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Of Skulls and Stealth: Reflections on the Image of the New Military Technology

Mark Dorrian

I.

In his essay “Norm and Form,” Ernst Gombrich commented that the standard art historian’s technique of using twin slide projectors when lecturing had its origin in the work of Heinrich Wölfflin.¹ Behind the all-too-familiar double image lies an originary opposition which was of course the nexus of *Principles of Art History*, Wölfflin’s most influential book—the classic and the baroque—and which he analyzed in terms of his famous “five pairs of concepts”: linear and painterly; plane and recession; closed and open form; multiplicity and unity; and absolute and relative clarity (13–16).

In the spirit of this opposition I want to invoke two images. They are both used for publicity purposes and appear on websites. On, let’s say, the left hand side (on which the “classic” usually appears) is *Concorde*, commonly referred to as the most beautiful aircraft ever built. The text on the British Airways website describes it in a sort of Hegelian epiphany as the “perfect combination of form and function” (perfect “combinations” or “balances” are always classical).² The aircraft is pictured as a transcendent object framed by the heavenly blue of the stratosphere. In contrast, the other image, that of the US Air Force’s F-117A *Nighthawk* stealth fighter aircraft, is a much more paradoxical affair. There are no perfect combinations here. Although evidently in the air, the object seems strangely and

even malignantly earthbound. We are no longer below the object gazing up at the limitless heavens; instead we see the aircraft against a desolate and folded earthly terrain with which it seems almost contiguous.³

The main concern of this paper is to analyze the cultural reception of this aircraft. More particularly, I want to say some things about it as an object of fascination for contemporary architects and architectural theorists. Although most of the critical apparatus is not derived from Walter Benjamin, I do want to signal at the outset a tentative link with certain themes in Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* study, namely:

- the antinomic character of the Baroque object;
- the centrality of the image of the skull or death's head to the Baroque—the role it plays as the very emblem of emblems, as something that as Benjamin puts it “lacks all ‘symbolic’ freedom of expression, all classical proportion, all humanity” (*Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 166). (In particular I want to consider it in relation to the Baroque tradition of anamorphosis, something which Benjamin curiously does not discuss);
- the amorphous, formless quality of the Baroque object, whereby, in Benjamin's account, the collapse of perfect nature is proclaimed and a physiognomy of putrefaction and decay revealed. While through the alchemy of the allegorist the glimmer of significance is retained in the object, its material is soon exhausted and, as an inert husk, cast aside, in the triumph of matter over allegorical significance.

II.

When form topples and “falls,” when matter becomes exorbitant through modes of distortion, deformation, liquidation, putrefaction or mutilation, a complex double movement, up and down, is historically evident. The primary gesture which splits the field of objects into the well-formed and the ill-formed, the normative and the aberrant, is followed by a secondary discrimination which bifurcates the second field, the domain of aberrations, into “bad” and “good” parts; that is, a division is instituted between, on one hand, the (horrific or abject) aberrant phenomena which

must be disavowed, and, on the other, those which can be reintegrated with the discourse (concerning nature, the will of the divine, the movement of spirit, etc.) within which the primary gesture (the designation of “good form”) is itself anchored and authorized. Thus the formless aberration can, in its evaluation, even come to *exceed* good form. This economy of recuperation has a long history, and the ambivalence attached to the monstrous figure is only one example: Ambroise Paré signals this characteristic scission, which produces the high and the low, the noble and the base, when, at the beginning of his book *On Monsters and Marvels* (1573), he writes: “There are several things that cause monsters. The first is the glory of God. The second his wrath” (3).

