

Messing with ornament: Theory and impure subjects

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ABSTRACT

This article describes my experiences while working on my PhD thesis 'Myth, Symbol and Ornament: the Loss of Meaning in Transition.' My interest in the topic stems from my observations, as a professional designer since 1978, of a huge gap between the official doctrine of the nature and status of ornament as promoted by designers and critics, and the views and practices of users regarding ornament. An early hunch in my research was that somehow this gap was related to the way people gave, conceded or denied meaning to ornament.

Introduction

As a designer and design educator I have particular expectations of theory. Theory, from a praxis perspective, is not only a disinterested investigation of why things are the way they appear to be, but also a necessary reflection on professional and educational practice with an expectation that the understanding of the contexts and frameworks affecting design will enhance practice.

Over the course of my PhD research, the investigation of different, positioned perspectives on ornament has led to major shifts in my own theoretical modelling, my perception and evaluation of data, and my understanding of how knowledge in academic and life-world situations is constructed and distributed.

The first part of this article *Sliding Scaffoldings* describes various re-framing procedures I went through and discusses their theoretical backgrounds. This part is written largely in narrative form to allow for the formative influence of the passage of time to become visible. The second part *Marginalisation of Knowledge: Ornament as a Problematic Topic* describes how ornament is excluded from design education and endeavours to explain this situation.

Sliding scaffoldings

During my literature review, I half hoped to find a conceptual model, a 'unified theory', which I could use as a starting point for further research. I did find some interesting concepts that appeared to be relevant to my topic. Elias' (1976) notion of an 'increasing control of affects' during the 'process of civilisation' seemed capable of explaining some of the 19th century argument about ornament as excess, related to both material excess (waste of material and labour) but also emotional excess (ornament as erotic, feminine and savage).¹ He also regards myth to be a way of making sense of the world, a pre-science exploratory method, which in his view is still a large part of contemporary science (Elias, 1991).

Bourdieu (1984: 258ft) develops the concept of 'habitus', which Featherstone (1991: 90) summarises as 'the unconscious dispositions, the classificatory schemes, taken-for-granted preferences which are evident in the individual's sense of the appropriateness and validity of his taste for cultural goods and practices.' When new groups try to establish themselves, they often redefine values and goals to compete with other groups, and groom their members into this new habitus. Thus, the increasing influence of the bourgeois class might have contributed to the re-evaluation of ornament.

Freud's idea of the 'return of the repressed' has been used by Muller (1977) in a book on the 'repression of ornament' to explain why modernist attempts to suppress ornament could never fully extinguish it. Freud's concept of 'cathexis'², the attachment of psychic energy to an object, might help to explain the tenacity with which users held on to ornament in spite of all efforts of re-education on the part of designers and their institutions. Also in the area of psychoanalysis, both Lorenzer and Lacan deal with the different registers of the symbolic in language and pre-language concepts which are sensuous rather than logical.

Langer (1980) deals with the difference between discursive and non-discursive symbolising systems, from an angle that is sympathetic to psychoanalytical approaches. Notions from critical theory such as 'culture industries' and 'instrumental rationality' are relevant, and Benjamin's (1969) concept of 'aura', as much as his views on creativity, address issues around art production and reception following the industrialisation of the artistic sphere. Bloch (1970) suggests that ornament contains a utopian aspect, one of unredeemed hope that might have the potential to initiate change in social relationships. He also uses the concept of 'Ungleichzeitigkeit', non-contemporaneity, to discuss the residence of past and future elements in the present.

Many other writers' ideas, such as Baudrillard's (1991) in *System of Objects*, and Barthes' (1973; 1983) semiological approaches in *Mythologies* and *Elements of Semiology* have extended my thinking about the topic of ornament.

Changing strategies and frameworks

In 1996, I perceived a gap between theory and practice in my own research, and decided to look at people's practices and views on meaning and ornament empirically. In my teaching, I had discovered that my research topic was more alive and kicking than even I had ever expected. My students were actually using ornament in their work, which not only lecturers but even students themselves considered to be a 'cover-up' first and foremost. Students' ornamental practices and their evaluation in design education was the subject matter of my first empirical research project 'Ornament as Cultural Practice in Design Education.'

In looking at the resulting 'data' - the given - and in trying to define for myself what 'data' meant in the light of theories, a range of theoretical approaches became increasingly irrelevant to my particular project. Firstly those that are not critical and/or praxis oriented enough and do not engage with people's realities. Secondly, many writers who proclaim from a postmodernist perspective the end of meta-narratives, but nevertheless assume universal relevance for their theories. Those theories, developed within the contexts of western societies (and often only particular and privileged contexts), are often uncritically transferred to non-western, non-urban and non-industrial cultures and societies.

Researching in New Zealand, and noticing how much my students (and most of their tutors) considered 'ornament' to be an element of other cultures rather than their own, it appeared to me that the same old meta-narratives are still applied in strategies of inclusion and exclusion. I was not surprised that the mainly Pakeha participants considered ornament as a means of identification, be it cultural or personal. Their descriptions of ornament, however, were also a negative re-enactment of their own perceived difference from 'primitive', 'less developed' cultures, mainly Polynesian or Maori.

This realisation intensified my reflection about how much my research ought to deal with the concepts and practices of ornament in New Zealand in relationship to Maori culture. I had kept this question open at the beginning, apart from deciding that I would not write *about* Maori culture. Eventually, the results of my first research project demonstrated in unequivocal terms that there was no way in which I could avoid the problematics of non-Maori classifying and using Maori images.

