

# Interactions – The Bulletin of I.A.W.I.S. No. 25, November 2000

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**Beauty and the Babes: Jeremy Gilbert Rolfe: *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime*. New York: Allworth Press, 2000.**

Theory and criticism have been major preoccupations in western cultural studies in the second half of 20th century. The accelerated multiplication of artistic avant-gardes in the post-war period and their subsequent implosion into post-modernism, along with the parallel collapse of structuralism into the deferrals and mobile play of deconstructionism, has turned the task of adjusting frames for the classification, analysis and critical evaluation of contemporary cultural expression into a major area of concern. Whether prompted by his own practice as a painter, goaded by questions aimed at him as graduate coordinator in a major American art school, or just following his own highly critical instincts, JGR is among the few commentators rigorously to confront the issues raised by artistic production in the late capitalist world and clearly to articulate possible critical positions in relation to them.

As the title of *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime* suggests, JGR grounds his discussion in terms that have been used in relation to artistic and literary expression from classical Antiquity, but which have gained new currency in European critical discourse at various points in its more recent history (the Renaissance, the 18th and the late 20th centuries). An introductory chapter, 'There is a Historical Context' critically justifies the application of classical aesthetic terminology to the reality of contemporary suburban culture, arguing, from the Hollywood home of film goddesses, for the ongoing relevance of Beauty, as first incarnated by Helen of Troy, as helpless attractiveness. A second chapter posits painting's freedom to pursue Beauty in the pure surfaces of colour photography, a medium that simultaneously releases it from any obligation to figural representation. A third and central chapter, sharing the book's main title, argues that Beauty, unlike the Sublime – which is associated with the incommensurable and thus the critical – stands in opposition to the idea of constructive thought. This provocative thesis forms the basis of the next chapter, 'Painting and the Photographic Model' where an attempt is made to relate current artistic production to the terms – such as 'glamour' and 'attractiveness' – in which Beauty is perceived in the contemporary world. This is followed by the book's most brilliantly convincing essay, 'Blankness as Signifier', in which the infinite potential of the computer screen is shown to incarnate the techno-sublime, that ideal world, now virtually possible, in which signs, liberated from their indexical function, endlessly play out their permutations. The following chapter asks what happens to the human when the Sublime becomes in this way identified with the idea and image

of technology and, logically enough, predicts that the human, as object, will disappear, its presence *assign* remaining in some sort of disembodied form in a virtual space in which knowledge is *merely* (as Peirce would say), signification. The place of Beauty in such a world is somewhat ambiguously sketched in a post-script 'A Last Word on Beauty', in which art is given an unpleasant choice between 'the vitality of the fashion video' or 'the dead hand of critique'.

The conundrum posed by JGR in his last chapter is symptomatic not only of contemporary art's actual situation but also of his particular style of argument. For the central problem his book tackles is that of language as applied to the transient and elusive qualities of the TV screen image, aesthetic categories to the commercial or technological, painting striving to imitate the electronic. So the central problem is not only of the meaning of words and the way they may be plausibly applied to their objects, but also the *logic* governing their application. It is here that JGR, impeccable logician that he is, finds himself trapped in the binary oppositions – this *or* that, if this, *then* that, masculine versus feminine, etc. – that have governed western philosophical and aesthetic thinking since the Greeks. To paraphrase, whereas the sublime is androgynous, beauty is feminine, because frivolous; this functional logic (as analysed, for example, by Baudrillard in *la Société de consommation*, 1970) is conflated in JGR with gender: feminine as female, as in a photographic model. Beauty 'can't be male because it's not encumbered by anxieties about power' (p. 71); the good is 'tough and male' (p. 71); correspondingly, 'the masculine has become absurd' (p. 47). Here JGR's ineluctably logical style of argument, in rationalising the unrationalisable, tends to trap him in paradigms (mostly white, heterosexual, bourgeois and male) which force him to exclude potentially interesting possibilities, – including his own project. So, where he states that 'beauty stands in opposition to the idea of productive thought' (p. 71) his own book is exemplary of productive thought brought to bear on beauty.

