert at the Symphony Hall in Birmingham, England, British artist Ceal Floyer stood alone on the auditorium stage and bit her nails before a microphone. Simply titled *Nail Biting Performance*, curator Jonathan Watkins has called this piece 'the artist defiantly assert[ing] her nervousness.'<sup>1</sup> While Watkins' description paradoxically evokes both confidence and vulnerability for Floyer, it clearly recognizes how the artist's action suggests her emotional availability as her apparently conflicted state is projected onto an audience.

Watkins cites this work as typical of Floyer in its conflation of absurdity and inner logic, yet as a work presenting the artist as a subject seem-

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1. Jonathan Watkins, 'Unbelievers,' eds. Judith Nesbitt and Jonathan Watkins, *Days Like These* (London: Tate, 2003) 10-15.

ingly consumed by emotions, *Nail Biting Performance* is the exception in Floyer's fifteen-year career. Indeed, this performance aside, her art belongs primarily to the opposite extreme of neo-conceptualist and minimalist strains in current British art. Whereas her Birmingham performance displayed 'an excruciating four minutes of nervousness,'<sup>1</sup> her other works—mainly sculpture, installations and video pieces—are notoriously slight and rigorously spare. Even with *Nail Biting Performance*, Floyer envisioned its symphony hall stage as the plinth for herself as object concretising the otherwise dead space between concert events.<sup>2</sup> Unlike a range of artists from her generation—from Rachel Whiteread to Damien Hirst—Floyer repeatedly denies the monumental or dramatic, creating objects and situations that often emphasize the seemingly insignificant by hinging on a small but troubling detail in an otherwise empty space.

Floyer's works are so chillingly sober and drained of overt emotional or personal content that if one were looking for the impersonal and unemotional in recent British art, it would appear one has found the clearest example in her productions. Yet looks will be deceiving as Floyer carefully manipulates her presentations of common, everyday objects to peel away the skin of conscious life. Under an otherwise stable surface, she pushes an object's physical properties to the absurd by draining its defining attributes and teasing out our more complicated personal attachments to them.

This article considers four works, found across Floyer's career, that follow that strategy. Three of them—*Light Switch* (1992-99) (Fig. 1), *Garbage Bag* (1996) (Fig. 2), and *Monochrome Till Receipt (White)* (2000) (Fig. 3)—all entail a single object, their subjects being, at least superficially, a light switch, a garbage bag, and a supermarket receipt. The fourth work, *Helix* (2001) (Fig. 4), brings together several objects in a strict, but seemingly arbitrary, pattern. This last piece can serve as an effective visual summary of Floyer's approach to our relationships to these 'ordinary' things regularly found in our midst.

In *High Art Lite*, British critic Julian Stallabrass casts a wary eye on such works of Floyer's, claiming that she makes 'the one-liner work of art.' 'To look at this work,' Stallabrass elaborates, 'is a little like doing crossword clues: you get the answer (or more likely the dilemma) and move onto the next.'<sup>3</sup> Being more about idea than image to him,<sup>4</sup> it is true that the

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1. Louise Hayward, 'Ceal Floyer' (Nesbitt and Watkins 86-89, 86).

2. Jonathan Watkins, ed, *Ceal Floyer* (Birmingham: Ikon Gallery, 2001) 11.

3. Julian Stallabrass, *High Art Lite: British Art in the 1990* (London: Verso, 1999) 99.

4. As Stallabrass points out: 'In the synthesis of idea and image that is the visual work of art, these works greatly favour the idea, and do so to the extent that the two may become

import (or what Stallabrass would call the weakness) of Floyer's work is precisely in the immaterial, which trumps our entrenched preconceptions. In that regard the answer, if indeed there is one, is neither so close at hand, nor as easily dismissed, as Stallabrass would have it. Such works may not be fraught with immediate emotional impact, but presented by Floyer as a means of confronting our daily relationships with most common objects, they at least suggest that our personal or emotional distance from them may not be as great or as clear as we may think. Emotional distance and emotional investment actually could be regarded as culturally constructed coping mechanisms, allowing a subject to filter and prioritise the daily flow of raw data to the senses.

Floyer's work highlights simple and ubiquitous items—just the sort that appear so unworthy of particular notice that they regularly escape our attention, even when located at the centre of our gaze. A garbage bag or a till receipt or a light switch... all are objects that seem utterly familiar, yet how many of us can remember exactly what style of light switch is in our bedroom or basement? Most of us may know what kind of car our neighbour drives, but do we know what kind of garbage bags our neighbour uses, after having seen them sitting by the road dozens of times?

In daily use these objects remain marginalised by our consciousness, though they may leave significant traces in the unconscious. Floyer says her work often 'attempts to prove something is really there, when there's no question about it in the first place.' (Watkins 7) As such, her work acknowledges different levels of presence for any object or set of objects in our experience. We must ask ourselves what exactly is 'there,' not only physically, but also psychologically?

To force this question, Floyer's central aesthetic task is one of substitution. She makes literal the codes and conditions of objects by altering the terms of their physical presence to unearth potential psychological obstacles in the viewer. Substitution exposes the sense of the familiar as no more than subjective presumptions about an object and how it operates in daily physical and psychological experience, thereby liberating the object to alternative connotations. Floyer's claim that 'Presumption is a medium in its own right' (Watkins 10) gets at the heart of her actions. By undermining personal presumptions, the works reveal the so-called neutral object as stubbornly embedded in the realm of our individual investment.

Floyer has not been alone on the British art scene in asserting this potentially hidden power of common objects in our lives. Michael Landy, for

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uncoupled. The image less embodies than illustrates the idea.' (Stallabrass 100)

example, is an artist who has posed innovative challenges to presumptions about objects and their personal value, most publicly and successfully in *Break Down*, a 2001 work in which he inventoried and destroyed all his possessions, from a car to a pen cap. Floyer's work, however, has taken a different turn. In contrast to Landy's deeply personal act, Floyer maintains objects on the plane of the impersonal and anonymous, relying on this placement to make the object equally available to every viewer and heighten the effect of any substitution. The object remains beyond possession, so that any subsequent attachments are not associated with the specific object but rather the conditions surrounding it.

In *Light Switch*, for example, the title is a play on words. The *Light Switch* is only the projected image of a full-scale light switch, carefully positioned by the gallery entrance, precisely where that object would normally be located in a room. Despite offering only the projected image of the object named in the title, this installation nonetheless fulfills that title's most basic meaning. *Light Switch* indeed switches a physical object with its representation in light and shadow. The term 'Light Switch' here signifies both the object *and* its absence. While the title denotes the work's presentation, the object is only connoted.

Through its paradox, *Light Switch* confronts viewers with the inadequacy of their presumptions. If presence here is only possible through absence, and absence through presence, the work's operation mimics how any light switch usually will remain outside our consciousness, even as we continually reassert its physical existence by switching lights on or off upon entering or exiting a room. Literally and figuratively, light switches hover at the edge of our experiences, but we reach for them to punctuate some of the most intense episodes of our lives—the end of a bedroom argument, the height of a party, or our arrival in our new house.

*Garbage Bag* similarly exploits the vagaries of language and the limits of our expectations. The work comprises an empty plastic garbage bag filled with air, tied shut and left sagging on the gallery floor like a full bag of garbage. Floyer has pointed out that she has never 'referred to [*Garbage Bag*] as a bag of garbage,' (Watkins 10) and though it holds no garbage, this empty object still contains the meaning of *Garbage Bag*. It still is, after all, a garbage bag, just as a wine glass is still a wine glass even when filled with water.

In addition to challenging our presumptions as *Light Switch* did, *Garbage Bag* has added complexity in evoking the personal precisely by evacuating what would be considered so intimate about this object—the garbage normally held inside. You can learn a lot about a person from his or her garbage, as any detective or archaeologist would attest. However,

when one sees garbage bags on the street, they are hardly ever seen as abandoned personal objects but rather as the anonymous refuse of society.

In 2002, when Floyer received a £30,000 Paul Hamlyn Foundation award, American newspaper columnist Dave Barry criticized the choice by citing *Garbage Bag* with particular contempt, deriding the work as

a standard black plastic garbage bag, just like the ones you put your garbage in, except of course that you have to pay people to haul your garbage bags away, whereas Ms. Floyer got \$47,000 for hers. There is a compelling reason for this: Ms. Floyer's bag is empty.<sup>1</sup>

Barry's reaction probably was not unique. In spite of this hostility, by citing personal experience as a counter-example his comments could be said to justify Floyer's act. It is Floyer's empty bag, ironically, that returns this object to the realm of the personal by rupturing the cohesion between presumption and evidence.

Although these objects by Floyer may be called impersonal, her operations remind us that our impressions of them, of course, cannot. Not in the gallery, not in the outside world. In trying to locate the place of emotion in today's artistic practice, one might say that in Floyer's case whatever place there is comes from the space her substitutions create between our presumptions about an object and the often-illusory conditions of its representation in her art.

Unlike *Light Switch* or *Garbage Bag*, there is no pun in the title or visual illusion in the object of *Monochrome Till Receipt (White)*. It is an actual receipt for £73.63 worth of goods bought at a Sainsbury's supermarket in London on 3 July 2000. Floyer executed the work as a comment on monochrome painting and modernist aesthetics by purchasing only merchandise that was predominantly white. Nonetheless, in relying on a common, disposable object as the physical support of this work, she remains within the register of personal quotidian experience.