Ordering the world: Concepts and methods

At the conception of my first research project, I had taken the usual approach of constructing a set of categories for the design of questionnaires. Apart from distributing the questionnaires to a larger sample group for completion, I also gave them to all interview partners to introduce the topic. The interviews were conducted in an open format, and some informants chose to discuss the questionnaire in detail, whereas others raised entirely different aspects. In particular Maori educators expressed concern about the term 'ornament' when applied to Maori culture, and about the epistemological framework into which this term is embedded.

The 'art of *naming* ... is an important strategy on the part of groups engaged in struggles with other groups' (Featherstone, 1991: 37). This hypothesis is formidably reflected in the struggle over the definition and relative merit of ornament over the last century in western aesthetic and social discourses, and the sometimes sad and sometimes violent polemics used by the opposing parties.³ They would be extremely puzzling if examined on their own. Once the arguments, however, are related to their respective social and historical contexts (industrialisation, imperialism, rationalisation, and the rise of the middle class to a position of political and economic control), the level of energy invested into such a seemingly innocuous topic is less surprising. From the beginning, I investigated the genealogy of discourses on ornament in the various stages of modernism.⁴ I was particularly interested in tracing back vulgarised notions of the status of ornament by relating those aesthetic discourses to social and cultural contexts - thus in a fashion trying to rehabilitate ornament by revealing the vested interests in its suppression.⁵

My first project explored the views held by various communities, and their ornamental practices. These groups included secondary and tertiary art and design students, their educators and design professionals. I discovered, in the first instance, that the English common sense understanding of ornament differs considerably from the scholarly terminology in day-to-day parlance it means first and foremost 'objects that collect dust on the mantelpiece'.⁶

As noted above, I also found myself confronted with a spontaneous and lasting rejection of many Maori informants of the term 'ornament' in the context of their own culture. Initially, I was at a loss to understand this reaction - particularly because their arguments seemed to concur with notions that had been advocated by some proponents of modernism,⁷ namely that ornament is superficial, superfluous and emptied of meaning. The majority of student participants, on the other hand, considered ornament as meaningful, and as something that could provide both personal and collective identity. At the same time, however, a significant proportion of students and educators in the sample identified ornament as being characteristic of Maori, Pacific Island, 'ancient' and other 'primitive' or 'less developed' cultures. Whether or not the concept of ornament can be a medium for an exploration of colonial and contemporary cultural relationships in New Zealand, the controversy made me aware that the term 'ornament' is at least problematic when used in the context of Maori culture. It has been (and still is) used often in a derogatory manner, and to devaluate Maori art.

In trying to construct my own definition of 'ornament' for the purposes of my research, I had thus encountered several complications which are characteristic of the New Zealand environment. That resulted not only in difficulties on my part to pin-down the subject matter of my research, but also in a recognition of conflicting positions in the struggle between different groups who are engaged in the 'art of naming.'

A similar complication took place while I was trying to clarify my methodologies. The data gleaned from the first research project themselves raised questions. The questionnaires had extensive open answer sections, and the interviews were primarily very open-ended. In analysing the textual data, I found myself faced with a considerable mismatch between my original, logically derived framework of categories and the key concepts emerging from the textual data.

I therefore turned to the concept of 'grounded theory' (Glaser, 1978; Glaser, 1992; Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990), which focuses on everyday realities and uses people's experiences together with those of the researchers' to develop 'emergent theories.' A method of 'open coding' is used to generate the categories for analysis and interpretation from the (usually textual) data themselves. While every researcher brings her own worldview to the research, and will thus inevitably frame the data in one way or another, a conscious effort is made not to superimpose preconceived theories on the data.

The theoretical attitude informing this approach has another advantage.

Grounded theory *does not* confront other theories with being wrong or off, nor does it synthesise with other theories that seem right on. It does not, *because* these other works simply become part of the data . . . to be further compared to the emerging theory to generate an even more dense, integrated theory of greater scope (Glaser, 1978: 7).

Theories, grand⁸ or small, are thus slices of data, of a different nature with but the same status as 'empirical data.' To separate the theoretical investigation of life-world phenomena into rigid and opposing theoretical propositions or methodologies such as 'scholarship' and 'empirical research' is unhelpful for an understanding of any problem in that sphere. Academia suffers from, and creates, trends according to current social representations. Social representations are elaborations of a social topic area by the members of a group or community with the aim of defining and coding action and communication (Flick, 1996: 99). They represent 'a system of values, ideas and types of action designed for . . . naming and unambiguous classification of the various aspects of their world, and their own and the group's histories' (Moscovici quoted in Flick, 1996: 99). Thus, a lack of reflexivity on orthodox social representations can lead to censorship by the hierarchies of subjects, which relegates to the unnameable all those subjects that current tradition has not constituted as worthy of philosophizing upon, by the hierarchies of styles, which demands or recommends as suitably important this or that variant of discourse, this or that rhetoric or profundity or radicality (Bourdieu, 1983: 4).

Ornamentation has not been considered worthy of academic attention for a long time. But even since ornament has been rediscovered as a topic, it is remarkable how seldom people and their perceptions, practices, wishes and desires feature in the texts. There is (in both 'modern' and 'postmodern' texts⁹) a significant absence of a concrete other. Similarly, little theorising in art and design criticism engages in face-to-face encounters where models of reality and people can be put to the test through direct contact between researcher and participant. Due to scientific procedures of abstraction and systematisation, as much as the necessary, be it temporary, distance from the everyday world, academic knowledge construction is always in danger of skimming over the realities of the life-world. In this sense, postmodern theories are still perpetuating what Luckmann, in his essay 'Philosophies, Science, and Everyday Life', calls the 'expulsion of Adam' from science's epistemological concerns.¹⁰

Another difficulty in the context of ornament, a visual phenomenon, is that much current theorising is based on linguistic and textual models. Lefebvre (1997: 7) says in *The Production of Space*

When codes worked up from literary texts are applied to spaces - to urban spaces, say - we remain ... on the purely descriptive level. Any attempt to use such codes as a means of deciphering social space must surely reduce that space itself to the status of a *message*, and the inhabiting of it to the status of a *reading*. This is to evade both history and practice.

