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Messy Subjectivities: The Popular, Affective and Technical Consistencies of Early Nineteenth-Century Staffordshire Ware

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Abstract

This article investigates how Staffordshire figurines and dinnerware, which were popular in early nineteenth-century England and its colonies, were complicit in forging emergent social, aesthetic and subjective consciousness. Staffordshire ware was influenced by diverse technical, economic and aesthetic factors, including the circulation of print media, private property, colonialism and Romanticism. At the same time, the wares both engendered Romantic versions of subjectivity that amplified the importance of the private individual, while generating emergent sites of contestation that exceeded them. The collection of Staffordshire figurines and dinnerware was a media and technical consistency where owners could inhabit the tensions of at times conflicting social, material, affective and performative affinities or antagonisms. This discussion draws from Walter Benjamin to develop a way of thinking with how the material and media specificity of Staffordshire ware could have co-composed heterogeneous knowledges, practices and subjectivities that undermined the Romantic individual. By examining the multifaceted qualities, affects and contexts of Staffordshire ware in detail, I develop new terms and practices with which to activate emergent versions of historicity, corporeality and world-making.

Keywords

subjectivity; property; affect; play; Staffordshire ware

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Introduction

In the early-to-mid 1900s ceramic display wares produced in Staffordshire, including decorative figurines and functional pottery, became wildly popular throughout English cities and colonies.[1] This high point in the production of Staffordshire ware is a transitional one in British culture and economy. The practice of collecting display objects, such as figurines and decorative dinnerware, was a formerly important outward assertion of wealth and broadly associated with political, religious and economic power. In this period ceramic display wares were, for the first time, accessible to an emerging middle class and, towards the middle of the century, to low-paid labourers as well. This was caused by a combination of factors, including a general increase in disposable income, as well as simplified production techniques and low wages at the potteries. The increased availability and popularity of Staffordshire wares coincided with emergent concepts and practices of private property that were often contradictory but that also intensified the role of taste and ownership in concepts and practices of subjectivity.

E.P. Thompson suggests that part of the reason for the rise in seemingly conflicting social and economic sympathies during this period was the emergent privatisation of life and culture that engendered the simultaneous valorisation of parochial and everyday themes and ironic disdain and admiration for 'provident bourgeois virtues'.[2] As an extension of customary culture, owning and collecting Staffordshire ware was a media practice where perceptual and subjective tendencies could emerge and play out in messy and seemingly contradictory ways. Staffordshire ware is a particularly generative entry point for unpacking the dynamics of this subjective contestation, because of its multiple thematic references, and its aesthetic inconsistencies (as a result of often makeshift production techniques and low-skilled labour). The particularity of the aesthetics of Staffordshire meant that it preserved affective openings that complicated and exceeded the abstractions of private property and the idealised status of Romantic objects. What I am interested in here is differentiating how the situated, technical, aesthetic and affective qualities of Staffordshire ware might have resonated with the volatility of social, economic, imperial and popular tendencies in the early nineteenth century. I anticipate that this will help activate openings to concepts and practices that can destabilise Romantic, private and colonising subjective tendencies.

To appreciate the generative potential of Staffordshire ware, it is important to emphasise that the wares were not merely objects of ownership or property. Staffordshire ware informed emergent tendencies of recognition and attention among the people who lived with and used the wares. It was part of what Bourdieu calls a 'habitus', or a lived ecology where one inhabits aesthetic dispositions, practices and perceptions.[3] The habitus does not produce contained subjects and objects but generates tendencies that attune attention to particular modes of recognition, identification and *affectivity*. Brian Massumi's description of virtual affects is useful here, since it explains how such affects are at once conditioned by social tendencies and are in excess of them. The virtual is 'asocial' but includes 'social elements' which mix with 'elements belonging to other levels of functioning ... [which are combined] according to different logic'.[4] To begin to articulate the qualities and felt tensions of this transversal logic, then, cannot rely on given or pre-determined modes of understanding practice and relations of cause and effect. Instead, one must consider how the media, materials, affects and techniques of recognition, practice and appreciation co-compose situated affinities and antagonisms. By examining the multiple ways Staffordshire wares were entangled in complex affective alliances, I aim to generate new openings with which to understand and complicate the given categories

and modes of abstraction that dominate modern concepts of society, culture and subjectivity. Suzanne Küchler refers to this as 'the transformative potential of materials within which technology is embedded ... [or] the stuff available to rethink the history of modernity'.[5]

To unpack the specific dynamics of this process in detail, I examine the production techniques, aesthetics, themes and practices that informed the wares. I then consider how the wares were complicit in co-composing emergent concepts of private property, Romanticism and imperialism, not only as objects of ownership and display but in contexts of use. Finally, I engage Walter Benjamin's discussion of play as an opening to differentiate how the specific technical and material values of Staffordshire ware could have activated emergent versions of subjectivity that were in excess of the propertied and private individual, who was conceived and valued in relation to the objects it consumed and possessed.

