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STAGED AUTHENTICITY: FEMININITY IN PHOTOGRAPHY AND FILM

CHRISTINA VON BRAUN

Identity constitutes itself through the possible continuities offered by collective memory. This is also the case for gender identity, since cultural memory shapes the structures of individual memory. The concept of ‘destabilised identity’ was first used during the Second World War to describe the psychological damage of people who had lost their sense of place within a particular cultural continuity. But what are the channels through which cultural memory transmits knowledge, emotions and thus also identities? I am going to outline these ‘channels’ using the concept of the collective imaginary and, in doing so, attempt to show that gender identity is closely connected to the medial conditions of the given time – not only because collective memory relies on the storage system of the media, but also because the media form and its interconnected communities impact individuals and gender roles via those communities. Marshall McLuhan (1964) defined media not only as the conveyors of the message but also as the message itself, insofar as media demand different kinds of attention, modes of reception and thus emotionality. However, McLuhan failed to consider a crucial aspect of medial identity formation: the creation of symbolic gender roles.¹ The symbolic gender order constitutes the most important point of contact

between the 'collective imaginary', the media and the community. In the gender order, the collective imaginary that is formed by the media becomes visible, tangible; the imaginary is incorporated.

How should the concept of the collective imaginary be defined? It has nothing to do with the archetypes of CG Jung, which are characterised by ahistoricity and immutability; nor does it refer to the collective unconscious, in which are buried the traces of a common cultural tradition or the traumata of a nation. Rather, the collective imaginary is related to what the German philosopher Walter Benjamin called 'ideal images' (Benjamin 1982a:1226) or 'images [that] belong to a particular time [and that] only become legible after a certain time' (Benjamin 1982b:577). The collective imaginary, as I would formulate it, thus consists of the historically variable models or ideals thrown up by every epoch which contribute to the formation of the self-image and visage of society.

The different ideals of the collective imaginary have three common characteristics:

- 1 In one way or another they convey a message of salvation, promising a revocation of human violability and expressing the yearning for an end to the transience of existence. This message is communicated both to the individual and to the collective.
- 2 Unlike an individual fantasy or a social utopia, whose imaginary qualities are generally recognised, the phantasmal models of the collective imaginary are comprehended by their adherents as *reality* or even equated with biological facts. Only when equivalence with reality is relinquished do they become 'legible'.
- 3 Because the collective possesses no corporeally delineated 'I', unlike the human body the community has no 'skin', unless one understands language or cultural memory in these terms. The phantasmal models of the collective imaginary are always precisely that: imaginary, ie an invention or a construct. Because the self-definition of the collective 'I' requires demarcation from what it perceives as 'foreign', it looks for an Other that is both imaginary and corporeal – for example, the opposite sex or another race. Demarcation from this imaginary and simultaneously physical-real Other gives the collective 'I' the appearance of reality. The same construct underlies the – culturally

diverse – symbolic gender orders. Like the images of the Other race, the imaginary attaches itself to a biological body, rendering itself visible through this body (cf von Braun 1990).

In the third process, visual techniques play an important role. However, this can only be understood if one recognises that long before modern optical machines media technologies emerged that generated new rules for community formation and also profoundly altered symbolic gender roles. Broadly speaking, the symbolic gender order was redefined with each media invention. Before discussing how this took place in connection with photography and film, I will briefly describe the transformations that occurred in connection with the emergence of the alphabet. Here, the impact of media on gender roles appears particularly clearly.

WRITING

The alphabetical system, in which phonemes are translated into signs, created a structure of thought that signified abstraction from the visible yet also entailed the materialisation of the abstract. The process of abstraction is constituted by the transformation of the sounds of language into visual signs. In this system of writing, language is detached from the living and mortal body and ‘immortalised’ on paper (cf von Braun 2009). One example of this materialisation is the emergence of monotheistic religions proclaiming an invisible god that created the world ‘from the word’. Another example is the invention of the concept of ‘utopia’, that is, an abstract idea demanding realisation. All the utopias written in the Occident have assumed real form sometime in the course of history. Often, the results of this realisation were different to what their authors had imagined; yet these utopias were nothing other than material transpositions of ways of thinking (cf von Braun 1984). This means that thought detached from the body has an effective power of its own – and one of the most important instruments of this transposition is the media. This is what is meant by ‘the medium is the message’.