The prevailing frameworks in research related to my topic cannot provide a unified theory capable of dealing with visual/verbal, cross-cultural, or theory/practice interfaces. However, Featherstone in his work on consumer culture and related issues discusses concepts and authors in a way which is compatible with my own approach. He describes how an author compares two theories of cultural modernity and favours one (Simmel) over another (Habermas) for certain reasons. He concludes '[w]e can use these contrasting positions to make a number of points. . . . it may not be a question of Habermas or Simmel, but rather that both are looking at different aspects of the same process' (Featherstone, 1991: 75).

This refusal to engage in oppositional and exclusive arguments is supported by propositions put forward by some theorists researching and writing from a perspective of *New Constructivism* (which draws on both theories of knowledge and brain research). Their hypothesis is 'that objective reality is in principle not amenable to cognition and that this necessitates epistemological modesty' (Arnold and Siebert, 1995: 15). Part of that modesty is a 'sober recognition that knowledge must always be knowledge from a certain position' (Berger and Luckmann, 1967: 10).¹¹

To identify the various positions from which knowledge and enquiries are framed, and by whom, is particularly important in my current research project about 'The Use of Maori Images by non-Maori in Design.' As a researcher, I cannot completely step outside the social constructions of reality and the particular type of common-sense knowledge I share with my communities.¹² As long as members of any community move within a world that is relatively homogeneously ordered according to conventions, social protocols and the like, they perceive of the world as 'real' and 'natural.' They do not think of their perception as a construct or representation. Goodman (1968: 37) points out that '[r]ealism is relative, determined by the system of representation standard for a given culture or person at a given time This relativity is obscured by a tendency to omit specifying a frame of reference when it is our own.' In my research, it was often through confronting the concrete other, and by being exposed to inconsistencies and conflicts, that it became possible to de-naturalise my own theoretical assumptions.

The stock of knowledge available to any individual or group is 'at any time of his life structured in zones of varying degrees of clarity, differentiation and precision' (Schutz, 1971: 16). Within academia there exists a tendency to presume that the stock of knowledge constructed and distributed in the institution will be of superior clarity, differentiation and precision. However, Bourdieu (1983: 4) draws our attention to the fact that the very discipline questioning everything, namely philosophy, excludes the

question of its own socially necessary conditions. Resembling the artist in this respect, the philosopher sets himself up as an uncreated creator, ... who owes nothing to the institution. The distance from the institution . . . which the institution itself allows him, is one of the reasons why he finds it difficult to think of himself in the framework of an institution; and difficult to cease to be its instrument and plaything, even in his institutionally directed games with the institution. Every attempt to bring philosophy into question which is not bound up with a questioning of the philosophical institution itself still plays the institution's game by merely playing with fire, by rubbing up against the limits of the sacred circle, while still carefully refraining from moving outside it.

As I understand Bourdieu, he suggests that philosophers and social scientists are unable to comprehend practice as long as they are unable to recognise that, in thinking about practice, their thinking is framed by their own 'scholarly relation to practice' (5). Our thinking is influenced by numerous assumptions about the value and status of philosophy (or theory) and the status of a philosopher (or theorist), and our adherence to 'all that is unreflectingly inscribed in the very logic of the field, and which provides the basis of tacit agreement on the subjects ... worthy or unworthy of discussion, etc. etc' (6). To render account of those assumptions and habits to ourselves and to others, according to Bourdieu, might enable us to think more comprehensively and more to the point about what we think about.

Further, the structure of our languages is 'together with *socially acquired knowledge of the world* we live in [one of] the two factors, which unfurl and delimit the horizon of meaning of any language based signification' (Reichertz and Soeffner, 1994: 316). Academic language is often characterised by the use of highly abstract terms. Consequently, 'the structure of the university world, [its] own divisions and hierarchies tend to impose themselves as structuring principles of the general world-view' (Bourdieu, 1983: 6). Narrative patterns inherent in our culture constitute the 'sociohistorical a priori' which are handed down to us, from our ancestors, and to our contemporaries and descendants (Luckmann 1984, cited in Reichertz and Soeffner, 1994: 316). They impose structures of representation which even scientists cannot escape and thereby imprint their own order on the polyphony of observed facts and actions.

Moreover, the ordering process necessary for any interpretation of data is always in danger of producing clarity through reduction at the cost of variety. Bohringer (1984: 610) states that the less this ordering takes account of the internal order of the as-yet-unordered the more it is prone to violence. Ordering can only succeed if it recognises existing order, and only within its latitude; realising, at the same time, that any such recognition is itself temporary and contingent. Simplification is capable of structuring disorder into a comprehensible complexity, but this complexity in turn never quite yields to the order designed by the theorist (611).

