**Abstract**

The article considers the affect folk art has on the development of a vernacular visual language in particular associated with the expression and translation of the graphic line in illustration. It is argued that this process of translation and transference results in a conflict between aesthetic readings of the vernacular line, associated with the kitsch and the agency of the illustrated image/object. In adopting Alfred Gell’s (1998) principle of the agency of art a more objective consideration of illustration in relation to its functional role in society, rather than the aesthetic value of the image/object can be developed.

**Keywords:** Kitsch, folk art, vernacular, illustration, Clement Greenberg, Alfred Gell, Jonny Hannah, Laura Carlin

**The Vernacular Line: Adoption and Transposition of the Kitsch in Illustration**

Folk art and Kitsch ought for once to be regarded as a single great movement that passes certain themes hand to hand, like batons, behind the back of what is known as great art. They both depend on great art at the level of detail, but apply what they have taken in their own way and in the service of their own “goal”, their *Kunstwollen*. (Benjamin 2005:278)

In the context of Walter Benjamin’s above quote how does illustration respond to folk art and does it also take from great art for its own services. While we could perhaps, identify work within the field of illustration that draws upon a range of different periods and forms of art history. There is equally a necessity to consider how illustration draws upon elements of folk art for its own usage. While contemporary illustrators such as Jonny Hannah acknowledge the influence and close relationship to folk art in connection to their practice. There are perhaps less explicit manifestations of folk art in the wider field of illustration. Hannah’s work presents explicit visual forms and structures that we identity as being folk. These range from the inscribed marks, simple forms, overlaying of images to the painting on objects. *Wee Jerry’s Red Motor* (2009) is such an example, in which the status and form of the object is transformed, made into something beyond its intended function. It has become more than a decorated object, in painting its surface Hannah has added a new layer of significance.

Figure 1: Wee Jerry's Red Motor (2009) Jonny Hannah, © Jonny Hannah.

For Benjamin (2005) this transformation is evoked at the micro level of the gestures and marks made by the artist on the objects surface. This presents a complex experience for the viewer as their relationship towards the painted object shifts from surface to form to gesture reflecting the complex visual narratological reading of the collage and assemblage. Within this progressively complex reading there remains traces that the folk artist has utilized drawn from previous generations. Benjamin’s (2005) reference to the passing on of themes “hand to hand” evokes the craft aspect of folk art and the way these traditions were taught. In part these have become part of the language of folk art, the syntax by which we are able to recognize and identify folk art beyond its mere physical manifestation.

Part of the visual heritage of folk art resides within the cultural history of early medieval manuscripts. In particular illustrations in medieval manuscripts often reflected regional differences, in particular differences that echoed those of dialects, speech and vernacular languages. Maidie Hilmo (2004) Joost Keizer and Tood M. Richardson (2012) note the significance of illustrations that accompanied text written in vernacular language such as early English in the Angelo-Saxon period. Hilmo (2004) adds that these illustrations were not often direct interpretations of the texts but reflected the medieval mind. Adding that;

Even recent critics who have shown an interest have, with rare exceptions, felt compelled to note the inaccuracy of many of the images, presupposing that their purpose is to reiterate the text by rendering faithful pictorial translations of it, and to pass judgments about their “quality.” (Hilmo 2004:1)

The anonymous woodcut illustration of a duck printed by Jacob Meydenbach[[1]](#footnote-1) in 1491 retains elements of its inaccuracy that relates more to the quality and mode of production than its realism in contrast to Albrecht Durer’s Rhinoceros (1515)[[2]](#footnote-2) woodcut. In particular the quality of the lines are explicit signs of its lack of sophistication, reminding us of what could be called naïve, folk or vernacular. There are noticeable differences in the line in both illustrations Durer’s lines are more uniform outlining the shape and form of the rhinoceros and creating a sense of light and shadow on an object. In contrast the duck illustration is flat and any depth is created by the colour washes. The line seems to be less sophisticated, unrefined, less developed, denoting the craftsmanship and material process of its production. The line evokes the vernacular origins of the illustration placing it within a particular regional folk culture.

