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Adornment Defended

I want to thank Wesley Cray, Eva Dadlez, Marilynn Johnson, and Julia Minarik for their very interesting and thoughtful comments on my book on adornment. They carefully and correctly characterize my position, so I can't say I've been misrepresented! And they produce wonderful counterexamples. I'm tempted to concede immediately and to take all the comments as friendly amendments.

Though I coyly deny offering a formal definition, my commentators draw attention to a passage on p.21 of my book to which I will also make reference: 'To adorn something is (1) (a) to intend to make it aesthetically special (b) by making it (more) beautiful or sublime, (c) to succeed in this to some degree, and (d) to receive audience uptake of the attempt and of the success; or is (2) (e) to follow a conventionalized, socially accepted practice (f) that originated in (1)-type adornment.'

1.

Cray says that I do not address 'the relation between adornment, the so-called gender "binary," and gender expression.' I do discuss "sex-based" differences in adornment practices, but largely interpreted and explained through the lens of evolutionary

psychology, Cray notes. That's correct, but I should add that I'm a critic. I'm also interested, however, when the views of evolutionary psychologists predict unexpected results that seem to be largely supported, such as some men's deep ambivalence about female cosmetic use.

I also comment on the assumptions that drive how evolutionary psychologists describe the relationship between co-parents: 'In these days of gender fluidity and variety in family relationships, these views can look conservative and sexist. They come from two assumptions. Evolutionary success is measured in terms of the number of children a person raises to have offspring of their own. And people usually choose their breeding partners in ways that promote their successful reproduction. There need be no presumptions here about sexual orientation, only about parenthood and what it entails.' (80)

I list a number of criticisms. 'Even as an account of heterosexual mate selection and attraction, the focus is too circumscribed.' (81) Both men and women want far more attributes in desirable partners than evolutionary psychologists tend to list. Also, we must be careful not to presume that nuclear families and male provisioning must be the norm. As well, the 'equation of human beauty with youthful female sexual attractiveness is infuriatingly narrow. This reduces women to their bodily appearance. It ignores the social and identity-conferring aspects of bodily self-presentation, not to mention the contribution of personality, emotionality, morality, and intelligence to human beauty. Besides, beauty in humans often has nothing to do with fertility and reproduction... And note that we extend the notion of beauty to landscapes and even to abstract items such as scientific theorems and mathematical proofs.' (82)

And I observe: 'evolutionary psychology ignores the fact that the kind of signaling we've been discussing continues unabated after mates have been found and even after

children have been raised. What this last point suggests is that, even if concerns with mate selection and attraction are involved initially in a range of adornment practices, those practices are soon co-opted to perform broader social functions, such as marking personal identity, group affiliation, and social position.’ (82)

Cray comments: ‘One means of gender-affirming therapy involves bringing gender presentation, including adorning acts, into better harmony with a person’s gender identity.’ This is not a case I discuss, but in the chapter on clothing there are some pertinent observations.

Because clothes mark sex, they can be appropriated to display a person’s non-heterosexual orientation. Or where women were effectively banned from the stage, their roles could be played by appropriately clothed boys. (161)

Because clothing almost always performs as social branding, it can be used to leverage one’s social identity. We dress our young children as superheroes and princesses. In Roman Britain, high-status locals adopted Roman dress and, following the invasion of 1066, Norman fashions became popular. Early in the twentieth century, Western middle-class business attire appeared in the Arab and Chinese worlds. Later, ethnic societies all over the world shed their native garb in favor of the ubiquitous T-shirt, jeans, and flip-flops (aka jandals, thongs). Inevitably, this affects their sense of identity. For example, when the Panará of the Amazon wear Western-style clothes, which they refer to as *white skin*, they see themselves as taking on new characteristics.

Because of its advertisement of identity and affiliation, the choice of clothes can make a political comment or social statement ... In the mid-seventeenth-century, the British Royalists copied French Catholic fashions while the Puritans followed the dress of Protestant Holland. Similarly, a person can express solidarity with a particular group by taking on aspects of their distinctive form of dress. A Texan businessman in New York

who dresses as a cowboy may be making a point about differences between the two communities. And teenagers explicitly repudiate their parents' values and attitudes if they reject their parents' modes or standards of dress and self-presentation. (164–5)

Notice that in these passages I'm talking about what clothing can be used to convey, not at this point about whether it's being used decoratively. But, when it comes to public self-presentation, the aesthetic intention rarely lies far from the surface, so these uses of clothes often are decorative. This leads us to Cray's counterexample.

