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## THE GROTTESCHE DESIGNS OF H.G. WELLS (OR, CRIPPING STYLE)

"Good art incorporates disability."<sup>1</sup>

"[These are] stories about the meaning and uses of style: rhetorical, sexual, sartorial...A riddle of unconscious excitements and conscious choices, style is a way to fascinate oneself and others—and to transform oneself and the world. It is an attempt to make the ordinary and the tragic more bearable...[It] is at once fleeting and lasting, and it has everything to do with excess—even when its excesses are those of austerity or self-denial. It is too much and it is nothing at all, and it tells all kinds of stories about the seams between public and private life. As a form of pleasure, for oneself and for an audience, and as an expression of the wish to exceed and confound expectations, to be exceptional, style is a response to the terror of invisibility and isolation—a wish for inclusion."<sup>2</sup>

### *Introduction*

The present essay enacts a disciplinary collage, pasting together academic, clinical, and industry contexts that seem like they don't go together. You could say that each acts as a prosthetic for the other, extending, replacing, or augmenting the capacities of one framework with those of another. The materials are taken from biology and design, and ultimately, their union is a reunion that traces the lost but vital historical and conceptual relationship of disability to style while also suggesting some of the ways that medical treatment paradigms can productively learn from and even incorporate design thinking.

Disability must meet design because discomfort with disabled forms is closely tied to modern Western civilization's discomfort with style, and a recuperation of style can do much to revitalize moral and emotional attitudes about disability. As Graham Pullin points out, "the boundary between inclusive design and mainstream design is always blurred and moving. Seeking a resonance between the needs of some people with a particular disability and some people without could also blur the boundary between design for special needs and mainstream design. Exciting opportunities could exist on this frontier of resonant design."<sup>3</sup> But exploring it requires putting aside the reigning American/Protestant/modernist/academic equation of style, and especially stylistic excess, with frivolity.

The unifying concept in the present analysis is the *grottesche*, a neoclassical pattern design that blends immiscible organic and inorganic materials into vibrant hybrids designed to destabilize the essentialist distinctions—between individual organisms, or between organisms and matter—that can cause such

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<sup>1</sup> From Tobin Siebers, "Disability Aesthetics." JCRT 7:2 (2006): 65

<sup>2</sup> From Lisa Cohen, *All We Know: Three Lives* (NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2012), 6. Kindle Edition.

<sup>3</sup> *Design Meets Disability* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 109.

combinations to trigger disgust. Better known in modern times as the grotesque, the *grottesche* pattern illustrates the ornamental potential of disfigurement and prosthetics that existed in antiquity.

Though the difference between the grotesque and the *grottesche* has much to do with the difference between biological and design paradigms, the latter has important implications for biological, and especially medical, thinking because it illustrates, in Elizabeth Grosz's formulation, the extent to which all "living bodies tend toward prosthesis."<sup>4</sup> The ornamental consciousness represented by the *grottesche* configures organic bodies as ever-moving outward: gripping other bodies, extending and embellishing the self, casting about for tools, fusing to the bits of the world that all bodies encounter. Such acts can be pragmatic, but they can also be cosmetic. And cosmetics can be "mimetic (this is what a leg looks like)" but they can also be "dynamic (this is what speed looks like)," producing such innovations as Oscar Pistorius's steel blade legs.<sup>5</sup>

Though biology is replete with aborted, distorted, and augmented shapes, these geometries are commonly considered abnormal and rejected, often in aesthetic terms deemed unavoidable because of deeply ingrained and involuntary emotional reactions against them. Evolutionary psychologists hypothesize that humans possess a "behavioral immune system" prone to misrecognizing and so to shunning potential disease threats in obese, disfigured, or otherwise visibly different people.<sup>6</sup> Putting aside the question of why evolutionary psychology attends in this theory to the biology of the shunning of but not the attraction to difference, it is easy to see how biology runs up against the (perceived) limits of the natural in innovation contexts.

But aesthetics, unlike biology, is a field of disciplined, not spontaneous, reactions. It uses the concept of taste, the physiological sphere of the tongue, to articulate a body's ability to construct reflexive preferences according to highly selective systems of social or textual custom. The inorganic context of design not only saves but also desires (and causes to be desired) prostheticized bodies by developing a taste for them. In fact, pattern design introduces a form of desiring *objectification* that does not harm but rather positively recasts entities that biological thinking discards. Therefore, recuperating the history of the *grottesche* introduces both disability studies and design theory to aesthetic principles that can accept or even posit a form of life that might otherwise be rejected. Whereas design ordinarily embraces user-orientation, and disability studies was founded on the basis of enabling agency for disabled subjects, re-reading biological life in

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<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power* (Durham: Duke UP, 2005), 146.

<sup>5</sup> Sarah Brill, "The Prosthetic Cosmos: Elizabeth Grosz's Ecology of the Future." *Philosophy Today* (SPEP Supplement 2011): 246.

<sup>6</sup> See Mark Schaller and Justin H. Park in "The Behavioral Immune System (and Why it Matters)," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 20:2 (99-103), and Justin H. Parka, Mark Schallerb, and Christian S. Crandall in "Pathogen-avoidance mechanisms and the stigmatization of obese people" in *Evolution and Human Behavior* 28 (2007): 410-414.

the light of design offers significant implications for the function of objectification in the self- and social perception of disfigurement.

In the present essay, an analysis of H.G. Wells's Beast People, the disfigured creatures who populate *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, serve as the context for rediscovering an historical instance of the suppression of design thinking by biology. My reading is grounded in remembering Wells's design background, which permeates his ancestry, upbringing, and even his formal education, but which is typically suppressed in critical accounts that fetishize the author's later training as a biologist. The recovery of Wells's forgotten biography recasts his novel less as a specimen of early science-fiction and more as an exploration of the human via fashion (and especially textile) design. The island bestiary represents a proto-community of stylishly disabled individuals who are its ornaments (instead of its wards), and Wells's novel thus spells out the moral and social implications of both queasiness about and appreciation for style.