So, we have the formless phenomenon serving, in certain historic moments, as a demonstration of the limitlessness or plenitude of creation: it is the monstrous “wonder,” something which has the aura of the divine, or else which serves through its very negativity as an index of the absolutely free character of God’s creativity. John Ruskin, in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, uses the latter argument: by the exceptional form (that is, the formless, here rhetorically sublimated) God indicates “that the adoption of the others was not a matter of necessity” (157). (Among these exceptional forms we should count those things, Ruskin says, [that should be] hidden from the eye, such as the body’s intestines or the strange mineral and vegetable aberrations concealed in the earth). Or again, form that is warped and tortured may point to an excessive content, as in Hegel’s discussion of the visual arts in the Romantic era, where content has exceeded the limitations of matter to express it and has thus passed beyond the “good form” of the Classical whose paradigm is Greek sculpture. Here the movement of spirit is understood in terms of the negation of the corporeal, the individual and the subjective as exemplified in the tortured and suffering body of Christ (538). And finally, doesn’t the divine voice itself come, as inspiration, in the grotesque “language” of glossolalia (speaking in tongues), a speech in which the matter of language exceeds its form? Michel de Certeau notes that this speech, which “encloses in a linguistic simulacrum all that is not language and comes from the speaking voice” (31) is already present in *the noises of otherness* that populate ordinary conversations and which, as he puts it, “represent the *tattoo* of the vocal and interlocutory upon the body of discourse” (30).

III.

We will see in a moment how this double movement which attends the formless works out in the case of the stealth fighter aircraft, which appears as both god-like *and* horrific. But firstly we need to recall the Form/Matter duality of idealist aesthetics whereby form comes to be identified with a subject who actively and with intention bestows it upon matter elevating it into the realm of meaning (its “content”) and “life.” This perhaps finds its most explicit demonstration, and its most extreme theatricalization, in the kind of anamorphic art known as catoptric or mirror anamorphosis. Developing from the early 1600’s (the first manual on the subject was 1630), its popularity grew during the following hundred and fifty years: by the middle of the 18th century it was widely disseminated throughout Europe as a popular amusement and toy. The technique worked by using curved mirrors to optically correct a distorted image. Viewed without the mirror, the anamorphic image appeared as a radically deformed field of lines, colors and tones that spread, in a circle or an arc, around a central point. The image would be painted or printed upon a flat surface, or, if a conical reflector was to be used, might be painted on the vertical surfaces of a casket within which the mirror would sit. When the mirror, a cylinder or cone of polished metal, was placed upon the central point, and when the anamorphic image was viewed in it, the field of warped and morcellated objects before it was, as it were, magically redeemed, brought back into life and form. In his classic study of anamorphic art, which he calls a *teratology of perspective*, Jurgis Baltrušaitis, discussing a Dutch conical anamorphosis of Venus and Adonis from the 18th century, writes: “Distorted round the mirror, the beautiful classical figures assume a monstrous aspect. The youthful hero is bisected, his head down. His swollen limbs are turned around, his feet are in the air . . . Venus’ arms resemble intestines. The whole is a strange whirlwind of scattered pieces and shapeless anatomical débris which are reformed and resolved with precision in the reflections of the cone” (145). And shortly before, considering a portrait of a woman with a bird: “The world bursts asunder before reconstituting itself. The heads, the limbs are detached from the body and are then reinstated. Thus the woman who is holding a bird by a thread is split into three pieces . . . The face is upside down and fluid . . . Illumined against a sombre background, the vision seems to emerge from the night . . . The

correction in the mirror, wherein true forms are reborn from the chaos, possesses [a] supernatural element” (140–43). In short the mirror is, as it were, the correlate of the Idea through and in view of which base matter (here the anamorphic collapsed and desiccated object-field) is worked upon and uplifted into Form (and thereby also “life”).⁴ In certain portraits the removal of the mirror revealed, occupying the centre of the swirling field of matter, a skull, a death’s head.

IV.

Of all the objects that technology presents us with today, the one that most obsesses architects and architectural theorists is (let’s use this word for the time being) an *anamorphe*: the F-117A *Nighthawk* stealth fighter plane. It comes as no surprise that this aircraft is also a supremely mythical object, perhaps *the* mythical object for the contemporary West. Each and every commentary made upon it bears witness to this.