JGR's reference in his penultimate chapter to Heidegger's discussion of the Anaximander fragment may throw light on this problem. Heidegger, in his characteristic concern to arrive at an unmediated approach to *being* or the object, reflects on how it might be possible without translation, and therefore rationalisation, authentically to 'read' the pre-conceptual logic of a fragment of early Greek text. Although JGR, like Heidegger, is fully aware of that it is impossible for a modern or contemporary human mind to read pre-conceptual logic in early Greek Classical writing, his project in this book is nonetheless to apply originally Greek concepts ('beauty', 'sublime') to the objects – or rather the *images* – of contemporary post-industrial capitalist culture. Although, then, JGR grounds his discussion of Beauty in the myth of Helen of Troy, he is aware that concepts change with time and have to be re-invented with changing circumstance; or rather that changing circumstances reinvent concepts: the information technology world obliges us to re-think all our categories, especially epistemological and aesthetic.

This leads to the question, not fully confronted by JGR, as to whether the information revolution, which he argues is profoundly transforming contemporary artistic and cultural practice, in motivating new patterns and logics of sign interrelation, is one that is fully intelligible to traditional logical analysis. It may be no coincidence that the philosopher, frequently cited by JGR, who has done most to deconstruct the binary logic and metaphysics of presence current in the western world for most of its classical and post-classical tradition, Jacques Derrida, is the writer whose texts (*Glas* is an obvious example – and not only in its juxtaposition of Hegel and Genet) are closest to the logic of the hypertext. And the logic of the hypertext, by definition, eliminates the imposition of violent hierarchies or choices between options presented as mutually exclusive: foregoing any *authoritative* recommendation, it in theory proposes infinite possible translations of the same word or sign, keeping multiple options open.

An intuition of how hypertext, as opposed to rigorous logic, might work in expressing contemporary beauty is of course already implicit, not so much in JGR's text as in his book's *images*. For, exploiting the 'helpless attractiveness' of the fashion magazine pictures, JGR's images, when not used more traditionally as 'illustrations', operate as wild cards, or trumps, capping further discussion (turn straight to the colour plate opposite page 77). This is of course also the strategy of contemporary advertising, which the image trumps the text, *silences* in its muteness all further discussion; it is one that had already been applied in an intellectual context by the Roland Barthes of *L'Empire des signes*, 1970, to whom JGR's book may owe something. The price to be paid for hypertext, in its logic of juxtaposition, is the risk of tautology: the aesthetic *is* the technological; beauty *is* the babe. This is a logic that JGR also finds himself occasionally applying, – one that, as in many logicians from Descartes onwards, is accepted by the reader mesmerised by the dazzling ratiocination operative in other parts of the text.

This risk of tautology has its double in JGR's argument in what looks like having it both ways. Take, for example, beauty's ambiguity: in Kant it is in both in the *act* of representation and in the *object represented*. While JGR critiques this position, he keeps open a similar double option, for example when he implies that beauty is both in the smooth surface of the colour photo and the model snapped within it: far be it for him to relinquish the model for the process of her representation, dissolving, as it were, the babe in the acid bath. If, as at other times he seems to imply, beauty can reside in the object, there is no need for the art work, and, as he as says (p. 148) 'so much that is in the art gallery is less interesting than what's on in the street'. But, on the other hand, if beauty is a function purely of medial representation – glossy photo, video screen, Gerard Richter painting – then the object is irrelevant. At yet other times, JGR seems to go for the 'beauty in the eye of the beholder' position, as when, for example he asserts of beauty that: 'you'll know when you see it' (p. 78). JGR's overall argument however, if I have read it right, is that beauty is a function of *two* processes of looking: looking (naively: you'll know when you see it) and looking at looking (what is at stake in the process). In the light of this there is perhaps always going to be a tension, an undecidability between the two: between beauty as object and beauty as image. And that tension is there in the glamour fashion shots perhaps as much as in other forms of contemporary cultural expression. So what JGR is in fact telling us is perhaps as much about the relationship between sign and object as between where the beauty of either lies. In other words, it is a semiotic as much as an aesthetic issue.