#### *Modern Disability Chic*

Disability has been having a moment in recent years, and understanding this moment is not the least of the benefits of an historical detour. Before we take this detour, let's survey the present landscape, which is abundant with examples of stylized representations of disability.

"Savage Beauty," the Alexander McQueen exhibit that stormed New York in 2011, featured a pair of hand-carved solid ash prosthetic boots worn by double amputee Aimee Mullins. These prosthetic boots worn twenty years ago for Givenchy are currently touring Europe. Mullins's touring legs are just the beginning. In the December 2014, Broadway revival of "The Elephant Man," Bradley Cooper played the pachyderm without makeup or prosthetics. Instead, the former *People Magazine*'s Sexiest Man Alive opened the play standing next to a photographic projection of the historical Joseph Merrick, who was severely deformed.

In the scene, Merrick's doctor described his patient in a voice-over while Cooper posed before a medical screen in a pair of Victorian boy shorts. The actor added embellishments to match the physician's description, tilting his head, distending his jaw, stooping to the side, curling his right arm, clubbing his fingers, and hobbling a leg. He shrunk several feet, and developed a lisp. Which is to say, Cooper *cum* Merrick was pretty as ever, looping and diving and curling like wrought iron grating or embroidered tapestry. The Apollo became one of those curious figurines carved or woven into the furniture and upholstery of another era. Ladies in and at the play swooned at the effect. In fact, the Elephant Man was a legendary dandy and a self-styled Don Juan. But the idea of a disfigured flirt is now anachronistic, and it's a testimony to the buffing of disability's image in American popular culture when a crowd tolerates the match.

But then, disability was "in" all over Manhattan in the fall of 2014. MOMA featured a special exhibit of Matisse's painted paper cutouts, which according to the museum were used by the wheelchair-bound painter to continue working after abdominal surgery. Downstairs were the posters of Toulouse-Lautrec, who

may have suffered from the congenital bone disorder named after him. Several posters depicted the *Moulin Rouge* dancer Jane Avril, who notoriously found relief from her epileptic seizures by dancing the can-can. On Fifth Avenue, the *Neue Galerie* recreated Hitler's Degenerate Art Exhibition. The original art exhibit was made up to look like a traveling freak show, because "Hitler saw in paintings by Modigliani, Klee, and Chagall images of 'misshapen cripples,' 'cretins,' and racial inferiors when the rest of the world saw masterpieces of modern art" (Siebers 66).

Disability is not making its way into the center of mainstream American popular culture because we are suddenly more empathetic or civically supportive of the disabled. It's because more people are disabled than ever before. 46,000 children were diagnosed with diabetes in 2008 and 2009, an increase of 33% from the past decade. Technology now enables preemies to survive outside the womb after only 23 weeks' gestation. The Veterans Administration estimates that 6% of the 2.8 million wounded servicemen who have returned from Iraq and Afghanistan needed amputations, and at least 20% have Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Baby Boomers are aging, diagnoses of Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder as well as Autism Spectrum Disorder have doubled between 2006-2010, 7 out of 10 Americans take at least one prescription drug. With prevalence comes prominence, and fascination.

Consequently, it's not medicine but fashion and fiction that are rehabilitating physical and mental disabilities today. Designers and storytellers have advanced restorative approaches to illnesses that have rendered science and politics relatively helpless. The emergence of the arts as a form of medical treatment is not metaphorical. Raphael Campo, the Harvard Medical School professor and Beth Israel physician, recently published *Alternative Medicine* (Duke UP, 2013), his sixth book of poetry on the subject of language and healing. "60 Minutes" twice featured stories on "iPads for Autism," in which schoolteachers discovered that digital tablets allow people thought to lack language, and possibly consciousness, to communicate. When one presumably incurable disorder is refurbished by a technology design interface, it's tempting to wonder what other diseases are design problems, too. Brian Wansink, the former Executive Director of the USDA's Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion, has proposed curing America's obesity epidemic with simple kitchen renovations in *Slim By Design: Mindless Eating Solutions for Everyday Life* (2014).

The rethinking of disability through design has been gathering momentum for two decades. Consider Rei Kawakubo's 1996 fall collection for *Comme des Garçons*. Fashion critics called it the "Quasimodo collection" or simply "Lumps and Bumps." Models resembling overstuffed sofas stomped and slouched in dresses equipped with what Voguepedia describes as "bulbous...padding." The pads were bustle-like protrusions misplaced on the chest, back, hips, and shoulders. In 1996, *Vogue* called them "the tumor dresses."

Kawakubo's medical makeovers eroded the difference between sick and chic. Think of Django Reinhardt, who reclaimed the loss of the fourth and fifth fingers on his left hand with "hot jazz," a two-fingered solo style. The appeal of the strange is the core of exotica. Kawakubo's tumor dresses, however, were not

outlandish but homey. The Quasimodo collection reupholstered deformities, swathing them in gingham to suit them for the living room. *Exoticus*, which in Latin means “the outside,” moved in.

