

How does Witkin manipulate the connotations surrounding death, religion and disability to reach the sublime?

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Introduction

Photographic representation is the incarnation or revelation of a transition between the material and immaterial; being good and evil, life and death, sacred and pagan. It is almost a manifestation of a visual theology that allows the visible world access to the invisible world¹

The quote above demonstrates the main direction this research workbook will be taking: looking at the concept of producing the act of sublimation. We set about to interrogate the following: does Witkin employ the connotations surrounding death, disability and religion in such a manner as to bring about sublimation? Or does his work reach the grotesque and nothing more?

In the first chapter, we will analyse the way social and psychological landscape has been renegotiated to produce a new social order, drawing upon research executed by psychologists Herman Feifel² and David Moller³, and the implications of dealing with death in such an order. We will look at the photographs 'Harvest' (Fig. 1) and 'Feast of Fools' (Fig. 2) for the examination of how Witkin manipulates the connotations behind the social order to create an ambiguity within his work.

We shall go onto consider the ideology behind death in religion, with a specific analysis of the photograph 'Harvest' (Fig. 1). We examine the explicit and implicit way Witkin draws upon Moller's and Nietzsche's separate theories of how four social trends have led to a taboo on death, and that God is dead. We will explore Witkin's outspoken desire to reach 'the sacred' through his work, investigating how such a goal might be achieved, and Witkin's motivations for prioritising this particular ideological element.

In chapter two, we will interrogate the way Witkin controls the social code of the gaze, pulling in research from Jacques Lacan. We shall carry out an investigation to the implications this has on how his work is viewed, and the way in which society thinks that he is exploiting his models, we will therefore examine the motivation behind why he chooses to mask his models. The work of Mary Duffy has significant reference to Witkin's work, briefly examining how her work transgresses boundaries relating to the gaze.

The next section looks at how Witkin places his disabled models within the context of art history, pieces that depict beauty, therefore an analysis of Witkin's photograph 'Woman who was once a bird' (Fig. 4) will be carried out. Looking at theories by Kant and Lacan, we will examine how Witkin's work breaches the social constriction of the definite and beautiful articles to become something ambiguous and grotesque. Leading onto a study of the relationship between religion and disability, and how Witkin wants to reach God through producing work that is sublime.

¹ Germano Celant, Witkin, Thames and Hudson, 1995, pg.10

² Herman Feifel, Meaning of death, McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1965

³ David Wendall Moller, Confronting death: values, institutions, and human mortality, Oxford University Press, 1996

Chapter one: Death

This opening chapter explores the argument for the hypothesis that Witkin is blurring the social boundaries surrounding death, pushing the work through the context of abjection into the realm of the grotesque. Along with an examination of how religion impinges upon our perception of death, and how in turn this can be used to reach the sublime.

Social boundaries and death

In 'Purity and Danger'⁴ Mary Douglas explains how a pollutant has a potential power. Douglas argues that pollution and impurity are direct products of disorder and therefore oppose social order. Depending upon type, pollution either reinforces the social order or terminates it. In either case, the social order is surpassed or transcended, its elements redefined and its boundaries blurred as a result. The relationship between order and disorder is mirrored in the relationship between the pure and the impure. These two elements are polar opposites, which form tension and interruptions. The objects 'pure' and 'impure' are definitely structured, because they rely upon a series of conditions that make them so. Abstract photography is abstract photography because it is identifiable, generically definite from, for example, documentary photography: it is separable. This separation causes tension when subjective terms like 'purity' are used to describe non-universal elements. Fine art photography is fine art photography, but what then is abstract photography? It is at this point – at the intersection between objectivity and subjectivity that ambiguity occurs, being neither structured nor disordered. It is within this 'formless' area where danger exists; this power can be harnessed to reinforce order, or destroy it.

I intend to explore if Witkin is intentionally blurring the boundaries, creating work that will appear offensive to the current order of experience. Through this blurring of boundaries he will distort this parameter between the human and the sacred.

External boundaries, internal lines

Douglas states that social boundaries are defined by social structure and personal experience, resulting in a framework of flexible limits⁵. Demonstrative of the interaction between what is considered acceptable and what is deemed unacceptable, social boundaries have been and continue to be subject to constant renegotiation of segregation by both society working as an independent and subconsciously self-organised group, and by often self-elected socio-cultural critics. In Witkin's photograph 'Harvest' (Fig. 1) an internal factor is highlighted, as we observe a physical representation of his personal and subjective views on death. Witkin has said

⁴ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger – An analysis of the concepts of pollution and taboo*, Routledge, 1966

⁵ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger – An analysis of the concepts of pollution and taboo*, Routledge, 1966, pg 96

that when he was young he saw a car accident in which a girl's head was decapitated, and that it rolled towards him. He bent down to touch it before he was taken away⁶. This experience proves to be an anchor point within his work, whereby he negotiates his concept of the transition from life into death through his photographs, he states that,

If I love working with death, it's because even in death I find this power of reality.⁷

The "even" suggests that he considers death to be an irreality or an artefact of impotent reality; his views on death are disconnected from the way in which the vast majority of society thinks.

