

# Flower Power

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What is the power of the decorative over us?

This is a venerable question in art history but seems to be of only limited, if important, relevance to contemporary art given the latter's emphasis on the conceptual content of an artwork for its meaning and value. And, in a way, this is the standard manner that the decorative and the conceptual are opposed to one another: while the latter carries the meaning and power of the artwork, its serious content, its worthwhileness, the former is by contrast now mere frippery, ornamentation, meaningless, derogated to the dismissive status of the pretty. Because it is hard to say what's meaningful or powerful about the decorative in and of itself, without comparative or external reference, without setting it off against some larger context to secure it and give it meaning. Put like this, the decorative has little if any power that is its own. At best, as regard (its) meaning, its power is subservient, secondary, derived, limited, preliminary, servile, subjugated. Determined from without.

Nonetheless, the decorative has a power over us. It holds us, sometimes entrances us. And maybe, simply, the only way to get to grips with it is through referring it to something beyond itself since, in fact, in no simple sense can or do we know what its power is, captured as you are by it, there, in front of you, your eyes following its contours, its lustre, its lure. In fact, it's the first thing that strikes you and holds you. And yet, we don't know what it is. But if we do not, then the decorative can not be subject to a science in any conventional way that we understand the term in its established Western sense. Because, by contrast, science knows: science is all about knowing through a cognitive-conceptual comprehension and, sometimes, as technoscience, making things from that knowing. Relatively impotent within science, even useless, the decorative would escape the power of science. It may even be another power to that of science, introducing an epistemological-political problematic of powers that are irreducible or heterogeneous or relative to one another.

In a way, the standard dichotomy between art and science could be easily established on this inequivalence, as could the actually often profound misunderstanding between them even as they call on one another, the one struggling to be understood in terms of the other: science pretified and (an)aesthetised in order to appeal more readily to 'the public', to non-experts without adequate knowledge of how science now effects our actuality in ways beyond our common understanding but to whom it must nonetheless appeal. And, contrariwise, art struggling to make itself relevant to a social dimension whose major transformative power is now technoscientific knowledge and construction, a dimension in which the decorative takes its familiarly subjugated or secondary place, science here providing the content, the weight of a concept and contemporaneity, by which art makes its social claim as per its modern conceptualist tradition. In either case, one side appeals to the other to extend its powers, its scope, its relevance. And in both cases, the difference in powers between the decorative and knowledge is attested to, is presupposed and utilised, the one coming to the aid of the other to help it out and furnish what it can not provide on its own terms, feeble responses to the questions: Who grasps what science is up to given the sorts of knowledges one needs to even begin to understand something of its current operations? Who still believes in the transformative or critical powers of art given today's technoscientific advances?

Such strategies are of limited scope and are mostly disingenuous since they are primarily about complementing the power of knowledge with the power of the decorative in order for both to continue with as much public credibility as can be mustered for either. As though neither could do it on its own terms. But what is disingenuous and misunderstood in these cosy alliances is that, in fact, the one does not serve the other but that their powers are more intimately involved than that; that if, as per our hypothesis, the decorative cannot be known the decorative and the scientific as we understand these terms today in fact have a critical relation to one another. For then the decorative may undermine all claims to the establishment if not the supremacy of knowledge as primary modality of comprehension and as condition of transformation - even for science itself. With that, its relative power to science is anything but 'useful' or productive or communicational, anything but minor.

What then is the power of the decorative over us? Can it be known in cognitive-conceptual ways? Why do we propose that it cannot, real though it is? If not, how then is it known, if at all? These questions are at their keenest in respect of what are perhaps the most typical if not the standard for decorative elements: flowers. What is the meaning of flowers? Science knows them in one way, through botany, comprehending them as they act and respond to their environment, proposing the flower as an element or individuated unity in an ecological system in which, in the neoDarwinian paradigm, its 'success' is judged by its phyletic 'survival'. Here, the flower has no power over us. It is meaningless as regards its human interlocutors, for those who claim to know it; meaningless to those for whom alone flowers are in relation to a certain type of knowledge as to what a flower is, what it does, how it functions. This is science's famed objectivity: the 'disinterestedness' of the scientist who keeps the object of study at some safe distance from her or his own investments (a notion complicated when dealing with sub-atomic scales, where issues of quantum measurement get in the way of such neutral accounting, and also when dealing with cognate animals, humans included, with whom factors of personal interaction are methodologically significant). The flower's decorative quality is ruled out, rendered insignificant. As though the scientist were blind to, untouched by, what stares them in the face. The flower's decorative power seems to be of another order.