Clothed in the ancient theme of the “cloak of invisibility” (which always comes as a divine gift), the attributes of the plane are turned into something of the order of a metaphysical token and directive. The surfaces of the aircraft, to which it owes its minimal electromagnetic profile, find a direct correspondence with the gifts in ancient myths which confer invisibility and which always have the nature of a “skin.” When the F-117A was brought down during the bombing of Serbia, the press reports of what followed drove home the mythic nature of the event. The reporting in the British press at the time cast the local farmers’ dismemberment of the wreckage as a kind of folklorish eucharist whereby a peasantry wielding rustic knives divided the body of a fallen god. Thus we were told that when the object “fell from the sky like a meteor . . . all of Europe was lit by fire.” As for where the body landed, “*for all time* this will be The Place Where the Plane Fell Out of the Sky.” Each fragment of the aircraft was sought after like “a piece of the True Cross” (Fisk).

It has been said that the stealth fighter is an *anamorphe*. But in what sense exactly? Certainly it might be characterized by a certain formlessness, but the claim can be more precisely delineated in terms of the aircraft’s status as an arrangement, a “spread” of matter, calibrated according to its representation in the mirror, or in this case, upon the radar screen; in constructing the deformed object one moves from its appearance upon the

surface of representation back out to the world into which the screen explodes the form and scatters it. As Paul Virilio has written: "It is somewhat as if the image in the mirror were suddenly modifying our face: the electronic representation on the screen, the radar console, modifies the aerodynamic silhouette of the weapon, the virtual image dominating in fact 'the thing' of which it was, until now, only the 'image'" (168). The contemporary *anamorphe*, however, inverts the relationship that its predecessor had to the screen and so realizes something that is historically quite unprecedented. Where catoptric anamorphosis affects the *recovery* of the form in the mirror (the form, that is, which in the first instance was "presented" to it), its contemporary double *disappears* into the screen. The notional sequence would be this: a conventional aircraft is presented to the screen; and then the representation that appears upon it determines the specifics of the deformation applied to the object. But here the process leaves its antecedent, for the deformation produces the almost total collapse of the object as representation. Thus the deformation might be more accurately described as *paramorphic*; it remains, like anamorphic distortion, addressed to a visual point, to an eye, but there is, through that eye, no imminent return (*ana-*) to form; rather it is put in a position radically alongside (*para-*) form.

However, the *Nighthawk* has an antinomical character and this is fundamental to its mythic status: in it, opposing properties and meanings coincide. Thus, even while arguing that the stealth fighter is a *paramorphe*, one is tempted to, at the same time, acknowledge that two great and antithetical dreams of form reach their apotheosis with this aircraft and in it are figured *simultaneously* in a strangely pure way. The first dream is that of the departure of form from the symbolic and its elevation into a state of pure content; which is to say, the total convergence of the "meaning of the form" with its Idea or task (in this case its invisibility to remote systems of detection) such that the form comes to rest, not merely as a signifier, but as a pure and necessary materialization of the motivating Idea. If this corresponds to Marinetti's notion of "speaking without adjectives," a speech purged of all (decorative and excessive) elements which would delay contact with the actual, then it finds its inverse in the other oneiric image presented by the stealth fighter; namely a speech which consists *only* of adjectives.⁵ Here, form, by refusing all demands made upon it, is raised into autonomy (the form of the aircraft *against* its flyability; the fact that the

plane flies *in spite of* its form). Viewed in this way the form of the aircraft, insofar as it is experienced as a signifier, becomes opaque and impossibly fecund: no longer assured of what it *is*, we can say only what it is like. Thus the F-117A is a kind of split phenomenon: and its status as an object both “invisible” and “spectacular” is only the beginning. To architects it offers a sado-masochistic object *par excellence*: through it one experiences the simultaneous refusal of the Law (autonomous, non-determined form) together with its absolute assertion ([the *frisson* of] complete technical determination of the object).

