

**Margaret Iversen, *Beyond Pleasure: Freud, Lacan, Barthes.***  
**University Park, PA, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007,**  
**204 pp., 20 colour and 12 black-and-white illus., paper \$40 U.S.,**  
**ISBN 978-0271029719**

Kathryn Simpson

Volume 34, numéro 1, 2009

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1069505ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1069505ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

---

#### Éditeur(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

#### ISSN

0315-9906 (imprimé)

1918-4778 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

---

#### Citer ce compte rendu

Simpson, K. (2009). Compte rendu de [Margaret Iversen, *Beyond Pleasure: Freud, Lacan, Barthes.* University Park, PA, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007, 204 pp., 20 colour and 12 black-and-white illus., paper \$40 U.S., ISBN 978-0271029719]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 34(1), 100–102. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1069505ar>

disruptions from outside the field inconveniently questioned the verities of established practices; where the very forms in which we conceive of history itself have been put into question” (199). This thread, which closes the book, aptly has the quality of a manifesto: like the protagonists of his study, Vidler has produced his own operative account, using the writing of history to send a message to the architects and historians of our own immediate present.

#### Acknowledgement

The author gratefully acknowledges the support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada during the writing of this review.

KEITH BRESNAHAN  
University of Toronto

Margaret Iversen, *Beyond Pleasure: Freud, Lacan, Barthes*. University Park, PA, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007, 204 pp., 20 colour and 12 black-and-white illus., paper \$40 U.S., ISBN 978-0271029719.

Margaret Iversen’s *Beyond Pleasure: Freud, Lacan, Barthes* is an ambitious contribution to theories of art beyond the pleasure principle. Setting the theorists invoked in the book’s title, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, and Roland Barthes, in dialogue with artists Edward Hopper, Salvador Dalí, André Breton, Robert Smithson, and Maya Lin, Iversen outlines “the contours of a tradition of twentieth-century art that touches on the traumatic core of human ‘being’” (6). More specifically, she aims to figure the workings of the death drive in twentieth-century art practice and theory, following Freud’s own formulation of this psychological concept in his 1920 essay “Beyond the Pleasure Principle.” *Beyond Pleasure* argues that there has been a shift in psychoanalytic aesthetics, away from theories of narcissistic mirroring and toward theories of anamorphic anxiety, and tracks both the history and value of this shift.

The book comprises eight chapters: “Introduction: From Mirror to Anamorphosis”; “Uncanny: The Blind Field in Edward Hopper”; “Paranoia: Dalí meets Lacan”; “Encounter: Breton meets Lacan”; “Death Drive: Robert Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty*”; “Mourning: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial”; “The Real: What is a Photograph?”; “Conclusion: After *Camera Lucida*.” As she explains, however, Iversen in fact worked in the opposite order: beginning with a reading of *Camera Lucida* (1980), she was drawn to Lacan’s analysis of the register of the real and the mechanism of the gaze, back through the surrealists, and finally to Freud. Given this trajectory, it is perhaps not surprising that Iversen frames her text as a reaction against a “dominant conception of the image widely promulgated in the 1970s and 1980s” (6), a conception informed largely by incomplete readings of Lacan and Louis Althusser in the domain of film theory. Iversen is at particular pains to correct an entrenched misreading of Lacan’s article on the “mirror stage” of infantile development which holds that the child’s perception of an illusory image of ideal selfhood is a wholly affirming experi-

ence. Lacan’s mirror stage is also “a conflicted domain fraught with anxiety and paranoia” (8). Thus the “anamorphic paradigm of psychoanalytic art theory” (13), as Iversen understands and practises it, attends to that which must be abjected from spectatorial theories predicated on this idea of happy identification. Indeed such theory assumes that the “smooth running of the pleasure principle is disrupted by something internal to the system itself” (13). Iversen’s overarching concern in *Beyond Pleasure* is to examine the structures and styles of that disruptive “something” which Freud first described.

Chapter two situates Hopper’s paintings in relation to Freud’s theory of the uncanny, emphasizing the “blind field” in Hopper’s work: “the space implied by the composition, but not shown, which incites an anxious reverie in the spectator” (14). Avoiding any “narrow interpretation of the uncanny that ties it too closely to castration anxiety” (20), Hopper’s uncanny is here theorized as a manifestation of the death drive, an unconscious compulsion to repeat “powerful enough to overrule the pleasure principle” (26). As those familiar with Freud’s anecdote of the fort/da game know, the concept of a “repetition compulsion,” its relation to trauma and the death drive, was central to “Beyond the Pleasure Principle.” Hopper’s use of a blind field, working to destabilize not only the viewer but the composition itself, his vertiginous angles, and his “indirect representations of unrecalable memories, banal but too-clear screen scenes of traumatic events” (35), all create uncanny effects that are themselves evocations of the death drive.