What is it? Can we deny it?

No. George Bataille's essay from 1929 'The Language of Flowers' proposes that the flower instigates a spontaneous reaction in us: 'in fact, the sight of this flower provokes in the mind much more significant reactions, because the flower expresses an obscure vegetal resolution'. These reactions are what flowers do to the mind, the way that they determine consciousness, meaning. And this is in fact their meaning - the meaning of flowers for us in and as decoration. Excluded though this may be from science (except maybe from the roper ends of psychology), and even if what flowers and their parts signify 'cannot be adequately expressed in language', thus sliding to the side of anything that could be grasped in the cognitive-conceptual dimension, nonetheless 'it is... useless to ignore (as is generally done) this inexpressible real presence and to reject as puerile absurdities certain attempts at symbolic interpretation'. Bataille locates the real effect of flowers in the mind and in the symbolic register, where their meaning is what they signify. This signification is however quasi-natural, or, at least, happens in the spontaneous impact of the flower on the mind, even if this cannot be spoken. Its meaningfulness is trans-verbal, unconceptualisable. There to be seen, to be smelt and felt and understood in other terms, it is (perhaps) an affective meaning, allied to the decorative status of flowers. What is it, then? It is, precisely, familiar enough: 'It is to flowers in general... that one is tempted to attribute the strange privilege of revealing the presence of love'. This meaning does not arise from some convention or contract between interlocutors using flowers as a mediating sign, like a word that is understood outside of itself, conceptually. Rather, flowers themselves signify love in the spontaneous way they strike the mind; it is a natural production of meaning: 'in fact love can be posited from the outset as the natural functioning of the flower... Men have linked the brilliance of flowers to their amorous emotions because, on either side, it is a question of phenomena that precede fertilization'. That is, flowers spontaneously signify, are affective, have meaning for the human mind because of the similarity between love and the flower in regard of sexual fecundity. (This moment of 'similarity' by which such meaning is occasioned will soon be revisited here.) This is the first moment of Bataille's argument. It opens the way for more specific flowery determinations of love, not all of which is welcome to its common romantic conventions.

Flowers signify love not as concerns their 'natural' or 'environmental' role, not in terms of function that science may claim to know, but in their symbolic-affective power: 'if one says that flowers are beautiful it is because they seem to conform to what must be, in other words they represent, as flowers, the human ideal'. The ideal here is not something one grasps and manipulates, or conceptualises or even knows. It is not mathematical. Rather, it is to be admired. Flowers symbolise love insofar as they are admired. Set at a distance, looked at, pleasuring. Which is to say, decorative. This is one of the powers of the decorative over us: it symbolises affects beyond the powers of language; it gives us meanings that strike the human mind but which are not in its cognitive-conceptual power; it tells us what love looks like. Or, at least, is meant to be, since within this meaning the decorative flower tells us more about love than perhaps we would like to know. For 'the flower is betrayed by the fragility of its corolla: thus, far from answering to the demands of human ideals, it is the sign of their failure'. That is, the flower also tells us that, unfortunately but intimately, idealised love fails in two ways. Firstly, love grows upon a repugnant base. Secondly, it does not last. Love thrives upon the vile. These are not truisms generated out of melancholy or pessimistic experiences of love. They are truths of love that the flower tells us in its very representing the idealised state of love, as decorative element.

