

# EYEMAZING



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# Lukas Maximilian Hüller

## The Seven Deadly Sins

Using as his reference points ideas of excess, decadence and decline that are as old as western culture itself, Lukas Maximilian Hüller draws a strikingly accurate picture of the way we live now. Taking his starting point from the representational tradition of the Seven Deadly Sins, Hüller stages large-scale performances in tableaux which he then photographs with a panoramic camera. What we see, whether in the violence meted out to the innocent (and perhaps the not-so-innocent) in *Wrath*, or in the conjoined sexual and gastronomic bacchanale of *Gluttony*, is a symbolic depiction of our world. Hüller demonstrates the capacity of the photograph for allegory; we know that these events are staged, but at the same time we understand their reality, elsewhere, undocumented. In doing this he has much in common with a number of other contemporary photographers who also use performance as a means of escaping the indexical literalness of the photographic sign. (I'm thinking here of

artists as varied as Sarah Jones, Sam Taylor-Wood, Jeff Wall – both of whom have a similar fascination with the large-scale tableau – and Charlie White.) We might say that one of the defining features of post-modern art has been the displacement of what were, within modernism, often thought of as purely indexical, documentary media (photography, film, and later video) to become the principal allegorical forms of our time. (Even if the media of modernity were deployed in the service of allegory by modernists – in surrealist film for example – such practices were generally subordinated to modernism's use of obsolescent media as the appropriate vehicles for a critique of modernity.)

Hüller is 'post-modern' in another way too: that of self-conscious citation. Hüller invokes Hieronymus Bosch as a starting point for his series. Bosch used the Seven Deadly Sins as both moral allegory for religious instruction and as a narrative structure – 'the painting

in the form of a wheel' that Hüller mimes with his use of the panorama. This story-telling property is important to the artist, but so too is the iconographic resource that Bosch in particular, and the western tradition of 'morality painting', in general, provides. If Gluttony, on one hand, reminds us of those critiques of excess that run through the quiet condemnation of Dutch still-lives, where Franz Hals might be understood as a "noisy" painter, to seventies films like *The Decameron*, then *Wrath* draws as much on Jake and Dinos Chapman's *Hell* as it does Jacques Callot's *Les Grandes Misères de la Guerre* and, of course, Goya's *Disasters of War*.

In many ways this self-conscious citation is the content and meaning of Hüller's work; the use of allegorical forms does not, seemingly, imply a self-conscious morality or pedagogic purpose. What 'entertains' us in these pictures is, rather, the identification of symbols and their sliding from one image to another, or











the relation of one image to another. We are then, it seems, bound up in a typically post-modern play of signs – one that abandons any notion of ethical value as necessary, or even possible, content for the sign. The 'ethical' question is raised only with the spectator's interpretation, and belongs to that interpretation rather than to the image. However, it does not seem to me that in doing this Hüller escapes morality, any more than the Chapman brothers do when they draw attention to the impossibility of moral agency – itself a moral act in the manner in which it is made – in their loving citation and extension of Goya.

We see this best in *Wrath*. Hüller throws us back on history: what we witness is a compression of the western legacy of war whose principal agents are the forces of World War Two (whether those of the Wehrmacht or the American army), whose atrocities are now lovingly reproduced in miniature (by wargamers) or in vivo by re-enactment fetishists. But within this we see not only the characteristic refugees of twentieth century conflict with their carts and bicycles, we see the saturation of media reportage, the

cameraman 'embedded' in a combat unit, the female reporter doing a live take to camera, and in parallel with Goya, describing a situation whose monstrosity cannot be described. As the camera, the microphone and the satellite dish make clear, this is our world, but one that is mediated to us, and in which we never see the mediation. In exposing, and parodying, that mediation, showing how 'documentary realism' is as much a fetishistic signing, a miniaturisation of the real, as the toy soldier or the re-enactment – *Wrath* here is as much a parody of the classic, indexical war photograph as Jeff Wall's *Dead Troops Talk* – it seems to me as though Hüller retains, or perhaps achieves, some moral grip in a slippery world of signs.

We cannot, as Goya observed, look at this, and yet we must. We find language for the impossible and unspeakable, even as we disavow any agency for that language. But Hüller's *Gluttony* comments, perhaps even more effectively, on how we are solicited to act impossibly, to be impossible beings constituted entirely in our excess. Where economies once depended on conservation, saving and investment, neo-liberal capi-

talism relies upon consumption. The measure of success is more things sold, more things used up, in an endless cycle of ingestion and excretion. This reaches to the point where we are ourselves commodities, as subjects, rather than simple consumers of objects. *Gluttony* proposes the woman as object to be consumed, equating sexuality with gastronomy, so that there is little difference between good sex and a good meal – and indeed one may involve the other. Few other works than *Gluttony* so well capture the commodity rush that has characterised western culture since the late nineteen sixties. Where, for the medieval or Renaissance moralist, gluttony was a sin because it diverted the individual both from work for the community and from time spent in the worship of God, for our time gluttony (over-consumption) is a necessity that drives an economic motor and defines us, or so we imagine, as individuals.

But there is a paradox, we still think of gluttony as 'sin', even as ever more of us become obese. The payback for excess is both a life cut short and self-loathing. Hüller's *Gluttony* makes this wonderfully





clear. Where the advertisement would solicit our consumption with promises of glamour (sex) or comfort, Hüller shows us a world that is locked into a cycle of consumption for its own sake, rather than any virtue in what is to be consumed. It almost doesn't matter if this tastes or feels good; rather the motto is it can be done, so it must be done to the point of boredom and self-annihilation. (De Sade understood this psychosis when he wrote the One Hundred Days of Sodom.) In making this over-investment in the object the subject of his art, Hüller perhaps establishes his most interesting point, the point where the work keeps an ethical register but one where it loses all relation to representation and becomes a commentary on signs in general. Not simply art (as a system of signs) but signs themselves have become objects of consumption as ubiquitous and as meaningless as bodies or food or clothes or cars. As we munch our way through them, with mouths or eyes, can we any longer discriminate between their meanings?

TEXT BY CHRIS TOWNSEND, 2006

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