Thematic excess

Given the huge range of references represented in the Staffordshire figurines, it is difficult to identify any single dominating type, era or genre. Llewellynn Jewitt relates that the commoner types of figurines are 'too numerous to mention', there were 'men and women and rustic groups, and dogs and cats, and Swiss cottages, and Bonapartes, Victorias, Great Moguls, Dukes of Wellington, Tom Thumbs, shepherds, dairymaids, cows, John Bulls and John Wesleys, etc., etc.'[6] As these diverse themes were collected and arranged on interior mantle-shelves and tables, they generated multiple narrative potentials. Anthony Oliver relates:

> The Four Seasons jostled for attention with Diana and Apollo; Faith, Hope and Charity bore silent witness to the liberality of Ceres and Pomona, while Andromache mourned interminably over the ashes of Hector. Village boys and girls demurely displayed their proficiency in reading not daring to raise their eyes to the sour-faced gaze of John Wesley … Bulls were baited and sailors said farewell.[7]

Parochial, romantic and political themes mixed with contemporary events based on prints from newspapers, which were only just reaching wide circulation at the time. The extent to which print media and newsworthy content played into the themes of the wares is particularly notable. For example, 'The Red Barn' was a popular figurine depicting a red country cottage that was the scene of a series of brutal murders. Likewise, the 'The Death of Munroe' was a popular menagerie scene that represented the story of a circus performer who was attacked and killed by a tiger. There were figurines commemorating the end of slavery in England and those depicting sport celebrities.[8]

To add to the strangeness of this plethora of themes, scenes of dandy culture were a popular source of satire and invited a play with exaggerated postures and fashions. The dandy culture of the middling elite was targeted as a source of satire by the comparably lower economic class of Staffordshire pottery producers and consumers, which was characterised as having the money and leisure time to be 'fastidious', 'coolly impudent', 'discretely dressed' and the 'epitome of good taste'.[9] This antagonism did not necessarily correlate with any clear political affiliation. The organised demands for higher pay and improved conditions that was widely supported in the weaving and cobbling industries was 'haphazard, feebly and timidly followed' in the potteries.[10] The radical leanings of potters are identifiable to some extent through design elements referencing the Jacobites: 'Motifs associated with [the Jacobites] appear frequently on English pottery and glass of the period.'[11] At the same time, patriotism was a very common theme in Staffordshire and took the form of royal emblems as well as depictions of the royal

family. Linda Colley explains that flaunting patriotic themes at the height of Staffordshire ware production felt like an opportunity for many nouveau rich and members of the emergent middle classes to 'assert their parity with, and in some cases their superiority to, the landed classes'.[12] The relevance of Staffordshire wares for softening the wealth gap did not only pertain to the gentry and the newly wealthy industrialists. By the 1830s the wares became simple enough that labouring and rural populations could afford them:

> **It is by the exertions of the Longton potters that the working-man and the cottages are enabled to set a china tea-service on their tables, brilliant in colors and gold, at a cost we must not name, but which the humblest housekeeper can contrive to pay.**[13]

The diverse interests and sensibilities of the consumers of the wares and the thematic diversity of print media played an important role in expanding the thematic content. Myrna Schkolne suggests that print media did more than influence thematic diversity but incited a 'visual awakening'.[14] Bruno Latour's notion of 'holding the focus steady' helps to elaborate what this 'visual awakening' might have meant in the context of the wares. Latour describes the reproductive technologies of print and perspectival techniques of image production as a process of world-making that emerged leading up to the modern era. These techniques generated new kinds of objects, but also engendered inhabited tendencies of focusing on visualisation and cognition. This focus on the *thought of seeing* allowed objects to become '*mobile* but also *immutable, presentable, readable* and *combinable* with one another', where the parts were thought of in relation with the whole and in relation with each other.[15] Such techniques of seeing activated an 'optical consistency' where 'real objects' could be 'drawn in separated pieces, or in exploded views, or added to the same sheet of paper at different scales, angles and perspectives' which could allow for a 'momentary suspension of gravity' or a technical scenario where nature could be 'seen as fiction, and fiction seen as nature'.[16] These 'optical consistencies' helped increase the accuracy of visualising coastlines on navigational maps and the precision of industrial drawing plans.[17]

The abstraction and visualisation processes that are manifest in print technology coincide with Staffordshire figurines in several ways. For instance, many of the wares were designed to face forward and were often backed with a flat, press-moulded slab that framed naturalistic scenes, menageries or circus displays like theatre sets. The two-dimensional, pictorial orientation of print aligned easily with the relatively flat dimensions permitted by press-moulding technology (which requires an absence of undercuts so the clay can be removed from the mould without breaking) and the flat walls of the interior against which collections were arranged for display.

Despite the dimensional and perspectival coincidence of Staffordshire and print media, Staffordshire significantly differs from print technology in that its value was less prescribed by the formal accuracy with which it represented or rationalised the lived environment, and more for its role in domestic world-making and the quickness and cheapness of its production. This combination contributed to what often resulted in bizarre aesthetic and formal outcomes. For example, in the northern towns of Staffordshire, potteries would frequently go into and out of business. This meant that moulds used to make the forms that were composed by assembling parts from different potteries: 'When a pot bank closed, the others bought its moulds.'[18] The fact that potters composed forms with whatever moulds were available is apparent in some figures; for example, where spaniels are larger than children, or in barnyard scenes where there are sheep of different sizes and styles, or where the sheep are as large as the farmer.