Adrian, a 'non-binary person who to their chagrin is resigned to being read as a man, engages in self-decoration practices typically associated (in their cultural context) with women. ... [Adrian's] primary—indeed, sole—intention is to publicly challenge entrenched norms regarding the correlation of specific adornment practices with stipulated poles on a purported gender binary, as a means toward contributing to the goal of making their culture safer for trans and gender-nonconforming persons.' So, Adrian fails my (1). Cray continues: 'Are the practices in question conventionally gendered, and thereby best described in a manner that references the agent? Given the supposition that Adrian has a reason to engage in such practices in the first place, the answer seems to be *yes*. But if that's right, then condition (2) is not met.' So, by my account, Adrian is not adorning. Cray then advocates an amendment, '(2*) (e) to follow *or contribute to the intended institution of a* conventionalized, socially accepted practice (f) that originated in *or shares a salient causal-historical connection with* (1)-type adornment.' This move keeps intact Cray's intuition that Adrian is engaged not only in activism-orientated self-presentation but also in genuine adornment.

I have a number of options for dealing with this case, including accepting the friendly amendment. But first, I'm surprised to learn that, in choosing their clothing, Adrian *never*

takes into account its aesthetic effects on their appearance. That is, I'm surprised Adrian clearly fails (1). As well, even if Adrian is not dressing conventionally, there certainly is an established convention of using clothes to express one's personality and identity, so Adrian might satisfy (2) on those grounds. But even if Adrian fails (1) and (2), I still have the route of arguing that Adrian is not decorating, in which case this is like an example I mention: 'The dogcatcher's badge of office might perform no ornamental function, though it plainly conveys a message about her social role.' (15) To soften this negative conclusion, I could note Adrian's intention to initiate a new conventionalized practice, and then could characterize what is done as proto- or pre-decoration.

2.

In their papers, Minarik and Dadlez argue that some adornments can be artworks, whereas I regard these categories as usually excluding each other. Let me quote some of the things I say about the relation between works of art and decorations.

Artworks sometimes *contain* decorative elements and embellishments. The melody is ornamented when it's repeated, for instance. ...

As well, artworks can perform a decorative function in a wider context. Statues, each a work of art in its own right, might decorate the town square. ...

In the most common case, however, artworks are appreciated for their individuality as complete, self-contained wholes and, as a result, are not regarded as adornments. They are made up of, not supplemented by, their aesthetic features.

...

Plainly we should acknowledge exceptions, however. An intricately woven rug might qualify as a work of art in its own right, with the word *art* here used literally and not in

the metaphorical mode. It's art on account of the excellence of the adornments that it displays. As a result, we might think it should be displayed for contemplation, not used merely as a pretty floor covering. (30–1)

Robert Brain, an anthropologist, [claims] that 'body decoration in some societies is the most important of the arts, and in many cases may justly be termed a fine art.'

Presumably he has in mind cases in which the body, rather than being aesthetically augmented by some embellishment, instead serves as a canvas for the decoration.

Rather than drawing attention to the body, the decoration itself becomes the focus. The decoration does not turn the person literally into an artwork, but is of sufficient interest and aesthetic quality to be counted as an artwork in its own right. (32)

Minarik identifies an unfilled logical space in my account. What occupies that space is an *artistic adornment*; i.e., something that is a work of art that is to be appreciated as such for its adorning function. She writes:

Davies thinks that something is either an adornment or an artwork, or an artwork used as an adornment, but why not think that an adornment can be an artwork? Aesthetically enhancing something else can surely be artistically performed without requiring that we abstract the resulting work. ... an artistic adornment must be an aesthetic modification that does not get abstracted from the adornee, nor modify the adornee's *primary function*. ... Artistic adornment then, must: (i) be essentially aesthetic, (ii) be non-transformative of the adornee, (iii) require essential reference to the adornee for its aesthetic appreciation, and (iv) be admired for how it modifies the adornee.

Minarik's key example is of a person elaborately made up for a gala, such that people are inclined to view them *qua* adorned.