This duality is seen perfectly in the roles that the image of stealth technology plays in *For Inspiration Only*, a picture book published in 1996 by the London-based architects Future Systems. Produced with the express intention of stimulating the architectural imagination, this small but widely circulated book presents a heterogeneous sequence of images underwritten by short captions. So, on one hand we have stealth technology appearing in the guise of a “new aesthetic”—the form, the implication is, is radically divorced from function (72); and on the other it is “explained” by the caption “new reasons, completely new form”—the form, the implication is, is radically determined by function (111).

In the last instance, however, we would have to say that what is so striking about the stealth fighter is not its strangeness, but rather a certain and uncanny familiarity. It presents us with the paradox that at the very moment at which we seem to depart from the field of the symbolic, we find that we re-enter it (or at least we once again experience its effects) with unprecedented force. The “semiotically neutral” calibration of the aircraft’s form (its determination by technical requirements) seems perversely to deliver us into a well-defined and highly semiotically-charged tradition of “form-making.” The stealth fighter is, in short, the vision of menace projected by science-fiction: the monstrous, phobic “thing” whose semiotic condition is established not so much by systematically eradicating the anthropomorphic as by preying upon it. This connection is made explicit in the orchestration of the weapon’s image by the official USAF and contractor photographs. Marinetti’s well-known aestheticization of war may today seem to have undergone “sublimation” into the ecstasies of precision in mathematized space, but as the stealth fighter shows, this is only partly true: at its root as an obsessive image lies an obscene pleasure

which technological connoisseurship might disavow and cover over, but which is absolutely congruent with it.

V.

The character of the stealth fighter as a traumatic image can be theorized by reading it in the context of Jacques Lacan's discussion of anamorphosis in his 1964 seminar. Lacan's commentary turns on Hans Holbein's painting *The Ambassadors* (1533) which he, following Baltrušaitis, linked, in its presentation of the symbols of the Arts and Sciences, to the theme of *vanitas*. What is of course the nexus of Holbein's work is the play between, on one hand, the extreme realism of the frontal perspectival view of the two ambassadors, the fabrics which clothe and surround them, and the (scientific and musical) instruments that lie between them, and on the other, the strange formless stain which is smeared across the foreground of the image but which, when viewed obliquely, emerges as a skull rising above the now collapsed field of the painting. The world represented in the painting, the world, that is, which is interrupted by the anamorphic skull, is extraordinarily fully achieved: as Baltrušaitis writes: "Everything is astonishingly present and mysteriously true to life . . . The whole painting is conceived as a *trompe-l'oeil*" (91–93).

In Lacan the distinction between "reality" (our constructed, familiar experience) and the *real* is crucial. The latter is something that is unassimilable by symbolization, something that resists being knitted into the network of signifiers through which the symbolic universe of everyday "reality" is constructed. The effect of the real upon this universe is disruptive; the subject experiences the encounter with the real—"an essential encounter," Lacan writes, "an appointment to which we are called with a real that eludes us" (53)—which is compulsively returned to, as trauma. Slavoj Žižek associates Hegel's notion of a pre-ontological "night of the world" with the Lacanian real: he quotes from Hegel's *Jenaer Realphilosophie*: "This night, the interior of nature, that exists here—pure self—in phantasmagorical representations, is night all around it, in which here shoots a bloody head—there another white ghastly apparition, suddenly here before it, and just so disappears. One catches sight of this night when one looks human beings in the eye—into a night that has become awful" (qtd. in Žižek, *Ticklish Subject*, 29–30). Figured in this Žižek sees the Lacanian

le corps morcelé, the fragmented body that is anterior to the assumption of a (phantasmic) unified, consolidated body image and to symbolization (*Ticklish Subject* 35). This horrific and spectral pre-symbolic and pre-ontological “night of the world” is something prior to “world,” something “not-yet-worldly”: it is “not the old, premodern “underground” as the dark, lower strata of the global cosmic order in which monstrous entities dwell, but something *stricto sensu* acosmic” (*Ticklish Subject* 50).