The thought structures created by the three alphabets (Hebrew, Greek and Arabic) can be characterised in six ways (which varied in importance in the various epochs):

- 1 Thinking in a language that does not require a living, speaking body for its communication.
- 2 The concomitant belief in the existence of an immortal spirit or 'neutral', abstract, objective concept of knowledge; the idea that there is a 'truth' that is not contingent upon the knower or would-be knower.
- 3 The consequent hope of *human* immortality. If human beings wish to overcome mortality, they must become like writing itself, i.e. become 'thought' and assume a 'sublime body', a concept used in Christianity.²
- 4 The phantasm of an immortal spirit led to the notion of the *superiority* of the spirit over visible, perceptible reality. The dichotomy between spirit and matter, culture and nature, especially characteristic of the Occident, derived from this phantasm.
- 5 In this dichotomy, femininity became the symbol of human determination by nature, and thus a symbol for the transience of existence. 'Being human' was, as it were, divided into mortal 'matter', embodied by femininity (the word 'matter' derives from the Latin *mater*, meaning mother) and the immortal 'spirit', embodied by masculinity. In other words, the opposition of spirit and matter, which is alien to pre-literate societies and which found particularly clear expression in Christianity, sought its mirror image in the visible difference between the sexes and hence established a connection with reality. Sexual difference, which tended to be experienced as a 'lack' (each sex is, in itself, 'incomplete'), became synonymous with the dichotomy between life and death. This aspect plays an important role in photography and film, albeit in an altered form.
- 6 Lastly, through writing, the phantasmal notion emerged that the message of salvation, that is, the 'becoming spirit,' would obtain fulfilment after visible reality had been shaped according to the laws of writing and the *logos*, also known as rationality, which excluded unpredictability and chance – in other words, when the divine 'Word becomes flesh'. Optical technology was thought to enhance this 'embodiment' of the abstract. 'Photography,' according to the philosopher of media Vilém Flusser, was 'invented in the 19th century as the first ever technically-generated image, in order to infuse texts with magical content once again' (Flusser 1991:16).

While some of the first characteristics also apply to other, non-alphabetic cultures of writing, this last aspect, which can be described as the materialisation of the spiritual, is characteristic of the occidental culture of writing, which is based on a full phonetic alphabet. No other culture of writing has followed *this* particular phantasm as unconditionally as Christian-occidental culture. Other cultures also had alphabets; however, their structures were different. The Semitic and Arabic alphabets originally included only the consonants, not the vowels; this meant that they could be read only by someone who could also *speak* the language, that is, someone who knew whether an *o* (*rose*), an *i* (*rise*), an *ai* (*raise*) or a *u* (*ruse*) belonged between the consonants *r* and *s*; or if the consonants even indicated the word *erase*. The Greek alphabet, in contrast, included the vowels and thus became a *full alphabet* that required no spoken element. The emergence of ‘full literacy’ – which can be defined as the visualisation of the rules of writing – was the basis for the dominance, characteristic of modernity, of the eye over the other forms of perception. This explains why, at the historical moment at which occidental society became, as a result of the invention of the printing press, a fully literate culture, new techniques of visualisation also arose. These, in turn, caused a profound transformation of gender roles.

During the Renaissance period, in parallel with the development of a society based on the principle of writing, a new phantasm of inviolability emerged that was closely connected with the rise of new optical technologies and images. Though this phantasm is present in the new electronic media, its basic structure first obtained clarity in the ‘classical’ forms of conveyance: film and photography. In the following section, I will attempt to describe its structure in both these areas of media.

PHOTOGRAPHY

A basic theory of photography (with numerous variants) maintains that the eye of the observer is always ‘dominant’.³ Its ‘activity’ and ‘power over reality’ express themselves in two ways: on the one hand, the photographic eye subsumes the Other, devouring it whole, in order to empower itself – a form of optical appropriation described by the psychoanalyst Otto Fenichel in his 1935 essay ‘Voyeurism and identification’ as: ‘to devour the observed object, to become like it (to be compelled to imitate it) or, conversely, to compel it to become like one’ (Fenichel 1972:149).

Hence, through the visual incorporation of the Other, the ‘voracious eye’ (Mattenklott 1982:78–102) obtains ‘inviolability’ or ‘wholeness’.

