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Leiden

The Netherlands

Designing Rites of Passage

Groot, Marjan

Citation

Groot, M. (2010). Designing Rites of Passage. *Visual Anthropology (Online)*, 23(5), 443-461. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/16491>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

REVIEW ESSAY

Designing Rites of Passage

Barney, Matthew. *Drawing Restraint 9*. Written and directed by Matthew Barney, 2005. Starring Björk and Matthew Barney; 135 min; distributor, IMDb, <http://www.imdb.com>

Valentine, David. *The Duellists*. Experimental video written and directed by David Valentine; choreography, Methods of Movement; performers, James Hall and Joe Livermore; soundtrack by Hybernation; producers, MediaShed, 2007; short version 3:00 mins., long version 7:11 mins.; <http://mediashed.org/duellists/>

Our conversation after seeing *Drawing Restraint 9*, the most recent art film of the American artist Matthew Barney, went more or less like this:

Observation (careless): It's about a marriage ritual between a man and a woman, very traditional in fact. There's a Japanese wedding costume in it.

Answer (indignant): It doesn't have to be like that. Maybe it's about incest between a brother and sister.

Reply: Well then, about an initiation. A wedding is an initiation as well. *End of conversation about the film, continuation with—yes, with what?*¹

My partner in conversation, an experienced (and provocative) scholar in French and American literary theory with a great interest in contemporary Western art, did not opt for an easy explanation. He clearly knew there to be more to Matthew Barney's work, whereas for some reason (even though I regularly visit museums of all kinds) it had completely passed me by. And so I began asking myself: Could *Drawing Restraint 9* be about incest and not about an "ordinary" marriage? Couldn't a contemporary artist like Barney be "traditional" with regard to meaning and form? How do form and meaning in this film relate?

The story of the film seems to be simple. A young man and woman experience a ritual, suggested to be an engagement as part of a wedding ritual, and sexual initiation as guests on board a whaling vessel; and Barney seems to be telling his audience the story of a common *rite de passage* of a heterosexual relationship. In an interview with the artist the story was called "A Natural Love Story" and Barney said he wanted the film to work as a love story [Hernandez 2006]. *Drawing Restraint 9* thus appears to be an artistic follow-up to *Titanic*, the well-known star-studded historical film from 1997.² Its design, however, and its ending make *Drawing Restraint 9* uncanny when compared with *Titanic*. The bizarreness of the

design may be characterized using art-historical terms like “grotesque,” “baroque” and “surreal”; and a published volume on Barney’s previous projects indicates that it is exemplary of his work [Spector 2002].³ Next, the sex between the lovers takes the form of a bodily mutilation that transforms them into whales. This ending, humans becoming animals, suggests that the design of the film has an agenda. In fact, it turns a common story into a complicated narrative about split cultures and identities (for this, design historian John Heskett [2005: 85]).

In this essay I shall discuss the uncanny and overt construed design of Barney’s film as a critique and metaphor for the construed nature of social reality, in this case the rituals that legitimate the construction of heterosexual relationships within a particular society and culture. And in response to my partner in that conversation, I shall focus on the gendered nature that this social reality implies in carefully nurturing its institutions, in this case marriage. To conclude, I discuss a short video of a totally different nature.

The works discussed here are not anthropological films in the sense that they document and analyze non-Western societies through a visual medium. Rather, in subverting and questioning rituals and boundaries, they are both postmodern visual documents and narratives of contemporary cultures presented in the form of artfilm and video (for visual stories in general [Bal 1997]). There may be objections to examining these works as visual anthropology, even if it is not clear what visual anthropology actually is or should be. Yet, to an art historian specialized in the Western so-called decorative arts and design, the very existence of a subdiscipline called visual anthropology seems to be quite natural and, given the discussion on usefulness and aims of visual *vs.* written anthropology [Taylor 1998; Schneider and Wright 2006: 21–24], art history, founding its research long since on analyzing the particularities of visual works *vis-à-vis* written (historical) source texts, may join in on a (subjective) visual analysis and reflect on the viewpoint of anthropology that considers Western art and the historical discourse it generates as dealing with aesthetic deceiving, affective, and un-textual images [Schneider and Wright 2006: 4–14]. Clearly contemporary art has left much of this imago by moving away from traditional media such as painting to incorporate new lens-based media such as film, video and photography. Moreover, presentations on the Worldwide Web are now to be found adjacent to those in institutionalized museums and galleries. This is not only testified by the works I am discussing here but also by those presented to support the recent quest for a sharing of practices between contemporary art and anthropology in a volume edited by Arnd Schneider and Christopher Wright [2006, reviewed by Mulcock 2008]. What’s more, both works under discussion vividly show the importance of the Internet as a medium for the researcher as well. Being fairly recent artworks, the Internet is vital for their dissemination, and one can hardly avoid interacting with Web information.

DESIGN

The first film was part of a sculpture Barney made in 2005 for the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art in Kanazawa, Japan; only subsequently has it

