

THE CARPET PARADIGM AND THE BLUE TILE FROM THE WALL OF DAMASCUS, THE GRID AND THE ARABESQUE

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Abstract

That painting is understood as being visual cannot really be contested. Even when Duchamp introduced his disavowal of painting and the schema of the chessboard to indicate an anti-retinal strategy, the implication of visual imaginary was still in place. Indeed the link between knowing and seeing is not only at the root of metaphysical (the desire to know is the desire to see —Aristotle) thinking itself, but persists even within the disavowal of it within Late Modernity.

This paper takes two key concepts from the discourse of painting in Late Modernity, the carpet paradigm and the grid, and looks at them through the idea of the arabesque and the ornamental. The arabesque is not a schema of a visual revelation, but the perceptive, as-well-as intermediary of donation and reception of form in re-presentation and the ornamental does not realise itself as ornament, even though it is also a form of manifested (planar) surface-embellishment, a tensely contracted figure-ground collapse. The ornamental is here the activity of form itself, the plasticity of beings, the “becoming essential of accident” and, at the same time, “the becoming accidental of essence”, as the capacity to receive and to produce form simultaneously. Meaning as a constant emergence of meaning, infinitely deferring from ‘taking’.

Keywords: Painting, grid, arabesque, ornamental

Introduction

This paper is part of my ongoing research as an artist and writer on the nature of the painted image, the ornamental and the idea of the arabesque. The paper is based on a chapter from my PhD thesis entitled *Painting as Gaze: On the Revelatory Force of the Arabesque*. I am confronting two models of painting and art history, the carpet paradigm (Masheck, J., 1976) and the grid (Krauss R., 1979), with the idea of the Arabesque and the ornamental (two of the main ideas of my research) in order to question the relationship between painting and decoration or ornaments. On this route, I am engaging with the image in western painting and thought through the idea of the Arabesque, the quintessential creative drive of Early Islamic Art.

I.

WHAT IS TO PAINT THE ABSOLUTE? AND SO: WHAT IS ABSOLUTE PAINTING? TO PAINT OR TO FIGURE IS NO LONGER TO REPRODUCE, THEREFORE NOT EVEN TO REVEAL, BUT TO PRODUCE THE EXPOSITION OF THE SUBJECT. TO PRO-DUCE: TO BRING FORTH, TO DRAW IT OUT(nancy 2006: 220, emphasis my own).

every image [painting] is in some way a ‘portrait’, not in that it would reproduce the traits of a person, but in that it pulls and *draws* (this is the semantic and etymological sense of the word), in that it extracts something, an intimacy, a force. and, to extract it, it subtracts or

removes it from homogeneity; it distracts it from it, distinguishes it, detaches it and casts it forth (Nancy 2005: 4). [...]The image is separated in two ways simultaneously. It is detached from the ground [*fond*] and it is cut out within a ground. It is pulled away and clipped and cut out. The pulling away raises it and brings it forward: makes it a ‘fore’, A SEPARATE FRONTAL SURFACE, whereas the ground itself had no face or surface. The cutout or clipping creates edges in which the image is framed: it is the *templum* marked out in the sky by the Roman augurs. It is the space of the sacred or, rather, the sacred as a spacing that distinguishes itself (Nancy 2005: 7; emphasis my own).

The Distinct is in fact none of that, but it is not nothing. It is the thing itself: it is what is the ground of things, at the heart of all things that are, and that withdraws their sense of being into the secret from which all the senses draw their sensibility (Nancy 2005: 75). [Is it not the process of imagination: “this schematism of our understanding with regard to appearances and their form [that] is a hidden art in the depths of the human soul, whose true operations we can divine from nature and lay unveiled before our eyes only with difficulty (Kant 2008: 273; A, 142; B180-181)?”]

The Distinct and the Oscillator have a common cause. One supports the other, which in turn agitates the first. It is no more possible to distinguish them than to confuse them (Nancy 2005: 75). The *distinct* according to its etymology, is what is set apart by marks (the word refers back to *stigma*, a branding mark, a pinprick or puncture, an incision, a tattoo): what is withdrawn and set apart by a line or trait, by being marked also as withdrawn [*retrait*] (Nancy 2005: 7).

The first mark, made on a surface, destroys its virtual flatness [...] The flatness towards which Modernist painting orients itself can never be utter flatness (Greenberg, in Knives 2012: 13). The first mark is the distinct. And each image is a finite cutting out, by the mark of distinction. Each image is a singular variation on the totality of distinct sense — of the sense that does not link together the order of significations. This sense is infinite, and each variation is itself singularly infinite (Nancy 2005: 12).

Even if flatness is, for one reason or another (that of medium-specificity and self-criticism, or that of a decorative flatness that opens up into the absence of any illusion-space in an image), a space-modus of the painted image in Modernist painting, we still have to acknowledge that any kind of mark on such a flat surface, on a pictorial plane, will nevertheless lead absolutely, not only to the purity of medium specificity, but also to distinction and composition, to participation.

Traditional Western painting, especially Renaissance painting operated under the visual ideology of the congruity principle between a Newtonian box-space and the pictorial space, which had to be used in such a way, that it would create the illusion, sense or depth of a real perspectival space. The tension between real space and pictorial space in image is controlled by the figure-ground relation which regulates, through an ornamental process (that does not hypostatise itself as ornament; Hetzer 1978), ontologically and symbolically the different imaginative planes, in which schemata of representation and perception, visual expectations and aspects of a visual habitus and visual ideologies get woven into flat all-over pattern (Brett 2005: 121). When the picture plane becomes dominant over illusionistic effects than the pictorial field operates within a flatness that demands an integral planarity of all pictorial form (Masheck 1976). This ornamental space is a relational space, of rapport, that does not figure something simply in front of a ground, but with and through the ground. And, not only is its spatiality constantly re-con-figured with, through and in con-tact with the ground, but also its temporality, which is effectively an infinite series of regenerative instants. The dynamic polarity of a figure-ground, or distinct-oscillator relation, or a quadripartite tension figure-ground-nonfigure-nonground (Krauss 1994) structure — it doesn’t really matter. In the end, what HAS TO be given necessarily is the possibility of disunity in unity

(and thus, ultimately a consciousness) of a ‘pattern’ on a ground. This is what constitutes the ornamental space, while the ornamental time is epitomized in the reconfiguration of the relational elements, through movement and cessation, as constant re-actualisations-modi. This ornamental space is an intermediary, internal plane in which sur-face and space, movement, still-stand or simultaneity co-exist, defying an either-or logic, in which either part would be denied and sacrificed for the perception of the other — as is the case, for example, in the famous paradoxical Duck-Rabbit figuration, in which, one can see the duck only by denying the rabbit and vice versa. Any figuration ex-poses itself, within itself, in an ornamental space and is a ‘as-well-as’ process, a *daimonic* act, an obvious demon, a monster, — half-man, half-god.