Tacked on the gallery wall at eye level, this till receipt could be no more than a provocative post-modern critique, but it also can be read—again, literally—as a deeply personal document. From the list of objects purchased, it seems Floyer constructed the shopping spree to suggest an ordinary trip to the supermarket. In most ways, this receipt is just like the ones we are handed every day and which usually end up in the dust-

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1. , Dave Barry, 'That's not a trash bag — it's art!' *Miami Herald*, 18 May 2003 and 20 March 2006 [www.miami.com/mld/miamiherald/living/columnists/dave\\_barry/5883113.htm](http://www.miami.com/mld/miamiherald/living/columnists/dave_barry/5883113.htm).

bin without our even looking at them. While all till receipts look more or less alike from a distance, up close each is as different from the other as a fingerprint.

Louise Hayward has astutely called Floyer's receipt 'a contemporary still life,' (Hayward 86) as it lists nearly fifty items that both reflect the universal and reveal the personal. There are mushrooms, cheese, beans, fish—common items for a market trip. But there are also more unusual items, like nightlights, shoulder pads and correction fluid. Whatever conclusions you or I may make based on the purchases found on this list, what is most remarkable is that examining this receipt, even while bearing in mind Floyer's art historical allusion, can feel like a violation of someone's privacy. Indeed, things as diverse as nightlights and fish can speak of us personally, producing certain connotations when they turn up with other items on a receipt. Yet, how can our reading be violating someone's privacy when the list itself was composed for an art piece? Even the person's identity still remains a mystery to us. It is likely that Floyer did the shopping, of course, but why can't it be someone else asked by the artist to buy any objects desired, so long as they are white?

That Floyer—or whoever bought these items—chose them not only for their colour but also according to personal needs cannot be excluded as a possibility. Given these circumstances, is it right to call this receipt a personal object? Or is it the objects that it lists that are personal? Or is the only personal aspect about this object our individual feelings as we examine its contents? We could extend such questioning from *Till Receipt* to the whole of the works cited thus far. There is no clear division between personal or impersonal in them, since both are mediated by the flux of individual perceptions and experiences.

*Helix*, the last work to consider, becomes a formal bracketing of this situation by physically describing a sliding scale of personal relationships toward objects. *Helix* presents a variety of common items organized according to their diameter and fitted into the gauged holes of a plastic template tray. Some of these objects—like the screw or the battery—remain far from most people's idea of the personal. Others, like the candy or the 'Addidas woman sports spray' may be considered more personal, being affected by questions of taste (i.e. sensory preferences rather than practical necessity). Near the centre, however, just in front of the coffee cream, lies an object over which there is less doubt. It is a piece of jewellery—a silver ring. A ring, of course, can be a deeply symbolic and extremely personal item capable of provoking strong emotional reactions. When a person gives a ring, or loses a ring, the event can produce an intensely charged, even unforgettable, moment.

Taken as a whole, *Helix*—with its screw, its candy, its ring—acts as a measuring device, both physically and metaphorically, that allows the viewer the immediate possibility of visually contrasting personal relationships and responses to various objects. Like the till receipt's list, these objects probably produce different associations for different people. Some of them may provoke a strong response, while most of them probably do not. *Helix* reduces all these objects to their material and spatial properties, and that equation leaves as its remainder our psychological relationships to each of them as the only means for any further differentiation.

In all of these works, the artist's stance is not clear. From what she has placed before us, we cannot tell if she is stone-faced or sniggering. It is clear that Floyer's work is not the transitive exercise of relaying emotional states from maker to viewer. On the other hand, some sort of emotional response may be produced based on our uncertainty over, or discomfort with, the thought of any personal investment in these objects in quotidian life. Across these installations the personal and emotional seem to lie on the side of the viewer, provoked by objects that otherwise might provoke nothing at all. Reducing the work to a tautological gag, as Julian Stallabrass would have it, or elevating it to a scandal, as Dave Barry does, only demonstrates the precarious relationship we forge between such common objects and our emotional investment.

Emotion is usually considered to be our own personal territory. Many of the objects treated by Floyer often are thought to lie well outside its borders. However, by hinting that even there these two—emotion and object—can be entwined, Floyer's work suggests that the personal and emotional, like a light switch or a garbage bag or a till receipt, are also just among the everyday tools and accessories we use to get through life.

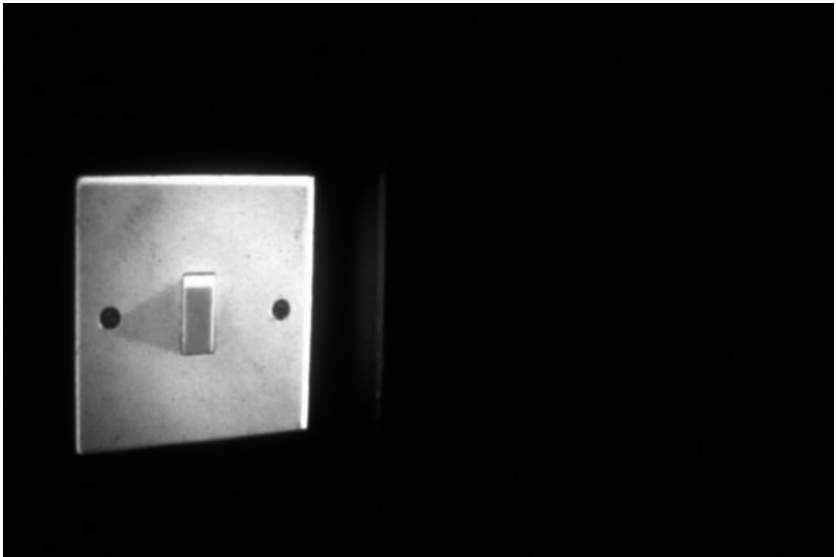


Figure 1. — Ceal Floyer, *Light Switch*, 1992-99, 35mm slide projection, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Lisson Gallery, London



Figure 2. — Ceal Floyer, *Garbage Bag*, 1996, garbage bag, air and twist tie, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Lisson Gallery, London

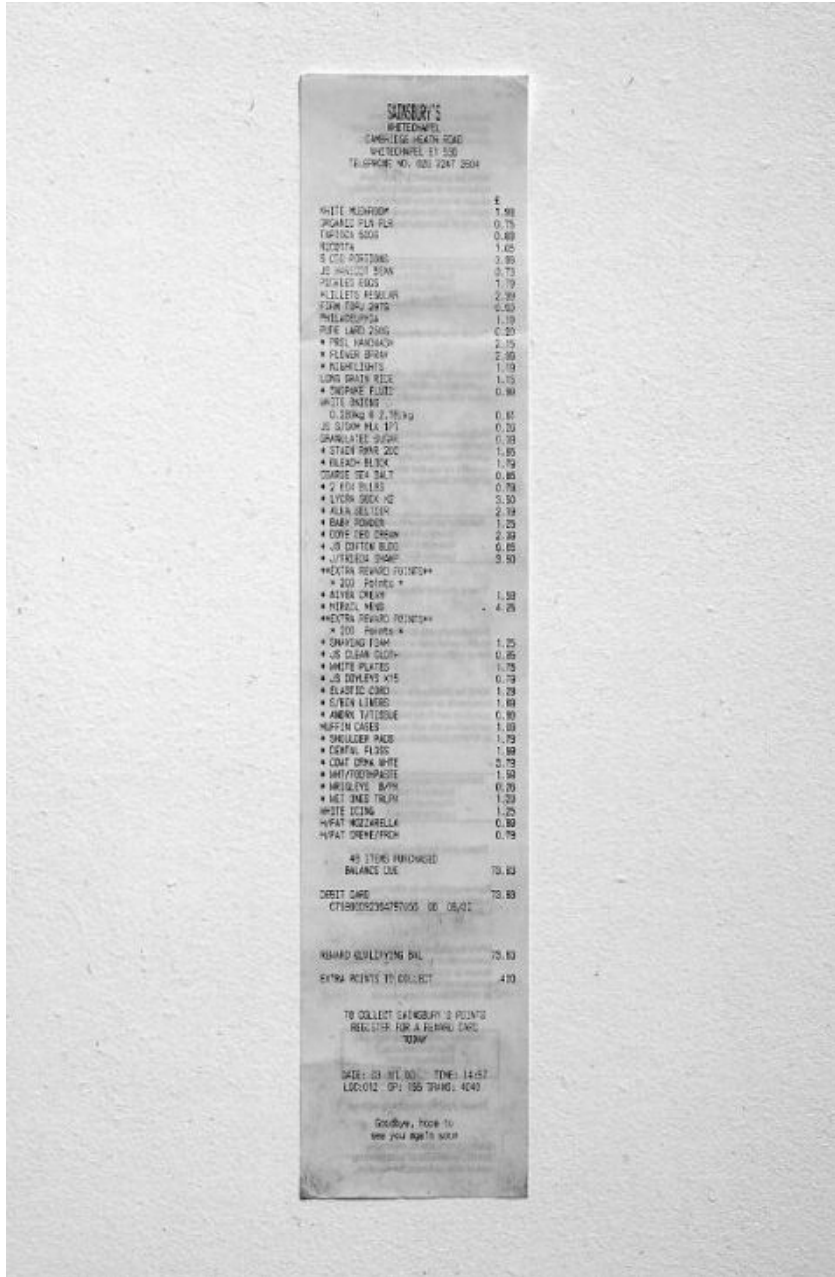


Figure 3. — Ceal Floyer, *Monochrome Till Receipt (White)*, 2000, ink on paper, 24 × 6 cm, UK version. Photo: Dave Morgan. Courtesy of the artist and Lisson Gallery, London