The research project on the use of Maori images necessarily deals with interculturality, where mutual foreignness must not only be accepted but rendered productive (Schaffter quoted in Arnold and Siebert, 1995: 140). Cultural patterns acquired through socialisation are usually deeply engrained, but not conscious. Thus, the ability to distance oneself from one's own cultural position is a key qualification in multicultural settings where a prevailing danger is to 'essentialise' opposing cultural positions. In the data gleaned from my research, 'them and us' positions surface as a form of identity politics. It is through the investigation of the differences and overlaps of such stances that they can contribute to understanding. However, not only are there Maori individuals and organisations who protest against being labelled 'Maori' since they perceive this to be a colonial construction; recent research strategies in anthropology and social sciences have also started to analyse models within the researchers' own cultures. It becomes more and more evident that the assumption of universality of the models for western (in this case New Zealand non-Maori) culture is questionable and needs to be checked by a perspective on social or sub-cultural interior differentiation (Flick, 1996: 93).¹³ Systematic intercultural self-reflection not only helps to communicate with people who have a different cultural habitus, it can also lead out of the epistemological vicious circle of 'the sneaking transition from the model of reality to the reality of the model' (Bourdieu quoted in Arnold and Siebert, 1995: 143).

In thinking about the way we frame problems, it becomes obvious that academia has its own specific types of common-sense knowledge; knowledge that is taken for granted and not rendered problematic in many cases. Methodological scuffles obscure questions such as what counts as knowledge, and under which conditions knowledge is constructed. The resulting divisions and the partly necessary, but often esoteric, abstractness of academic language may cause researchers to bypass important issues in the life-worlds of their research subjects, such as ornament as cultural practice. Further, in a society where one culture holds a dominant position, the framing of knowledge becomes increasingly problematic as it invades the field of the subordinate culture, in this case Maori culture.

Rendering account

The data generated in the project 'The use of Maori images by non-Maori in design' were often implicit rather than explicit; as if what was being said could only be discovered by reading between the lines. Body language, pauses and contradictory remarks (most pronouncedly the differences

between the 'off the record' preliminary discussions and the recorded interviews) exposed as much as what was actually being said during the interviews.

Simultaneously, I realised on one occasion in particular that my own non-verbal expressions contaminated the data. The subject matter of this project is contentious and difficult, and I was prepared for differences of opinion. However, on that occasion, I noticed that I was not able to maintain the posture of 'the impartial researcher.' My interview partner perceived disagreement in my body language and changed his own narrative considerably.

Reichertz and Soeffner (1994: 310), in a salient description of the difficulties of writing research reports in the area of qualitative social research, state in their essay on texts and convictions

Much (and not the least important) is even despite one's best intentions indescribable. (...) (1) the rapport built up in the field ... , (2) the partially acquired competence for participation, (3) the reasoning behind the selection of the analysed data, and (4) the practice of the interpretative procedures.

One problem of ethnographic research is that it cannot satisfy some requirements derived from classical science paradigms. The ethnographer's subject matter deals with phenomena which the readers (a) cannot examine themselves; (b) the repeated observation and investigation of which under the same conditions is *not possible*; (c) which the readers cannot pattern adequately on the basis of their previous knowledge. The only means available to the author to convince her readers is the text, and *all* the reader has to examine is the text (314). This problem is aggravated by the fact that, in conventional research reports, the author has no voice and is thus unidentifiable. Objects thus acquire their own life and act and reveal themselves autonomously. The subject, on the other hand, who perceives and records (and interprets and selects) remains invisible. This approach leads to an almost magical perspective and has two notable consequences: firstly, the author is removed from both her own and others' control and accountability; secondly, it leads to the false assumption that the matter observed, or the observations, can imprint themselves onto the text without mediation. '[T]he impression is created that non-verbal phenomena could be unproblematically rendered, stored [and] repeated through language' (315). Thus, decisions about processing and representation of the data remain unaccounted for, contradicting a sensible maxim of science to render the process of interpretation transparent to oneself and to the examining reader (ibid).

Reichertz and Soeffner contend that under such conditions the proper scientific attitude is to make the process of interpretation transparent, not only to the author herself but also to the readers. Another requirement is the effort to re-convert any obtruding unambiguousness into a sequence of conclusions and decisions. Positioning and historicising the work of interpretation does not only render account of the research process, and hopefully increases the plausibility of the work, it also has the side effect of 'sowing doubt.' This 'can now act as a powerful motivation for further production of new interpretations - which is ultimately in the interest of science' (325).

This is of particular importance in research projects which deal with different cultures, and thus with different epistemologies, and where the researcher, unless she is truly biculturally knowledgeable, will always be in danger to impose her patterned perception onto the subject matter. Accepting that it is impossible to retrace faithfully and in detail the process of data collection, analysis and interpretation in a report, I became increasingly aware of the necessity to be present as an author to enable readers to identify my position, my strategies and my own contaminative existence in the data.¹⁴

Marginalisation of knowledge: Ornament as a problematic topic

Students in at least two research projects claimed that the prevailing attitudes in their educational environment had made them perceive of ornament as something inferior and inherently deceptive.

Their experiences of tutors' reactions had also prevented them from engaging with the topic in any serious manner. Ornament was snubbed, but not talked about.

The silencing of knowledges

Discursive practices serve to reassure the members of a community of their common concern for issues that are relevant to their lives. If conversation about an issue ceases to take place, this might lead to a diminuation of its reality potential:

the subjective reality of something that is never talked about becomes shaky. ... Generally speaking, the conversational apparatus maintains reality by 'talking through' various elements of experience and allocating them a definite place in the real world. ... In the establishment of this order, language realizes the world, in the double sense of apprehending and producing it (Berger and Luckmann, 1967: 153).

The fact that ornament has not been given consideration as a topic in design and educational discourse amounts to marginalisation, if not repression.¹⁵ Loosely following Saussure, the meaning of a term is defined by its difference from other terms. This difference is enacted in its use.¹⁶ Collective use only can lead to socially constituted meaning, and the definition and redefinition of terms and concepts. If a term is not used, as is the case with *ornament* in art and design education,¹⁷ its relationship of difference is not enacted and it loses definition. Accordingly, *pattern*, *embellishment*, *adornment*, *decoration* or *motif* are often used in New Zealand to paradigmatically replace *ornament*. Characteristic of this replacement is that all those terms belong to a semantic field that has been discredited since the end of the 19th century, all terms having similarly negative connotations.