Absolute painting in this sense might be the absolute form of self-relation mediated through a departure from the self (Nancy 2006: 226), not to reproduce, not even to reveal, but to produce the *ex-position of the subject*. To produce it: to bring it forth, to draw it out (Nancy 2006: 226), to articulate a presence or the pre-sense of presence itself (Nancy 2006: 234). In this ornamental space of the in-between [*Binnen-raum; Zwischen-raum*], presence is por-trait and drawn to itself (Nancy 2006: 237).

The atmospheric INFINITE RAPPORT, the possibility of infinite growth in all directions —which Krauss addresses through the schema of THE GRID and as a centrifugal aspect of a work — is a characteristic of ornamental space. It has to be said here that it is ornament which, contrariwise to its traditional understanding, instantiates itself as an autonomous form of perception enabling not only a sensory but also a cognitive understanding of the imaginative space of the image, and of the constant relational re-calculation in the concatenation of different modus operandi in the pictorial field: on a first, conventional level, the perspectival box-space; on a second, ‘decorative’ level, a two dimensional flat space with a very short depth created through the raising of a plane before or in front of another (ground) plane (which is behind it) without any connection between the two (and this is a case not only for decorative (wall) patterns, but also happening when only one single mark is made —even in Fontana’s case, of cuts and punches through the canvas) and, on a third level, an in-between space that implies a series of planes placed ONE IN FRONT OF THE OTHER, as much as, ONE NEXT TO THE OTHER, in an ‘as-well-as’ relation between the different planes, between figure and ground, which ARE not, but becoming distinct in a chain of differing instantiations. Strictly speaking, there is no figure and no ground, in this case, but the infinite latent potential of becoming and the instantiations of this potential in contact with a subject, a sub-jectum or a subjectivity — or whatever is now in their place. In between these space-figures, and their specific co-relative temporalities, the atrophy and hypertrophy of one or the other regulates the infinitely finite imaginative space within an image. Depth-space with its hierarchical, perspectival, fixed structure of parts-to-whole relations, and co-existence-space of all parts on the same meaning- and value level, can be simultaneously and antagonistically realised within the ontological dimension that is constitutive of the ornamental space.

Infinite rapport, parallelism of contradictory elements, all-over coverage of a flat sur-face, the equal value given to all elements and placing the primary burden of interpreting and enjoying an image, object or monument on the viewer-user (Grabar 1987: 180) are characteristics of the arabesque as an idea and ornamental form (in Grabar’s specific understanding of ORNAMENTAL: carrying beauty and giving pleasure, an essentially redundant form that trans-forms anything it touches). The figure-ground inversion and the dynamic oscillation between the two is recognized as an invention of Islamic art (not in terms of new forms, but of new ways to combine and compose already existent basic forms within their potencies for new variants), whose creative attitudes manifested best in the idea of the arabesque: “the very notion of background is open to doubt, as almost all motifs appear on the same level of perceptibility” (Grabar 2006: 20). Direct visibility and immediacy of

interpretation are being avoided and there is no clear meaning that is transmitted — the creative impulse in Islamic culture was not to tell something, but to make life and its activities more beautiful. Early Islamic art, with few exceptions, was mainly secular and popular, modest and utilitarian in character. This can be seen best in what is recognized as its main form of manifestation, in the HIDDEN architecture of interior spaces that truly exists not in the collective experience and not when seen as a monument or symbol visible to all from all sides, but through how it exposes itself in private, in the inward-turned perception, when entered, penetrated and experienced from within.



Figure 1: Sheikh Lotf Allah Mosque, Isfahan, 1618. Available from URL <http://taghribnews.com/vgliwpazrt1auz2..tt9kluckiptl.x.html#2>. [Accessed October 2013].

It is a curious peculiarity of much of Islamic art (with the notable exception of Ottoman architecture) that even its grandiose architectural compositions can best be seen and appreciated, not as a collective experience, but as a lonely and private one. The understanding of a stalactite façade with its almost infinite subdivisions cannot be shared, just as the elaboration of the endless details of a rug and of the subtleties of a miniature or the use of an ewer or of a plate are individual, private activities. [...] It is as though the point of anonymous (collective) artistic creativity were to compel the viewer or user to withdraw within himself, to meditate on his own, in effect to find his own explanation of the work of art or to discover in it an inspiration for his own life (Grabar 2006: 28).



Figure 6: Ardabil Carpet, 10.51m x 5.34m, Victor and Albert Museum. Inscription at one end of the carpet: “I have no refuge in the world other than thy threshold./There is no protection for my head other than this door./The work of the slave of the threshold Maqsud of Kashan in the year 946.”

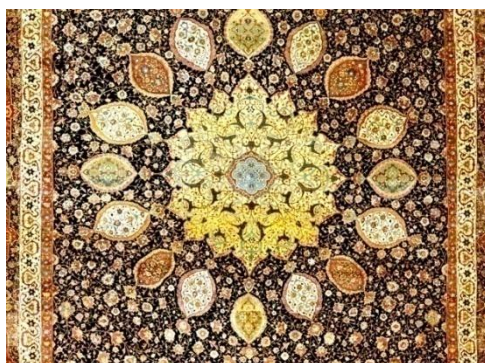


Figure 7: Detail of fig. 47.

One gets immersed in an ‘enclosed court’, with almost no outlook. In a manifold complexity of sensory perceptions coming from the sky, from an outer world, to imagine one’s own real and concrete world, and one gets arrested in this haphazard, indirect circulation that takes one by surprise in never-ending rhythmic circles and virtual sur-faces. It is not clear meaning that is transmitted, but the embodied perception of BLIND WRITING, the corporeal experience of simultaneous centrifugal and centripetal forces.

