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Myth, Symbol, Ornament: the Loss of Meaning in Transition

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and, for verbatim quotes from interviews, the research participants

Abstract

How meaning is articulated, suggested or repressed in transition processes is an inherently social phenomenon. The history of theorising about ornament bears evidence to this as much as do current practices of ornamentation. From myths, as narratives of meaning, to 'mere ornament' – the various signifying practices (and forms of life within which they take place) determine how meaning changes. People will perceive such change differently, depending on their perspectives and circumstances and, under certain conditions, change can be conceived of as loss.

This thesis, in its theoretical part, explores issues pertaining to meaning and ornament in epistemology, philosophy, sociology, semiotics, aesthetics and psychoanalysis. In its practical part it seeks to make connections with signifying practices involving ornament in the life-worlds of users, the use of ornament in public buildings, bicultural relationships involving appropriation or misappropriation, and the education of designers in New Zealand. For that, data derived from four empirical research projects are presented and theorised. In the fourth part, theories and practices are brought together to shed light on struggles with ornamental meaning in the past and in the present.

Theories, with their classification of myths, symbols and ornament, ignore wide ranges of signifying practices and privilege some form of significations at the expense of others. Because of their separation from the language-games and forms of life of ornamental practice, they often fail to grasp issues that are important to non-theorists. All the research projects demonstrated that the large majority of participants like and relate to ornament. They also showed, however, that Pakeha traditions of ornament are not only perceived to have suffered the same historical rupture as those in the West but also that the theoretical discreditation upon which they were based was used as a tool of oppression when applied to Maori art.

Attempts to explain bicultural practices of appropriation or misappropriation without reference to the history of colonisation and present power configurations must fail. Whether or not a cultural image retains or loses its meaning depends on factors such as knowledge, understanding, relationality and co-operation. If culture is, however, treated as a resource for commodification – as it is by the culture industries – cultural elements are subjected to rules inherent in marketing and capitalist economies and their meaning is deliberately changed. Those who ought to be able to deal competently with these issues (designers and other cultural intermediaries) receive little in their education to prepare them for the ornamental strategies and tactics of their future clients. The academic environment is still largely determined by modernist agendas, and ornament – as a topic and as practice – continues to be repressed.

If a meaningful ornamental language and practice relevant to Aotearoa is to be shared, created, and sustained the divisions between theory and the life-world need to be interrogated; the distance through an assumed superiority of Pakeha to Maori history, culture and people relinquished; and a type of conversation must commence that takes seriously the Treaty of Waitangi as the founding document of this country. The partnership concept of this document facilitates conversation about differential positions and rules and can 'take us out of our old selves by the power of strangeness, to aid us in becoming new beings' (Rorty, 1980: 289).

Acknowledgements

Mo Anni Engels me Sophie Kaa

For Sophie Kaa and Anni Engels

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Many other people have influenced my work considerably, who will know of my gratitude even though their names are not mentioned here. I hope that my efforts honour the support I have so generously been given, and that this thesis is a contribution to a process we all care about.



I cannot say, to be sure, whether it is going to get better if it changes. However, this much I can say; things need to change if good is to come of it.¹

¹ 'Georg Christoph Lichtenberg (b. July 1, 1742, Ober-Ramstadt, near Darmstadt, Hesse [Germany]--d. Feb. 24, 1799, Göttingen, Hanover), German physicist and satirical writer, best known for his ridicule of metaphysical and romantic excesses.' (1997b)