Many figurines also appear distorted because of the low-skilled and child labour employed in surface design. Representing marble at the base of a figurine was a common way to reference neo-classical style, but there is a huge range in how painters depicted the stone surface, including colorful smears and blotches, textures of squiggly lines or both. The same is true for animal fur, which could range from stylised polka dots or solid blobs resembling an amoebic shape to sponge blots and masses of multi-directional brush strokes. Appearances were further complicated when the same painting techniques were applied to both flat, textured and three-dimensional surfaces. Despite these incongruences the wares manifest a similar aesthetic consistency, largely because of their specific materiality: the similarly saturated colours were painted from the same mineral pigments, on the same white, opaque glaze that evenly softened the details of both the brushwork and clay forms with its thick coating and reflectivity.

In the final section of this article I will show how the specificity of this aesthetic consistency intensifies affects that exceed Romantic and propertied affective values. But first, to appreciate how the wares were particular in their capacity to co-compose emergent subjectivities in early nineteenth century Britain, I consider the emergence of other dominant forms at the height of the popularity of Staffordshire ware that resonate both with its thematic and formal content, namely the format and concept of absolute property and neo-classical tropes in Romantic art and criticism. It is relevant to approach Staffordshire ware through the context of Romanticism and emergent notions of property since it offers a complex way to engage with how aesthetic and social phenomena coincide. It is precisely the a-sociality of the diverse affects associated with collecting Staffordshire wares that helped amplify propertied versions of subjectivity but that also allows the wares to eventually open a space of contestation and co-composition with subjectivities that exceed the contained and propertied individual.

Property, Romanticism and techniques of the 'improved' subject

By the early nineteenth century, 'improvement' philosophy had already largely transformed both concepts of property and subjectivity, as well as consistencies of recognition and abstraction. The concept of absolute private property, a concept designed to prevent the peasantry from continuing to exercise their customary right to use the land, had begun to gain currency in British Parliament and criminal courts from the early 1600s.[19] At the same time, something peculiar happened—a new concept of property was developed that was not based on land ownership. The legal argument in favour of the absolute privatisation of the land is not premised on enclosing individual plots of land (even though this was the pragmatic conclusion of the legal process) but rather on an individualisation of ownership based on the absolute individualism of the owner. In *The Second Treatise of Government* (1690), John Locke famously elaborated the concept of 'self-propriety' towards a justification for absolute private property ownership. Locke asserted that any improvement that a person invested into the land gave him natural, and exclusive, right over it because the labour of one's body and hands are 'properly his'.[20] This abstraction allowed for a series of logical extensions to be made regarding what could be considered property. For instance, the labour of 'improvement' needed not be materially situated in the labour of the hands, as was suggested in the initial premise, but could also correspond to the 'productive and profitable utilization of property' through capital investment or employing labourers.[21]

This abstraction of property as a concept of extraction did not only influence the legal grounds for capitalised land and labour, but also influenced concepts and practices of object ownership and subjectivity more broadly. Emily Apter in *The Lure of the Object* affirms that Locke's definition of the proprietary drive 'applies not only to the subject's relation to private property … but also … to the process by which a subject becomes propertied; that is, constituted as subject, by virtue of the possession of things'.[22] This concept of a propertied subjectivity was very different from previous notions, where subjects were embedded in the mutually constituting hierarchies of royal, religious and economic orders that were thought to be God-given.[23] Like the 'immutable mobiles' described by Latour in the previous section, the abstraction of land, individuals and society according to the improvement philosophy of capital meant that becoming 'propertied' was a practice of constituting oneself through modes of abstraction, where subjects inhabited techniques of objectification, ownership and discrimination. Even education became a practice of becoming propertied when it became a concept of self-improvement: 'The more affluent middling classes wiled away their leisure hours attending philosophical societies, visiting subscription libraries, and enjoying a host of other *improving* activities.'[24]

Despite the appearance of openness and accessibility, improvement activities were limited to those who could afford it, and affirmed prejudices that linked class status with moral superiority: 'an identifiable "middle class" interest began to be defined in political discourse which also proclaimed that class was the prime source of moral and political virtues'.[25] Although improvement activities required privilege, improvement philosophy was part of a national public interest such that art institutions and education initiatives received significant government support. Thomas Gretton states that the Reform Bill of 1836, which sought to enact a compromise between landed and reforming (capital) interests, emphasised taste and its acquisition, as well as its dissemination, in a way that the bill's values were 'both economic and moral, both political and transcendental'.[26] The Reform Bill committee regarded art education as 'a magic ingredient in the relationship between the state and civil society, and in the workshop and marketplace too … [affecting] the rates of crime and profit'.[27] The importance of taste in constituting a moral subject meant that a new concept of art had to be established, one that privileged individual expression over the traditional reproduction of historical themes and techniques. Gretton affirms that art education was valued as 'a set of dispositions and leisure practices, an expressive freedom'.[28] Here the subject is conceived in ideal relation to the art object that can improve through practice and education, but that expresses itself through access to a romanticised, moral and spiritual individualism.