#### *Textiles Tech-Style*

This section examines one component of the literary history of the relationship between textiles and technology, and of cloth design’s consequent ability to introduce and assimilate technical capacities to the human body. The so-called “soft” technologies of books and clothing have long been instruments of human connectivity to the larger world,<sup>7</sup> and these materials are, not coincidentally, becoming synonymous with some of the most popular technical developments of our era: electronic media, including e-books and television, and wearable technology. Investigation of the mythology of “smart” textiles embedded in our cultural past invites further consideration of the role of pattern design as a form of the textual—literally “woven”—manipulation of intimate spaces.<sup>8</sup>

Modern-day textiles have left drapers’s shelves to become a cutting-edge biomedical technology. These goods now feature prominently in recent wearable technology expos from New York and San Francisco to London and Milan. According to Secant Medical, a biomedical textiles manufacturer, textiles engineered with advanced biomaterials can facilitate physiological healing responses in the cardiovascular, neurovascular, and orthopedic body. Another producer of implantable textiles, ATEX Technologies, Inc., produces medical yarn, fabrics, and looms, and provides a web tutorial on how to match fiber content and construction details like weaving, knitting, and braiding to the performance specifications of biomedical structures. Manufactured on textile-forming technologies, biomedical materials ameliorate while rapidly integrating with the body’s native tissues.

The healing capacities of textiles are not intrinsic. Military operations have also found occasions for exploiting the bio-mimicry of woven multifilament networks, which have been used in the manufacturing of lighter combat vests and wearable integrated battery chargers for field operatives. But the textile’s appeal, even in combat, is its capacity to ameliorate by imitating and supporting organic systems. US Army and Marine Corps soldiers sporting the combat vests made of electrically conducive textiles commissioned from Intelligent Textiles Ltd, for instance, have a light, flexible, breathable means of charging their equipment as well as of passing power and communicating data around their bodies. The vests’s “smart threads,” as they are called, form computer networks with wires woven together on a loom. The most ancient and contemporary of technologies—wiring and weaving—today are reconvening on mutual territory.

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<sup>7</sup> See Mary Schoeser, *World Textiles: A Concise History* (Thames and Hudson: 2003)

<sup>8</sup> According to the OED, “text” derives from the Latin *texte*, that which is woven, and “technology” from *technologia*, which until as late as 1803 referred to written treatises on arts and crafts or the technical language used by master craftsmen. The etymological lesson is that texts, textiles, and technology were once more intuitively entwined than they are in contemporary culture.

Though e-textiles are relatively new and showcase some of the most exciting possibilities for posthuman<sup>9</sup> experiences and capabilities, textiles have always been a space of intimate human interface with non-human materials and entities. Worn on the body, as a kind of second skin, people expect textiles to imitate the functions of their organ by providing soft, breathable, flexible, durable, beautiful, light, and semi-permeable temperature regulation throughout the day and in a variety of contexts.

We also seek something more than our skins can provide from the textiles in which we clothe ourselves. Our quest for extra-human properties in clothing has driven us to borrow from the animal world, appropriating the hirsute attributes of furred mammals like bears, otters, seals, minks, rabbits, deer, buffalo, predatory cats, foxes, ermine, and wolves as well as those provided by the wool of sheep, goats, and llamas. We import the ornamental biology of birds like peacocks to our surfaces through colored dyes or plucked feathers, and overlay our porous mammalian skins with the moisture-repelling scales of alligators and snakes. In the form of linen, cotton and dye, humans take on aspects of plant and mineral matter. Using silk, we enmesh ourselves in worm protein fibers, becoming cocooned larvae in the manner of metamorphosing insects. To clothe oneself in natural fabrics is to become a hybrid being, made of many kinds of animal parts and possessing many types of animal capabilities, as well as those of plants, flowers, and minerals.

Pattern design, while a classic textile attribute virtually inextricable from the material, is not one of the features typically considered relevant to the evolution of wearable technology, biomedical textiles least of all. In fact, biomedical textiles, while *textured* according to their manufacturing method, tend to be pattern-free. Today, ornament is technology's antithesis, the decorative aesthetic against which modernist functionalism, touted as a machine aesthetic, rebelled.

Ornament, however, is precisely the space to which we must look to find traces of human hybridization with inorganic objects in the distant past. And when we do, such instances abound. As steampunk *aficionados* in our own time presuppose, ornament is arguably the *more* mechanical aesthetic in comparison to the smooth, sleek surfaces associated with modernist architecture and interior design.<sup>10</sup> Philosophically speaking, modernism rejected the mechanization of humans and their culture; its aesthetics were shaped by its reaction against transformations occasioned by the Industrial Revolution. The spare and functional design of modernist, as opposed to Victorian, houses communicated despair at the effect of human interdependence on mechanically reproduced objects, and tried to reduce it. The ornamental intricacies of the nineteenth-

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<sup>9</sup> Posthumanism refers to the human condition after people's interface with technology has become so integral to their biological and cultural existence that they can no longer be considered a purely organic life form.

<sup>10</sup> Steampunk is a contemporary science fiction design aesthetic, predicated on the existence of a fantasy steam-powered Victorian computer. Steampunk culture is populated by all kinds of gadgets, including wearable ones. Unlike the compact digital gadgets with which contemporary consumers are familiar, however, the steampunk versions exhibit exposed mechanical processes that depend on wood and metal, not silicon, to function.

century middle class home, on the other hand, embraced objects and the prospect of human interface with them. Its complicated lattices, engravings, and appendages reflected the similarly complex, densely packed, and busily ornate interiors of the machines that made them.

Specific ornamental patterns have been concentrated sites for exploring the form and function of human-object combinations. William Morris's floral wallpaper patterns, for instance, brought nature into the home. He wrote of "what we want to clothe our walls with," using the human language of clothing to describe the covered surfaces of interior spaces.<sup>11</sup> The erasure of three-dimensionality in his wallpaper patterns likewise pressed out the space between wall and flower and the space between the interior domestic and exterior natural worlds.