Chapters three and four trace mutual forces of influence between Lacan and the surrealists, particularly Dalí and Breton during the 1930s. Iversen argues for direct connections between Dalí’s *The Tragic Myth* (the Spanish surrealist’s analysis of Jean-François Millet’s *The Angelus* of 1857), Lacan’s work on paranoia and the mirror image, Breton’s *Mad Love* (1937), and Lacan’s later “conception of the *objet petit a* and the missed encounter with the real” (39). She also foregrounds her intention to take *The Tragic Myth* “a good deal more seriously” than other critics have done, “considering its form, its language, its argument, its precedents, and its implications” (42). Dalí’s method of “paranoiac-critical interpretation,” “which involved

the simulation of paranoid psychosis, with its typical perceptual hyperacuity and rigorously logical style of thought,” led him to see in Millet’s work a threatening, incestuous, anamorphically distorted mother (40–41). Iversen emphasizes the stylistic significance of paranoia, both to Lacan, who “considered ‘the formal envelope of the symptom’ to be most telling” (41), and in Dalí, whose “preference for the concrete, objective quality of paranoid delusion” cannot be separated from his hyperrealist painting practice (54).

According to Iversen, Lacan, who introduced the idea of the “missed encounter” in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis (Seminar XI)* (1973), “derived the term from *la rencontre*, a key surrealist concept advanced by Breton” (61). Moreover, after acknowledging Hal Foster, who in *Compulsive Beauty* (1993) briefly suggests that Breton’s *trouville* anticipates Lacan’s *objet petit a*, Iversen asserts her “stronger claim... the possibility that Lacan appropriated Breton’s concept” (65). Some readers might balk at this parallel, arguing that the surrealist encounter, unlike the Lacanian missed encounter, is predicated on “success, rather than failure;” Iversen nonetheless draws our attention to “the uncanny aspect of both” (66). Freud’s clinical view of trauma, as something which precipitates illness, is here contradistinguished from Lacan’s “surrealist adaptation of Freud,” where trauma is resignified into something more desirable, “one of the routes the subject finds to breach constraining imaginary identifications and the alienation of the symbolic” (73). Yet Iversen also critiques excessively optimistic readings of Breton that reduce the “foreboding and even panic” of a text like *Nadja* (1928) to a serendipitous convergence of pleasure and reality principles, stressing, rather, “the disturbing uncasiness, *le trouble*, provoked by the encounter” (67). By attending to the surrealistic language of the original *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, rather than its English translation, one “is able to argue that Lacan recasts Freud’s conception of trauma in terms of the surrealistic encounter” (67).

Such observations are important for several reasons: first, there are very few English-language analyses of the relationship between Jacques Lacan and surrealism, much less the specific histories of imbricated concepts therein. Also, as in the case of anamorphosis, which Lacan theorized through the anamorphic skull found in Hans Holbein’s *The Ambassadors* (1533), “the encounter has the virtue of being already embedded in the history and theory of art” (61). Theorists of the later work of Lacan, notably Slavoj Žižek and Parveen Adams, both of whom Iversen credits in her introduction, thus rightly use works of art to substantiate Lacan’s theory, recognizing the fundamentally aesthetic nature of that theory. *Beyond Pleasure* avoids applying the theory to works of art, favouring instead a dialogical approach between creative theory and theoretical art, predicated on the

understanding that the boundaries between theory and art are always already chiasmic.

In chapter five Iversen uses her analysis of the aesthetic dimension of Lacan’s understanding of trauma and repetition to buttress her own claim that Robert Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty* (1970) “is an attempt to make the death drive visible” (73). Noting the importance of the idea of “unbinding” (the dissolution of psychic connections and coherence) to Freud’s admittedly nebulous concept of the death drive, Iversen explains that she wants “to consider the notion of unbinding from the aesthetic point of view, that is, as another avenue for developing a theory of art beyond pleasure” (74). Just as Lacan “looked to the potential of the death drive to breach the defensive ego,” so “Smithson looked to it in order to undo the rigid formalism to which both art and thought are susceptible” (79). Iversen surpasses readings that focus on the way the title, *Spiral Jetty*, refers indiscriminately to earthwork, film, and text to suggest very specifically that the “filmic, photographic, and literary versions” of *Spiral Jetty* “have the weight and interest they do precisely because they circle around the vortex created by this great lost object” (87). Indeed the whorls and spirals of the earthwork and its appearance in the film are described as visual concretizations of the death drive, entropic images invoking the real beyond imaginary and symbolic attachments.

Maya Lin talked about death, loss, and her Vietnam Veterans Memorial in terms of “a sharp pain that lessens with time, but can never quite heal over. A scar.” Iversen suggests, in chapter six, that this description proffers “the germ of an alternative to the symbolic of castration and fetishization [often applied to Lin’s work]. A scar implies an acknowledgment of loss and a slow process of healing: a slow work of mourning, rather than a dramatic instantaneous disavowal and substitution [i.e., fetishization]” (100). Iversen proposes that Lin’s memorial uses the “openness, doubt, and anxiety” of Post-Minimalism to “make loss real and connect us to the dead” (105). In the Freudian paradigm, mourning, unlike melancholia, releases attachment to the lost object in order to preserve the self; accordingly Iversen proposes that the wall is a kind of work of “anti-mourning,” something that “establishes a cathexis by re-opening a psychic wound” (105). The wall’s healing function has to do with its reflective surface, which “will do some remembering for you, allowing you to take your leave” (107).