However, the photographic eye also takes possession of the Other, insofar as it brings the *time* the Other inhabits to a standstill. (This explains the prohibition of the portrayal of humans amongst some cultures which identify life with continuous time.) The French cultural theorist and philosopher Roland Barthes wrote that the experience of being photographed was equivalent to ‘the event of death in miniature’ (Barthes 1985). ‘When I see myself in the image resulting from the process,’ wrote Barthes, ‘I see that I have become UTTERLY AND COMPLETELY image, that means DEATH in person’ (Barthes 1985:22ff).

For the photographer, on the other hand, photography conveys a sense of empowerment over the Other. The photographer has the power to bring the *life* of the Other to a standstill at the moment the shutter release is pressed. Yet the photographic eye also experiences itself as the *creator* of the Other. It offers the Other immortality ‘as a gift’ and makes the Other ‘capable of being reproduced’ (forever) on the photographic plate or celluloid strip.

The fantasy of the generative power of the gaze existed long before the birth of photography: its potency was revealed in the perspectival gaze of the Renaissance, which re-ordered the world from the viewpoint of an omnipotent subject. However, the move from fantasy to phantasm (‘illegible fantasy’) occurs only with the emergence of the technically produced image.

The impact of the new generative power of the gaze on gender roles can clearly be seen in the mutation of the meaning of the word *shame* – a concept closely related to seeing as well as to the gender order.

Originally, the word *shame* denoted the visible sexual characteristics of both sexes. The feeling of shame derived from the need to render the visible sexual characteristics ‘invisible,’ whether behind clothing or via body language signalling reserve. In many cultures, the man was said to be reduced to a state of powerlessness at the sight of the female genitals – an image reflected in the idea of the ‘evil eye’ of the woman or the fatal gaze of the Medusa.⁴ With the Renaissance, *shame* as a feeling became detached semantically from *genitals*. At the same time, *seeing* assumed an increasingly sexual connotation, expressing male invasion and penetration. Formerly, the principle of writing was attributed to

masculinity and the oral tradition to femininity; now, the gaze was attributed to the male body and the object of the gaze to the female body. Whether the real female body, natural phenomena, or the ‘foreign lands’ under colonial rule – the object of the gaze was always equated with femininity.⁵

From the second half of the 18th century (although photography was still to be invented, all the necessary ‘ingredients’ had long since existed), the concept of *shame* takes on a new meaning, this time connected to the new power of seeing. The shift shows itself particularly clearly in the work of one of the major philosophers of the Enlightenment, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose Bildungsroman *Emile*, published in 1782, simultaneously served as the basis for a new gender order. Rousseau proclaimed the *blush of shame* as one of the most important signs of femininity and the only permissible symptom of female desire.⁶ With Rousseau, for whom nothing seemed more attractive than this physical sign of shame, the visible blush of the woman in a certain sense replaced her visible sexual characteristics. For Rousseau, the woman’s blush was caused by the man’s ‘penetrating’ gaze. If the ‘normative gaze at the woman’ had already been established in previous centuries, making ‘her body essentially appear as a product of male fantasies’ (Kleinspehn 1989:123), Rousseau took this fantasy a step further. The gaze was now interpreted as enabling the man to *create* female shame with his eyes – and thus her visible sexuality.⁷

Alongside this shift in the meaning of the concept of ‘female shame’ was a shift in the understanding of male shame, which now moved away from the male body towards denoting the visible sexual characteristics. Masculinity is transposed to the gaze. According to Rousseau, the ‘shame’ of the man consists of being *caught looking*. In *Confessions*, describing his admiration for a young woman, Rousseau writes that he ‘devoured with greedy eyes everything that he could without being noticed’. He secretly follows her into her bedroom, where he is discovered. ‘Deeply ashamed’, he sinks to his knees. The feeling of shame does not deter him, however, from holding the moment in lustful memory: ‘Perhaps,’ he writes, ‘this is precisely why the image of this lovely woman has imprinted itself so deeply onto my heart’ (Rousseau 1981:77ff).

To sum up: the transformation of the concept of shame and the different meanings attributed to the male and the female sex reveal that with the Enlightenment, a particular order in relations between the sexes

was established that was determined by the eye; an order in which the sexual act was substituted by the act of seeing and being observed, and which was constituted by the generation of femininity or Otherness.