Either text is distinguished in the ground of the image and this image oscillates on the former’s face, or else the image is distinguished between the lines of the text and this text oscillates throughout. The image scintillates, and the text gives off a flat muffled sound. The image is mute, and the text crackles with noise. Or it is the inverse, at the same time, in the same movement. Each one, in the end, is the distinct and the oscillator of the other. Each is the *ekphrasis* of the other while also being its illustration, its illumination. *Ekphrasis* draws a phrase from its other, just as, from its other, illumination draws a sight. A phrase image and a sight of sense (Nancy 2005: 75).

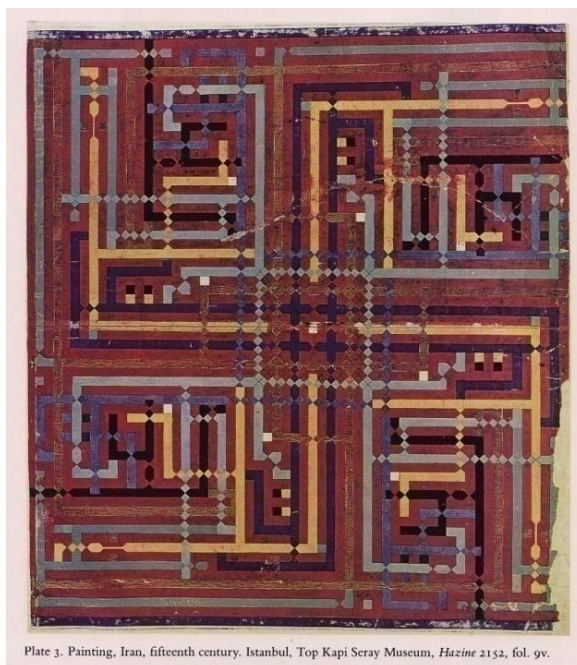


Plate 3. Painting, Iran, fifteenth century. Istanbul, Top Kapi Seray Museum, *Hazine* 2152, fol. 9v.

Figure 8: Painting on paper, 45 x 50 cm, 15th century; it contains the name of Ali rotated in four quadrants and depicted in every one of the colours used in the painting except for the red background (Grabar 1992: 47-48; 120, Plate 3.).

At this level we can modify Derrida’s assumption of writing as a signifier of the signified. In some written objects, like the Ali page (pl.3) [...] the primary signified is not the word or combinations of words that was written, but the artfulness of the

craftsman, the imagination of the artist, or an inversion of esthetic behaviour possible in a post-Bakhtian world, the pleasure of emotional, intellectual, sensuous reactions by today’s viewer, regardless of the correctness or even appropriateness for the considered work of art, projected onto the object as examples of the pleasure or involvement of all viewers since the object’s creation (Grabar 1992: 115).”

The attainment of a manifest planarity (*Flächenerscheinung*) and pictorial “farsightedness” that flattens what is seen into “optically farsighted planar impressions” (*optisch fernsichtige Flächeneindrücke* – Riegl, Masheck 2001: {167}), long before its modern and modernist rebound, was the structuring principle in medieval and Byzantine painting, as demonstrated by Riegl in *Spätromische Kunstindustrie* (1901).

When modern painting started to imagine itself as flat two-dimensional surface, through the old *text(ile)*-metaphor of the WOVEN TEXTURE, the ORIENTAL CARPET with its system of flat embellishment and colourful interlacings based on centralized motifs boxed into compartments, was the preferred analogy (to wallpaper-design). However its ornamental characteristics were gradually and increasingly neglected, until being entirely ignored in the modernist interpretation.

Cultural collages, fragments appropriated and embedded into another context are interesting traces to follow, not in order to decide upon their correctness, but in order to experience a webbing of contingent similarities and associations. The arabesque itself relies on such appropriations and imports from different cultures, regions or time periods.

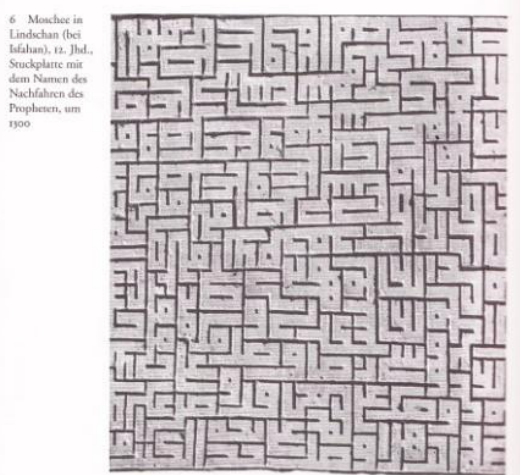


Figure 9: The Lindschan Mosque (in Isfahan), 12th century, stucco decoration repeating the name of the prophet, around 1300, (Grabar 2006: 74, fig. 6).

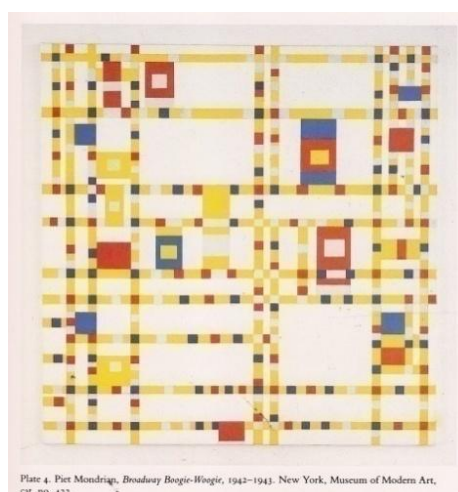


Figure 10: (Grabar 1992: 121, Plate 4.).

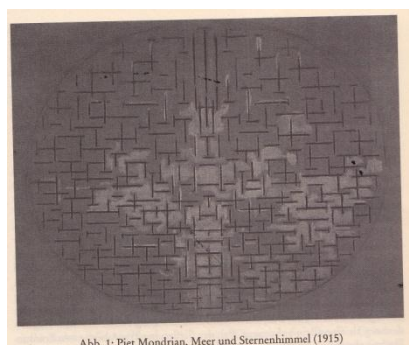


Figure 11: Piet Mondrian, *Ocean and Stars* (1915), (Hofmann (2001), 282, Illus. 1).