been presented on its own. The title *Drawing Restraint 9* has been linked to the following quotation from an anatomy book given in a compiled A–Z cremaster glossary: “The cremaster muscle draws the testis up toward the superficial inguinal ring”; furthermore, it has been explained as “facilities to defeat the facility of drawing” [Wakefield 2002: 99, and 1995: 16, respectively]. In the context of art history, however, the title also evokes the ancient artistic process of drawing (*disegno*), which is an essential element of design and art. It implies purpose, project, plan, and also draft, picture, portrait. With the element of force in it in the meaning of pulling, the restraint could be interpreted as restriction(s) caused by or incorporated into the process of designing and, on another level, be applied to the construed project of the figure of the artist while creating his history. The most prominent feature of Barney’s film is its design. It works against the restraint that dictates the classical tradition in art, by far the most outspoken tradition [e.g., Gombrich 1984: 18], and that is being denied by a hybrid mix of cultures and geographies. Not only is the film pure visual seduction, a body of absorbing and eye-catching hyper-sharp images of intense color, but all visual elements are excitingly strange and unexpected too. Objects have been perfectly cast, and shots are long and thoroughly composed, all contributing to the rhetoric of the visual. In a way it all looks almost idyllic, except for some images at the end that may be unbearable to those with weak stomachs, such as the person with whom I saw the film. Natural and industrial surroundings, design, colors and textures of objects, food, costumes—everything contributes to a forced, artificial aesthetic environment and directs the narrative through contrasts. This has been quickly noticed in one aspect, the food, which made the food artist Debra Solomon write that the design and composition of the food in *Drawing Restraint 9* were exceptionally good [www.culiblog.org]. We then have to imagine the black surface of petroleum jelly, heaps of green seaweed, blood-red pomegranates and rose-red shrimps. These seemingly absurd, Dadaist ingredients and combinations underline the aesthetic impact as well as the significance of food as a sign for sensuality through taste. With regard to the ending of the film it can be said that food and sex go together in the sense that they are, to use a memorable phrase of Martha Nussbaum’s, “part of a general problem of bodily appetite and its management” [Nussbaum 1996: 200; see below].

The primacy of the visual in *Drawing Restraint 9* is further achieved through the tempo. The film takes approximately two-and-a-quarter hours. All the time the action is very slow, as if the seduction of the images needs to be underlined in order to sort optimal effect, until it becomes almost boring to look and focus one’s attention, and threatens to undermine the seductive potential. Furthermore, there are hardly any scenes with people conversing, speaking or talking. There are sounds and noises of the movements of people and machines, and there is film music by the Icelandic pop-artist Björk, Barney’s partner in real-life marriage, with whom he also made this film and who has performed in Japan herself. The minimal use of language to express emotions adds to the almost sterile and inhuman character the film already expresses through its design. Facial expressions are quite neutral too; only the acting through gestures is articulated, communicating an air of theatricality common to performances of rites but also to Japanese theater, whether the popular Kabuki or the formal Nôh. As I shall conclude, this lack

of human voices and of facial emotional expression also has a philosophical consequence, in elevating the visual as erotic sensation. It underlines what could be called an affective potential of images [Van Alphen 2008]. To this, however, comes an affective potential of Björk's music which is one-to-one connected with the images. Being an essential part of the artwork, which is testified by the artist's co-operation and the viewability of the film by means of Björk's clips on the Web, the music consciously evokes sensory experiences, *e.g.*, as in "Pearl," a scene where women dive for pearls in the sea (see hereafter). The combination of Western and non-Western "indigenous" music—in "Pearl" performed by the Japanese *sho* player Mayumi Miyata and the Inuit throat-singer Tanya Tagaq—makes the musical scheme similar to that of its visual counterpart; the music has also been professionally reviewed (links are provided on the Web). Thus the artwork more or less invites a response to the lack of sensory affect that Schneider and Wright criticize in text-based anthropology [2006: 8–12].

The design and slow pace turn the film into a stream of still-lives and *tableaux vivants* that can be stopped at any moment to become static art photos, as indeed Barney has done with other films of his Cremaster cycle. Stills from the film keep to familiar iconographical themes: scenes of landscape, still-life, mythological narrative, industrial scenes—all art historical genres are present. Yet the stills keep the surreal and baroque air that characterizes the entire film through its design. *Drawing Restraint 9* uses design to make the mythical and fantastic as its theme against, as Baudrillard puts it, "the absolute real, in its banality, in its veracity, in its naked obviousness, in its boredom, and at the same time in its presumption, in its pretension to being the real, the immediate, the unsignified, which is the craziest of undertakings" [Baudrillard 1994: 47].

Through its design Barney's film is a protest against the hyper-real of contemporary society and the "terrorism [which] is always that of the real." It is the opposite of Baudrillard's simulation, and as such this visual language confirms the unreal state of being that is deliberately and temporarily evoked in tribal rites of passage. In terms of the art-historical notion of iconology, "decoding" the film can be as complicated (or as easy) as that of the 17th-century Dutch paintings; these too testify to "ordinary life," "high" and "low" culture alike, as well as to other symbolic levels and cultural codes. Indeed, the fact that there has been compiled a "Cremaster Glossary" [Wakefield 2002] tends to make Barney's work an affair of scholarly connoisseurs not much different from traditional iconology. Personal readings however do not necessarily need to take into account all of the multi-layered references to cultural phenomena and texts. One might even say that the images and references present such a complicated mix of cultures, rituals and practices that any "academic" explanation works against the visual and audible "message" of the work. That there is indeed a problematic side to this visual seduction will be addressed shortly; suffice it to say now that it also led to the feminist "guerrilla performance" *Drawing Complaint* when the film was shown in SF MOMA in June 2006, featuring Tina Takemoto and Jennifer Parker as Björk and Barney [www. 'Memoirs of Björk-Geisha,' 3:34, with unauthorized, therefore inaudible, soundtrack!].

From the perspective of design and design history, the location of the film—mainly on board a colossal Japanese whaling vessel, the *Nisshin Maru*—is telling. To Europeans and Americans, Japanese culture seems both extremely sophisticated and

extravagant with regard to technical perfection, discipline and the presentation of artifacts as well as everyday things. Food and interiors of traditional houses, for example, all seem formalized, either by strict minimalism or by contrasting exuberance.

Humble things are used in works of art and in rituals as if it is the contrast that needs to give meaning, as it does not have any real, valuable existence outside the created artificial context. In the film the costume of the young couple, which Barney says was inspired by the costume for a Shinto wedding, is an example: its form is basically simple, like all *kimonos* and *kosodes*, yet its materials, decoration and wearing can be very complex [e.g., Sparke 1987; on costumes, Noma 1980; Ishimura and Maruyama 1988; Hernandez 2006]. Likewise in Japanese culture the Western categorical separation of visual art and decorative art/design doesn't seem to be an issue, and it is not in Barney's film.