In a similar vein, Dadlez argues that some tattoos can be *both* art and adornment. Such tattoos are location-specific, or at least gain an impact from their bodily location. As a

result, they cannot be admired for being the artworks they are if we abstract them from their locations. Such tattoos are like a work of street art in which the material use of the street is internal to its meaning, so that it cannot be transported elsewhere without loss of (artistic) significance. 'The use of bodies is as essential to the significance of some tattoos as the use of the street can be to street art.'¹

From how Dadlez describes these artistic tattoos, it's apparent that she thinks they meet Minarik's four criteria for artistic adornments, and more especially, the key conditions that distinguish *artistic* adornments from what Minarik calls benign (non-art) decorations: the artistic adornment must (iii) require essential reference to the adornee for its aesthetic appreciation, and (iv) be admired for how it modifies the adornee.

Let me focus on site-specificity briefly. Many of the cave paintings of the Upper Paleolithic are said to be site-specific because they make essential use of the topography of the cave surface. A mound suggests the rump of a horse, say, or a fissure is an opening from which an animal is depicted as emerging. In other words, these are three-dimensional pictures, and that is why the substrate contributes to their identity. Does the shape of the wall also contribute to the *content* of the picture? Yes and no. Yes, the rump-shaped mound becomes a rump. No, the mound might have suggested a chest instead. Meanwhile, another mound elsewhere might have suggested a similar-looking horse.

Some tattoos are like these cave paintings. They are three-dimensional and to that extent site-specific, though what works on one person's upper arm might work as well on another's. They have the potential to be yet more site-specific than this, if they are designed to be affected by movements in the underlying musculature or to alter and evolve in

¹ A similar point is made by Laura Sizer. In "The Art of Tattoos," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 60 (2020): 419–33, she argues that some tattoos are artworks and that some of these make *living skin* their essential medium.

significant ways due to the natural ageing (wrinkles, droops etc.) of the skin. Temporality, as well as three-dimensionality, features in the identity of such tattoos.

Assuming these site-specific tattoos are artworks, is their site-specificity really sufficient to satisfy 'must (iii) require essential reference to the adornee for its aesthetic appreciation, and (iv) be admired for how it modifies the adornee'? I think this can be questioned. One can't abstract them from the body. That's because the relevant medium includes living skin, tendon, and muscle, as well as ink. But we can view such tattoos impersonally in appreciating them as art; they do not implicate the individuality of the adornee quite so directly as (iii) and (iv) seem to require. So, I'm not yet persuaded that these are more than artworks that are used to decorate the person who bears them, even if they require *some* person as the appropriate substrate.

3.

As Minarik notes, "artwork used as a decoration" is one of two cases that I discuss in the book. As a way of returning to Minarik's comments, let me mention the second. It's that in which the alleged decoration effaces or subsumes the wearer, who, as it were, disappears beneath it. What we get might be an artwork, but it does not decorate the wearer because the wearer is rendered largely invisible. Some examples might help. I might be made-up for Halloween as a zombie with an open wound on my face. The result is an artwork (yes, really!), but it's not one that is appreciated as decorating me, because I wouldn't be recognisable as its wearer. The same effect can be apparent in a suit of full-body paint that disrupts the lines of the body and dissolves its features in psychedelic swirls. Another example, perhaps, is the New Guinean tribesperson who appears in a heavily painted guise

on the cover of my book. The effect I have in mind is most often achieved with paint and makeup, though very heavy scarring or tattooing might produce the same effect.

Recall that Minarik's counterexample was that of the person artistically made up for the gala. So, was she writing about site-specificity also? It might appear so. 'I may apply makeup to my thigh rather than to my face, merely painting with it. This work may be easily abstracted from my body.' But as she makes clear, the artistic adornment is not of this kind and, in her example, it is face-specific.

I assume that the makeup in question can't be abstracted from the artistic beautification of the face because it highlights the eyes, sculpts the cheek bones, etc.. The adornee clearly remains herself, and is recognizable as such, though she is beautified in an artistic fashion. So, the point is not about site specificity but is rather about the centrality of a person's face in others' identification of them. Instead of masking the face, as the zombie makeup does to mine, the face is what is beautified. So, what we seem to get are (iii) and (iv): there must be essential reference to the adornee for aesthetic appreciation of the artistry achieved, and the artistic makeup is admired for how it modifies the adornee.

My response depends on the case. Facial makeup is often subtle and modest, even if it's detectable. But, of course, it need not be like this. It can draw attention to itself. And in that case the wearer is appreciated *qua* adorned. The gala makeup job is of this second kind, and as well, it is tasteful rather than gaudy and its effect is beautifying. But now I'm liable to push back against the claim that the face has been turned into an artwork.