Firstly, in its very emergence the flower is witness to the higher aspirations that beauty, justice and love - and progress through knowledge - have been traditionally idealised as. The flower takes its traditional decorative and alluring role in making that vertical thrust yet more attractive and powerful: 'Nothing contributes more strongly to the peace in one's heart and to the lifting of one's spirits, as well as to one's loftier notions of justice and rectitude, than the spectacle of fields and forests, along with the tiniest parts of the plant, which sometimes manifest a veritable architectural order, contributing to the general impression of correctness... Flowers themselves, lost in this immense movement from earth to sky, are reduced to an episodic role, to a diversion, moreover, that is apparently misunderstood: they can only contribute, by breaking the monotony, to the inevitable seductiveness produced by the general thrust from low to high'. Flowers inspire the feeling of rectitude and upstandingness that accompanies feelings of love, justice and honour and other higher ideals, a decoration that entices the affect of what it is to reach upwards, of idealisation in these social concerns where anything else seems to spell betrayal, corruption, deceit. But, Bataille adds, this lure, this decorative lustre, implies at its heart the very opposite of the ideal it displays. For in its 'breaking' the upward movement of vegetal life, the flower also intimates the filthy tangle of roots in the soil that feed those plants. 'In order to destroy this impression' of idealised upstanding beauty and rectitude 'nothing less is necessary than the impossible and fantastic vision of roots swarming under the surface of the soil, nauseating and naked like vermin'. Hence, it is in the decorative power of the flower to no less indicate this vermin-like entanglement of filth, dirt, manure and swarming roots. The flower gives us occasion to encounter not just the idealised aspect but also the repulsive one, to encounter both at once, without distinction in principle. Idealised and abject, alluring and nauseating. Decorative. And the flower's second teaching regarding love is in keeping with this duality. It is that the flower shrivels up - as then does the ideal love it signifies: 'after a very short period of glory the marvellous corolla rots indecently in the sun, thus becoming, for the plant, a garish withering. Risen from the stench of the manure pile - even though it seemed for a moment to have escaped it in a flight of angelic and lyrical purity - the flower seems to relapse abruptly into its original squalor: the most ideal is rapidly reduced to a wisp of aerial manure'. That is, however much the flower is to be admired, longed for in its beauty and power to signify the ideal of love, it returns to the stinking humus that feeds it and on which it lives. The flower no less tells us that 'love smells like death' - and this repulsive truth is announced by the flower as a decorative element. The repugnant lies at the heart of the ideal. It is the power of the decorative to show us this and to let us feel it in all its difficult complexity.

This duality is very difficult for a scientific sort of knowing to handle. Not only for the trivial reason that it's crucial for mainstream science to exclude the affective-symbolic element in its investigations since such concerns introduce questions of subjectivity and personal determination which would wholly undermine all claims to objectivity and repeatability of proof and evidence, but also because the intrinsic duality of the flower as decorative element - ideal and repulsive - means that it is intrinsically obscure as to its meaning. For these two reasons, and unlike the natural flower in its 'functioning', the decorative flower cannot be apprehended with the cognitive-conceptual clarity that scientific determinations require. It cannot be finally known or, in fact, idealised. The problem here is one of distinction, or rather its absence: the decorative flower defeats a certain kind of conceptualisation for two reasons: because of the indistinction between the flower and the mind that is affected by it, responding to it with a meaning that that mind does not produce from itself but responsively, which counts as a want of objectivity; and also because of the indistinction in the contrary meanings of love that the decorative flower presents us with, which counts as a want of identity. Something like an intrinsic camouflaging that cannot be removed to reveal a true, upstanding meaning, a meaning that can be known for once and all.

The power of the decorative, determined as other than that of the known, becomes pressing precisely around this doubled indistinction. The meaning of camouflage in life processes is examined by Bataille's friend Roger Caillois in his essay of 1935, 'Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia'. Caillois firstly tells of the phenomena of camouflage through well-known examples together with the standard reasoning: 'It has been assumed that, in order to protect itself, an inoffensive animal took on the appearance of a forbidding one: for example, the butterfly *Trochilus* and the wasp *Vespa* Crabro - the same smoky wings, the same brown legs and antennae, the same black and yellow striped abdomen and thorax, the same vigorous and noisy flight in broad daylight. Sometimes the imitative creature goes further, like the caterpillar of *Choerocampa* Elpenor, which in its fourth and fifth segments has two eye-shaped spots outlined in black: when it is alarmed, its front segments retract and the fourth swells considerably, achieving the effect of a snake's head capable of deceiving lizards and small birds, which are frightened by this apparition'. Despite these camouflages and mimics seeming to serve as defensive or protective strategies against predators, Caillois points out that in fact they serves no useful function since, firstly, carnivores tend to hunt by smell and mobility rather than by direct visual signals. Secondly, such visual transformations are in any case unsuccessful since 'predators are not at all fooled by homomorphy or homochrony: they eat crickets that mingle with the foliage of oak trees or weevils that resemble small stones, completely invisible to man. The phasma *Carausius* *Morusus*, which by its form, colour, colour and attitude simulates a plant twig, cannot emerge into the open air without being immediately discovered and dined on by sparrows'. Thirdly, mimetic transformations are carried out by species that are inedible anyway. In sum, 'one ought to conclude... that this is an "epiphenomenon" whose "defensive utility appears to be null"'. What then is camouflage and mimesis about for these natural phenomena? Rather than benefiting the species or the individual, or being useful to either, as the neoDarwinian model proposes, Caillois suggests instead that with mimesis 'we are dealing with a luxury'. Furthermore, this luxury of indistinction is sometimes even detrimental for the continued survival of the species, 'a dangerous luxury, for there are cases in which mimicry causes the creature to go from bad to worse: geometer-moth caterpillars simulate shoots of shrubbery so well that gardeners cut them off with shears. The case of the *Phyllia* is even sadder: they browse amongst themselves, taking each other for real leaves, in such a way that one might accept the idea of a sort of collective masochism leading to mutual homophagy, the simulation of the leaf being a provocation to cannibalism in this kind of totem feast'.