THE CARPET PARADIGM is a modern construct of Western painting, a model generated in Western art history from its perspective and for its specific needs and through an influence coming more from design-theory than an interest in Oriental carpets and what they manifested. Joseph Masheck published in September 1976 in *Arts Magazine* the essay entitled *The Carpet Paradigm*, which “was something of a history-of-ideas inquiry into carpet, textile and the related figures for integral flatness in surface design as they emerged out of the early modern design movement to serve the modernist cause” (Masheck 2009). The phrase was proposed to describe the enthusiasm and fascination for Oriental carpets among modern artists in the last years of the 19th century. These carpets seemed to provide a model for the pictorial space and colour combination, but also the revaluation of figure-ground rapports, which informed and preceded the 20th century theories of pictorial FLATNESS. In Post-impressionist circles, to compare painting to textiles was a singular point of praise; and the equivalence of the ‘decorative’ and the ‘fine’ arts was a topic that was gaining more and more terrain — this, until the modernist ideology of medium-specificity, self-criticism and ornament debate set in and imposed an ideological asceticism. In 1891, Oscar Wilde still wrote in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*:

In the flowerless carpets of Persia, tulip and rose blossom indeed, and are lovely to look on, though they are not reproduced in visible shape and line ... Nor, in its primary aspect, has a painting, for instance, any more spiritual message or meaning for us than a blue tile form the wall of Damascus (Brett 2005:209).

It had become commonplace to treat of carpets and tiles in the same sentence as paintings. This signified the overthrow of academic precedents — that taste could be formed in manufactures, and that *colore* had won over *disegno*. With this went the rejection of narrative values in painting, so that hitherto more humble genres such as still-life gained prestige over historical subjects; narrative meaning was to be replaced by musical analogy and symbolism [...] [and] in the avant-garde of 1900, [the motto became] [...] *ut pictura musica* [...] (Brett 2005: 210).

The conclusion has to be that any attempt to base a history of modern painting upon the development of painting’s own unique means and conditions of existence, autonomously self-generating and independent of other realms, is likely to be historically thin and theoretically restricted. Modern painting largely grew out of the nineteenth-century discourse of decoration, both in its formal means and its theory of meaning (Brett 2005: 210).

The connection between 19th century painting and modernist criticism was the Kantian assumption that aesthetic pleasure is detached from social function — *interesseloses Wohlgefallen* — which, Brett rightly writes, seems (falsely) to elevate the blue Damascus tile, while it just as falsely debases the decorative aspect of painting. Greenberg wrote about Picasso that it loads the picture with “decorative space fillers” — (Often Orientalists interpreted the ornamentalization of Islamic art as the drive of a *horror vacui*, the fear for empty space, which in Ancient Greece, in the Geometric Age, was considered a stylistic

element of all art, but which received increasingly negative connotations within the Vitruvian-Ciceronian discourse of *decorum*) — that are “cramping instead of liberating” (*Picasso at Seventy Five*, 1958, in: Brett 2005: 210) and that “collage declined into decoration” (*The Pasted Paper Revolution*, 1958, in: Brett 2005: 210). Greenberg explains his argument for the deprecation of the decorative:

“Solo works of art are meant to be looked at FOR THEIR OWN SAKE (and) WITH FULL ATTENTION, and not as adjuncts, incidental aspects, or settings of things other than themselves [...] they CHALLENGE OUR CAPACITY FOR DISINTERESTED ATTENTION in a way that is more concentrated etc. (*The Case of Modern Art*, 1959 in: Brett 2005: 210; emphasis my own).”

This seems to be the distinction between abstract art and decoration, but this argument not only presupposes a priori that the two are in fact distinct, but it also de-forms the Kantian argument which speaks about “*interesselose Wohlgefallen*” with respect to Nature, and not to culture, that is very much created for our own purpose and in which we invest a lot of interest (Brett 2005: 210-211).

A crucial juncture here: the painting that becomes in the studio and the painting that becomes outside the studio are two distinct things (or maybe one thing with a cut in the middle?) And then there is the painting in my head, which I can see, but which will never happen, and the one I cannot see, which will happen. And, without falling prey this time to any thoughtful entanglement: Is not every painting I made the ONE painting, as Balzac let Frenhofer to believe?

Painting in the studio and painting outside the studio are distinct, yet the same. Outside the studio and the art world, painting’s existence is most often intermingled with an idea of *lack* — of colour, of an object to fill an empty space, of a (taxonomic) presence in a collection, of value, of resemblance. Outside of the studio painting is an ornament of life “because, as at best in the ‘applied’ or decorative arts themselves, it magnifies (or celebrates) qualities already present in material life and work (Masheck 2009).” Painting in the studio, on the other hand, is ornament (in its traditional pejorative sense) because it:

Is but a guiled shore
To a most dangerous sea; the beauteous scarf
Veiling an Indian beauty; in a word,
The seeming truth which cunning times put on
To entrap the wisest
(Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice* in Grabar 1992: 26).

“*The seeming truth* which cunning times put on / To entrap the wisest” is very much what Krauss laid bare in the *Optical Unconscious*: the equation of painting with perception, that becomes disembodied personality, and flatness led to the repression of those aspects of painting that were impurely mixed with literature, dream, visual puns, and with other forms of depiction that were not part of ‘art’ (such as advertising), and of those works of art which used found objects and images, such as scientific illustration (Brett 2005: 211). But also, the lure of a theory that institutes itself in reaction to something that it in fact revives, a new academicism that represses its origins, and the lure of an empty historical formalism itself.

In another trail of thoughts, if painting comes from the ground of the image, from the distinct, desiring to be desirable, penetrated, touched, to find its ‘*seamă*’, its being-alike, from another world, or from the sky, then it most definitely is (also) an ornament. The distinction between (painted) image and ornament is ambiguous and not clear, and it is not fixed.

My undecidability in the plasticity – ornamental couple, the fact that I would even end up with a couple to uncouple, haunts me. And before it gets forgotten, as it often happens with most unexpected thoughts, I have to write this down here, in such a manner, that at least once in the text, something was mentioned about this: plasticity, Malabou writes (and to

adjourn my trail of thoughts in this moment to find out where exactly she did this, so that I can guard the truthful authority of my argument would be a crime and I have to live with the guilt of not committing it!) has the following significations: it designates the capacity to receive form (reception), the power to give form (donation), and the possibility of the deflagration or explosion of every form (annihilation). These were the first three significations analysed in her earlier books. Later she focused on a fourth signification, discovered through drifting in psychoanalysis, cellular biology and neuroscience, that of the creation through the irrevocable destruction of form —that of negative, destructive plasticity. In the first three meanings of plasticity form retains in itself the possibility to return to its initial form, while the destructive negative plasticity completely and absolutely destroys any such possibility, creating an entirely new identity without past or future (Alzheimer disease).

