



HAL
open science

DO YOU SPEAK FLOWER?

Alexandra Midal Head-Geneve

► **To cite this version:**

Alexandra Midal Head-Geneve. DO YOU SPEAK FLOWER?. 87, pp.657 - 663, 2024, 978-2-37896-559-4. <10.5325/pennhistory.87.4.0657>. <hal-04975029>

HAL Id: hal-04975029

<https://hal.science/hal-04975029v1>

Submitted on 10 Mar 2025

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire HAL, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



HAL Authorization

Do You Speak Flower?

Prof. Dr. Alexandra Midal HEAD-GENEVE, HES-So

In Praise of Secrecy

Double Agent: Do You Speak Flower? explores a field at the intersection of flowers and steganography. Steganography describes the practice of concealing secret information within an image, message or physical object to avoid detection. From a technical point of view, steganography has the particularity of being invisible, unlike cryptography, which consists of encrypting information in order to conceal it and therefore points to the existence of a message to be decrypted. More simply, cryptography hides the meaning whereas steganography hides the very existence of a secret.

Through a number of case studies at the crossroads of design, art and architecture, often flirting with popular culture, this essay will survey the range of concealment practices employed by designers and artists, but above all by dissidents, revolutionaries and various kinds of agitators who want to communicate in secret without attracting suspicion. More specifically, it explores the unsuspected tactics of concealment that can lurk beneath the delicate, romantic language of floriography.

Among others, it shows that the association of women and ornaments, specifically in the analogy of the woman-flower, has prompted astonishing works of camouflage. Far from being 'mute'¹, as sociologist of micrology Siegfried Kracauer argued, mundane details such as floral ornaments have gained in scope, cunning and polysemy throughout the twentieth century, particularly since the emergence of Art Nouveau. Examples of their political implications abound, from Allen Ginsberg's 'Flower Power'² to the 1974 Carnation Revolution in Portugal, which put an end to forty years of Salazarist dictatorship, and the British custom of wearing remembrance poppies. This shows that the language of flowers reaches far beyond the gallantry embedded in Victorian floristry.

Double Agent: Do You Speak Flower? does not concentrate on any one artistic field or genre, and rejects all hierarchies between disciplines. Rather, it moves back and forth across history to reveal an abundance of steganographies and affirm their topicality in such troubled times as our own. This essay is itself political inasmuch as it examines the practice of secrecy in light of a language that overtly uses manipulation and lies – practices long condemned by the proponents of the Modern Movement in search of moral approval³. To this avail, it takes a side step and highlights the strategic, beneficial and vital importance of pretence and visual simulacra.

¹ Siegfried Kracauer, 'The Mass Ornament' (1927), *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. and ed. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 84.

² It was Ginsberg who, during the Berkeley peace marches, suggested flowers to be used as a symbolic means of non-violent demonstration: 'Masses of flowers – a visual spectacle – especially concentrated in the front lines. Can be used to set up barricades...' Allen Ginsberg, 'Demonstration or Spectacle as Example, as Communication or How to Make a March/Spectacle', *Berkeley Barb*, 19 November 1965, republished in *The Portable Sixties Reader*, ed. Ann Charters (London: Penguin, 2002), 208–12, here 208.

³ See Alexandra Midal, *The Murder Factory: Life and Work of H. H. Holmes, First American Serial Killer* (London: Sternberg Press, 2023).

The flower-woman

In the wake of the first Industrial Revolution, nature made a much-commented comeback in decorative arts via a plethora of ornaments, many of which revisited the scientific discoveries of Carl Linnaeus. Based on observations, the Swedish botanist established a universal classification system for animals, minerals and plants, whose impact was such that it was later applied to a range of other fields, including the ‘scientific’ study of human ‘races’ by the founder of criminal anthropology, Cesare Lombroso, or the typology of cloud formations in Luke Howard’s treatise *On The Modification of Clouds* (1803).

With the publication of his *Fundamenta Botanica* (1736), Linnaeus effectively laid the foundations of a hyper-sexualised metonymy of female genitalia and flowers inflected by a sexist and moralist bias⁴. Far from acknowledging the hermaphroditic characteristics of flowers, his concepts helped to establish the paradigm of the sexualised ‘flower-woman’. At the same time, artistic institutions responded to the threat posed by the advent of the ‘New Woman’⁵ by endowing women with gifts or talents that manifested themselves exclusively in private interiors, which until then had been the preserve of men. These ‘typically female’ predispositions were said to derive from the supposed principles of their vitality. It was for the same reasons that women, as the agents of ornamentation framed as a ‘natural’ occupation, were firmly confined to the realm of the ‘minor arts’ – a designation that betrays its hierarchical status, and by extension theirs. They were associated with the unified concept that tasks flowers with expressing their shared regenerative qualities: ‘The flower affirmed the union [of decorative arts] theme of the *femme-fleur*: fresh, variable, receptive and revitalizing as nature herself⁶’.

Standing at the origins of the Modern aesthetic, the flower-woman embodies the eternal feminine in Alfonse Mucha’s *Seasons* as much as in Loïe Fuller’s *Lily Dance*. This comparison suggests a redefinition of woman as a ‘hothouse flower’ – an essentially ravishing, sensual creature supporting the ideal of the vulnerable and submissive woman. This figure revisited the taxonomies of Linnaeus’s *Systema Naturae* (1735) and Erasmus Darwin’s *The Loves of the Plants* (1791), both of which described a botanical sexuality that mirrored the morality of conjugality between spouses. In her Victorian interpretations, we find her incarnated in the title of Coventry Patmore’s poem *The Angel in the House* (1854), where she appears in the guise of a chaste being who unconditionally supports her husband’s wishes. In 1929, after demanding that women should have ‘A Room of One’s Own’ in which to work and exist, Virginia Woolf also summoned this celestial being:

She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of the family life. She sacrificed herself daily. . . . in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all – I need not say it – she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty

⁴ Ian Larue, *Les dinosaures rêvent-elles de Hollywood?* (Paris: Éditions iXe, 2021), 55.

⁵ The term was coined by Sarah Grand in ‘The New Aspect of the Woman Question’, *The North American Review* 158, no. 448 (March 1894): 270–76, followed in June by ‘The Modern Girl’, *The North American Review* 158, no. 451 (June 1894): 706–14.

⁶ Debora L. Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France: Politics, Psychology, and Style* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2023), 206.

– her blushes, her great grace. In those days – the last of Queen Victoria – every house had its Angel⁷.

Under her pen, however, the Angel suffers a different fate⁸.

In light of the flower-woman's multiple incarnations, we should keep in mind that even if Irene Sargent, in her inaugural text *The Wavy Line* (1902), saw Art Nouveau as the expression of an ornamental style characterised by a profusion of plant forms, the movement, as Debora L. Silverman points out, originally 'heralded a new world of public technology and advanced industrial production . . . a synthesis of new materials and new methods of engineering construction . . . the triumph of engineering aesthetics over architectural tradition'⁹. The Eiffel Tower embodied these values to such an extent that 'planners and organizers alike designated the new iron monuments as the forms of an "art nouveau", a "modern style", terms associated with the values of youth, virility, production, and democracy'¹⁰. It was during these same years that floriography, emanating from cultural traditions as diverse as Mongolia, Constantinople and Japan, was brought to Europe by writers such as Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, and established itself as the expression of feelings within the white aristocracy¹¹.

At the same time, the woman/flower association proliferated in art, literature and poetry. Confined to the status of a sexually pure and passive, and hence desirable, objects, women were depicted surrounded by bouquets of flowers in their homes or in flower gardens, symbolising their place in the world. But over the flower-woman in Proust's *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* (Within a Budding Grove, 1918) and the 'cat(t)leas' in *Swann's Way* (a name for a type of orchid but also the code word for love-making used by Swann and Odette) looms the threat of her wilting. In the same vein, Pierre de Ronsard, in his ode *Mignonne, allons voir si la rose est éclose* (1550), spins a vegetal metaphor, comparing the 14-year-old Cassandre to a morning rose and asking her to give in to his desires before she withers.

This context enables a better understanding of the relationship between women and flowers, which has been a recurring topic of interest for countless historians. Poring over the 370 herbarium pages in Rosa Luxemburg's seventeen blue-covered notebooks, for instance,

⁷ Virginia Woolf, 'Professions for Women', *Virginia Woolf: Women and Writing*, ed. Michèle Barrett (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 59.

⁸ Indeed, Woolf appropriates the expression and – literally – kills it: 'I turned upon her and caught her by the throat. I did my best to kill her. My excuse, if I were to be had up in a court of law, would be that I acted in self-defence. Had I not killed her she would have killed me.' Ibid.

⁹ Debora L. Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France: Politics, Psychology, and Style* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2023), 2.

¹⁰ Ibid., 4.

