

## Constructing Critiques of Ornament: What can we know?

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#### Abstract

Using the example of discussions of ornament and ornamentation, this paper sketches out scenarios in which "minor knowledges" (Foucault) and practices fail to be recognised in mainstream discourses of academics or professionals. The suppression of ornament, as is well known, went hand-in-hand with the putting down of an irrationality and excessiveness ascribed to women, the working class and savages. The latter's relative rise in power, and resulting perspectival changes manifest in, for instance, postmodernism, have freed ornament of some of the stigmata previously attached to it. However, the mechanisms involved in its suppression are still at work, and current frameworks are still based on countless unexamined assumptions. These effectively continue to re-enforce power/knowledge relationships and to marginalise non-fitting outlooks and practices.

The paper sets out to discuss and critique some key aspects of knowledge production and the limits of our ability to know. I suggest that some conditions that applied to the discussions of ornamental practices are likely to apply similarly to dilemmas with which designers are confronted today, when they deal with something which is not acceptable or doesn't even feature in the canons into which claims to knowledge solidify. The paper argues for courage on the part of design theorists, professionals and educators to accept uncertainty and to exercise epistemological modesty. A crossover and mutual transformation of different ways of understanding is required if we are to unfold new knowledge and to look at the familiar with new eyes.

#### Keywords

Ornament, ornamental practices, knowledge, claims to knowledge, new constructivism, professional knowledge, mimesis

#### Introduction

In 1996, an Auckland Grammar School teacher thought that it was "time to get out of teaching, when they bring decoration in", because only students who "aren't able to draw" would use it. His colleague concurred: a student who could not "conceptualise things in space" and produced work "that was full of ornament" would most likely be "disguising something, he's lacking somewhere else, his drawing skills are not accurate, or his formal skills aren't. So he's starting to use a lot of ornament to seduce ... " (Engels-Schwarzpaul, 2001, p. 391). In 2008, the Swiss Architectural Museum in Basel opened the exhibition *Re-sampling ornament*. The press release claimed that the exhibition was "a first step towards tracing [ornament's] re-emergence" (SAM Swiss Architecture Museum, 2008), one hundred years after Adolf Loos' publication of *Ornament and Crime*, an essay which made a profound impact on architectural and design discourses of the last century.

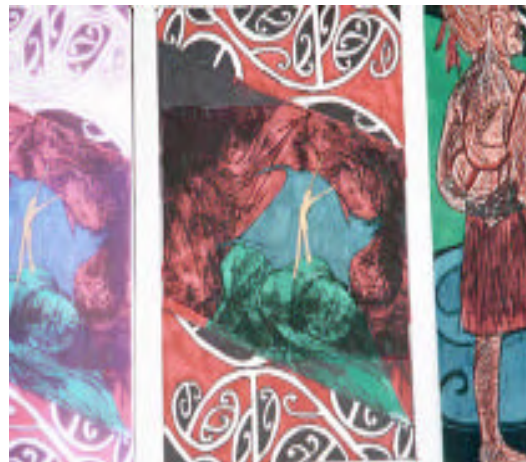
Twelve years, 11,405.29 miles, and significant differences in status and worldviews lie between these two positions. They indicate gaps between practices and theories, and they are symptomatic of a whole history of conflicting claims about ornament within Western art, architecture and design discourses—going back hundreds of years. It was precisely this charged constellation that initially motivated me to engage in a PhD project investigating *Myth, symbol, ornament: The loss of meaning in transition* (2001). A fascination with the ‘never-the-twain-shall-meet’ relationship between design theory and users’ practices soon expanded into a fascination with several other incommensurabilities in the judgements of ornament.

Prominent amongst them were colonial, neo- and post-colonial assessments of what has variously been called Māori art or craft, on the one hand, and Māori epistemologies and material practices, on the other. In this context, the latter part of Loos’ statement, “[t]he lack of ornament is a sign of intellectual power. Modern man uses the ornament of past and foreign cultures at his discretion” (1908a, p. 103), takes on a new meaning. When, in a climate of growing disregard for ornament, Augustus Hamilton wrote in Aotearoa/New Zealand that, “[f]rom a general point of view, the whole of the art work of the Māori comes under the head of ornament” (1901, p. 6), he classified Māori art as inferior and denied it the status of Art. However, in an opposite movement, Maori ‘ornament’ also became an increasingly important resource for the production of a New Zealand national identity. In the local situation, then, it became quite obvious how power/knowledge (Foucault, 1977) shape theory and practice.<sup>1</sup>

The results of one of the research projects undertaken for my PhD, *Ornament as cultural practice in design education* (Engels-Schwarzpaul, 1997) confirmed that Loos’ ideas survived to an astonishing degree in local constellations. This research was initially motivated by my observations of students’ problems when using ornament in interior and industrial design studio at UNITEC Institute of Technology. To place those observations into a wider context, I sampled New Zealand secondary and tertiary institutions involved in design education, employing a variety of methods. A questionnaire survey, for instance, probed into the views of 291 secondary and tertiary students. The results were followed up by interviews with their educators, to establish links between theories, policies and practices.<sup>2</sup> Briefly, the outcomes of the research indicated that bursary and tertiary students, at the time, had a strong emotional affiliation with ornament, which diminished somewhat over the course of their tertiary education as designers; that perceptions of students and educators regarding the role of ornament in teaching often differed significantly; that students found it difficult to rationalise and justify design decisions involving ornament; that what they learnt in their tertiary education only increased this difficulty; that an exploration of ornament, if at all, took place in theory lectures but not in studio practices; that there were identifiable differences in the way Pākehā and Māori definitions of ‘ornament’ play themselves out in this context. Moreover, ornament, from the (explicit or implicit) perspective of Pākehā students and their educators, was the ornament of the Other (Engels-Schwarzpaul, 2001, pp. 377-396).



Student's work 1996, Boys' school, Auckland.



Student work, 1996. Girls' school, Auckland.