In terms of the external boundaries relating to Witkin's work the boundaries deal with how society is sterilising itself of the issues surrounding death in Western culture. Throughout history each society has defined their own rituals in order to deal with death. From the 5th to 19th century European civilisations confronted death on a regular basis. The people within the community defended themselves against the threat of death through the community, spirituality and ritual. These elements formed a network of help, and provided a source comfort to the dying and their families.⁸

The invention of photography enabled people to take post-mortem photographs, in order to keep a momentum of the deceased, who would be positioned to make them appear as if they were sleeping for the photograph. This trend was generally carried out across America and Europe although each family/individual had their own way of dealing with the deceased. America treated corpses with concern and casualness, whilst Europe existed in a state between the two; they were more comfortable about photographing the dead than the British, but more disinclined to talk about the subject than Americans. People then became aware that you could contract infectious diseases from dead bodies, and whilst this stopped many Europeans from taking photos America still continued the fashion. It was not until the 1890's that post-mortem photographs became less common, this was due to a decrease in the price of photographic equipment, combined with an increase in gross domestic product for the average working family meant that the opportunities for owning one's own camera increased dramatically – to the extent that professional photographers, whilst they still had their place in the social apparatus, were demoted in favour of the personal experience and empowerment of taking one's own pictures.

During the twentieth century the social and psychological landscape was being further renegotiated in terms of its boundaries, Herman Feifel states that these changes resulted in a "taboo on death"⁹. This meant that funerals became a personal experience for those close to the deceased¹⁰. David Moller theorizes that there are four social trends that have allowed this to transpire; firstly the disintegration of the

⁶ Chris Townsend, *Vile Bodies – Photography and the crisis of looking*, Prestel, 1998, pg 46

⁷ www.horvatland.com

⁸ David Wendall Moller, *Confronting death: values, institutions, and human mortality*, Oxford University Press, 1996, pg. 4

⁹ Herman Feifel, *Meaning of death*, McGraw- Hill Book Company, 1965, pg. xii

¹⁰ David Wendall Moller, *Confronting death: values, institutions, and human mortality*, Oxford University Press, 1996, pg 15

community, empowering individualism. Secondly the removal of dominant religious structures, such as those propagated by the Catholic and Protestant churches and their replacement with a secular belief system, engineered from an economic base, where empowerment of the individual is furthered by the creation of his/her own individualistic belief schema. Thirdly, an increase in materialism and the effect that this has had on society, and finally the everyday use of science and technology.¹¹ All of this has created a society that has not only become afraid of death, but has engineered a way of shielding ourselves from the reality of it. Today's social structure has evolved to a state whereby we do not

Refer to death as death, but instead employ cumbersome and elaborate euphemisms such as "passed away"...or "departed"¹²

We have built an entire industry through which we safeguard ourselves from the veracity of death, allowing others to prepare the body and to make the deceased appear as though they are not dead but asleep.

When writing about Witkin, critic Cynthia Chris¹³ observed that, as a culture, we have become bombarded with the imagery of death; through the media, it has become a drug to which we are numb. Witkin's response to this realisation – to this transcendence of the normal and accepted cultural status quo – is to confront the viewer with a higher dosage, one that incorporates a multiplicity of symbolic references in a manner that represents the 'Other'.¹⁴ In my opinion art, in part, is responsible for this attitude towards death. Classical scenes depict deaths of ancient heroes, or the Victorian Age's painting of child death that shocked the Victorians middle and upper classes. Art has been fascinated by death, most especially by honouring the dead through lifeless statues, which represent the 'living dead', departed. David, Venus de Milo, the busts of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle – death and the idea of combating it have been at the forefront of art because of art's power of immortalising the individual. Death seeps through art, plaguing it...why? Because art is the representation of life, and it is at its most potent when it is a representation of life as we do not see it.

The photograph 'Feast of Fools' (Fig. 2) depicts food and body parts, the viewer is aware that Witkin has sought out these cadavers to create this tableaux, much in the style of 17th century Flemish still life painting. Feast of fools was a medieval feast in which young people in the community would play major parts; the feast would often mock the highest members within the church, for example the pope or bishop. The Christian reinterpretation would include the saints as being fools. The idea of the feast was to reverse the normal order; the epiphany is in the story of Jesus' birth with the kings bowing down to baby Jesus, and according to iconography being blessed by him, represented in Witkin's photograph by the dead baby. In doing so Witkin has

¹¹ David Wendall Moller, *Confronting death: values, institutions, and human mortality*, Oxford University Press, 1996, pg. 44

¹² Herman Feifel, *Meaning of death*, McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1965, pg 17-18

