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PROSTHETIC GODS

Hal Foster, *Prosthetic Gods*. (An October Book). Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2004. xv + 455 pp. \$35.00 ISBN:0-262-06242-9

Prologue

I select these artists and not others because they focus crucial topoi of modernist art: primitivism, purity, technology, mental illness, complications of masculinity and femininity, cracks in the symbolic order. Many other figures could be discussed equally as well ... Yet my figures also permit insights into the intersections of modernism and psychoanalysis that others do not; and some simply intrigue me in ways that I cannot fully explain. (341, n1).

THUS THE SCENE IS SET, as a self-fulfilling investigation into the notion of the “self” and the persistence of ideals of “origin,” Hal Foster identifies those artists which will permit the insights he seeks. Through his “psychoanalytical” approach Foster seeks out the subconscious desires and suppressions within modernist art. Foster is defensive about both his method, and his selection of artists, and rightly so. Here are the usual suspects of modernism: Gauguin, Kirchner, Marinetti, Klee, Ernst, et alia, et cetera, couched in the most conventional of psychoanalytical terms. Indeed Foster seems unwilling to take risks in terms of his approach or his carefully defined terrain.

Foster’s theorising is good and bad. It is good because there is not enough of it today, and his annoyance with this situation is endearing. He explains that part of his motivation for writing is “out of pique with all the phobias about theoretical work ...” (p.xiv). Yet, it is also bad, since it is limiting theory, Foster is scotomised by his own schemas, for all the irony that might entail. His inability to see, or sing, through the scales, can make his work read as deterministic. There is something incredibly retentive in his construction of analytical schema, with an apparent need to explain the factors which produce the apotropaic works he traverses. Somehow Jay Appleton came to mind, with his quest to find an explanation for why humans prefer park-like landscapes. Appleton’s theorising led him to the reduction of the “experience” of landscape into notions of “prospect / refuge” or “habitat”, such that “... aesthetic pleasure in landscape derives from the observer

experiencing an environment favourable to the satisfaction of his biological needs." And *therefore*, because "the ability to see without being seen is an intermediate step in the satisfaction of these needs, the capacity of an environment to ensure the achievement of this becomes a more immediate source of aesthetic satisfaction."¹ Thus sociobiologically, he suggests, this is why humans prefer picturesque type landscapes. Yet not humans do, nor have they always. In Medieval times, no-one wanted to go and sit in the trees and admire the view. Therefore such theorising undoes itself, and Foster also falls into the trap of seeking a much too transparent connection between representation and subjectivity.

Act One: On the Dissecting Table

Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of me! You would play upon me, you would seem to know my stops, you would pluck out the heart of my mystery, you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass; and there is much music, excellent voice, in this little organ, yet cannot you make it speak.
William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, (III, ii, 350)

The dissecting table is a place of potential fruitful encounters, of surrealistic syntheses, where such chance meetings might issue forth something of beauty. And Foster's familiarity with the terrain of modern art allows for some clever juxtapositions, such as the move from the Medusas of Canova and Caravaggio, with all of their attendant phallic paraphernalia, in a master stroke to Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty. Yet, Foster is also very familiar with his analytical devices, overfamiliar, such that he seems to have become blind to them. Thus he cannot see that his dissecting table is also a place where things are dismembered, probed, and there is a clinical after taste, a bad taste, through the removal of entrails that this entails, and ultimately all that such analyses offer is offal.

However, modernity is the culture of spectatorship, the society of the spectacle, and it is much enamoured with the dissecting table and its compulsive beauty of death and decay. While Foster traverses this domain, he also transgresses, voyaging through a voyeuristic realm which resonates with the escalating interest in "outsider art" and "outsider music." The clash of aesthetics and ethics is troublesome, particularly in the domain of surrealism. The pervasive perversion and seductive subversion that is exhibited is indeed the very stuff of this repulsive attraction. The sub-rosa glow creates the very (an)aesthetic that allows us to suspend our scruples

¹ Jay Appleton, *The Experience of Landscape* (Chichester England: John Wiley & Sons, 1975), 73.

and indulge the other parts of our selves, delighting in the undoing of the moral order at Maldoror, smelling the monstrous flowers of the torture garden. At the same time this very numbing can have regrettable consequences; after all, when better than while anaesthetised to pluck out one's heart?