### Contingency of knowledge

In 2010, when a greater permissiveness regarding ornament prevails, why talk about a project which may be outdated? Because we actually don't know how ornament is treated in design education in Aotearoa/New Zealand right now (we do not know whether the 1997-9 problematics have significantly changed), I believe the questions raised then remain pertinent. Plus, the discussion is relevant to similar dilemmas designers are confronted with—whether students, practitioners, researchers or educators— when having to deal with something which is not acceptable or doesn't even feature in the canons into which claims to knowledge solidify.

These claims to knowledge—appeals to general rules and justifications—often obscure how knowledge is constructed and produced according to context. In contrast, approaches to knowledge which embrace contingencies take into account differences between alternative positions; such as scientific or life-world knowledge, or that of professionals and lay people. Claims to certainty and objectivity tend to generate a need to control and classify knowledge (and in the process inevitably marginalise some knowledges, in this case, indigenous knowledge), particularly if they are ruled by binary oppositions. A greater composure and modesty in the face of uncertainty tends to favour surprise, interest in the unknown, tolerance and openness—and thereby be more congenial to design theory and practice (as well as helping us better to engage with what seems strange).<sup>3</sup>

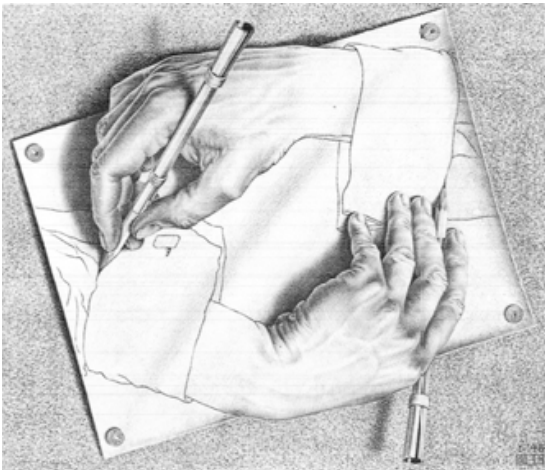
Like other professionals, designers have at various stages endeavoured to justify their methods and goals with reference to natural or positive science parameters. The latter have enjoyed an increasingly higher status, since Descartes and Hobbes, and came to surpass the reputation of other areas. As Richard Rorty argues in *Philosophy and the mirror of nature* (1980, p. 387), scientific discourse was considered 'normal' in the twentieth century, and there was an expectation that all other types would be modelled upon it. This outlook also influenced, in no small way, many conversations or controversies in art and design theory: designers, too, are "heirs of three hundred years of rhetoric about the importance of distinguishing sharply between science and religion, science and politics, science and philosophy..." (p. 330). The distinction relies on an ostensibly neutral framework, which assumes that scientific disciplines inquiring into 'the real' are on a secure path, whereas all others are not. Scientific parameters (used to achieve efficiency, functionality and productivity) presumed rational and objective justifications in all areas of life. This mode of thinking was based on a correspondence theory of truth, where meaning rests on a one-to-one relationship between a referent (which is "really out there", p. 332) and a word or symbol. Rorty introduces

a useful distinction between reference to what is “really out there” and reference as that which we are “really talking about” (p. 290). In ‘talking about’, the relation between an expression and an object is mainly intentional. ‘Talking about’, a common-sense term, covers fictions *and* realities, whereas ‘reference’ is a philosophical term much more suitable to establish claims from “some transcendental standpoint outside our present set of representations and their object” (p. 293).

Rorty’s overview of the history of science and philosophy demonstrates the importance of theory choices in what we want to say about the world. The dominant theory choices in philosophy and science of the past three centuries are not necessarily better choices, but they appear ‘normal’ when there is “more consensus in the sciences than in the arts” (p.362), and as long as “Nature is whatever is so routine and familiar and manageable that we trust our own language implicitly” (p. 352).<sup>4</sup> Thus, at the end of the 1990s, the rationality of modernist architectural education had been in place for so long that it appeared natural and easy to understand—even when it amounted to claims about the honesty or dishonesty of materials, or about the opposition between ornament and structure.<sup>5</sup> Thus, a student was surprised that a group of lay persons with whom he had discussions found it “difficult ... to accept that structure and ornamentation were two separate components” (in Engels-Schwarzpaul, 1998, p. 18).

Where, as in art and design, much hinges on non-empirical, non-objectivist concerns, something like Hilary Putnam’s “internal realism” seems to be more fitting than the ambition to represent Nature according to its own rules. In internal realism, not language, but “*speakers* mirror the world ... in the sense of *constructing a symbolic representation of that environment*” (Rorty, 1980, p. 298). Here, the emphasis lies on a speaker’s creative and constructive activities. The possibility of different language-games is acknowledged, where different language groups carve up the world differently and give different meanings to individual words. Conversation is more important for understanding than confrontation: it is no longer a matter of who is right, and how claims to knowledge are justified, but of keeping a conversation going. Refraining from claims to objective truth helps participants in such conversations to make connections between their own culture and another, even if the other pursues incommensurable aims using an incommensurable vocabulary. Such discourse is “*supposed to be abnormal, to take us out of our old selves by the power of strangeness, to aid us in becoming new beings*” (p. 360).

In the discourse of ornament, incommensurability abounds, but the gap between professional discourse on ornament and ornamental practices has seldom been analysed. More recent discussions of ornament, even when difference and the user’s autonomy are acknowledged, remain mostly abstract and distanced. In the 1980s, for instance, philosopher Jacques Derrida (1987, p. 61) and New Zealand-born architectural theorist Mark Wigley (1993, p. 11) extensively discussed the place of ornament in Kant’s aesthetic scheme and, like Rorty and others, criticised his need for foundations. But what is alive in their own accounts are architectural elements and concepts—more than people who perceive or practice art and ornamentation.