Barney says a Shinto shrine inspired the design and idea of *Drawing Restraint 9* with its focus on the whaling tradition and natural creation cycles. When confronted with the otherness of Japanese culture, he wanted to use the formal relationship that exists in Japan between guests and hosts, as well as refer to the idea of being in a whale that Westerners know through such stories as *Jonah*, *Moby Dick* and *Pinocchio* [Hernandez 2006]. Apart from the "being in a body," an obsession of Barney's that will be met with later on, the seemingly absurd connection Barney makes here serves to connect very distinct cultures and notions of historical time. Both Western "historical" mythology, Greek or Antarctic, and "traditional" Japanese culture become the Others through which our present-day culture is analyzed [Augé 2008: 15–16]. This potentially globalized present-day culture may be one of confusion as well as con-fusion, and essentially hybrid, yet with the other two it shares elaborate rituals and practices that are tied to institutions. The reference to two famous written Western narratives of *Moby Dick* and *Pinocchio* with canonical status—themselves to be dated to 19th-century Western historical time when scientific interest in other cultures further evolved—reminds us of Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's "*devenirs-animaux*," "becoming animals," a category that is supposed to transcend both Carl Gustav Jung's archetypal series and Claude Lévi-Strauss's symbolic structures of totemism with regard to the relationship between man and animal [Deleuze and Guattari 1980: 290–292]. As Deleuze and Guattari argue, this "*devenir-baleine*" or "*baleinelement*" is more than just a correspondence, a resemblance, an imitation or an identification: "Moby Dick is neither an individual nor a type but a borderline, and I need to hit it, to reach the whole pack and get beyond" [Deleuze and Guattari 1980: 285–291, trans.; quotation 300; compare Sterckx 2007 for the "*devenir-cochon*" of the Belgian artist Wim Delvoye].⁴

The film as such is about a Deleuzian becoming in the widest sense especially because, despite Deleuze and Guattari, the two main characters of the film actually seem to become whales. Yet living whales are never really shown. This brings me to the story of *Drawing Restraint 9*.

NARRATIVE

In terms of visual analysis, the splendid and uncanny design of the film supports a narrative that in general terms seems to be about contrasts: nature/culture, old

rituals/modern world, East/West, female/male. The contrasts are such that they imply the gendered structure of (Western) society. Since *Drawing Restraint 9* has references to classical Greek culture as well—in line with Barney's other work—it is important to note that this gendered structure is a part of classical Western philosophy [Lovibond 2000: 14–17]. At the time of its release in 2006, after screening at festivals, the film was presented worldwide in about twenty cities, and it was then said that it would probably never be released on DVD [Hernandez 2006], thus creating exclusivity. Parts of it, nonetheless, are shown on You Tube as videoclips with Björk's soundtrack. Through this medium, with virtually no boundary whatever, viewers and their comments indicate its popularity, reception and appropriation; for example, in remixing its soundtracks (e.g., "Storm," DarkJedi). Björk also uses the interactivity of "Web 2.0" for her video-clips. Thus it simultaneously functions as an exclusive and as a popular artwork. I saw the film only once, without any intention of analyzing it as I do now, and my account relies on what I could remember when I started to think about the film afterwards and the parts I later saw on the Internet.⁵ I may then be making things up to some extent as I appropriate the story and its design from the frameworks it offers me, thus acknowledging that any observation is always being subjectivized.

The story is presented in present-day society on a hyper-modern ship that leaves a port for whaling; a bird's-eye shot of the country shows a fan-form island that hints at the long contact between Japan and the West through the trading of the Dutch from their enforced base at Deshima, Nagasaki, before Commodore Perry made Japan open up her borders around 1854. At the beginning of the film men walk in line along the seashore and construct something (a film set?) while shots show women and men performing a procession-like ceremonial dance [YouTube, *Drawing Restraint 9* "Construction Dance," 7:14]. Then the vessel is being waved goodbye by ceremonial flagging.

The vessel presents an industrial *décor* for the narrative. Her enormous cooling space is empty and probably meant for whales that are going to be hunted and killed. In this cooling space and during the voyage, sailors work hard to assemble an irregular long piece of rock and a string of pearls formed out of white greasy matter. The rock is a suggested potential breeding ground for oyster shells with pearls and appears to be a sculpture by Barney representing ambergris, an organic material produced as waste by whales [*Drawing Restraint 9* storyline on Wikipedia, last modified 22/12/2009 at 16:15, p. 2]. These aspects refer to the contrast between substances that recurs throughout the film and has a parallel in the ancient philosophical concepts of form and matter, which are opposed and gendered [Lovibond 2000: 12–17]. The popular erotic connection of oysters with male sexual potency and pearls with the female sex is just one of the many Western clichés Barney uses.

Two characters, an older woman and man, act as all-knowing focalizers within the film. They lead the young couple, played by Barney and Björk, into the story of their ritual engagement suggested to be a wedding. The story begins with the old (married) woman putting stone fossils in a larger and a smaller box [YouTube. *Drawing Restraint 9* "Opening," 5:59]. She wraps the two boxes in paper as gifts—wrapping is a renowned Japanese artform—and seals them demonstratively.