¹¹ 'Douglass's flowers were a language of their own: a cultural appropriation of a Victorian pastime that allowed Douglass an avenue into "creating back". She generated her own interpretation of female gentility and artistry denied her by a self-proclaimed virtuous yet racist society. As seen in "*I love a flower!*", the detailed sophistication of the flower epitomizes the intricacies of nineteenth-century femininity. To embrace the refinement of her upper-class and educated background while also challenging stereotypes of Black achievement in the arts became a valiant act of resistance in white America. Douglass's reclamation, while seemingly just of roses and butterflies, in fact underscores the vital importance of art, historicized aesthetics, and the individual voice within social revolutions.' Tabitha A. Morgan, 'Revolution and Roses: The Voice and Aesthetic of Sarah Mapps Douglass', *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 87, no. 4 (2020): 657–63, <https://doi.org/10.5325/pennhistory.87.4.0657>

researchers noted the inclination for botany of the famous revolutionary, who first studied zoology before submitting a thesis in political science on *The Industrial Development of Poland* at the University of Zurich in 1897. Her passion was so consuming that her first herbariums were continually enriched even during her years in prison. Indeed, the anti-militarist activist repeatedly was accused of incitement to sedition and imprisoned on various occasions between 1915 and 1918, during which time she compiled seven more notebooks.

Her herbariums of flowers collected in the Sudetenland and the Alps, in infirmaries and prison courtyards are thought to have been a life-saving distraction for the captive, whose daily life was punctuated by bouts of depression. On several occasions, her correspondence mentions the benefits she derived from them: 'You see, I always have to have a subject that absorbs me from head to toe¹²', she wrote. 'A very special thank you for the flowers; you can't know what kindness you did me. For I am able to return to my botanizing once again; it is my passion and the best relaxation after working¹³.' These precious notebooks with their 377 specimens, now preserved at the Central Archives of Modern Records in Warsaw, are considered to have been the curative pastime that provided much-needed solace to one of the sharpest minds of her time.

The flowers of evil

As already suggested, the trope of the flower-woman in Victorian literature and art was at odds with the appearance of the New Woman. This figure, 'alternatively envisioned as a gargantuan *amazon* or an emaciated, frock-coated *hommesse*'¹⁴, was deeply unsettling not least because she 'inverted traditional sexual roles and threatened the essential divisions ordering bourgeois life: public from private, work from family, production from reproduction¹⁵'. Only when she was not seen as a threat did the aristocratic woman attain the romantic status of a disembodied muse. As for the other women of that social class who refused to procreate or give in to convention (by fighting for the right to vote and education, for instance), their image in society was steeped in overt anti-feminism, as expressed, among others, in the metaphor of floral morbidity used by Charles Baudelaire in his collection of poems *Les Fleurs du mal* (initially entitled *Les Lesbiennes*), which encourages physical violence against women, seen as impure, and asserts male domination in economic, institutional and social matters¹⁶.

This attitude is summed up in Rae Beth Gordon's sharp observation that the '*femme-tapisserie* and *femme-cafetière* will become the *femme-fleur* of Art Nouveau¹⁷'. Woman is an object of consumption¹⁸, the subject of a process of commodification in which Annette Stott

¹² Georges Haupt, Gilbert Badia, Irène Petit and Claudie Weill, eds., *Rosa Luxemburg. J'étais, je suis, je serai! Correspondence 1914-1919* (Paris: Maspero, 1977), 78.

¹³ 'Letter to Mathilde Jacob, 9 April 1915', in *The Letters of Rosa Luxemburg*, ed. George Adler, Peter Hudis and Annelies Laschitzka, trans. George Shriver (London: Verso, 2011), 162.

¹⁴ Silverman, *Art Nouveau*, 69.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal* [1861], in: *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Claude Pichois (Paris: Gallimard, 2006), 27.

¹⁷ Rae Beth Gordon, *Ornament, Fantasy, and Desire in Nineteenth-Century French Literature* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1992), 244.

¹⁸ See Margaryta Golovchenko, 'The Female Body as Commodity: The Woman in Alphonse Mucha's *JOB* Poster (1896)', *The Coalition of Master's Scholars on Material Culture*, 9 October 2020, <https://cmsmc.org/publications/the-female-body-as-commodity>

distinguishes two aspects: On the one hand, the flower-woman is the conservative response to velleities of emancipation, that is, ‘to the “New Woman” of the 1890s, the flapper of the 1920s, and all their liberal sisters in between¹⁹’. On the other hand, this metaphor equates women with passive elegance, when in fact they are boldly attacking the bastions of art and design held by men:

As large numbers of women left the prescribed female specialties of flower painting, china painting, and miniatures to enter the broader and more competitive arena of traditionally male subjects and media, floral-female paintings reasserted that women and the activities of women artists belonged most properly in the world of flowers.²⁰

The flower-woman proved to be such a determining image that when it came to planning the successor event to the 1889 Paris Exposition, the organisers floated the idea of an ‘Exhibition of plants’. Scheduled for the year 1892, this organicist project aimed to replace the engineering aesthetic epitomised by the majestic Eiffel Tower with flower gardens. After a series of U-turns, the plan was eventually abandoned and an exhibition on women and the arts held instead. This transition from flowers to the decorative arts, which in the meantime had become the expression par excellence of the feminine, confirms their interchangeability: ‘If the art nouveau conceived as artisanal luxury could not be implanted in the belly of the machine, it would flourish in another site under the charming guidance and fecundity of women²¹’. A contemporary writer asserted that ‘nature, ceaselessly revitalizing itself, had its social analogue in women, who devoted themselves, in self-presentation, to the art of continual renewal. And it was “woman’s role and mission in society” to embody “nature’s freshness” in her seasonally changing physical adornments and interior surroundings²².’

For further examples, we may turn to cinema, more specifically the thriller *The Manchurian Candidate* (dir. John Frankenheimer, 1962), where flowers take on surprising missions. The film’s main character, Major Bennett Marco, is a US Army intelligence officer investigating Raymond Shaw, a former soldier and decorated war veteran who has unwittingly become a sleeper agent, brainwashed to murder when he sees a given playing card. A killing machine without memory or conscience, he is the ideal mole. The brainwashing operation is shown in the surrealistic opening sequence of the film, where a group of haggard infantrymen are led to believe by a hypnotist that they are attending a lecture on hydrangea given to the members of a ladies’ gardening club²³.

On a different note, the first images of Billy Wilder’s *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* (1970) show Holmes and Watson returning to their London pad in August 1897. In his trademark blasé tone, Holmes makes an ironic commentary on Watson’s suppositions concerning his love life, before he abruptly explains that he has received a letter inviting him to begin a new investigation:

¹⁹ Annette Stott, ‘Floral Femininity: A Pictorial Definition’, *American Art* 6, no. 2 (Spring 1992): 61.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 62.

²¹ Silverman, *Art Nouveau*, 189.

²² *Ibid.* Silverman quotes Pierre Plauszewski, ‘Un salon de fleurs à l’Exposition des arts de la femme’, *Revue des arts décoratifs* 12 (1891): 320.

²³ Gardening clubs did not emerge until the 1870s. Their threat to patriarchy was perceived to be so great that they were banned for a long time. See Elizabeth K. Menon, *Evil by Design: The Creation and Marketing of the Femme Fatale* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

An urgent appeal to find some missing midgets. . . . Yes, six of them, the Tumbling Piccolos, an acrobatic act of some circus. . . . They're not only midgets, but also anarchists. . . . By now, they have been smuggled to Vienna, dressed as little girls in organdy pinafores. They are to greet the czar of all the Russias when he arrives at the railway station. They will be carrying bouquets of flowers, and concealed in each bouquet will be a bomb with a lit fuse.

In both these films, flowers are given a dramatic role, whether as the object of a hallucination induced during a brainwashing session or as a cover-up for a lethal plot. It appears that simplicity and accessibility are indisputable assets for the efficacy of steganography, as opposed to costly modern cryptology and deciphering devices.