M.C. Escher, 1948. Lithograph

Some writers with a constructivist approach to knowledge take the historically and socially situated character of knowledge production and distribution into account. They are perhaps best labelled social constructivists,<sup>6</sup> since they postulate that humans structure and order their experiential world according to relationships which they simultaneously construct themselves. These writers pay specific attention to situational, social and cultural contexts of human thinking and doing, feeling and evaluating (Flick, 1996, p. 18).<sup>7</sup> Knowledge is the result of socially, culturally and historically contingent processes of knowledge production. Rather than searching for correspondences between the mind and the world, constructivists look for attunement,

or fit, between new knowledge and what was familiar before. They emphasise the active construction of knowledge and the way humans project onto the world as they try to explain it (Olssen, 1995, p. 50). Knowledge, from this perspective, is based on sense perception, on *aesthetics* in the Greek sense: it is the result of human creations, using specific fictional tools—modes of perception, metaphors, archetypal images and fantasies (Flick, 1996, p. 16, 160).<sup>8</sup> This approach also has affinity with design and cultural practices due to many constructivist writers' use of tropes and analogies, which turn their writing into a practical aesthetics: this provides a possibility to link subject matter and methodology.

Two basic propositions of *New Constructivism* are, first, that objective reality is in principle not (directly) amenable to cognition and, second, that this necessitates *epistemological modesty* and *pragmatic composure*. To take a constructivist position means learning to let go of argumentative styles and develop a competence of plurality, a less passionate, but nonetheless productive mode of interpretation (p. 15). *Epistemological modesty* refrains from gestures of certainty, accepting knowledge forms inherent in images, myths and fantasy.

The demand for *pragmatic composure* results from the acceptance that human interpretation of the world will always vary according to individual positions and perspectives—pragmatic composure promotes the ability to handle resulting uncertainty. Where certainty and objectivity are in doubt, comparing and examining different constructs of reality become important factors in the production and interpretation of knowledge (p. 34).<sup>9</sup> Further, constructivism takes into account the relationship between thought and action. Its concepts of uncertainty of knowledge, circularity of learning, reframing and crisis etc. reconstitute the learning-teaching process as one where learning does not flow mono-directionally from the teacher to the student. It abandons traditional role discrepancies and didactic differentials. It assumes that the teacher has to learn important things from the students, and that education in adult education is successful only if "different semantic attitudes really touch and penetrate."<sup>10</sup> Constructivist approaches have precedents in the critique of scientific knowledge and investigations of life-world knowledges carried out by phenomenological and sociological research in the wake of Edmund Husserl's *Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*. In the next section, I will look a little closer at this line of thinking, as an underpinning of the tension between professional and lay knowledge in the education of designers.

### Science and common-sense knowledge

In their seminal work, *The social construction of reality* (1967) Berger and Luckmann set out to clarify the concepts 'reality' and 'knowledge' and the different functions those concepts have in different situations.

The man in the street does not ordinarily trouble himself about what is 'real' and about what he 'knows' unless he is stopped short by some sort of problem. He takes his 'reality' and his 'knowledge' for granted. The sociologist cannot do this, if only because of his systematic awareness of the fact that men in the street take quite different 'realities' for granted as between one society and another (p. 2).

Common-sense knowledge, then, is an unproblematic and taken-for-granted type of knowledge about everyday life, which is shared by the members of the same group. It includes manifold pre- or quasi-scientific interpretations of reality, which allow the members of a group to act and interact. Theoretical propositions about reality, on the other hand, are more specific and scientific but they "do not exhaust what is 'real' for the member of a society" (p. 15). While the 'trickle-down effect' from science into lay discourse has often been observed, it can also be argued that intellectuals draw on the "currency of ideas *already* available in a society" (p. 168). In that sense, common sense, the knowledge of everyday life, can be a *source* of scientific understanding. Scientists and their communities share common beliefs and interests, and these in turn lead to shared representations of the world (p. 170).<sup>11</sup>

Common sense thus contains constructions of the world, which are a source for scientific knowledge and, in turn, are influenced and fed by it. There are at least three levels or forms of co-operation, namely the *institutional*, the *professional*, and the *everyday* practice and use of knowledge (Flick, 1996, p. 87). Due to processes of abstraction and systematisation, as well as its distance from the life-world, scientific knowledge construction is always in danger of missing the realities of the life-world. Similarly, students are affected by this condition over the course of their education and, thus, a fourth year interior design student observed in a workshop *Emerging Theories* that an account of memories at different ages had brought back situations of her childhood which made her realise vividly that "there *are* ornaments and that people *do* use them ... it's more original in a sense ..., compared to now [where] the attitude tends to be more judgmental. Back then it was more emotional and more real. Accounts make you realise the difference between those attitudes". (Engels-Schwarzpaul, 2001, p. 394) Luckmann describes in *Philosophies, science, and everyday life* (1983) the history of a new cosmology of science based on the "expulsion of Adam" (p. 11) from its epistemological concerns. Based on the Copernican-Galelean-Newtonian paradigm, it is characterised by the conviction that

the universe is deceptive yet fully knowable; that the appearances given to pre-scientific man, an inferior 'subjective' species easily befuddled by secondary qualities, hide a structure of 'objective' primary qualities; and that discovery of that ultimate reality depends on the supreme and autonomous form of knowledge, (numerical) mathematics. (pp. 13-14)

Ernst Cassirer and subsequently, Norbert Elias, similarly conceptualise the development from older explanations of nature (Cassirer calls them "mythic consciousness") to scientific explanations. In the process, as Susanne Langer (1953) sums up, "the gradual perfection of *discursive form*, which is inherent in the syntax of language as metaphor ..., slowly begets a new mode of thought". This is "'scientific consciousness', which supersedes the mythic, to greater or lesser extent, in the 'common sense' of different persons and groups of persons" (p. 189). Typically, Chris (another student in the same workshop) remarked: "When you first come here you are taught to rationalise and think of your ideas rationally (Engels-

Schwarzpaul, 2001, p. 394) and added that ornamentation is not “necessarily a rational thing” but rather partially related to the unconscious. “A lot of people talk about it being a supplement of the soul, something to necessarily do. It is part of our human make-up. The problem [is] that we try to rationalise it to a degree.” (p. 394). Chris later elaborated that students tend to exclude ornament because “it’s just too difficult to deal with. It’s something you don’t want to deal with ‘cause you know you’ll just get ... So we move forward by not using it at all, but it keeps coming back. You can’t escape it because it is part of the human psyche, it will emerge again, somewhere and somehow” (p. 394).

