

# Manikins Wobbling Towards Dismemberment: Art and Religion – a State of the Union.

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At the end of a volume such as this it seems appropriate to make some considered speculations not only upon the themes that arise from such a collection, but also upon what they say about the future of the interface between Religion and Art and a society dedicated to their study.

Although over many conferences the Society for the Study of Religion, Literature and the Arts (RLA) has shown itself to be a resolutely international movement, with guests appearing at conferences from around the world, these events themselves have never wandered far from Sydney; a place that acts as the permanent host city for our society. This might seem unfair to those who live beyond the bounds of the Emerald City, but it does demonstrate that an examination of the interface between artistic and religious dimensions finds itself most at home here with a willing supply of artists and scholars to support a continuing program of events. This *gemütlichkeit* ('at-homeness') in Sydney is a reflection of who we are as a thinking and art-experiencing society.

As a nation, Australian social discourse is notorious for keeping discussions of religious matters off the national agenda. This is partly due to a general phobia that Western nations share,<sup>1</sup> but a long history of inter-religious tension in Australia, not completely forgotten, assists the proscription. The RLA thus becomes a place where scholars of religion (often misconceived by the general public as theologians) and artists who investigate the spiritual (occasionally mistaken for cranks) can be understood (at last!).

It is, however, a difficult understanding to fathom. Beyond Andrew McGarrity's introduction to this volume, I would have it that the darkness of the previous papers lay around the fields we are labouring in, as scholars and artists continue to wrestle with the concepts of

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<sup>1</sup> This absence of religious discourse has befuddled many commentators including Theodore Roszak, *Where the Wasteland Ends*, Faber and Faber, (London, 1972) p xxx.

'religion' and 'art'. We know we have a 'gut feeling' for what is and what is not religious, yet a satisfying and universally applicable definition is a complex construction that must take into account 'religion' as a word first brought into use during the rise of a European empire to describe disparate belief systems around the Mediterranean. It is a word that was simply not needed in other civilizations such as India, China and Australasia until very recently. Similarly, 'art' is a spider's web of possible definitions. Again, we know what 'art' is at a non-cogitative level, mainly by how it is framed, but our own working definitions reveal just as much about our cultural, social and economic backgrounds as they do about a universal ideal of 'art'. Furthermore, religious groups, artists and scholars are continually working to expand the field; Duchamp turns a *pissoir* upside down at the beginning of the twentieth century, the prophet Raël makes cloning a religious pursuit at its end,<sup>1</sup> and somewhere in between Coomaraswamy declares that the two fields are essentially the same,<sup>2</sup> whilst a dozen others contradict him to varying degrees.<sup>3</sup> Given all this, is there anything that can be *really* said about art and religion?

The answer may be a little way off but the RLA is providing real meeting grounds for solutions that the world will want to hear, but they are answers that must be pan-cultural if they are to be universally useful.

In addition to this volume, where, as McGarrity has noted, much blurring of categories has taken place, the RLA was eager in 2003 to bring Muslim Australians and scholars on Islam into the general project of our society. Whereas in East Asian thinking the lines between art and religion are truly blurred, in the Islamic mindset the two concepts of 'religion' and 'art' *must* be dealt with quite distinctly. So distinct, in fact, that from the very start of the faith, the prophet Muhammad laid down very clear distinctions between Allah *the* Creator and other lesser creators (poets, painters, musicians and sculptors) who, on The Day of Judgement, will be asked to breathe

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<sup>1</sup> See, Raël, *Yes to Human Cloning*, Raelian Foundation (Vaduz, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *The Transformation of Nature in Art*, Dover Publications, (New York, 1956) p62.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Paul Weiss, *Religion and Art*, Milwaukee, (Marquette University Press, 1963) p1, Clive Bell, *Art*, New York, (G.P.Putnams, 1958) p63.

life into the forms they have created. Similarly, in the *Hadith*, the prophet of Islam amplifies the attitude of the *Qur'an* when he provides this very backhanded compliment for one of Arabia's finest poets; 'Imr al-Qais [is] the most poetical of the poets, and their leader into hell-fire.'<sup>1</sup> So strong is the separation of art and religion in Islam that the artist must operate in a constant state of 'double-think', or else a serious, albeit unofficial, compromise must exist between the spiritual and the artistic. The works of Sufi poets such as Hafiz, for example, have made them simultaneously national heroes and suspicious marginal figures. In this way, Islam serves the project of our society in a way almost diametrically opposed to the more relaxed attitudes of East and South Asia.