¹³ Liz Heron and Val Williams, *Illuminations women writing on photography from the 1850's to the present*, I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1996, pg. 283

¹⁴ Liz Heron and Val Williams, *Illuminations women writing on photography from the 1850's to the present*, I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1996, pg 290

confronted the viewer with a social boundary, this photograph as well as other photographs similar in context, work against the given order, it places the viewer in a position where they are forced to look at death without a screen. This screen protects the viewer; through implementing devices society has created to place between itself and the reality of death, for example using euphemisms to say that someone has died. Julia Kristeva states that the border where death is placed begins to impinge upon everything else, to such an extent that an individual no longer has the power to expel, as it is them that become expelled in the eyes of death.¹⁵ Witkin is confronting the viewer with this reality and by doing so his photographs become abject. Kristeva goes on to state that

It is thus not a lack of uncleanness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, and order. What does not respect borders, positions, and rules? The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite¹⁶

By confronting the viewer with an image that goes against the social boundaries the photograph becomes ambiguous. In theological terms ambiguity has the power to distort the relationship between the human and the sacred. In the next section I will explore how Witkin blurs boundaries, and what impact this has upon human and the sacred.

Religion and death

I will be examining the photograph 'Harvest' (Fig.1) in order to investigate how Witkin merges the ideology behind death and religion. Witkin is known for extracting certain images from Western art history, in this case he has been influenced by Guiseppe Arcimboldo's image 'Summer' (Fig. 3). Arcimboldo himself created images built up of vegetation to represent human faces. He uses this image as a building block to construct a photograph that encompasses his religious views, for which it has been said,

He considers his art as a vehicle for his individual purification and entreaties will be offered to God on the divine altar when he will die.¹⁷

The image, also known as 'Death Mask', depicts a human face attached to a headdress made of vegetation, at the bottom of the headdress are roots of vegetables which then leads up to the fruit and vegetables, eventually reaching the front where the face is, the face in turn being connected to the roots. This immediately gives the notion of nature's cycle through combining a trio of symbolic objects relating to life, death and time, in doing so Witkin plays with the notion of tension; the juxtaposition of life and death, of beauty against the grotesque. As Witkin was brought up under the Catholic religion he will be aware that the Bible states that death is the payment for sin, as well

¹⁵ Julia Kristeva, Powers of Horror – An essay on Abjection, Columbia University Press New York, 1941, pg. 3-4

¹⁶ Julia Kristeva, Powers of Horror – An essay on Abjection, Columbia University Press New York, 1941, pg. 4

¹⁷ www.izinsizgosteri.net

as the fact that the harvest festival was a sacrifice to God, whereby the farmers would give the best of their crops, this can be seen in the account of Cain and Abel. The fact that Witkin has used a human face at the front could symbolise that the man is ready to be harvested, with the wholesome amount of vegetation behind him as his sacrifice to get into heaven.

Witkin's photograph collapses the boundaries between life and death, by reanimating the corpse; this allows the image to become timeless and somehow alive. Its as if Witkin has suspended death not only by the fact that you don't know whether or not this man will go to heaven, leaving him at his time of judgement, but also through toning and scratching the negative. In creating this new reality where both life and death are suspended Witkin begins to disturb the viewer, they recognize the elements as being part of their reality, but become insecure as it is not what they thought. They begin to look more closely, drawn to it through a sense of abjection, and a predisposition towards death, known as the death drive¹⁸.

Referring to David Moller's theory, discussed fully in the section External boundaries and internal lines, specifically about the removal of dominant religions, as well as how we render death to be meaningless, the photograph questions the viewer as to what they think will happen to them when they die. Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche concluded that when an individual dismisses the Christian faith, they then lose the right to Christian morality, part of which is having the knowledge that you will not cease to exist when you die. Nietzsche goes on to say that a non-religious person can have nothing of Christianity, and that they are left with nothing¹⁹. This means that a non-religious person could find this work more abject as they do not have the comfort of a religion telling them that there is more to live, Kristeva supports this within her work stating that

The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life.²⁰

Grotesque as a means of reaching the sublime

By blurring the boundary between life and death Witkin has rendered the image as being grotesque. The grotesque is defined as being a disturbance within the ordered structure of experience, and by encapsulating both life, through the headdress of vegetation in the image 'Harvest', and death with the face of the dead man, Witkin is succeeding in disturbing this structure. Through this he has produced an image that is offensive to the ordered experience, that being a denial towards the reality of death, and has created critical analysis of where the social boundaries exist. This is unlike the sublime, which is something that exceeds human understanding, as it is at the point where we begin to realise our own limitations that we get a sense of failure, this