Despite this privileging of freedom and expression, in Britain Romanticism was often referred to as being interchangeable with neo-classicism. After 1800 'an almost obsessive refinement and privileging of … the classical ideal … became the model for the perfectly autonomous and whole work of art'.[29] Susan Buck-Morris describes the stylistic biases that privileged neo-classical style even after the Industrial Revolution when steel was a primary building material: '"good taste" meant neo-classicism and limited how architects could use steel during the early industrial period'.[30] As Romantic idealism coincided with the neo-classical, artists and critics found expression in tropes such as the incomplete, lost and hidden relics of the past. For example, the broken Greek statues of Ilissus and Thesus that were purchased in 1801 by Lord Elgin demonstrated the highest ideal of taste by conjuring affects of autonomy through their rarified status as well as their historical and physical decontextualisation.[31] In this valuation of the decontextualised ruin, the statues made an opening for a subject to inhabit an ideal of loss, remove and autonomy: the statues 'intimated the loss of what the

viewer wanted to possess from them ... they were relics of an ideal made unreal by modern culture'.[32] The relevance of the neo-classical for Romantic idealism was thus two-fold: it severed the ideal romantic object from its embeddedness in space, affectively rendering it timeless, and separating the subject from both critical and inhabited versions of history.[33] Susan Stewart affirms that antiquarianism requires 'a rupture in historical consciousness'[34] where a transcendent, ideal subjectivity can emerge: 'To arrange objects according to time is to juxtapose personal time with social time, autobiography with history, and thus to create a fiction of the individual life, a time of the individual subject both transcendent to and parallel to historical time'.[35]

It must not be forgotten that these individualised conditions of possession were complicit in affirming colonial dominance. W.J.T. Mitchell states, 'representing an artificial world as if it were simply given and inevitable' can have the effect of naturalising and disguising how it feeds relations of cultural and ecological dominance, and the 'formation of a colonial and national identity'.[36] Whether the represented becomes a place holder for the premodern, exotic 'other' or emerges as a space where everything and everyone represented become 'mythic' and 'generalisable' the Romantic operates as first an abstraction and then as an opening to organise relations of dominance.[37]

While Staffordshire wares include many references to Romantic subjects that feature neo-classical aesthetics, as well as to kitsch versions of Romantic tropes such as the ruin, or the picturesque, they do not conjure the Romantic affects of authenticity and rarity. Due to its popular availability Staffordshire wares were imperfect in activating the spatial and temporal remove of Romantic idealism. At the same time, Staffordshire played a role in engendering and intensifying a propertied, Romantic subject through specific practices in the everyday lives of its owners. The following section considers various ways that Staffordshire participated in amplifying propertied subjectivities in the nineteenth-century domestic interior.

Display and use

In many ways, the interior was a site that both mirrored and extended the contained subjectivity of its inhabitant. Benjamin suggests that nineteenth-century Paris 'conceived the residence as a receptacle for the person, and it encased him with all his appurtenances so deeply in the dwelling's interior that one might be reminded of the inside of a compass case'.[38] A major feature that intensified a subjectivity-mirroring interior was the display of objects. Benjamin cites Adorno, who characterises the cluttered Parisian interiors of the nineteenth century as a Romantic aesthetic dominated by a timeless or endlessly immediate version of history at the expense of the technical, functional and historical-materialist specificity of objects. When displayed in the interior, objects are:

> **mere decoration, alienated from the purposes they represent, deprived of their own use value … But in the interior, things do not remain alien … Foreignness transforms itself from alienated things into expression; mute things speak as 'symbols' … objects are arranged in the semblance of unchangeable nature.**[39]

As we saw in the first section, the Parisian interiors described by Benjamin share many similarities with the Staffordshire collection; mismatched genres, styles, eras and themes jostled together to compose narratives across discontinuous times and spaces. In the case of Staffordshire, the intense collapse of time into the space, and vice-versa, meant that distortions of scale, surface design and style may have gone entirely unnoticed.