Speaking the Unspeakable

The first debates on the influence of flowers on human behaviour followed on from the criticism of The Great Exhibition in London (1851)²⁴. In parallel with considerations on the permeability of the modern subject, flowers were associated with the idea that 'self-expression', or the manifestation of personality, was in dialogue with objects and things. As lines, colours and swirling shapes were credited with stimulating a suggestive power that would lead to self-discovery, concepts such as psychological interiority and nervous vibration took hold in society at large. As part of these developments, a current of 'new psychology' was founded in the 1890s by Jean-Martin Charcot, the star doctor who interned 'hysterical' women at Salpêtrière Hospital, and Hippolyte Bernheim, whose concept of 'suggestion' opposed Charcot's vision of hysteria on the grounds that

'visual images' penetrated the mind directly from the external world. The thought process transformed ideas into images. . . . Rather than a concrete surround from which the individual selected and processed information, the external world was a torrential flow of stimuli, to which the individual was unpredictably and imaginatively impressionable.²⁵

The replacement of decorative geometric motifs by floral meanderings echoes the upheavals caused by the discovery of the unconscious. Seen from this angle, floral abundance offered a unique opportunity to reveal nervous tensions. Influenced by Alexandre Axenfeld's *Traité des névroses* (1883), various pathologies of city life (notably hypersensitivity, a popular subject with women's magazines such as *La Grande dame*) and phenomena of suggestion were thought to be triggered by curvilinear, swirling objects and motifs²⁶. As in Loïe Fuller's floral dances, they conjured states disconnected from reason and thus enabled communication with other worlds:

At the end of the play, on the evening of the first presentation, we gave our hypnotism scene. The stage scenery, representing a garden, was flooded with pale green light. Dr. Quack made a mysterious entrance . . . I endeavoured to make myself

²⁴ See Alexandra Midal, *Design. Introduction à l'histoire d'une discipline* (Paris: Press Pocket, 2009).

²⁵ Silverman, *Art Nouveau*, 87.

²⁶ See Hippolyte Bernheim, *De la suggestion dans l'état hypnotique et dans l'état de veille* [1884] (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2004).

as light as possible, in order to give the impression of a fluttering figure obedient to the doctor's orders. . . .

Under the influence of suggestion, entranced – so at least it looked – with my gaze held by his, I followed his every motion. My robe was so long that I was continually stepping on it, and mechanically I held it up with both hands and raised my arms aloft, all the while that I continued to flit around the stage like a winged spirit.

There was a sudden exclamation from the house:

'It's a butterfly! A butterfly!'

I turned on my steps, running from one end of the stage to the other, and a second exclamation followed:

'It's an orchid!'²⁷

It is certainly no coincidence that 'Lily', the 'very mark of spiritual strength'²⁸, was also the nickname of Fuller's mother Delilah, with whom the dancer had an exceptionally close relationship. In 1896, Fuller created *Lily of the Nile*. Clad in a white silk dress more than three and a half metres in length, she embodied the flowering of a lily 'under a shower of pink light. She curls into an immense corolla of lilies, covered in silver by streams of white light'²⁹, producing the illusion of blossoming in 'a constant play of metamorphoses [that] reflects her conception of nature as an infinite unfurling of forms'³⁰. This production of an image of woman did not escape the trained eye of Stéphane Mallarmé, who famously quipped that she 'is not a woman, but a metaphor'.³¹

Escaping ornament

While floral formulations of woman were quickly commodified, the effectiveness of these commercial endeavours was counterbalanced by the proliferation of floral motifs embodying the soul and its torments. This was the case with the 'oasis of greenery' of Alphonse Germain, for whom 'The Decorative Landscape' (title of his 1891 essay) lay at the heart of an arrangement that shapes the mind and soul of its inhabitants³². In 1895, mining the same vein, Henry van de Velde changed the conception of housing in his *Remarks on a Synthesis of Art* (1895) by introducing the idea of a fusional principle between space, ornament and the inhabitant's mood: 'There is an absolute correlation between the individual man and the home, the room in which he lives.'³³ This connection, Silverman reminds us, had already been explored by Edmond and Jules de Goncourt, who in their *Goncourt Journal* consigned

²⁷ Loïe Fuller, *Fifteen Years of a Dancer's Life* [1908] (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1913), 31. 'Orchidée' was also the nickname of one of her dancers, Vilma Banchi.

²⁸ Giovanni Lista, *Loïe Fuller, danseuse de la Belle Époque* (Paris: Hermann, 2006), 252–53.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 231. Lista quotes an article by Jean Laurent in *Le Cri*, 232.

³⁰ Justine Christen, 'Loïe Fuller et la poésie des voiles', *Fabula-LhT* 18 (April 2017): n.p., n. 12, <https://doi.org/10.58282/lht.1862>.

³¹ Stéphane Mallarmé, 'Crayonné au théâtre', in *Œuvres complètes, vol. II* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), 304.

³² See Joyce Henri Robinson, "'Hi Honey, I'm Home": Weary (Neurasthenic) Businessmen and the Formulation of a Serenely Modern Aesthetic', in *Not at Home*, ed. Christopher Reed (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 98–112.

³³ Henry van de Velde, 'Remarks on a Synthesis of Art', in *Henry van de Velde: Selected Essays, 1889–1914*, ed. Katherine M. Kuenzli, trans. Elizabeth Tucker (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2022).

their thoughts concerning the decoration of their private mansion, a 'clinic' of the senses designed to treat and accommodate the upheavals of their inner lives³⁴.

However, the experience of affluent men was surely at odds with that of women such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who set forth the point that architecture dispossessed women and condemned them to a state of reclusion imposed on them by their fathers, husbands or doctors. Perkins Gilman was the great-niece of the famous designer Catharine Beecher, who educated her together with her sister Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*³⁵ (1852). In her doctoral thesis *Woman and Economics* (1898) and in her books, she documented economic and social discrimination against women. *Herland* (1915), for instance, depicts a hidden civilisation inhabited and run solely by women, inspired by the Amazon kingdom described by Christine de Pizan in *La Cité des Dames* (1404–7), while her account titled 'The Yellow Wallpaper', which, as its title indicates, revolves around an industrial by-product of continuous paper (invented around 1830), denounces the stranglehold of patriarchy.

The short story describes the confinement of a young woman who has given birth to her first child. For her own good, her husband, a physician, forbids her to pursue her professional occupation as a writer. She is locked up in a bedroom with barred windows on the top floor of an old mansion whose walls are covered in yellow peeling wallpaper. The patient's only distraction is to watch the patterns on the wallpaper come to life and metamorphose³⁶. Assailed by visions, she discerns a woman – her alter ego – trapped beneath the wallpaper, who, like herself, wants to escape.

Perkins Gilman's pamphlet, which was widely criticised when it was first published, builds on the ornamental patterns on the wall to lambast the medical ignorance of a bourgeois society that locks up women who, after giving birth, are inevitably thought to be hysterical until they recover their senses, if not for the rest of their life. In 1923, the author published the autobiographical account 'Why I wrote "The Yellow Wallpaper"', where she recalls her own post-natal depression and her doctor's advice that she stop writing for good if she wished to recover. She followed the prescription to the letter for three months before realising that her condition was worsening. Shortly later, she divorced her husband and embarked on a career as a writer.³⁷

Perkins Gilman's tale bears witness to the social, cultural and economic dimension of medicine, practised at the expense of women³⁸. Accordingly, Paula Treichler's analysis of the text focuses on the materiality of language embodied by the wallpaper. In the nineteenth century, medical diagnoses concerning the bodies of women, who were necessarily neurasthenic and/or hysterical, were closely tied to the production of language: 'Language is intimately connected to material reality, despite the fact that no direct correspondence

³⁴ See Edmont et Jules de Goncourt, *Journal des Goncourt, vol. 1: 1851–1896* (Paris: Laffont, 2004).

³⁵ See Alexandra Midal, *Design by Accident* (London: Sternberg Press, 2019).

³⁶ Charlotte Perkins Stetson [Gilman], 'The Yellow Wall-paper. A Story', *The New England Magazine* 11, no. 5 (January 1892): 647–56.

³⁷ Perkins Gilman, 'Why I wrote "The Yellow Wallpaper"', *The Forerunner* (October 1923), reprinted in Ann J. Lane, ed., *The Charlotte Perkins Gilman Reader: The Yellow Wallpaper and Other Fiction* (London: Women's Press, 1981).

³⁸ Ann Oakley, 'Beyond The Yellow Wallpaper', *Reproductive Health Matters* 5, no. 10 (November 1997): 29–39.

exists. The word is theory to the deed: but the deed's existence will depend upon a complicated set of material conditions' confiscated by the institutions in place.'³⁹

But how does the story end? In the last scene, the young woman frees herself by tearing up the wallpaper and setting out to 'creep around as I please'.⁴⁰ Only what does the association between 'creeping' and 'freedom' mean? Revisiting Treichler's analysis, Karen Ford asks a series of relevant questions for our investigation:

Treichler recognises that 'the story only hints at possibilities for change', that 'as a metaphor, the yellow wallpaper is never fully resolved . . . its meaning cannot be fixed'. Nevertheless, her analysis raises several questions. First, if the wallpaper stands for a new vision of women, why is the narrator tearing it down? Next, how can it be a 'representation of women that becomes possible only after women obtain their right to speak', if it grows more vivid as the narrator becomes less verbal? Moreover, if the narrator comes into her own through the wallpaper, then why does she become more and more a victim of male diagnosis as she becomes further engaged with the wallpaper?⁴¹

Deprived of stimulating intellectual interaction, the presumed hysteric uses ornaments to engage in a dialogue with the only mirages with which she is allowed to converse.⁴² These ghosts give her the illusion of a presence. It is but a small step from this materialisation of the unspeakable to making spirits speak through mediums – whom the Marquis de Puységur described as 'magnetic somnambulists' – in order to make the inaudible audible. The resulting 'messages' are subsequently transcribed, analysed and published by male physicians⁴³ – a practice reminiscent of the phallogocratic regime of the Shakers, as we shall see.