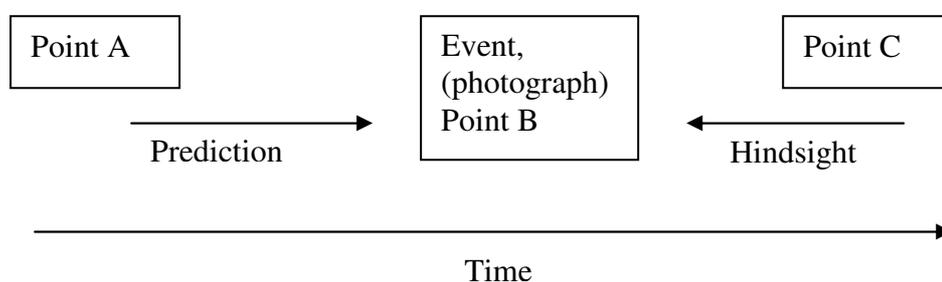
¹⁸ The death drive is a Freudian term, to describe the characteristic inherit in all of us, a drive towards death, destruction and non-existence.

Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, W.W. Norton & Co., 1990, pg. 46-49

¹⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of Idols and Anti-Christ*, Penguin Classics, 2003, pg. 136

²⁰ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror – An essay on Abjection*, Columbia University Press New York, 1941, pg. 4

in turn becomes a negative pleasure²¹. In relation to this image the viewer is confronted with something that is finite, that being human life, yet through this the viewer can experience something infinite, something that is beyond the human scale, the continual cycle of life and death. The diagram below shows the arc of sublimation, Witkin is at point C whereby he can look back at the planning and completion of the photograph 'Harvest' (Fig. 1). The photograph as it is being produced and at the time of completion is at a transcendent point, and has the potential for reaching the sublime. However, Witkin's point of reference would by default, be so far removed from the original perspective that a comparative understanding becomes difficult if not impossible to accomplish. This explains why society has difficulty in understanding the sublime quality of his work, as their perspective is at point A, whereby they can only envisage what it would be like to experience the photograph, as well as what it felt like to go through the process of constructing the headdress and to find the dead mans head.



(Diagram 1)

The grotesque challenges the social order, by introducing the chaotic element of nonconformity. This can develop into two areas both of which subvert boundaries: the rejection of something, or the sublime disruption of existing boundaries, yet both are equal, as they go against the grain and are points of interruption. Witkin's work can be seen to be disrupting the boundaries in order to reach the sublime through the use of the grotesque; Nietzsche supports this by saying that through the death of God people would be able to realise their potential creative abilities, as the restrictions of religiously governed moral law would no longer apply.²² This would alter how the grotesque was viewed; instead of being a destructive force it would have the power to produce a medium whereby the sacred could be present. This means that the once formless subject acquires form, becoming a system, which produces an end product - in this case an image that seeks to reach the sacred. There is therefore a relationship between the way boundaries and the grotesque is formed, and the boundary structure and the experience of God, which parallels the formation and imposition of religiously informed moral law.

Witkin has combined death and religion within many of his other images, one piece depicts a masked man on a cross, with monkeys on smaller crosses behind him (Fig. 7), another shows two halves of a mans head kissing (Fig. 8), perhaps alluding to

²¹ Although the sublime can inhibit some pain, through the realisation of human limitations, it also produces an element of pleasure, one that can be described as a negative pleasure, which is derived from the respect for the object. The person experiences this negative pleasure as they are presented with the limitations of themselves when compared to that of the meta-man.

George Hartley, *The abyss of representation*, Duke University Press, 2003, pg.35

²² http://culturemagazine.ca/cinema/is_god_dead_at_the_mall_of_america_.html

Saint Francis who kissed the leper. Yet for all the symbolism of Catholicism in Witkin's work it does not establish the fact that the sole purpose is to interpret its themes, it could be seen as a link to his interest in Western art history. Witkin's work appears to have an undercurrent of despair, coupled with a pessimistic outlook on Catholicism, leading to an ambiguous search for the sacred.

Chapter Two: Disability

This chapter aims to link chapter ones evaluation of how the grotesque can be used to reach the sublime, yet this time it will be through an interrogation of how Witkin plays with the social code to explore issues dealing with disability.

In the book 'The creature's time forgot' author David Hevey²³ explains that impairment is when a person is missing part of or all of a limb, or that the limb itself is defective. Hevey goes on to claim that disability is actually a social state;

The disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organisation which takes no or little account of people who have physical impairments and this excludes them from the mainstream of social activities.²⁴

When Witkin first started taking photographs of disabled people there was very little coverage of disabled people in the media, they were not put into commercial adverts, as they were not seen to represent the wider market. The only time you would see disabled people in magazines would be for health sections or health magazines whereby they would be used to demonstrate a new drug or procedure to cure or enhance their lives. However, the disabled person themselves would be oppressed by the company promoting these drugs / procedures, the photographs present the viewer with the disabled peoples identity, yet it is the identity they have been given by the company to promote their product rather than there own. In reference to Witkin's work it could be said that he has done a similar thing to the companies, he has presented the disabled in order to achieve his own agenda: reaching the sacred. In the social climate at the time, the 1980's, Witkin's work goes against the social order by actually photographing disabled people in the first place. Disabled people where treated as being sub-human, outcasts of society, this Douglas would call 'dirt'.²⁵ It is possible for social boundaries and experiences to go through a series of changes, there lies within this a danger, as this state is neither a new order nor an old one, and it is shapeless.