The suppression of ornamental claims to form became visible in architecture and design in the 19th century, following the second industrial revolution. The concurrently developing *instrumental rationality*, according to Bloch (1935: 217), amounts to the 'anarchy of a semblance of rationality, peculiar to a profit-oriented economy', the 'hate of fantasy' and 'animosity towards utopias.' It is also expressed in the 'absence of ornament' in architectural work. Bloch regards the conflict between the development of industrial production and private capitalist appropriation on the one hand, and individual-aesthetic practice on the other, to be central to the problem.

Müller (1977: 7-10) describes ornament as a phenomenon of 'historical fantasy' and 'social memory', which functionalism's representatives deliberately wanted to exclude from the process of value-formation in architecture and design. The elimination of ornament was further motivated by the social rejection of undesirable dreams and wishes (of internal stimuli [drives]¹⁸ or stimuli connected with imagination [memories, fantasies]), which are aesthetically expressed and evoked in the figurative form of ornament. This can be interpreted as an effort to constrain energy invested in (ornamental) expressiveness, to favour the investment of energy into performance; openly manifest in the argument that ornament in architecture equates to a waste of labour (Loos, 1908: 101).

Desymbolisation of knowledges

Müller uses concepts derived from psychoanalysis to describe a social process. Another author to make this link is Alfred Lorenzer. For the following discussion, it is important to understand that he discusses the term symbol in the context of the conventions of his discipline. This convention understands a symbol to be a sign 'on an ontogenetically or phylogenetically primitive stage of development, with an expression of emotional-regressive conditions' (Lorenzer, 1979: 40). In logic, on the other hand, the sign is part of an 'instrumentarium used for the most clear thought processes.' (ibid) Those different definitions need not conflict, but they express the disciplines' different types of interest in knowledge. At one end of the spectrum, the term symbol has come to be associated

with images, on the other with concepts.¹⁹ In artistic creativity, there is a high potential for symbol formation on the organisational level of presentational symbols (e.g. images) which are flexible (with an expansive field of connotations to grasp the 'unspeakable') (82). On the other hand, in the strict sense in which symbolic signs and terms are used in science 'all is extinguished that might in any sense possess expressive value ... What is lacking in [science's] formulae in terms of closeness to life and individual fullness is replaced ... by universality, breadth and general validity' (Cassirer quoted in Lorenzer, 1979: 112).

This ambivalent character of a symbol or sign can also become manifest in the process of repression. In an article about the subjective configurations of life-stories and their relationships with the socially objective, Lorenzer (1993: 247-8) describes how sensory and intuitive components of personality, which are predominant in early childhood, form a nondiscursive and sensuous-organismic system of interaction. They are elements of what Freud called 'primary processes.'²⁰ As the child grows up this system is gradually replaced by the symbolic system of language. Human experiences are subsequently located in two registers: both in the older sensual-organismic system, and in the system of language.²¹ As individual sensual practices increasingly become mediated through language, the two registers can conflict.²² If the interference between them becomes unbearable for the subject, some forms of interaction may be relegated to the non-discursive, unconscious primary system. In this process of repression, symbolic representations are excluded from the conscious and preconscious. 'The representation of the object is thus excluded from the totality of symbols, the process of cognition is reversed, and the symbol becomes unrecognisable' (Lorenzer, 1979: 107). In this way, the symbol is severed into two different representations. The conscious representations have the characteristics of (formal) symbols and have lost the psychic energy previously cathected to them. The unconscious representations appear in the form of clichés (Lorenzer, 1979: 93).²³ They become inaccessible to the (language-based) conscious, and their corresponding tropes (in language) lose their sensuous base. Such ruptures result in de-symbolised (i.e. repressed) complexes of experiences, and desymbolised (i.e. formalised) unsensuous language constructs.

The conflict between the hidden layers of personal-sensuous regulation of action, and the logocentric organisation of action forged by the consensus in language, is always also a struggle with collective, unconscious rules of conduct. Unconscious, because they have been made collectively non-discursive in each single individual.²⁴ Student participants in an educational research project testified to the relevance of this model in the context of design education.²⁵ For example, one student said about her avoidance of ornament 'I perceived it as a dangerous element and did not acknowledge using it in my work for fear of being too literal.' Another student asked quite succinctly how it could be

any surprise that students asked to rationalise the use of ornament, having originated in their subconscious, stumble to find the words. They realise that if they must rationalise work verbally that it can be done more easily with the exclusion of ornament. Here lies a student's dilemma that as part of our subconscious nature we must ornament. However, as part of our education we must put our thoughts into words and therefore rationalise.

When it comes to the investigation and enlightenment of collectively rejected patterns of behaviour, all participants of this collective are the prisoners of social delusion (Lorenzer, 1993: 249). This has implications for the role of educators, in that it limits their epistemological advantage over their students. However, Lorenzer postulates that explorations of biographical transcriptions have the potential to reconnect the severed layers (250-1). Unconscious representations derive from concrete, historically defined *imagines* and can be converted, for example in therapy, into conscious symbolic representations if the unconscious attachment to an object can be rendered conscious. (Lorenzer, 1979: 93) 'Object- or self-representations definitely do not consist of a one-layered, simple symbol but always of a structure, a collection of symbols. Their 'historicity' rests on this fact.' (94)²⁶ Analogous to therapy, the confrontation with biographical material can, in Lorenzer's (1993: 250-1) opinion, provide an opportunity to realise, through identification and rendering conscious the

connections of representations with their objects, the problematics of each individual's tension between sensuousness and consciousness. It can help to clarify the conflict between concepts of practice hidden in the individual, and socially approved rules of conduct. In the educational research project mentioned above, students developed a much wider awareness through the investigation of a number of biographical sources: their own accounts of what they thought about ornament at different ages, the logs of their design work reflecting on the role of ornament, interviews with people from different generations and life-worlds (concrete others), but also their collectively shared comparison and reflection.

