

*The Military-Floral Complex: Phillip George's Fog Garden*ⁱ

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In Sophie Fiennes documentary film *The Pervert's Guide To Cinema* (2006) Slavoj Zizek – whose critical reflections form the backbone of the film – is shown watering flowers on the front lawn of an American suburban house. In one of his trademark off-the-cuff provocations, Zizek holds the hose suggestively and remarks that flowers are inherently 'disgusting', both a reminder of *vagina dentata* – vagina with teeth – and an open invitation for insects to copulate. Zizek's quip should be seen in the context of what he is re-enacting: the philosopher is watering the flowers in front of the house featured in the opening scene of David Lynch's movie *Blue Velvet* (1986), which starts with a peaceful suburban watering of flowers violently interrupted by a heart attack.

This heart attack scene from *Blue Velvet* is followed by camera movement penetrating the soil to expose the insect infested nightmare lurking just beneath the pristine surface. In a way not dissimilar to this, Philip George's multilayered rendering of roses in *Fog Garden* initiates us into a visual culture where the beautiful also carries the dark underbelly of threat, war and violence as necessary supplements. . His close-up photographs of roses with that combine the Arabesque and military planes superimposed onto the petals mark an altogether different approach to beauty. George's multi-layered images slowly unravel, demanding patience and concentration. Just as the fog enveloping the flowers slowly parts as we move from one image to the next, the petals also slowly give way to intricate textures. As our eyes move from left to right, our vision moves from fog to clarity. The titles highlight a sense of movement: *Giardini, Fogged world, Isfahan, Fog Garden, Trance, Boom-Boom, Eden, Mountain*. Yet, they also highlight a sense of confusion and threat of the unknown: the Arabesque and the contours of the planes are often barely distinguishable from each other, even as the fog parts.

The experience of these images is one of slow discovery and part of the interest emerges from the play between the visual and the titles. The first image in the series, *Giardini*, references the symbolism of the garden through the image

of the white peacock, the bird of paradise and luxury. The motif of meticulously cultivated gardens is crystallized in *Eden*, *Fog Garden* and *Trance* in the close-up of the rose, which traditionally held the most prominent place in the centre of the garden. In turning this motif over to the rose, George also draws attention to the long history of gardens in the Arab world. He also turns our attention to Iran with the image *Isfahan* that takes its name from a province south of Teheran, that is known not only for its production of intricate textiles and carpets but also for its nuclear facilities. The image fuses the complex and contradictory image of Iran into a singular frame of mystery and beauty whilst alluding to the symbolism of Roses in both Persian literature and Islam.ⁱⁱ The close-up shot of the rose references its role as a potential symbol of martyrdom whilst also conjuring up images of aerial spy photographs of military installations, botanic photography and the long history of flower painting. This gesture of blurring of the Arabesque and its religious and historical connotations with the contours of bomber planes is also echoed in *Boom-Boom*, which mixes beauty, symmetry and threat of the unknown into a powerful symbol.

George's interest in the symbolism of the rose recalls a wide array of associations from carnal desires, through religious symbolism to familiar cultural modes of remembrance and commemoration. Yet above all, roses here serve as visual framing devices. Much like Gothic rose windows, George's roses are there to look into and look through, rather than to just look at. In this respect the pictorial space of his images recalls Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia: a space arranged in a way that mirrors the society that created it.ⁱⁱⁱ According to Foucault, heterotopia has the power of juxtaposing in single place different spaces, locations that are alien and incompatible with each other. Gardens are the oldest examples of heterotopias, such as the traditional sacred gardens of the Persians that were supposed to unite four separate parts within its rectangle, representing the four parts of the world. Like in *Fog Garden*, roses were in the centre of the garden, symbolizing both the centre of the world and the most prized possession. Roses reproduced the symbolic perfection of the garden, as the smallest fragment of the world that represents its totality.

George's interest in the garden as the setting, just as his use of the Arabesque is a reference to the long history of world's most volatile and most misunderstood region of Middle and Central Asia. Best known to the outside world through carpet designs, the beauty of the Arabesque often conceals the world where even the simplest motif can be filled with religious, tribal and political significance. The Arabesque is a timely reminder that apart from carpets, the first commodities of a globalised trading system by several centuries, war has been the main form of interaction between nations.^{iv} Yet, it would be a mistake to assume that roses in *Fog Garden* are only intended as symbols of Islam. Rose has been adapted widely by most religions as decoration and a symbol of commemoration and remembrance. The motif of incorporating a rose into the sign of the cross – as a sign of the birth and martyrdom of Christ – or of adding a cross to the image of a rose, has been used widely in the later Mediterranean antiquity. In this sense, roses in George's photographs should be understood less than conflation of Christian and Islamic religious symbolism – although this is an important aspect of the work – but rather as a pictorial focus on a singular object in which this object becomes the stand-in for the whole. The massive presence of the flower heads is a reminder of their symbolic power and pathos. Yet, they are rendered profoundly ambiguous through the juxtaposition with symbols that make us reevaluate the significance and understanding of the rose.