In chapter seven Iversen argues that despite *Camera Lucida*’s “apparent antitheoretical stance,” Barthes’s writing of it was in fact “deeply influenced” by *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (113). Iversen suggests that “Barthes’s punctum is equivalent to Lacan’s gaze or, in other words, to that which is elided in classical optics”; indeed descriptions of the punctum in terms of a prick, wound, or hole clearly relate it to the Lacanian concept of lack as a “gaze [that] inevitably looms up in the visual field and disorganizes it” (123). Following Jane Gallop,

Iversen notes that the photograph “endowed with a punctum has a ‘blind field’” (120); this blind field exposes the viewer as an object, rather than subject, of the gaze. Thus for Iversen “the real value of *Camera Lucida* lies not in its excavating ‘the essential nature of photography,’ but rather in its success at conveying to a large audience “a particular idea of our fascination with the image that was formulated by Lacan in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*,” and elaborating a theory of the visual beyond pleasure (132–33).

Iversen’s lucid prose and cogent interpretations help to make *Beyond Pleasure*, a deeply theoretical text, surprisingly accessible. Nonetheless, the book will likely appeal most to readers familiar with psychoanalysis and already engaged with one or more of the titular theorists. Indeed, Iversen’s treatment of Lacan and Lacanian concepts is particularly illuminating, especially when one considers the relative opacity of Lacan’s own writings. Although Iversen surveys a vast array of material, *Beyond Pleasure* seems most at home amongst a rather specific group of theoretical writings on trauma, death, and the real—texts by *October* associates Rosalind Krauss, Hal Foster, and Mignon Nixon; Slavoj Žižek and his interlocutors; and Parveen Adams and Briony Fer, amongst others.

Some readers might ask for a more thorough treatment of Melanie Klein, for example her theory of the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions. Iversen characterizes not only the former but also the latter in terms of retributory fears (109), which could obscure somewhat the essential transformation of the persecutory fears of the paranoid-schizoid position into the empathetic guilt and concern for the other of the depressive position. Nonetheless, *Beyond Pleasure* constitutes a *tour-de-force* of original research, visual analysis, and theory that will engross anyone interested in aesthetics beyond pleasure. My one quibble would be with the index, which is not as deep, broad, or accurate as merited by such a sophisticated text. In section five of “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” Freud mentions in passing that it would be difficult to convince an adult to reread a text they had recently finished. I can think of no more appropriate recommendation of Margaret Iversen’s book than to disagree with Freud here, demurring that in the case of *Beyond Pleasure* one can finish the book and want nothing more than to immediately begin rereading it.

KATHRYN SIMPSON  
Concordia University

Peter Richardson and Douglas Richardson, photographs by John de Visser, *Canadian Churches: An Architectural History*. Buffalo, NY, Richmond Hill, ON, Firefly Books, 2007, 438 pp., 400 colour illust., \$85 Cdn., ISBN-13: 978-1554072392.

The publisher announces that this book is “the first definitive guide to more than 250 of the most beautiful and significant churches across the country.” Definitive or not, there can be little doubt that this lavishly produced volume with its fine colour photographs will serve to raise interest in Canada’s rich and diverse, yet little-explored, heritage of religious architecture. The Richardsons tell us that “*Canadian Churches* is for anyone interested in architecture and how buildings respond to society’s needs.” They hope “to make the confusing variety of churches understandable to persons with little knowledge of churches or theology” (26). To cover all denominations of all dates across the entire country must have been a daunting task. They “made deliberate efforts to include famous churches alongside less well-known buildings” (15). “The challenge was always to limit the number of churches. Lists grew and shrank, grew and shrank again and eventually stabilized. Decisions were rethought. Yet many churches we hoped to include had to be left out because of lack of space, not lack of enthusiasm” (15). While there is always likely to be debate about the inclusion of certain buildings and the exclusion of others, the overall bal-

ance—temporally, geographically, and by denomination—is a satisfactory one.

The division of the book is straightforward. There is an introduction entitled “Churches,” in which the sections on Style and Design are succinct and informative; the latter provides a particularly useful list of questions that aid our interpretation of a church and the way it functioned. There follows Atlantic Canada, Quebec, Ontario, and the West and North, plus “Changes,” an overview of church buildings from the third-century house-church at Dura Europos, Syria, to the present day. Within the chapters material is organized chronologically, thematically, or geographically. Throughout the book extended captions to the illustrations provide much useful information.

Atlantic Canada opens in the seventeenth century; the historical context is clearly presented and there is a well-conceived overview down to the present. The chapter on “British and American Colonial Traditions” opens with St. Paul’s, Halifax, 1750, the earliest surviving Anglican church in Canada. There is an excellent historical contextualization, an exemplary discussion of the English and American design sources, and a clear account of the subsequent additions to the original fabric. For other churches the reader is likewise informed of the essential history and a clear interpretation of the building and its use. Particular fine are the entries on St. George’s Round Church,