The problems outlined above are no doubt ineluctably a function of the complexities of JGR's preoccupations and the multiple strategies he mobilises in his effort to pinpoint their implications; also of the obvious pleasure he takes in provocation. If he applies such a rigorously logical style of argument, it is because it is indispensable to clarification or critique of the words and concepts so frequently used and abused by modern critical writing: no really meaningful discussion is possible without them. And of course, JGR, as we have seen, is a master of the other discursive strategies available. Not least of these is wit, a sign par excellence of a challenge to logic, evident in JGR's text in some excellent jokes or neo-Wildean aphorisms. Here are just two examples: 'war [is] a condition that prepares geographical areas for the free market', p. 128, and 'America only ever was a market with preaching in it' (p. 116). Yes indeed.

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**Anita F. Bennet, Roger Cardinal and Kyriakos Koutsomallis: *Henry Moore in the Light of Greece*. London & Turin: Allemandi, 2000, 215 pp.**

This splendid book was published to accompany an exhibition organised by the Basil & Elise Goulandris Foundation at the Museum of Contemporary Art at Andros, Greece 25 June-17 September 2000. As its title suggests, and as the book's lavish plates abundantly illustrate, the project's aim is to re-assess the

achievement of Henry Moore in the light of his study of classical as well as early Greek sculpture, and thus, while continuing to acknowledge the major debt to non-European and so-called primitive sculptural forms, to re-inscribe Moore's work more precisely within a western artistic tradition. The case is convincingly put by Roger Cardinal in an essay written under the exhibition title which argues that despite an early, and no doubt necessary, rejection of Greek classical art, Moore's work was, after the Second World War, to be deeply influenced by it, whether it was studied in the British Museum and other collections, or in Greece itself, a country to which Moore made one visit in the Spring of 1951 at the time of the exhibition of his work in Athens.

The gist of the argument is that in establishing an original, modern and authentic sculptural style, Moore from the 1920s was obliged to resist the influence of the classical tradition which had had such a stranglehold on European sculpture until well into the nineteenth century. Instead, following the Cubists and other continental artists, he was to turn to non-European sources for new and mostly non-verisimilar conceptions of form, scale and space. In establishing – in the massive, simplified forms his most distinctive sculpture took from the late 1920s and 1930s – his mastery of an original and personal style and technique, Moore was able, with maturity – and in response to the many public commissions which followed on in the 1940s and 50s from post-war reconstruction of cities and civic spaces – gradually to absorb into his work forms and themes of classical Greek sculpture – without letting himself become overpowered by them. Two features in particular which characterise much of Moore's sculpture after around 1950 mark the impact of his renewed study of Greek art: the use of drapery and of the fragment.

Moore had already been exploring, in his Shelter Drawings – sketches of people taking refuge from the Blitz in the London Underground during the Second World War – the expressive possibilities of drapery in relation to human forms, and this interest was further re-activated after 1945 by his study of the Parthenon sculptures in the British Museum, and later in Greece. The *Draped Reclining Figure* of 1952-1953 marks a turning point in this respect, one which was to lead to a new sensitivity to surface texture and to the expressive articulation of human forms through drapery in his sculpture. The poignancy of the massive destruction brought about by the Second World War also found an echo for Moore in the mutilations that time or earlier conflicts had wrought on much classical Greek sculpture. The poetry of the fragment had of course already been appreciated within the European tradition at least from the nineteenth century (one thinks of the Goncourt brothers lyrical extolling of the famous limb-less Torso in the Vatican collection), but Moore was perhaps more than any other modern sculptor the one to explore most fully its pathos – both human and poetic – by re-creating it in modern sculptural terms. In this way, Cardinal argues, Moore was able to create a new and original synthesis of the massive, primitive forms of non-European carving with the expressive detail and human poignancy of classical Greek sculpture.

The humanistic dimension to Moore's later – that is post-1950 – sculpture is further explored by Anita Feldman Bennet in her tellingly illustrated essay 'Rediscovering Humanism'. In addition to the wonderful collection of colour and black and white plates, not only of Moore's sculpture but also of his drawings, his collections of stones, bones and other *objets trouvés*, the book provides complete catalogue entries, written by Roger Cardinal, of all items on display, a chronicle of Moore's 1951 Athens exhibition, drawn up by Elizabeth Plessa, a Chronology and a Bibliography. All this makes the book not only a pleasure to dip into and explore in purely visual terms, but also an instructive manual and, not least for Moore specialists, an invaluable source for detailed reference.

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