Books

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JONATHAN T.D. NEIL

In View

The Modern Ideal: The Rise and Collapse of Idealism in the Visual Arts from Enlightenment to Postmodernism

Paul Greenhalgh

V&A £35.00 / HARRY N. ABRAMS $55.00

Towards the end of Paul Greenhalgh's *The Modern Ideal* we learn that, 'Postmodernism has been important but deeply problematic'. It seems that this point is a particularly necessary one to make, because a mere ten pages later, at the beginning of the following section, which supposedly treats the 'idealists, radicals and reporters' of the 1980s and 90s – the 'true post-modern decades' – we learn that, 'as energized and as necessary as this recent period has been, and important as individual oeuvres are, Postmodernism has been problematic'.

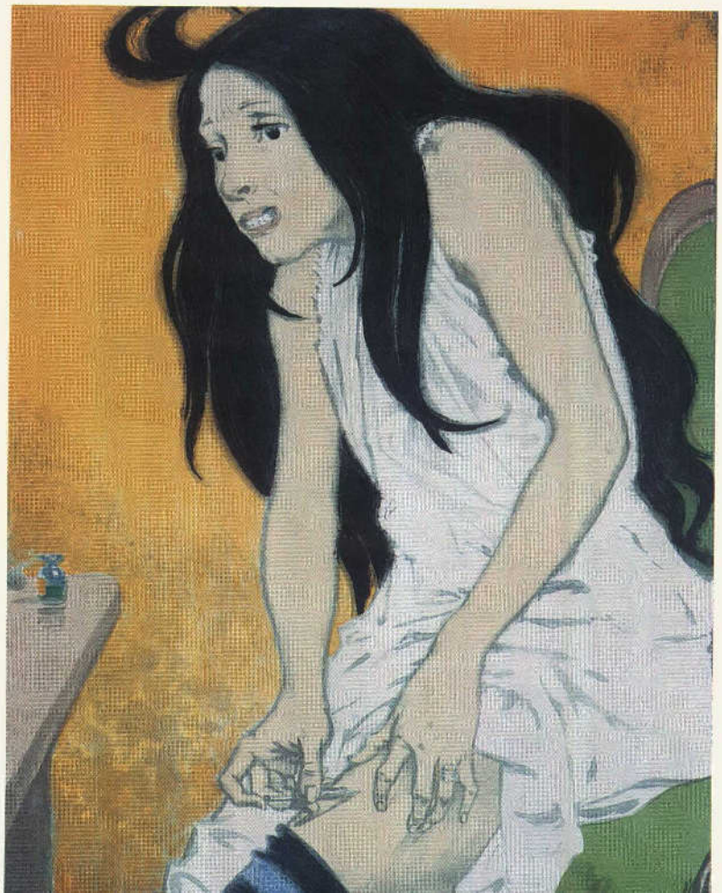
Since Greenhalgh is no doubt an idealist at heart, this repetition is delivered with none of the irony he finds so corrosive to the ideas of Utopia and Progress that form the cornerstones of the 'modern ideal' which his exhausting narrative seeks to detail, from its origins in the eighteenth century and the Enlightenment, to its efflorescence in the early twentieth century, to its supposed decline at present in the twenty-first. Greenhalgh is certain that 'postmodern thought derailed progress', and this derailment is clearly lamentable, as evinced by any number of his typical pronouncements: 'it is clear that in the absence of progress – mythic or not – idealist modernity has lost its intellectual core. Essentially, the ending of Progress has eliminated the Utopian disposition within modernity. And modernization voraciously surges on without a structured, positive response to the problems it poses.'

This observation and the rest of Greenhalgh's meandering treatment of modernity, the moderns, and their various modernisms, is mostly a prelude to his final proclamations upon what our new 'constructive, non-ironic, positive' response must be, which in the final pages we find is 'eclectic', 'interdisciplinary', 'pan-technical' and 'global'. In other words, our response, by which Greenhalgh means our art, must be exactly what it is now, and that is postmodern.

This is different from saying that our art is 'postmodernist', which, like modernism, has taken on the contours of a period style, for which the 'Pictures' generation – figures like Jack Goldstein and Robert Longo – may stand as exemplary. A postmodern art, on the other hand, is simply what is contemporary with our current postmodernity, a periodizing term and concept that any number of Greenhalgh's 'postmodern theorists' – a label that Greenhalgh employs with no little derision – have attempted to tackle in rigorous ways. I refer the reader here to Fredric Jameson's *A Singular Modernity* (2002) for a brief but thoroughgoing account of the fraught relationship between modernity, postmodernity and their associated '-isms'.

Which brings us to the central weakness of Greenhalgh's work. For an author who declaims theory, yet yearns for an art and writing that mounts a 'structured, positive response' to the problems posed by the march of modernization, Greenhalgh seems particularly averse to structure of any kind, which is theory's province, be it postmodern or otherwise. (We must remember that even Derridian deconstruction followed logic and structure through to their own paradoxical and often repressed aporetic ends.) In contrast, Greenhalgh spends much of *The Modern Ideal* simply describing the well-rehearsed conditions of modernity, and quoting other authors' descriptions of them as well. All is label and loose categorization, hung like ornaments on an absent tree. So it is that we read of the three major modern artistic dispositions, 'idealism', 'radical critique' and 'reportage', and soon learn that 'Purism, De Stijl, the Bauhaus, Constructivism, Suprematism, the Studio Craft Movement and Scandinavian Modern' were essentially idealist; that everyone and

Below
Eugene Grasset ***La Morphinomane*, 1897**, colour lithograph
COURTESY VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM, LONDON



Eugene Thiebault
***Henri Robin and a spectre*, 1863**, albumen silver print
23 x 18 CM
GERARD LEVY COLLECTION, PARIS

everything from Courbet to 'Neo-dada, Pop, the Independent Group, Happenings, Fluxus, Arte Povera, Art and Language, various forms of Conceptualism, Situationism and the YBA' were radical critics; and that figures as diverse as Van Gogh, Matisse, Bacon, Kiefer, Rauschenberg and Sherman were simply reporters. Such ahistoricism guts any kind of 'structure', let alone the possibility of a 'positive response'.

