

Excessive Beauty

Ornamentation, Supplimentarity and Modernism

Even what is called ornamentation (parerga), ie., what is only an adjunct and not an intrinsic constituent in the complete representation of the object, in augmenting the delight of taste does so only by means of its form. Thus it is with the frames of pictures or the drapery on statues, or the colonnades of palaces. But if the ornamentation does not itself enter into the composition of the beautiful form-if it is introduced like a gold frame merely to win approval for the picture by means of its charm-it is then called finery and takes away from the genuine beauty[1].

The critical and theoretical fortunes of ornamentation have a rather chequered history. Modern art theory and criticism have often regarded the ornament as an unessential, if not downright pernicious, addition to the "real thing", such as a building, the human body, a functional object or a work of art. Due to its debased status, ornamentation has frequently been seen as a lesser artform associated with women, peasants and tribal culture.

The question concerning the status of ornamentation is already present in the most seminal text of modern Western aesthetics: Kant's *Critique of Judgement*. In the quotation which introduces this essay, Kant summarises the position of ornamentation within his philosophical edifice. He asserts that ornaments are supplements, adjuncts,

[1] Kant, H. *The Critique of Judgement*, (1790) transl. James Creed Meredith, (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 1986, ss14.

accessories which, by their own nature, are necessarily extrinsic to the "proper" work of art. This quotation also indicates that for Kant the ornament can attain to the level of "genuine beauty" only by disavowing the immediacy of the sensuous appeal of its material base and by privileging purely formal values.

In more recent times Kant's discussion of the ornament has been used by Jaques Derrida as one of the main thematic threads in his 1972 book *The Truth in Painting*[2]. In a move typical of all his work, Derrida's analysis of the conceptual materials woven into the *Critique of Judgement* aims at identifying the ties which bind Kant's work to the recurrent assumptions of Western philosophical thought (which in Derrida's view, include the notions or ideals of essence, presence, foundation etc.). Derrida sees Kant's treatment of the *parergon* - or, which is the same thing[3], of the ornament - as an attempt to address a fundamental philosophical problem: the distinction between the "inside" and the "outside". To understand what this means one should bear in mind that Kant defines the *parergon*/ornament as something which is placed on the boundary between the "proper" work of art and the surrounding environment. The *parergon*, in a sense, is this margin, this hybrid in-between frontier zone which belong to both the work and the

[2] Derrida, J *The Truth in Painting*, Trans. by G. Bennington and I. McLeod (Chicago: University Press of Chicago) 1987.

[3] Derrida seems to posit a distinction between *parergon* and ornament, and assumes that the latter is always to be identified with the inferior, purely physical aesthetic pleasure ("charm", in Kant's terminology). Kant, however, clearly states that ornaments can achieve aesthetic pleasure of the higher, intellectual degree (ie "beauty") if they are endowed with the necessary formal qualities.

world. Typical *parerga* are, for Kant, the drapery of statues (the naked body being, in his eyes, the "real" object of artistic representation), the columns of buildings and the frames of paintings. And while these example might seem a bit odd, it is certainly true that in architecture, fashion and design ornamentation often concentrate on boundary areas such as frames, friezes, skirtings etc.

At a theoretical level, the physical marginality of the *parergon*/ornament is a reflection of its ambiguous or "undecidable" (to use a term dear to Derrida) positioning on the border which delimits what is inside of the true and proper realm of the pure judgement of taste from what lies outside it. The *parergon*, therefore, is neither totally inside nor completely outside the "true and proper" realm of the pure judgement of taste. This kind of irreducible ambiguity of the *parergon* has for Derrida crucial theoretical implication because it destabilises the fundamental philosophical distinction between what essentially and intrinsically belongs within a certain class of phenomena, such as "art", and what is absolutely excluded from it[4].