Makeup can be taken further than this and would have to be if the claim that the face has been transformed temporarily into an artwork is to be plausible. But the further it goes in the art direction, the further it moves from being plainly of the person who is the adornee. Consider the photographer who photoshops her client's image to produce an

artistically skilful, gorgeous result. The photo starts with its sitter but does she survive to be essentially implicated in the edited version?² The genuinely talented makeup artist is not so far from the photographer, I reckon. She produces art perhaps, but it's no longer clear that the artwork makes essential reference to the adornee and that we are admiring the effect on the adornee as such.

So, my response to Minarik's counterexample is: either *decoration but no artwork* or *artwork but not essentially including the adornee*.

4.

I turn now to Johnson's contribution. She thinks that my "beautifying intention requirement" is too narrow; it excludes Billie Eilish, Cray's genderfucker, and myself (having been accused of dressing like a homeless person). But in addition, my account is too broad in extending to our material possessions and environments, without recognizing the special importance of the body as the primary site for adornment.

As Johnson acknowledges, I do allow that the aestheticizing intention might aim at sublime effects rather than beautifying ones, and I hold that the aestheticizing intention can be subservient to other intentions. I also explain how the practice can become conventionalized in ways that remove the need for any self-conscious aesthetic intention. But I certainly do think that intended aesthetic enhancement is the hinge on which the door of adornment swings.

² To see the transformative effects that can be achieved by makeup, hair styling etc. (plus photoshopping), see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iYhCn0jf46U>

I already explained how I would respond to Adrian, who is Cray's challenger to gender-stereotyping with respect to clothing, and I think I have similar options in regard to Billie Eilish. That she inverts the convention and achieves a distinctive personal style in doing so does not mean that she succeeds in being a self-decorator. And if she does succeed in fact, this is likely to depend on complexly-layered intentions and on a degree of aesthetic appeal, albeit of an unconventional kind, in the results she brings off. As for me, it's true that I'm not a heavy decorator in the apparel department, and in that respect I'm not a good advertisement for my book, but I did not claim to eschew all forms of adornment or to be entirely indifferent to my appearance.

Bodily adornment is central to my book, though I'd initially planned also to cover material possessions, rooms, and buildings. (I didn't do so because I'd just be repeating arguments already made.) I got only as far as clothing and jewelry, before closing with a discussion of the many modes of adorning found in Balinese culture (because these might be thought to challenge the separation I posited between adornments and works of art).

According to Johnson, I lose sight of the fact that 'bodily adornment is special because it is on *us*, touching us, sticking with us, across contexts until we change, or dye our hair, or take out our piercings. There is a *phenomenology* to adornment. You picked out what you are wearing now for a number of reasons—yes, you may have thought about how it looked, but we also think about how things feel.'

Johnson is correct that I've little to say in the book about the phenomenology of adornment, of how it feels from the inside to be an adornee. Here's the exception: in discussing the headpiece of Ötzi, the 5,300-year-old Iceman, I note that 'in the case of clothing, we should consider also the tactile qualities of what is made. With this in mind, we might regard the fur lining of the hat as a decorative touch.' (157) I avoided psychologizing

the adornee because my project of showing that we are an adorning species involved emphasizing the social dimensions and significance of adornment: 'Decoration should be analyzed as a social effect, more than a personal one, because it involves potentially public display, requires widespread acceptance if it's to be successful as such, and is often concerned with signaling to others.' (56)

Of course, discussing the social effects of adornment does allow us to work out how the adornee is affected to the extent that they are aware of being adorned and of the social messages those adornments convey. If a large headdress made of rare and beautiful items trumpets the status of the wearer, we can reasonably assume that she feels empowered when she dons it. (Or, if we know she has grown weary of her elevated office, we would more likely infer that she feels crushed and overpowered by her headgear.)

We should note, however, that only scars and tattoos are permanently with us. Clothes, jewelry, bodypaint, and makeup can be removed and/or changed, as can most plugs and piercings. Meanwhile, I believe I know people who keep their phones longer and closer to them than any garment and who act as if their phones are essential contributors to their sense of self and well-being, so much so that they would feel *as if naked* if the phone stops working or is temporarily misplaced. If a person's clothes are adornments, why not their phone, assuming that it was selected in part for how it serves as an aesthetic enhancement? And what goes for that person and her phone might go for me and my car. I allow that adornments that touch the body can have a special importance and intimacy, but I don't see a rigid exclusion of a person's material possessions on this score. After all, I might prefer to be judged as an aesthetician by the books that adorn my lounge than by my all-too-tasteless attire.

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