Jessica Brantley (2002) Joost Keizer and Tood M. Richardson (2012) refer to examples of early medieval manuscripts in terms of the vernacular. In particular they associate illustrations within these manuscripts as forming part of this vernacular tradition. Jessica Brantley (2002) argues that the term vernacular offers a useful way in analyzing word and image relationships in medieval manuscripts, noting that linguistically usage of the term and indigenous vernacular architecture. Keizer and Richardson (2012) note that, “the term connotes a rootedness in a tradition and implies a resistance to universals and international currents, which, in the early modern world, basically meant a resistance to Latin language and culture. The vernacular is often cast as an alternative to the official language of the Church and authoritative, classical authors. (2012:3)

Keizer and Richardson (2012) expand on this arguing that as early European regional painting developed artists became more critically aware how others painted. Leading to changes in regional and national painting resulting in regional differences slowly disappeared consumed by national or universal ideals of painting. It also lead to folk, vernacular, forms of painting, decoration being diluted or erased. Resulting in the dissolution of the vernacular and folk traditions of painting. However even with this dissolution there remains elemental forms that could be read as signs of the vernacular. What remains is more than an aesthetic form, in particular in reference to the example of the duck woodcut in comparison to Durer’s woodcut of a rhinoceros it is the line highlights the differences.

As Keizer and Richardson (2012) note it may not be perceived as resistance, but just the continuation of tradition. To those looking at it from outside of the community it could be considered vernacular, regional, accented with the tones and voices of previous generations. This distinction is evident in the developing sophistication of printed images from simple lines that echo that of early forms of wood engraving and carving. A more direct example of this can be found in Giotto’s paintings at Scrovegni Chapel in Padua (Arena Chapel) (circa 1305) as progressive compared to Cimabue’s *Maesta du Louvre* (circa 1280).

For the viewer of Cimabue’s *Maesta du Louvre* or the duck woodcut the line enables them to identify them as vernacular. In particular they embody what I would like to term the *vernacular line*. The vernacular line represents the distinctive difference between the natural organic forms of mark making, social art in contrast to the cultural art of higher society represented by that produced for the church and state. As such the vernacular line was perceived as badly executed, debased, primitive, uncultured and therefore should be erased. In early medieval European Art the line is highly visible and the use of perspective is limited. In a sense it is not realistic it is a distortion of reality or what was considered to be reality. In order to erase traces of the vernacular, perspective became the rationalist’s foci in conjunction with the removal of gestural lines.

Durer’s print’s represent a developing sophistication and drive to re-produce an equivalence of mark making produced in drawings and paintings being transposed into print. Modes of reproduction enabled the expansion of sharing of ideas and knowledge. In particular printing became the significant tool in the reproduction and copying of paintings, drawings etc. The reproduction of paintings into prints forms a key foundation to this article in particular in how engravers developed ways to produce equivalent marks to those of the original paintings. It is perhaps through printmaking that the vernacular line continued to develop as Benjamin (2005) notes, passed on behind the back of great art. Although on closer inspection traces of the vernacular became a significant component of early modernism most notably in the work of Paul Gauguin. His wood engraving Nave *Nave Fenua* (Fragrant island) (1893-94) is an explicit example of the vernacular being revived as part of his engagement with Tahitian culture.[[3]](#footnote-3) The vernacular is also present in the manifestation of Modernism in particular in Cubism. Picasso’s “light drawings” (1949) represent the fluid transition of gesture into the cohesive form of a vernacular line. The line constructs an image for the viewer although the line could be considered a contour it equally denotes a primitive vernacular form. This represents an example of the continued us of the fundamental trace elements that is part of the vernacular line of folk art. The most direct are those produced via woodcuts and subsequently engraving that the vernacular line in illustration is transposed onto to other mediums.

This ability to recognize the syntax of folk art extends beyond aesthetic readings. The vernacular seems to confront and resist attempts to place it within a universal codex. It is precisely this that perhaps makes it more problematical as it runs counter to the aims of artists and theorist attempts to construct universal models. To the extent that even William Hogarth’s treaties *The Analysis of Beauty* (1753) on the “Line of Beauty” draws on classical traditions to define art. If we are able to dislocate our concern for aesthetic value perhaps we will be able to better understand how we perceive and gauge the illustrated image. Equally it is hard to separate aesthetic judgments when looking at illustrations. In part the viewer is confronted by the choices the illustrator makes in constructing their images.