In the context of the *Critique of Judgement*, and of much post-Kantian aesthetic thought,

[4] This, however, does not simply mean erasing the boundary, given that this move is also, as Derrida clearly indicates, typical of the kind of Western philosophical tradition he intends to deconstruct (it is the Hegelian sublation, the *reductio ad unum*). The *parergon* manifests simultaneously the absolute necessity and the total impossibility of the boundary between the inside and the outside. The positive effect of this aporia is that it prevents thought from falling into the essentialist, foundationalist and "phallogocentric" bad habits of Western metaphysics. The anxiety generated by this hybrid in-between space keeps thought moving, driving it through the restlessness of its undecidability.

the inside/outside boundary is that which separates the opposite poles of *form* and *matter*. As the opening quotation indicates, to the extent that ornament is an integral part of the overall formal structure of the work it is truly beautiful. If, however, it gives in to the temptation of making use of the purely sensuous qualities of its medium, such as colour and texture, it regresses to the rank of the merely sensuous, of the kind of pleasures produced by immediate physical sensations. But this borderline, which the ornament occupies and constitutes, between the intellectual pleasure of the beautiful[5] and the sensuous, bodily pleasure we derive from our corporal involvement with the physical texture of the world, turns out to be, paradoxically, an issue which lies at the very core of modern art theory. Thus the humble and often despised ornament, despite its constitutional marginality finds itself right at the centre of the main contentions in modern aesthetics.

As Jonathan Culler pointed out[6] the deconstructive movement which allows Derrida to bring to light the centrality of the margin follows what he calls the "logic of the supplement". For Derrida the supplement is what traditional philosophical theories have to marginalise in order to establish themselves. And, as I have pointed out in the preceding paragraphs, Kant aesthetic theory of the beautiful has to

[5] For Kant the pleasure of the beautiful arises from the spontaneous and free interplay of faculties of imagination and understanding on the occasion of presentation an object characterised by a certain formal "proportion".

[6] Culler, J. *On Deconstruction*, (London: Routledge) 1992, pp. 193-199.

marginalise the sensuous and corporal pleasures of the "agreeable" ornament in order to establish an aesthetic order centred on the intellectual pleasure of the beautiful. But a deconstructive analysis could in fact show that the supposedly debased supplement is required because the centres lack something[7]. And in the case of Kantian aesthetic this "something" that the supplementary ornament reveals is the lack of the body in the aesthetic of the beautiful. The lack, which is created by the expulsion of the supplement, perpetually haunts the stability of traditional, or non-deconstructive, philosophical theories and provides the main entryway for those who want to carry-out a deconstructive reading of their legacy.

The debasement and marginalisation of ornamentation took a particularly nasty turn in the early stages of Modernism when Adolf Loos declared it to be "a crime"[8]. Loos' condemnation expressed modernism's desire to relegate ornamentation to the margins of the artistic field and to sanction its aesthetic redundancy and ethical/political dubiousness. And despite various attempts to re-evaluate the role of ornamentation - Postmodernism, feminism, multiculturalism have all contributed in different ways to this re-

[7] "The supplement is an inessential extra, added to something complete in itself, but the supplement is added in order to complete, to compensate for a lack in what is supposed to be complete in itself. These two different meanings of supplement are linked in a powerful logic, and in both meanings the supplement is present as exterior, foreign to the "essential" nature of that which it is added or in which it is substituted" (Culler:102) My summary of the logic of the supplement/parergon is necessarily very simplified and does not take into account many key aspects of its modus operandi. Deconstructive practices require, almost "by definition", a detailed account of the many textual twists and turns of their argumentative unfolding, which I cannot reconstruct exhaustively in this essay.

[8] The pamphlet "Ornament and Crime" (*Ornament und Verbrechen*) was published for the first time in 1908 in the journal *Der Sturm*. A French translation was published in 1920 in *L'Esprit nouveau* and provided Le Corbusier with formidable ammunition for his rationalist crusade.

evaluation - in current art criticism the term "decorative" is still redolent with pejorative overtones.

It is interesting to note that Loos' polemic resonates with ethical connotations which are typical of many anti-ornamental stances. According to these perspectives ornamentation lies because it covers-up the purity of the naked human body, the sincerity of the constructive structure of a building, the honesty of a tool's function or the truth of a material in a work of art. Ornaments seduce, deceive and cover-up. Like tattoos they are the favourite of criminals, prostitutes, savages and decadent aristocrats[9] The ornament is, Derrida would say, an assault on the traditional Western ideal of "presence", of the "naked truth" which discloses itself in the immediacy of the given. In its deceitfulness the ornament is linked with traditional techniques of rhetorical embellishment: its function is not, as it is the case with plain speech, to tell the truth, but to daze, lure and persuade.