An early passage in George MacDonald's *Phantastes* observes the broader entanglement of decorative objects with the subjects who use them.<sup>12</sup> Organic compositions of inorganic objects (like lamps that look like lilies, or furniture legs carved to look like hooves) were a major formal characteristic of the Arts and Crafts movement Morris helped to found. MacDonald describes a scene in which the collapse of three- and two- dimensionality creates the conditions for a human-vegetable-mineral combination:

I suddenly...became aware of the sound of running water near me; and looking out of bed, I saw that a large green marble basin, in which I was wont to wash, and which stood on a low pedestal of the same material in the corner of my room, was like a spring; and that a stream of clear water was running over the carpet, all over the length of the room, finding its outlet I knew not where. And, stranger still, where this carpet, which I had myself designed to imitate a field of grass and daisies, bordered the course of the little stream, the grass blades and daisies seemed to wave in a tiny breeze that followed the water's flow. (Macdonald 9)

The speaker goes on to describe his encounter with a woman who emerges from a secret compartment of his secretary, as well as the transformation into a lush forest landscape of the ivy leaves carved on his wooden dresser, the clematis tendrils of its gilt drawer handles, and the branches and leaves woven into the window curtains. "I found myself," the man observes, "completing my toilet under the boughs of a great tree...as the cool morning wind swung it to and fro, like a sinking sea-wave" (Macdonald 10).

MacDonald's narrator has been rendered two-dimensional as he is drawn into the woven textile and carved furniture designs around him. The chapter ends as the man and woman walk off together into the forest; they seem to leave the interior for an exterior, but it is clear that his "outside" is inside the secretary, dresser, curtains, and carpet. MacDonald's rendering of the exterior on various flat surfaces that bring humans and objects into extraordinarily intimate and

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<sup>11</sup> From "Some Hints on Pattern-Designing," <https://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1881/hints.htm>

Retrieved on February 5, 2016

<sup>12</sup> (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1858, 2000)

dimensionless contact is prescient of screen technologies that are currently doing the same. In his view it is ornamental pattern, not engineering, that forges this path.

The *grottesche* is an ornamental pattern, typical in the cloth, ceramics, and glass of the Paleolithic, Classical, Renaissance and Victorian eras. It can be found on the textiles with which people have covered their bodies and furniture, the painted or papered walls of homes, the decorated pottery that holds food and drink, and the stained glass windows of public gathering places. Consequently, the *grottesche* pattern interacts closely with the popular imagination about human bodies and dwellings in all the periods of its emergence. The word, however, dates to the 1400s, when Italian decorators rediscovered the interlocked mutilated, aborted, and subjoined human and animal figures that were considered stylish by ancient Roman designers. Nero's *Domus Aurea*, dug up by Renaissance archaeologists, was tiled in a swirling amalgam of painted flora and fauna combined so extraordinarily as to seem monstrous or divine.

The *grottesche* were Classical forms, sprung from the Greek metamorphosis myths collected and retold by Ovid in Rome. Myths that include Daphne, the nymph turned by Apollo into a tree; Cygnus, the man who metamorphosed into a swan; Medusa, the snaked-haired woman; or Pegasus, the winged horse. Nineteenth-century neoclassicism ushered the magical hybrids into the Victorian imagination, where the Pre-Raphaelites and Arts and Crafts movement mingled botanical with decorative objects and recreated Renaissance book and tile patterns. Of course, ornamental distortions were also popular in the Muslim and Hindu images that made their way westward during the Oriental mania evoked by Britain's imperial ventures. The form's resurgence in that period could equally have been inspired by East India Company ventures that exposed the English to images like that of Genesha, the God with an elephant's head and human body who may have inspired James Merrick's Victorian surgeon to call him an Elephant Man.<sup>13</sup>

From the biological perspective pervasive in the West since Darwin, the combined forms of alternate beings with each other and objects are seen as grotesque, a synonym for horror. But in the ancient, often nonwestern, inorganic world of design, *grottesche* could be fetching. The association of disfigurement through abortion and unnatural modification with *chic* is perhaps more globally and historically common than the modern industrialized alternative. The term "*jolie laide*," coined by the decadent British diarist Lady Monkswell in 1894, means "pretty ugly" and captures a particular quirk of high fashion: its tendency toward irregular, often outlandish, shapes. Other well-known stylish distortions across the globe include bound feet in China and Japan, stretched lips in Ethiopia, elongated necks in Burma, and the cauliflower ears of western boxers.

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<sup>13</sup> Discussed in Colbey Emmerson Reid's "Victorian Cybernetics: Networking Technology, Disability, and Interior Design." Eds. Dennis M. Weiss, Amy D. Proven, and Colbey Emmerson Reid. *Design, Mediation and the Posthuman*. (Lanham, MD: Lexington Press, 2014): 129-150.

When *grottesche* patterns populate a civilization's most intimate, domestic objects, the things that come in contact with our skins, stomachs, homes, families and souls, they impact its expectations about the formal and ontological purity of matter, orienting expectations about the natural world toward ornament and the ornamental normal. The ornamental normal objectifies human and other organic matter. The objectification is not morally or politically benign. It can be mobilized to justify the oppression of people and animals and the ravaging of our environments. But it can also provide relief from oppression, when biological norms become restrictively constructed around conservative mandates about what is "natural."