Shadow Land: Speaking in Flowers

In the fields of art, design or architecture, the possibility of disembodied speech is all the more relevant if we acknowledge their tacit agreement that forms are born and exist by themselves. This dream of absolute mutism found a comical incarnation in the art of ventriloquism, as first performed in public in 1753 by the Baron de Mengen. But beyond the numerous *mise-en-abymes* of the (male) artist and his (female) creation in cinema and on stage, delegation of voice, not coincidentally, routinely occurred in sessions conducted by female mediums.

³⁹ Paula A. Treichler, 'Escaping the Sentence: Diagnosis and Discourse in "The Yellow Wallpaper"', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 3, no. 1/2 (1984): 74, <https://doi.org/10.2307/463825>.

⁴⁰ Perkins Stetson, 'The Yellow Wall-paper', 656.

⁴¹ Karen Ford, "'The Yellow Wallpaper' and Women's Discourse', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 4, no. 2 (1985): 310, <https://doi.org/10.2307/463709>.

⁴² In the wake of Charcot's descriptions of these pathologies, the decorative arts became the main terrain for the reunion of psyche and aesthetics. This is all the more interesting as Charcot, whose interest in fine arts is well known, also pursued the less well-documented hobby of making organic-shaped furniture together with his wife and daughters.

⁴³ See, for instance, the Geneva psychologist Théodore Flournoy, who wrote *Des Indes à la planète Mars: études sur un cas de somnambulisme avec glossolalie* (From India to Planet Mars: A Case of Multiple Personality with Imaginary Languages), a book based on the séances of the medium Elise Muller and published without her consent.

The first modern spiritualist communication – reported on 20 April 1848, four years after the first transmission made using the electromagnetic telegraph invented by Samuel Morse – was experienced by the two youngest daughters of the Fox family in Hydesville, New York. The event was recorded in a small booklet by the journalist E. E. Lewis, who brought together more than 20 eyewitness accounts. From March 1848 onwards, Maggie, aged 14, and her sister Kate, aged 11, heard ‘rappings’ and ‘knockings’, to which they replied by making the same noises. When their calls were answered, they knew they had made the first communication with a spirit, in this instance *Mr. Split-Foot*, the ghost of a pedlar who had been murdered in the house a few years earlier.

Borrowing from theories of animal magnetism associated with eroticism and occultism, spiritualists spoke in flowers. In June 1890, in the presence of witnesses, Madame d’Esperance (pseudonym of Elizabeth Puttock Hope) thus materialised an *Ixora crocata*. During another séance, a potted Golden Lily appeared: ‘Remarkably, this plant was said to have grown to close to 2 metres in [the witnesses’] presence.’⁴⁴ Madame d’Esperance even had her photograph taken next to it before it vanished, a fact recorded in her memoirs *Shadow Land: or, Light from the Other Side* (1897). Alongside spirit trumpets and other communication media, floral manifestations offered a formidable channel for women’s unconscious schizophrenic desires to escape social alienation. However, the majority of witnesses ignored these questions and concentrated on the authenticity – or fraudulent character – of the appearances: ‘The only remaining enigma concerns the medium’s ability to materialize a seemingly endless number of flowers.’⁴⁵ The doctor and psychotherapist Poul Bjerre, who attended several sessions, decided to find out for himself and

went so far as to visit all the flower shops in Gothenburg without resolving the mystery. Victorian skirts could have provided a convenient repository for many of the props needed for séances – perhaps even for smaller roses and other flowers, but the nearly 7-foot-tall Golden Lily remains a mystery.⁴⁶

However, we should keep in mind that these occupations served as mere distractions from a more important question, namely: Are the materialisations of flowers by female mediums not the ultimate subterfuge for reclaiming a voice of which women have been deprived?

Female flower power

The United Society of Believers in Christ’s Second Appearing, better known as the Shakers, is not only credited with being one of the cradles of modern design, but also with establishing a strong ideological link between religion, community and ecstasy in a non-Oedipal psychosexuality, as memorably highlighted by Dan Graham in his video *Rock My Religion* (1984). Their name derives from the movements made by the faithful during prayers, as men and women take communion by performing spontaneous, free, often trance-like dances. For Friedrich Engels, the sect combined the strange viability of a kind of communism tainted by

⁴⁴ Adrian Parker and Elisabeth Warwood, ‘Revealing the Real Madame d’Esperance: An Historical and Psychological Investigation’, *Journal of Scientific Exploration* 30, no. 2 (2016): 234.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 258.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

irrationality, while Dolores Hayden sees it as the communitarian pillar of Christian socialism in the founding years of the American nation.⁴⁷

Conceived as a religious alternative to capitalist patriarchy, inequality and industrial exploitation, the Shaker movement was founded by Ann Lee, a mother of four children, all of whom died in infancy. The daughter of a blacksmith, she had been married off by force to live in the squalor of Manchester's industrial precinct, the birthplace of the British Industrial Revolution. While serving a prison sentence for blasphemy, she had a revelation that God was dual in nature and that, just as Christ had embodied the male part, she was the incarnation of the female half.⁴⁸ Furthermore, she believed that sexual relations were at the root of all human suffering and therefore advocated strict chastity.⁴⁹ We may assume that in Lee's mind, observance of this precept, a pillar of Shaker worship, also served to emancipate women from their condition.

In order to avoid further persecution, Lee and eight of her companions in faith left England in 1774 and settled in Watervliet, New York, where they hoped to be allowed to freely exercise their religion. Dance was an integral part of worship, as it was thought to liberate the individual from sin by inviting spirits to momentarily take possession of one's body and soul. The ceremonies, which could last up to a whole day and night without interruption, have been described as

an emotional and spiritual outburst in dance and song [which] forms a singularly violent contrast with the limitations and rigorous rules to which the Shakers submit . . . In the early days, under the pressure of persecution, these were ecstatic explosions: everyone danced for themselves, shaking, trembling, jumping, stamping their feet, shouting and screaming. Dancers thus reached a state of trance that could even lead to syncope. This relinquishment of self, this alienation, seems to be an attempt at liberation, the object of which is perhaps – as contradictory as it may seem – the realisation of the self.⁵⁰

The Shakers, whose economy was based on craftsmanship and the sharing of property and goods, welcomed anyone, poor or rich, who wished to join them. In America, the sect thus became a harbour for abolitionists, anti-racists, pacifists, early environmentalists, defenders of social equality and all kinds of people fighting against profit,

⁴⁷ See Dolores Hayden, *Seven American Utopias: The Architecture of Communitarian Socialism, 1790–1975* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1979.)

⁴⁸ Citing Philip Hoare's *England's Last Eden: Adventures in a Victorian Utopia* (London: Harper Perennial, 2006), Kodwo Eshun points out that 'Ann Lee's conviction is not unique. Several women proclaimed to be messiahs in the second half of the eighteenth century'. Kowdo Eshun, *Dan Graham: Rock My Religion* (London: afterall Books, 2012), n. 52, 102.

⁴⁹ The notion of original sin was framed in relation to flowers by Rudolf Steiner in a lecture given on 22 November 1907: 'If man had not transformed the plant-like substance into flesh, he would have remained chaste and pure like the plant, he would not have become acquainted with passion and desire. But this condition could not be maintained; for had it remained thus, man would not have wakened to self-consciousness.' Rudolf Steiner, 'The Gospel of St. John (Basle)', Lecture VII, online text at *The Rudolf Steiner Archive*, <https://rsarchive.org/Lectures/GA100/English/LR1942/19071122p01.html>.

⁵⁰ Karl Mang et Wend Fischer, eds., *Les Shakers, vie communautaire et design avant Marx et le Bauhaus*, exh. cat. (Munich and Paris: Die Neue Sammlung, Staatliches Museum für angewandte Kunst and Centre de Création Industrielle, Centre Georges Pompidou, 1976), 20.

usury and finance, and demanding equality between women and men, regardless of colour, origin or religion.

Only ten years later, on 8 September 1784, Ann Lee, exhausted from her proselytising work, died in a rocking chair after speaking in over 80 tongues. After her death, the sovereign principle of equality was slowly eroded by her successors, and her legacy was eventually swept away by the so-called Millennial Laws, which James Whittaker, and later Joseph Meacham⁵¹, argued would make the sect more acceptable to future members. Between 1785 and 1845, the cult's leaders thus reverted to promoting more traditional roles whereby women were subordinate to men. Meanwhile Lee's texts and teachings were instrumentalised to minimise her role, caricaturing her as the stereotype of the loving, tender and irrational mother – a figure she had always fought against.