Although the Copernican-Galelean-Newtonian paradigm has lost some of its force, it still holds an often invisible but nevertheless forceful sway in current debates on knowledge. The split between ‘qualitative’ and ‘quantitative’ research approaches is but one example. These methodological quibbles could be rendered more productive if they addressed some fundamental assumptions about their own position in relation to the generation of knowledge. Husserl argued in 1936 (1970, p. 270), for instance, that the critical condition of science can be traced back to the alienation of idealised and formalised forms of theoretical activity from their sources in the life-world (*Lebenswelt*). Professionals may suffer from a similar alienation: Thomas Wolfe’s (1981) figure of the despotic architect, who forever polices the purity of his design by controlling his clients’ use of it, is only a rhetorical exaggeration of many stories (circulating amongst professionals and their clients alike) about designers ignoring clients’ needs in the name of their supposedly superior knowledge. “What is likely to be particularly galling is the experts’ claim to know the ultimate significance of the [users’] activity better than the [users] themselves” (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, p. 118). The resulting resentment reduces the potential of everyday knowledge as a dialogical inspiration for research: research subjects do not recognise themselves in the research results, and researchers feel frustrated about the declared irrelevance of their labour.

Face-to-face contact between scientists and their research subjects, and professionals and the users of their designs, might alleviate some of this alienation because, while it is relatively easy to type-cast others, and while such patterning is part of everyday life, it is comparatively difficult to maintain stereotypes in a face-to-face situation. For, then, we are confronted with the subjectivity of the other, which, in the interplay between action and meaning, will challenge preconceptions (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, p. 30).

### Education and Professionalisation

These incommensurabilities are partially caused by different experiences of socialisation and professionalisation on the part of designers and users. In this context, what is of interest are the experiences designers make in what Berger and Luckmann (1967, p. 131) term secondary socialisation which takes part in, and is shaped by, the order of social institutions, knowledges and values. Intrinsic to this part of a person’s socialisation and professionalisation is the acquisition of role-specific knowledge, which is based on the division of labour in the social world and mediated by an organised distribution of knowledge. This role-specific knowledge includes a profession’s specific vocabulary, the “internalization of semantic fields” which structure conduct and routine interpretations. At the same time, “tacit understanding”, along with “evaluations and affective colorations of these semantic fields are also acquired” (p. 139). Secondary socialisation experiences allow individuals to develop a certain degree of doubt through comparison of conflicting assumptions.<sup>12</sup>

At a tertiary level, this ability to compare and evaluate ideally increases. After the workshop mentioned above, Jane evaluated her position by saying, “I am more aware of ornament, perhaps less afraid of it” (Engels-Schwarzpaul, 2001, p. 396). However, it is alarming that she

was previously afraid of using ornament. Chris described this condition as “a student’s dilemma”. Is it any surprise that students asked to rationalise the use of ornament, having originated in their subconscious, stumble to find the words. They realise that if they must rationalise work verbally that it can be done more easily with the exclusion of ornament. Here lies a student’s dilemma, that as part of our subconscious nature we must ornament. However, as part of our education we must put our thoughts into words and therefore rationalise (p. 369).

Architecture and design professionals (out of a related dilemma resulting from binary oppositions between different kinds of knowledge) often profess simultaneously to artistic and socially relevant elements in their practice, the latter supposedly based on scientific knowledge. Having to reconcile contradictions resulting from the duality of their professional alignments, they also face contradictions inherent in science: according to Wigley, science has two faces, one public and one private. The public face depicts scientific inquiry as a progressive and logical enterprise, carried out rationally and by carefully measured thought—free of passion and emotion. The private face, however, which scientists know well as the basis for their activities, is rather chaotic, highly emotional and intertwined with strong personal convictions (Wigley, 1983). Thus, the practice of architecture and design as *art* would presumably align it with the private face of science. However, the practice of architecture and design as *business* requires it to be presented as rational and reputable. Accordingly, depending on context, architectural and design professionals alternatively represent their discipline, and themselves, as one where intuition and genius are cardinal virtues—or as a rational, reputable enterprise, which can deal with reality just as well as other fields of the so-called ‘exact sciences’. This conflict remains unresolved and surfaces in design education in the contradictory and unexamined assumptions made about the nature of ‘professional knowledge’.

Thus, the intellectual field in which architectural and design praxis operates seems constituted by several sets of sometimes opposite forces, such as economics, ideology, science, theory, art and technology. An intellectual field is not just a “simple aggregate of isolated forces” or a mere accumulation of disparate elements (Bourdieu, 1974, p. 76), but akin to a magnetic field, in which different forces create diverse and dynamic relationships—be that through affinity or through controversy. Students, in their professional education, acquire their particular *habitus* (p. 143) as architects or designers through exposure to these force fields. Design schools, as intellectual as much as educational institutions, transfer not only the knowledge base of their profession, but also its value systems. Students are expected to join faith to reason: to have faith in the established values and standards of their area of study. What contributes to internal cohesion, however, has often the opposite effect in the relationships with non-professional audiences. Designers’ and architects’ sense of professional superiority and artistic genius sometimes prevents them from understanding taste that is not theirs, and aesthetics they have learned nothing about.

In the reverse, the aesthetics they have been inducted into are, as Bourdieu (1984) points out, alien to large parts of any population. The typical formalism of ‘high culture’ often produces situations in which the emphasis on form seems to require “a neutralization of any kind of affective or ethical interest in the object of representation” (p. 44). This was confirmed in my research when four educators, interviewed on two separate occasions, held that bursary art prescriptions actively discouraged the use of ornament (Engels- Schwarzpaul, 2001, p. 390).<sup>13</sup> For some educators, bursary art prescriptions even prevent the exploration of meaning more generally. They believed that, even if contextual exploration were possible at secondary school level, it would be considered as irrelevant in tertiary art education: “they just kick that stuff straight out of you, to start with anyway. It’s very formal” (p. 390).