This appears now as the suture of my haunting: the ornamental is plasticity that leads to something else, it doesn't come back to itself as itself, but as other, that it, itself, is. For some this is negative and destructive, for others it is positive and it implies effective completion (that still remains transitory), even transfer of sense and meaning from one to the other. And this is why the image is ornamental: “— because the image, then, is above all the there of a beyond. It is not at all its ‘representation’: it is thinking as the effectivity of a place opening itself to presence (Nancy 2005: 125).” The ornamental is the flight home, the interval, the in-between, the “infinitesimal calculus of a passage to the limit” (Nancy 2005: 111), of the transformational mask, between an interior and an exterior of form, between faces that make a sur-face possible. Plasticity spaces itself from within or without, the ornamental slips in, it buffers, filters, fills, spaces, attracts, expels, exhales, proofs, orients, directs appetites... Plasticity implies a host or a parasite and movement, the ornamental multiplicity and spacing — and, plasticity.

Thinking about destructive plasticity in the realm of art, this permanent dislocation of one identity through which a new, completely alien identity is formed, that is neither the sublation, nor the compensatory replica of the old form, but literally a form of destruction, which remains ultimately an *adventure of form* (Malabou 2012: 18), we have to pause and reflect what this means, if it happens, how it happens and if not, what if it would happen? (Ready-mades, icons, museum-marketing objects, souvenirs, performance-objects during the performance and after, installation objects — what is the relation between art's previous and other forms of existence? Is the image image or image plus its otherness, non-image?)

Painting and text — *ut pictura poesis* — and text (Latin *texere*, to weave) and textiles, thus painting and textiles, are at least terminologically interlaced with each other since ever.³³¹ “Consider painting once again: *pingo* means above all ‘to embroider with threads of colour,’ or else ‘to tattoo’. This mixes weaving, incision, and delineation with tinting and coloration. The woven thread and the puddle, or the line and the covered surface” (Nancy 2005: 74).

Text means *Tissue*; but whereas hitherto we have always taken this tissue as a product, a ready-made veil behind which lies, more or less hidden, meaning (truth), we are now emphasizing, in the tissue, the generative idea that the text is made, is worked out in a perpetual interweaving; lost in this tissue—this texture—the subject unmakes himself, like a spider dissolving in the constructive secretions of its web. [...] (Barthes 1975: 64).³³²

³³¹ After 4th century: *contexere*, *intexio*, *contextio* literally meaning to weave together and webbing, net; an ancient metaphor, is that of thought as a thread, and of the raconteur as a spinner of yarns, whereas the true storyteller, the poet, is a weaver; and the written page becomes a *textus*, meaning cloth.

³³² The metaphoric trail of text-texture-textile-context is complicatedly intermingled with that of the *veil*, and together they belong the platonic-macrobian paradigm of the relation between philosophy and literature connected through the third paradigm of truth. Chrétien de Troyes' (1140-1190) structural concepts of *contextio* (designing technically the *ordo relations*, the structure of content in a story), *conjointure* (the harmonious

mmmm

What is interesting about the façade mosaics on the walls of the Great Mosque of Damascus, is the way in which an ornamental value is combined with an iconographic meaning. The main subject matter of the mosaics of the buildings is one which in the classical and Byzantine tradition whence it derived usually formed a background —at times meaningful, at other times ornamental —to some other topic. In Damascus the latter is absent; instead, a series of naturalistic trees is rhythmically set in the forefront. Since it appears unlikely that these trees were the main subject matter of the mosaics, they become the formal equivalents of personages who form the main subject matter in the models used by Damascus mosaicists, as for instance in the fifth-century mosaics of the church of St. George in Salonika (or Thessaloniki). A fascinating example of THE TRANSFER OF FORMAL RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THE PARTS OF AN IMAGE occurred here. The desire for a concrete meaning — paradisiac architecture — in an understandable iconographic language — the vocabulary of the classic tradition — led to the mutation of a background motif into the main subject and the transformation of the foreground motif—in the tradition the main subject — into a secondary theme (Grabar 1987: 88-89, emphasis my own).

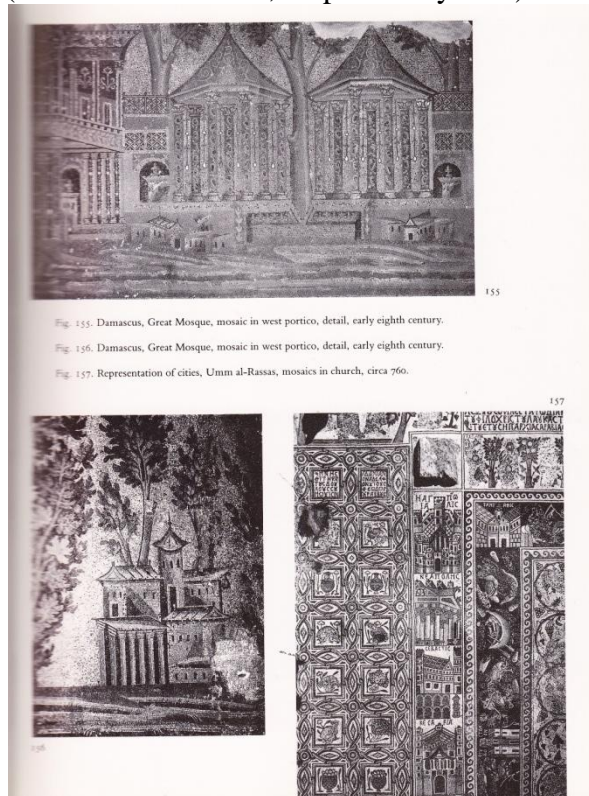


Fig. 155. Damascus, Great Mosque, mosaic in west portico, detail, early eighth century.
 Fig. 156. Damascus, Great Mosque, mosaic in west portico, detail, early eighth century.
 Fig. 157. Representation of cities, Umm al-Rassas, mosaics in church, circa 760.

Figure 12: Damascus, Great Mosque, mosaic in west portico details, early eight century (fig. 155 and 156) and representation of cities, Umm al-Rassas, mosaic in church, circa 760 (Grabar 1992: 181, Fig. 155, 156, 157).