An era of manifestations

By 1837, seven years before the Fox sisters' 'communication', the Shakers had thus adopted a more reserved behaviour. Their dances, and even the distances to be observed in encounters between men and women, were minutely codified. But one day, during a service, several teenage girls were seized by convulsions and started spinning around and speaking in unknown languages, unable to stop. The community was transfixed by these syncopations of women jerking, screaming or rolling on the floor like spinning-tops. Within the sect, certain members assumed that these channels of irrationality had been reopened by the spirits of the early days, first and foremost Ann Lee, but also Inuit and Native American peoples, all manifesting and expressing themselves in their respective languages.

When they came to, Emily Babcock, Polly Collins, Sarah Bates, and hundreds of other women after them, described their visions. Their testimonies took the form of songs, paintings and ornate drawings, sometimes coloured or embellished with signs and writings that could not necessarily be deciphered – the so-called 'gifts'. Whatever their form, they were all considered to be, 'on a par with glossolalia, . . . consolidating the authority of those who use them'.⁵² Contrary to some scholars who consider the abundance of domestic motifs in these works to derive from the supposedly feminine ability to tap into one's emotions,⁵³ I would suggest that their floral iconography, contrasting with the geometric drawings and stylised writing of the three only 'gifts' from that period made by men, served to camouflage the inherently seditious nature of their actions.

In order to regain control over these irrational phenomena, which were affecting the entire congregation, the Central Ministry resorted to an insidious form of censorship by inviting more and more men to recount, or invent, visions. Moreover, it did not only require all spiritual communications to be written up and examined before being shared with the community, but also instituted a series of annual nocturnal rituals – The Midnight Cry, The Mountain Feast and The Sweeping Gift – aimed at containing the emotional spill-over from the ethereal worlds. Armed with *spiritual* flat brooms – of the same design than those the community manufactured and sold during the day – the members were made to sweep everything clean, women included. The broom, the witches' attribute, materialised the

⁵¹ After Meacham's death, the sect was led by Lucy Wright, but during her 25-year-long tenure, her predecessor's patriarchal principles were rigorously observed and passed on.

⁵² Pierre Déléage, 'Pseudographies. L'écriture révélée d'Emily Babcock', *L'Homme*, no. 227/228 (2018), <http://journals.openedition.org/lhomme/33018>.

⁵³ See, for instance, Sally L. Kitch, "'As a Sign That All May Understand": Shaker Gift Drawings and Female Spiritual Power', *Winterthur Portfolio* 24, no. 1 (1989): 1–28, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1181214>.

transfer from the visions and 'gifts' to the collective act of purification: no dust, no sin, no overflow must stain the surfaces and souls, nor escape the watchful attention of the authorities.

Maintained in illiteracy, the women who were responsible for what is commonly referred to as the Era of Manifestations thought they had found an effective means of making their protest heard. By re-establishing the lost link with Ann Lee, they attacked the establishment within the sect, 'embedded in a patriarchal framework'⁵⁴ which in no way corresponded to the principle of gender equality⁵⁵ advocated by Ann Lee⁵⁶, who believed that 'the principle of freedom to man and woman alike has . . . made the Shaker Sister the freest woman in the world.'⁵⁷

In the eighteenth century, it was unthinkable for a poor and illiterate woman to take on institutional responsibilities. Ann Lee had found a way to overcome this hurdle via a theology of the feminine. Decades later, Shaker Sisters tried to reassert their rights within the sect by making the voices of the beyond resonate.⁵⁸ In this respect, the plethora of giant flowers, scattered meadows and 'Heavenly Flowers'⁵⁹ that abound in the 'gifts' can also be read as an unbridled, anti-modern and irreverent response to the sect's ban on all ornamental representation.

This example, then, deconstructs the prevalence of sexual reproduction seen as the sole space for women's creation. By showing that it cannot be reduced to the ban on conjugality amongst Shakers – in other words, that fertility is not the equivalent of marriage – Ann Lee laid claim to other creative territories. The woman who called herself 'Ann the Word' in her lifetime conquered a forbidden space of freedom through speech. In the same way, her Shaker Sisters, who were also deprived of their rights, found an astonishing lever of protest in words and flowers.

Toxic

The botanical metaphor of the *femme-fleur* is inextricably tied to the male gaze, a concept first developed by Laura Mulvey and Margarita Jimenez in their analysis of beauty pageants,⁶⁰ and which Mulvey subsequently extended to cinema.⁶¹ As we will see, women generally responded to the violence of male domination that manifested itself through the

⁵⁴ Marjorie Procter-Smith, "'Who Do You Say That I Am?' Mother Ann as Christ', in *Locating the Shakers: Cultural Origins and Legacies of an American Religious Movement*, ed. Mick Gidley (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1990), 91–93. See also Procter-Smith, *Women in Shaker Community and Worship: A Feminist Analysis of the Uses of Religious Symbolism* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1985).

⁵⁵ See Priscilla J. Brewer, "'Tho' of the Weaker Sex": A Reassessment of Gender Equality among the Shakers', *Signs* 17, no. 3 (Spring 1992): 609–35.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 635.

⁵⁷ Anna White and Leila S. Taylor, *Shakerism: Its Meaning and Message* (Columbus, OH: Fred. J. Heer, 1904), 386.

⁵⁸ 'Of the 121 signed or attributed "gift drawings" that survive from this period, 117 were produced by sisters.' Isaac N. Youngs, *A Concise View of the Church of God and of Christ on Earth Having its Foundation in the Faith of Christ's First and Second Appearing* (New Lebanon, NY: 1856–60), 121.

⁵⁹ See the drawing reproduced in David Sellin, 'Shaker Inspirational Drawings', *Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin* 57, no. 273 (1962): 94, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3795072>.

⁶⁰ Laura Mulvey and Margarita Jimenez, 'The Spectacle Is Vulnerable: Miss World, 1970', reprinted in Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 3–5.

⁶¹ Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen* 16, no. 3 (Fall 1975): 6–18.

exploitation of the reified female body by resorting to a vocabulary of mutilated, toxic and poisonous flowers.

An engineer fascinated by 'the study of the mind',⁶² Lillian Moller Gilbreth was considered her husband's 'little woman',⁶³ although it was she who induced a paradigm shift by changing the relationship of power and representation between women and men. In *The Home-Maker and Her Job* (1927) and *Efficiency of Women Workers* (1929), Moller Gilbreth effectively deconstructed the 'male gaze' by upturning the production of images of women according to the principles of scopophilia and replacing them with a double gaze that encouraged women to think of themselves as both the eye of the camera and the subject of the film. This back-and-forth shifted the stereotype of the maternal gaze towards the logic of scientific objectivity traditionally associated with masculinity.

Moller Gilbreth appropriated the cinematographic device as if it were an instrument of emancipation⁶⁴ with which she retroactively and from within critiqued the works she had co-authored with her husband Frank. Their 1912 greeting card, for instance, depicts a worker sitting behind a table, concentrating on her task. Facing the camera, she is no more than a ghostly appearance, a head and a bust disappearing behind the traces of light caused by her movements. Rick Poyner reads this as the expression of a spectral negation of gender, and hence of women; of work and individuality; and, finally, of class struggle (through the physical disappearance of the worker and her work).⁶⁵

Moller Gilbreth, a doctoral graduate of Brown University, the first woman to join the prestigious American Society of Mechanical Engineers and to teach mechanical engineering at Purdue University, was a brilliant scholar. But it wasn't until her husband's death that she was able to embark on a career of her own and demonstrate that engineering, design, motherhood and feminism were not mutually exclusive. Her most important legacy to later generations is to have shown the use of the camera as a means of emancipation.

The reduction of women to reproducible objects of scopic pleasure lies at the heart of the cinematic experience. Drawing on Lucy Fischer's analysis of film director and musical choreographer Busby Berkeley,⁶⁶ famous for his meticulously synchronised production numbers, Ramsay Burt argues that, 'the history of middle-class dance criticism is full of men judging the formal beauty of female dancers in rarefied terms in order to claim that their appreciation of dancing is entirely aesthetic and therefore innocent of any erotic motivation'.⁶⁷ Berkeley's visual vortexes transform the female anatomy into parts of a giant kaleidoscope made of abstract signs opening and closing like the corollas of giant flowers.

⁶² Lillian Gilbreth Moller, *The Psychology of Management: The Function of the Mind in Determining, Teaching and Installing Methods of Least Waste* (New York: Macmillan, 1914).

⁶³ Alexandra Midal, 'Le Spectre de Lillian Moller Gilbreth: les images parlent', in *Design Arts Medias*, no. 6 (2023), Dossier thématique: 'Femmes de sciences', ed. Anne-Lyse Renon, <https://journal.dampress.org/issues/femmes-de-sciences/le-spectre-de-lillian-moller-gilbreth-les-images-parlent>.