While formalism appears to be neutral, and its artistic categories generally valid, Bourdieu emphasises the volatility and flexibility of categories of taste by asserting they are applied from particular social and historical positions (Bourdieu, 1992, p. 974). The adage that a work of art is constructed in the eyes of the (aesthetically sensitive) beholder is valid only with a qualification: she or he will only be able to construct to the degree that she or he in turn is the product of a social discourse and practice of art. The game of art (and design) requires the “stakes of the seasoned player, endowed with a sense for the game, as if made for the game, since made by the game”, thus granting the game its existence (p. 970).

### Control and classification of knowledge

In all this, the relationships between Western constructions of knowledge (traditional and current) and non-Western epistemologies are crucially important here in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Definitions of terms developed in one particular context cannot be transposed from their ‘native environment’ into another without difficulties. The transposition changes their meaning, but they may also change what they are applied to. Such transpositions are usually carried out with a presumption of authority. In this spirit, definitions are applied to other contexts and cultures by representatives of dominant groups. In the process, a definition’s conventional and situational belonging to an ‘original home’ is not normally recognised (Wittgenstein, 1958: # 116). Rather, its essence is taken as natural. Rorty argues that the strategy of “most naturalisms is to find some way of showing that our own culture has indeed got hold of the essence of man—thus making all new and incommensurable vocabularies merely ‘noncognitive’ ornamentation” (1980, p. 362; my emphasis). In the context of my research, the use of the term ornamentation, and its taken-for-granted connotations is indicative of the problems explored in this paper.



Air New Zealand dish

Similarly, the equation of Māori visual motifs with ‘copies’ from nature, in the 1995 account of an ex-Air New Zealand marketing manager, sheds light on the interconnection of knowledge, classifications, control and practices.

The Māori took many of the traditional designs of nature ... Māori carvings are all very simplistic in their design because the Māori copy the fern fronds and they copied the waves breaking and they copied other things that they saw ... the Māori relied on nature ... (cited in Engels- Schwarzpaul, 2001, p. 390)<sup>14</sup>

The quote illustrates the point: with a staggering self-confidence, a non-Māori lectures a Māori researcher on Māori (art). Perhaps unconsciously, he reiterates Victorian patterns of interpretations of non-European arts where the “analogy with vegetable growth explained complexity without consciousness” (Stallabrass, 1990, p. 99). In his 1910 essay

*The art of the bushmen*, which is regarded as an important piece of modernist art criticism, Roger Fry wrote about a “stage of intellectual development where the concepts were not so clearly grasped as to have begun to interfere with perception, and where therefore the retinal image passed into a clear memory picture with scarcely any intervening mental process” (1930, p. 96). This, of course, is in opposition to ‘civilised man’, who goes about art systematically, and refines and defines, and where, in the development of the Air New Zealand

corporate logo, the submissions of several advertising agencies' designs were "fine-tuned and redesigned ... into the koru ... Our koru defined and stylised ... New Zealand."

Whatever the genesis of the logo, whether it goes back to a traditional pattern or is somehow derived from stylised fern fronds, the association with Māori culture is clearly intended: Air New Zealand named their logo a 'koru'.

"The ability to control knowledge patterns and speech in a society is usually a concomitant of the distribution of power in that society" (Elias, 1991, p. 6). The "remarkable power" to name things creates a particular reality for the objects so named: "A man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language" (Fanon, 1967, p. 18). By the end of the nineteenth century in New Zealand, Pākehā had editorial control over the writing of history in Aotearoa (Pearson, 1990, p. 68) and attributed the status of art and non-art to exhibits so while Pākehā or Euro-American style art was exhibited in art galleries (Bell, 1989, p. 12), Māori art was (until not so long ago) displayed in museums along with exhibits of natural history. These curatorial and academic strategies have set the frame for the perception and evaluation of Māori- and European-based art and design respectively. Thus, Pākehā art critics have called Māori 'essentialist' and criticised, if not ridiculed, claims for authenticity in the 1990s.<sup>15</sup> This is a symptom of Western academics transposing their own conceptual development and critique (i.e., that essentialism and related concepts are generally problematic) unproblematically to non-Western theorists' concerns and challenging their entitlement to use such concepts. This is, in a more contemporary dress, the repetition of old hegemonic politics. Minh-Ha stresses that the fact that the west might criticize its continuing racist and ethnocentric legacies—its attempt at anthropologizing 'man' and at gathering the world around itself—does not mean that whatever is now considered negative in its own past language should become censored or tabooed for others (1987, p. 139).

This is an exhortation to 'the West' to give up control and to exercise epistemological modesty. Diverse, and yet in many respects converging, criticisms of traditional concepts of knowledge have profoundly challenged the assumption that institutionalised theories hold a privileged position. The assumption invariably leads to the marginalisation and subjugation of "a whole set of knowledges" (Foucault, 1980, pp. 81-2)—oppositional and naïve, Indigenous and popular.

### **Marginalisation of knowledge: ornament—a problematic topic**

The marginalisation of knowledge is sometimes effected through open violence, as in the witch-hunts in Europe, at other times through institutionalised practices, such as the punishment of Māori children for speaking their own language at school (Kāretu, 2000, p. 86), or through legislative procedures, such as the Tohunga Suppression Act 1907 (Durie, 1998, p. 76). The repression of a field of issues around ornament led to its virtual disappearance from officially recognised discourses and practices for decades.

In their conversations, members of a community refer to common concerns and issues that are important to their lives. In this way, they maintain these issues' reality potential, which diminishes when no longer talked about: language realises the world, both in apprehending and in producing it (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, p. 153). Ornament's exclusion from art and design discourses significantly diminished its place in that world.