#### Fauve Biology

H.G. Wells, who was trained as a draper<sup>14</sup> before beginning his renowned studies in biology, is the literary figure whose well-known texts, *The Invisible Man* and *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, pit the rhetorics of biology and design against each other as vying paradigms under which to consider the animal body. Typically, both novellas are read as science-fiction influenced by Wells's interest and training in biology. H.G. Wells's training as a biologist at the School of Science in South Kensington is well known and often cited in readings of his novels, commonly considered to have been influenced by Wells's teacher, the so-called "Darwinian bulldog," Thomas Huxley. But Wells was descended from a family of merchants and he was twice apprenticed as a draper before attaining a scholarship to study biology.<sup>15</sup>

Contemporary criticism nowhere acknowledges the role of drapery in Wells's fiction, but doing so highlights Wells's complex engagement with modernist aesthetics and the philosophy of science, positioning his texts as philosophically inquisitive, commercially savvy, and sophisticated about the interface of biological and technological innovations—versus the rather conservative, cautionary morality tales about rogue scientists that they appear to be absent the design context. If we do not presuppose that an apprenticeship in cloth sales is too ignoble to have influenced a canonical male author and public intellectual, it becomes obvious that a craft sensibility is equally operative in the books and the Wellsian consciousness. In fact, Wells's fiction actively studies the extent to which framing paradigms—biology vs. design—can alter their own status as horror or Arts and Crafts.

Wells wrote, in his autobiography, about his mercantile career as a draper as a source of boredom and discontent.<sup>16</sup> Yet often what one loathes is as influential as what one loves, or more. Wells at any rate learned the intricacies of cloth and

<sup>14</sup> A draper is a textile merchant. In the medieval period, drapers were also textile craftsmen.

<sup>15</sup> The London School of Science was located next door to the Victoria and Albert Museum of Art and Design at the time (then called the South Kensington Museum); for Wells, science and ornament were, quite literally, neighbors.

<sup>16</sup> *Experiment in Autobiography: Discoveries and Conclusions of a Very Ordinary Brain* (New York: Macmillan, 1934)

textile design, and still remembered them at the age of 68, when he composed his memoir. In the shop where he apprenticed, Wells:

found fixtures of wrapped blocks labeled...Hard Book or Turkey Twill or the like, rolls of grey and black silesia, flannels with a variety of names, a perplexing range of longcloths and calicoes, endless packages of diaper table-cloths, serviettes, and so forth, and rolls of crash, house cloth, ticking and the like... There were also...cotton dress materials, prints, ginghams and sateens, cretonne and kindred fabrics for covering furniture. (115-116)

Wells had to "straighten all this stock and pack it up after it had been shown and put it back into the proper fixtures; ...to measure and refold it when the manufacturers delivered it, to block it or to roll it in rolls. This blocking, rolling and folding was skilled work that needed a watchful effort" and Wells "never learnt to do it swiftly and neatly." Years later as though it were yesterday, the author exclaimed: "You cannot imagine how maliciously a folded piece of sateen can get askew, how difficult it is to roll huckaback, how unruly a fat blanket is to pack up and how heavy and unwieldy pieces of cretonne can be when you have to carry a score or so of them up narrow folding steps and adjust them neatly on a rising pile" (*ibid.*) There is an intimate understanding of cloth forms and attributes in this expostulation—which continues over many pages, a kind of hate-poem that counts the ways, and so ends up protesting a little too much.

Indeed, Wells never fully distanced himself from the concerns of his first trade. When the city of London sponsored, in 1911, a contest to showcase the possibilities for suburban home and furniture design that would inform the construction of the new suburb, Romford Garden, male intellectuals like Wells—and also including Thomas Hardy and Sir Frederick Treves (the Elephant Man's doctor, and by then the Royal Surgeon)—weighed in, writing letters for publication in the exhibition guide about how crucial a beautiful home is to human wellbeing.<sup>17</sup>

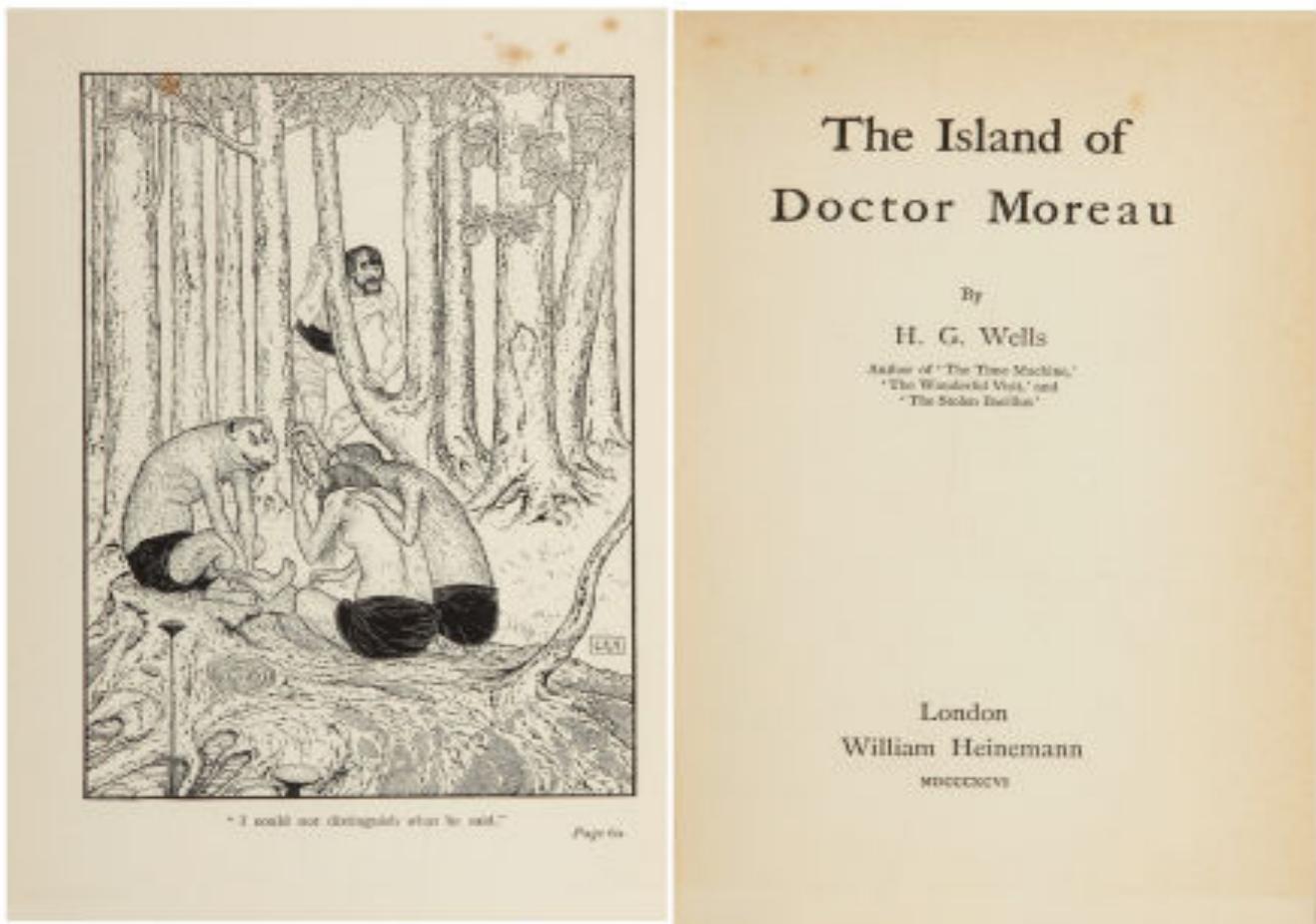
Wells employed in his novels an explicit rhetoric of the grotesque often subtly shaded with elements of the *grottesche*. *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1895), the author's most explicit of numerous literary investigations of the grotesque during the same period, features a castaway named Prendick on an island inhabited by an infamous vivisectionist who cuts up and re-sews live animals into "grotesque caricatures of humanity" (46).<sup>18</sup> Wells returns to the word "grotesque" in each of his descriptions of the Beast People as a mélange of varying human and animal features. He also details the island's landscape as a