⁶⁴ Liu Linda Ai-Yun, *Images between Images: Cinematic Inventions of the Everyday*, PhD dissertation, Modern Culture and Media, Brown University, 2011, 130.

⁶⁵ Rick Poyner, 'Exposure: Motion Efficiency Study by Frank Gilbreth', *Design Observer*, 4 December 2016, <https://www.designobserver.com/feature/exposure-motion-efficiency-study-by-frank-gilbreth/39272>.

⁶⁶ Lucy Fischer, 'The Image of Woman as Image: The Optical Politics of "Dames"', *Film Quarterly* 30, no. 1 (1976): 2–11

⁶⁷ Ramsay Burt, *Alien Bodies, Representations of Modernity, 'Race' and Nation in Early Modern Dance* (London: Routledge, 1998), 115.

The role of the director, and therefore the spectator, is that of the panoptic eye. The visual propaganda of entertainment metamorphoses the seemingly dislocated limbs of the dancers into flowers. This aestheticisation of the fragment speaks as much to everyday crime stories as to the notion of male gaze: in both instances, the women are cut up, mutilated, dismembered.

This practice of cutting up is also at the core of Carlo Mollino's plethora of erotic Polaroids. The nude images the famous Italian designer, architect, decorator, writer, painter, inventor, novelist, historian of photography and photographer produced for his very own pleasure were, according to some critics, tinged with a 'gentle, antique eroticism . . . Whether the subject is a crouch or a backdrop, he plays with chiaroscuro without ever indulging in voyeuristic libertinism . . . the women are merely a pretext.'⁶⁸ From 1962 onwards, Mollino took thousands of photographs of undressed women in specially furnished interiors in various homes in Turin, but it wasn't until after his death in 1973 that this secret production was revealed to the public.

Among other places, a second-floor flat in Via Napione thus served as his private photo studio for nearly fifteen years. The interior decoration abounded with metaphors of nature, from organic chandeliers, acanthus leaves and Eero Saarinen's tulip chairs to reproductions of Ricardo Moncalvo's lithographs of forest motifs running across the two walls of the living room. In this kingdom of the male gaze, Mollino, like a pharaoh living amidst towers of books describing him as an eccentric, whimsical and elusive genius, had one wall of his bedroom covered with 317 reproductions of butterfly drawings, thus revisiting the Egyptian rite by which the insects, symbolising the souls of the deceased, represent the mistresses who accompany the monarch after his death.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Mollino, who was a vocal proponent of Surrealism, did not leave the protocol of his special photographic sessions to chance. After spotting potential models in bars and clubs, he had them approached by an accomplice who would invite them to meet a visiting diplomat. If they accepted, they were whisked away by a chauffeur and handed an envelope with cash. Once they had arrived at the flat, they were dressed up and led into a room where the master himself would be sitting behind his camera. A photographic chamber the size of a flat, Mollino's 'bachelor pad' provided the backdrop to thousands of images of paid women-objects who were assigned an erotic-decorative function that was supposed to mirror the abstractions of nature.

A very similar logic of commodification underpinned the murder of Elizabeth Short, who was found dead in Los Angeles on 15 January 1947 in a macabre staging: bloodless and horribly mutilated, cut in two, her torso lying at a distance from the rest of her body, her arms bent and raised, her mouth slashed from ear to ear. For reasons that are not entirely clear, the 22-year-old Short, who had a tattoo of a black rose on her upper thigh (which her murderer cut out and placed in her vagina), was nicknamed the Black Dahlia. This uncanny detail would lead to her name disappearing behind that of a non-existent flower, which has since become a well-established artistic, literary and cinematographic trope.

According to Steve Hodel, a retired police inspector, all the evidence points to his very own father George, an art lover and Man Ray's partner in debauchery, as being the murderer. A doctor with the Los Angeles Department of Health specialising in the treatment of venereal diseases, George Hodel mingled with the 1940s Hollywood crowd. In 1947, he

⁶⁸ Giovanni Arpino, 'Le dernier grand extravagant', in *Carlo Mollino. Polaroids*, ed. Fulvio Ferrari (Paris: Le Promeneur, 1986), 7.

was living with his wife in a lavish mansion at 5121 Franklin Avenue in Los Feliz where, according to his son Steve, he murdered, cut up and bled to death the Black Dahlia before disseminating the pieces of her body on the pavement. Authors Mark Nelson and Sarah Hudson even hypothesise that Hodel had planned the murder as a *cadavre exquis*, a real-life tribute to the Surrealist movement he so admired.⁶⁹

Although the house in Franklin Avenue differs from the rest of Lloyd Wright Jr.'s work, it bears the hallmarks of the architect's obsession with floral motifs, Art Deco, Expressionism and the Mesoamerican textile block houses developed by his famous father Frank. His totemic structures made from standardised concrete elements echo the stylised flora in the openwork copper portal, where the leaves, similar to Berkeley's dancers, form a perfect rhombus. The door opens onto a gloomy succession of staircases leading to the rooms of the house, which face inwards towards a hidden central stage designed for the theatrical performances enjoyed by the house's original owners, John and Ruth Sowden.

According to Steve Hodel, his father used a secret room adjacent to the living room where he, Ray and other men spied on their guest's conversations and, thanks to a one-way mirror, chose their female preys for the night. This echoes Mollino's practice of turning his flat into a private, obscure and closed scenic device where he locked up the women whose bodies he wanted to enter into a dialogue with the arabesques, twists and turns of the organic and floral motifs of the furniture and décor. Steve Hodel also surmises that Short was tortured and killed in the cellar of the building before being left to bleed to death in the bathtub of the bathroom on the upper floor, whose ceiling is decorated with knotwork.⁷⁰ The stage of a clash between the horror and brutality suffered by Short and the quasi-cinematic décor of an elegant ruin where the vegetation competes with the architecture, George Hodel's lair remains fraught with mystery.

Mollino, the heir of a well-to-do family, did not intend his Polaroids for publication or exhibition, but kept them for his own fetishistic excitement, in which he indulged as an untouchable in the society of his time. In those years, cultivating an interest in decoration and interior design was elevated to the status of a virile attribute, an occupation that featured prominently in men's magazines such as *Esquire* and *Playboy*. In one of his articles for the *Architects' Journal*, the eminent design historian Reyner Banham famously claimed his attachment to *Playboy* for its attention to design and architecture: 'Of course, I buy it for the giant fold-out full-colour pin-ups [but also for] a dozen other reasons'⁷¹ What caught his interest above all were the 'bachelor pads' in which the women were displayed, sleek icons of modern living in which the magazine's male readers fantasised to attract their one-night stands.

The analogy between nature and the body of the reified woman is common to the architecture of Sowden House and Mollino's Polaroids. In one of his untitled black-and-white photographs from 1963, a woman kneels precariously on a cushion beside a typewriter and a tray with a glass and a bottle of champagne, her back turned to the camera, her feet outside of the frame, wearing only a corset and a flower-embroidered stole, her face concealed. As though he owned her, the photographer later added his initials on her buttocks. In several collages from 1962–1973, he combined a colour polaroid of a woman, her face always hidden, next to a dried flower and the gilded initials 'C' and 'M'. With

⁶⁹ Mark Nelson and Sarah Hudson Bayliss, *Exquisite Corpse: Surrealism and the Black Dahlia Murder* (New York: Bulfinch Press, 2006).

⁷⁰ Steve Hodell, *Black Dahlia Avenger: A Genius for Murder* (New York: Arcade, 2003).

⁷¹ Reyner Banham, 'I'd crawl a mile for... *Playboy*', *Architects' Journal* 131, no. 3390 (April 1960): 107.

Mollino, the scopic image, without the slightest hint of irony, boils down to the representation of a flower-woman whose off-centred body is only seductive when it is considered in parts.

Hidden in plain sight

Far from the floriography practiced by Oscar Wilde, who adorned his buttonhole with a green-tinted carnation to signify his homosexuality, supporters of the amendment for women's suffrage during the 1915–1919 campaign in Pennsylvania planted yellow 'suffragist gardens'. As 'visual propaganda',⁷² these colourful experiments in campaigning served as a training for a whole generation of women who were determined to defend their rights and take part in the political life of their country. To illustrate the complexity of the social position of the New Woman as opposed to the flower-woman, Silverman dissects a cartoon, published in the satirical newspaper *Le Grelot* in 1896, depicting a

female virago beating her husband. Smoking a cigarette, dressed in bloomers and a straw hat, she announced that she was on her way to a 'Congrès féministe' and blasted instructions to her housecleaning husband. She would ride off on her bicycle, often depicted as the technological partner of the *femme nouvelle*.⁷³

The concern about the disappearance of differences in the political and social roles of women and men is also addressed in one of the first films in the history of cinema in which flowers play an important role: the satirical short *La Fée aux choux* (The Cabbage-Patch Fairy, 1896), directed by Alice Guy. Long dismissed as Léon Gaumont's 'secretary' and largely overlooked by retrospectives and film museums, Guy was the first woman to direct a fiction film. By deconstructing the clichéd image of baby boys being found in a cabbage patch and baby girls growing amidst the roses (in Guy's film all the babies are harvested in a cabbage patch), she instils a dose of feminism and equal rights in an otherwise conservative industry. Similarly, in *The Results of Feminism* (1906), Guy paints a comedic picture of modern society by reversing the roles traditionally assigned to men and women. But behind the comedy lurks an attack on the vitriolic caricatures of emancipated woman.