The repression of ornamental claims to form became visible in architecture and design towards the end of the nineteenth century, during the second industrial revolution, when traditional craftsmen almost disappeared from the sphere of production. The concurrently developing

'instrumental rationality' (Horkheimer, 1967) amounted, according to Ernst Bloch (1935), to the "anarchy of a semblance of rationality, peculiar to a profit-oriented economy", accompanied by a disdain for fantasy and utopias (p. 217). It became manifest in the deliberate absence of ornament in the works of its architects and designers. Architectural functionalism's representatives deliberately wanted to exclude "historical fantasy" and "social memory" (Müller, 1977, pp. 7-10) from processes of value-formation. The elimination of ornament was further motivated by a social rejection of undesirable imaginations and wishes: an effort to constrain energy invested in (ornamental) expressiveness. This energy was considered better invested in performance—performativity in the Lyotardian sense (1984)—openly manifest in the argument that ornament in architecture equates to a waste of labour and material (Loos, 1908b, p.101; 1924, p. 395).

Unconstrained wishes and drives were, of course, attributed to the lower classes (and the natives in the colonies) and thus, the discreditation of ornament also became a matter of the differentiation of high and low culture—ornament becoming increasingly associated with low culture. Michel de Certeau (1984) records a general tendency in European cultures to marginalise and disempower popular ('low') knowledges. Technical optimisation in the nineteenth century, although drawing important aspects from "the reservoir of the 'arts' and 'crafts'", left little space for everyday practice. The residual space was rationalised as "a folkloric region or rather as an overly silent land, still without a verbal discourse and henceforth deprived of its *manouvrier* language as well" (p. 70). While popular knowledges persisted even in the face of a lack of means of production, their expression was restricted to everyday activities that had no legitimacy in terms of productive rationality. What was left behind acquires the status of a 'private' activity, is charged with symbolic investments concerning everyday activity, and functions under the sign of collective or individual particulars; it becomes in short the legendary and at the same time active memory of what remains on the margins or in the interstices of scientific or cultural orthopraxis (p. 70). The ways of the system conflict with the ways of the life-world through the high-brow pretence that formal value can only occur through the neutralisation of affective and ethical interests one might have in the objects of representation (1984, p. 44). A student participating in the *Emergent Theories* workshop commented that there were "lots of unconscious and difficult issues around ornament" that are hard to articulate, let alone defend. From his perspective, this was the main reason why students steer clear of ornament. The conflict manifests also in the diverging forces of rationalisation and mimesis.

### Rationalisation and mimesis

As described earlier, architects and designers occasionally do adopt attitudes that are marked by rationality, exactness, reliability, and consistency. Their creativity, however, is more akin to mimetic processes. Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin's use of the term "mimesis" has nothing to do with the eighteenth century notion that works of art should exclusively imitate nature (see Todorov, 1995, pp. 111-2), nor with the form of 'copying' the ex-Air New Zealand marketing manager spoke of. Nevertheless, mimesis does imply a close relationship to an external reality, which it seeks to assimilate *and* seize. Adorno (1984, p. 64) argues that art, because of its mimetic component, can be in permanent rebellion against instrumental rationality. By creating connections between inner and outer worlds for, and between, individuals, mimetic processes provide important conditions for understanding (Gebauer & Wulf in Flick, 1996, p. 26).<sup>16</sup> However, mimesis is incompatible with a "naming theory of meaning", since such a theory is too limited to explain sometimes "intensely meaningful" concerns (Hagberg, 1995, p. 141). A naming theory of meaning, which relies on denotative relationships between language and objects outside of their multiple contexts of use (Wittgenstein, 1958), is

particularly problematic in fields that deal intrinsically with non-verbal, non-rational subject matter.

The principles of vision which become apparent in the structure of decorative forms are principles of *artistic vision*, whereby visual elements are carved out of the amorphous sensory chaos to conform not with names and predications, like the data of practical cognition, but with the biological feeling and its emotional efflorescence, 'life' on the human level. They are, from the outset, different from the elements that conform to discursive thought; but their function in the building up of human consciousness is probably just as important and deep. (Langer, 1953, p. 62).

These forms of cognition can be cultivated through mimesis. The latter, as the re-presentation of sensuously receptive, expressive, and communicative elements of life in symbolic form, has, as its ascribed territory, special sectors of society. They function as reserves for those forms of meaning that do not fit with the rationalisation Western society went through in the wake of the Enlightenment (Hörkheimer & Adorno, 1944a, p. 11). The development of modern science, and its concomitant social developments, led to the disenchantment of the modern world (Weber, see Adorno, 1984, p. 81). As thought was reified, existence was "thoroughly cleared of demons and their conceptual descendants" (p. 34), and rationalised control of internal and external nature became an absolute goal (p. 38).<sup>17</sup> Special social areas—like art—were created however, and exempted from (otherwise pervasive) instrumental rationality.

The more an educational system relies on rational definitions, the more difficult it is to conceive how mimetic understanding can be nurtured. An assumption that learning processes are orderly and fully rationalisable is likely to produce oversimplified task/solution approaches, where course outlines, learning outcomes and performance standards will determine what counts as tasks or solutions. Another assumption, namely that all participants will go through and benefit from the same learning process, is in danger of reproducing ethnocentrism (and thereby racist exclusions) by contributing to—or even instigating—practices that render the knowledge of other groups "invisible, silent, and nameless". For to "render invisible is to silence, and to silence is to erase the presence of those whose voices are drowned out" (Goldberg, 1993, p. 110).

What is at issue here, to use Wittgenstein's metaphor again, is the compatibility of the language-games played out in our tertiary institutions (and the media and the public discourses they feed on and into) with the forms of life of many of their 'clients', as well as their capacity for responsiveness and care. And indeed, some of the factors contributing to their potential incompatibility are already imbedded in their preferred language.