Figure 4. — Ceal Floyer, *Helix*, 2001, Helix template and found objects, 17 × 20 × 12.5 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Lisson Gallery, London



# Vanitas Redux: Sam Taylor-Wood's *Still Life* and the Poetics of Impersonal Sensibility

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Sam Taylor Wood, generally considered a YBA, is a versatile artist who works on photography and video, exploring the limits of those media. This article provides a panorama of her work before focussing on one of her most shocking installations, *i.e.*: *Still Life* (2001). In this mixed-media piece, Taylor Wood taps the tradition of baroque Vanitas still life and pushes it to its limits. By resorting to a remarkable economy of means (she simply uses a fixed video camera that is cruelly edited before being run in fast motion), she impersonally rehearses a tradition that is central to Western culture. But this excessively impersonal handling is but the prelude to a paroxystic soliciting of emotion as the filming of the still life is a way to express the pathic contradiction of the immaterial materiality of time. In the end, by showing emotion refined out of personality, what Taylor Wood stages is vulnerability and sensibility, a demise of the self that is the prerequisite for the impersonal practice of an ethics of alterity.

I tend to pare everything down to its minimum, every type of clever film technique that I want to reproduce I tend to eradicate quite quickly.<sup>1</sup>

Sam Taylor-Wood, generally considered a member of the Young British Artists movement, a former student at Goldsmith College, and a participant in the 1997 'Sensation' exhibition at the Saatchi Gallery is one of the *enfants terribles* of the English contemporary art scene. Her

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1. Sam Taylor-Wood, 'Interview with Clare Carolin,' *Sam Taylor-Wood*, ed. Sam Taylor-Wood, Michael Bracewell and Jere Miller (Göttingen: Steidl, 2002). N. pag.

works, from the photographs of the early 1990s to more recent videos and mixed-media pieces, have met with mitigated reactions, from the most dismissive to the most celebratory. Taylor-Wood is often accused of tampering with easy emotions. A *Guardian* article from 2004 reviewing an exhibition at the White Cube (the famous gallery owned by Taylor-Wood's husband, Jay Jopling) lampoons her work on account of its flashy shamelessness,<sup>1</sup> while another reviewer describes his experience of one of Taylor-Wood's earlier exhibitions in New York in the following terms: 'Taylor-Wood [...] does] leave me with qualms, a certainty that I have seen glib jokes in place of decent art.'<sup>2</sup> Admittedly, there is little decency—in the commonest acceptance of the term—in her practice and achievements. What Taylor-Wood ultimately presents the public with is an art of the excruciatingly indecent, obscene type, in which the spectators are spared next to nothing on the scale of the unbearable. But this needs qualifying immediately, for Taylor-Wood is also known for her sleekly elegant, superlatively clever presentations of what might be termed 'urban gentrification', i.e.: the evocation of the artistic, V.I.P. crowd of fashionable London that she featured in her famous *Five Revolutionary Seconds* photographic series or in her *Third Party* video installation (1999), with Marianne Faithful as the goddess of a-temporal, international party-going. Taylor-Wood was also commissioned to write and direct the video of Elton John's 'I Want Love' (2001), and then went on to publish a series of portraits of famous American actors, *Crying Men*, in which men of various generations, from Jude Law to Paul Newman, through Benicio del Toro, are frozen in states (or should one say 'poses'?) of terminal disconsolation, thus triggering off reflections on the authenticity of exposure. In all such instances, Taylor-Woods taps the rich emotional potential of the film stars together with their power of contextualisation (Taylor-Wood 2003, N. pag.), but she obviously mixes the glamorous with the lonely, the fragile, the vulnerable, in an audacious yoking that some have chosen to interpret as an instance of wanting to have one's cake and eating it, while others have grown enthusiastic about the potential of aesthetic and ethical intervention that such associations unleash.

However, one should remember that the piece that won her international notoriety is the video of David Beckham sleeping, ingeniously entitled *David* (references to the tradition are never far from her concerns, as will be developed later) that was commissioned by the National

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1. Jonathan Jones, 'Sam Taylor-Wood,' *The Guardian Digital Edition*, Nov. 2004, [www.guardian.co.uk/arts/reviews/story/0,11712,1340667,00.html](http://www.guardian.co.uk/arts/reviews/story/0,11712,1340667,00.html)

2. John Haber, 'The Body in Question,' *gallery-Going: Fall 2002*, [www.haberarts.com/chelfa02.htm](http://www.haberarts.com/chelfa02.htm)

Portrait Gallery and whose exhibition was advertised on all the television networks of the world. In this 2004 tribute to Andy Warhol's 1960s film *Sleep*, Taylor-Wood divests one of the world's most potent icons of masculinity of all aggressiveness and presents him as sleeping beauty, both the individual picture and emblem of vulnerability, relying on the (almost-)complete exposure inherent in the related images of bareness and unconsciousness.<sup>1</sup> Here again, the glamorous perfection of the football star's lineaments and cosmetics is counterbalanced by the sterner, less immediately appealing notions of isolation and loneliness, the fragility of individual exposure. What may be derived from the above, then, is that Taylor-Wood's art is certainly not of the monomaniac, monologic type. It favours a multiplicity of sources and subjects, and systematically presents the viewer with a tension that is the mark of a desire for openness.

If the emotions represented in and exacted by her works are easy to pinpoint, the impersonality of Taylor-Wood's creations may not have seemed apparent in the above-mentioned examples. Interestingly, in her early self portraits, the artist mixes personality and impersonality, as is perceptible in the famous 'Suck, Fuck, Spank, Wank' (1993) that shows her in a state of literal exposure and fragility, but hidden by oversize sunglasses that make her virtually unrecognisable. The same impression of wilfully putting together the personal and the impersonal is also at work in 'Slut' (1993), in which the heavily made up subject closes her eyes that cannot be seen, that refuse to look straight into the camera lens, as if the figure emerging from the black background were but an eyeless mask. Now, another self portrait of the artist is also shown in a more recent video, *Pietà* (35mm, 1 min. 57 sec., 2001) in which she is sitting on a flight of stairs, holding a bare-chested young man (one can recognise the American actor, Robert Downey Jr, who performed in the Elton John video, and in fact the *Pietà* was shot immediately after the making of the Elton John clip) who imperceptibly slips away from her hold, as she is readjusting her grasp and posture, straining to hold his dead weight, giving the impression, when the image ultimately fades out, that she is not going to be able to hold him for much longer. In this marginal self-portrait, Taylor-Wood's eyes never cross the viewer's, in a gesture that could be read as a refusal of personality—or at least personal contact—and more positively as an insistence on impersonal participation, as if the ephemerality and provisionality of the whole scene had to be unaffected by the identity of

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1. Richard Dornment, 'Beckham, the Sleeping Beauty,' *Arts.Telegraph* 28 April 2004, [www.arts.telegraph.co.uk/arts/main.jhtml?xml=/arts/2004/04/28/babecks28.xml](http://www.arts.telegraph.co.uk/arts/main.jhtml?xml=/arts/2004/04/28/babecks28.xml)

the models. Additionally, the fact that the whole video should be meant as a revisiting of one of Michelangelo's most famous works should not pass unnoticed. It is a further attempt to promote impersonality through imitation, the soliciting of the canon taking the upper hand over individual creation, according to the basic tenets of classical *imitatio*.

Hypertextual references to famous works in the Western—and more specifically English—canon are recurrent in Taylor-Wood's *oeuvre*. *Imitatio* is at work in her famous *Soliloquy* series that tap the conventions of sixteenth-century religious compositions with the top part (and bulk) of the piece being devoted to the portrait of a character (the portrait of a saint, in the original painting), while a band of images at the bottom reproduces the convention of the *predella* devoted to the narrativisation of striking episodes in the life of the saint. Taylor-Wood applies this technique to some of her paintings in which the panoramic *predella* is used as a means to figure the thoughts, drives or fantasies of the main subject, as if the whole series were an attempt at probing the unconscious of contemporary society. This is the case with *Soliloquy I* (1998), in which the young man featuring as the central subject is seen to be reclining in a position very reminiscent of Thomas Wallis's notorious painting *Death of Chatterton* (1865).