The seal is a black oval with a horizontal bar in the middle. It is a stylized form of the cremaster muscle that triggers the reaction of male testicles to stimuli such as sexual intimacy, fear or—more prosaic—cold (as mentioned by Flood [1995: 32] and Van Alphen [2005: 134, 123]). The form marks all Barney's works, as a male signature, and in this film it recurs, cut out of other forms and substances. After cutting part of the seal the horizontal bar turns red; the color red is also recurring, and it is visually alarming. The fossils in the boxes introduce the factors of space and time; hence the notion of something that takes place in another environment and in the past. This is a mental past that implies a reference to a real past while the couple is entering a ritual time and space. Following Marc Augé, these two aspects would characterize the times of super-modernity and its ambivalence to historical time [Augé 2008: 20–33, 59–63], and while in general allusion to former times and places actually has to do with talking about present space, the story does so in an abstract sense. Yet hints of "real" history are given, first by the form of Deshima and next by the fossils. According to Barney the fossils are a source of petroleum, which will ultimately replace whale oil as an energy source [Hernandez 2006]. The fossils relate to a refined liquid from earth sediments developed on the border of land and sea, while whale oil relates to the sea; like the opening up of international trading, grand-scale exploitation of petroleum started after the mid-19th century by the United States; it has since become vital to capitalist economies and obviously lies behind many a modern political strategy or conflict. After the wrapping of the boxes, the old woman seems to have played her role.

The boxes contain the story of a young man and woman and their wedding ritual at sea. Ships and seafaring are cliché metaphors for a voyage in life, hence for a passage. First the man brings the woman in a little boat from an island to the big whaling vessel. Then, in bare spaces in the hold of this industrial ship, they are given a bath and are made up and dressed in ceremonial costume, only to meet in a small room and to be offered tea prepared by the old man. After this, while they have what can be termed sexual intercourse and experience what can be seen as stages of satisfaction, they metamorphize into whales.

Their sex, however, consists of mutilating and hurting each other while water enters their room because the vessel has crashed onto something. First they give each other a vampire-like bite on the neck, which makes a sort of whale-hole. Next they cut each other with knives, just as whales are treated once caught. The man is the first to wound the woman with a sharp object—he "penetrates" her. We do not see the actual penetrating; we only see her reaction, which may mean sexual satisfaction as well as pain. Cuts appear in their skin, the skin of their legs is stripped off and their legs are cut off; blood colors the water red. Their faces remain intact for quite a long time; I believe they are not damaged. This de-skinning occurs in other of Barney's films [Wakefield 1995: 16].

In anthropological terms this bodily mutilation could be explained as part of a series of transition rites between separation from a usual environment and incorporation into another environment, and in this respect the design of the place is extremely important. The location, an empty industrial ship for commercial hunting, is a place beyond human territory. Although it is a familiar work-space to the seamen, for rites of passage it becomes liminal. Geographically the sea is

an equally undefined free liminal territory in wild nature, especially as concerns the much-contested whale hunting. The ship “operates,” as it were, in between completely cultivated human nature on shore and wild nature. It is a human-built shelter moving towards an area outside territorial waters and without distinct geographical demarcation. After the 100-year-old classic *Les Rites de passage* [1909] by the German-French ethnologist Arnold van Gennep, the importance of such rites and their corresponding time of liminality or in-betweenness in a variety of societies has been discussed by many authors [Van Gennep 1977 (1960): 81–82; Turner 1969: 94–130; Winchester *et al.* 1999: 60–61]. Here, however, the liminality of the vessel at the same time subverts the ritual that takes place in it and is connected with the rite of passage, for as a non-place the ship lacks the meaning and historical tradition of a sacred Shinto temple where “normal” weddings are supposed to be consecrated—the design of the ship stands in explicit contrast to the connotations of such a temple. This makes the ship symbolize the narrative’s concern with identity, since it actually *is* the place where identities are going to be discussed (for anthropological place, space and non-place, Augé [2008: 35–42, 65–66], discussing Michel de Certeau). As a space the vessel becomes invested with a meaning other than for practical hunting, and transforms into an anthropological, animated place, the latter both literally and symbolically. Hence the active character of the narrative as, in the words of Augé, a journey narrative with its “privilege of the route over the inventory” [*ibid.* 65]. The emptiness of the cooling space and bare rooms of the ship shows that, as yet, there is hardly any inventory to make, and the film as visual narrative constitutes the very place for different identities. This playing with “undefined” geographical and spatial liminality again echoes other works of Barney. In this film the liminality is reinforced by eerie electronic sounds, murmurs, utterances and echoes that characterize Björk’s soundtrack: it is as if the music is not of this world. Liminality even extends to the level of personification when *Drawing Restraint 9* is viewed simply as a biographical love story between the American artist Barney and a woman-musician from an area marginal to big continents, namely Iceland—a postmodern re-enacted myth after an ancient format.

In the film the cuts in the lovers’ bodies are paralleled by cuts in food. On board the whaling vessel seamen “sculpt” the stylized black form of the cremaster muscle as a giant pudding sculpture of petroleum jelly. The form—part of their physical bodies too—resembles their meal, and the soft substance is like the white fat and smooth black skin of whales. It is cut horizontally, as de-skinning, and shows the food jelly turning red under it, suggesting flesh of dark raw fish and human beings alike. The color red recurs in a food mix of pomegranates and shrimps as part of the sailor’s meal [YouTube, *Drawing Restraint 9* “sailor’s meal,” 3:28].

The making of the jelly sculpture seems to be a pastime of the seamen until they reach cold seas and can start the whale hunt. The jelly pudding falls apart at the end when the young man and woman seem to have become whales and the ship reaches an icy sea in which whales seem to swim. This falling apart is a sign of destruction and irreversible change. It may parallel the man and woman becoming whales, leaving the reality of the human world on earth and beginning life in an animal world in the sea. It also bears on the classical difference between

form and matter: (male) form falls apart, (female) formless matter is what is left [Van Alphen 2005: 129].