The 2003 special conference *From Culture to Multiculture* organized hand-in-hand with the Turkish-Australian community proved that an examination of culture in a multicultural milieu (with an emphasis on the Islamic) can provide a whole new dimension of study for our society. This will be shown most clearly in the upcoming edition of papers collected from this conference, which will be due out in 2005.

The other direction the RLA will take in seeking universal answers to the relationship of 'art' and 'religion' is in a further examination of the basic elements of mainstream Australian culture. This is why the 2004 conference will focus on popular culture under the title, *The Buddha of Suburbia; Art, Religion and Popular Culture*. Already, Carole Cusack in her paper for this volume and other commentators such as Victoria Nelson, in her *The Secret Life of Puppets*, are making clear how the nexus between religion and art is affecting us both right now and into the future through both popular culture and technology.

In fact, Nelson provides a fascinating glimpse into a dark side where religion and art become almost incestuous interdependent enabling devices:

[d]uring the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as Western culture moved more gradually into its present postreligious intellectual

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<sup>1</sup> A.J. Arberry, *The Seven Odes*, MacMillan, (London, 1917), p27.

## *The Dark Side*

stance the supernatural was increasingly consigned to popular entertainments, where it carried on its circumscribed role.<sup>1</sup>

Nelson demonstrates how cult writers such as H.P. Lovecraft, Will Self and others, and film directors such as Lars von Trier and their fellow cinema stylists (in particular the Neo-expressionists) are becoming our *only* conduit to the spiritual because of the way they are able provide an experiential space where our double-thinking minds permit us access to ‘other’ worlds. Just as the Muslim artist must somehow deal with the *Qur’anic* censure and the Prophet’s attitudes to the (lesser) human creator, so too today’s secular artist must somehow compromise on the even more powerful ‘modern’ proscription against the spiritual. With a long heritage of puppets and other automata in mind, Nelson suggests that

the machine... is the enabling conceit that gives us, as rationalists, permission to journey to the transcendental otherworld as a fantasy experience without having to acknowledge a direct contradiction to our worldview.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, this nexus between cultures, modernity and technology becomes essential to a clear understanding of what the relation between ‘religion’ and ‘art’ means at this moment.

It is a relationship with a serious dark side, one that suggests firstly that the spiritual will only be able to be accessed in the future through fiction or works of art until, secondly, some kind of paradigm shift occurs. It is a shift that Nelson suggests will be a swing from the prevailing Aristotelian materialism currently dominating social attitudes and the reassertion of a more Platonic comprehension of the world. The future, as Nelson hopes it shall be, will grow out of the dark aperture of an art-which-is-supernatural into a light that is *neo-Neoplatonic*.

Interestingly, Gabrielle Carey has written in this volume that

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<sup>1</sup> Victoria Nelson, *The Secret Life of Puppets*, Harvard University Press (Cambridge, Mass., 2001) p21.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p21.

## *Manikins Wobbling*

the trouble with human beings who have been purged of the dark side is that they also seem to run the risk of being purged of creativity. It is probably a cliché to suggest that art and creativity need to draw on the dark side in order to flourish.<sup>1</sup>

And similarly, the creative impulse that good academics rely on to interpret a culture must also draw on darkness or risk being purged of both interest and relevance. (As an aside: although many depreciate the postmodern project as a highly interpretive and overly sceptical development, it has nevertheless provided its own dark matter against which the reality of our lives can be more clearly established.)

It is in the habits of our society members, the habits of living in Sydney, of being able to organise conferences and bring in various cultures from the multicultural mix of this town, that we are able to address a series of very large questions. Access to these questions will come not through those apertures to otherworlds we are constantly presented with in childhood, whether it is the backless wardrobe in C.S.Lewis's *Narnia* series or the subtle knife that cuts openings between worlds in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*. The real aperture is the space in-between these worlds; that is, the 'enabling conceit' itself, the dark space within which the puppets and automatons, robots, cyborgs, fictional characters, installations, sculptures and canvasses appear to us and affect our lives. 'Art' and 'religion' are also such enabling devices; two words that are like manikins wobbling towards dismemberment, but never completely dismembered. Wrapped in their struggle, they pose for the future of the RLA the promise of a resolution, and towards this resolution, the present volume has set a sturdy foundation.

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<sup>1</sup> Gabrielle Carey, 'Literature and Religion as Rivals', p12 of the present volume.