The logic of impersonal imitation is similarly at work in more recent pieces from which the human element has been jettisoned altogether, witness the photograph *Bound Ram* (2001) in which the eponymous animal is cowering in its urine and excrements, with bound legs, waiting for slaughter, a direct reference to Zurbarán's *Agnus Dei*. A similarly hyper-textual inspiration, though going further in its radical confrontation with the vulnerability of the flesh, turns towards what might be a reference to a still life by Chardin. *A Little Death* (2001) is made up of a flat screen in which a skinned rabbit is hanging from a nail in a wall, the lower parts of the corpse lying on a table, with a peach close to one of its sprawled paws. The image seems to be still at first, which gives the impression of a traditional still life, but the spectator soon realises that he/she is in fact confronted with a fast-motion video, in which nine weeks are being concentrated into the span of a few minutes. And soon enough the dead rabbit seems to move imperceptibly, then distinctly, and the shock of recognition comes as one realises that it is being devoured by thousands of worms, making it move from a solid to a liquid to a gaseous state, as signs of putrefaction spread over the wall and the table until, ultimately, there is nothing left of the carrion but the dry, motionless, picked-clean skin of the rabbit.<sup>1</sup> While still relying on the basic tenets of *imitatio*, one has come

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1. For more information on this video installation, see anonymous, 'Les choses de la vie,'

here to tread new, more intense territory, *i.e.*, that of the purely impersonal, in which the perspective of the still camera does not betray the least trace of a personal presence and in which the subject, a depersonalised borrowing from the tradition of Western painting, radically forbids any form of identification and any inter-subjective type of relationship. The experience of watching 'A Little Death' (perhaps an allusion to Georges Bataille) then intensifies and radicalises the experience felt in the bulk of Taylor-Wood's *oeuvre*, *i.e.*: a violent soliciting of affects in the impersonal idiom that harps on the joint categories of fragility and vulnerability.

*Still Life* (35mm, 3 mins. 44secs. 2001)<sup>1</sup> returns to the territory of the fast motion still life by using the same medium. The piece is shown on a flat screen, surrounded by a wooden frame, which at first sight creates the illusion of a fairly traditional luscious representation of a flat wicker basket of fruit (complete with apples, pears, peaches, apricots and grapes), in the still centre of the frame, resting on a wooden table, against a monochrome background sharing the hues of the table and wicker basket. Coming from the left, the light is cast on the central figure and leaves some of the background in the shade. The focus is on the figure and one notices, in the lower right-hand corner, a blue biro lying on the table, slightly out of focus. Now, as the camera remains fixed throughout, it takes some time to realise that the piece is in fact video and not photography. But soon enough, the impression of a creeping movement enters the composition, raising the question of the medium, as the fruit is seen to be growing beards of mould, first spreading superficially, then reaching fairly impressive proportions, adding silver, cottony volume to the dish, then quickly invading the table around it, covering all horizontal space in the foreground and background. Besides, the superficial movement of the mould is accompanied by another, deeper, more radical one, *i.e.* that of the fruit that first seems to adjust itself imperceptibly under the effect of decay, then to swell out and become bloated before shivering back into a wizened mass, imparting some sort of an organic rhythm to the whole painting which, from still life, is transformed into scene. Such organic beating is buttressed by the gradual change in the colour spectrum, from the dominating warm, golden hues of the beginning to the grey-greenish magma of the end. Another rhythmic motion is seen to be woven into the piece in that the regular variations in light remind the spectator of the alternation between night and day (or rather between day and twilight as total darkness is never allowed to interrupt the scene) that acts as a natural, cosmic reminder of the flight of time. One should specify that

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*Le Monde.fr* 21 Sept. 2005 [lunettesrouges.blog.lemonde.fr/lunettesrouges/2005/09/les\\_choses\\_de\\_l.html](http://lunettesrouges.blog.lemonde.fr/lunettesrouges/2005/09/les_choses_de_l.html)

1. Sam Taylor-Wood, *Still Life*, Tate Modern, London.

the last seconds show the scene being literally invaded by swarms of flies that, out of their sheer numbers and activity, come to darken and blur the whole image, in the disconcertingly deafening silence of the silent video installation, before the screen ultimately fades out into total darkness.

Now, together with *A Little Death*, this painting obviously revisits the conventions of eighteenth- and above all seventeenth-century *Vanitas* still life.<sup>1</sup> One recognises the iconography of the genre through the typical subject and choice of luscious fruit as the emblem of classical *maturitas*,<sup>2</sup> i.e.: the intimation that decay follows hard on ripeness, a *topos* that is pushed to the extreme and assumes the status of a conceit in Taylor-Wood's video. The conformity to the genre is also signposted by the resort to traditional emblems of ephemerality and transience, like the flies, which refer back to the presence of the insect (as a complement to the moths, lizards and mice of the *vanitas*-related bestiary) in seventeenth-century Dutch vanities, a detail once again submitted to hyperbolic treatment.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, the presence of the biro in the foreground might be reminiscent of the worn out goosequill that we are told is a staple of the seventeenth-century subgenre of the still life with books (complete with creased leather binding and attendant hourglass) as a specific reminder of the vanity of both material<sup>4</sup> and intellectual pursuits in the face of life's unavoidable transience.<sup>5</sup> The biro might also be seen as the metonymic avatar of the inscription that often accompanied the *Vanitas* still life and that, interestingly, used to appear in the lower right-hand corner, providing a redundant linguistic anchoring to the whole enterprise.<sup>6</sup> In traditional fashion, then, what is taken up in Taylor-Wood's *Still Life* is the *topos* of the material used to point to the immaterial, the finite from which to begin conceiving of the infinite, the concrete that

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1. The tradition of seventeenth-century Dutch painting comes to mind naturally enough, but one might find Bailly's famous 1651 *Vanitas Still Life* even more emblematic of the aesthetics and hermeneutics of the genre.

2. Peggy Munoz Simonds and Roger T. Simonds, 'The Aesthetics of Speaking Stones: Multi-lingual Emblems on a 17<sup>th</sup>-century English Transi Tomb,' ed. György E. Szónyi, *European Iconography East and West: Selected Papers of the Szeged International Conference* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 1996) 50.

3. H.G. Gadamer, 'The Speechless Images,' *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1987) 85.

4. For more information on the warnings against the vanity of material wealth, see Ann Beningham, 'Introduction. The Consumption of Culture: Image, Object, text,' eds Ann Beningham and John Brewer, *The Consumption of Culture 1600-1800. Image, Object, Text* (London: Routledge, 1997) 10.

5. Douwe Draaisma, *Metaphors of Memory. A History of Ideas about the Mind* (Cambridge, C.U.P., 2000) 37.

6. Beth F. Tobin, *Picturing Imperial Power: Colonial Subjects in Eighteenth-century British Painting* (Durham: Duke UP, 1999) 191.

promotes abstraction, in a word: the traditional harping on fragility and ephemerality to provide an allegory of the human condition dominated by mortality.

*From Goosequill to Biro* might be an apt title for the piece, both signposting its conformity to a genre and its tampering with or at least adaptation of generic conventions. For the biro, discreet and incongruous as it is in the general arrangement of the piece, acts as a marker of anachronism and paradox, a figure that seems to dominate Taylor-Wood's *Still Life*. This sense of paradox is captured by a critic reflecting on the art of Taylor-Wood in general and coming up with the insightful opinion that it is a combination of 'sensuality and sepulchral chill'.<sup>1</sup> However, the tonal paradox is not the only one at work here. First of all, the title introduces an antiphrastic commentary, since the in-built principle of fast motion is what characterises it most specifically, as may be inferred from the above. What we are presented with, in fact, is a hesitation between the immobile and the moving that resolves itself into pure movement, in the last seconds when the swarms of flies are seen to crisscross the video screen in anarchic patterns reminiscent of Brownian movement. The effect is prodigious, in the acceptation of showing a prodigy or monstrous occurrence, as such logical impossibility (the inanimate generating pure movement) assumes an excessively striking pragmatic function. Added to this is the contradictory impression that though the fast motion cannot be overlooked after the first few seconds of the viewing, a sense of permanence remains, since despite the movements and alterations the identity of the subject is not substantially modified, the morphology, lighting and general shape of the figure being recognisable throughout. One step further, the choice of video, which allows for the introduction of the temporal dimension through movement (as opposed to the conventionally emblematic and allegorical reference to movement in the painted versions of the *Vanitas* still lifes) raises powerful questions about the nature of the medium. In fact, the first moments of confrontation with *Still Life*, if taken at the beginning of its running time, because of the presence of the flat screen and of the wooden frame around it,<sup>2</sup> perform an ambiguity or confusion as to the medium since the first impression is that of a confrontation with the photograph of an arrangement of fruit or, possibly, the photographic shot of a painted still life. In other terms, it seems as

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1. Michael Bracewell, 'The Art of Sam Taylor-Wood,' ed. Sam Taylor-Wood, Michael Bracewell and Jere Miller (Göttingen: Steidl, 2002). N. pag.

2. A technique favoured by other contemporary artists, like Ger Van Elk, for instance, revisiting a series of Pissaro paintings by tapping the potential of pixelisation as an intensification of pointillist effects

though illusionism were first introduced the better to be shattered and condemned in the next few seconds and throughout the video, one of the apparent purposes being to expose illusionism as lie.