If we ask ourselves what “art” in the modern sense means to folk art on the one hand and to kitsch on the other, the answer would be: all folk art incorporates the human being within itself. (Benjamin 2005:278)

Benjamin suggests that kitsch enables us to view the world from within the object not from the objects surface. As noted previously Jonny Hannah’s *Wee Jerry’s Red Motor* (2009) enables the translocation of the viewers reflective gaze from the surface of the object, to an outward gaze from within the object. Laura Carlin’s recent work includes the creation of ceramics with glazed paintings that echo her illustrative work. The form and texture of the ceramics are equally part of the reading of folk art traditions and the vernacular. The flora and fauna elements in the Flora Bowl (2009) are more than decoration they present a narrative that the viewer becomes immersed in. The bowl is transformed into something more than its potential as a functional object. Hannah’s object painting is perhaps a particular example of the linage that connects his practice with folk art traditions, as does Carlin’s. Hannah’s and Carlin’s combining of illustration with material objects, surface painting and the creation of objects is not new. While the visual elements of their illustrations are formed of the vernacular line they equally transform the status of the object, in particular its ‘agency’ (Gell 1998).

Figure 5: Flora Bowl (2009) Laura Carlin, © Laura Carlin.

Walter Benjamin’s essay on folk art echoes the concerns of Alfred Gell (1998) towards studying art within different societies. In considering the study of illustration we perhaps need to acknowledge the complex role and function illustration has within society. In particular we should consider the agency of the object in terms of its function, rather than its aesthetic value. Considering illustration in terms of an aesthetic worldview fails to fully engage with the complexity of the illustrated image. As Hilmo (2004) suggests in terms of the layered relationship with text and illustration in medieval literature a simple surface reading fails to fully appreciate the complex relationships between these communicative forms and the mind of the medieval reader/viewer. Gell (1998) proposes that the agency of the object relates to its functional role in society, rather than the aesthetic value of the image/object. In part illustration is a mode mediating between different views and experiences, it is also an exchangeable commodity. It is perhaps this exchangeable function that has in the past limited the consideration and study of illustration.

Part of the agency of illustration is dependent on the “index from which abductions” can be made. (Gell 1998:15) Within illustration there are perhaps numerous indexes by which we may make abductions from. In side stepping the issue of aesthetic reading we are able to consider the different elements within the illustration that perhaps enable us to read it as being vernacular. One such abduction is the vernacular line, for this to occur there must be some form of agency.

Agency is attributable to those persons…who/which are seen as initiating causal sequences of a particular type, that is, events caused by acts of mind or will or intention, rather than the mere concatenation of physical events. (Gell 1998:16)

Figure 6: Unity is Strength (2011) Jonny Hannah, © Jonny Hannah.

Hannah’s *Wee Jerry’s Red Motor* presents a multiplicity of indexical forms that function as agents. Hannah’s work is embedded in a rich visual culture that informs and extends into a complex personal visual language. The close relationship with music and the vernacular in particular folk culture, popular culture leads to a recognizable codex that references the visual culture of the past. The vernacular line within Hannah’s *Unity is Strength* (2011) print is a manifested agency that provokes cognitive actions beyond the surface form of the image. This is derived from a range of indexes as proposed by Gell (1998) such as the line, mark and signs of the process of printing. These are physical visual signs (manifestations) of its folk tradition, origins.

Signs of indexical marks of the vernacular line are not just present in obvious examples as Hannah’s but can also be found in the work of other illustrators such as David Gentleman and Maurice Sendak. In particular Sendak’s illustrations for *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963) echo forms and lines, found in the tonal cross-hatchings of engravings. Presenting a ‘abductive’ (Gell 1998) transference from earlier forms of print traditions of engraving. In part this heritage is drawn from the difficulties in translating paintings into prints. William Hogarth’s work is an example of the interrelationship between painting and printmaking and how to produce effective translations of the original paintings into engravings such as those for *A Rake’s Progress* (1734) and the suite of prints (1735). The fineness of the lines produces a cohesive tone of shading and texture highlighting the use of layering lines to construct complex levels of light and darkness. There is also a clear development and refinement in his engraving as his career progressed. His earlier prints such as *Masquerades and Operas* (1724)[[4]](#footnote-4) show indications of vernacular forms of engraving and subject matter.