The spectral presence of the anamorphic skull in *The Ambassadors* appears, in its intrusion into the frontal perspectival “reality” of the painting, as a phobic image. Its appearance within the painting constitutes the mark of “the real whose extraction constitutes reality” (Žižek, *Looking Awry* 95): the subject’s encounter with the anamorphic stain is an encounter with the exhaustion and collapse of representation, and specifically with *its* representation, that with which it identifies. The skull rips across the surface of “reality,” displaying it as a signifier, as contingent, as surface, as “empty.”⁶ The subject is no longer confirmed in the fullness and plenitude of its representations: rather, as Lacan writes, “Holbein makes visible for us here something that is simply the subject as annihilated—annihilated in the form that is, strictly speaking, the imaged embodiment . . . of castration” (88–89). And indeed the appearance of (the anamorphic skull as) the stain or blind spot within the field of the vision is founded in the annihilated subject, that is the subject constituted by lack and desire. The anamorphic stain in *The Ambassadors* materializes the gaze, the gaze which appeared as an object in some primal separation from the subject (symbolic castration) and which now appears, directed back at the subject, in the field of the Other: as Margaret Iversen puts it, drawing a comparison with Roland Barthes’ notion of the punctum, the gaze as object “reverses the direction of the lines of sight and disorganizes the visual field, erupting into the network of signifiers that constitute ‘reality’” (“What is a Photograph” 457).

If Lacan values the “anamorphic ghost,” the stain which denaturalizes the representational space within which the ambassadors stand, he values equally its “secret meaning,” the death’s head which emerges upon the collapse of the worldly scene. However, something that is very striking about the painting is that it portrays not simply a straightforward disjunction between two perspectival registers, but rather the *accommodation* of one within the other. For, notably, the anamorphic skull is figured as an

object within the “reality” of the space which belongs to the pictured figures: the index of this accommodation is the shadow which the skull casts across the mosaic floor upon which the two men stand.⁷ Here then we seem to have a picturing of the inclusion of the real within “reality.” This is precisely the condition which Žižek sees as lying at the root of the paranoid construction of the prosecutor-figure (the Other of the symbolic register, that which lies beyond it and “controls” it: here death as the prosecutor of the ambassadors).⁸ And is the character of this prosecutor, who is at once spectacular and unseen, who cannot be simply named, determined or circumscribed, who (inescapably) sees us (the stain as the gaze of the Other) and whose punishment is imminent, not that of the stealth fighter as it is supported by the discourse within which it is embedded? The god-like quality of the “paranoid’s persecutor” is, as we have seen, equally evident in commentaries upon the aircraft. Insofar as the stealth fighter is experienced as an “anamorphic ghost” within “reality” it actualizes something of the death of the world, of the subject’s symbolic universe. To this extent the death’s head is as much the emblem of the *Nighthawk* as it is of the anamorphic stain in Holbein’s painting. The weapon as stain, as anamorphic ghost, is a spectral, unworldly, uncanny thing: a thing which haunts reality, which opens up a rift, an abyss, within it, and insofar as it resists symbolization and incorporation within the network of signifiers, is compulsively returned to in search of meaning.

VI.

Earlier in this paper a comparison was made between the Futurist aestheticization of war and the reception of the image of stealth technology today. There is more to be said on this connection and it will return us, in conclusion, to Walter Benjamin. Seen in the light of Benjamin’s thought, stealth technology appears as a contemporary counterpart of the modern imperialistic warfare which he analyzed, via reference to Marinetti, at the end of “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” In a brilliant essay which focuses on Judaic categories in Benjamin’s thinking, Gillian Rose has argued for the importance of a sustained reflection running through his work which she characterizes as an investigation of “the Baroque Ethic and the Spirit of Fascism” (88). Linking Benjamin’s early essays on language and violence to his *Trauerspiel* study and reflections