Interestingly, in those early seconds when stillness and illusionism prevail, the installation becomes a sign (a photograph) referring not to a concrete referent, but to another sign, *i.e.*: a painting belonging to the *Vanitas* still life genre, as suggested above. Paradoxically, then, Taylor-Wood's work calls forth the paradigm of genre painting *without* referring directly to a painting, and by representing real objects instead. Said differently, the video installation summons the painting *in absentia*, *i.e.*: by deputizing for it, as pure substitute. But the real paradox of this presentation is that the chain of simulacra (in which a sign is taken to refer to another without any direct link with any identifiable, concrete, ontologically discrete referent) becomes itself but mere appearance, since the video flow, by introducing temporality, summons the concreteness of the represented subject, the thereness of the basket of fruit, so much so that the simulacrum and concrete object are seen to coexist in a reciprocally haunting mode. What appears from the above is that *Still Life* owes much of its pathic power to the technical, impersonal rendition of a time-honoured motif. The impersonal, unblinking efficiency of the video apparatus is used to strikingly revisit a tradition whose subject is one of the most potent passions or humours as have inspired Western tradition, *i.e.*: melancholy. The technical acceleration from lushness to decay taps the pathic potential of temporality (performing an image of inexorability) by impersonally presenting an image of absolute exposure and vulnerability.

As may be obvious in the previous remarks, what Taylor-Wood is interested in is the violence of images, a violence that she performs in relation with tradition, by using new media, and with a view to defamiliarising the viewer's gaze. More specifically, the main tool in this aesthetics of iconographic violence is paradox. But it is not altogether the only one. By far. In *Still Life*, paradox finds its roots in the practice of disturbance—more particularly temporal and rhythmic disturbance. In fact, what we are presented with is the sublime device called *ametron* whose function is to allow for the mutation of beautiful still life into sublime installation. This is all the more striking as, through the use of video, Taylor-Wood manages to update the more archaic versions of visual narrative which she often paid a visit to, in her earlier production. This she did with the predellas of her *Soliloquy* series, with the monumental collages of her *Contact* (contacts, prints and post-it notes, 660 × 220 cm, 2000), and with the *Five Revolutionary Seconds* series in which, still on a grand scale, she used

a photographic camera that panned, registering a 360-degree rotation in one continuous take. This corresponds to a 'five-second revolution shot round a room during a five second exposure,'<sup>1</sup> the image being a still photograph, but accompanied with a soundtrack reproducing sounds taped during the take. In this hybrid between the still photograph and the film or video shot, photography is stretched to breaking point. In the *Five Revolutionary Seconds* series then (which in the exhibition room corresponds to a very elongated colour photograph in vinyl with sound, measuring 72 × 757 cm), Taylor-Wood makes it impossible for the viewer to catch the whole exhibit at a glance, making him or her subservient to the tyranny of linearity and time.

Shockingly, in such video installations as *A Little Death* and *Still Life*, the reverse becomes true in so far as the use of a time-capturing medium allows for the spatial taking in of the whole process at a glance that has to remain still, movement being provided by the video flow. This clearly creates the conditions for a viewing of the adhesive type in which disturbance through acceleration and montage (hence ellipsis), even though effected through the impersonal medium of the video camera, has an arresting, affecting function.

Hyperbolic literalisation is also one of the means that *Still Life* resorts to by taking one of the emblems of traditional *Vanitas* still life, the fly, and by multiplying it, transforming the motif from aesthetic convention to organic reality.<sup>2</sup> As suggested above, the fact that there should be no soundtrack underlines the uncanny nature of the deafening silence, thus rendering the Brownian ballet of the flies even more menacing and presensitizing the impression of vulnerability.

Besides paradox, disturbance and literalisation, another means to perform violence on the spectator is inherent in the choice of isolation that goes along with concentration. By focussing on a figure that is cut off from all background, and by radically de-narrativising it (even though a form of re-narrativisation is effected through the use of the video flow), the presentation is drained of its figurative, illustrative, narrative effects foregrounding the matter-of-factness of the figure. In Deleuze's terms, this is tantamount to moving beyond figuration towards pure sensation,

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1. Adrian Gargett, 'Representations // recognitions // Questions: The Art of Sam Taylor-Wood,' *Getunderground* 15 April 2004 [www.getunderground.com/underground/columns/article.cfm?Article\\_ID=1542](http://www.getunderground.com/underground/columns/article.cfm?Article_ID=1542)

2. This type of radical defamiliarisation resorting to the multiplication of not symbols but *agents* of decay has been favoured by the YBA, admittedly, witness Damien Hirst's famous installation *A Thousand Years*, in which the decaying head of a large animal (a cow) is lying on the floor, in a huge Perspex box, surrounded by vibrating flies flying anarchically and meeting their deaths at the hands of an insect-ocutor.

i.e.: that which is transmitted directly.<sup>1</sup> Of course, concentration follows close on isolation and paves the way for intensification which seems to be one of the most powerful devices at work in Taylor-Wood's production. For in fact, as Jean-Luc Nancy reminds us, the prefix 're-' in the compound 'representation' must not be taken as a marker of repetition but, more specifically, of intensification, since in classical rhetoric, *representatio* is not strictly synonymous with faithfully mimetic representation but indicates some sort of a foregrounded or underscored (re-)presentation whose function is to imbue the (re-)presented subject with displayed, ostentatious *presence*.<sup>2</sup> Such presence is rendered all the more perceptible, almost haptic, by the nature of the video image itself which, Nancy reminds us, is not projection on a screen but penetration of a screen. (Nancy 137)

It thus appears that paradox, disturbance, isolation, literalisation and intensification are hyperbolic devices that are meant to produce some ostension of the figure, not as mere represented object but as force or presence. (Nancy 74) Such a manifestation is but a means to promote emotions of the striking type, like surprise and violent pathos, and the central notion that is thrown into the viewer's face is that of fragility. When all is said and done, then, the impersonal, technical imitation of tradition becomes a means for the artist to vanish out of existence, to withdraw any human presence and trace of personality from the subject of her presentation, the better to present and solicit forces. *Still Life* thus moves well beyond the imperatives of mimesis and figuration. This it does by taking up a baroque *topos* (and the choice of seventeenth-century Dutch still lifes as a hypotext becomes absolutely meaningful here) according to which works of art feature an excess of matter the better to point at immateriality, or infinity.<sup>3</sup> This is probably what led a critic of Taylor-Wood's *oeuvre* to comment on the 'too thereness' of her images (Bracewell N. pag.). In other terms, despite the crucial paring down of technical effects, some sort of a baroque temptation is at work in *Still Life*, a work in which sensual emphasis on the presentation and presence of materiality (definitely visible, potentially haptic) is used as a means to suggest the infinite and the invisible.<sup>4</sup>

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1. Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon. Logique de la sensation* I (Paris: La Vue du Texte, Editions de la Différence, 1996) 9-10, 27-28.

2. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Au fond des images* (Paris: Galilée, 2003) 73-74.

3. On the law of *extremum* of matter, see Gilles Deleuze, *Le Pli: Leibniz et le baroque* (Paris: Minuit, 1988) 166.

4. For more information on baroque aesthetics as mimesis of nothing ('mimétique du rien'), see Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *La folie du voir. De l'esthétique baroque* (Paris: Galilée, 1986) 49.

This excursion into baroque poetics raises the question of the goals, functions and effects of the work, on top of the means of production and presentation commented on above. The first answer would be that *Still Life* is yet another means to render visible what is invisible. This in fact constitutes a *topos* of religious art in general and of baroque art in particular and one cannot but accept that metaphysical concerns loom large in Taylor-Wood's works, and specifically so in her still lifes in particular. However, it seems as though there is something more notable in the way in which this work shows time as a modality of the invisible. In fact, what the acceleration of the video-flow foregrounds is some sort of opaqueness that is the dimension of time. Through disruption and intensification, the traditionally transparent is given literal colour, shape and movement. Said differently, what *Still Life* does to temporality is, by stretching chronology to breaking point, perform a demise of *chronos* the better to promote an image of time as pure *kairos*, *i.e.*, as Giorgio Agamben reminds us, contracted *chronos*.<sup>1</sup> We are thus left with an image of the quality of time more than a quantitative image of time, which gives an impression of its flaunted substance.

Secondly, what *Still Life* shows is that it shows, precisely. This implies that by filming an aesthetic arrangement calling forth a whole tradition of genre painting, it lays the stress on the presentational process itself, clearly signposting that its agenda is not figurative, but sensation-oriented, as underlined above. More especially, by promoting some presentational opaqueness, what *Still Life* does is present presentation as endless process, thus underlining its consciousness of the workings of contemporary media and commenting on the timeliness of its present contribution to tradition. In other terms, Taylor-Wood situates herself in the wake of the canon of early-modern and modern representation, vigorously tackling any crippling manifestation of the anxiety of influence the better to renew, through the efficiency-seeking techniques of impersonal media, the presentational power of visual arts. Even if she keeps paying tribute to the role of Ancients, she thus comes up as a fervent Modern in her practice, while helping define the presentness of British contemporary art.

Thirdly, what *Still Life* shows, *directly*, because it does away with the trammelling effect of figuration, is a force. And this force has a name: it is the violence of vulnerability, an obsession that runs through Taylor-Wood's *oeuvre* and seems to find its pathic consummation in this work.