The Great Mosque in Damascus is one of the most official buildings of early Islam and the intention behind its decoration was to have a symbolic and illustrative meaning. The avoidance of figural representations in early Islam was intentional and deliberate in the case of religious buildings and led to unexpected syntactic changes and transformations on the vocabulary of imagery borrowed and utilized by Muslim Patrons. However, the avoidance of

mélange of multipletraditions) and *velum* (referring to specific types of stories in the platonic paradigm used to represent truth): Der Dichtung Schleier aus de Hand der Wahrheit’, the *Dichtung*’s veil from truth’s hand (Goethe in von Graevenitz 1992: 235). With respect to the composition of an arabesque novel this metaphorical chain precedes and informs the literary theory of Early Jena Romanticism, and Schlegel’s ideas.

figural representations was not the avoidance of symbolic meaning, which was still attached to forms that were used. Contrariwise, symbolic significance was given to new, or adopted forms in older artistic languages for which such symbolism had not been known (Grabar 1987: 89). It was not an *a priori* doctrine that informed the creative consciousness in Early Islam, but the avoidance of representations was the result of a response to an available formal vocabulary and of a search for an identifying original imagery. Grabar's argument brings here also *coinage* as an example, and he writes that the official art of the empire avoided representations of living things, but the culture as a whole seemed at first indifferent to the problem. This indifference will turn into an opposition later on, which was not only the result of a concrete historical circumstance, but: a typologically definable attitude that sees and understands any representation as somehow identical with that which it represents, and it is its peculiarity that it immediately interpreted this potential magical power of images as a deception and as evil.

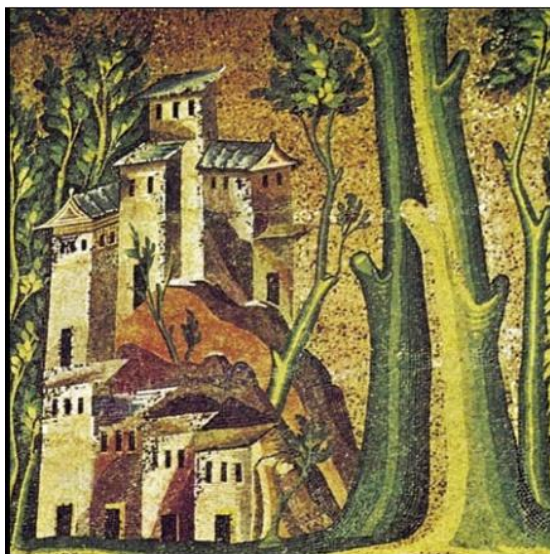


Figure 9: Damascus, Great Mosque, Syria, mosaic detail. available from URL <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/media/107279/Detail-of-a-mosaic-from-the-Great-Mosque-Damascus-Syria>. [Accessed October 2013].

Is not THE TRANSFER OF FORMAL RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THE PARTS OF AN IMAGE ONE OF THE MODI OPERANDI, if not THE MODUS OPERANDI, of contemporary painting —with all the good and bad infinities that it implies —and, of course, ‘formal relationships’ understood in its widest sense possible and not only within formalist parameters?

One has to slip in here some of Riegl's observations about Antique and Late Roman painting: Antique painting aimed to capture individual particular forms as unmediated, clear, material phenomena, in their extension in a two dimensional space. This was realised through a rhythmic composition of forms one next to each other or one above the other, but not one behind the other, in which case individual forms or parts of forms would cover each other up. A rhythmic, in-row repetition of similar or identical forms opened and created, in first place, a plane. Late Roman painting however, presented not so much individual forms as singular phenomena, but in their relation to a collective appearance and in a tri-dimensional space. This led, on the one hand, to the isolation of the individual autonomous form from the ground, or from the universal visual-plane, and on the other, to its co-relation to other individual forms. This meant also the emancipation of the ground, which gained a new function as an individual unity and creative form-force. Rhythm continued to be the principle that structured the composition of forms. The short depth of field that had been introduced added a new rhythm of colour and light/shadow play that would help to structure the rapports between what was posited (Riegl 1901: 211-217).

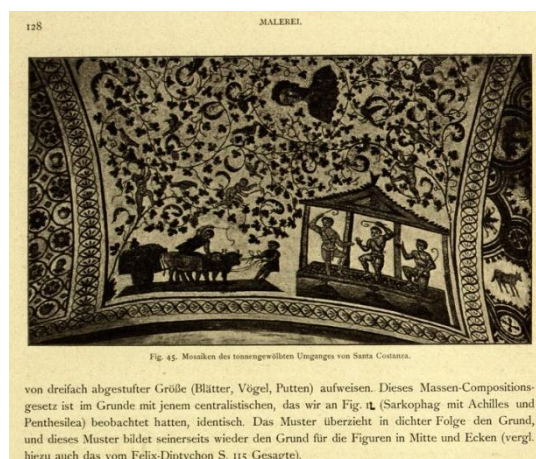


Figure 13: (Riegl 1901: 128).

What started to form and to manifests itself in early Islamic mosaic decorations, but also in other techniques (stucco decorations, wood and metal-work, ceramics, etc.) in resistance and under the temptation of Byzantine and Christian art is an attitude towards ornamentalization and an ornamental mode of creation that emphasizes visual pleasure, rhythm, ambiguity and ambivalence, and a peculiar nature of perception. This type of creativity found its right measure and determination in a spatiality and temporality in which “[...] the operative point of view is quite literally the place form which one uses, touches or views a motif displayed on a surface of something (as opposed to a place created in order to view it).” Thus, consciously or not, location and the activities connected with it (sitting or walking, for instance) determine the meaning of what one sees (Grabar 1992: 210).

Next to sensory materiality we have, thus, a choice of possible but incompatible ways of focusing. [...] the viewer-user penetrates into the object, both literally, as rugs are meant to be walked on, and perceptually, as the eye meanders its forms, to follow rinceaux or to decompose flowers. At this stage it no longer matters much whether kings and courtiers played here or whether some mystical message is encoded, for in reality it is only the sensory pleasure of seeing, feeling, composing, and recomposing that dominates. And it does so, because of a setting taken from nature that has nothing to do with any real nature, just as the people or animals are not common beasts or men in common activities. They are all in a dream, they are an imaginary fantasy. They are totally unreal and yet they are stems, leaves, animals and flowers. [...] Nothing is happening, has happened, nor will happen. It is all a dream, a fantasy, and that fantasy without event, without story, has been expressed with a stunning visual clarity in which every part, every brick or tile, every bit of inscription has been defined with utmost precision. Once caught, one cannot but wander and forget. (Grabar 2006: 240, 249).