Before they meet for their ritual the young woman is bathed and the man is shaved. After his toilet the man falls asleep on the floor, which makes him look poor and humble. While asleep, his head's hair is being shaved off as well—again a familiar element in a *rite de passage*—and he transforms from a human masculine bearded sea-dog into an animalistic satyr type with horns on his head and hair on his cheek. The satyr, a classical Western grotesque, half man-half animal, is a favorite in Barney's work, as are sculptures of soft substances such as the jelly pudding [Spector 2002]. The girl does better than the man: for her a bath is prepared with cut lemons to give her bathwater an aroma. The artful make-up of her hair gets particular attention and she is dressed in what resembles a traditional Japanese ceremonial costume like that for a wedding, with long sleeves and fur, which enhances her beauty. The soft, tactile texture and associated warm qualities of fur give the association with animals of the earth such as rabbits or foxes, and present an ambiguity within the environment of the sea. They also underline the stereotypical softness of femininity. The costumes of both man and woman are in brown and beige hues; that of the man is darker. This light/dark palette is a common visual signifier of gender difference. Each carries a small backpack in the fascinating form of a shell and shoes of unusual form that seem to be of fish or whale bones; when "walking," which is difficult, they make clicking bright, almost ethereal, sounds that make their movements seem delicate and unreal.

All colors contrast with the bright items—thus these draw attention visually. At the beginning of the story red was explicitly connected with the young woman: she wore a bright red cape with fur at the hemline and pink stockings—a bit like Little Red Riding Hood—before she boarded the whaling vessel where she was re-dressed for the ritual. Though colors do not have overall fixed meanings [Gage 1993], red does generally signify strong emotions, and as used in the film its connotation may be stimulating as well as alarming, thus to signify that the girl may respond to sexual intentions.

After their bathing and beauty care the old man prepares them a ritual drink in the form of a tea ceremony where he acts as tea master, a role reserved for men. The thick seaweed-green liquid is the most exquisite to be served at a Japanese tea ceremony. The ceremony is performed with unusual utensils from sea animals: a nautilus shell, a sea urchin, all with "fantastic" forms that deny modernist functionalist stereotypes for their purpose of sipping and drinking. As such these forms represent the ambiguity of liminal symbols, while at the same time they demonstrate Baudrillard's statement that "functionalism's pretension to designating—design—the greatest degree of correspondence between the object and its function, and its use value, is a truly absurd enterprise; no culture has ever had toward its signs this naive and paranoid, puritan and terrorist vision" [Baudrillard 1994: 47; cf. Heskett 2005]. Like the costumes, the fantastic nature of the accessories stresses the mythological feel of the story, while the ceremony as such belongs to Japanese tradition. In a way it also mirrors and undermines the Shinto Wedding practice of *san-san-kudo*, when the couple drink *sake* from special flat cups guided by a Shinto priest. While hinting at a mixing

of different rituals, Barney questions the purity of the one specific ritual and underlines the alienation of its context.

While the tea is brewing an image of two mating whales appears above the vessel (there is, of course, the double meaning of the word “vessel” for ship as well). The color green is paralleled by a green paste with rose-red shrimps that is prepared and spread against an oyster rock/sculpture by boys in white clothes. During the tea ceremony the old and young man have the only real conversation of the film. The old man tells the young one the history of the ship, when it was built, which place it occupies in the genealogy of vessels (the number 4 of the boat is a bad-luck number), and he mentions that the ship has been slightly damaged in a collision with another vessel. He also makes clear that the Japanese are much attached to nature. His story prefigures the ending, when the vessel seems to sink while the young man and woman transform into whales. In this stage of the film the minimal use of human language underlines the fact that animals have different ways of talking and communicating than human beings.

Secondary to the main characters are diving women and “earthly” seamen or ship’s lads; again, similar figures populate Barney’s previous work [Spector 2002]. Here their actions underline common references to male and female gender stereotypes which are also very much part of visual art and literature from earlier periods. The diving women dive for oyster pearls near a rock, the ambergris sculpture, while schools of fish and jellyfish swim around them [You Tube, *Drawing Restraint 9 “Pearl Hunters Tanya Tagaq,”* 3:43]. They resemble Japanese *ama* who, known for their pearl-diving prowess because they have developed a body temperature of 30°C, have been recorded diving in Japanese chronicles as early as 300 BCE. They are dressed in immaculate white with white hoods on their heads. This also alludes to the mythical sea nymph Galatea, the nereid from Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*: “she who is milk white.” Further along in the story an *ama* pops up from the water surface when ships approach. Apart from the connotation of innocence evoked by the white of the costumes, this scene is most instructive for the sensuality of the accompanying sounds, murmurs and sighs. The track is performed by the singer Tanya Tagaq, who revives the ancient tradition of Inuit throat-singing in order “to push the boundaries of emotion and to express the primitive instincts she believes still reside deep within our flesh” [Wikipedia]. The sounds are unarticulated and soft, making them somehow tender, erotic and suggestive of those from a closed-off place. Indeed, the divers themselves work underwater and the sounds indicate a transformed way of hearing as sensory experience that is likewise operative in a fetal state and comes prior to looking.

Another long piece of rock (*i.e.*, sculpture), seemingly blown from the seascape with (presumably) a whale harpoon-gun, is drawn into the belly of the ship with considerable manpower. The handling refers to separation from a whole form, a natural environment and penetration of a hard form in a hole. Of a contrasting soft substance or matter are “pearls” of white fat, which are meanwhile produced on the vessel. As these can melt they are less durable and less form-fixed than natural pearls. So, if both hard and soft pearls are signs of femininity and virginity, the fat-pearls indicate that this femininity can give way. The rock

(form) and pearls (matter) are brought together by seamen as two strings or lines in the vessel's cooling space.