Benjamin identifies a contrast between the idealised objects of the Romantic interior and the context of their use-value. Stewart elaborates that the severity of an object's remove from use-value increases its abstraction and, therefore, the multivocality of its referentiality.[40] This suggests that the context of use is one way to potentially dampen Romantic subjectivities premised on object–subject dialectics. At the same time, the particularity of Staffordshire ware shows us it is important not to consider use-value as categorically distinct from non–use when considering the operative dynamics of subjective idealism. In Staffordshire, the difference between useful and decorative objects is less consequential than it might first appear—an object's ideal or abstract value can overshadow or *consume* use as well as mundane practices of the inhabited corporeal. The ceramic historian Philip Rawson alternatively develops the term 'ceramics-without-environment' to describe useful ceramics that were implicated in co-composing Romantic manners and subjectivities.[41]

If Romantic idealism operates through the affects conjured by an object's remove from its embeddedness in historical, functional and material spacetime, this remove is not without its own constraints and shared modes of recognition. Margaret Ponsonby relates how the early nineteenth-century British interior coincided with 'projecting an image' that corresponded to socially recognisable indicators of moral and economic status.[42] Norbert Elias suggests that these indicators operate as communities *attune* to them and are critical for developing ways of 'living amicably together others as social equals, irrespective of social origin'.[43] Elias proposes that such attunements are key to understanding the 'national character' that emerged in Britain and France with the rise of industrialisation.[44] Once such attunements are learned, and inhabited as a tendency, the socially recognised grounds for status and hierarchy become 'unconscious'.[45] When we take the process of attunement seriously, the way we inhabit tendencies of social distinction, whether by recognising Romantic tropes or those of nationalism and civility, becomes increasingly pertinent. The coincidence of Romantic aesthetics, including aesthetics associated with colonial and national idealism, and the adherence to strict everyday practices and social protocols is particularly acute in Staffordshire ware.

The relevance of a popular nationalism in the early nineteenth century is visible in examples of Staffordshire dinnerware that were widely produced for the British colonies, notably Canada and Australia. The dinnerware often featured decals of print images commemorating local landmarks and landscapes alongside imperial symbolism. A notable example includes a tableware line illustrated by English explorer W.H. Bartlett called 'Arctic Scenery', which features the colonising gaze of arctic scenes populated by Inuit communities in the centre of plates and bowls, surrounded by the flora and fauna of the four corners of the earth on its sectioned rim.[46] Although pictured on dinnerware, such representations were not only designated for contexts of use but were displayed outwardly on mantels in the home. This duality of display and the ceremony of food consumption may have only amplified the civilising effects and affects of colonial identity. Over the course of production, Staffordshire potters 'provided a greater variety of ceramics for serving and eating food'.[47] This can be attributed not only to newly sophisticated cooking ranges and the availability of a greater variety of foodstuffs, as Ponsonby suggests, but also to an increasingly idealised concept of the body. That Staffordshire pottery engendered both inhabited and socially recognised tendencies of 'civility' resonates closely with Elias's observation that the attunement to a 'national character' in early nineteenth-century England corresponded to an 'expanding threshold of repugnance' such that touch and contact with any form of bodily fluid increasingly provoked disgust.[48]

Roberta Bernstein considers this process of engendering subjectivities that are at once implicated in recognisable hierarchies and unconscious tendencies to be *citational*. Bernstein elaborates how this citational process activates objects in performative kinesthetic memory—this is a way of 'thinking through movements—at once remembered and reinvented'.[49] Here, the repetitions of use emphasise habits of self-abstraction, privileging ideal versions of the self. At the same time, since these tendencies are inhabited, they fade into rote continuity while also holding open the potential for affective and performative excesses—they are never fully reducible to this abstraction. The question then remains, how can the affects that exceed the abstraction of the Romantic subject be amplified? And what alternative versions and concepts of subjectivity might this process generate?

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett proposes a pertinent alternative explanation to 'use–value' or of 'ceramics-without-environment' to explain Romantic idealism in the context of heritage.[50] For Kirshenblatt–Gimblett, nostalgia is generated when an object is distanced from the conditions, and specificity of its made-ness, taking on an authority that transcends the scope of lived experience.[51] Importantly, the notion of made–ness emphasises the specificity of media itself, before use, task-oriented or contextual criteria are determined. While the concept of made-ness poses a generative opening to conceptualise affects that are in excess of the made-real' it is important to differentiate made-ness and hand-made objects to avoid returning to a situation of object fetishism and a corresponding Romantic subject. In the case of Staffordshire, made–ness is operative where material qualities and figurations exceed given registers of recognition, and are not reducible to the form of a made object. In the next section I elaborate how we might rethink Staffordshire ware in terms of how it comes into tension with the Romantic through the diversity of its material and formal affects in consistencies in contexts of play.

The material consistencies of play

To begin to develop this issue, it is useful to situate the Staffordshire collection within a larger aesthetic context that was already extreme in terms of the multiplicity of its references. Benjamin relates: 'The masquerade of styles, as it unfolds across the 19th century, results from the fact that relations of dominance become obscured. The holders of power in the bourgeoisie no longer exercise this power … in direct unmediated forms.'[52] Like playfully ostentatious fashion, Benjamin also considers the collection to be a site of contestation where collections largely conditioned by commodity production, are 'sensuously transfigured in their immediate presence'.[53] Benjamin situates this process in the practice of the collector, who 'transfigures things by divesting them of their commodity character'.[54] We can draw a parallel between the Staffordshire collection and the eccentric fashion during the same period in terms of how both contest the appearance of power by engaging in an aesthetics of display that exceeds given modes of recognition. In trying on appearances at the fringes of recognisability, one can begin to inhabit the excess of what is given and discover that which remains *undissolved* into the Romantic absolute. These openings can emerge from anywhere in the space of the collection and pose new terms for thinking with the affective complexity of the Staffordshire collection.