Mimicry is a luxury, Caillois says. It is extraneous to base functions of survival and may even act against them. Counter to utility, manifested in the visual dimension of experience for the eye of whatever beholds it, mimicry is a decorative phenomenon. What and why should the organism pursue mimetic transformations - become decorative - even when it is to its detriment? What then, to return to the initial question, is the power and lure of the decorative, a power that is here seen to be greater than even the power of survival (which science today understands as the motor of nature)? Caillois draws up a minimal conclusion from the facts, namely that 'there remains in the "primitive" an overwhelming tendency to imitate, combined with a belief in the efficacy of this imitation'. And this decorative power is a tendency to indistinction which Caillois does not restrict to 'primitive' organisms but is even 'still quite strong in "civilized" man, since in him it continues to be one of the two conditions for the progress of untrammelled thought' in the mode of the 'subjective association of ideas' which corresponds to the 'objective association of facts'.

Which brings us back to science: for this contiguity between ideas and facts characterises the method and ambition of modern science, attempting as it does to ascertain laws and consequences in the register of the concept that match what happens at the level of fact, this being what it is to 'know' something scientifically if not otherwise. However, it is for Caillois no less the 'law of magic' wherein 'things that have once been in contact remain in contact'. This is a pointed if perverse identification: the knowledge of facts that science aims for is one that can be accurately characterised as magical in that science aims for a mimetic indistinction between knowledge at the cognitive-conceptual level and the world of facts and material processes, often confusing the one for the other, especially in its application and fabricating power, as technoscience. In this sense which is without any mysticism, science is magical at its heart. (This is not a point that can be historically restricted to science up to and including Newton. It is a point about the condition and movement of science as we continue to understand it in principle.) That is, however much the magical may be rightly denied in the name of the countermythical and countermythical drive of science (to know rather than to believe), science is no less animated by the affinity of knowledge to actuality, which is to say that it obeys a law of magic between thought and facts. By the 'luxury' of mimeticism (the 'scholar' being etymologically the one with leisure to pursue such knowledge). Which is no less the power of the decorative. It follows: the power and luxury of the decorative is not in fact other to the power of scientific knowing but animates it. In more familiar terms, science happens because of something like a fascination between the mind and facts. This is not unlike what Bataille says about the meaning and language of flowers but here it is not the affective-symbolic register that is animated but cognitive-conceptualisation. Furthermore, such knowing is an effect of the tendency towards imitation that is the generation of the decorative. Science is then itself a mode of, happens in the movement of, is under the power of, exists through, the decorative.