Another strategy that has proved its worth is the use of flowers for deception purposes. In the work of Ray and Charles Eames flowers abound, from *House of Cards* to *Solar Do-Nothing Machine* and Ray's knack for flower arrangements. For the Eames, the 'natural designs embodied in Mojave desert plants' was a fascinating source of inspiration, as an article in *LIFE* magazine told its readers in 1950.⁷⁴ Their long-standing interest in flowers and cryptography came to fruition in 1960 when Herman Miller Furniture Company asked them to create a certificate of authenticity. Ray designed a floral motif, for which she asked the secretary of CEO Dirk Jan De Pree to pick wild flowers in the fields near the company's headquarters in Zeeland, Michigan, wrap them in dry ice and post them to her in California. When the flowers arrived, Ray assembled them into a bouquet, which was then

⁷² See Michelle Moravec; Katherine Pettine and Hope Smalley, 'Stunts and Sensationalism: The Pennsylvania Progressive Era Campaign for Women's Suffrage', *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 87, no. 4 (2020): 631–56, <https://doi.org/10.5325/pennhistory.87.4.0631>.

⁷³ Silverman, *Art Nouveau*, 67.

⁷⁴ *LIFE*, 11 September 1950, quoted in Ben Gosrvoe, Design Genius : Charles and Ray Eames, <https://www.life.com/history/charles-and-ray-eames-simply-genius/>.

photographed by Charles. The resulting image was used as the basis for a security print to prevent counterfeiting of the company's bonds.

Flowers served another purpose in one of their earlier projects, conceived for the American National Exhibition in Moscow, which took place at the height of the Cold War. For this propaganda display financed by the US government, the Eames produced a visual installation entitled *Glimpses of the USA* (1958–59), housed in a geodesic dome designed by Buckminster Fuller. The presentation consisted of more than 2,200 still and moving images shown simultaneously on seven screens to a musical score by Elmer Bernstein. After months of research and discussion, the Eames settled on a bouquet of forget-me-nots as the final image. This decision went against the US government's wish to conclude the presentation with a simultaneous projection of American flags. The flower sequence, which the couple describe in their archives as 'Tender Goodnight Scenes',⁷⁵ was a way of ending a somewhat ostentatious demonstration of power with a friendly symbolic gesture towards the USSR.

These examples show that steganography can embrace various strategies. But to fully appreciate its many layers and driving forces, I suggest we return to some of the case studies examined earlier, which are far from having revealed all their secrets. First among them are Fuller's floral dances.

As hypnotic spectacles born from the mastery of the latest technological innovations, Fuller's danced metaphors inspired the visual juxtapositions of photographer Stefan Lorant in his satirical magazine *Lilliput*. On a double-page spread, he placed two photographs facing each other: the image on the left, a photograph by Dr Krohn dating from 1937 and captioned *Our Lily*, shows a woman in a flared white dress performing an acrobatic feat by lifting herself off the ground on one arm; the image on the right, a photograph by Felix Man captioned *Arum Lily*, represent a tumescent flower. This reduction of the female body to an explicitly sexual-morphological metaphor is the exact opposite of the steganography of the wallpaper pattern that stubbornly eludes the analysis of the protagonist of Perkins Gilman's story, who must master a double language in order to regain her freedom:

Learning to monitor her own speech, she develops an artificial feminine self who reinforces the terms of her husband's expert diagnosis: this self attempts to speak reasonably and in 'a very quiet voice', refrains from crying in his presence, and hides the fact that she is keeping a journal.⁷⁶

Treichler's analysis emphasises the need for the protagonist to evade the prohibitions imposed on her by her husband, such as having an intellectually stimulating conversation or writing. In the face of adversity, and knowing that she is being watched, she has no choice but to disguise her thoughts, modify her speech, conceal her activities. In a similar vein, Fuller, in trying to avoid being plagiarised, 'insisted upon a culture of secrecy, closely guarding all the details of her costumes and lighting'.⁷⁷

Fuller even refused to commit her lighting cues to paper, preferring to signal her technicians through a system of onstage heel taps. While such guardedness may have

⁷⁵ Ray and Charles Eames, 'Glimpses of the USA (1959)', Production Files Narration, Eames Collection, Box II.135 folder 13, Library of Congress.

⁷⁶ Paula A. Treichler, 'Escaping the Sentence', 61.

⁷⁷ Rhonda K. Garelick, *Electric Salome: Loie Fuller's Performance of Modernism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 33–34.

been necessary to protect professional secrets, in maintaining this level of secrecy around her performances Fuller only enhanced her reputation as an unknowable 'wizard' with mysterious powers.⁷⁸

Accompanied by a small team who followed her everywhere, she used codes to remotely activate the 30 to 40 spotlights she needed:

Not only does Loïe have to worry about arranging her sails correctly in space, but she gives all the signals and directs the electricians while she is dancing. A light tap of her nose with her heel on the glass plate and her immaculate white dress shows all the colours of the rainbow; another tap, and she turns yellow, then red, then green, and so on, until all the tints and shades and colour combinations known to man have been exhausted.⁷⁹

But there is, quite literally, more to it than meets the eye. The steganographic dimension of her veils conceals yet another secret, as we learn that when dancing the *Lily Dance*, Fuller accomplishes a physical tour de force:

The wands used in this dress are very long and at the very end of the dance she forms a figure of a colossal white lily, such as could have lived and flourished only in the land of Munchausen. When the big lily wilts out of sight in the last dance she returns to her dressing room and sinks panting into a big chair . . . 'do you know', she said, 'I make that lily by sheer will force? . . . *Le Lys du Nil* is the hardest thing I do'.⁸⁰

Furthermore, her stage costume acted as a screen for coloured light projections. Fuller had always nurtured a well-documented interest in telescopes, microscopes, X-rays and other scientific instruments. They held out the promise of an ideology of transparency, providing access to knowledge that had previously been unattainable. The dancer repeatedly expressed her fascination with the revelations these instruments of unveiling enabled: 'Fuller cared deeply about peering beneath the surfaces of things and presenting the hidden truths discovered.'⁸¹ This resonated with her fascination with the infinitely small and the infinitely remote:⁸² 'As we know, Fuller consistently staged dramatic revelations of interiors, and of normally unseeable spectacles: human organs, microscopic creatures, heavenly bodies.'⁸³ In her choreographies, the costumes served to accommodate the projections of light as much as the unconscious projections of the spectators, while simultaneously concealing her anatomy:

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Lista, *Loïe Fuller*, 214.

⁸⁰ 'Loïe Fuller: The Serpentine Dancer behind the Scenes', *New York Blade*, 11 April 1896, quoted in Garelick, *Electric Salome*, 40.

⁸¹ Ibid., 177.

⁸² 'The Curies . . . had discovered something unseen and unseeable, something which had to do with those forces which hitherto had been looked upon as supernatural, insomuch as our eyes were inadequate to see them . . . If radium can bring to our vision those things we cannot see, we cannot measure its influence.' Loïe Fuller, 'Lecture on radium', draft, 1911, Loïe Fuller Notebooks and Letters, 1907–1911, The New York Public Library.

⁸³ Garelick, *Electric Salome*, 208

Fuller's fundamental solo technique enacted a very basic game of hide-and-seek with her body – hiding it, reshaping it, scientifically altering its visibility through lights and stagecraft. By virtue of being nearly always invisible, her literal, biological self acquired a kind of powerful, negative stage presence, which forced audiences to wonder where her body was and what it was doing.⁸⁴

Critic Georges Rodenbach lauded the invisibility of this 'body [which] was charming precisely because it could not be found'⁸⁵ – an absence that Mallarmé described as 'ghostly'⁸⁶. Completely covered in her veils, the dancer becomes a spectral being who withdraws from the concupiscent eye and thus regains power over the male gaze. Much more than an allegory of modernity and femininity, Fuller's choreographic 'flowering' takes on a different meaning in the context of the morphological metaphors of Art Nouveau. In their stead, she outlines the coming of age of the New Woman, as one critic remarked:

The other evening . . . I had a vision of a future theatre, something like feminist theatre. Women are increasingly taking the place of men, supplanting the so-called stronger sex. . . . Expect to see women grow in influence and power, and if, in Gladstone's words, the nineteenth century was the 'century of the Workers', the twentieth will be that of the Women.⁸⁷

In contrast to Isadora Duncan or Mary Wigman, who chose to liberate the dancer's body by freeing it from the constraints of traditional costume, Fuller adopted a strategy that was directed against the over-exposure of the reified female body. By staging hypnotic visions of blooming flowers and refusing to expose herself in the public space, she emancipated herself from the prescriptions of the male gaze and invented a stage language that acknowledged the autonomy of the modern woman.