If we refer back to the formal and qualitative traits of the wares, as described in the first section, we can start to articulate these openings. For instance, the naturalistic themes of the wares often meant that figures were framed with a mantle of foliage, typically glazed with the translucent green of oxidised copper. The gloss of the foliage backdrops might pose an opening from the mode of naturalistic representation by resonating with the reflectivity of a plant appearing under the flow of water, activating an intense movement over the surface that is in

excess of the glassified representation of leaves. In many examples, the foliage was flattened to front-facing dimensions, which inscribed the material plasticity of clay on its surface. This flattening could evoke the give of pressing a step into soft ground, intensively localising the figurine between the form of foliage and the inhabited practice of stepping, rather than in opposition to the abstract dimensions of a two-dimensional image. Alternatively, rendering animal spots on the surface of the Staffordshire figurines entailed techniques of blotting with a sponge, filling in round, amoeba or cloud shaped outlines with solid enamel or composing densities of radially arranged brush strokes. When put together in the space of display, these differences could have activated rhythms and durations that resonated with inhabited pasts of their beholders, dampening the affectively charged containment and binary separation of subjects and objects in Romantic thought. The swathing smears of glaze on figure bases meant to mimic the marble architecture of antiquity, also activate an intense, indetermined dimensionality by rendering a visible consistency where the substance of the wares appears to compose the qualities of the surface and vice-versa. A similar affective tension occurs as painted outlines delineate forms on the three-dimensional surfaces complicating the difference between image and object. The mismatched scales of familiar scenes, or the juxtaposition of front-facing and side-facing figures could have also affectively conflated the difference between figures, floors and walls by putting different architectural proportions into tension—perhaps activating an intensity where the felt fixity and the walled enclosures of private spaces could stretch, compress and degrade.

Some or all of these tensions could have generated affects that inspired emergent corporeal tendencies, by conjuring the inhabited past in the thought of one's own perception, or what Massumi calls a 'thinking–feeling'.[55] This felt thought of the inhabited corporeal exceeds citational or given aesthetic and social values and modes of recognition. These intense potentials complicate and reroute tendencies of objectification as well as tendencies of localising subjects and objects within a stable, idealised form. In turn, they are openings to inhabit the lived ecology differently, and to develop new concepts of corporeality that are composed multiply and that continually propose the potential for their own variation. This variation emerges in dramatic or slight differences, where an edge unexpectedly peels instead of seeps, or when a brush stroke gracefully guides attention in its directional movement only to widen into a grinding parch against the absorbent surface of unfired glaze.[56]

The intense dynamism and potential for transfiguration in this tension between the ideal modes of recognition and these emergent, material and technical abstractions can be elaborated with the relationship that Benjamin draws between toys and play. Benjamin distinguishes between 'simple' toys and those which are beautiful and well-crafted, stating 'the more appealing toys are, in the ordinary sense of the term, the further they are from genuine playthings; the more they are based on imitation, the further they are from real, living play.[57] Simple toys more easily become 'genuine playthings ... not in their shapes but in the transparent nature of the manufacturing process'.[58] This transparency is not the criteria of a toy's intrinsic value or beauty but is an opening to engage with emergent material, formal and subjective potentials.

Unlike the object of Romantic criticism, the value of a plaything does not reside in 'furnishing' or 'civilising' the individual but in its potential to participate in generating changing the terms of participation. Benjamin corrects the false assumption that the content of play resides in or is 'determined' by the object of the toy:

> in reality the opposite is true. A child wants to pull something, and so he becomes a horse; he wants to play with sand, and so he turns into a baker; he wants to hide, and so he turns into a robber or policeman.[59] These transformative events are not isolated in space and time but become instilled into habit as their initial intensity lingers and lures further repetitions. These rhythms, which proclaim themselves in play 'are the rhythms in which we first gain possession of ourselves.[60]

As long as these repetitions always integrate a degree of conscious variation, they remain a generative site where subjectivity is contested and played out in a way that one can develop and co-compose an inhabited consistency.

Benjamin relates further that play is a way to wrestle with and transform inherited perceptual tendencies: 'The fact is that the perceptual world of the child is influenced at every point by traces of the older generation, and has to take issue with them. The same applies to the children's play activities.'[61] Instead of affirming the authority of the previous generation, play defies the notion of authority altogether by fusing and confusing given terms of engagement: 'Reality and play became fused so that acted sufferings can merge with real sufferings, acted beatings can shade into real beatings.'[62] Benjamin continues: it is '[o]nly when in technology body and image space so interpenetrate that all revolutionary tension becomes bodily collective, and all the bodily innervations of the collective become revolutionary discharge'.[63] This process thus requires intense media and material interventions into rote modes of recognition and practice, where an intense play with the complexity of the inhabited past can inform and transfigure technical, representational and citational values and consistencies in the present.