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1. Giorgio Agamben, *Le Temps qui reste*, trans. Judith Revel (Paris: Payot/Rivages, 2000) 114-115.

Without showing any human figure, by tapping the potential of the emblems and allegories of tradition and stretching them to their limits, this work saves itself the mediacy of personality (both the artist's personality and the subject's) to throw vulnerability into the viewer's face as pure force or event. And ultimately, it is the violence of the pathic projection, completely unhindered by any residue of personality, that makes *Still Life* such a potent visual event.

By way of conclusion, the previous developments lead me to the evocation of Taylor-Wood's art not merely as religious or, at least, metaphysical (which it is, perforce, partially), but as an art that is ethics-oriented. As underlined above, her point is to break open both the canon and the *doxa* of figurative and non figurative representation so as to perform some violent defamiliarisation on the viewer as passive, affected participant. In other terms, and to take up an opposition very much valued by Emmanuel Levinas, Taylor-Wood's photographs, videos and installations are definitely concerned with the event of the Saying breaking open the Said, which does not just imply a renewal of perception, or the breaking open of *doxa* through paradox but above all the suggestion that openness and exteriority are better than totality and the definite.

One step further, what I tend to see in Taylor-Wood's work (and I consider *Still Life* as eminently emblematic of this tendency) is a resolute attempt, by eschewing any move towards personality, by concentrating on the non-human and the immateriality of forces, to postulate a time and locus that are elsewhere than in being and otherwise than being.<sup>1</sup> Related to this ethical agenda, I tend to see Taylor-Wood's suspicion of the mimetic aspect of representation in general and personality in particular as an attempt to perform (as opposed to represent) some form of disinterestedness (or *dés-inter-esement* to take up Levinas's play on words) whose purpose is to suggest a way out of the condition of being (*esse*, hence *-esement* to accommodate the French suffix).<sup>2</sup> In other terms, what remains is a demise of the self as the temple of the same in favour of a possibility to be affected, as pure openness, exposure and vulnerability, which Levinas sees as the condition of sensibility. And in her conception of emotion as miles away from its narcissistic, same-oriented acceptance, what Taylor-Wood presents us with, ultimately, is ethical emotion refined out of personality, *i.e.* impersonal sensibility.

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1. I am referring to one of Levinas's most enduringly influential propositions as expounded in *Autrement qu'être, ou au-delà de l'essence* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 1978).

2. Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethique et infini* (Paris: Fayard, 1982) 107.

# Contemporary Architecture in London: a New Sublime

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A meditation on the epic dimension of London's contemporary school of architecture: starting from Arakawa's notion of the architectural body—that we always are what our senses perceive and take in from our environment—, and thus from the fundamentally affective dimension of architecture, the aim of the paper will be first to review significant contemporary architectural 'gestures', and their objective correlatives, by the leading figures of the new London architecture (among others, Alsop, Farrell, Foster, Grimshaw, Hopkins, Rogers), then to investigate the dialogical tensions that sustain, and result from, such gestures—for instance concerning economy and the urban scape, the relation of engineering with art, the shock between past and present, or between utopian and pragmatic drives—, to come to a definition of an architectural sublime in full development, treading a delicate path between a stark challenging austerity and an exhilarating lightness and inventiveness, a demanding dialectics at the very heart of the exploratory dynamism of contemporary London.

'London architecture today is, on the one hand, a reassertion of the continuity of the city, on the other, a manifesto for radical change. [ . . . ] London is increasingly a place [ . . . ] where history and modernity coexist and feed on each other. As such it has lessons to teach the world'<sup>1</sup> Any visit to contemporary London will easily corroborate this judgement; particularly concerning the latest productions of Foster, Rogers and Hopkins among others. Foster's work, for one, consistently impersonates the aesthetic and technical brinkmanship which is so inspiring in London's contemporary architectural practice. As proof of this inventiveness, one

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1. Kenneth Powell, *New London Architecture* (2001; London: Merrell, 2005) 25.

need only turn to a few outstanding places and buildings. In the moment of surprise, the emotional and intellectual shock they cause unveils a truth soon to be blunted and possibly erased by what Coleridge calls the 'film of familiarity.' In actual fact, what they bring us comes very close to Burke's sublime. Their fight against gravity, space and form may be said to vibrate with the adventurousness that sustains modern architecture at its best. At the same time, these examples seem to articulate a specific national dimension characterized by a kind of romantic energy both running up against and supporting the sleek self-control of surfaces and appearances. Three preliminary examples will thus serve to illustrate the inherent energy of larger-than-life architectural gestures embodying technology at its most advanced, an energy born of the oxymoronic alliance between a vision of tradition transformed by a utopian invention of the future, and a ruthless pragmatism deliberately rejecting arbitrariness and artifice. The sheer logic of artefacts thus exploited or pushed to their extremes fosters a pathetically fragile sense of beauty, the beauty of the human fight with and for life. The tentative but necessary discovery of new types of equilibration which characterized the work of the cathedral builders, in Viollet-le-Duc's description,<sup>1</sup> seems to find here a new and complete illustration. The forceful exchange between the lyrical élan and the requirements of technology may vary in its economy, but in the best of cases it achieves a balanced fruition which has little to do with artistic sublimation, resulting as it does from an expressiveness at once limited and multiplied by concrete feasibility.

Let us first imagine the visitor's impatient quest for the Swiss Re Tower<sup>2</sup> in the reticulated streets of the City, and the fierce visual blow that suddenly stupefies her or him at the exhilarating sight of an oval tower springing from, and tapering over the diminutive buildings around it,<sup>3</sup> just as happens in Chartres or Strasbourg when the daunting apparition of the cathedral instantly overawes the spectator at the unexpected turn of a street.

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1. 'La construction gothique [...] est souple, libre et chercheuse comme l'esprit moderne [...]; elle est ingénieuse: ce mot dit tout.' Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, *L'Architecture raisonnée* (Paris: Hermann, 1964) 102.

2. Swiss Re is a reinsurance firm. The building which goes by its name shows Foster and Partners at their most innovative. According to Powell, 'At street level, the painstaking aerodynamic modelling of the tower has been calculated to avoid down draughts and ensure benign conditions in the new piazza that surrounds the building. [...] It reinforces the point that office towers can be distinctive, even beautiful, objects, that complement, rather than deface, the skyline.' (Powell 233)

3. See figure 1: Swiss Re (*Foster and Partners Catalogue* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2005) 273; and on <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/image:30-St-Mary-Axe.jpg>).

The second example could be the discovery, at Canary Wharf, on the ground floor of the HSBC (Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation) offices, of Thomas Heatherwick's 'Wall of History': a thirty meter long and seven meter high sort of relief, a cold composition based on the rather chilling sleek and steely shine of a multitude of blade-like-fins. This frigid composition confronting a visitor coming in through the secondary entrance is suddenly reversed at the moment of turning round and looking back, in the instant realisation that each single fin is part of a teeming composition of 4,000 images spanning two centuries, the colours of which explode in one's face: innumerable moments of life, from simple commercial contracts to snapshots of the different stages in the construction of the Eiffel Tower in Paris. This is the perfect example of the breathtaking experience which accompanies the dynamic 'abutting'<sup>1</sup> of industrial efficiency against variegated life, inspiring modern architecture at its most exploratory. The highly-strung contrast thus achieved shows the two contrary dimensions to be mutually supportive in a kind of metaphoric exchange: the constructive interrelation between paradoxically complementary alternatives could be said to be very close to the open semiosis Umberto Eco speaks of. This underlying abstract scheme may surface at any moment in other buildings, as in Tate Modern whose former industrial logic—Giles Gilbert Scott's 1947 power factory—is now formalized into its quintessential design: the bare black parallel oblongs of the triple windows photographed in *London, A Guide to Recent Architecture*<sup>2</sup> frame the light and set it off ascetically, as twinned or triple windows in early Romanesque churches would.

The third introductory image illustrating this architectural exploration of the possible, could be the Turner-like composition featuring Giles Gilbert Scott's 1930 Battersea Power Station (Powell 80-81) soon to be transformed by Nicholas Grimshaw and Partners with Benoy into a grand auditorium. The high rectangular structure framed by four corner chimneys, 'classical columns in concrete,'<sup>3</sup> looms sombrely at the same time as it is delicately silhouetted against the still glowing sunset. A poignant contrast is born of the collision between the delicate russet transparency of the light-glazed upper structures and Scott's dark monumental brickwork, which in their alliance with the shining river and the sombre shape of

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1. 'Suppose within the girdle of these walls / Are now confined two mighty monarchies, / Whose high upreared and abutting fronts, / The perilous narrow ocean parts asunder', *Henry V*, Prologue (19-22).

2. Samantha Hardingham, *London, A Guide to Recent Architecture* (2002; London: Chrysalis Books Group, 2005) 125.

3. Rowan Moore and Raymond Ryan, *Building Tate Modern* (London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 2004) 180.

the bridge spanning it on the left, seem to exemplify the daring and epic pitting of architectural contraries against one another which is London's contemporary version of the sublime.