Act Two: Through the Window

Running through Foster's work is the constant concern with the play of optics, the visible and the invisible, presenting, for example the iconic conical Lacanian can anecdote, which diagrams the way in which both the subject and the object are seer and seen. The notion of windows and transparency is part of the "crucial topoi" of modernist art, and modernism in general. The interiority and exteriority of the public and private realms, so embedded in the work of Loos, and in the writings of Walter Benjamin, resonating on levels which are at once spatial, social and psychic. The window is in essence an opening out of the interiorisation which came about through the mass-produced book. For Baudelaire, the window defined the spaces in which "life is lived, life is dreamed, life is suffered."²

However, the symbolic currency of transparency within modernity allies optics with objectivity, and windows are associated with the detached ocularcentrism founded on the reception of linear perspective as a "natural" rather than constructed phenomenon. The very exposure brought about through extreme transparency threatens the sanctity of the individual. Kandinsky famously painted out the extensive street-facing windows in his dwelling at the Bauhaus, as he did not want people "staring" at him. This notion of exposure and the oppression of subjectivity in modernity is transposed into the domain of analysis, and it seems that Foster's work suffers from this tell tale mode.

Exposure through transparency not only threatens to erode the individual's domain, but also that of the mystical. Following the conventions of modernity, Foster also overlooks mystical dimensions to the works he discusses, where the Other is only okay if it is a primitive god, an ancient deity. Essentially, mythology is admissible, but theology is not. The limitations of Foster's terrain are thrown into sharp relief at such times. How much more radical it would be, for example, to interface Marcel Duchamp's *Etant donnés* with Jean-Luc Marion's *Etant Donné*, to look beyond the orchestration of Cartesian castration, and into the invisible. The perspectival games of Duchamp offer a possibility of looking towards a sublimity of sorts,

² Charles Baudelaire, *Poesie e prose*, cited in Renzo Dubbini, *Geography of the Gaze: Urban and Rural Vision in Early Modern Europe* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2002), 206.

perhaps to contemplate Pascal rather than Descartes, and ponder that "melancholy geometry." It is here, after all, where "The perceptible mark, the tangible sign of divine omnipotence is that the imagination gets lost in the thought of the infinite: the impossibility of perceiving the infinite dynamics of nature occasions a 'properly' sublime sensation."³

Act Three: On the Couch

Through the construction of his corpus, "my modernists", "my artists", Foster creates a flavour of modernism which is long since passed. The question has to be asked, and who better to ask it than Hélène Cixous: "Where is She?"⁴ Are there no Prosthetic Goddesses? However "desperate" these male artists might be, this is still an extension of the modernist masculinist discourse. While on one hand Foster claims to be "complicating" the dominant discourse of the masculine, he is also complicit. Why not Leonora Carrington instead of, or as well as, Max Ernst? Where is Frida Kahlo? And what of Hannah Höch, one of the very earliest Dadaists, whose alarming montages are every bit as relevant to any arguments about technology, primitivism and sexuality as motivations for the transgressions of art? (One needs only to call to mind the image of "Beautiful Girl" (1920) with its juxtaposition of technology, consumerism, and the feline feminine, or "Monument 1," (1924) where the primitive African mask is hybridised with the "modern" German female.) As equally powerful apotropaic topoi, Höch's work has the potential to radically extend the scope beyond Foster's usual suspects. So, is Foster, as Cixous teases, "afraid of us?" It is true that many of the male artists are far from heroic, and we sense the pathos of the prosthesis, yet, the work remains a product of a one point perspective which offers no new viewpoints. And Foster not only turns away from women artists, but also from women theorists. While one would imagine that any book that seeks to extend ideas on psychoanalysis into the domain of art would acknowledge the work of Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, they are notably absent. Hélène Cixous manages a fleeting appearance, but there is so much that could be gained from the connections to the work on the psychoanalytical by all of these writers.

There is a sense of *déjà-vu* with this work, and some of it literally has been seen before, as a group of essays which are primarily re-publications and re-workings of pieces already in publication, dating from 1991 through to 2003. Foster's tried and true is now tired and needs something new. The theme of

³ Marin, 'On the Sublime, Infinity, *Je Ne Sais Quoi*', in Denis Hollier (ed) *A New History of French Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 344.

⁴ Hélène Cixous, "The Newly Born Woman", in Susan Sellers (ed.), *The Hélène Cixous Reader* (London: Routledge, 1994), 36-55 (37).

the psychoanalytical and the social could lead him to, for example, Damien Hirst, with his shocking toxic sampling of the pharmaceutical, the psychological and the surgical. And Christine Borland arguably offers much more to rub oneself up against in terms of the production of apotropaic pieces. Indeed there is connection begging to be made between the image of Katharina Detzel "with a stuffed dummy of her own making" (fig. 5.1, p. 192) and Christine Borland's *Phantom Twins*, from the 1997 Turner Prize shortlist.

Paradoxically, Foster's work, while seeking to reveal the construction of the self within the modern art discourses of technology and primitivism, is in itself a terrain of omissions and elisions. The question, "Where is She?," with reference to the feminine, (and perhaps even, "Where is He?"), serve to highlight some of the limitations of the map that Foster continues to follow. There is a sense that much is repressed in Foster's work. A complementary supplement is awaited with anticipation ...

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