Greenhalgh is at his best when discussing what he undoubtedly knows best, which is nineteenth- and twentieth-century decorative art and design. His treatment of this material and its history is often illuminating, and it no doubt deserves fuller integration into the orthodox histories of modern art. But what is lacking in all of Greenhalgh's efforts is some stab at an underlying logic connecting the diverse and often contradictory artistic practices of the modern age; some attempt to crack the hard kernel within the idealist project. And it seems to me, at least, that his current, grand explanatory concept, 'simplicity', is just too, well, simple. JTDN

Photography

The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult

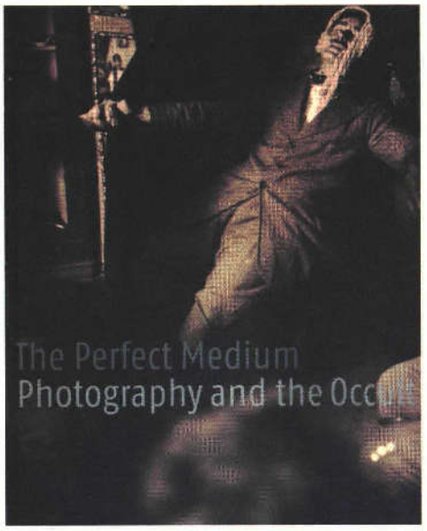
Clément Chéroux, Andreas Fischer, Pierre Apraxine, Denis Canguilhem, Sophie Schmit

YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS $65.00 / £40.00

So seductive is the idea that nineteenth-century photographic portraits have something spectral about them – see Roland Barthes's 'flat death', Walter Benjamin's 'remembrance of loved ones, absent or dead' – that the spooks conjured by *The Perfect Medium* can look pretty hale beside the pallid living sitters themselves. Abraham Lincoln's widow, attended by the shade of her husband, seems to have passed over already, while one Master Herrod, a cadaverous youth slumped beside his phantomic double, might be lately embalmed. Both images were produced in the 1870s by William H. Mumler; they purport to show what neither photographer nor client had actually seen: a realm susceptible only to photographic unveiling. Mumler's blatant double exposures would eventually land him in jail for fraud, but they inaugurate one type of occult photography: the effort to picture the invisible.

The object of the spirit snapshot could also be gaseous, luminous, liquid, membranous or unnervingly fleshy. In several senses, the quick and the dead come to look uncannily alike. It is not only a matter of blatant deception, though the number of photographers who thought they could get away with superimposing themselves or others as supposed spirits is quite astounding. 'Katie King', ostensibly a seventeenth-century woman summoned by the medium Florence Cook in the 1870s, looks remarkably like Florence Cook. French photographers, in particular, seem to have specialized in etheric beings whose blackened fingers mark them out immediately as studio assistants. In terms of theatrics, these early efforts look touchingly naïve beside the outrageous, utterly unsettling experiments of Albert von Schrenck-Notzing. The genius of his *Phenomena of Materialization* was to posit – in the form of palpable ectoplasmic 'pseudopods' – a direct physical extrusion of one realm into another, the conduit being the body of the medium.

The grisly artefacts photographed – an ectoplasmic 'veil' over the head of the medium Eva C., a vegetal lattice strung between her breasts, a great spume of something white emerging from the mouth of another woman – are less fanciful Victorian sprites than direct precursors of the Surrealists and Francis Bacon. The perplex of science and fantasy that surrounds late-nineteenth-century



photography has mostly to do with capturing what had been invisible (consequently, often, simply seeing what wasn't there). The psychiatrist Charcot condemned spirit photography, but imagined he could frame the symptoms of hysteria or the ciphers of dermographia; police forces that exposed occultist fraudsters nonetheless thought they could photograph and taxonomize the criminal physiognomy. Darwin thought he could anatomize, in photographs, the expression of emotion. Schrenck-Notzing and his ilk, for all their patent lunacy – photographing thought, or the body's 'vital effluvium' – managed, also, the opposite trick: not seeing the frank sham that was staring them in the face. BD

Monographs

Reflex: A Vik Muniz Primer

Photographs and Text by Vik Muniz

APERTURE FOUNDATION £22.00 / $39.95

There is a tendency for art critics to write about an artist's work as if their objective outlook, coupled with lengthy discussions with the artist, were to represent a central point between the artist's intention and the viewers' inferences. It must be painful, however, for an artist to hand over control to a mediator, despite often speaking of welcoming new interpretations as 'interesting' or 'just as valid'.

This symptom of late twentieth-century relativism keeps lots of us in business, but it is good to see Vik Muniz take a more patrician grip on his own work. *Reflex: A Vik Muniz Primer* is written by the artist, with an autobiographical sketch charting the progression of ideas and outlining the connective tissue of a body of his work. In an epilogue, Muniz lets us know that he realizes the falsity of such narrativization: 'In retrospect, every piece of