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<sup>17</sup> In Romford Garden Suburb Exhibition Guide, 1911. [https://archive.org/stream/bookofexhibition00romf/bookofexhibition00romf\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/bookofexhibition00romf/bookofexhibition00romf_djvu.txt) The commentaries are striking by contemporary medical standards. Dr. Treves, in particular, worried in print about the effect of ventilation pipes on the otherwise pretty roofs of suburban London cottages. He intimated that health and aesthetics were of equal, and indeed intertwined, importance—a belief that he brought to bear in his medical practice.

<sup>18</sup> All quotes are from H.G. Wells, *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (New York: Bantam Classics, 1994)

tangle of biological and vegetable shapes. These images do not merely support the notion of pervasive physical and moral deformity; they function as allusions to the fantastic ornamental designs of Roman *grottesche*. Like the drolleries on Nero's frescoes, each Beast Person on Moreau's island is a "lump of mystery" (60). Moreau's menagerie of creatures is an "interlacing network" of species-parts. It is not only their bodies, but also the whole world in which they live, whose boundaries are "[confused]" (37). For instance, Wells describes "a great patch of vivid scarlet on the ground" that turns out to be "a peculiar fungus branched and corrugated like a foliaceous lichen, but deliquescent into slime at the touch." This image, whose description recalls both animal and plant matter, leads the castaway Prendick to notice, in "the shadow of some luxuriant ferns," "an unpleasant thing, the dead body of a rabbit, covered with shining flies but still warm, and with its head torn off" (41). The mixture of fern, rabbit, and flies is both disgusting and gorgeous in its anomalous mingling of decorative words and phrases like "vivid scarlet," "luxuriant ferns," and "shining" with images of insects, decapitation, and organic decay, all ornamented by the linguistic equivalents of a wrought iron grating: "corrugated," "foliaceous" and "deliquescent" make an Arts and Crafts image of the mess.



*The Island of Doctor Moreau* frontispiece

The artist of the frontispiece to the 1886 London edition of the novel, one Charles Robert Ashbee, seems to have recognized that the *grottesche* was an influential pattern in Wells's conception of the novel. Ashbee figured importantly in the Arts and Crafts Movement. A disciple of Morris, Ashbee set up the Essex House Press after Kelmscott Press was shut down following Morris's death. He hired Morris's printers and craftspeople to staff the new press. Like Wells, Ashbee was a Socialist; he was also a highly skilled designer and a very literary man. Contrary to the convention of many Victorian frontispiece designers, he would undoubtedly have read Wells's work, offering an interpretation rather than an imposition upon the novel when he drew upon the *grottesche* in depicting the Beast People represented in the lower left-hand corner of the picture.

The Beast People's curled half-human shapes emerge from a swirl appropriate to a fresco, a textile, or the border of an illuminated manuscript. As the speaker in the MacDonald narrative above stepped *into* a pattern design—they have stepped *out* of one. They are figurines. The style of Ashbee's depiction of the creatures sharply contrasts with the realist conventions employed in the depiction of Prendick and the forest in the upper right hand corner. Ashbee's frontispiece demonstrates the cultural availability of the *grottesche* as a way of thinking about evolution and its crises, and Ashbee's sense of the paradigmatic conflict between biological and ornamental ways of seeing.

Wells's appropriation of design discourse, seen immediately by the illustrator of his work, should be understood in the context of the author's contempt for "natural" man. Most readers assume that Moreau's horrifying live dissections of animals are morally abominable. Wells, however, wrote elsewhere about the forms of artifice necessary to make a good citizen, whom he called *homo tewler*. "Tewling" is beating, kneading or molding; for Wells, citizenship was craftsmanship. In the novel, it is Moreau who tewls and Prendick who believes in the Rousseauian "natural man," a being who is most pure and moral in an uncivilized and undisciplined state. It is Prendick who must overcome his sentimental and essentialist revulsion of Moreau's treatment of organic beings as craftworks. Prendick becomes Moreau's "apprentice," whose medieval spelling is "prentyc," a near-homonym for the narrator's name.