Another symbolic reference is given by close-ups of a young woman playing a Japanese mouth organ, an old instrument.⁶ These important close-ups break up the main storyline. Towards the end of the film she plays another song. We only get to see her long dark hair with strings of pearls in it. Seen from behind, it is a contrasting black and white image. She appears to double the girl who undergoes the ritual and who will consequently lose her virginity. The string of pearls in her hair resembles the string of fat-pearls in the cooling room of the vessel; both this room and the vessel may parallel the female body as container. The white fat, which is one of Barney's favorite substances, may be connected with birth as well: babies leaving the womb are normally covered with white, greasy *vernix caseosa* (cf. Van Alphen [2005: 131], who mentions Vaseline and "gluey, glandular substances"). It thus underlines a state of supposed fetal "innocence."⁷

Revoking its beginning, the story also ends with a box form: using a rope, a large chest is pulled out of the sea on the slips. The slips are deserted and no longer in use, and are blown up when a woman appears spitting pearls from her mouth. She has blackened teeth—which, as the novelist Junichiro Tanizaki pointed out in 1933 in *In Praise of Shadows*, his defence of traditional Japanese cultural practices against "intruding" Western Modernism, in Japan is an ancient ideal of feminine beauty [Tanizaki 2001: 44]—and she vomits pearls, as if to signify that her virginity is lost. It parallels a seasick boy who vomits a white liquid on board a ship caught in a storm. As a milky-white sperm this liquid signifies the product of male sexual activity and the passage into sexual maturity of the adult seaman he is to become; it may also allude to the sperm whale species which, diving to 3200 meters (the sunlit zone is 200 meters), is the deepest diver of all whales, hence reaching hardly accessible environments, or, in psychological terms, "layers of existence/conscience."

At this point something has ended, a transformation has taken place, man and woman have changed their perception of human physical sexuality. The vessel (or other ships, or the young couple) will not need to come ashore any more. The man and woman seem to have become whales; their voyage of initiation has taken them into a life as animals.

SEXUALITY

The narrative suggests a fairytale about heterosexuality that is confirmed by the magnificence of the images. Can the visuality counteract this narrative in any way? In presenting a heterosexual couple in what seems to be a traditional wedding rite Barney has chosen the most important of transition rites from one social category to another. As anthropologists have shown, the pattern of the *rite de passage* is more complicated for the wedding rite than for the initiation rite [Van Gennep 1977: 72–82, 116–117; Grimes 2000: 151–214].

Yet the ritual in the whaling vessel clearly is not one of present-day society. The fairytale is disturbed by what is suggested as a violent consummation of the engagement in marriage and the partner's becoming animals. Their unifying

bond with associated temporary rites of washing, eating and dressing is not a transformation from one social category to another—a change of family, clan, village or tribe—but a transformation to an altogether non-human environment. Their bodily mutilation, being a means of permanent differentiation, underlines the difference. This would also affect their sexuality: as animals they would lose their possibilities of human subject positions with multiple (sexual) subjectivities and equally multiple social restrictions (and, for that matter, liberties...). The normatively controlled body becomes the out-of-control body with identities becoming fluid [Winchester *et al.* 1999: 61, 68]. This even happens literally because the man and woman go under the water; with the small space that encloses them now, it is as if they return to a womb, a female-gendered sphere within, and opposed to, the already hybrid male-gendered sphere of the ship. Ernst Van Alphen has pointed out how in Barney's previous films the design of substances signified shifting boundaries between *individual* male and female *bodies* and their genders [Van Alphen 2005: 128–129, 137]. The jelly-pudding sculpture and the fat-pearls do something similar in *Drawing Restraint 9*. Yet in *Drawing Restraint 9* this blurring of boundaries is embedded in a critique of the *institutions* that affirm human gender roles into a metaphorical “terrorism of the real,” indicating that sexualities and genders are represented through institutions.

Thus fairytales and myths as formalized stories for social structures and constructs are misleading. In her analysis of Lucretius, Martha Nussbaum says as follows: “Reading love poems and hearing love stories produce images and patterns of attention” [Nussbaum 1996: 208]. Because of what *Drawing Restraint 9* doesn't show, a couple happily living ever after, it may be about all forms of sexuality that counteract the accepted tale of a heterosexual bond: homosexuality, trans-sexuality, incest. Yet in the end all human sexuality and desire is problematized in favor of “natural” animal instinct. Like animals, and like fetuses in a womb before their gender is differentiated, they return to a state of supposed preconscious sexuality. The starting point is a traditional heterosexual relationship as the accepted human construct of “naturalness,” only to end with a rejection of human sexuality and the institutions that represent it. The rites of passage of the protagonists become those of contemporary culture moving away from fixed sexual categories, or maybe acknowledging that these categories never really existed in the first place.

Into its smallest details, then, the design of this film underlines the fact that human (hetero)sexuality and desire as we understand them are a recent social construct—as is, in fact, the traditional Japanese wedding rite. This rite is furthermore one alien to Western culture.⁸ As one explanation has it, this construct was to indicate the difference from homosexuality. To quote Jonathan Katz in *The Invention of Heterosexuality*, “heterosexuality . . . signifies one particular historical arrangement of the sexes and their pleasures. . . . An official, dominant, different-sex erotic ideal—a heterosexual ethic—is not ancient at all, but a modern invention” [Katz 1995: 14, 34–55]. Ancient, on the other hand, is a variety of sexualities: a pleasurable sexuality as a bodily urge, a “functional” heterosexuality aimed at procreation, and a homo-eroticism that Plato presented as the prelude to intellectual love and the knowledge of Forms. Gender makes for a further complication. In his essay “Men without Balls,” Ernst Van Alphen connects Barney's work to

the notion that various sexualities form free alliances with multiple (expressions of) masculine and feminine gender identities. In his reaction to other reading—which discusses Barney’s work as dealing with genetically or biologically manipulated bodies without sexual desire and biological sex—he further points out that although Barney effectively challenges dominant fictions of masculinity and masculine sexuality, literally designing “men without balls,” he does not alter or subvert gender differences [Van Alphen 2005: 127–131, 134]. In this I agree: in the film Barney presents men designing their genders through their bodies and organs; he doesn’t show women doing the same.