Rationalisation and linear models of knowledge construction

In spite of the 'paradigm shift' assumed to have happened with the rise of postmodernism and its critique of modern notions of rational understanding, most of educational practice and the structure of curricula content and practice are still deeply steeped in late modernist frameworks.²⁷ Thus, knowledge is still transmitted with 'a gesture of certainty' (Arnold and Siebert 1995: 20), in a logical and linear fashion. In many areas, only those types of knowledge can be transmitted that are amenable to discursive reasoning and evaluation and fit into the framework of socially endorsed knowledge. This marginalises other elements of knowledge: emotional, imaginative, narrative, tacit, deviant - those that lie outside the sanctioned canon of 'worthwhile' knowledge. This is particularly problematic in fields of education, which intrinsically deal with non-verbal, non-rational subject matter such as ornament.

The principles of vision which become apparent in the structure of decorative forms are principles of *artistic vision*, whereby visual elements are carved out of the amorphous sensory chaos to conform not with names and predications, like the data of practical cognition, but with the biological feeling and its emotional efflorescence, 'life' on the human level. They are, *ab initio*, different from the elements that conform to discursive thought; but their function in the building up of human consciousness is probably just as important and deep (Langer, 1953: 62).

Flick discusses Adorno's understanding of *mimesis* as representing sensuously receptive, expressive and communicative elements of living entities in a symbolic form. In the course of the process of rationalisation, it has been preserved most prominently in art. If *mimesis* is integrated with abstract thought, rationality can be redeemed from its own irrationality (Wellmer quoted in Flick, 1996: 26).²⁸ In mimetic processes, human beings assimilate to the world and step outside of their selves to bring the exterior world into their own interior world, and to express themselves. They establish an otherwise not possible connection with external objects and thereby a necessary condition for understanding (Gebauer & Wulf quoted in Flick, 1996: 26).

Discursive and non-discursive reasoning

Suzanne Langer has prominently concerned herself with the different nature of discursive and non-discursive reasoning and the relevance of that difference to artistic production and reception.

Because the prime purpose of language is discourse, the conceptual framework that has developed under its influence is known as 'discursive reason.' Usually, when one speaks of 'reason' at all, one tacitly assumes its discursive pattern. But in a broader sense any appreciation of form, any awareness of patterns in experience, is 'reason'; and discourse with all its refinements ... is only one possible pattern (Langer, 1953: 29).

Not logic, nor conventional symbolic qualities, establishes the particular character of art, but its character as significant form, which is articulate, but non-discursive; capable of being felt, not logically appreciated (32). Knowledge related to this area is non-discursively exhibited and perceived long before it is acknowledged through scientific means (65). Non-discursive forms, such as art, are able to articulate knowledge that 'cannot be rendered discursively because it concerns experiences that are not *formally* amenable to discursive projection', which are 'endlessly complex,

and sensitive to every sort of influence. All together they compose the dynamic pattern of feeling. It is this pattern that only non-discursive symbolic forms can present, and that is the point and purpose of artistic construction' (240).²⁹ The student quoted on page 81 named the problem of articulating artistic reasoning discursively, a 'dilemma.'

A typical feature of non-discursive forms is that they are not precise. They can have more than one import, a phenomenon which Freud called 'over-determination.' Further, a significant form can fuse contradictory meanings.³⁰ Langer suggests that 'emotional opposites ... are often similar in their dynamic structure, and reminiscent of each other. Small shifts of expression can bring them together, and show their intimate relations to each other, whereas literal description can only emphasise their separateness' (242).

One of the dilemmas of designers and architects is that, while they operate as professionals in the instrumental and rational sphere of production, their professed task is to cater for the artistic needs and non-discursive processes that are part of the life-world of their clients. Design education, modelled on the goals and structures of the productive sphere, does not offer students models to create and maintain links between those two spheres.

Conclusion

In my research, both the nature of the topic, which spans various disciplines and life-world experiences, and the sometimes conflicting and adversarially held positions on research methodologies, combined to render problematic many theoretical notions that I held at the outset of my studies.

Ornament is an 'impure' topic, which is, in art and design theory, still regarded largely as holding an inferior status. Different from fine arts, it is associated with craft (interestingly not with popular art) and has not been considered worthy of much academic attention. Although recently design criticism has gained more status within academia, ornament is still marginalised even within that area of discourse. When the particular colonial history and present in New Zealand situation are also taken into account, a topic such as ornament is bound to lead to larger questions of knowledge construction and distribution.

Partly as a consequence of the lack of previous research in the area, partly due to the interdisciplinary approach I wanted to take, I had to perform a major shift towards empirical research methods. The subsequent difficulties with conventional empirical research assumptions again led to larger questions of how research subjects and processes are defined and framed. This in turn necessitated the examination of concepts of knowledge and epistemology, and of the inclusion or exclusion of certain areas of life in research. It resulted ultimately in an approach similar to bricolage, where existing concepts and tools are evaluated and used according to their practical and theoretical suitability.