By the end of the novel Prendick has adapted and even exceeded his trade master. He abandons a former interest in biological vivisection. But he advocates an era of innovation through experiments with inorganic matter. Writing of his newfound interest in chemistry and astronomy, Prendick proposes that "it must be in the vast and eternal laws of *matter*, and not in the daily cares and sins and troubles of men, that whatever is more than animal within us must find its solace and its hope" (160). Prendick's vision of the future entails imagining how the vivisectionist's design project can be realized as something other than horrific, a task accomplished by conceiving "tewling" as the future of human evolution.

Richard Sennet, a contemporary sociologist of objects, offers a useful extrapolation of Wells's abandonment of nature for craft in matters of human advancement. He notes "the past life of craft and craftsmen suggests ways of using tools, organizing bodily movements, thinking about materials that remain

alternative, viable proposals about how to conduct life with skill" (11). Sennet believes that people can learn from things, which entails "[caring] about the qualities of cloth or the right way to cook fish; fine cloth or food cooked well enables us to imagine larger categories of 'good'" (8).<sup>19</sup>

The space for human craftwork is preserved within the text from its beginning, where Prendick reveals that the disaster that left him stranded in the Pacific is the sinking of a ship called *The Lady Vain*. Dispensing (via shipwreck) with the typical (devalued) context for design appears to enable Wells to explore an ambitious alternative spectrum of self-invention. On the island, Moreau is a kind of cosmetic surgeon, primping, and plucking the animal body in a quest for ever greater refinement. Prendick's mental transformation, from one who views his own capacity to change in the limited terms of moral discipline supplied by law and religion, into a truly plastic thing, involves reinventing himself as a textile. He compares his hand to "a dirty skin purse full of loose bones" (5). His body, reshaped by hunger, contains the same plastic potential as the Beast People, into whose humanoid features Moreau has "woven" the "unmistakable mark of the beast" (42).

While we could see the references to weaving, sewing, and cutting in descriptions of Moreau's medical labors as metaphorical, it is worth considering the evidence that implies that surgery is in fact the metaphor, and design the denotative context. Leon Stover has interpreted the titles of the second and fifth chapters of *Moreau*, respectively "The Man who was going Nowhere" and "The Man who had Nowhere to go," as allusions to William Morris's Arts and Crafts treatise called *News from Nowhere* (1890). Accordingly, Moreau describes his vivisections as trying "to find out the extreme limit of plasticity in a living shape" and he is untroubled by the moral implications of the gruesome experiments because he thinks it isn't necessary to be "troubled about the ethics" of reshaping "matter" (78). Moreau reshapes matter by a process of "grafting," a botanical term for inserting part of one tree into another tree. He dissociates his method from biology by referring to the grafted parts as "material" (74), even calling the process of instilling social prohibitions into his creations a "[weaving]" of taboos "into the texture of their minds" (84).

Moreau uses the language of design to describe his production of figurines "carven and wrought into new shapes" (74). During the climactic chase through the woods that results in Moreau's death at the paws of his masterpiece, a redesigned puma, Prendick breathlessly describes the "thorny plants hooking into and tearing cloth and flesh together" (84), until finally the doctor is cornered by his puma, who stands erect, gasping, and "swathed"—not in blood—but "in lint" (102).

Wells contextualizes the Puma's thingness in Quattro-cento art, comparing her to an "angry virago" (102) in reference to the rare medieval usage of the term denoting a heroic woman.<sup>20</sup> She is *grottesche* as a lint-covered amalgam of puma

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<sup>19</sup> In *The Craftsman* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2008)

<sup>20</sup>A virago more commonly refers disparagingly to an angry woman, but if Wells meant the word this way the modifier "angry" would be redundant.

and woman, and also because of the strange mixture of humanity and so hybridity implicit in her violence against Moreau. As Moreau might (had he lived) explain—insisting as he does that the suffering experienced through live dissection is not incidental but intrinsic to the process of humanization—the puma is magnificent, and magnificently human, in her suffering, a masterpiece of humanity in her noble refusal of submission to further suffering, at the price of death. The puma (rather wittily) points Moreau’s oversight out to him before her demise, by bashing Moreau’s head in with her broken fetters (as though to wonder whether he will see her humanity, attained through suffering, if she hits him over the head with its symbol). Moreau’s failure is as a craftsman, because he is unable to see the ability of his figurines to evolve beyond his own capabilities and control.

After Moreau’s confrontation with the puma, Prendick enlists the Beast People in helping him to extinguish “all [that was] living” in Moreau’s laboratory, leaving him marooned on an island of Things, wishing desperately that his schooling had included Slojd, a Swedish system of manual training in technical design, so that he would be competent to survive upon it.

The preposterousness of Wells’s novella conventionally has been understood in terms of its status as science fiction, but one can also read it as the preposterousness of textile design, which audaciously normalizes anomalies. What is monstrous in the context of realism and even science fiction becomes ordinary in the context of ornament. Wells trades realism for design, and in doing so constructs an island on which being human, indeed, being organic, is not the predominant life form. The trick of the island, and the outcome of Prendick’s sequestration on it, is less the humanization of animals than the dehumanization of Prendick and all other humans with whom he interacts after his captivity there. He begins to see in everyone, even scholars and preachers, the “mark of the beast” (39) and begins to think that only reinventing the human as matter can propel humans beyond evolutionary stagnation or regression.