This space and temporality is one of becoming, not of being. It is a space in which ornamental forms fulfil their intermediary agency and lead the viewer or user to behave in some way or another toward an object, image, monument. And it is one of the characteristics of ornament, as an intermediary, to transform everything it touches into something else, to lead elsewhere than towards itself (or towards itself as other).

For the secret Image of ... —[...] It is an image that must be unimagined, that is thought, if thought is a commotion, a syncope, and a bedazzlement. Its flash is not the image of the obscure, but the brilliance that sparks out from having knocked against it: a flash of darkness sliced away. A blow and a shout, a stupefying pain, a breath cut short, the wordless unimagined, in a bark, a wail, a groan, a sonorous uprising (Nancy 2005: 79).

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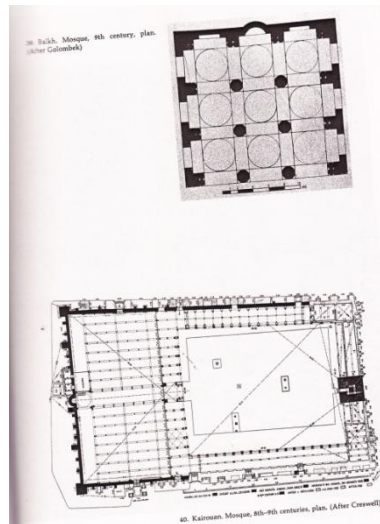


Figure 14: Balkh Mosque, 9th century, plan. Kairouan Mosque, 8th-9th centuries, plan. (Grabar 1987: Illus. 39 and 40).

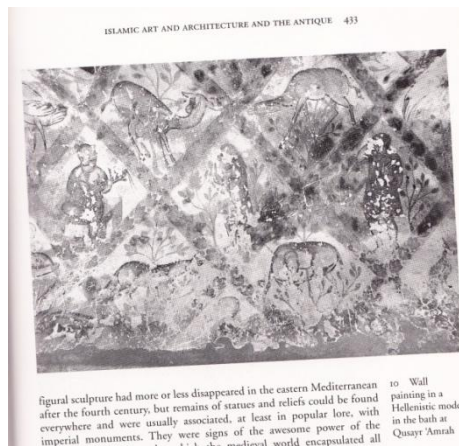


Figure 15: Wall painting in Hellenistic mode in the bath at Qusayr ‘Amrah (Grabar 2006: 433; Fig. 10).

In 1979, Rosalind Krauss published in Volume 9 of *October* magazine an essay entitled *Grids*. In this essay, she identifies the grid as the emblematic structure of the modernist ambition and as a form that relentlessly sustained itself as such, while, at the same time, being impervious to change. Its appeal relies in the demonstration that physical and aesthetic planes are co-extensive and coordinate. Its structure displays an infinite lateral spread of a single surface, over-all regularity, an order of pure relationship, and declares the pictorial field as: flattened, geometricized, ordered, anti-mimetic and anti-real. The grid claims thus not only for the pictorial field, but for the space of art in general, an autonomous and autotelic existence. Krauss identifies the grid with a hidden naked materialism, and as a matrix of knowledge that enacts the separation of perceptual field from real field. But looking at the work of artists such as Ad Reinhardt or Agnes Martin, she states that artist were attracted and devoted to the grid, which was a deterministic and hugely restrictive structure, not because they were interested in what happened in the concrete, naked materialistic order, but in the Universal, in Being, Mind or the Spirit, and thus in the Symbolic. The structure of the grid operates within its own, newly (or re-discovered) constructed spatiality and temporality: that of the infinite, autonomous and autotelic space and, respectively, its temporality that is an absolute present, that declared everything else to be the past: “in the temporal dimension, the grid is the emblem of modernity by being just that: the form that is ubiquitous in the art of our century, while appearing nowhere, nowhere at all, in the art of the last one” (Krauss, 1979: 50-59).

The grid is, to be clear about this, one of the oldest and most basic types of flatness, infinite rapport, all-overness, absolute symmetry, seriality, mirroring and uninterrupted continuity, while being also, as Krauss claims, the emblem of modernity. Emblem that is: symbol, inlaid ornamental work, embossed ornament, or insertion – to insert, to throw in (Online Etymological Dictionary). The structure of the grid on which the chequerboard pattern is based — and the Duchampian anti-retinal chessboard schema — is one of the most ancient examples of ornamental space, in which the figure-ground relation is not only annulled or levelled out, but presented as becoming and in visual form. Already in Late Roman painting, the ground, as *Intervalle*, interval/gap/cessation, became a creative individual unity with potential to form through rhythm (Riegl 1901: 210). The ground was not so much a surface behind or underneath another sur-face, but the condition of possibility for a gap, a cessation, a blank in and of rhythm — of the Distinct.



5 Detail from the mosaic pavement in the bath hall at Khirbat al-Mafjar

Figure 16: Detail of the Mosaic Pavement in the Bath Hall at Khirbat al-Mafjar (Grabar 2006: 428; Fig. 5).

The affinity of modern painting with ornament and pattern lies in the reevaluation of the ground and this does not imply that modern paintings have to be spatio-logically or semantically flat. The change from perspectival box-space to ornamental space, or the reduction of space to sur-face, led to a gradual de-substantiation and simultaneous metamorphosis of the image-figures into ornamental figures and to an optical and ontological gain in substance of the ground. Spatial homogeneity of conventional image-space is thus abrogated, and the figure-ground relation negates the depth of field and becomes an ornamental blank, interstice, gap, distance. There is a phenomenological necessity involved here: figure and ground have to be phenomenologically given as distinct from each other for the ex-tension and ex-pansion of an ornamental distance or gap to take place; so the intelligibility of the ground has to be present and this ground-intelligibility constitutes not only any surface decoration, but consciousness itself (Kirves 2012: 15). In *The Optical Unconscious*, Krauss speaks of a figure — non-figure — ground — non-ground schema, as modernist painting negated both figure and ground, and thus dialectically levelled out the difference between them.

So, what is ornamental space, ornamental temporality? Is it space that accommodates within itself non-space, blank or gap, and non-time, cessation? The fiction of what is not; the ‘what is not’ that is real? The ornamental is the imaginary production without a referent, a pure ontological creation, “the foreigner on the inside, the whole of the metabolic force that

sleeps without sleeping in what is, the very face of being that concepts cannot say without losing face (Malabou 2011: 12).