Table of Contents

Part One: Passageways	1
<i>I Approaching</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>II Positioning</i>	<i>9</i>
1 Relations out of which the research arises	10
2 Rules and conditions of its production	14
<i>III Mapping</i>	<i>18</i>
1 Research and reality	18
1.1 <i>The limits of disciplines</i>	<i>24</i>
1.2 <i>Theories and 'data'</i>	<i>26</i>
2 Strategies and decisions	29
3 Reporting and editing	34
3.1 <i>Principal issues of accountability</i>	<i>34</i>
3.2 <i>Writing styles</i>	<i>35</i>
4 Concepts and definitions	39
4.1 <i>Key terms around the subject area</i>	<i>43</i>
4.2 <i>Models as abstractions from life</i>	<i>51</i>
<i>IV Implementing</i>	<i>59</i>
1 The projects	60
2 Research methods	62
3 Integration of research into PhD thesis	67
Part Two: The place of theories	68
<i>V Contingency of knowledge</i>	<i>69</i>
1 Science and the life-world	75
1.1 <i>Scientific and common sense knowledge</i>	<i>75</i>
1.2 <i>Social Representations</i>	<i>78</i>
1.3 <i>Socialisation and Professionalisation</i>	<i>80</i>
1.4 <i>Control and classification of knowledge</i>	<i>83</i>
2 Marginalisation of knowledge: ornament – a problematic topic	87
2.1 <i>Desymbolisation of knowledges</i>	<i>89</i>
2.2 <i>Rationalisation and mimesis</i>	<i>92</i>
2.3 <i>Discursive and non-discursive reasoning</i>	<i>96</i>
<i>VI Myth and Meaning</i>	<i>97</i>
1 Meaning	98
1.1 <i>Accounts of meaning</i>	<i>98</i>
1.2 <i>Loss and recovery of meaning</i>	<i>105</i>
2 Myths	112
2.1 <i>Perspectives on myth</i>	<i>113</i>

2.2	<i>Myth in use</i>	118
VII	<i>Symbol and Ornament</i>	126
1	Semiotics	126
1.1	<i>On the margins of mastery</i>	128
1.2	<i>Interfaces of meaning</i>	134
1.3	<i>The context of practices: rules and codes</i>	141
1.4	<i>Units and lexica</i>	142
1.5	<i>Words and images</i>	143
1.6	<i>Signs and symbols</i>	146
1.7	<i>Allegory and metaphor</i>	150
2	Aesthetics	153
2.1	<i>Classifications of ornament</i>	154
2.2	<i>Ornamental content: semantics</i>	157
2.3	<i>Ornamental rules: syntax</i>	170
2.4	<i>Ornamental use: pragmatics</i>	180
VIII	<i>Transition and Change</i>	203
1	Modes of perception	204
2	Tradition and Modernisation	208
2.1	<i>The process of civilisation</i>	209
2.2	<i>Modernisation and detraditionalisation</i>	211
3	Colonisation and Globalisation	218
3.1	<i>Globalisation and commodification</i>	225
3.2	<i>Maori culture and the aesthetisation of commercial life</i>	231
	Part Three: The time of practices	239
IX	<i>Practices of everyday life</i>	239
1	Users and the system	240
2	Users' relationship with ornamentation	242
3	Production and consumption	244
4	Positions of cultures	249
5	Ornamental practices	257
5.1	<i>Bricolage: interrogating what is at hand</i>	259
5.2	<i>Construction and maintenance of biographies</i>	264
6	Ornamental tactics	269
6.1	<i>Consensus or conflict of meaning</i>	272
6.2	<i>Actualisation and loss of meaning</i>	276
X	<i>Signifying practices and the use of culture</i>	278
1	Signifying practices in New Zealand	280
2	The use of ornament in public buildings	281
2.1	<i>Styles as means of persuasion</i>	284
2.2	<i>Transition processes</i>	292
2.3	<i>Stories of identity and community</i>	305

3	The use of Maori cultural images by non-Maori in design	312
3.1	<i>The scaffolding of discourses</i>	315
3.2	<i>Theories in practice</i>	334
XI	<i>Rites of passage in design education</i>	363
1	Education: a phase of transition	365
1.1	<i>Knowledge construction in education</i>	366
1.2	<i>The theory/practice interface in design education</i>	371
2	Ornament as cultural practice in design education	377
2.1	<i>Students' use of ornament</i>	378
2.2	<i>The educational context</i>	387
3	Emergent theories and the gap between theory and design practice	393
Part Four:	At the end a beginning	397
XII	<i>Classifications and exclusions</i>	399
XIII	<i>Spheres of life</i>	401
1	Cultural boundaries and crossovers	404
2	Use and consumption	410
3	Cultural intermediaries	414
XIV	<i>The work of culture</i>	418
Part Five:	Appendices	427
1	Glossary	427
2	Bibliography	429
3	List of Illustrations	451
4	The Treaty of Waitangi - Tiriti o Waitangi (full text)	457
	<i>Further appendices on separate CD_ROM, for an overview see page</i>	427