My concerns with academic rigour and standards were greatly alleviated through the confrontation with some key concepts. The realisation of the social nature of the construction of reality and knowledge helps to de-naturalise the particular type of common-sense knowledge prevailing in academic circles. The hypothesis of the contingency of knowledge and the request for epistemological modesty put forward by theorists of new constructivism sustain an approach to research and knowledge where emergent theories, which incorporate the knowledge of research subjects, are as adequate as grand theories. Finally, a different approach to reporting data, which does not attempt to serve up objective results, but rather historicised and positioned accounts of research results, can enable both writer and reader to engage in further discussion.

In that sense, I hope that this article will find critical readers who are not only sceptical of the certainty of my findings, but also able to render differences productive.

Notes

1. Women were, particularly during the nineteenth century in middle class European society, regarded as less rational than men and their emotions therefore as not moderated by reason.
2. For a discussion of these concepts, cf. *Desymbolisation of Knowledges*, p. 80
3. Adorno (1967: 111) says about Adolf Loos' attacks on ornament: 'Loos tracks ornaments back to erotic symbols. The request to eliminate them is coupled with his aversion to erotic symbolism; untamed nature to him is backward and embarrassing in one. The tone in which he condemns ornament contains something like the, often projective, indignation at sexual delinquents. ... His hatred of ornament could not be understood without the realisation that, in it, he still senses the mimetic impulse, which is contrary to rational objectification; the expression which is related to the pleasure principle even in grief and complaint.... Only schematically can the expressive momentum be relegated to art, and separated from the things for use.' - All translations from German texts are mine.
4. Following Lyotard, I include postmodernism here.
5. cf. *The Silencing of Knowledges*, p. 79.
6. This difference does not exist in German, where the term simply means 'ornamentation.' The English scholarly meaning is similar, in that ornament is regarded as an aesthetic device or motif.
7. Most notoriously Adolf Loos, but also in the debates of the German Werkbund up until at least the late 1950's, the British Design Council, the German Institute for New Technical Form and other international institutions advocating functionalism.
8. I am using this term ironically. Glaser and Strauss (1967) speak of 'all-inclusive grand theories' as accepted and coherent theoretical works, which are frequently referred to as important building blocks of the stock of knowledge available to a discipline (e.g. in sociology the work of Weber, Durkheim or Simmel). Small theories are incomplete and often unrecognised.
9. Lyotard uses the term 'modern' 'to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse ... making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth' (Lyotard, 1988: xxiii). He defines 'postmodern' as 'incredulity towards metanarratives. ... To the obsolescence of the metanarrative apparatus of legitimation corresponds . . . the crisis of metaphysical philosophy and of the university institution which in the past it relied on. The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements - narrative, but also denotative, prescriptive, descriptive and so on. Conveyed within each cloud are pragmatic valencies specific to its kind. Each of us lives at the intersection of many of these. However, we do not necessarily establish stable language combinations, and the properties of the ones we do establish are not necessarily communicable' (xxiv).
10. Luckmann (1983: 11) describes this as a typical feature of the development of a new cosmology of science following Copernicus, Galilei and Newton.
11. 'Mannheim coined the term 'relationism' (in contradistinction to 'relativism') to denote the epistemological perspective of his sociology of knowledge - not a capitulation of thought before the socio-historical relativities, but a sober recognition that knowledge must always be knowledge from a certain position' (Berger and Luckmann, 1967: 10). Mannheim's belief was that, while it is not possible to eliminate ideologising influences, they could be kept in check by analysing as many socially positioned versions of reality as possible, and that knowledge would become clearer through the accumulation of different perspectives on it.
12. As Berger and Luckmann argue, common-sense knowledge is unproblematic, taken for granted knowledge. It remains unquestioned and functional within the parameters of its provenance (20, 23).
13. cf. also Dutton (1995) and the responses to his article.
14. At this point, I ought to say something about my own cultural habitus: I am a 45 year old German and lived in New Zealand first between 1982 and 1985. Since 1984, I have been married to a man from Ngatiporou who also has German ancestry and who lived with my family in Germany for some years.

I came back to New Zealand in 1992, and I maintain, in my professional and personal life, contacts with individuals from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. My perspective is no longer that of a total stranger, but neither do I look at issues fully from inside New Zealand society.