Today's society is in such a state, it has progressed to a point whereby disabled people are neither fully accepted by society nor cast off, and they are in an area of indeterminate state. This has occurred through several factors; a discrimination act enables disabled people to have rights within the work place, promoting independence and a greater sense of self; the media has played an important role through showing adverts with disabled people in them. In 2008 there was a TV program entitled 'Britain's missing top model' where disabled women had the opportunity to become a

²³ David Hevey, *The creatures time forgot*, Routledge, 1992

²⁴ David Hevey, *The creatures time forgot*, Routledge, 1992 pg. 9

²⁵ 'Dirt' can be described as a 'matter out of place', implying two conditions: a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order. Therefore dirt is basically an object/subject that exists in a system, or order, that classify it as this. The order of experience rejects the given subject; this Douglas calls 'pollution behaviour'.

Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An analysis of the concepts of pollution and taboo*, Routledge, 1966, pg.165

model; questioning what beauty is, and helping to redefine it. Yet, despite all this there is still a lack of definition within the boundary, allowing for the ambiguous to become suspended along the lines of social order. I will go on to prove that Witkin's work is along this boundary line, whilst he uses it for his own purposes he is also a cog in pushing for the independence of disabled people.

Gaze

Jonathan Schroeder notes that

To gaze implies more than to look at - it signifies a psychological relationship of power, in which the gazer is superior to the object of the gaze²⁶

When looking at Witkin's photographs it is important to know that there are three different types of gazes involved, firstly the gaze of the spectator, this is specific to each person as it is subject to experiences and the social order in which they reside. Witkin's gaze is the most important as he is able to manipulate the gaze of the spectator as well as that of the third gaze; the model. Witkin's gaze has evolved throughout his life, it has been influenced by his childhood experience of seeing his grandmother who only had one leg which was gangrenous²⁷, therefore his behaviour towards the disabled is different to that of the majority of society, as he has become immunized to it. Freak shows played a significant part in forming Witkin's perspective on disability as he frequented Coney Island shows when he was younger²⁸. He would be aware of the archive of not only performance art by the disabled, but also of the non-disabled gaze. In the United States freak shows exploited disabled people, and labelled them as social outcasts, they even produced postcard photographs of their performers allowing them to capitalize even further.²⁹

Performance art from disabled feminist artists has flourished since the 1970's, it is seen by those involved to be a means to retrieve the female body from the objectification of multiple gazes. Mary Duffy is a performance artist who places herself on a podium within a gallery and asks the viewer to look at her, to ask her questions about her disability. Duffy was born without arms, for which she has been likened to the Venus de Milo. As part of her live performance she talks about how her body was characterised as being broken, and how this has affected her sense of self³⁰, something felt by many disabled people, Witkin's models included. Duffy's work transgresses boundaries between the interpretation and the everyday life of a disabled person; this is a progression from Arbus's work as she presented the viewer with her own interpretation of those she photographed. Within Duffy's performance she talks

²⁶ <http://alicjadobrucka.blogspot.com/2008/10/ba-thesis-draft.html>

²⁷ Chris Townsend, *Vile bodies – photography and the crisis of looking*, Prestel-Verlag, 1998, pg 46

²⁸ Chris Townsend, *Vile bodies – photography and the crisis of looking*, Prestel-Verlag, 1998, pg 45

²⁹ Ann Millet, *Disarming Venus: Disability and the re-vision of art history*, <http://femtap.com/id13.html>, Summer 2006, pg. 35

³⁰ Ann Millet, *Disarming Venus: disability and the re-vision of art history*, <http://femtap.com/id13.html>, Summer 2006, pg 22

about how she has been ignored by doctors or other able-bodied people³¹, I know through personal experience that this is the case for many who are disabled, they are treated as though they are sub-human incapable of social networking. Many disabled people are treated as though they are invisible, as they become a victim of the averted gaze, this occurs when the gaze of an individual or camera specifically avoids the gaze of another. I have myself been victimised by such a gaze, not for being disabled but for being thought to have been. I once sat in my Nana's wheelchair whilst on a day out, I suddenly felt myself subjected to the uncomfortable behaviour of others, a family walked past, the children looked at me until they were told not to by their parents, who after telling them this gave me a sideways glance. Like Witkin, I have become neutralized to disability; we have both grown up surrounded by it. Many believe Witkin to exploit his models for the simple fact that he disabled people within his photographs, and whilst historically photographs of disabled people did just this, the evidence proves otherwise in Witkin's case. Jackie Tellalian, the model for Witkin's photograph 'Woman in the blue hat' (Fig. 9), said that she never felt exploited by him

First of all he never made me feel as though he was using my disability as a sensational aspect in the picture. I was always within some sort of larger vision that he had, and it wasn't really the focus on a disability, it was the focus on the picture and this person, or essence, within the picture, and it didn't matter what the disability was³²

In my opinion the viewer dislikes the fact that Witkin mirrors how society feels and treats disabled people; a subject lost between boundaries. The photographs are seen as grotesque, in the present and past context, yet in the present context only through a lack of definition in the social boundaries surrounding disability. The fact that Witkin has incorporated elements of the grotesque within the image makes the viewer stare, something they have been conditioned by society not to do, forcing them to feel abject towards the image.

