**Herbert Read and the Geometry of Fear**

**Recommended images:**

**http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/butler-woman-n05942**

**or**

**http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/armitage-people-in-the-wind-t00366**

The phrase ‘geometry of fear’ is used to describe the work of a group of British sculptors who came to prominence in the 1950s. Their work often resembles insect or bat-like forms combined with the human figure. Typically they have rough surfaces resembling hammered and wrought ironwork. This has been controversy over the term ‘geometry of fear’ as it was not a name chosen by the artists themselves. It first appeared in an essay written by Herbert Read to accompany a display of sculptures by the artists Robert Adams, Kenneth Armitage, Reg Butler, Lynn Chadwick, Geoffrey Clarke, Bernard Meadows, Henry Moore, Edouard Paolozzi and William Turnbull at the Venice Biennale in 1952. Although Read did not intend to label the artists as a coherent group, the ‘geometry of fear’ quickly became a shorthand description for most of those involved in the Venice show. The characteristics Read identified in the work of these sculptors relate to his wider theory of art. He used the term ‘geometry of fear’ to evoke the angular and spindly sculptural forms that he equated to the fears in society at that time. This was in the context of the recent end of World War Two, the discovery of the Nazi death camps and the growing fear of nuclear war between the USA and the Soviet Union. However, Read did not claim the sculptors were consciously illustrating these fears through reference to insects, bats or other forms that might be read as frightening. Instead, the images emerged from the artists’ unconscious minds without prompting.

For Read the ‘geometry of fear’ demonstrated a key function of all art, to reconcile the desire of the conscious mind to feel safe and secure with the genuine threats that exist in the world. This has affinities with the theory put forward by the classical philosopher Aristotle of theatrical catharsis. As in Read's theory of art, catharsis is a way of bringing people into direct contact with their fears in a controlled way in order to allay them. Noel Carroll later put forward similar ideas in relation to horror films. Although Read derived his theory largely from the philosopher Wilhelm Worringer and the psychologist C.G. Jung, the ‘geometry of fear’ also has a corollary in an earlier phrase used by Read, the ‘geometry of love’. If the ‘geometry of fear’ suggested art was the byproduct of human anxieties, the ‘geometry of love’ implied it could also be the byproduct of other unconscious desires, such as sexual desire. These other desires could also be disturbing, and so art makes them manifest to the conscious mind, again in a controlled way, producing what Read called the ‘reconciling image’.

There is little doubt the ‘geometry of fear’ refers to Read’s idiosyncratic understanding of this group of sculptors. When Kenneth Armitage was asked about the name he explained that his sculpture *People in the Wind* (1950) was not meant to look frightening. It was, he said, simply a sculpture of people with their coats blowing in the wind.

Further Reading

Read H. et al (1952) *The British Pavillion at the XXVI Biennale, Venice, 1952*, London: Arts Council of Great Britain.

Garlake, M. (1998) *New Art, New World : British Art in Postwar Society*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

Paraskos, M. (ed.) (2008) *Re-Reading Read: New Views on Herbert Read*, London: Freedom Press.

Causey, A. (1998) *Sculpture Since 1945*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Carroll, N. (1990)*The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart*, London: Routledge.