Here Darwin offers an instructive explanation of the new hierarchy:

As man advances in civilization, and small tribes are united into larger communities, the simplest reason would tell each individual that he ought to extend his social instincts and sympathies to all the members of the same nation, though personally unknown to him. This point being once reached, there is only an artificial barrier to prevent his sympathies extending to the men of all nations and races...Sympathy beyond the confines of man...seems to be one of the latest moral acquisitions... This virtue, one of the noblest with which man is endowed, seems to arise incidentally from our sympathies becoming more tender and more widely diffused, until they are extended to all sentient beings...[:] to men of all races, to the imbecile, maimed, and other useless members of society, and finally to the lower animals. (*Descent* 126-7, 129)

The “artificial barrier” against the unfurling of sympathy toward the whole world—*organic and inorganic*—might be understood to be subjectivity, which needs to oppose itself to objects. It could be the dichotomy that pits biology and

design against each other, failing to explore the implications of collaboration. Or, it could be unsophisticated aesthetic taste, a preference for the so-called natural, normal human and world forms that Siebers describes, in "Disability Aesthetics" as kitsch.

Moreau's island lacks all these barriers. Its coordinates place it within the Galapagos Islands, where Darwin first discovered evolution, and it contains a collection of trans-species specimens. Prendick's "prentyc-ship" on the island relieves him from species isolation; the next experiments in matter on which he finally proposes to embark upon on another island, that of Great Britain, and in which he has been tutored by design aesthetics, draw upon the island's lessons of expansion beyond the "artificial barrier" that separates species from each other, and from matter.

Each Beast Person on Moreau's island is a radical experiment in "tenderness and sympathy" extricated from subjectivity, in which maimed animals take on the pieces of other animals (such as humans) as prostheses that enable them to become miniature ecosystems in lieu of selves or subjects. We might consider Wells's notion of an "After-Man," a being achieved through hyper-unity with others, as referring to this construction of organism-as-ecosystem.<sup>21</sup> For Wells, it was necessary to become an "After-Man" to become fully human in the sense of possessing "the latest moral acquisition" of "sympathy beyond the confines of man." After-Man is a synthesis of the human to organic and inorganic portions of the landscape, all of which must be seen as part of, not merely external to, the so-called self.

Wells's science-fiction novel bears an interesting place in the history of design. Though there are many nineteenth-century biologist Moreaus who may have been the fictional scientist's namesake, there is also a candidate in painting: Gustave Moreau, whose painting of Oedipus and the Sphinx has been used as cover art in some editions of the book. This Moreau is known for his inclination for painting mythological beasts—and elaborate textile patterns, many of which he left unfinished in his Paris home and continued to embellish until his death. Moreau donated his house, filled with the paintings of decorative textiles, to the city of Paris when he died.

Though Gustave Moreau is more typically considered in the Symbolist tradition than that of British Arts and Crafts, his decorated house harkens to the intense interest in domestic ornament taken by contemporaries like Morris, Wells, and Treves. He fits even more squarely within this lineage when we consider that one of his famous students in Paris was one Henri Matisse, the Flanders weaver whose grottesche designs first rocked Paris art circles under the auspices of the Beast People called *Fauves* that populated works like *Le bonheur de vivre* (1905).

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<sup>21</sup> Wells theorizes the After-Man in *The Shape of Things to Come*, 1933 (New York: Penguin, 2006). Discussed by Leon Stover in his introduction to *The Island of Doctor Moreau: A Critical Text of the 1896 First Edition, with an Introduction and Appendices* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Co., Inc, 1996), 53.

*Fauve* became the name for painters who adopted a particular decorative aesthetic that in the case of Matisse included dimensional collapse merging human models with cloth, wallpaper, furniture, and windows to vividly ornamented natural exteriors. These amalgams of person, house, and world—brandished “grotesque” among art critics in their published reviews—were a modern variation on the *grottesche* mutations discovered on the excavated Roman tile designs in Renaissance Italy. The critical despair with which they were greeted evinces the colonizing even of art by biological standards, according to which the *Fauve* creations were viewed, quite literally, as horribly disfigured people. But in houses, if not in nature, such individuals are the height of style, a framework in which excesses in physiological, emotional, intellectual, or rhetorical functionalism are all treated as sources of aesthetic pleasure and delight.

### Coda

As modern textiles resume their ancient place in the vanguard of technological and biomedical innovation, designers would do well to remember what is offered by their aesthetic, as well as their functional, components. Three-dimensional embroidery, used for vascular prosthetics, imports a cultural and design history devoted to showiness and display to the interior transport of blood. The ceramic-based fabrics used in fuel filtering and swimwear construction for their insulating capabilities connect the legacy of pottery design with fashion and transportation.<sup>22</sup> As *grottesche* pattern designers understood a long time ago, textiles loosen categorical boundaries that are historical, cultural, and ontological in nature.

And as the Psalmist put it, describing his maker in the language of ornamental craftsmanship: “You formed my inward parts; You wove me in my mother’s womb...I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Wonderful are Your works, And my soul knows it well.”<sup>23</sup> Ornamental design casts formal embellishment—regardless of its implications in a biological framework—as “wonderfully made” in an inorganic one, allowing the range of permissible variations of material works to exist, *stylishly*, in human beings as well. This is the radical potential of a design discourse for the biocentric paradigm that the nineteenth-century ushered into western modernity along side an alternative with the capacity to disrupt it.

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<sup>22</sup> For a discussion of these technologically-innovative textiles see *Techno-Textiles II: Revolutionary Fabrics for Fashion and Design*, by Sarah Clarke and Marie Mahoney (Second Edition, Thames and Hudson, 2008).

<sup>23</sup> Psalm 139: 13-14

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