In 'Woman in the blue hat' (Fig. 9) Witkin masks the model's eyes with a piece of material, in doing so he begins to make her identity ambiguous. Whilst the mask could have been used to protect her identity, Witkin is in effect castrating her gaze, intentionally interrupting the power of sight. Lacan presents the gaze as if it is an objective structure, one where all viewers, both past present and future, will respond to it in the same way. Witkin's work proves that this is not the case, the gaze's structure is built up of a composition between the object and each individual viewer, and the effect of the gaze is mediated by personal experiences and social order. Witkin has reinterpreted the male gaze of the renaissance, the object of the gaze is still a woman yet now she is now disabled, and the male gaze becomes that of the able-bodied. He has transformed his photographs to an optical investigation for the viewer, whereby the viewer can look at the model without feeling like they are participating; David Hevey supports this within his work, claiming that it has a property of

³¹ Ann Millet, *Disarming Venus: disability and the re-vision of art history*, <http://femtap.com/id13.html>, Summer 2006, pg 21

³² Chris Townsend, *Vile bodies: Photography and the crisis of looking*, Prestel-Verlag, 1998, pg 50

voyeurism for the non-disabled gaze.³³ In doing so the viewer experiences the grotesque, and the social order has been disrupted by presenting the public with something that they usually expel to the periphery of society, as he has replaced the metaphorical mask with that of the physical one inflicted on them by society.

It would be wrong to state that Witkin does not in some way exploit his models, however, he does not seek to achieve a high status within the art world for what he is doing, his sight is set on reaching a personal desire. Witkin's route of desire is to reach the sublime; I believe that Witkin feels that disabled people bridge the gap between the human and the sacred, in doing so becoming part of the sublime, traversing through the realm of the grotesque. However, the path of desire is tied to the time it takes for such a desire to become manifest. For Witkin to accomplish reaching the sublime he would effectively have to stand still in time, as the social order around him is continually evolving, thus changing the perception of the manifestation of desire. If Witkin felt that he had achieved the sublime in his work, the focus of his desire would morph into a new desire³⁴, this gives reason as to why his work over the last few years have digressed massively from the subject matter discussed within this text.

Beauty and the Grotesque

The body 'beautiful' has been defined throughout history as an attractive figure, one that is impossible to attain, shrouded in myth. On a daily basis society is flooded with advertising posters, fashion magazines, television and films, all of which push the idea of the body beautiful; thin, tall, symmetrical, deriving from an archaic Vitruvian man (Fig.11). Society has become obsessed with achieving this desire, to achieve such beauty. Diets, exercise programs, 'beauty' products such as creams and moisturisers become part of our daily routine. Society is telling us as individuals we are not good enough. Instead of following this ideology, Witkin pursues a different order. Rather than desiring the current ideology of beauty, he believes that society should change its ideals, to where the condition of ones spirituality, materiality and appearance, is not as important as the relationship you have with God, and how content you are as an individual.³⁵ But this is impossible, as Moller's theory points out, as society has moved past this order into a new one. This leaves Witkin within the domain of Western art, this is perpetually evolving, and in Kantian analogy it is believed that -

Art is freed from the definition of beauty deriving from nature, thus giving "monstrosity and malformation" their rights³⁶

I believe that Witkin's work has broken away from the previous aesthetic restraints of Western art, this can be seen in the photograph 'Woman once a bird' (Fig. 4) this is in direct response to Man Ray's 'Le Violon D'Ingres' (Fig. 5), who is a symbol of

³³ David Hevey, *The creatures time forgot*, Routledge, 1992, pg 72-73

³⁴ Jean-Paul Satre, *Being and Nothingness*, Routledge, 1943, pg 15 -18

³⁵ Chris Townsend, *Vile bodies – photography and the crisis of looking*, Prestel, 1998, pg. 47

³⁶ D.N Rodowick, *Reading the figural, or, philosophy after the new media*, Duke university press, 2001, pg. 22

female beauty, wearing a turban of seraglio a sign of being an escapist³⁷. Witkin has subverted this photograph; the f-holes of Man Ray's model become the lesions left from wings, which could be seen to have biblical references, the fallen angels who came down to Earth gave up their immortality to do so thus becoming imprisoned in the body of a human. Witkin states that his model is enclosed in a 'prison of flesh'³⁸, which promotes this biblical reference, or it could represent the removal of her freedom, as she has become an object of the gaze, relating back to the objectification of women throughout history. The model shows the spectator her small waist, a symbol of beauty within Western culture; this is all he has left her with. Witkin has metamorphosed her into something grotesque, she has a bald head, no arms, her small waist appears deformed encased in the metal corset. Man Ray's model sits with her back straight to the viewer, showing the viewer the symmetry of her figure, yet Witkin has decided to have his model sit slightly to the left, breaking the line of symmetry, again this could be Witkin mirroring societies views on disability, that they cannot be beautiful because they do not conform to the ideology of what beauty is.