### Where to from here?

The empirical project that prompted the above reflections was concerned with the way knowledge is accessed and assessed. There seemed to be a congruence between the empirical data and the literature surveyed, which indicated that it is important (in education, but surely also in design practice and research) to deal productively with different given realities, their constructions and interpretations, and to initiate a crossover and mutual transformation of ways of understanding. Roth, writing on education, suggests that it is important to handle uncertainty competently (cited in Arnold & Siebert, 1995, p. 19). This competence is pertinent for design generally, where putting aside one's habituated constructions of reality, along with those endorsed by official interpretations, is a precondition for 'thinking outside of the box'. Like educators, designers need to build up "situational competence" and interpretative flexibility, which facilitates discourses about the appropriateness and viability of different

potentials (pp. 183-4). Reframing what one knows can lead to a multiplication of world-views, enriching everyone's perspectives in an exploration and ordering of the known and the new.

In the decade since the completion of the above project, architects have increasingly used digital technologies to create "elaborate decoration" (Murphy, 2009). In London, studios at both the Architectural Association and the Bartlett School of Architecture have explored this decorative tendency, along with ornament and issues of meaning in languages of form. New technologies such as milling, moulding, routing and 3D printing play a significant role in this, providing opportunities for the production of ornament as never before. This technological aspect has perhaps also induced approaches in which the term 'function' plays a different role—further extending, perhaps, the "erweiterten Funktionalismus" (expanded functionalism) advocated by Jochen Gros in the 1970s. While, however, the latter took an explicit position against instrumental rationality, current reflections on ornament under the mantle of an expanded concept of function sound like an instrumental-rationalist justification of a much more varied and elusive phenomenon. Charles Holland of FAT (Fashion Architecture Taste), London, quite rightly notes that these rationalisations may hide enjoyment that cannot be admitted: both "rejection and the re-embracing of ornament seem to be rationalised in a technological way" (as cited in Murphy, 2009).

In opposition, Prof. Neil Spiller, Bartlett School of Architecture, proposes that "arguing over styles is to be missing the point really, there are bigger fish to fry", such as pressing ecological concerns (as cited in Murphy, 2009). Likewise, here in Aotearoa/New Zealand, there are important political issues underlying ornamental practices and the use of cultural images that still need addressing. Following the Swiss Architecture Museum's declaration in 2008, "ornament is the home of metamorphosis uniting and transforming conflicting worldly elements. It is an image of combination and a spectacle of transformation" (SAM Swiss Architecture Museum, 2008). Ornament itself, could then be far more radically involved in the construction of knowledge than it has ever been given credit for, and allow us to look at the familiar with new eyes. For Māori, there is no dualism between art and craft, "in terms of ornamentation, the two don't exist ... a translation of ornament in Māori doesn't exist" (AW, a senior Māori tertiary educator in Art and Design, in Engels-Schwarzpaul, 2001, p. 49).

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> "Knowledge linked to power, not only assumes the authority of 'the truth' but has the power to make itself true. All knowledge, once applied in the real world, has effects, and in that sense at least, 'becomes true.' Knowledge, once used to regulate the conduct of others, entails constraint, regulation and the disciplining of practice. Thus, 'There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time, power relations.'" (p. 27)

<sup>2</sup> For details on data collection and analysis, see Engels-Schwarzpaul (2001, pp. 62-66).

<sup>3</sup> This paper presents an attempt to make theoretical sense of the results obtained in the empirical research for my PhD thesis (2001). It may also serve as an introduction into constructivism as an approach to learning in design education, also covering relevant German sources. I have concentrated on a discussion of the contingency of knowledge generally, and how this notion is germane to design and design education, in particular. This, in turn, is relevant to the theoretical understanding of, and practical education about, ornament in New Zealand in two ways: the traditional status of ornament in design generally which was, since the late nineteenth century, characterised by a bifurcation between professional and lay attitudes; and the implications of this for language games between settlers and tangata whenua.

<sup>4</sup> Whereas "Spirit is whatever is so unfamiliar and unmanageable that we begin to wonder whether our 'language' is 'adequate' to it".

<sup>5</sup> "I think the kind of modernist messages about construction and structure are easy ones to grasp. It's very easy to talk about - the honesty or dishonesty of this element ... easy to talk about, easy to think you know what you mean. If you actually start talking to students philosophically about whether a building element really can tell a lie, whether it can have moral intent ... I think they start realising things are more complicated than that." (PW@347 in Engels-Schwarzpaul, 1997: 132). In a research workshop about ornament, a student reflected in his report, "How can two inanimate parts of a building be in opposition? ... This hypothesis 'Is there opposition between ornament and structure?' was born of my naive faith of modernist theory" (in Engels-Schwarzpaul, 1998, p.47).

<sup>6</sup> Social Constructivism is compatible, although not identical, with Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's theory of the social construction of reality (discussed below). Kanuka and Anderson (1999), in their overview of constructivist approaches, map the field by locating various positions along two axes: one axis which describes a continuum between objective and subjective nature of knowledge, and another spanning between social and individual processes of constructing knowledge. My own approach would be that—outside of philosophical epistemologies—one's position can shift across the field, depending on topic, biography and learning project. The literature I refer to mainly in this text discusses a German variation, *Neuer Konstruktivismus* (New Constructivism – Jensen 1994), which has affinity with social constructivism, but also critically appraises *radical constructivism* in the context of adult education. The term seems to be intended to represent a combination of approaches from constructivism(s), with interpretative concepts derived from human and social sciences—outside of the oppositional trenches set up by objectivists and constructivists. As Heylighen points out, constructivism does not necessarily involve anti-realism: "[t]his "brain in a vat" view is unnecessarily strong. Instead we take a kind of agnostic view, which is a-realist, not anti-realist. While it is true that knowledge provides no direct and incorrigible access to the world, and it is not justified to make strong inferences about reality on the basis

of knowledge, at the same time it is not allowed to make inferences about reality on the basis of a lack of knowledge: ignorance of something does not entail its non-existence' (Heylighen & Joslyn, 1992).