MYTH

The undertone of classical Western civilization in *Drawing Restraint 9* is obvious through references to Greek mythology in the sea voyage, the satyr and the nymph-like *ama*. It is also clear that both film characters fit into the universal narrative of an opposition and contrast between culture and nature that is further suggested by differences and mixes of form and substance (matter). This implies a gendered conceptual structure of good *vs.* bad as the basis of rationalist philosophy. Hence the position of women with regard to gender remains as problematic with Barney as the desire and sexuality of women in the classical scenario. Both homosexuality and natural instinct give little room for a positive experience of reflection on female sexuality. In principle the sexual desire of women need not be less emotional or “instinct-driven” than that of men—the romantic word would be “passionate.” Yet in nature as well as in social rites female sexuality is generally less articulated and often even deliberately repressed in favor of a “harmless” gendered maternal role.

Feminist writings on classical philosophy do not agree on the essentialism and misogyny that authoritative authors such as Plato and Aristotle express with regard to the sex and roles of women. However, in general women are thought to be naturally inferior to men, while only animals or slaves are lower than women [Annas 1996: 7].⁹ With regard to *Drawing Restraint 9* then, a few things may be noticed. From a feminist viewpoint the film narrative shows a repressed position of women, for overall the female protagonist is a passive character. She doesn’t talk, thus has no human voice, and makes music and sings only while being directed in the (male) frame of the story. Even the form of *Drawing Restraint 9* as art product reflects this contrast: Barney directed the visual form, Björk composed the formless soundtrack. Yet the female film character escapes her fate of “imprisonment” in a formalist feminine role in human culture by becoming a whale; for as an animal she will be less conscious of social restrictions. Also, as the most abstract kind of art, music is thought to be closer to the Platonic Forms than form, hence higher in rank, and in the film it is represented by a woman.

The metaphor of *Drawing Restraint 9* is obvious: the restraint that the process of drawing and designing forces onto the artist functions both as a mask and a corset. The visual form of art/culture makes a masquerade of the narrative of instinctual behavior. Within a visually regulated environment messy nature becomes a longed-for but forgotten state; then rationality is thought as well

as supposed to be separated from desire. As both mammals and animals that are written about in ancient texts and sources, the whales represent humans in their “natural” state before they learned what their sexuality might be. The “Natural Love Story” turns out to be literally natural, and bestial sex the drive that breaks conventions after humans repressed it to establish and maintain those very conventions. Even alternative present-day wedding practices of lesbian or homosexual couples that challenge the restraint of social and gendered groups lack this extreme, for they conform to the formula of the rite of passage into married human life. Thus the risk to be preyed upon by the powerful majority of the dominant culture remains [Grimes 2000: 207–214]. Becoming animal seems to be the only way to escape—yet then biological research may question this symbolic idealization of the animal world in the same way that medical research questions the symbolic paradisiacal environment of the fetus in the female womb.¹⁰

If we return to the idea that *Drawing Restraint 9* functions as a critical narrative with the potential to reflect upon incest, it is precisely through its exaggeration of design and the visual that this can be done: its rhetoric is the visual. Barney wants his audience to look. The viewer’s emotional distance is enlarged and overpowered by aesthetic awareness. Applying Plato’s final state of philosophy to *Drawing Restraint 9*, the Beautiful must be of an unlinguistic nature and reached through Eros—for example, the sex scene. Words do not seduce, images do. Language therefore has its weaknesses, for it does not see the Beautiful itself—hence the importance of a “mute,” textless story of and about beautifully designed images [Bowery 1996: 191–194]. In the end the visual even overpowers the audible, the music.

INITIATION AND “REALITY”

Since *Drawing Restraint 9* was intended to be a product for the art world that has its own unwritten rituals, I want to conclude by addressing an issue of another nature: Is the exclusivity of this film not working against the important narrative about the construct of rituals and naturalness of sexuality?

To honor the art historian Heinrich Wölfflin’s practice of comparison, the short video *The Duellists* [2007], directed by David Valentine, offers an alternative, even though this too comes from the realm of art video and film. It deals with another initiation and is the opposite of *Drawing Restraint 9* in virtually everything except for the romantic potential of the story and the businesslike setting of its design. Yet in its simplicity and ingenuity I find it equally constructive and “beautiful.” *The Duellists* is one of the first productions of the British collective MediaShed. The collective infiltrates in open video systems, hacks cameras, and in this way creates its own TV studio in buildings, shopping centers and streets; this is called “video sniffing” or free-media which makes use of the existing infrastructure of cities. *The Duellists* was commissioned by the Futuresonic Festival in Manchester and shown in December 2007 at the exhibition “Video Vortex” in the Netherlands Media Art Institute in Amsterdam. This exhibition was set up as a response to the openness of “Web 2.0,” which stands for power to the user and democracy

for everyone [Info leaflet *Video Vortex*, December 2007]. At present the video is on YouTube in a short and a long version.

The Duellists records the dance of two adolescent boys, the performers James Hall and Joe Livermore, in a shopping mall in Manchester after closing time. They wear the casual clothes of young people today: sporty, baseball caps, nothing special. The rite of passage their dance entails is an initiation rite. While historically initiation rites have always been of great importance, anthropologists have shown that in modern Western societies they are no longer formal, traditional and clearly visible—as are marriage rites. Instead they are peer-driven forms of initiation that are developed from the ways adolescents grow up [Krenichyn 1999: 43–44; Grimes 2000: 94–100]. The setting is that of contemporary life in a place for leisure. However, since the mall is empty and without the usual crowd, its character as a non-place with nothing but the architecture and design of benches, escalators, railings, and so on, clearly stands out [Augé 2008]. This makes the mall an even more liminal space than the whaling vessel in *Drawing Restraint 9*, and much more contemporary as well. The mall, like the vessel, has also to be invested with a meaning, this time a meaning other than the ordinary and perhaps vulgar late-capitalist pleasure of consuming.