Lacan puts forth the idea of a screen which acts as mediator between the models gaze and that of the spectator; it also has the power to protect the spectator from such a gaze. Without such a screen the spectator would be blinded by the gaze of the model, or be touched by the real. Lacan states that by being able to manipulate the gaze, the artist is able to tame the gaze through the use of the imaginary coalesced with the symbolic in order to work against the real.³⁹ However, he goes on to state that some contemporary artists work against this

It is as if this art wanted the gaze to shine, the object to stand, the real to exist, in all the glory (or the horror) of its pulsatile desire, or at least to evoke this sublime condition.⁴⁰

On a basic level Witkin suggests that the screen is torn in the photograph 'Woman once a bird' (Fig. 4) by scratching the negatives, through toning the prints, and creating a textured look that is unnatural in photography. When the viewer sees the photograph, they are repulsed by the lack of aesthetics that protects them from the real. There is a connection between the surface of the negative and the model Witkin uses, like the model the negative is missing something, it is not complete in societies eyes. The inadequacy of the photograph in terms of beauty indicates the power of the connotations, and how they become negative signs. Jean-Francois Lyotard argue that this condition returns to the sublime, but as an energy of nonpresentation, this energy reduces the optical pleasure the viewers receive, and in doing so start an endless cycle of contemplation towards infinity.⁴¹

When the idea beauty breaks away from the constraints of the norm, the linear continuum of art movements is interrupted. Society feels comforted by the fact they are able to predict what will appear next in art, as they can derive this from looking at

³⁷ Pierre Borhan, Joel-Peter Witkin – Disciple and master, Fotofolio, 2000, pg 51

³⁸ Pierre Borhan, Joel-Peter Witkin – Disciple and master, Fotofolio, 2000, pg 51

³⁹ Hal Foster, The return of the real, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1996, pg.139-141

⁴⁰ Hal Foster, The return of the real, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1996, pg 140

⁴¹ D.N Rodowick, Reading the figural, or, philosophy after the new media, Duke university press, 2001, pg. 21

the evolution of previous movements.⁴² By placing a negative value within his work, Witkin has suspended this continuum bringing confusion to the viewer in the form of pleasure, pain, anxiety and joy, allowing for the beautiful to be gradually replaced by the sublime.

Disability and the religious connotations

The Bible dictates that disease and disabilities is a by-product of sin, and therefore should be seen as impure and abject. Whilst people with religious beliefs are on the downward spiral, the abjection towards the disabled still stands within Western civilization, despite efforts of abolishment. For the photograph 'Un Santo Oscuro' (Fig. 6) Witkin has used a young man whose mother took Thalidomide when she was pregnant with him, leaving him without any skin, arms and legs, without hair, eyelashes or eyelids. He has been subjected to ridicule and the non-disabled gaze, and been asked to join freak-shows and sideshows.⁴³

In 'Un Santo Oscuro' (Fig. 6) Witkin has drawn inspiration from a variety of paintings from the Spanish Baroque, a time when it was common practice for clerics of religious institutions to model for artist as martyred saints. This was seen as a form of self-aggrandisement on behalf of the cleric for placing themselves in the position of the tortured saints, implying that they understood and shared the humility and spiritual virtue, yet merely demonstrating their power⁴⁴. Witkin takes someone who is already in this position and portrays him as a martyred saint, doing so Witkin elevates his model to a point whereby he should be beyond such miseries, making him abject. This works to Witkin's advantage, as his motivation is to reach the sublime, and Kristeva's work informs us that

The abject is edged with the sublime. It is not the same moment on the journey, but the same subject and speech bring them into being.⁴⁵

It is apparent that the time continuum, for which the subject is to be viewed, is very important to the discourse of the photograph if it is to reach the sublime, as explained at the end of the section 'gaze'. Nevertheless, other elements are employed when reaching the sublime. For example, the work of Andres Serrano, especially the piece 'Piss Christ' (Fig. 10) a photograph of a jar of urine with a plastic crucifix in it, has been condemned because of subject matter, defined as being indecent by conservative Christian groups.⁴⁶ Despite the intense condemnation of Serrano's work, Witkin's work has not experienced such volumes of abhorrence, even though the contents of his work are far more explicit than Serrano's. I believe there are a number of reasons for this; firstly the photographs were taken in a classical style, and secondly they do not directly criticise Catholicism, rather they are a discourse as to what religion is.