Floriographic tricks

In 2015, Joanna Piotrowska travelled to Nagorno-Karabakh, a territory disputed by Armenia and Azerbaijan, to produce a series of photographs. Detained by local police and accused of spying for Russia, she decided to photograph only roses – a seemingly innocuous choice. Yet in the particular context of this region, the rose can be read as a (socialist) symbol of resistance and resilience. The photographs from this series, evocatively titled *Sub Rosa*, are shown in specifically designed anti-frames 'made of elements, materials and forms found in interrogation rooms . . . [which] replicate the power dynamics inherent in [the artist's] story'.⁸⁸ In the same steganographic vein, Walid Raad recounts how Fadwa Hassoun, a botanist by training and an officer in the Lebanese army in the 1970s and 1980s, devised a system to code-name political and military leaders based on Middle Eastern flora. She consigned the code names in a logbook where their faces were collaged to the flower by whose name they were now called.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 177–78.

⁸⁵ Georges Rodenbach, 'Danseuses', *Le Figaro*, 5 May 1896, 1, quoted in Guy Ducrey, *Corps et graphies. Poétique de la danse et de la danseuse à la fin du xix^e siècle* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1996), 442.

⁸⁶ Mallarmé, 'Considérations sur l'art du ballet et la Loïe Fuller', *The National Observer*, 13 May 1893, reprinted in *Œuvres complètes*, 313.

⁸⁷ Fuller, *Fifteen Years*, 282.

⁸⁸ See <https://formafantasma.com/work/sub-rosa>.

According to various scholars, the modern origin of camouflage flowers can be attributed to Rosa Luxemburg during her long years in prison. As her letters were checked by prison censors, she had to find a way of communicating essential information to the other members of the Spartacus League. It appears that her activities and correspondence with those closest to her revolved almost exclusively around botanical subjects: she named her friends after flowers, received dried or fresh flowers and worked on her herbariums in her cell. It is highly unlikely that Luxemburg, who was renowned for her pugnacity, had given up her political struggle on the pretext that she was imprisoned and put under surveillance. Hence, 'critics have sought behind [her] epistolary exchanges . . . a secret language which, thanks to the names of plants, allowed information to be transmitted clandestinely'.⁸⁹ In the introduction to *Rosa Luxemburg. Herbarium de prison*, Muriel Pic speculates about the existence of a double language'.⁹⁰

Although Luxemburg considered the discovery of plant names as a 'gift' and constantly expressed onomastic and poetic joy in her letters, which are mainly devoted to botany, animals and the skies, with a few considerations on the arts and literature strewn in, you sometimes get the feeling that the revolutionary is pulling the wool over the censors' eyes.⁹¹

Pic's analysis supports Dorota Sajewska's hypothesis that Luxemburg and her assistant and friend Mathilde Jacob communicated through flowers. Officially intended to enrich the prisoner's herbarium, the flowers she was sent by her confidante could have served to fluidify the exchange of political information, which would otherwise have been impossible:

The seven 'wartime notebooks' also contain notations that can be read as political meanings . . . For example, the detailed description of the leaves and buds of the plant identified as 'Ponsetti' with a double question mark includes information on 'a yellow stamp on the side'(?).⁹²

Anna Styczyńska agrees with this reading. She even suggests that Luxemburg's handwritten notes on certain pages of the herbarium concealed her instructions:

The cryptical nature of the herbarium has drawn researchers' attention to the inconsistencies between its individual pages, primarily when it comes to the amount of work put into their creation. It cannot therefore be ruled out that Rosa Luxemburg concealed hidden messages in the compositions themselves. They are yet to be deciphered.⁹³

⁸⁹ Muriel Pic, ed., *Rosa Luxemburg. Herbarium de prison* (Geneva, Héros-Limite, 2023), 11.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 352.

⁹¹ Muriel Pic, 'Le problème de l'herbier, De l'Herbarium de Rosa Luxemburg à L'Herbier des villes de Georges Perec', *Les Cahiers du MNAM*, no. 157 (Fall 2021): 23.

⁹² Dorota Sajewska, *Nekroperformans. Kulturowa rekonstrukcja teatru Wielkiej Wojny* (Warsaw: Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego, 2016), 200–9, quoted in Anna Styczyńska, 'A Herbarium or a Cipher? The Mystery of Rosa Luxemburg', *Virtual Shtetl*, https://sztetl.org.pl/en/dziedzictwo/rewolucje-i-utopie/zielnik-czy-szyfr-zagadka-rozy-luksemburg#footnote2_8egz263.

⁹³ Anna Styczyńska, 'A Herbarium or a Cipher?', *Ibid.*

Conversely, the bouquets of flowers sent to Luxemburg by Jacob may have been used to smuggle information about the political situation. Charlotte Berard writes that to date no one has ever found this code 'which would have been known to Jacob only'.⁹⁴ Nevertheless, in contrast to the gallant clichés of the flower-woman, the secret use of the herbarium by the revolutionary, who wrote to her friend Sophie Liebknecht at Christmas 1917 that she held a 'magic key',⁹⁵ demonstrates the persistence of the mystery and duplicity of flowers.⁹⁶

All these 'tricks' are in line with the kind of intelligence that the philosopher of media Vilém Flusser attributed to the designer, this 'malicious schemer dedicated to engineering traps'⁹⁷ – a description that could be extended to the artists, filmmakers and architects cited in this essay. Cunning, deception and perfidy, along with Morse code and various cryptologies, steganographies and glossolalia, which are now the subject of so-called intelligence studies, are in keeping with the idea of morality already described by Torquato Acceto in *Della dissimulazione honesta* (On Honest Dissimulation, 1641). Operating under the cover of gallantry and metaphors of the eternally feminine, flowers are cunning spies.

Now It's Time to Speak Flower!

Double Agent: Do You Speak Flower? is not intended as a wake-up call against the depletion of natural resources or the trade in endangered or lost species. Reaching beyond the clichéd trope of the *femme-fleur*, it highlights the use of flowers in strategies of artifice and cunning as effective means of resistance.

The multitude of meanings attached to the concept of the flower-woman raises questions that concern the use and *raison d'être* of forms in general, as well as their metamorphoses and secret meanings. Whatever she was originally meant to embody (allegory, metaphor, alienation, reification...), each of her occurrences offers the possibility of semantic renewal.

These palimpsestic effects take a political turn in *Double Agent: Do You Speak Flower?*, as it reinvests the aesthetic trivialisation of floral variations the better to decipher what they are really trying to say. Between appearances and mystification, it demonstrates that the manipulation of form is as important as ever when it comes to fighting oppression. Drawing on a non-exhaustive range of critical and speculative associations, I have tried to frame the issues at stake in a political and feminist steganography that operates under the cover of the seemingly neutral and seductive banality of floral language. Combining aesthetics and feminism, the double agent embodied by cunning is revealed in the final pages of this book, if you have taken the time to read it in its entirety.

By brewing an artistic elixir in homage to *Proteus anguinus*, an aquatic salamander of exceptional longevity, Marguerite Humeau puts her faith in so-called signature theory. During shamanic ceremonies based on this concept, participants believed that they ingested

⁹⁴ Charlotte Berard, ed., *Rosa Luxemburg im Gefängnis. Briefe und Dokumente aus den Jahren 1915–1919*, (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 1973), quoted in Pic, *Rosa Luxemburg*, 11.

⁹⁵ Letter to Sophie Liebknecht in Jörn Schütrumpf (ed.), *Rosa Luxemburg or the Price of Freedom* (São Paulo: Editora Expressão Popular, 2006), <https://capirorev.org/fr/experiences/rosa-luxemburg-lutte-inlassable-contre-les-guerres-et-le-capital/>.

⁹⁶ See Claudie Weill, Afterword, *Rosa Luxemburg. Lettres à Sophie, 1916-1918* (Paris: Berg International Éditeurs, 2002).

⁹⁷ Vilém Flusser, *O mundo codificado: por uma filosofia do design e da comunicação*, ed. Rafael Cardoso, trans. Raquel Abi-Sâmara (São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2007), 182.

not only the flesh of what they ate, but also its attributes and capacities. The promise of eternity held by Humeau's concoction is a reminder of the fragility of living beings and, likewise, of the victories so far achieved. It materialises our hope that by being absorbed, it may carry the teachings of floral steganography into the bodies and souls of generations to come.