FILM

Theoretical considerations about the workings of photography, in which the ‘supremacy’ of the observer is coupled with the powerlessness of the observed, contrast with theories about film, which in a certain sense claim the exact opposite. These considerations are, in part, derived from psychoanalytic theories that happened to emerge at the same time as film. In these theories, cinema is the site of experiences of omnipotence and impotence simultaneously. For the spectator, the feeling of supremacy created by identification with the view of the camera combines with a feeling of powerlessness, because the eye of the camera is determined by someone or something else (the director, camera, etc.). Thus, a double identification arises – on the one hand with the eye of the camera, i.e. the subject of the gaze, and on the other hand with the actors and the roles that they embody, i.e. the objects of the gaze, which, unlike the objects of the photograph, are perceived as an active subject. In her essay ‘Voyeurism and masochistic aesthetics’ (1985), the American film theorist Gaylyn Studlar expands on these ideas. She claims that the experience of cinematic pleasure consists precisely in viewers’ ability to experience power *and* powerlessness. This possibility is provided not only through identification with the gaze of the camera, but through the free choice of identification with the male *and* the female roles. Indeed, the ‘active-omnipotent’ roles are by no means always tied to the male protagonist, any more than the ‘passive-impotent’ roles are always played by female characters.

Studlar cites the classic films of Josef von Sternberg, in which Marlene Dietrich embodies the ‘active gaze’ while her male partners embody the model of passivity. The attraction of these films – and the mythology surrounding Dietrich (according to Studlar) – resides in this blurring of gender patterns and the possibility that they offer to men and women of being able to slip into the role of either sex (Studlar 1985).

According to these theories, the power of the moving image consists in sensing omnipotence at the moment of impotence, thereby transgressing the boundary between the sexes drawn by the symbolic gender order.

However, the symbolic order of writing allocated to one sex the role of being 'different'. If the word 'differ' is understood in the sense of 'part' (as in to part from), then to place oneself freely in the role of powerlessness or as object of the gaze – femininity – means to expose oneself to the knowledge of one's own mortality, or parting from life (in German, the word for 'different' – *verschieden* – can also mean 'deceased'/'departed'). This implies that the spectator in the cinema experiences precisely the lack that the photographic gaze purports to overcome.

Seen from the perspective of the self-image, however, these theories are by no means as contradictory as they might appear. If the subject can freely choose between identifying with masculinity or femininity, between the experience of 'inviolability' and that of 'lack', and even both simultaneously, then underlying this is a new phantasm of 'completeness'. If photography conveys the experience of omnipotence over the extinction and generation of the Other, film brings forth an idea of completeness that permits the self all possibilities of being: the possibility of being subject *and* object, I *and* you, life *and* death, man *and* woman.

VIRTUAL VIOLABILITY

The filmic illusion of completeness opens up an additional perspective on medial identity formation. If the subject is willing to experience and identify with impotence in the cinema, then it is only because he or she perceives this experience not as a real threat, but as a fiction. This means that the sense of fear and the experience of mortality are accompanied by the reassuring certainty that 'none of this is true'.⁸ In the cinema – not to mention the even more immersive worlds of cyber-space – the modern media subject can imagine herself as a victim or a perpetrator, as in decline or ascendant. The fact that cinema is a medium permits her to experience such feelings without a profound threat: her vulnerability (and that of others) becomes a 'thrill,' a pleasurable 'splitting of the self', as Friedrich Nietzsche called it.⁹ To emphasise the religious dimension of this experience, one could say: the psyche embarks on a transcendental experience encompassing its own destruction and renewal. It undergoes Dionysian dismemberment and, crucially, escapes unharmed. That it is indeed a religious phantasm is supported by the visions of Stanislav Grof, the consciousness researcher, for whom the 'virtual realities' made

possible by electronics offer the revolutionary possibility of attaining the mystics' 'other state of consciousness' (Grof 1993). In contrast with other cultures, the Christian-occident has always treated mystical and esoteric experiences with scepticism or even anxiety. But, thanks to the new media (according to Grof), even the rational occidental human being can now become a mystic. In other words, thanks to a technique owing to the exertions of his consciousness (logic, calculation, planning), the spiritually impoverished occidental being can finally dare to leave the state of waking consciousness. The vulnerability experienced in this state is regarded as being technically controllable by the occidental being. This experience, too, becomes a sign of one's own omnipotence.

