"Dancing the Old Enlightenment": Gould’s Book of Fish, the Historical Novel and the Postmodern Sublime

Abstract

The strategy that I wish to explore in this analysis of Gould’s Book of Fish is the postmodern experimental narrativisation of the colonial past applied to a political critique of the national present. More specifically, through interpreting the novel through Lyotard’s discussion of the postmodern sublime and a theory of bodily experience, it is possible to argue that Flanagan employs a postmodern aesthetic as a type of immanent critique in which the postmodern dialectic can be read as an extension of Enlightenment thinking. In the novel the past is shifting and, at least in a positivistic sense, ultimately irretrievable. This signals the notion of history as the postmodern sublime – a space of irretrievable loss and unfulfilled desire at the edges of the margins of history. While history and the colonial past shift and change in the novel, the representations of bodily experience anchor Flanagan’s novel in the recognition that real lives, often individual and collective suffering, often motivate postmodern critiques.

Keywords

Richard Flanagan; historical novel

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Refbacks

There are currently no refbacks.

The history of England in the second half of the 17th c. and during all of the 18th.c. was marked by British colonial expansion and the struggle for the leading role in commerce. The most active sections of the population at the time were the commercial classes that are the middle classes. They hated prejudice and lived by common sense; it was a sound – thinking and rational age. In fact, it was not until almost ten years after its first printing that the book appeared with the entire text that Swift had originally intended it to have. Ever since, editors have excised many of the passages, particularly the more caustic ones dealing with bodily functions. For artists throughout history the sublime has been an expression of the unknowable, and it therefore seems to have escaped definition. The book is about orally transmitted poetry rather than paintings, sculptures or any other aspect of visual culture, just as Burke’s later theories were also intended to apply across cultural fields, not just in the visual arts. 9 The subjects of these works were invariably histories or historical landscapes and were often on show at the annual exhibition of the Royal Academy, which was from 1769 the nation’s premier public space for exhibiting contemporary art, especially art that aspired to create sublime effects. Jones, J. 2008. "Dancing the Old Enlightenment": Gould’s Book of Fish, the Historical Novel and the Postmodern Sublime. JASAL Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature. 2008 (Special): pp. 114-129. Source Title. JASAL Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature. Additional URLs. http://www.nla.gov.au/openpublish/index.php/jasal.