Concluding remarks

Erin Manning clarifies the ethical implications of going beyond the symmetry of Romantic abstraction: '"I" is a habit, and where it leads is toward the supremacy of the human. Being and the human-as-supreme cannot be disengaged, and with the human at the center, the frame is unequivocally in place for the eclipsing of the complexity of other ecologies, of other surfaces of experience.'[64] The question then becomes, how can we activate the heterogeneous material and affective consistencies of Staffordshire ware to develop inhabitable ecologies that dampen, destabilise and reroute the Romantic, private individual? Although Staffordshire ware may not have been able to fully escape tendencies of privatisation in the early nineteenth century, it does demonstrate a media practice that could degrade the ideal subjectivity of the Romantic, if only in situated instances of practice and attunement. The diversity of textures, themes, significance and distortions of form, as well as the relative cheapness of the wares, readily complicated dominant modes of practice, valuation and subjectification. This meant the wares could participate in rerouting or modulating the habitus and forge new ways of aligning affect, representation and subjectivity within a dynamic, evolutionary consciousness. Like the children's theatre, the coincidence of diverse themes, styles, associations and abstractions in the Staffordshire collection incited a process of play. Unlike the refined or rarefied objects of Romantic criticism, the movable, recombinable and collectible parts of the Staffordshire collection, the often strange and incongruent formal and material qualities that allowed for emergent narrative and aesthetic alliances between them and their widespread availability, amplified an aesthetic consistency that was in-the-making and embedded in everyday corporeal practices, This was a dramaturgy that could open to playful practices of contestation between multiple and often contradictory subjective tendencies. The transformative,

transversality of play and the heterogeneous aesthetics that invite play is then an important place to begin to amplify emergent modes of recognition that exceed and undermine the reductive concepts, practices and affects of Romantic, colonising and commodifying subjectivities.

About the author

Nicole De Brabandere holds a PhD in artistic research from the Zurich University of the Arts, Switzerland, and the University of Arts in Linz, Austria, a Master of Fine Arts in ceramics from the Ohio State University, Columbus, USA and an honours degree in Cultural Studies from York University, Canada. She was awarded two research grants (PhD research, post-doctoral research) from the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNF). De Brabandere regularly presents her research in a variety of formats, including academic and experimental writing, workshops and installations.

Notes

1. Llewellynn Jewitt, *Jewitt's Ceramic Art of Great Britain in 1800–1900*, revised Geoffrey Goddin, Arco Publication Company, London, 1972, p. 7.

2. E.P. Thompson, *Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture*, The New Press, New York, 1991, p. 72.

3. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Critique of the Social Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice, The President and Fellows of Harvard College and Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, Cambridge, MA, 1984, p. 4.

4. Brian Massumi, 'The Autonomy of Affect', *Cultural Critique*: *The Politics of Systems and Environments, Part II*, vol. 31, 1995, p. 91.

5. Susanne Kuchler, 'Technological Materiality: Beyond the Dualist Paradigm', *Theory Culture Society*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2008, p. 103.

6. Jewitt, p. 6.

7. Anthony Oliver, *The Victorian Staffordshire Figure: A Guide for Collectors*, BAS Printers Ltd, Wallop, Hampshire, 1971, p. 14.

8. Hunter Oatman-Stanford, 'Murder and Mayhem in Miniature: The Lurid Side of Staffordshire Figurines', *Collectors Weekly*, 2003, http://www.collectorsweekly.com/articles/the-lurid-side-of-staffordshire-figurines.

9. Myrna Schkolne, *People, Passions, Pastimes, and Pleasures: Staffordshire Figures 1810–1835*, Hot Lane Press, 2013, p. 5.

10. Oliver, p. 14.

11. Linda Colley, 'Whose Nation? Class and National Consciousness in Britain 1750–1830', *Past and Present,* vol. 113, no. 1, 1986, p. 74.

12. Colley, p. 110.

13. Jewitt, p. 6.

14. Oatman-Stanford, np.

15. Bruno Latour, 'Visualization and Cognition: Drawing Things Together', in *Knowledge and Society Studies in the Sociology of Culture Past and Present*, no. 6, ed. H. Kuklick, Jai Press, Bingley UK, 1989, pp. 5–7.

16. Ibid., pp. 8–9.

17. Ibid., pp. 5–6.

18. Schkolne, pp. 21–2.

19. Douglas Hay, Peter Linebaugh, John G. Rule, E.P. Thompson and Cal Winslow, *Albion's Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in Eighteenth-Century England*, 2nd edn. Verso, London and New York, 1976.

20. John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Civil Government*, 1690, Project Gutenberg EBook, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/7370/7370-h/7370-h.htm. See Sarah Tarlow's *The Archeology of Improvement in Britain, 1750–1850*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007, for further discussion of the role of transfer-

printed Staffordshire wares in British nationalism as well as in improvement and self-improvement practices and philosophy.

21. Ellen M. Wood, 'The Agrarian Origins of Capitalism', *Monthly Review*, vol. 50, no. 3, 2002, http://monthlyreview.org/1998/07/01/the-agrarian-origins-of-capitalism/.