Ornaments are supplements *par excellence* in that they are, structurally, something which is added on. As such they are inessential, a surplus and a luxury which signifies wealth, indulgence and waste. Ornaments are excessive, irrational and non-functional and therefore totally at odds with the functionalist and rationalist ethos that modernist design, architecture and craft have inherited from the Enlightenment. In this discursive context, in fact, function stands for

[9] Damisch, H "Ornamento", *Enciclopedia* (Turin: Garzanti) 1980

the ethics of modern rationality and its utopian promises of an ultimate redemptive destiny for humanity.

But, perhaps the exclusion of the 'frivolity' of decoration - this absolutely crucial move for the establishment of modernist aesthetics - reflects an abstract and simplistic notion of rationality. The sensuous richness and the rhythmical pulse of decoration have, in fact, traditionally provided a vehicle for the expression of our concrete bodily engagement with the physical world. To exclude ornamentation means to ignore the carnal reality of the body in all its perceptual, libidinal and physical richness. Therefore, as I have indicated earlier on in this essay, the ornament, intended as a Derridean supplement, offers a deconstructive thread which reveals a fundamental lack at the heart of Modernism itself[10]. And this discovery can lead to the undoing of the modernist hierarchical order and to the revelation that its rationality is not redemptive or utopian but instrumental. The rejection of the corporeal texture of experience shows that modernist rationality often does not stand for the liberation of the "human potential" but rather for the liberation of the potential of the market forces and for the maximisation of the performative efficiency of the systems of

[10] Furthermore, in Derrida's view, the deconstructive logic of the supplement shows that the originary term to which the supplement is attached is nothing else than a disguised derivation of the supplement itself. In our case, this entails that Modernist art would be a special case of, or a derivation from, ornamentation. The ornament, therefore, would not be a marginal accessory to "serious" art but the originary and hierarchically dominant term of the equation. This is a conclusion which would greatly surprise many great Modernist abstract artists who have often based their reputation and careers on the lofty aspirations of their non-representational aesthetics and the total repudiation of ornamentation. (this reductionist thesis has also been proposed by Gombrich in *The Sense of Order. A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art* (Ithaca: Cornell University) 1979.

economic exchange which rule every aspects of life in modern industrialised societies.

The constellation of issues which I have tried to outline in the preceding paragraphs provides, I believe, an apt interpretative framework for Pam Gaunt's recent work. Over the last few years the Perth based artist has centred her practice on an exploration of the interplay between the notions of marginality and ornamentation in the context of a broader reflection on the place of textiles tradition within the legacy of Modernism. The decorative motifs quoted in her recent works often refer to the patterning of borders, rims, fringes and margins rooted in different textiles genres. Their spatial arrangement reflects their original function which was not to occupy the centre stage of the perceptual field but to mark discretely its perimeters.

The distinctive spatial qualities of these works, which often take the form of site-specific installations, resonate with architectural allusions and frequently draw upon visual and functional analogies between architectural and textiles ornamentation. This element of Pam Gaunt's recent work is particularly interesting if one considers how ornamentation has often been described as the "dress" of architecture. This dialogue between architectural and textile ornamentation is not only apparent in the visual analogies between motifs but also in their distribution and in the use of a compositional grammar based on the repetition and variation of fixed basic units.

In this sense, Pam Gaunt's work often lends itself to two complementary readings. On the one hand each individual element is characterised by a subtlety of nuances and details that can be only perceived at close proximity. Conversely the formal patterning generated by the general lay-out of the works can only be grasped from a certain distance - and from this distance individual pieces appear only as dots of colour, chromatic punctations on the margins of space and on the threshold of vision.

A subtle, gentle, *sotto voce* irony is threaded through these fragile sequences of motifs. This is often generated by the deliberate clash of traditional and non traditional materials and by the playful transformation of functional elements into decorative ones - a reversal of the functionalist ethos of classic modernist design. But perhaps Pam Gaunt's work could also be interpreted as a series of ironic notes on the margins of the recent history of modernism. In particular the unobtrusive almost self-effacing way in which she marks, punctuates and border the field of vision implicitly mocks the bombastic posturing of those modernist 'heroes' who are always a little too eager to occupy and conquer the visual field with their boisterous works.

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