## 1 Three contextual elements

The first of these elements concerns the notion and practice of architecture *per se*. Arakawa's *Architectural Body*<sup>1</sup> and its revolutionary approach might help us better understand what such shock effects really achieve. The underlying meaning of the title *Architectural Body* is that the notion of architecture must be extended to include the user's or the viewer's body sensations in the course of the exchange with any 'architectural surround.' (Gins and Arakawa 39) According to Arakawa, architecture is not simply a matter of inventing and shaping forms. It is the whole of space offered to us by its constructive strategies: '[ . . . ] the organism-person feels and thinks its (way through an) environment;' (Gins and Arakawa 3) 'The body is sited. [ . . . ] An organism-person, a sited body, lives as one site that is composed of many sites.' (Gins and Arakawa 5) Our different senses are dependent on the 'landing sites' offered to them: 'A person parses the world at any given instant into particular distributions of landing sites;' (Gins and Arakawa 6) hence, for instance, the contrary feeling of constriction and expansion respectively caused by a low or a high ceiling. A telling illustration of this is found in Tate Modern again, where after the intensely dysphoric feeling fostered by dark successive showrooms, a sense of spine-tingling relief is triggered off by the surprise explosion of light, the totally unexpected freeing of a vision chancing upon the panoramic skyline of London discovered through a glazed wall, a fitting conclusion for an itinerary called 'Rites of Passage.' For Arakawa, architecture is 'a coming alive for "sentience",' (Gins and Arakawa 6) an appeal to the five senses, which allows us to, and makes us 'person.' (Gins and Arakawa 2) We are at each moment 'held in place' by 'architectural surround[s]' (Gins and Arakawa 38) which are a constant but varied source of the subconscious affects at the origin of our emotions. Architecture is thus considered from the point of view of its reception by the user. This response theory of the art is quite enlightening concerning everyday reactions to one's physical environment; more interestingly, it is extremely helpful to characterize the effects of the new type of architecture which is being defined in London today.

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1. Madeline Gins and Arakawa, *Architectural Body* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2002).

The second point to consider is the historical context of what is being invented. This recent architectural productiveness is first and foremost to be assessed in terms of its material conditions: a liberated and flourishing economy which, in reference to international globalization, entailed the formation of master teams of architects such as Foster and Partners (Swiss Re headquarters, City Hall, the Millennium Bridge), Grimshaw Nicolas & Partners (Battersea), Hopkins (Westminster Station on the Jubilee line), Michael & Partners (Lloyd's Register), Rogers (Richard) Partnership (the Millennium Dome). Also to be mentioned, a second and most effective catalyst, the National Lottery's financial support, redirected by Labour towards projects which would otherwise have had to be funded from taxation. Created in 1994, the National Lottery has transformed the arts' scene. In the case of architecture, the Millennium commission was a major recipient of funds from the Lottery. Third, a new awareness of, and commitment to, the need to achieve a synthesis between the civic and the commercial, contrary to France where it has long been a tradition—perhaps less so in recent years—to consider such concerns as secondary and possibly tainted, and to prefer grandiose abstract schemes like Dominique Perrault's Bibliothèque Nationale de France at Tolbiac. This constantly inventive conjunction between functional requirements and individual needs makes modern architecture in London particularly seductive.

An objection could be raised against the very idea of a specific English brand of modern architecture: a superficial approach might make one think that such urban developments are nothing but supplementary signs of the levelling effects of globalization. This contention is not unfounded, yet a comparison between the recent architectural creations in Berlin, London and Paris—to keep to a European context—, immediately shows that in each case a trans-national style is found to vary according to the country: from the massive, like the British embassy in Berlin, to the abstract and more formal in Paris, to the pragmatic in London, which is not new and has frequently happened in the past, as appears in the national variations in Romanesque and Gothic styles or the metamorphoses of baroque and neoclassical rules in XVIIIth century Europe, to take only two of the most obvious examples.

## 2 Telling cases

### 2.1 Swiss Re by Foster and Partners (1997-2004)

This is by far the most striking recent edifice in London and the most emblematic of what may be called the naturalization of modern architecture. At the same time, it is the one which most closely approximates the crushing and nearly overwhelming effect pertaining to the sublime according to Burke: this seems particularly obvious at close range, a sensation that all photographers strive to effectuate. (Figure 1) Conversely, the entrance lounge might be said to contribute to this effect in a paradoxical way since its delicate and glassy elegance, contrasting with the towering mass above it, has every characteristic of Hogarth's ideal line of beauty: very tall sinuous ivory like walls blanché from the top by hidden luminous ramps, temptingly suggesting the entrance to a labyrinth into which people seem to glide and to be engulfed one after the other.

The forty-one story spiralling structure, integrating garden spaces, in line with a 'low-energy environmental strategy,' (Lowell 233) calls up memories of wreathed columns as in the chancel of the Saint Séverin Church in Paris, with a rotation to the left in both cases. Painters, cartoonists, film makers frequently avail themselves of the generally negative connotations resulting from a right to left movement (in cultures where one writes from left to right). This counterpoising impression possibly concurs, at a subconscious level, to the disturbing mix of admiration and alarm caused by the spectacle of such a strangely innovative glass and steel contraption. At the same time, the geometrical circular lacings of the glazed domed apex shown in a downward overhead view (*Catalogue* 9) remind one of a Gothic rose-window whose foliated tracery branches out from the centre, Swiss Re's dome evincing in comparison a lighter and more abstract design, due to the relative thinness and the seeming tenuity of the structuring materials; a surprising and reciprocal interfusion of strength and fragility.

### 2.2 The Queen Elizabeth II Great Court, the British Museum, by Foster and Partners (1994-2003)

According to *Foster and Partners Catalogue*, this 'reinvent[ed]' and 'recapture[ed]' inner courtyard is in actual fact '[t]he largest enclosed public space in Europe,' (*Catalogue* 162) defining a new 'civic space.' (*Catalogue* 14) And yet as soon as one enters the remodelled and formerly underused open courtyard one undergoes a strange impression of con-

striction. For all his admiration Kenneth Powell cannot but observe that ‘some [might feel that] the monumental gravitas and the cool—even icy—æsthetic of the place are a deterrent to the relaxing in the café areas [ . . . ]’ (Powell 69): a passing remark about an essential and central characteristic questioning the intrinsic nature of this architectural gesture, a point which is entirely missed in the presentation given by the firm’s catalogue. (*Catalogue* 162) Let us go back, for a moment, to Arakawa’s ‘architectural body’, his ‘landing sights’, and the fact that we should be ‘coming alive for “sentience”’ (Gins and Arakawa 6): one is certainly struck by the grandeur of the place, but the top-down luminosity allied to the white marbles, the fact that the court is so completely enclosed, the massiveness ‘of the great staircases wrapped around the Reading Room,’ (Powell 69) the circular though slightly decentred space due to the original placement of the Reading Room, all of this seems to exert a pressure on the viewer in exact opposition to the elevating impression achieved elsewhere by the same architect, for example in the slender tapering shapes of the Millau Viaduct (1993-2004), an effect which in the present case is repressed to the point of impersonality. On reflection, this is what the photograph provided by the British Museum eloquently shows: in the low-angle shot, in the clash between ancient and modern, the ponderous portico conflicting with the lighter tracery of the roof structure, the disturbing conjunction of stateliness with entrapment seems to be deliberately underscored. In Arakawa’s terms, we are offered a contradictory series of ‘landing sites’, the cold beauty of the whole contrasting with the sensation of containment, which explains the malaise one feels, a malaise deliberately pointed up by the slight visual tilting of the upward view chosen by the photographer. Even though the reworking of a disused space obviously brings out a new ‘relationship between the museum and the urban community,’ (Powell 69) there appears to be a willed contradiction between the conceptual end and the concrete means used to this end, thus creating a composite feeling of admiration and unease that possibly explains why the visitors who flock to see the court seem at a loss what to think as they ‘palely loiter’ in the sparse and nearly spectral surroundings.

### 2.3 The Jubilee Line

Taken as a whole, the Jubilee Line provides a massive example of the fertile combination between the aesthetic and the utilitarian conjoined with the technical, in line with a long English tradition of industrial or functional and serviceable constructions. The ‘design-and-build’ contracts (*London, A Guide* 321) entailed, beyond the Jubilee Line Extension

Architects, the participation of most of the important teams at work in present-day London: Michael Hopkins (for Westminster), Mac Cormac Jamieson Prichard (for Southwark), Ian Richtie Architects (for Bermondsey), Foster and Partners (for Canary Wharf), Alsop Lyall & Störmer with Jubilee Line Extension Architects (for North Greenwich) and two teams, Troughton MacAslan and Wilkinson Eyre, for Stratford Regional Station. The sturdiness and the muscular vigour of the shapes allied to the coldly gleaming stainless steel surfaces, the fact that, except for the last example, these are underground structures, the work of modern Nibelungen, impart the compelling impression one is entering a Herculean world where technology makes an impressive show of itself, each time differently, and through original conceptions and solutions. In Powell's words in reference to Foster's Canary Wharf station, 'Canary Wharf triumphs through sheer rationality—the inevitability of function expressed in noble form.' (Powell 30) This 'heroic' project (Powell 30) might seem to embody the other face of the new London sublime, the tough underground robustness answering to the quest for heights and transparency in the structures above ground. As Powell observes, '[t]he experience of descending the banks of the escalators into the 265-metre-long [Canary Wharf] concourse is as memorable as any found in contemporary London architecture' (Powell 30), an impression confirmed by the nearly mythical dimension that seems to exude from the photographic rendition of one of the three entrance canopies, pointedly chosen by the designer.<sup>1</sup>