22. Emily Apter, 'Dan Graham Inc. and the Fetish of Self-Property', in *The Lure of the Object*, ed. Stephen Melville, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2005, p. 16.

23. Georges Duby, *Art and Society in the Middle-Ages*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2000.

24. Stockolne, p. 18.

25. Andrew Hemingway, 'Marxism and Art History after the Fall of Communism', in *Art in Bourgeois Society, 1790–1850*, ed. Andrew Hemingway and William Vaughn, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998, p. 22.

26. Thomas Gretton, '"Art is Cheaper and Goes Lower in France": The Language of the Parliamentary Select Committee on the Arts and Principles of Design of 1835–6', in *Art in Bourgeois Society, 1790–1850*, ed. Andrew Hemingway and William Vaughn, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998, p. 87.

27. Ibid., p. 93.

28. Ibid., p. 90–2.

29. Alex Potts, 'The Impossible Ideal: Romantic Conceptions of the Parthenon Sculptures in Early Nineteenth-century Britain and Germany', in *Art in Bourgeois Society, 1790–1850*, ed. A. Hemingway and W. Vaughn, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998, pp. 101.

30. Susan Buck-Morris, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project,* The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 1989, p. 126.

31. Potts, p. 119.

32. Ibid.

33. The moral virtue of an ideal, immutable subject was also prevalent in German Romantic Criticism where reflection was embraced as method of 'self-cognition' that 'guaranteed the absolute subject ... through the immediacy of cognition, but did so equally because the concept guaranteed a peculiar infinity in its process ... an infinity of connectedness' (Walter Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 1 1913–1926*, ed. M. Bullock and M.W. Jennings, The Belkmap Press of Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, and London, 1999, pp. 122–3). This infinity was sustained through reflection on a present without antithesis: 'the immediacy of thinking comprehension ... [or the] mediation through immediacies' (Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 1*, p. 126).

34. Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1984, p. 142.

35. Ibid., p. 154.

36. W.J.T. Mitchell 'Imperial Landscape', in *Landscape and Power,* University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2002, p. 23.

37. Stacy Pigg and Carol Silverman describe this phenomenon in detail in, respectively, Stacy Pigg, 'Inventing Social Categories Through Place: Social Representations and Development in Nepal', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 34, no. 3, 1992, p. 504; Carol Silverman, 'Trafficking in the Exotic with "Gypsy" Music: Balkan, Roma, Cosmopolitanism, and "World Music" Festivals', in *Balkan Popular Culture and other Ottoman Ecumene: Music, Image, and Regional Political Discourse*, ed. Donna Anne Buchanan, Scarecrow Press, Lanham, 2007, p. 8.

38. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howerd Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, The Belkmap Press of Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, 1999a [1927–40], p. 220.

39. Ibid.

40. Stewart, pp. 150–62.

41. Philip Rawson, *Ceramics*, University of Pennsylvania Press, London and New York, 1984, p. 191.

42. Margaret Ponsonby, *Stories from Home: English Domestic Interiors, 1750–1850*, Routledge, London and New York, 2016, p. 10.

43. A. Linklater and S. Mennell, 'Retrospective: Norbert Elias, The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations—an Overview and Assessment', *History and Theory*, vol. 49, 2010, pp. 384–411.

44. Ibid., p. 399.

45. Ibid.

46. See the Canadian Museum of History for photographs of the Arctic Scenery wares <http://www.historymuseum.ca/cmc/exhibitions/hist/poterie/po14eng.shtml>. See Gavin Lucas 'Reading Pottery: Literature and Transfer-Printed Pottery in the Early Nineteenth Century', *International Journal of Historical Archeology*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2003, pp. 127–43 for a detailed tracing of the literary influences on the themes depicted on Staffordshire dinnerware.

47. Ponsonby, p. 4.

48. Linklater and Mennell, p. 399.

49. Roberta Bernstein, 'Dances with Things: Material Culture and the Performance of Race', *Social Text*, vol. 27, no. 4, 2009, p. 70.

50. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage*, University of California Press, California, 1998, p. 272.

51. Ibid., p. 272.

52. Benjamin, Arcade Project, p. 218.

53. Ibid., p. 938.

54. Ibid.

55. Brian Massumi, 'The Thinking–Feeling of What Happens: the Semblance of a Conversation', *Inflexions—How is Research Creation?*, no. 1, 2008.

56. This process is demonstrated in a practice of line-rendering that I developed in relation with choreographic examples in 'Experimenting with Affect in Drawing and Society', *Body and Society*, vol. 22, no. 3, 2016, pp. 103–24.

57. Walter Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2 1927–1934*, in Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith (eds), The Belkmap Press of Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, and London, England, 1999, pp. 115–16.

58. Ibid., p. 119.

59. Ibid., p.115.

60. Ibid., p. 120.

61. Ibid., p. 201.

62. Ibid., p. 202.

63. Ibid., pp. 217–18.

64. Erin Manning, *Always More Than One: Individuation's Dance*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2013, p. 46.

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