It could be argued that the influence of the 'new media' on the subjective and objective image of the individual may well be observable in fictional film or the 'virtual realities' of electronics, but not in the optical representation of social and political reality or the construction of one's own identity. Yet the manner of perception that allows the transgression of boundaries in the fictional film also extends to the documentary; indeed, it is in documentary that the significance of this identity-creating mechanism is perhaps most pronounced. The realities shown in the documentary film are also perceived as *images* and thereby removed from their relationship with reality. That was already the case for the first films of the Lumière brothers, which rendered scenes from everyday life – and for precisely this reason fascinated their audiences: it was not the usual sight of working women leaving the factory that captivated people but the fact that this process had become 'eternalised' and reproducible, and thus transformed into a picture (cf also Zielinski 1989:78). That means that documentary film, too, intensifies the feeling of reality 'as-if' (in fiction this would be the 'suspension of disbelief'). This has two consequences, both of which are highly political. The first is the fact that many directors merge documentary and fiction in the hope that what is shown is perceived as 'reality'. The 'documentary' character of a film might be conveyed through the employment of stylistic devices typical of documentary film, such as the unsteady camera movement mimicking the hand-held camera. However, it is also generated through the use of documentary footage in fictional film, or the insistence on filming on original location, as Steven Spielberg did in *Schindler's List*, for example. The presence of the real extermination camp at Auschwitz lent

his film the ‘myth of the real’. In reality, the film contributed to Krakow becoming a tourist destination; indeed, it is only a matter of time before Auschwitz becomes an ‘as-if’ reality, even in collective memory.

The second consequence has to do with the politics of memory. This is seen in film reports of totalitarian show trials. The trial of the men involved in the assassination attempt on Hitler on 20 June 1944, for example, was filmed in a way intended to show the men as being ‘unworthy of identification’. However, the films were never shown to the public because it was sensed that viewers’ identification was directed towards the men on trial and not the judge or the court – or the eye of the camera. The reports of Stalinist show trials in Moscow and Prague demonstrated a similar effect. It became clear within a year or two that the consequence of these (publicised) reports was an intensification of resistance *against* the regime. This suggests that the patterns of identification in documentary film (to which these reports should be counted) are less predictable than in fictional film, which is not perceived to be about *reality*. Moreover, one can assume that identification (in this case unintended) with the victim and the object of the gaze is probably stronger in documentary than in fictional film.

That a profound transformation in the ability to perceive and remember has taken place with the emergence of the new media was demonstrated clearly with the deployment of cameras in the Gulf War. It was not just the media politics of the American army that caused the ‘simulated images’ of the Gulf War to leave a deeper mark on the memory than documentary shots. Admittedly, in this war there were very few pictures at all of the destruction and annihilation caused by the bombardments. However, the pictures shown on 13 February 1991 of a bombed-out civilian air raid bunker in Baghdad and its charred corpses might have been sufficient to reach the eye – the inner eye, the perceiving, sympathetic eye (Willich, in Haller 1991). Despite this, as Stuttgart-based sociologist Franz Willich has shown, these pictures did not become ‘engraved’ in memory. In the early summer of 1991, Willich carried out a survey among 20 students who had watched at least 120 hours of television over the six weeks of the war (as had hundreds of thousands of people). He established that all remembered quite vividly the video film shown in the first week of the war, in which a laser-piloted bomb was seen passing through the cross-hairs and hitting an equally abstract target with centimetre precision.

None of the respondents mentioned the pictures of the air raid bunker in Baghdad (Haller 1991). The television network NBC reported a similar phenomenon eight weeks after the end of the war, when the pictures of the massacre of the Kurds went around the world. 'Most people had somehow forgotten the horror that the war caused within the civilian population. However, almost everyone could remember the high-tech videos of the American arts of weaponry' (Haller 1991). Meanwhile, not a week goes by in which no pictures of catastrophes and victims of war appear on the screen – yet nobody investigates the perception of these images any more. The employment and recycling of these pictures has become matter of course, even a part of consumerism.