15. cf. Lorenzer on p. 81 and MOiier on p. 79.
16. cf. also Wittgenstein (1958) about meaning as use.
17. '... not a word in my vocabulary' (JS41) 'Ornament is a word that we don't use' (MP00) cf. Engels-Schwarzpaul 1997: 54).
18. Freud uses the word *Trieb* which I would translate as 'drive'. However, in English language literature the commonly used term is 'instinct'. 'An innate biologically determined drive to action ... [a]n instinct has (a) a biological source, (b) a supply of energy derived therefrom, (c) an aim, ... and (d) an object in relation to which the aim can be achieved' (Rycroft, 1972: 73).
19. Lorenzer here refers to Langer (cf p82 below) whose concepts in his view use a terminology 'reminiscent of psychoanalytical experiences', (1979: 52) and according to whom '[d]iscursive symbols systems [which would be exemplified in logic] represent the articulate symbol formation in language, while presentational symbol systems embrace all those elements which belong into the 'logical yonder', the realm of the 'unspeakable' as Langer calls it with a reference to Wittgenstein. This realm includes myth, music, the arts etc.' (51). Ragland-Sullivan (1986: 142) remarks 'The role which Lacan assigns the image is so central to the formation of mind that without it there would be no human identity, no perceptual basis to which to apply language, and no experiential link between the lifeless phonemes of language and the sensual realities of infant (and adult) experience.'
20. 'The *primary processes* were so called by Freud because he believed that they were more primitive and manifested themselves at an earlier stage of development than the secondary processes' (Rycroft, 1972:123). '*Primary process thinking* displays condensation and displacement, i.e. images tend to become fused and can readily replace and symbolize another; uses mobile energy, ignores the categories of space and time, and is governed by the pleasure-principle ... In topographical formulations it is the mode of thinking operative in the *Id.* ... The primary processes are exemplified in dreaming, the secondary processes by thought. Day-dreaming, imaginative and creative activity and emotional thinking contain an admixture of the two processes. The two processes resemble the discursive and non-discursive symbolism described by Suzanne Langer (1951)' (125). Lorenzer renders the following differentiated definition: '1. Primary process means on the one hand a low level of organisation of thought in the sense of 'presentational symbolization', while the secondary process represents the higher organisational level. 2. Primary process means on the other hand 'freely mobile' energy, while secondary process means 'stable cathexis' with a high component of neutralised energy.' (Lorenzer, 1979: 70) Cf. also Freud (1900: 756-765; 1915: 161-215).
21. 'Culture imposes itself on nature from the start of life, building up a representational base to which all other representations refer. This is why Lacan placed the perceptual-consciousness system in the Imaginary' (Ragland-Sullivan, 1986: 142) 'Lacan showed ... that language has its roots in the corporal and symbolic bedrock of the Imaginary. That is to say, symbols mediate between effects, things, and sounds. In Seminar II Lacan said that 'the first symbols, the 'natural' symbols, have come from a certain number of prevalent images - the image of the human body, the image of a certain number of obvious objects like the sun, the moon and some others. And this is what gives its weight, its spring and its emotional vibration to human language'. But, said Lacan, these Imaginary themes cannot be reduced homogeneously to the Symbolic.' (150).
22. 22 Cf Holmes 'FREUD'S DISCORDANT THEORY OF SUBLIMATION' (p. 37).
23. In the German text: Klischees. Repression results in 'de-symbolisation, a formal regression of the symbolising process in the direction of cliché formation, through which behaviour mediated through symbolisation is replaced . . . by cliché-determined blind action and reaction. In the context of compulsive neurotic arrangements of isolation and intellectualisation, on the other hand, the symbolising process hurries ahead in the transformation of symbols in to signs.' (Lorenzer, 1979: 110) Cliches are characterised by rigidity, they are intransigent and inaccessible to cognition, but they maintain their emotional charge (111).
24. cf. Müller (1977) above.

25. Engels-Schwarzpaul (1998).
26. Lacan takes a similar perspective. 'The unconscious material which surfaces into discourse through Imaginary 'laws', therefore, is not a thing or the absence of a thing; nor a word or the absence of a word; nor an organ or the absence of an organ; but a knot in a structure where words, things, and organs can neither be definitely separated nor compatibly combined. Although a person can never return to the radical and elemental stage of structuring . . . the repressed Imaginary text can be ascertained as a representational shadow meaning that refers back to the prespecular objects of Desire. At the level of perception and meaning, however, it is almost impossible to separate the Imaginary from the apparent (phenomenal) 'objectivity' of consciousness, although artists and some psychoanalysts know how to freeze this second meaning, which usually escapes detection' (Ragland-Sullivan, 1986: 151).
27. cf footnote 9, and Janet Mansfield's discussion of modernist frameworks in art education on p. 22. 'The *Curriculum Framework* (1993) as a specific context in which authority is defined, contributes to the 'hegemonic order' (1995: 131) as scheme through which the programme of the dominant group is promoted ...'
28. Bourdieu (1984: 44) observes about the typical formalism of high culture that '[e]verything takes place as if the emphasis on form could only be achieved by means of a neutralization of any kind of affective or ethical interest in the object of representation.'
29. This includes literary art forms, particularly poetry. Goodman (1968) states that '[n]onlinguistic systems differ from languages, depiction from description, the representational from the verbal, paintings from poems, primarily through lack of differentiation - indeed through density' (226). He adds that '[d]escriptions are distinguished from depictions not through being more arbitrary but through belonging to articulate rather than to dense schemes; and words are more conventional than pictures only if conventionality is construed in terms of differentiation rather than of artificiality. Nothing here depends upon the internal structure of a symbol; for what describes in some systems may depict in others. ... The often stressed distinction between iconic and other signs becomes transient and trivial' (230). On the difference of dense and articulate symbol systems cf. also Mitchell (1986: 66ff). Kubie (1965) remarks that conscious, discursive reasoning is efficient for communication and certain areas of (articulate) symbolic representation, while unconscious, non-discursive psychological processes usually seek to disguise the relationship between the symbol and what it represents (39). However, he adds that 'there is ... another type of mentation whose relationship to its roots is figurative and allegorical. The function of this intermediate form of mentation is to express at least by implication the nuances of thought and feeling, those collateral and emotional references which cluster around the central core of meaning. Here every code has many overlapping meanings; and every item of data from the world of experience has many coded representatives' (30).! ... each [i.e. the scientist, artist and other specialists] deals with his subject on all three of these levels at once. On the *conscious* level he deals with them as communicable ideas and approximate realities. On the *preconscious* level he deals with swift condensations of their multiple allegorical and emotional import, both direct and indirect. On the *unconscious* level, without realizing it, he uses his special competence and knowledge to express the conflict-laden and confused levels of his own spirit, using the language of his specialty as a vehicle for the outward projection of his own internal struggles' (31).
30. 'The cathectic intensities [in the Unconscious] are much more mobile. By the process of displacement one idea may surrender to another its whole quota of cathexis; by the process of condensation it may appropriate the whole cathexis of several other ideas' (Freud, 1915: 186).

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