

WMS (US) Sponsored Events at the Modern Language Association Convention

(Chicago, IL | January 3-6, 2019)

Sponsored MLA Session: William Morris: Reflections on Art and Labor

Session Date/Time: Friday, January 4 | 8:30 AM-9:45 AM,

Session Location: Michigan 2 (Hyatt Regency)

Presider: KellyAnn Fitzpatrick (kellyann@gatech.edu), Georgia Institute of Technology

The Handcrafted Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction: Walter Benjamin and the Revolutionary Potential of William Morris's Decorated Books
Brandiann Molby, Loyola University Chicago

While scholars have long debated the extent to which Morris achieved his socialist ambitions for the Arts and Crafts, critical discussion has not addressed the extent to which the tension between Morris's financial success and (arguable) ideological failure can be traced back to his reliance on reproducible, printed media. Drawing on the work of Florence Boos, Susan Buck-Morss, and Walter Benjamin, I examine the 2017 facsimile of the Kelmscott Press *News from Nowhere* and Morris's unfinished book designs for *The Earthly Paradise* to contend that Morris's understanding of the nature and function of the reproducible work of art can be understood in terms of Walter Benjamin's dialectical images, which, like Morris's designs, rely on the reader or user to bring together text and image and decoration and design to generate revolutionary socioeconomic change. Through an examination of Morris's lectures, I argue that Morris locates the revolutionary potential of the handcrafted work of art in its identity as a nonfetishized object defined by its use-value rather than its exchange-value. My paper maintains that the tension between Morris's success and failure lies in Morris's determination to maintain the Benjaminian aura of the reproducible work of art through Ruskinian craftsmanship, to leverage that reproducibility through the object's exhibition-value, and in the process to transform both the decorated interiors and the socioeconomic structure in which it operates. Through a reading of the frame structure of both *The Earthly Paradise* and *News from Nowhere*, I contend that the failure of the reader and the protagonists in both works to achieve any lasting paradise ultimately reveals Morris's own recognition of this paradoxical tension at the heart of his design principles between the revolutionary capacity for and the inability of the work of art to generate individual improvement or wider socioeconomic change.

Aestheticism and the Birth of the Consultant: Wilde versus Morris on Art, Work, and the Self

Patrick Fessenbecker, Bilkent University

A generation of post-structuralist thought has insisted on the fluidity and instability of identity, condemning theories of autonomy that rely on a clearly-defined self as "essentialism," a view that is both philosophically mistaken and politically pernicious. Writers in this line of thought have in turn praised aesthetic theories of the self, celebrating the tendency in authors like Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde and others to see the self as not so much a thing but a process, the name for the ever-ongoing process of self-fashioning. However, as scholars like Luc Boltanski, Eve Chiapello, and Richard Sennett have shown, this view looks a good deal less promising than it once did. Global capitalism has assimilated the aesthetic theory of freedom in developing an economy based around the consultant -- a worker who is always more than his particular project, who is always outside (and therefore not responsible for) his organization, and whose fundamental skill is not any particular craft or set of crafts but a certain indefinable creativity and insight. This assimilation has revealed, Sennett and others argue, that such identities do not offer the freedom they promised: the instability of selfhood introduces as much anxiety as it does liberation. In that light, William Morris's reflections on the relation between art and work deserve a reconsideration. If it is now possible to look skeptically on Wilde's claim that one should make one's life a work of art, then perhaps we might offer as an alternative claim Morris's insistence that art matters in work insofar as it is an ornament.

This paper proceeds in three steps. The first is a sympathetic reading of Wilde's "De Profundis" that understands it as an account of autonomy, one aligning with Jean-Paul Sartre's notion that the free self avoids arbitrariness in its choices by giving a form to itself, a form that offers a guiding structure for subsequent choices. The second draws on Sennett, Boltanski, and Chiapello to consider the limits of this account of freedom, and in particular its implication that creativity is the only essential element of the self. The third and final movement turns to Morris's "Signs of Change" and *News from Nowhere* to develop an alternate account of the role creativity plays in the autonomous self--as a necessary but supplementary component of the execution of a concrete and definite skill.

William Morris and *The Dawn*: Ideas for "The Society of the Future"

Rebekah Greene, Georgia Institute of Technology

Phillippa Bennett and Rosie Miles (2017) observe that

Physical and psychological wellbeing, a healthy environment, social justice, meaningful work, beautiful buildings, a dynamic art and literature are never, for Morris, isolated areas of concern: they are so thoroughly interrelated that failure in one sphere is inevitably related to failure in another (7).

William Morris's commitment to social justice, fair rates of pay for laborers, and a healthy work and living environment captured the attention of both British and American labor activists and religious leaders. I argue that Morris's appeals for

increased rights for workers, in particular, were pivotal to the development of a radical political and literary trans-Atlantic exchange of ideas.

For the purposes of this talk, I will investigate three short Morris lectures and editorials--“How we live and how we might live,” “True and False Society,” and “The Society of the Future”--works that were enthusiastically received by W.D.P. Bliss, the editor of *The Dawn: A Journal of Christian Socialism*. These selections offer significant insight into Morris’s beliefs that workers might be able to build a more effective, healthier, robust future society. Interestingly, Morris also suggests that more fortunate members of society also are responsible for transforming society, observing that for many, “they know that the poor exist” (394). Morris, in these particular works, argues that *all* have a duty to improve society, not just the working classes. “Feeling for the poor” (to use Carolyn Betensky’s term) through occasional charitable acts or small donations is not enough for activists such as Morris or Bliss. They advocate for a fuller understanding of the political, public, and private spheres and a more active, individual commitment to transformation of both the individual self and the overall human condition.

Sponsored Outing: Newberry Library Tour & Presentation

Event Date/Time: Friday, January 4 | 3:00 PM-4:30 PM

Event Location: Newberry Library | 60 W Walton St, Chicago, IL 60610

If attending, please RSVP by December 28 to: KellyAnn Fitzpatrick
(kellyann@gatech.edu)

Annual Dinner & Meeting

Event Date/Time: Friday, January 4 | 6:00 PM-9:00 PM

Event Location: Quartino | 626 N. State St., Chicago, IL 60654

If attending, please RSVP by December 28 to: KellyAnn Fitzpatrick
(kellyann@gatech.edu)