Clearly, visual perception and the collective memory that derives from it records what serves to confirm the integrity of the community and one's membership of it, rather than what calls this integrity into question. This means that memory, the constituent factor of our 'construction of identity', seeks images that resist the remembering of reality and thereby also the constitution of self in the sense of violability. Of course, one could ask why we need reality at all, if things go so well without it. Could we not live without the perception of our violability? Could we not manage without a memory that transforms past traumas into fictions? The fact is that human violability is the only uncontested certainty available to us. Vilém Flusser defines reality as that 'which we come up against on our way towards death' (Flusser 1991:77). To renounce this certainty would mean to renounce the historicity able to provide the imaginary community with the claim to be a real – or living – community.

What does this mean for the perception of femininity and the symbolic gender order? It can be surmised from the gender order – understood as a cultural code, as the close reciprocity between media and gender would suggest – that the collective imaginary is subject to historical change and can itself be comprehended as a historical force. Because the gender order is subject to permanent transformation, it can be used as a 'code-breaking machine' through which the desires of a given epoch become legible. Of course, this presupposes that one wants and is able to see the 'staging' behind the 'authentic', including one's own staging. Here, perhaps, lies the difficulty. It is relatively easy to understand the 'authentic' of other epochs as masquerade or staging. However, it is much more difficult to get to grips with one's own 'reality', that is, to

comprehend one's own existence not so much as fake, but as culturally coded. That means learning to differentiate between the phantasmal self-images of the collective imaginary and one's own, individual violability. Only then can the images of the collective imaginary be 'made legible'. 'It is precisely the ability to observe oneself as observer that characterizes modern individuality,' writes the German philosopher Niklas Luhmann in his essay 'Perception and communication in connection with works of art' (Luhmann 1991:71).

The female sex is, I think, predestined for this task – not for biological reasons, but because of the cultural role historically ascribed to it as 'violated gender' and as symbol of mortality. This perennial cultural coding of femininity would imply that a movement to make 'legible' the images of the collective imaginary must emanate from the 'feminine gaze'. In other words, the factor that for centuries caused women to be excluded from culture today turns out to enable cultural work in the best sense as contemporary critique. It can be no coincidence that numerous female cinematographers reflect on the medium of film in their work. The reflection on film and how it works in turn offers an exceptional possibility for visualising the genesis and medial coding of gender roles.

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NOTES

- 1 Translator's and editors' note: the symbolic gender order includes symbolic gender roles.
- 2 Werner Sombart (1901) calls writing the 'language of the absent'.
- 3 Translator's and editors' note: among the most notable variants of this theory can be found in Susan Sontag's *On Photography* (1977), Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* (1980), and Laura Mulvey's theories of the male gaze, as expounded in her article 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema' (1975).
- 4 On the 'evil eye' see Kleinspehn (1989: 42ff).

- 5 Translator's and editors' note: see Yuval-Davis (1997) and Schülting (1997).
- 6 Emile and Sophie's engagement plays out according to the following pattern: 'She had barely kissed him when her delighted father clapped his hands and called out *once more, once more* and Sophie, without having to be begged, immediately gave him two kisses on the other cheek; but almost in the same time moment, she fled into her mother's arms and hid her blushing face, inflamed by bashfulness, on this motherly bosom, frightened by everything that she had done.' (Rousseau (1980) (1762): 880ff).
- 7 The so-called 'characteristics of pregnancy' currently receive a very high profile. (cf Kleinspehn 1989:170). They are signs that the female body is being fantasised as 'transparent': the gaze is penetrating it.
- 8 'The world itself,' as Niklas Luhmann writes, 'becomes topical in the news only as a contingency, and in fact as a threefold negation: as a consciousness that the transmitted occurrences didn't have to happen; as a consciousness that they didn't have to be communicated at all; and as a consciousness that one does not need to listen at all and occasionally, for example during the holidays, that one does not do so either'. (Luhmann 1972: 315).
- 9 Nietzsche described the state of the Bayreuth Pilgrim as a 'wonderful splitting of the self'. Norbert Bolz, who sees Richard Wagner as the real inventor of this medial experience, writes that the individual 'incarnated in other bodies, shakes off his bourgeois past, his social standing; he enjoys the "wondrous self-splitting" of that which turns from destruction into luxury, from pain into pleasure and decline into enjoyment of the first order' (Bolz 1990:36).