The looseness of lines in *Masquerades and Operas* (1724) reflect the development of Hogarth’s career as an engraver, printmaker and painter. Lines are inscribed to infer the presence of form in particular the foreground and the dense of people gathering in the shadow of the building. The layered lines used to create tonal depth and shadow to achieve darker tones is utilized by Sendak in *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963). These are not used to illustrate textures but to create depth and form. Yet in using colour washes over the line work Sendak adds to the complex atmosphere of the narrative. Including an uneasy response to the light quality of the soft pastel colour pigments in contrast to the drawn lines. Sendak’s line work also references steel engraved illustrations for Victorian magazines and journals. The illustrated narrative reconnects with other illustrated children’s stories in particular John Tenniel’s wood engraved illustrations for Lewis Carol’s *Alice in Wonderland* (1865). The subsequent coloured washed versions of Tenniel’s illustrations bleed over the illustrated lines resulting in images that hark back to the anonymous woodcut illustration of a duck printed by Jacob Meydenbach in 1491.

Both Hannah’s, Sendak’s and Tenniel’s illustrations present ‘abductive’ (Gell 1998) readings of the elements and forms from within the index, evoking greater perception for the reader. In particular the vernacular line functions as a focal point from which to develop abductive readings of the index. Carlin’s flora bowl also presents a complex chain of alternate readings that directly relates to the context of Gell’s writing on an anthropological theory of art. The bowl has a function beyond the confines of institutions of art, as an ‘index’ (Gell 1998) it can be ‘seen in relation to some specific reception and that this reception may be active or passive, and is likely to be diverse.’ (Gell 1998:24) The decorative aspect of the bowl is an active catalyst for this abductive process from which we may consider it to be more than a decorative object.

This diversity according to Gell is partly due to the ‘culturally prescribed framework for thinking about causation when what happens is (in some vague sense) supposed to be intended in advance by some person-agent or thing-agent. Whenever an event is believed to happen because of an ‘intention’ lodged in the person or thing which initiates the casual sequence, that is an instance of ‘agency’.” (Gell 1998:17) This causation is more than a semiotic reading of illustrations rather it digs deeper into the foundations of illustrative practice in relation to the perceived intentions of the illustrator. In terms of Hannah’s object painting how do we judge the intended ‘agency’, in part this is dependent on the cultural framework of the viewer towards the object.

This causation in relation to Carlin’s ceramics and Hannah’s object painting are perhaps due to the associative connections made by the viewer in terms of the decorative. One potential reading of the object relates to folk art the other in relation to the kitsch. This associative connection towards the decorative, kitsch and folk art could also be extended to Hannah’s *Unity is Strength* (2011) illustration. However it is doubtful that Hannah intends his work to be kitsch. This is partly why the engagement and study of illustration may need to displace concerns about aesthetic values. Instead by considering its social agency we are perhaps better placed to consider the diversity of responses towards illustration.

Within contemporary culture we are perhaps assured by what kitsch means in terms of visual, aesthetic and physical form. We are perhaps overly confident on what kitsch issues, yet in terms of how it is manifested, it is perhaps, as Greenberg (1939) has suggested a manifestation of the industrialization of society. Greenberg proposes that kitsch is a product of the displacement of workers from the rural to the urban. That manufacturer’s produced products that replaced or helped ease the mind of the displaced. In part the surface form of these objects echo or reflect elements of the rural past and the practices of these communities. The surface decorative form represented an adoption of the elements of the folk. These elements could equally include the vernacular line being transferred onto industrial products.

Gell’s (1998) discussion on decoration in relation to his thesis on the agency of art offers a counterpoint to Greenberg’s argument. Gell states that;

...decorative patterns applied to artefacts attach people to things, and to the social projects those things entail…The world is filled with decorated objects because decoration is often essential to the psychological functionality of artefacts, which cannot be dissociated from the other types of functionality they possess, notably their practical, or social functionality. Gell (1998:74)

Therefore the social function of Carlin’s bowl is perhaps enriched by the deeper complex psychological functions it offers its owner, user or viewer. Thereby expanding the potential diversity of how we construct intentions between the ‘person-agent or thing-agent’ and us. There remains the potential for us to read an illustration as being kitsch whether we know the intentions of its creator. However as Hilmo (2004) has highlighted this misreading maybe due to our inability to access the creators mind and their intentions. As Benjamin states, ‘art teaches us to look into objects. Folk art and kitsch allow us to look outward from within objects.’ (Benjamin 2005:279) We should perhaps bear this in mind when viewing the work of John Tenniel, Maurice Sendak, David Gentleman, Jonny Hannah and Laura Carlin, by viewing their work from within we become directly engaged with vernacular line and its genealogical traces.

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