The same reciprocal foregrounding of, and alliance between the aesthetic and the technical can be seen in Foster's Millennium bridge spanning the Thames in front of Tate Modern, its bland rounded shapes reminding us of a long tradition of architectural feats, with Brunel's Bridge over the Tamar (1859) as a daring early example: an idea the narrator in Graham Swift's *Ever After* expresses with suppressed enthusiasm, 'It still stand. It is still there, still bearing its designer's name, and still bearing the (diesel-powered, narrow-gauge) expresses into Cornwall.'<sup>2</sup> There too, an inherent tension, whose vibration we hear in the 'It still stands', was already, and still is to be felt at work: the living core of an architectural sublime which might thus be said to be trans-historic. Contemporary architecture as evidenced in London is the present-day version of an unchanging given. What can be observed though is that the advanced techniques now available tend to foreground and privilege the risky dimension of it all. Audacity seems to have become the rule. But

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1. See figure 2: Canary Wharf by Foster. (*Catalogue* 77) or [www.earth-photography.com/Countries/England/England\\_London\\_CanaryWharf\\_Underground.html](http://www.earth-photography.com/Countries/England/England_London_CanaryWharf_Underground.html).

2. Graham Swift, *Ever After* (London: Picador, 1992) 203.

all things considered was it ever different? Were not some of the Seven Wonders of the World testimony to this daring Babel-like striving, at the frontiers of the possible?

### 3 New sublime

One may first remark that what makes the notion of 'sublime' so crucial, so valuable and so effective is its oxymoronic nature. Oxymoron is the prime figure of distance, extracting the central validity of contradiction in itself, which Heraclites assures us, is the seminal law of all that which happens in life and thought.<sup>1</sup> On the basis of physical oppositions (lightness v. weight, balance v. imbalance, hence the delicate laws of equilibration), today's architecture embodies more than ever a sort of epic fight against failure (falling, collapsing, being crushed), which essentially refers us to the confrontation between life and death. Such technological temerity is our contemporary version of Burke's antinomy, as the world felt so graphically during the incredibly charged hours of the first moon landing. In the same way, the completion of any new bridge re-enacts the whole series of historical moments whenever and wherever the void was successfully spanned. This is the knowledge which fosters our trembling admiration when we contemplate such technological feats and the risky balancing act they continue to evidence under our eyes. The founding point is the act of building, of constructing against, and in collaboration with the law of gravity, of forging a way over the impassable. This is precisely the reason why Burke's notion, and the affinity between greatness and terror he constantly returns to, seems so relevant here. No need today, after the fall of the World Trade Centre twin towers in 2001 to demonstrate the presence in us, when we contemplate such structures above or underground, of a disturbingly surmised vertigo, the terrifying but quelled anticipation of a collapse, the temptation of a sadomasochistic phantasm, all of which underlie our wondering. Reversing Julia Kristeva's remark, to affirm that sublime is edged with abjection,<sup>2</sup> would go a long way to show that it is what founds its concealed power and appositeness. The urge to build and destroy is one of the earliest pleasures of the young child. Was not the ambiguous play between positive and negative already present in the Gothic builders' crazed quest for heights, a quest that cli-

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1. 'Il faut savoir que le conflit est communauté, la discorde justice, tout devient par discorde et par nécessité.' Héraclite, *Fragments*, trad. A. Jeannié (Paris: Aubier, 1977) Fragment 80, 110.

2. 'L'abject est bordé de sublime', Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* (1980; Paris: Seuil, 1997) 19.

maxed in the 1284 collapse of the 48 meter high nave at Beauvais? At the very centre of the architectural sublime currently embodied in some of London's contemporary architecture, one feels a kind of *punctum*, as if the risky forwardness of technological prowess was undermining the Promethean dimension of our episteme. Height is not enough to suggest it, as Tower 42 in the City, or the Canary Wharf ensemble shows. The edifice must also suggest the reciprocal balancing of bulk against lightness, a graceful but perilous overreaching into novelty, and more generally the conjunction of the strong with the fragile, be it in heights, in depths or in size.

T. S. Eliot's 'objective correlative' might here seem quite fitted to describe one particular technical aspect that recurs again and again: glazed canopies and surfaces abound in modern London. This technique is frequently resorted to, particularly by Foster. What makes it so distinctively eloquent and symptomatic is perhaps the fact that it shows that high technology can be condensed into attenuated constituents like glass and the dainty arching and netting of spindly lines of steel. What is more, the triangulated skin of an abstractly transparent casing is the visual trace of a spatial osmosis between inside and outside, calling again to mind the open-work panels between the supporting pillars in Gothic churches and cathedrals. It assumes various forms and is apt to turn up in all types of situation and building: in Portcullis House by Hopkins (the extension to the Houses of Parliament), in Waterloo International Terminal by Grimshaw, in Swiss Re and The National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, by Foster, etc. It ideally negotiates the dialectics of fullness and emptiness, strength and fragility, balance and imbalance, as the condensed symptom and cipher of the search for new ways of tactically encompassing space, the exact embodiment of an inventive technological sublime. It inspires the disquieting impression of an immediately repressed vulnerability, the presence of which one senses in some of the most successful architectural achievements in present-day London. It is the most attenuated, the most refined and effective presence of the implicit sublime that takes effect in the best of London's contemporary architecture.

Implicit sublime, that is, and to conclude: in the most challenging and awe-inspiring architectural accomplishments, the adventurous pursuit of a hazardous limit that strains the spectator's imagination, at the risky edge of the possible; the baffling implementation of a heroically taut effort; the cutting edge of sheer individual visions, that each architect or team embodies differently in the dynamic moment in a collective enterprise pioneering its new forms of equilibration into the future.



Figure 1. — *Swiss Re* by Foster



Figure 2. — *Jubilee Line: Canary Wharf* by Foster

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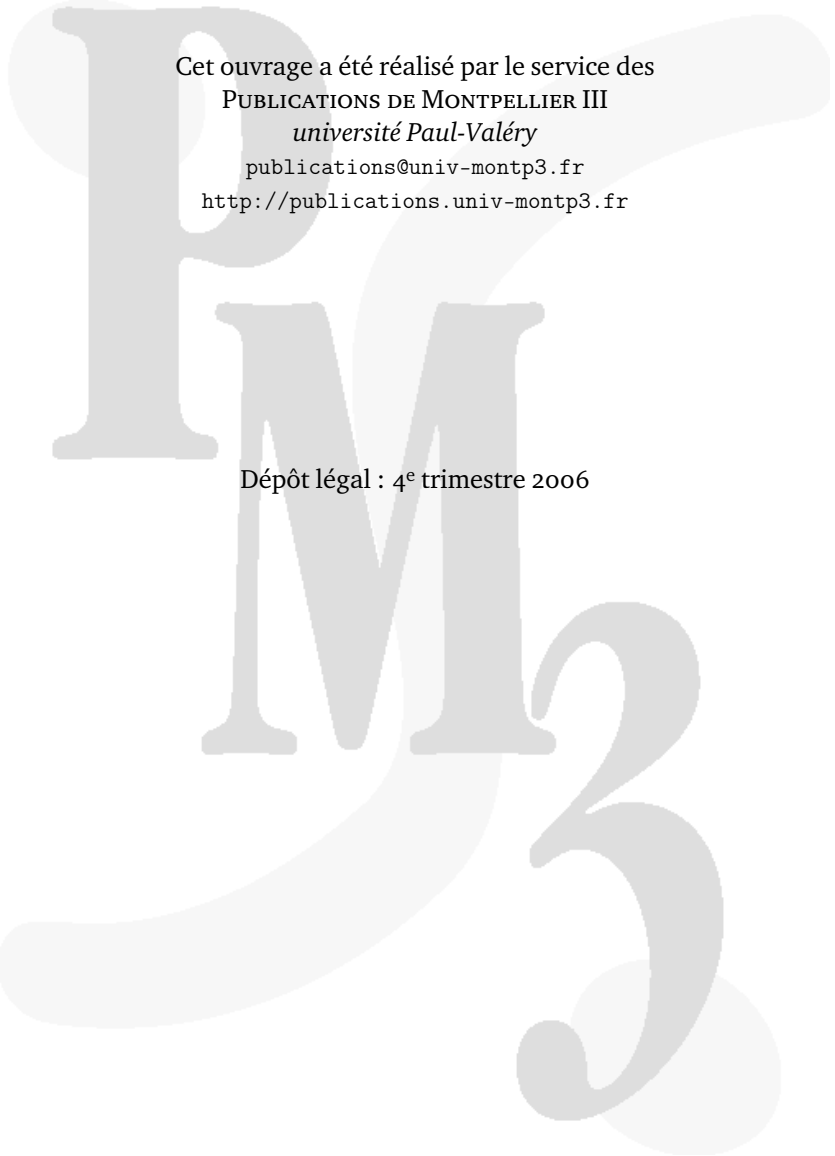
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