And what is the grid, this emblem of modernity? This ornamental structure that resists development, that covers up and reveals at the same time the shame of its relation to the symbolic and to the ornamental? — The character that best embodies the tragic mythology of the grid, that of not being able to act in accordance with his own thinking, is Don Juan (or Don Quixote):

His entire anxiety is to give himself Determinations. But these are denied to him, in their truth, in the first part of the book (they are windmills and flocks of sheep), because it is he who invents them, while in the second part of the book they are not real Determination for him, because everything depends on the invention of others (Noica 2009: 32).

The grid, like Don Juan, fully incorporates the Individual. Both are true individualities, characters severed from the inertia of common generality. They are not into something already given, but have provided themselves with the image of their own. Don Juan no longer wishes to be caught in the truth and prejudices of society and belief. He is a libertine and does as he pleases. The problem that both face and that leads to their tragedy is that although they are individualities, they are really into anything, as they reject any General. They are caught into an infinity for which they have no responsibility and no RAPPORT and are thus caught not even in a ‘bad infinity’, but in the IN-DIFFERENT infinity of more and more. They are both advocates for INFIDELITY, like Plato, but whereas Plato saw INFIDELITY as necessary to ascend to the Idea of Beauty, the grid and Don Juan ascend to nothing, because they are blind and refuse any general order, or are unable to see it. Don Juan loves conquest for its own sake, as the grid, in mere self-repetition or blind rotation. Don Juan falls into lower and lower determinations, into complete disorder in his ‘becoming’, only to face an inert generality, nothingness. But nothingness itself speaks in the name of order, of the general, of death. Don Juan and the grid are figures of human slaves who have forgotten all masters, even the inner one: fortress, ghetto, the Stone Guest, the General, defied by man and accepted only as a guest and not as a true master. It is Molière who introduces GUILT as a characteristic of man in the old Spanish story, and it is SHAME, Krauss writes, that the grid presides over, the shame of the indecision about the grid’s connection to matter and spirit. Both Don Juan and the grid are mythological structures that deal with contradictions and that allow contrary views to be held in some kind of para-logical suspension, through covering up the contra-diction or through repression, but not through re-solving the paradox.

Furthermore, Krauss pays attention in *Grids* to what she calls “a certain kind of accessory literature to which painting paid an increasing amount of attention” and identifies the grid as the illustrative matrix of knowledge in physiological optics. Thus, even though, “itself invisible in nineteenth-century painting”, the grid, “as an emblem of the infrastructure of vision”, became an insistent and visible feature of neo-impressionist and symbolist painting. The grid was present in symbolist painting, Krauss writes, in the form of the window, which in the associative system of symbolism, was equally opaque and transparent, as transmission and reflection, as mirror that flows and freezes; as source towards birth and, simultaneously, as freezing into stasis towards death. As grid or window, as a matrix of ambi- and multi-valence, the grid is present even where one does not expect it, Krauss writes, in the works of Matisse, who “admits openly to the grid only in the final stages of the *papiers découpés*”.

The grid (like the image) is “fully, even cheerfully, schizophrenic, because it portends the centrifugal and centripetal existence of the work of art” — however, I believe that the precariousness of being of the work of art is something ontologically constituent for the work of art as such and does not reside in the grid as a structure to portend to this. It is rather the mode of being that the work of art is, that is cheerfully schizophrenic: beyond-the-frame-

attitude and within-the-frame-attitude; engulfment, implosion and petrification; complete isolation from and complete merger with the world.

Krauss ends her essay with the conclusion that one has to interpret the grid not from a historical perspective, that is in terms of development, because, as she stated in the beginning of her argument, the grid resists any development, but from an etiological psychological condition, which is different from the historical one as it is not progressive, but rather “an investigation into the conditions for one specific CHANGE -the acquisition of disease to take place”, “into the background of a chemical experiment, asking when and how a given group of elements came together to effect a new compound or to precipitate something out of a liquid (Krauss 1979: 50-64).” The lack of development does not imply a lack of quality (in the same way as a malady can be creative). And thus the grid is also anti-developmental, anti-narrative and anti-historic.

Conclusion

Traditional Western painting was the art form par excellence. It was a way to an ideal higher state, a ‘window to another world’, something to be transcended through contemplation. It had a narrative and symbolic meaning. Traditionally, painting implied frontality between viewer and a painting on the wall that constituted an opening into a metaphysical space. And even after all modernist and avant-garde moves to challenge and disrupt a traditional understanding of painting, after all postmodernist attempts to deconstruct and re-construct it, painting, or rather paintings in plural, still remained primarily a visual form of art (subjected to truth’s paradigms).

The idea of the arabesque remembered here is not a schema of a visual revelation, but the perceptive, as-well-as intermediary of donation and reception of form in re-presentation. In it, the infinite plenitude of the one manifests itself suggestively (directly, not symbolically). The arabesque confronts sight with a kaleidoscopic challenge that no longer allows it to linger on details or individual forms, nor to be able to take in the whole image at once, there is no ideal operative view point anymore. The arabesque is an avoidance of immediate and quick interpretation, of immediate and collective apperception of interpretable phenomena. Visual perception is intensified by the excessive sensuousness of the interiorization of aesthetic experience. Complex and rich interlacings protect the mysteries and intimacies of thoughts and images. The fascination with the subtleties of detail, the elaboration of endless details are best explored and experienced in private. Confronted with arabesques, one has the feeling as though the creative impulse has been driven by a desire to compel the viewer or reader to withdraw within her/himself, to meditate on her/his own, to discover meaning for her/himself and for her/his own life.

Krauss brings to the sur-face the relation of the grid to the symbolic, which modernist painting tried to (un)consciously hide away. But she does not look at the grid in terms of an ornamental structure. Nakedly displayed as symbolic structure, as myth, matrix of knowledge, as window or as schizophrenic sur-face, defined as an *emblem*, Krauss does not refer to what remains repressed even for her, the inlaid ornamental work, the embossed ornament that determines its character. The grid is the most basic and oldest schema of the ornamental, and also of the arabesque. The grid is an ornament — in which pure (mathematical) presentation and aesthetic ex-position can be displayed on the same value plane. And the conclusion has to be, in Brett’s words, that any attempt to base a history of modern painting upon the development of painting’s own unique means and conditions of existence, autonomously self-generating and independent of other realms, is likely to be historically thin, theoretically restricted and, I believe, a less interesting and empty formalist game.

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