

The Body Project: Anatomy, Relationships, and Representation  
An Interdisciplinary Graduate Student Conference  
University of Missouri  
Presented April 12, 2008

**Andrew Warburton**

MU Department of English

Oral presentation

**A Wealth of Absence: Visualising the Body in Winckelmann, Lessing and Blake**

In *Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture* (published 1755), Johann Joachim Winckelmann sets a precedent, through a series of metaphysical exclusions and affirmations centred on the nature of the soul, for an understanding of artistic beauty that would later be appropriated and reinforced in Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's seminal essay *Laocoön*, published in 1766. Before we attempt to say more about these exclusions and affirmations by examining them in greater depth, let us question the source from which Winckelmann and Lessing's texts receive their authority in the first place – namely, the exigency that requires them to impose their conceptions of beauty upon the imaginary artwork at the precise moment that these conceptions are apparently created in the artwork's image. We will see that the same exigency that inspired these two writers to attempt to fix the image according to their particular schema also inspires our own attempts to uncover the assumptions that inform their discourses. The exigency in question arises from the role that Jacques Lacan assigns to beauty in 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I' as a source of "homeomorphic identification" that is both "formative and erogenic" in nature (4). If, as Lacan suggests, beauty takes the form of a gestalt that is capable of reflecting and forming our understanding of what it means to be human through an internal "assumption of [its] specular image", sources of beauty and discourses on art inevitably become sites of contestation against which visions of humanity are played out. 1

The production of an aesthetics that attempts to advise on the creation of beauty in human form must, according to the above definition of beauty, be treated as intrinsically political in nature. It is this project that I aim to interrogate through a series of deconstructive readings, which, if performed correctly, should disclose in a general way the metaphysical constructions that underpin Neo-classical constructions of beauty in art. By comparing these constructions with their Romantic 'counterparts', moreover, I hope to uncover the continuities and discontinuities that characterise the two periods and come to some form of conclusion about the nature of their epistemological foundations. While resisting the temptation to label the movement from one period to the next an 'epistemological break' (this would perhaps be an example of what Jacques Derrida has criticised as a "[mirage] of the new, the confusion or crushing of layers... the archeological lure" (Margins 140)), I will, nevertheless, aim to shed light on the political implications of the relationship between Neo-classicism and Romanticism by charting the metaphysical revolutions that occur in commentaries on art throughout the 18th century, paying particular attention to Winckelmann's *Reflections*, Lessing's *Laocoön*, and William Blake's *The Book of Urizen*.

## Works Cited

- Barrell, John. *The Political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986.
- Blake, William. *The Book of Urizen*. Mineola: Dover, 1997.
- Bonfiglio, Thomas Paul. 'Winckelmann and the Aesthetics of Eros'. *The Germanic Review*, Vol. 73, No. 2, 1998: 132-144.
- Butler, Judith. 'Gender Trouble'. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch. New York: Norton, 2001.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Margins of Philosophy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.
- . *Of Grammatology*. Baltimore: JHU Press, 1997.
- . *Speech and Phenomena*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973.
- Gustafson, Susan E. 'Beautiful Statues, Beautiful Men: The Abjection of Feminine Imagination in Lessing's *Laocoon*'. *PMLA* Oct 1993: 1083-1097.
- Hazlitt, William. 'On Gusto'. *Annals of the Fine Arts*. London: Sherwood, Neely and Jones, 1820: 543-549.
- Howard, Seymour. 'William Blake: The Antique, Nudity, and Nakedness: A Study in Idealism and Regression'. *Artibus et Historiae*, Vol. 3, No. 6, 1982: 117-149.
- Hunt, Robert. 'Mr. Blake's Exhibition'. *The Examiner*, 17 September 1809: 605-606.
- Lacan, Jacques. *Écrits*. London: Routledge, 1989.
- Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim. *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*. Baltimore: JHU Press, 1984.
- 'Literary Anecdotes of German Authors, and particularly of Lessing' in 'Biographical Anecdotes and Characters'. *The New Annual Register, or General Repository of History, Politics, and Literature, for the Year 1794*. London: G.G. and J. Robinson, 1795: 51-54.
- Mitchell, W. J. T. 'Poetic and Pictorial Imagination in Blake's *The Book of Urizen*'. *Eighteenth Century Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1, Special Issue: *The Eighteenth-Century Imagination*, Autumn 1969: 83-107.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 'On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense'. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch. New York: Norton, 2001.

Reynolds, Sir Joshua. *Discourses on Art*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness*. London: Routledge, 1969.

Schopenhauer, Arthur. *On the Suffering of the World*. London: Penguin, 2004.

Silk, M.S, and J.P. Stern. *Nietzsche on Tragedy*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981.

Winckelmann, Johann Joachim. *Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture*. LaSalle: Open Court, 1986.