But magic is for Caillois only an 'initial approximation' of the 'search for the similar', the more extensive comprehension of which brings us even more forcefully to the decorative and its power as a production in space, and what this means for the knowing that science claims for itself. The 'end' of the search for the similar, Caillois proposes, 'would appear to be assimilation to the surroundings. Here instinct completes morphology: the *Kallima* places itself symmetrically on a real leaf, the appendage on its hind wings in the place that a real petiole would occupy; the *Oxydia* alights at right angles to the end of a branch because the arrangement of the spot representing the middle veining requires it [etc.]'. The assimilation to space as the end of this tendency to indistinction, of magic, overrides any spatial or nervous-bodily identity of the organism. The organism places itself - and purports itself - not as regards its internal representations and perceptions but in terms of the spatio-visual arrangements in which it is such that it is no longer the origin of the coordinate, but one point among others; it is dispossessed of its privilege and literally no longer knows where to place itself. The 'temptation by space' as Caillois calls it is greater than the demand for unified closed and discrete distinction, than its survival. It is luxurious, to say the least. It is greater than the power of the self over itself: a legendary psychasthenia as Caillois calls it, adapting Charcot's term for 'the disturbance in the above relations between personality and space', where and when the closed shape of the body, the legend, does not determine its environment around it and for it but is rather literally figured by that environment, even for that psycho-organic body; where 'space seems to be a devouring force'. For the human mind, this temptation by space is at its keenest in the sad drama of schizophrénies, whose experiences in this regard thus gives an insight into the power of the decorative at its most overwhelming, an experience in which 'space pursues them, encircles them, digests them in a gigantic phagocytosis. It ends by replacing them. Then the body separates itself from thought, the individual breaks the boundary of his skin and occupies the other side of his senses. He tries to look at himself from any point whatever in space. He feels himself becoming space.... He is similar, not similar to something, just similar'. The experience of this evacuation of self to space is also more commonly had in the experience of darkness, when it 'touches the individual directly, envelops him, penetrates him, and even passes through him'; 'the feeling of mystery that one experiences at night would not come from anything else' but this legendary psychasthenia, which is more or less common to all. And this experience of darkness invading and extending your spatial self-figuring is no less the dizzying experience of the decorative, its power. It happens in the decorative itself, where spatial bodily integrity is overwhelmed by the demands of the spatial configuration in which that body is placed, as in 'the extraordinary motifs of Slovak popular decoration, which are such that one does not know whether it is a question of flowers with wings or of birds with petals'.

Identity, unity, integrity, closed legends are undone by the power of a spatial configuration greater than any one body considered as a discrete entity. But the power of the decorative is even greater than that and has another dimension. It no less threatens to eat up the integrity of the individual who looks upon it in space, devouring them through the eyes that follow it in its intensive and extensive configuration, its details, its vertiginous lustre that floods space: the decorative flower that impacts the mind beyond its own powers and tells it what it doesn't want to know, that love smells of death; the knowing that speaks to the interiority of facts, where and when there is no distinction between the fact and its knowing: science at its internal limit, in its promise, in its ambition, in its cognitive-conceptual psychasthenia that floods and is flooded by not just the facts it comes across but also its space. This spatial psychasthenia, to which magic is only preliminary, directly counters Walter Benjamin's assertions in his 1936 essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Technical Reproducibility'. There, Benjamin contrasts the actions of the magician to those of the surgeon in healing. For Benjamin, 'the surgeon represents the polar opposite of the magician. The magician heals a sick person by the laying on of hands; the surgeon cuts into the patient's body. The magician maintains the natural distance between the patient and himself; though he reduces it very slightly by the laying on of hands, he greatly increases it by virtue of his authority. The surgeon does exactly the reverse: he greatly diminishes the distance between himself and the patient by penetrating into the patient's body, and increases it but little by the caution with which his hand moves amongst the organs'. If, however, the action of the surgeon's knife - an incision directed by scientific knowledge and understanding, 'objectively' formulated - if this penetration is but the actualisation of a legendary psychasthenia of sorts - and we can say so since the surgeon's penetration into the body is an instance of spatial bodily distinction being replaced by spatial equivalence, where the individual, patient or surgeon, 'breaks the boundary of skin' and 'invents spaces of which he is "the convulsive possession", the space of the inside of the body exposed, available to eyes and hands - if, then, the surgeon's actions are an instance of the temptation of space indifferent to distinctions between bodies (a distinction that the magician continues to respect), then the surgeon cannot be contrasted to the magician but is rather, in Caillois's terms, the magician's completion or endpoint. The surgeon's knife, directed by the demand of similarity of bodies, interiors and exteriors, is then wielded under the power of science that is itself under the power of the temptation of space. It is an incision that realises the legendary and cognitive-conceptual psychasthenia that generates the scientific adventure. It is an incision demanded by, following, desiring, the dizzying power of the decorative. An incision, then, that strikes the mind like a flower.

## Sources

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## HANGING

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*Hanging*  
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