George engages with the very medium of photography by photographing the roses and then modifying these images to reveal their ideological backdrop. His painstakingly precise and detailed technique of layering digital images is both a method for thinking *about* and thinking *through* photography as a site of multiple and complex histories. George's long-standing interest in conditions of visibility^v here translates into bringing attention to the representational frame of the image that makes beauty familiar.

On the one hand, this representational backdrop refers to the history of western modernist aesthetics. There is something both pre-modern and decidedly post-modern in George's juxtapositions that speaks to the crux of contemporary debates over the status of the photographic image. Despite

frequently heard claims that the photograph has lost its currency in the current hyper-speed interactive image economy, and despite consistent attempts to empty the content out of images, George's roses stubbornly denote a register of meaning that defies contemporary iconoclasm. As Bruno Latour suggests, when it comes to images we had never been modern, but now we are even less so, and for every attempt to remove the power of images a new source is found.^{vi} George finds this new source in the act of re-imagining the familiar by rendering the ubiquitous image of the rose both beautiful and strange. Modernist avant-garde radicalised itself against photography, creating images that were could not be photographed and inventing a visual language that emphasized gesture and expression. Digital technology made it possible to incorporate hand-gestures into photographs signaling the disillusion of modernist representation, and the shift from photographic to post-photographic practices. In *Fog Garden* photographs materialize this shift in an inverted form. George uses 'hand-painted' digital photography of roses not just to evoke the traditional connection to modernist aesthetics, or to describe the cultural and religious associations with what is in the image, but to materialize the gap between the two registers of meaning.

Yet another way to understand the way in which George engages with the medium of photography is to say that if images of flowers materialize the gap in the wake of the dissolution of modernism, George materializes the ideological backdrop to the gap. Returning to Žižek, we can call this gap the 'unknown knowns': the disavowed beliefs, suppositions and obscene practices we pretend not to know about, even though they form the background of our public values.^{vii} George materializes the link between the medium of photography and the 'unknown knowns', which here become 'invisible visibles'. We cannot approach the image of the rose outside the *Fog Garden*, the complex history and the network of gazes, conflict, war and violence that surround it. This gesture discloses what Marianne Hirsch calls 'structure and effect' of ideology in the photograph reproduced through 'a screen made up of dominant mythologies and preconceptions that shape the representations'.^{viii} In other words, in *Fog Garden*, roses do not exist as a recorded object. Rather, they exist only insofar as the

screen of dominant mythologies that shapes the representation – the fog garden of roses – is the object.

ⁱ This title is a reference to Slavoj Zizek 'The Military-Poetic Complex' *London Review of Books*, Vol 30. No 16, (2008) 17

ⁱⁱ Julie Scott Meisami, 'Allegorical Gardens in the Persian Poetic Tradition: Nezami, Rumi, Hafez,' *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Volume 17 (1985) and Maria Alvanou, 'Symbols of Basic Islamic Imagery in Jihadi Propoganda', Italian Team for Security Terroristic Issues and Managing Emergencies

ⁱⁱⁱ Michael Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces,' *Diacritics*, Vol 16. No 1. (1986)

^{iv} Christopher Kremmer, *The Carpet Wars*, (Sydney, Harper Collins, 2007) 40

^v. See Scott McQuire, "Awaiting the Barbarians on the Road to Baghdad", catalogue essay Phil George *Edge of Empire*, BreenSpace, Sydney, 20120 [URL]

http://phillipgeorge.net/essays/awaitingTheBarbariansOnTheRoadToBagdad_scottMcQuire_2010.pdf

^{vi} Bruno Latour 'What Is Iconoclash? Or Is There A World Beyond The Image Wars' in *Iconoclash* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002) 14-37, 21.

^{vii} Slavoj Zizek 'What Rumsfeld Doesn't Know That He Knows About Abu Ghraib' *In These Times*, May 21, 2004, [URL] <http://www.inthesetimes.com/article/747/>

^{viii} Marianne Hirsch *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Memory* (London: Harvard University Press,1997) 7.