on fascist warfare, she argued that, on Benjamin's terms, the latter should be understood as a usurping of the divine boundary-destroying violence that he had invoked in his 1921 essay, "Critique of Violence." This concept was closely tied to Benjamin's metaphysics of language, and in particular to the distinction he drew between an originary paradisaical language of names and language in its fallen state—instrumental, abstract, and, crucially, a language of judgment.⁹ With the emergence of judgment, the violence of law-making and law-preserving is initiated and hence too the establishment of boundaries. Emblematic is the figure of Niobe in whose punishment a law is founded and who, in her guilt, is left, as Benjamin puts it, "as a boundary stone on the frontier between men and gods" ("Critique of Violence" 149). Against the violence which establishes laws and boundaries, Benjamin posits a divine, expiatory violence under whose force they are swept away. It is this that fascism tries to seize: "Seeking in desperation the unobtainable redemption, the *spirit of fascism* usurps divine violence in the spectacle of war which is to abolish the boundaries of the world" (Rose 94).

Certainly stealth technology presents us with another boundary-destroying military technology: this is entirely in accord with its spectral character, its efficacy being founded in the frictionless permeability of boundaries and territorial definitions to it. Today the military destruction of boundedness is rendered less in the cataclysmic spectacle of warfare than in the omnipresence of a horrific phantom which holds the world in its gaze. With this, the convulsive temporality of Benjamin's "imperialistic warfare"—the rapid succession of explosive charges, cannons, mortars, and machine-gun reports—is exchanged for a mode of dissolution which seems to suspend the "event" and indeed time itself. With this in mind, we can recognize the extent to which stealth technology represents a potent emblem and executor of the new global political-economic order of which Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have recently written. In defining their concept of Empire against the old nation-state imperialisms of the modern period, Hardt and Negri set out four propositions. Three seem of immediate relevance: that "Empire is characterized fundamentally by a lack of boundaries . . . no territorial boundaries limit its reign"; that "Empire presents itself . . . as an order that effectively suspends history and thereby fixes the existing state of affairs for eternity"; and "although the practice of Empire is continually bathed in blood, the concept of Empire is always

dedicated to peace—a perpetual and universal peace outside of history” (xiv–xv). Describing when they wrote their book, Hardt and Negri situate it between “two signal events in the construction of Empire”: the Gulf War and the war in Kosovo (xvii). It is perhaps more than coincidental that the former saw the first “operational deployment,” as the jargon has it, of the F-117A, and the latter its full extension.

Notes

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1. “It was Wölfflin who gave art history the fateful tool of systematic comparison; it was he who introduced into our lecture rooms a need for two lanterns and two screens;” E.H. Gombrich, *Norm and Form: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance I*, 90.
2. <http://www.british-airways.com/flights/factfile/airfleet/docs/conc.shtml> The crash of an Air France Concorde in July 2000 seems to have had little impact on the website’s rhetoric, save for a new “Safety Enhancements” section. For an interesting recent article on the aircraft see Francis Spufford, “Love that Bird.”
3. The photograph I am discussing can be seen on Lockheed Martin’s website at: http://www.lmaeronautics.com/products/combat_air/f-117/index.html
4. For comments on the collapsed anamorphic image as the image of death see Margaret Iversen, “Orthodox and Anamorphic Perspectives,” 84.
5. As Marinetti wrote, in his *Risposte alle obiezioni*, 11th August 1912: “I believe it necessary to suppress the adjective and the adverb, because they constitute (taken together and individually), the multicoloured festoons, the *trompe-l’oeil swags*, pedestals, parapets and balustrades of the old traditional period”; cited in Tim Benton, “Speaking Without Adjectives: Architecture in the Service of Totalitarianism,” 36.
6. See Parveen Adams, *The Emptiness of the Image: Psychoanalysis and Sexual Differences*.

7. A shadow which has a markedly different directionality to those cast by other objects. See the discussion in Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*, 17–21.
8. Žižek, *Looking Awry*, 18–20.
9. Walter Benjamin, “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man” in *One-Way Street and Other Writings*.

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