<sup>7</sup> This perspective is supported by recent findings in brain research and neuro-biological theories of cognition which point to the circularity of human perception, thinking and action as opposed to classical models of cognition which posit a linearity of thinking: first sensory perception, then cognitive processing, then resulting actions (Roth, G. 1992 "Das konstruktive Gehirn" in *Kognition und Gesellschaft. Der Diskurs des Radikalen Konstruktivismus 2.* edited by S.J. Schmidt. Frankfurt, quoted in Arnold & Siebert, 1995: 107). Similar views have been put forward by, for example, Vaihinger (the philosophy of the "As-if"), Piaget (developmental theories of cognition), Mead (symbolic interactionism), Garfinkel (ethnomethodology), Luhmann (systems theories), Beck/Beck-Gernsheim (biography as construction) etc.

<sup>8</sup> This establishes an affinity with ornament: according to Verworn (in Kroll, 1987: 70), it is characteristic of ornament never to 'copy' objects observed in reality, but rather to associatively express mental processes.

<sup>9</sup> The danger, though, is that different interpretations are merely arbitrarily juxtaposed, without an exploration of their contradictions. An absence of such debate can even lead to a relativism that sacrifices emancipatory potential (pp.36-8). Arnold and Siebert observe that the concept of *autopoiesis*, which holds human beings to be fundamentally self-regulatory organisms (Luhmann, 1984; Maturana & Varela, 1992), lacks a minimal articulation of correspondence between subjective and extra-subjective reality. Thus, the question how sociality could be conceptualised if there was no correspondence is left largely unanswered, even though it seems clear that individual development is not merely determined by self-regulation. Rather, it takes place in a constant, oscillating movement between self-regulatory potentials and external demands, a movement often characterised by crises (Arnold & Siebert, 1995, p.39). In Maturana's and Varela's (1992) *Tree of knowledge*, however, substantial sections address sociality in the form of shared environments, created and maintained by individuals through social and linguistic coupling (207-244).

<sup>10</sup> Mann in Arnold and Siebert (1995: 52).

<sup>11</sup> Alfred Schütz (1971, p. 7) distinguishes between first and second order constructions. Social science constructions are of the second order, i.e. constructions of the constructions of actors in a social field. They are not in principle different and separate from everyday knowledge, but organised according to different principles. "The cognitive style of practice, of the everyday life, aims at the elimination or minimisation of the unusual, of doubt; [it aims] at unproblematic, and therefore economic, co-ordination and action" (Soeffner in Flick, 1996, p.23). The cognitive style of theory and research is comparatively free of demands for immediate action, so that a theorist—in contrast to actors in the social world—can explore multiple interpretations and histories successively and/or in parallel. This is what enables her to pursue knowledge and understanding systematically, and to be reflective of process and content. Reflexivity of the research process is an important aspect of theory, integrating what Nietzsche called "the art of mistrust" (in Berger & Luckmann, 1967, p.7), which acknowledges the inevitable historicity (and situatedness) of human thought.

<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, it rests on the patterns formed in primary, early childhood socialisation and "must deal with an already formed self and an already internalized world. It cannot construct subjective reality *ex nihilo*" (140).

<sup>13</sup> "Your job is to get them to meet those criteria, and get them through the exam; and usually ornamentation is looked up[on] as a decorative thing ... The kids aren't allowed to explore that sort of thing." (DT@403 in Engels- Schwarzpaul, 2001, p.390) For a discussion of the role of ornament in the new Arts Curriculum, see Engels-Schwarzpaul (2003).

<sup>14</sup> The ex-manager of Corporate Marketing at Air New Zealand had held this position at the time of his retirement for twenty five years. The interview was given to Mel Whaanga, a Māori researcher in 1995. According to the former, Air New Zealand in the 1960s asked about eight advertising companies "for submissions to design a logo that was synonymous with New Zealand and certainly for Air New Zealand. Several of them came back with a stylised fern and out of all those designs they fine-tuned and redesigned all the submissions into the koru and the koru symbol has its origins in the natural history of New Zealand. ... The Māori took many of the traditional designs of nature ... As you may know ..., the Māori carvings are all very simplistic in their design because the Māoris copy the fern fronds and they copied the waves breaking and they copied other things that they saw ... The Māori took many of their traditional [inaudible] from nature because of the simple beauty ..." Three years later, the ex-manager would claim that "The [Air New Zealand] logo is representative for the Pacific, not specifically for Māori. Several motifs across the Pacific are similar. [You] need to be weary of Māoris claiming ownership over this and that ..." (in Engels- Schwarzpaul, 2001, p.390). From the point of view of visual analysis, the fine-tuning and re-designing of the Air New Zealand 'koru' from several versions based on the fern frond in nature is less likely than a more direct descent from a kowhaiwhai pattern, particularly the hammerhead shark motif, as the juxtaposition of the kowhaiwhai pattern and the Air New Zealand logo on a dish shows.

For the association of nature and instinct, supposedly operative in non-Western art, see Hamlin (1916: 15).

<sup>15</sup> There is, however, a strategic use of terms such as authentic in the struggle against non- Māori assessment of "who really is indigenous, who is worth saving, who is still innocent and free from Western contamination" (Smith, (1999): 74). This assessment was regularly operationalised in funding schemes where 'non-authentic' Māori art was excluded.

<sup>16</sup> Mimetic processes seem to be related to what Maturana (1992: 234) calls a 'network of social and linguistic coupling' by means of which a 'world [is] brought forth in coexistence with other people' (241), and in which 'smelling, seeing, building, preferring, rejecting, conversing' all have their place. While 'language is a condition *sine qua non* for the experience of what we call the mind,' 'our experiences flow according to coherences in the operation of our nervous system to which we have no access as observers but which necessarily occur as part of our ontogenic drift as living systems' (231). On another level, I also sense some consonance with Kristeva's *semiotic* (even though she seems to limit the sphere of the semiotic to crisis situations, when the symbolic system fails).

<sup>17</sup> The domination of nature and fellow men came at the price of the negation of human nature. '[t]his domination, the core of all civilising rationality, is the cell of a mythical irrationality which continually grows rampant: with the negation of nature in man, the telos not only of external domination of nature, but also the telos of one's own life becomes confused and opaque. ... the enthronement of the means as an end, which in late capitalism takes on the character of open madness, is already perceivable in the primeval history of subjectivity' (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944: 61-2).



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