The video's soundtrack—by Hibernation—is a rhythmic compilation of environmental sounds generated by doors and other elements of the mall and recorded during production. The video is recorded with 160 CCTV cameras from fixed locations in the mall, determining shots and angles of the video first and foremost by the location of these surveillance cameras supervised by the director, David Valentine, not by an artist-director such as Barney. As it is, the film looks quite documentary in style and is visually of no great interest. The architecture of the mall is unattractive and this is stressed by the desertedness of the place—to use Baudrillard's words, it literally evokes "terrorism of the real." In the version I saw all was in un-sharp black, grey and white images with little contrast, on a small screen; color versions on YouTube show outrageous colors in a children's play-car machine only. Yet by counteracting this terrorism the story offers a critique.

The boys are running through the mall at a high speed, dictated by the beat of the sound, and meanwhile performing a choreography of acrobatic and gymnastic figures. Their so-called free-running matches free-media, and both contribute to signify the spontaneity of the subject matter, as opposed to *Drawing Restraint 9*. They rival in difficulty and performance of their dance and in the originality of using the stairs or a railing for their acrobatics—hence the dueling. Their duel is friendly in nature and, in the process of looking at the video, their extraordinarily skilled and complicated movements turn the environment of a 21st-century consumer society with hoodies hanging around in shopping malls into something positive. The story of their duel starts to counteract common alarming "news" by TV programs about trouble and criminality caused by adolescents, as well as about the violation of privacy by safety cameras. Their invented rite of passage rejects institutionalized authority by manipulating the very same authority that these cameras represent. Baudrillard's "terrorism of the real" is deprived of its threat.

The rivalry between the boys could be interpreted romantically as a modern duel for honor. Traditionally duels were of course the business of noblemen

and aristocrats: they were formalized rituals with personal honor at stake and mostly fought because of a woman. Yet in the video no woman is present; at the most a future alliance with a female partner could be imagined because of the boys' age. The video appeals to the social reality of competition between male adolescents from middle or lower social classes who perform a *tour de force* in order to show off on the street, more or less in public, to reach their personal goal of perfection, of being the best. It is a symbolic rivalry for social prestige and personal power which for men in "real" life is to be attained by a job and the phallic system of money, material possession and a wife (considered as possession). Before the boys enter this economic and cultural system—and as adult men are expected to support it for the rest of their lives—they play in the hyper-real environment that is part of it and even symbolize the consumptive nature of it. Like the observations Kira Krenichyn made of adolescents in a New York City high school, they appropriate this environment and create a space of their own in order to expand their capabilities. In their domestic situation they often do not find such a space [Krenichyn 1999]. Here, at this stage in their lives, they experience a sense of freedom that leads to their inventing an anti-established and contemporary free-running dance-form. They use the creative potential of the anti-structure they find themselves in a structure that in their situation even lies outside the official creative potential of established art theater. Again, the location and its design mark the initiation rite as different, for on a theater stage duels are common stuff. While open, the mall is normally associated with women and youth shaping their identities through shopping; when closed it becomes a place for male adolescents excelling in creative dance who, in so doing, are expressing another identity as well. Only as symbolical *Duellists* can they express a dualist view of contemporary times and spaces with which they grow up, appropriating spaces of super-modernity as places. Challenging the mall as a space, they are as much dueling with its architecture as with each other.

When compared, *Drawing Restraint 9*, with its pretension of being visual art, and *The Duellists*, having no such pretension, question boundaries between high and low culture. The duel form refers to an old and aristocratic culture; the supposed wedding rite is more like the saga that is associated with oral literature and folktales. The narrative of both films is phallogentric and follows a male perception. *Drawing Restraint 9* in fact admits this: the stylized cremaster that seals the wrapped boxes with fossils at the beginning of the story is a statement of male supremacy (with balls) despite the fact that the boxes refer to a past. In both films historical boundaries of sex, gender, work and behavior thus remain intact in a different way [Krenichyn 1999: 54]. And they make *Drawing Restraint 9* "traditional" despite itself (and in contrast to the conclusion of Van Alphen [2005: 139]). Both rites of passage are acted out on an individual scale, yet both turn on historical times between modernity and postmodernity.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am much indebted to Mrs. Kayoko Kawamura and her pupils for letting me attend a traditional Japanese tea ceremony, and to Mrs. Sato and Yoko Takagi for introducing me to this ceremony. Many thanks also to Paul Hockings for his editorial assistance.

NOTES

1. This was in May 2006.
2. Spector [2002] and Flood [1995] mention the many references to Western films in detail but, although unquestionably important, this stands separate from my argument here.
3. There are eight other works from the *Drawing Restraint* series, not only film but performance and drawings as well. These works did not appear in a logical numerical order; [Wakefield 1995, 2002, Spector 2002, and the website of Matthew Barney].
4. See also Calarco and Atterton (eds.) 2004.
5. I shall refer to these clips with the titles of the soundtracks in brackets.
6. The woman is the famous Japanese *sho*-player Mayumi Miyata.
7. From a medical perspective, the innocence may be questioned by the effects of physical and psychic stress of the mother on the unborn child. See numerous research reports on PubMed. Other research argues that fetuses learn and have a memory [e.g., Dirix *et al.* 2009].
8. For a clear account of this see Nussbaum [1996] and Grimes [2000]. Most literature dates both the idea of heterosexuality and the wedding rite to the end of the 19th century. The standardized Shinto wedding ritual seems to date from 1990 with the wedding between Crown Prince Yoshihito and Princess Sado.
9. For Plato's much analyzed texts on this see Lovibond [2000], and for contrasting feminist analyses of Plato and Aristotle the various contributions in Ward [1996]. The analysis by Annas in this volume contrasts with that by Susan B. Levin, "Women's Nature and Role in the Ideal Polis: Republic V Revisited," 13–30. For a positive evaluation of the "feminine" narrative of Diotima, see Bowery [1996].
10. See note 7.

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Marjan H. Groot
School of Art History
University of Leiden
Leiden
The Netherlands
M.H.Groot@hum.leidenuniv.nl