⁴² D.N. Rodowick, *Reading the figural, or, philosophy after the new media*, Duke University Press, 2001, pg. 22

⁴³ Chris Townsend, *Vile bodies*, Prestel, 1998, pg. 46

⁴⁴ Chris Townsend, *Vile bodies*, Prestel, 1998, pg. 48

⁴⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of horror – An essay on abjection*, Columbia University press, 1982, pg. 11

⁴⁶ www.joejarrell.com/art/witkin.pdf

As stated in the beauty and grotesque, scratching and altering the negative can give right of way to the grotesques, and thus the sublime, it can also show the relationship between love and pain. In an interview with Frank Horvat⁴⁷, Witkin relates how love and pain are similar to how St. Francis loved the leper, and that he didn't fear catching leprosy. Witkin draws a parallel between himself, St. Francis, and the metaphorical saint he produces in his photographs. He likens printing straight from the negative as being like St. Francis going to an ordinary leper, but he didn't ,

He wanted to see the worse, to go the whole way, to face not just any manifestation of fear, but fear itself. He had to find out what was contained in his greatest fear, which was also his greatest love.⁴⁸

Witkin believes to reach the 'cleansing point'⁴⁹; you must follow the path that involves great risk and an investigation into your greatest fear, to find God. In the gaze section Witkin's desire to reach the sublime through using disabled people was explained, yet Witkin demonstrates to the viewer how sublimation can be achieved by drawing close to God. To be close to God would be to personify him, which Witkin does so by placing the model within the position of becoming a martyr. Yet he also tries to follow Jesus' example, by seeking out those marginalized by society, and trying to elevate the suffering of such people, this he does through working with disabled people. Whilst the photographs tend to shock the general public, the images do possess qualities of enlightenment and understanding. Through isolating the disabled models Witkin has highlighted the fact that the sacred is beyond that of nature, and indeed existence. I believe this leaves his work placed upon an altar to God, in the hope that it will allow him to breach the gap between the human and the sacred when he dies, as it is only through non-existence that this state can be attained.

⁴⁷ www.horvatland.com/pages/entrevues/12-witkin-en_fr.html

⁴⁸ www.horvatland.com/pages/entrevues/12-witkin-en_fr.html

⁴⁹ www.horvatland.com/pages/entrevues/12-witkin-en_fr.html

Conclusion

In setting out to answer the main question of how Witkin utilizes the social connotations associated with death, religion and disability to achieve sublimation, we have inevitably touched upon other discourses, especially how the grotesque can challenge the social order, and how this can open up the possibility of a transcendent point. Witkin must have a deep understanding of these three areas in order to manipulate them to produce the sublime. He uses them as a starting platform, and through correctly juxtaposing different theories associated with them, he produces photographs that go through stages of ambiguity, grotesque, abjection and finally the transcendent point whereby the sublime can manifest itself.

I think the first chapter demonstrates how Witkin employs his knowledge of death, and religious aspects of death, to put his photographs on the path of the sublime. He is aware that society sees death as taboo, he then juxtaposes this by producing images that are classical in style, relating to art that represents life without any respect for the social order. In doing so Witkin is able to blur the social boundary, allowing ambiguity to manifest itself.

Through manipulating the ideology of death, within the context of religion, Witkin presents the viewer with the sublime, born out of the grotesque. Witkin does this by placing life and death in the same realm, something religion and society have parted so as to live without the shadow of death. By contrasting the two ideals he has strengthened the abjection felt towards them, rendering the images grotesque, putting them at the transcendent point.

It is important to reference the arc of sublimation (Diagram 1), as although Witkin is able to reach the sublime in his work, he does so on a personal level. This is due to the fact that his perspective is different to that of society, that is not to say that a person in the same social order, with similar experiences would not be able to see the sublime, but merely that their perception of it would be diluted, as it would be through Witkin. Yet, many are confused by the mixture of connotations within his work, to this end he has reached a universal state of sublime as there is continual contemplation over his work.

In the second chapter my discoveries have shown that Witkin questions society on the way that they treat disabled people, and how they view beauty. Art history has dictated how both should be viewed; through analysing the different stages one would be able to predict what would come next. Witkin's work disrupts this, he deviates from the linear continuum to obtain his own desire, this action results in the beauty being supplanted by the sublime. It has become apparent through this investigation that the sublime and the manifestation of desire are subject to a timeframe; Witkin is only able to accomplish his desire when his work is in the realm of the sublime.

I think it is important to realise that whilst Witkin has personally succeeded in reaching the sublime, he will never be able to reach the sacred, as it is beyond existence. Analogous to the ideology of the photograph 'Harvest' (Fig.1), Witkin will have to harvest his best photographs, to lay before God when he dies as a sacrifice, this is the only way he would be able to realize the sacred.

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